



Kate Ryan

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(South Australia)**



I started my career in early childhood working as a family day care provider in the mid-eighties. I moved from there to work as an unqualified childcare worker in a casual position in LDC in a country town in South Australia. I enjoyed what I was doing and could see the benefits of getting a qualification so I initially studied for my Advanced Certificate in Child Care and later I went off to Uni SA to do a Bachelor of Teaching: Early Childhood Education. Soon after graduating I worked as leader in the 3–5 room in a new childcare centre in metropolitan Adelaide and was soon promoted to Assistant Director and periods of Acting Director and Director. I then moved to Lady Gowrie Adelaide as a Project Officer and Trainer before taking up this position as Director at Halifax Street in March 2006.

Halifax Street was in much need of rejuvenation when I arrived. Utilisation of childcare and sessional preschool was low and financial viability was a concern. Staff involvement in professional learning was mostly based around one-off sessions and regulatory training. We needed to build staff morale, staff knowledge and engage families and the community in rebuilding the centre as a high-quality early childhood setting.

I had been actively involved with a practitioner research project that had been initiated by DECS (Department of Education and Community Services) in SA and my involvement in Early Childhood Australia really helped me to keep a focus on 'the big picture'—what research tells us makes a difference for children. I also had developed a particular interest in early childhood curriculum and planning and was keen to move our focus to children's learning, rather than on keeping children safe and happy (of course, this is still important but shouldn't be the dominant driver). I involved staff in professional learning focused on practitioner research that enabled them to build long-term networks with other educators in our region (LDC, preschools and schools) and to engage with current research.

I worked with the management committee, sharing research information about the impact of teachers in early childhood settings. We took some risks, first employing more staff than minimum requirements, then more qualified staff, and increased the teaching position from .5 to full time. Parents began to see the difference in our practices, our reputation grew and utilisation improved to full capacity and has remained there for some time. With day-to-day operations going well we had some time to invest in thinking big picture about improvement (continuous). I guess this was also influenced by our involvement in QIAS and later our involvement in DECS' quality improvement system and the National Quality Standard (NQS). Both systems require involvement of all stakeholders in planning for and implementing and reviewing practices to seek improvement.

The centre had a philosophy statement that was acceptable, but could have been just as relevant for any centre. The leadership group (myself and our team leaders) had participated in some long-term professional learning with our DECS Regional Leaders around leadership. As part of this learning we began to see the importance of developing a shared vision to help us in developing our strategic plan for the future. We started by identifying our key stakeholders and asked them to identify what they considered the most important things about our service—what they wanted to keep, what they might change etc. We used tools such as Wordle to identify key words and concepts.

We researched vision statements of other educational sites and corporations that we knew of and this inspired us to have a go at writing a vision statement for our setting. We sent this draft to the management/parent group for comment. This stimulated a huge discussion among the parents about what they felt was missing—the conversations ranged from big concepts to reactions to specific wording. The management/parent group sent back comments and their suggested modifications to the leadership group. This back and forwards of suggestions continued for about three months. Each time there was a change in the vision statement it was displayed in the hallway and in the staff room and stakeholders were invited to comment. Gradually the two groups began to get closer together in what they wanted in the vision statement. It took some compromise on behalf of both groups. However, both had a really strong understanding of what the other group was thinking and why they were thinking it.

After five months each stakeholder group voted to accept the following vision, accepting that it isn't perfect but will help in guiding the development of underpinning principles and in guiding our decision-making in the centre.

'Working towards positive futures for our children': Our educators are dedicated to creating best practice learning programs in a nurturing environment which will contribute to strong foundations and positive futures for our children.

Once the vision statement had been agreed on we plastered it everywhere, in newsletters, on the front door, in our play rooms and in our program documentation. We made games of trying to remember it. As we had groups working on different projects and groups working on policy reviews we asked them to keep the vision in mind. We were then able to do our strategic plan—called our Site Plan. We involved everyone who was interested to be a part of contributing and we had a particular interest in involving the children. To do this staff and parents observed children's involvement in play and analysed their involvement to assist in planning both the day-to-day program and longer-term plans (e.g. environments, routines). With older children we have always involved children in planning discussions each morning about what they would like to do. When we were putting the vision statement together we asked the preschool children to draw and discuss what they liked about Halifax St and what they would like to see more of at the centre.

The plan guides our involvement in professional learning, staffing decisions, budgeting and educational programs. The plan, our continuous data gathering and analysis of the previous year's plan are documented in the annual report and presented at the AGM. Copies of the report are available for parents and community members. The leadership group and management committee regularly review the plan and take action to ensure goals are met. This keeps our plan alive and keeps us focused on the big picture—positive futures for our children.