The role of staff in quality improvement in early childhood

Margaret Sims

Abstract

There is international recognition of the importance of high quality services for young children with a consensus that three pillars contribute to quality improvement: adult: child ratios, staff qualifications and group size. In Australia over the past 5 years, early childhood policy has attempted to drive improvements in early childhood service quality through national regulations for both adult: child ratios and qualifications. However, a review of early childhood history demonstrates that service quality in the past tended to depend more on the dedication of staff who were expected to be emotionally rewarded through their caring roles rather than from the pay and status associated with their work. The current political direction in Australia is now tending again towards this latter position. We review the literature associated with both positions in relation to quality improvement and flag our concerns for the future.

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Regardless of setting, children’s safety, health, and happiness are the non-negotiable elements of quality care and education. Minimizing risk and maximizing children’s opportunities to engage with teachers, caregivers, other children, and the world around them are essential strategies for promoting physical health and social-emotional, language, and cognitive development. Further efforts should target improvements in the quality and content of early childhood education preparation programs; opportunities for supervised internships and student teaching; ongoing professional development that is rigorous and relevant; compensation parity; and coaching, consultation, and mentoring that facilitates the application of new knowledge to everyday practice.