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Context:

I am the Educational Leader/Nominated Supervisor/director and teacher at Huntly Kindergarten. We are a relatively small regional kindergarten, our staff consists of 1 teacher (B. Ed (Primary), Grad. Dip Early Childhood Teaching) and 2 assistants (both Diploma qualified). We have 36 kindergarten children enrolled and 17 pre-kinder children enrolled at present and we expect to have 20 pre-kinder children enrolled before too long, bringing our numbers up to capacity. The kindergarten children attend for 15 hours each per week and the pre-kinder children for 2 hours per week. I recently (2012) retrained at RMIT to receive my Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching, studying over 2 years part time while working 4 days a week in Early Childhood services. Out of the 53 enrolments for this year we have 5 children with additional needs – three undergoing assessment and currently in Early Intervention, one with a major speech delay, one who is vision impaired. We also have three indigenous children. Several of our families are from low socio-economic backgrounds and a significant number of families are on Health Care Cards. Huntly is on the outskirts of Bendigo and has limited access to services for families, although the waiting list for assessment of developmental concerns is extremely long and we are often in a position of having children in our centre who are not formally assessed or receiving any assistance for most of their kindergarten year, despite having been on waiting lists for more than a year. We are cluster managed by the Loddon Mallee Preschool Association and have a Volunteer Parent Committee for fundraising and day-to-day support of the kindergarten. Huntly is in a growing area and has a number of new estates currently being built which will cause our numbers at the kindergarten to increase over subsequent years.

The importance of quality services for children and families:

Huntly Kindergarten's Assessment and Rating Visit was in September last year and we were given a rating of EXCEEDING the NQS, with 5 areas rated as exceeding and 2 as meeting the NQS. I believe this rating was a result of high staff qualifications and staff ratio of 1:9. (We have a maximum of 27 children here on any one day.) The families at Huntly kindergarten are extremely important and valuable individuals who should not be disadvantaged based on their locality, and high staff ratios and qualifications are important to us. We have a strong parent community who are very supportive of staff and would only expect the very best quality when it comes to the care and education of their children. Last year we had the same staff and the same ratios and it was certainly needed – we had a child with additional needs who required a lot of 1:1 time (as I suspect we do this year as well) and we also had a very busy, active group with a large percentage of boys. In order to give these children the quality education they deserve, we needed 3 staff in order to provide individualised attention to each child.

Our staff are completely committed to continuous improvement. We have regular formal staff meetings once a month as well as daily joint reflections of the day. At our staff meetings we reflect

and discuss our observations of children, plan together for better outcomes for the children, and share what we have learned from Professional Development and professional reading. This collegiate collaboration is possible with the qualifications and experience of our staff. If the staff were less qualified, or unqualified, we wouldn't enjoy the same level of professional sharing and mentoring. This is a very strong indicator of quality for Huntly Kindergarten, as the staff bring so many experiences and so much knowledge to our work and in turn for the children.

Our high staff-child ratios helps us keep a close eye on at risk children as well as additional needs children through closer observation and more time spent with the children. Our program is based on the interests and needs of the individual children and the children themselves have a large part in curriculum decisions. We have good connections with the local schools and have joint projects with them – last year we planted a bush tucker garden at the kinder with assistance from grade 5 children from the local school (Huntly Primary).

This year we are embarking on a bush kinder program, utilising the bush area adjacent to the kindergarten. Part of this process will involve revegetating the land with indigenous plants. We have an indigenous parent who is also a keen gardener who is very excited to be able to assist us with this during the year. A bush kinder program would not be possible without our staff-child ratio, as there is a strong danger of snakes in our local area so close supervision is paramount, particularly with the additional needs children in our group.

Resources needed for high quality ECEC services

The NQF has brought about much needed quality reforms for Australian ECEC. Based on the Innocenti Working Paper to UNICEF in 2008, Australia had slipped well below many Industrialised nations in our efforts to provide education and care for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens. Surely the children of our great country are worth more than this! The NQF, beginning with the EYLF in 2009 was the start of rectifying our appalling international position. I have seen in our local area the vast difference between centres in ECEC in terms of quality and the NQF is a step in the right direction for bridging the gap between these differences and bringing about quality education and care for our youngest children. Much research has been done to show the difference quality early years education makes in many areas of life for children as they grow, including long term academic and social benefits. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (EPPE) study in the UK showed "The quality of pre-school centres is directly related to better intellectual and social/behavioural development in children, and these effects persist in later assessments at age 6 years plus... Disadvantaged children in particular can benefit significantly from good quality pre-school experiences, especially if they attend centres that cater for a mixture of children from different social backgrounds." (2004) EPPE study also showed that a low quality early years education was actually harmful to children from a disadvantaged background.

The Assessment and Rating system for the NQS goes a long way to establishing quality across the board in all ECEC services. I feel it is important to have a system that establishes a benchmark for quality and creates expectations for all services to comply in order to give our children the very best possible start in life. Early Years education prepares children not just for the transition to school but it gives them many important life skills that will hold them in good stead throughout their life. The first 8 years of a child's life is the most important in setting foundations for learning across all areas –

social, emotional, academic and physical. In order to give children the best we need to maintain quality and look for ways to continually improve. Our children are worth it.

Finances should never be a consideration when it comes to quality – if this government makes change to the NQF for financial reasons it will be cutting the quality that is delivered to our children. We will then regress back to the state Australia was in prior to these reforms and prove to the world that our youngest citizens are not important to us.

Instead of cutting funds to the ECEC sector, the government should increase funds in order to assist us in our vitally important role. Teachers should be given (as primary teachers in Victoria are) paid time to complete transition statements. Nominated Supervisors and Educational Leaders should be given extra paid administration time to complete requirements. At the moment we are using our own unpaid hours to complete these very necessary tasks. As Nominated Supervisor I spent an average of 8 hours unpaid overtime each week in the last 12 months. The time spent in administering a quality kindergarten is time well spent, as this benefits the children. They are our priority.

The government should provide the resources and funds where they are needed and support those who are carrying out the important job of caring and educating young children, while upholding the standards that provide for quality such as staff qualifications and staff-to-child ratios.