



Lindy Farrant

Director, Parkes Early Childhood Centre (PECC), Parkes (NSW)



I am a four year qualified early childhood teacher with over 30 years' experience working in the early childhood profession. I have experience teaching in long day care and preschool, as a Children's Services Adviser with NSW Department of Community Services, and a Children's Services Teacher with TAFE NSW.

In 1994, I took on a pilot project setting up a large rural multipurpose centre, a joint federal and state government initiative that involved seven early childhood services in rural settings. I have continued on in my role as the director of this service. The centre is licensed for 86 places, providing long day care, preschool and occasional care for children 0–5 years.

In addition, I have been a member of numerous local, regional and state advisory committees including the NSW pilot project for SCAN funding (Supporting Children with Additional Needs) and currently participate in the Early Childhood Workforce Capacity Project and the Birth to Kindergarten—Spread the Word early literacy project. I provide professional support and mentoring to colleagues, other directors, teacher students and other early childhood professionals within the region.

*Why is the inclusion of children with additional needs an important aspect of quality at PECC?*

I believe that our centre belongs to our local community. All families have a right to access our early childhood educational programs. I believe that our centre community is enhanced by the diversity that each individual brings to our setting; each child, their families, our staff and committee members, other professionals, visitors and the broader community. The inclusion of children with additional needs is an integral part of this diversity and adds to the rich tapestry that is created by all individuals coming together within our early learning environment.

*How does your vision and philosophy, and the NQF, drive inclusion at your centre?*

Collaborative partnerships with families and communities (Quality Area 6) are critical to inclusion. Our educational programs for children with additional needs are developed in close collaboration with parents/caregivers through ongoing formal and informal discussions. This process includes input from medical specialists, therapists, early intervention services and other professionals/organisations such as The Spastic Centre, Northcott Disability Services Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT) etc. These plans facilitate the learning and development of each child through planned and spontaneous experiences in large, small and individual groupings with educators constantly reflecting on the child's confidence and readiness to participate in the particular setting or experience (Quality Area 5).

When planning for the inclusion of a child, staffing ratios are assessed taking into consideration the playroom setting, age group and particular strengths and needs of the children in the group. If required, adult:child ratios that are stipulated in the NQS are exceeded. Applications are made to various funding bodies to enable us to do this (Quality Area 4).

Within the plan, consideration is also given to health and safety needs of the child which can include strategies to manage particular medical conditions or safety considerations, such as planning to manage behaviours that pose a risk to the child or others (Quality Area 2).

The physical environment is assessed with the support of therapists and other specialists and adjusted wherever possible to facilitate inclusion in the playroom and outdoors (Quality Area 3.1.3). This may include rearranging furniture and equipment to allow a child using a wheelchair ease of movement around the playroom to aid their access to the activities and experiences. The choices of toys, resources and activities are varied and adapted for individual children and available to all children within the playroom setting.

The selection, ongoing professional development and support of educators working in an inclusive environment is

critical to best practice (Quality Area 4). Educators are selected with appropriate qualifications, demonstrating qualities such as professionalism, enthusiasm, empathy, excellent communication skills, a willingness to learn and a team focus in their approach to their work. Budget allocations are made by management to ensure all educators have opportunities to further develop their knowledge, understanding and skills to support our inclusion programs. Management also supports educators upgrading their qualifications with the allocation of study time during working hours (Quality Area 7).

Our practice of reciprocal visiting by our staff, therapists from the local early intervention services and teachers from local schools for transition to school programs also supports inclusion. This approach leads to increased opportunities for more effective communication between all parties to reflect on and review each child's learning and development (Quality Area 6).

As inclusive educators we constantly strive to achieve the best possible learning outcomes for every child. We use the NQS to guide us in our daily practice. We also continually reflect, review and refine our practice with the belief that children are both our central focus point and our starting point.