

Quality vs quantity: The truth behind 'under the roof' ratios

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Whether we like it or not, financial viability is at the forefront of every early learning service provider in the country, regardless of whether they are community or privately funded. Given that the cost of service provision inflates each year, predominantly driven by increases in industry awards, is it sustainable for the sector to continue mopping up the excess spend?

International research has perpetuated the evolution of early childhood education in Australia.

While these trends have driven increased demand for teacher training, experts caution that, in an environment where institutions are pressured to continue contributing to the nation's economic success, quality teaching is at risk of being compromised. Fuelled by evidence released by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in their Starting Strong report in 2006, which highlighted that Australia's investment in early education was one fifth of the global average, the then Rudd Government introduced the National Reform Agenda.

Motivated by addressing the shortfall of access to universal high-quality early learning, the rollout of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2009 was both necessary and timely. While facilitating initiatives to improve educational outcomes for children, the framework has also offered service providers opportunities to address staffing inefficiencies.

Part and parcel of the new NQF was the amalgamation of state regulations into a single document: The Education and Care Regulations (2011). Notwithstanding a series of grandfathering provisions, the approach brought with it one of the most profound changes to staffing arrangements; no longer are service providers bound by ratio calculations according to numbers of children per room. Instead, they are offered the flexibility of calculating ratios across the whole centre, regardless of where the children are located. By adjusting educator-to-staff ratios according to increases and

decreases in occupancy throughout the day, the management of routines, rosters and programs can take place more holistically, without impacting the quality of service delivery.

Referred to as 'under the roof', this tweaking approach provides the savvy operator opportunities to take better command of their overall wage spend. It is not uncommon, however, for many service providers to be confused or totally against the 'under the roof' model, considered somehow in contravention to quality provision. For those more knowledgeable, 'under the roof' staffing arrangements have been a blessing, offering better grouping techniques to meet the needs of children, families and staffing, that is, if implemented how the NQF intended, as outlined below:

'Ratios are calculated across the service (not by individual rooms). This gives providers the flexibility to respond to the needs of children. In a mixed age group of children, maintaining the ratio for each age range of children does not mean the educator-to-child ratio for the youngest age range must be applied to all children in an older age range. An educator who is caring for one age range of children can also be counted against another age range of children, as long as the ratio for each age range is maintained and adequate supervision is maintained at all times.'

Unfortunately, the government has not provided clear definitions for operating this way; therefore, you won't find the term 'under the roof' referred to in any standard or regulation. What is available however, is a visual aid provided to explain its

practical application, available in the NQF guidelines themselves. When applied correctly, 'under the roof' ratios facilitate learning opportunities that would otherwise not be possible, including those that take place during family grouping, mixed-age grouping, open indoor/outdoor grouping and flexible grouping, which occurs when children are offered the freedom to roam between rooms at their leisure. Not only does this approach facilitate child-led play, but it also provides opportunities for children to develop social relationships outside of their immediate age group, opportunities for educators to work alongside colleagues they may not typically work with and eliminates staffing inefficiencies.

It's no wonder there is so much confusion. After all, the regulations have not done us any favours by blurring the lines around educator presence definitions. I refer to regulation 13, educators 'working directly with children', which is defined as being physically present and directly engaged with children. Applied practically, this regulation does offer exception and flexibility, which is clearly articulated in the below:

'A centre-based service is taken to meet the relevant educator-to-child ratio while an educator or early childhood teacher is on a rest pause if the rest pause is not more than 10 minutes in duration'.

The need to dig into nitty gritty detail is important here. Ignorant service providers have adopted the practice of enforcing 'working directly with children' by recruiting 'benchies' to their staffing team, which has led to many of them going out the door backwards.

Allow me to apply a metaphoric explanation. In most team sports, there is a certain number of players required on the field at any given time. To support the team's endurance, additional players or 'benchies' are available, prepared to replace players should the opportunity present itself. If we took the 'working directly with children' regulation definition literally, we would also employ several casuals (benchies) who would be available to step in when day-to-day happenings occur, such as the phone ringing, an impromptu visitor or the need to use the toilet, all at the expense of the service provider. Unlike A-grade level team sports, the payment of a 'just in case' educator places an unnecessary financial burden on the service provider, which is not what the NQF intended.



There is a lot to be said for too many adults in the one space. In my opinion, more people does not necessarily equate to better outcomes for children. Quality is defined by the nature of interactions, the implementation of responsive programs and the offering of quality resources. If we take the 'the environment is the child's third teacher' philosophy as an argument, it would stand to reason that we should be focusing our energy on resourcing our children effectively if we truly want to have a positive impact on their learning.

When implemented effectively, new staffing arrangements needn't disrupt children's routines, including those when instances of short-staffing occur. This is not only unsettling to the children and educators alike, but it's totally unnecessary. Instead, there are practical solutions to such commonplace scenarios.

What is important is that we don't lose sight of the fine print in the regulations and compromise quality care as a result. The operation of 'under the roof' should not be misused in scenarios where illegal ratios are adopted in one room on a permanent basis. Instead, educators should be pragmatic and assess each situation for its own merit. Rather than frowning upon the operation of 'under the roof' ratios, we should think of it as an opportunity to sustain our longevity. After all, this approach is not only legal, but recommended. 🐦