

Performance Excellence in Early Childhood Education – the award-winning Auckland Hospital Staff Preschool.

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Abstract

The Auckland Hospital Staff Preschool – a small, state-subsidised, fee-paying, not-for-profit private preschool – has twice won a national quality award. The preschool's leadership system – a partnership between governors, managers and teaching teams – is characterised by clearly identified responsibilities, frequent purposeful meetings, and a focus on performance review, continuous improvement, customer satisfaction, cooperation and consultation. Strategy processes incorporate government-mandated standards and curriculum requirements, the preschool's own values and culture, and stakeholder interests, to yield tightly-specified operational plans. Customers are partitioned into groups and their separate preferences influence the services provided. Employee education, training and development have high priorities. Process and product definition, design, and management integrate customer requirements, professional standards and national mandates, and are subject to cycles of evaluation and improvement. Metrics for group size, teacher qualifications, remuneration, and adult/child ratios compare well to industry benchmarks and all show improvement trends.

140 words

Introduction

New Zealand's Business Development Quality Award (BDQA) is an entry-level, Baldrige-derived award scheme, open to all New Zealand organisations, public and private, regardless of size. Since its inception in 1993 the scheme has attracted applications from a wide range of organisations – among them very small family-run businesses, cooperatives and not-for-profits, museums, public and private hospitals, nursing homes, schools and education service providers, tourist operations, recreational organisations, primary producers and commodity extractors, and a number of manufacturers. All applicants which exceed a threshold score (set annually by the assessors at about 400 points on the Baldrige 1,000 point scale) receive an award, and the top scoring public and private sector organisations are invited to send one representative each on a two-week study tour of US Baldrige winning organisations.

In 1999 two public sector organisations and one from the private sector exceeded the award threshold. The private sector winner was the Auckland Hospital Staff Preschool. This case study is based on the preschool's application.

Introduction to the preschool

The Auckland Hospital Staff Preschool is a not-for-profit incorporated society, located on the Auckland Hospital campus in the city of Auckland, New Zealand. It offers “a quality early childhood educational service for preschool children” (Exton, 1999, p2), most of whose parents work in the adjacent hospital and medical school.

The preschool is licensed for 48 children (the maximum number on-site) and has 80 on its roll (and a waiting list of 160), ranging in age from 3 months to 5 years, with one third under 2 years. Staff comprise a business manager, a supervisor (the head teacher), 12 teachers (sharing 10 full time positions) and a teacher-aid.

The preschool funds its services through a mixture of state subsidy, user fees and fundraising, and has total revenues of about NZ\$500,000. It operates in an inner-city area where there are many private and community-based early childhood facilities, and most of its users have a large number of childcare facilities to choose from between home and work. There has been a 40% increase in the number of early childhood centres in New Zealand since 1990, with Auckland leading this growth. The sector is also experiencing rapid change, driven by demands for better educational outcomes and more qualified staff, and by higher customer expectations and more stringent government audit requirements (ibid, p2).

Leadership

The preschool’s leadership is realised through a 4-part structure, with an elected parent committee providing governance, an executive team (the manager and the supervisor) and two teaching teams (for under two and over two year old children – known as the *under 2s* and the *over 2s* teams) each of four teachers and a leader.

The elected parent executive provides governance, with a focus on strategy, policy, business performance and future direction. It meets monthly with the management team and reports annually to its electorate – the members of the incorporated society of parents which owns the preschool. The management team splits day-to-day responsibility for running the preschool between the manager who deals with the business of the school, and the supervisor who reports to the manager and is responsible for staffing, the educational programme and relationships with parents and the wider community. Team leaders, responsible for service delivery, meet weekly with management, weekly together, and fortnightly with their teams for programme planning and review purposes.

The key elements of the preschool’s leadership system are:

- It is a small intimate unit staffed by skilled professionals
- Roles are explicitly delineated and accountabilities clearly defined
- The school’s governors, senior managers and teaching teams, while in hour-by-hour contact in a relatively small workspace, have a structured schedule of meetings, each with an established agenda and purpose
- Deliberate and careful attention is paid to the cooperative and consultative development of organisational principles, which are then widely communicated to all stakeholders
- There is a focus on performance review, future improvement and customer and staff satisfaction.

Strategic planning

The preschool's regulatory environment

The preschool's strategic options are constrained by its regulatory environment. Early childhood centres in New Zealand must be licensed, and all are bound by the associated government regulations (the *Education (ECC) Regulations 1998*). Almost all have a charter approved by the Minister of Education, which includes a *Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs)*, outlining the broad objectives to be achieved by all chartered services – with the aim of providing good quality education and care (Ministry of Education, 1998). All chartered centres are also expected to implement a national early childhood bi-cultural curriculum called Te Whariki, which is intended to “provides the basis for consistent high quality curriculum delivery in the diverse range of early childhood services ...” (Lyall Perris, Acting Secretary for Education. For the full text go to www.education.govt.nz), and which defines ‘curriculum’ as “... the sum total of the experiences, activities and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (Education Review Office, 1998).

How the preschool develops and implements its strategy

Strategy development occurs against the backdrop of the charter’s “desirable objectives and practices,” Te Whariki’s five curriculum strands – Well-being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication and Exploration – and the preschool’s own values: valuing employees, partnership development, public responsibility and citizenship, continuous improvement, and learning and customer focus.

The process begins with an “idea and dream gathering” invitation to staff and parents, who complete “Dream Sheets” which suggest “Let your imagination run wild and use the space below to offer, write, draw, list any suggestions, dreams, hopes, expectations, plans for the preschool for the next two years. Nothing is too large or too small to note...” (Exton, 1999).

Staff analyse the dream sheet information and group ideas according to Te Whariki’s five strands. Suggestions from customer and staff satisfaction surveys are also incorporated, as are statistics and trend information from media, industry and regulatory sources, and forecasts of future resource needs.

From this process, three groups of strategic objectives, each with implementation details and timelines, emerged in the 1999 cycle:

Learning and development objectives included a programme to support families facing pressure from the changing expectations of society; goals for teacher registration and training; and the development of project and heuristic learning opportunities in the educational programme, involving workshops and discussion groups and a review of practice.

Communication and consultation objectives included the creation of a mission statement for the newly elected executive committee “that clearly defines its focus for the three years;” and better transition programmes for children moving within the school and on to primary school.

Operation and administration objectives included either upgrading the premises on the current site or moving to a new site on the Hospital's campus (depending on the outcome of Auckland Hospital's current redevelopment programme), and accreditation of the preschool's existing quality assurance programme to secure additional government incentive funding.

The preschool also has separate business plans and a management plan. This set of documents, and the processes that create them, are subject to a biannual cycle of development, implementation, evaluation and review. The management plan is in 12 sections, each with *objectives*, *practice* and *management of practice* subsections. Operational details, project specifications, target dates and key accountabilities are specified in *management of practice*.

Key elements of the preschool's strategic planning process are:

- The creation of a strategic viewpoint begins with extensive and inclusive data- and idea-gathering, from all stakeholders
- The preschool's strategic objectives are explicit, measurable and subject to continuous review
- Strategy is actioned through the operational plan's targets and accountabilities

Customer and market focus

Opposition to the use of Baldrige-like approaches in not-for-profit, educational and healthcare organisations often centres on discussions about who is (and is not) a customer. For example, see articles and correspondence in recent issues of *Quality Progress* (starting with Nachlas, 1999, p81). The preschool appears to have resolved this question without reservation, partitioning its customers into two groups:

(1) Funding customers. The preschool is part-funded by the New Zealand government through Ministry of Education (MoE) subsidies. In effect, the government buys six hours per day of care for each enrolled child. Some low income families also have their school fees subsidised, and the preschool treats the state agency involved (Work and Income New Zealand) as another customer. Auckland Hospital owns the preschool's premises, could choose to contract another provider of preschool services, and is also treated as a customer.

How funding customers measure performance

The Education Review Office (ERO – the government agency which reports publicly on the quality of education in all New Zealand schools and early childhood centres, including private schools) reviewed the preschool in March 1999, requiring the manager to complete a self-review, supply management plans, business plans and operational documents and undergo a site visit during which the operation and management of the preschool was scrutinised and answers to the self-review validated. Processes and interactions in the centre were observed and recorded. Management, teachers, parents and the executive chairperson were interviewed. The resulting report is a public document (Education Review Office, 1999). The preschool's goal was full compliance, with no recommendations for improvement, and "we met our goal and received an outstanding report and commendation of our service excellence from the Education Review Office" (Exton, 1999, p 19).

The MoE audits the roll to establish the integrity of data in funding claims and to monitor occupancy limits, staffing levels, qualifications and teacher/child ratios. "We were in full compliance and did not have to make any adjustments to funding claims We have remained on Quality Funding Rate 2, which is a measure of MoE satisfaction with our delivery of quality education" (ibid, p 19).

(2) *Parent customers.* Parent fees cover almost all costs not met by government subsidy or other fundraising. The preschool regards whole families as customers (not the individual children), recognising that they provide a service to the working parent(s) and their dependent children.

How parent customers measure performance

Parents have completed annual customer services surveys for three years (Figure 1) and satisfaction has been consistently high (Figure 2).

The preschool has conducted an annual customer satisfaction survey for three years. Parents score 20 questions on a five-point scale, and provide written comment in five key areas (communication, education, staffing, administration and cultural sensitivity). Results for the past two years have been consistently in the 4.5 to 5 range (where five is best), but the first survey revealed sub-4 point averages for two questions: "I am well informed about my child's progress and development," and "I am well informed about the centre's routines and programmes." The preschool's response has included:

- (1) parent/teacher evenings, explanations of the educational programme during new-parent orientation and more, proactive, contact between teachers and parents to discuss progress and achievements
- (2) increased cooperation between team leaders so that Children's transition between teaching teams is well documented and explained to parents
- (3) wall displays throughout the centre, photographs of daily events on display (some parents only see the beginning or end of the day) and entrance-way whiteboards and day books with details of meals, events, staff on duty and outings planned for the day. As a result of these efforts, scores in these two areas have improved in the past two years.

Figure 1 Customer surveying - example of actions taken to improve less than satisfactory survey results

The preschool does not advertise or market its service. It has a growing waiting list, 160 at October 1999. Children starting in August 1999 had been waiting for a place since early 1998.

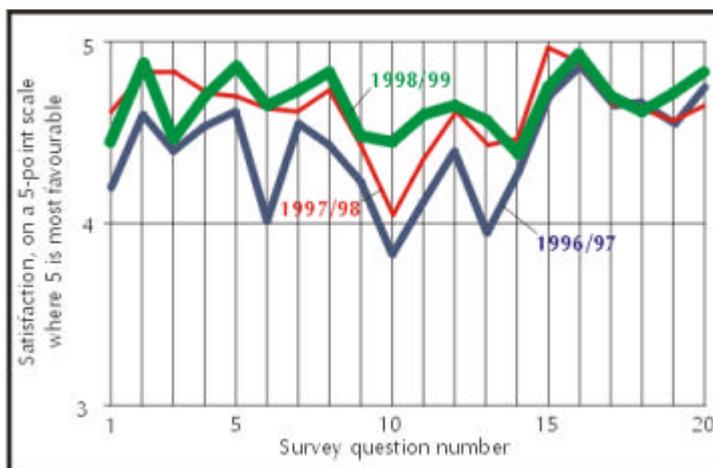


Figure 2 Customer satisfaction survey

Key elements of the preschool's customer and market focus are:

- There is no ambiguity about identifying and partitioning customers, and effective relationship management is a high priority
- Information collected from customers is used to drive service improvement, and action is taken to improve customer satisfaction when results are less than excellent.

Information and analysis

Gathering and analysing information is a key management tool in the preschool.

Data are gathered about:

(1) *Organisational management*, including income and expenditure against budget, occupancy, staffing costs against income and working capital

(2) *Staffing*, including job application, recruitment and induction records, satisfaction surveys, appraisal worksheets, wage and contract information, professional development records and qualifications, training reports, leave and employment records, staff turnover and length of service data

(3) *Parent and family involvement*, including family information collected at enrolment, customer satisfaction survey results, attendance at meetings and participation in school governance

(4) *The management of teaching, learning and development*, with a concentration on two groups of measures:

(i) Quantitative data on occupancy, attendance, staff/child ratios, staffing, role numbers, and so on – some for statutory and compliance purposes, some as indicators of business performance.

(ii) Qualitative information about the day-to-day activities within the centre which build a picture of the effectiveness of teacher/child interactions, allowing teachers (and parents) to monitor educational progress. Education Programme Planning data are collected for groups of children and used to assess the effectiveness of interactions over time. The information moves through the centre with the child and is handed to parents when children leave. It includes anecdotal observations, checklists, diary records written up at home and in the centre, photographs and art work, activity evaluation sheets, and records of the individual child's welfare (nappy changes, sickness and accidents, sleep records, and day book records, for example).

(5) *The physical environment, resources and equipment*. Registers are maintained and audited, for maintenance scheduling and for health and safety reasons.

Designed to be collected in ways that minimise time away from teaching, information must have day-to-day relevance, provide for future planning, satisfy both internal and external requirements and be timely, easily understood and accessible.

Human resources focus

Work systems

Teaching is delivered by two self-directed work teams, each with a coordinator and an internally negotiated team contract. Tasks are assigned cooperatively and leaders act as coaches in an environment of "reflective practice, whereby ... individuals self-assess performance" (ibid, p14). Income is performance-based and reviewed annually, and there are opportunities for rewarding exceptional performance.

Team leaders meet weekly with the management team and are appraised twice per year, negotiate individual contracts annually and are paid bonuses for meeting performance targets.

Employee education, training and development

All new employees pass through an induction process. On-going professional development is designed to support staff and assist them gain qualifications; to link performance appraisal and training; to keep staff informed about training opportunities; and to provide management with training and development opportunities.

Training and professional development is a budget line item, staff are paid to train, have a qualified mentor during training, and relieving teachers are employed to pick up their workload. Staff who attend courses, workshops or conferences share their knowledge at team meetings. Training goals are identified during performance reviews.

Employee well-being and satisfaction

Management of occupational health and safety, the physical work environment, and the resources available to aid work is collaborative, to ensure it is "safe, pleasant, stimulating and conducive to learning," (ibid, p16). The preschool's work climate is characterised by:

- Teamwork, a homely and relaxed atmosphere, and a comfortable workplace
- Employment conditions which include generous leave, above-average pay, individual employment contracts to encourage flexibility in rewards and conditions, job sharing, and subsidised childcare to ease return to work for new-parent teachers
- Organised off-site social events

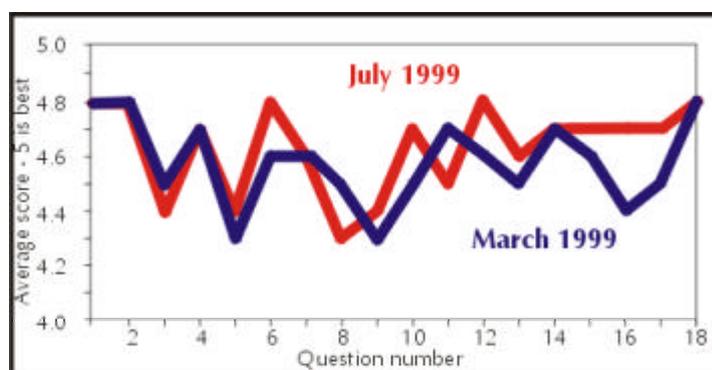


Figure 3 Staff satisfaction survey

Staff satisfaction (Figure 3) will be measured annually from 1999, with two surveys conducted in the 1999 year. Twelve staff scored 18 questions. Space was provided for written comments on communication and feedback, individual training and professional development, conditions of employment, management, employment policies and practice, and dreams and wishes for the next six months. These surveys indicate high levels of satisfaction amongst employees, with average ratings above 4 (on a five point scale) for all questions.

Proxy measures of satisfaction (use of available sick leave, staff turnover – for example) are low and decreasing (with five year trends – Figure 4). The preschool has six employees with more than five years service, five with two to five years, and two with less than two years.

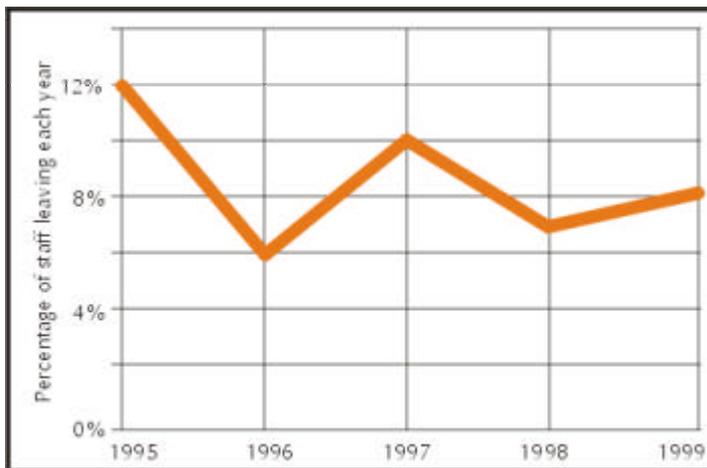


Figure 4 Staff turnover

Process management

*The definition of **process** in an educational environment*

The Baldrige National Quality Program's inaugural (1999) Education Criteria for Performance Excellence defines processes as "... linked activities with the purpose of producing a ... service for a customer ...," and comments that "In knowledge work such as teaching ... process does not necessarily imply formal sequences [but rather] implies general understandings regarding competent performance such as timing, options to be included, evaluation and reporting."

Just as the preschool's management team is unambiguous about who their customers are, and the nature of their relationship with them, they are also clear about process design and management.

The preschool's product is its educational programme. The processes used to design and deliver this product are clearly specified, with iterative evaluation and improvement cycles and in-process measures of effectiveness and efficiency. Performance excellence is designed-in, not retrospectively inspected-in (there are no examination or test results or certificates of proficiency awarded in preschools).

Process design

The preschool's educational product is designed around the themes of Te Whariki, and its principal funding customer (the MoE, through its audit agency – the ERO) measures performance against Te Whariki's values and goals. The preschool "took the goals and expected outcomes of [Te Whariki] and created our own unique implementation of it based on the identified needs, aspirations, culture and philosophy of our preschool community. Parents, teachers and children's needs as well as the particular 'flavour' of the ... organisation were ... considered."

"We set in place a staged educational programme for teachers, management and parents with support from professional support and early childhood advisory organisations. We used a process that slowly built up teachers' skill, expertise and commitment to the new curriculum and through the cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation and review monitored this process and its impact on the children" (ibid, p18).

Process management

Process goals are achieved through:

- Child observation, assessment and programme planning of individual teachers and teaching teams
- Children's individual progress, individual and group activities, the teaching environment and the teachers themselves are continuously evaluated. Teaching and interaction are enhanced through reflective practice, and adjusted to meet programme and curriculum standards
- Progress is monitored with checklists, purpose-designed needs forms, peer evaluation, team meetings, staff appraisal and observations by third-party early childhood advisory agency staff
- Changes in children's behaviour are observed and measured.

Key results areas

Baldrige assessments reserve 450 from a possible 1,000 points for results, which are "real time information – measures and indicators of progress – for evaluating and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of school services, aligned with the school's mission and strategy," (Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, 1999).

This preschool has nominated four key results areas, considered to include the most significant measures "promoted by educational researchers in the field of early childhood education and used by the MoE to ascertain 'quality' early childhood centres for the purposes of higher levels of funding" (Exton, 1999):

(1) *Group size.* (the number of children per group). The preschool adheres to strict levels for children in the 'under 2s' area with no more than 17 at any one time and a team of five teachers. In the 'over 2s' section children work in groups according to ages for particular segments of the day (Figure 8).

(2) *Qualifications of teachers.* In 1995 the preschool had three teachers who had qualifications at or above the industry benchmark and the majority were either untrained or in training. By 1999 the preschool had one teacher with a degree and seven with teaching diplomas (Figure 5).

Many early childhood centres in New Zealand are struggling to have at least one 'person responsible' with the minimum 120 licensing points. There is a national shortage of qualified early childhood teachers. The preschool's ability to attract, grow and retain people of high caliber enables it to provide an educational programme that is built on professionalism, knowledge, expertise and a depth of understanding of the development needs of preschool children.

(3) *How much teachers are paid.* The preschool conducts an annual wage review, and there has been a steady increase in hourly rates of pay. When entering into contract negotiations with its teachers, the management team compares its rates of pay with those offered in the market for the industry through surveys, comparisons with other centres and comparisons with collective contracts negotiated on behalf of early childhood centres by the union that represents preschool staff. Figure 6 shows that in 1995 80% of the preschool's teachers earned under \$13-14 per hour with many earning under \$10 per hour. In 1999 91% earn over \$13-14, with 73% earning over \$14-15 per hour.

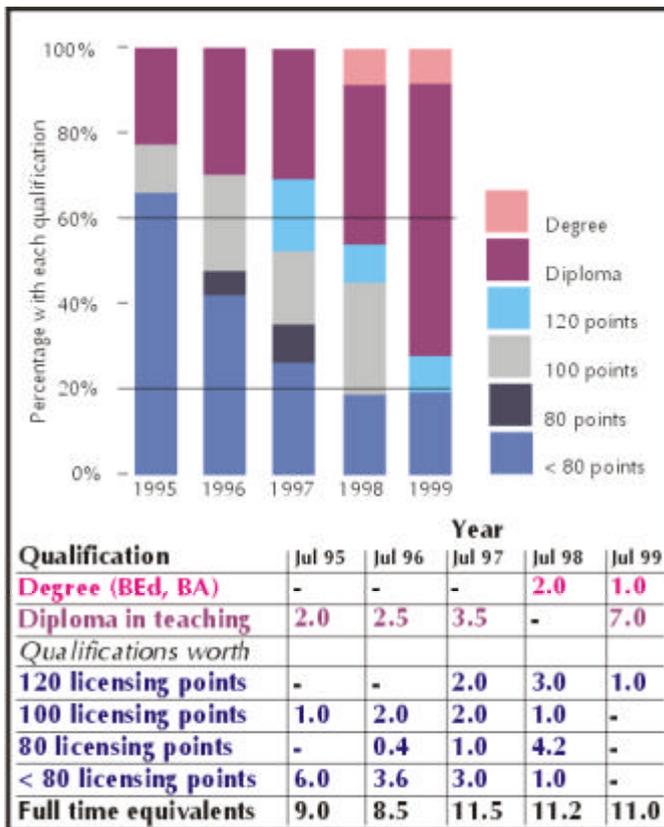


Figure 5 Qualifications of teachers

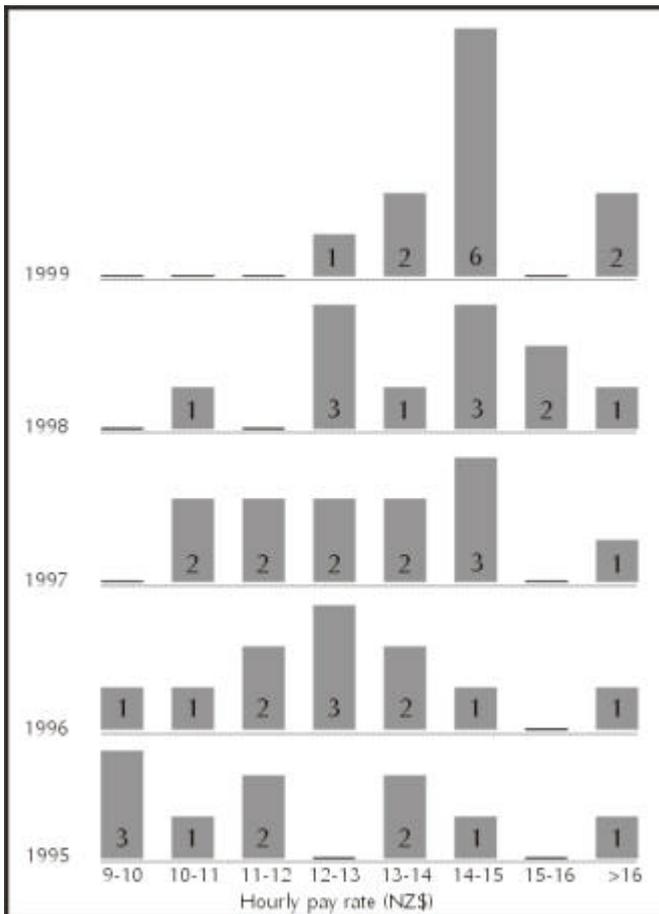


Figure 6 Distribution of hourly rates of pay and numbers of staff in each wage bracket for the years 1995 - 1999

Income compared to staffing costs (Figure 7) shows that increasingly resources are directed to the preschool's most valuable 'investment' – its teachers. The indicator accepted as appropriate in the early childhood sector is 75-85% of income from government funding and parent fees. As more teachers complete their training, enter into individual contracts and take up salaried positions the preschool will continue to see rates of pay increase.

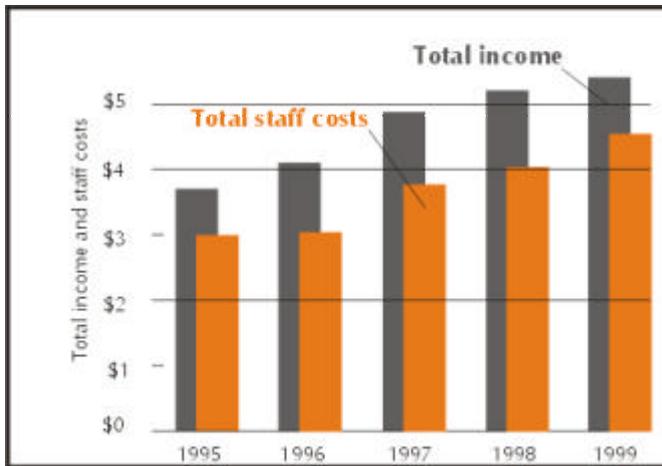


Figure 7 Total income and staff costs (x100,000)

(4) *Adult/child ratios.* With the creation during the past five years of an additional two teaching positions, one management position and one teacher aid position the preschool has been able to reduce adult/child ratios (Figure 8).

	Comparable Early childhood centres				Hospital Staff Preschool
	A	B	C	D	
Staff qualifications¹					
Total teaching staff	27	8	12	7	11
Teachers with Diploma	9	2	7	3	7
% of qualified staff	33%	25%	58%	43%	64%
Staff turnover					
Total teaching Staff	27	8	12	7	11
Resignations in 98/99	5	4	3	1	1
% of staff who resigned	19%	50%	25%	14%	9%
Teacher/child ratio²					
Under 2	1/3	1/4	1/4	1/5	1/3.4
Over 2	1/8	1/9	1/9	1/9	1/5
Average ratio, all ages	1/5.5	1/6.5	1/6.5	1/7	1/4.2
Training funding³					
Part-funded	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Fully-funded	No	No	No	No	Yes
Training leave funded	No	No	No	No	Yes
Fully-funded training	No	No	No	No	Yes

Notes

¹Industry results - only 34% of ECCs in New Zealand have >1 qualified staff and government 'quality' funding. ²Industry results - the national average ratio is 1/4.8. ³Ministry of Education results, Ed Stats News Sheet v9(1), May 1999

Figure 8 Comparative human resource data

Telephone survey, July 1999. Compared to four nearby early childhood centres, the Auckland Hospital Staff Preschool has the highest percentage of qualified staff, the lowest staff turnover, the best teacher/child ratio and it is the only centre to fully-fund training.

Financial results

While the preschool is a not-for-profit incorporated society, it budgets for an annual profit/surplus – with the goal of a \$100,000 fund for future development and contingencies – while increasing staff numbers, rates of pay and hours of staff training (Figure 9).

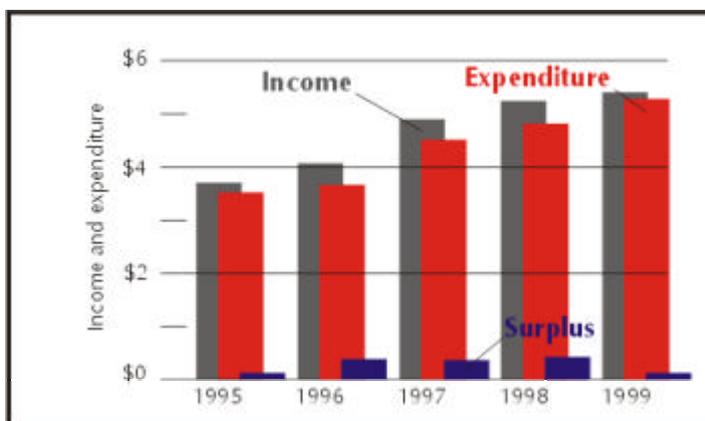


Figure 9 Income and expenditure (x100,000)

Total expenditure has increased over the past five years, while fees have remained below market levels. Working capital has grown from \$22,000 in 1995 to \$95,000 in 1999, and net capital has grown from \$41,000 in 1995 to \$175,000 in 1999 (Figure 10).

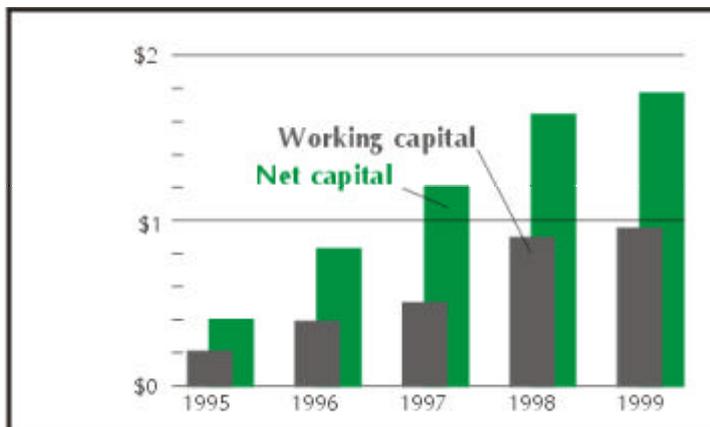


Figure 10 Working capital (x100,000)

Occupancy

The preschool's occupancy (total number of children on-site at any one time) is limited by licence, but has to be as near as possible to the maximum to optimise income compared to fixed costs. In the 1998 and 1999 years occupancy has been close to 100% (Figure 11).

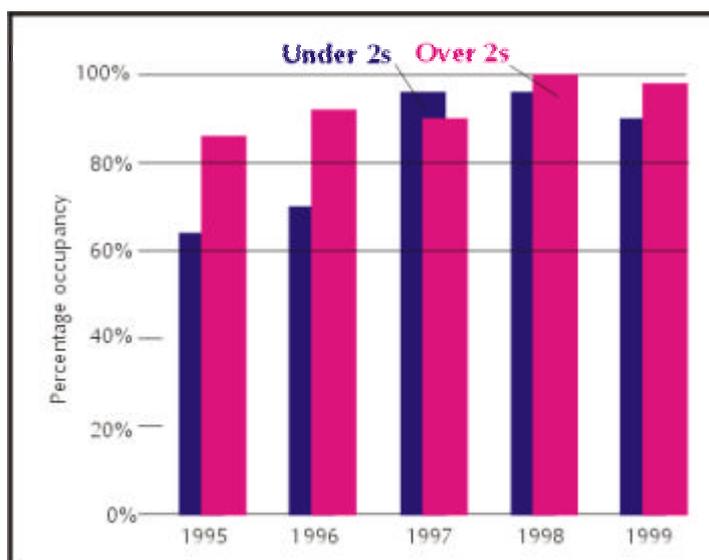


Figure 11 Occupancy

Discussion – quality in early childhood services, lessons learned from this case study

What is quality in early childhood services?

Quality has two common organisational meanings, which may be summarised in a school context (for example by Siegel, 1999), as either: *Quality assurance*, focusing on auditable standards (ISO 9002, QMS) and accreditation, including student performance standards; or *Quality improvement*, typically described as continuous improvement or performance excellence (Deming, 1993; Tribus, various dates; Baldrige National Quality Program, 1999).

The challenge in education – eminently achievable according to Siegel – is to align the agendas and resources of the two approaches. The incentive to do so, in the USA at least, comes from the growing number of state and school district programmes, usually based on the Baldrige criteria, which are beginning to document impressive improvements in student performance, often in poor and ethnically-mixed communities (Barlow, 1999; Broder, 1999; National Alliance of Business, 1999).

Writers on quality in the early childhood environment often do not distinguish between the two approaches. For example in a policy statement on children in early care and education programmes, the American Academy of Pediatrics (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care, 1996), characterises quality as: Adult care givers who have specialized training or experience in child development; a warm, nurturing, attentive, and developmentally appropriate and stimulating learning environment; small groups of children with sufficient numbers of consistent, interactive care givers who have long-term relationships with the children in their care; and ... staff ... that actively involve parents in child care activities and that try to enhance parenting skills.

And in an exploration of the trade-offs between quality, teacher compensation and affordability in exemplary early childhood programmes in the USA, Fowler and Schweinhart (1999) note that all “set high standards for quality that are conveyed through ... policies and written standards ... the program mission, a statement of philosophy ... educational approach and hiring practices. Programs also maintain high standards through staff reviews, parents’ program evaluations, accreditation applications, self assessments and staff training.”

Both narratives mix quality assurance measures (group size, staff/child ratios, accreditation) with performance excellence indicators (mission-driven performance review, parent’s/customer evaluations, self assessment).

Some authors (and some school programmes) seem to assume that quality is just an assurance issue. For example in a pair of reports on quality in the early childhood sector (Education Review Office, 1997, 1998), New Zealand’s ERO lists a range of criteria (in areas like record keeping, adherence to government-mandated objectives and priorities, and programme delivery), which apparently constitute, *de facto*, a sufficient definition of quality.

In a series of widely used assessment tools designed to measure quality in early childhood education and care, Harms, Cryer and Clifford (1980) and Harms and Clifford (1980, 1989, and see Little, 1997) distinguish between *process* quality and *structure* quality. Process quality is defined as classroom interactions – staff to children, staff to parents, children to children – and the interactions children have with the many materials and activities in their classroom environment, as well as those features, such as space, schedule and materials that support these interactions. Structure indicators are, for example, staff/child ratios, group size and cost of care – in other words, assurance and accreditation factors.

According to these authors, a quality program must provide for three basic sets of children’s needs: Protection of their health and safety, positive relationships, and opportunities for stimulation and learning from experience. Each of the three should be visible in a preschool’s environment, curriculum, schedule, supervision and interaction. The broad definitions of quality in these assessment tools are, say the authors, consistent with the Criteria for Quality Early Childhood Programs of the US

National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, and with US Child Development Associate requirements.

Where does the hospital preschool fit into these considerations? There is a strong focus on structure indicators – to satisfy audit requirements, qualify for government incentive funding, and measure operational success. And there is an increasing focus on process quality – on performance excellence and continuous improvement, with leadership, strategy, customer, human resource, child care and educational processes all assertively reviewed and improved.

It seems to this writer that even better performance – in this preschool and in this educational sector – will be achieved by separating rather than aligning the two sets of goals; by taking accreditation as a necessary but not sufficient start and by focusing on process quality – testing progress against, for example, the Baldrige criteria. Fletcher (1999) offers a template for just such an approach, and Jasinski (1999), notes that in the USA, in an “exciting and interesting educational experiment,” there is a move away from accreditation – in part because of questions about its utility, in part because of the arrival of a Baldrige award for education – towards their replacement by “continuous quality improvement principles.”

Lessons learned

(1) *There is no quality budget.* The preschool does not have a quality team, does no training in quality methods, and has not adopted or contracted-in a ‘branded’ quality product. Quality is not an add-on – a project that might be sidelined when other priorities intervene – it is the essence of how things are done.

(2) *The BDQA/Baldrige criteria are used as a test, not a template.* The preschool came to the Baldrige criteria three years into what at time of writing (late 1999) was a five year performance improvement initiative. The manager found a good fit between the criteria and what she was doing, allowing her to test and validate her approach. Applying the criteria “made the process more overt.” (personal communication).

(3) *Leadership is highly visible, but distributed.* A leadership system with explicit responsibilities and accountabilities, clarity of purpose, a strategic planning process which cascades from mission to metrics, and unambiguous definitions of customer relationships, products and processes, communicated clearly by all leaders, are characteristics of this preschool.

(4) *Meetings matter.* This preschool is small, in both physical size and numbers. It is reasonable to assume that inter-staff contact is frequent and communication almost continuous. Staff turnover is low. Yet there are frequent, purposeful, meetings.

(5) *Teamwork works.* Five-person teaching teams, each with a leader and with negotiated internal and external relationships, have total responsibility for the educational and child care product this preschool delivers.

(6) Perhaps the most significant lesson is the most obvious – that it can be done! Good management (defined in Baldrige terms) can yield high performance and exemplary results, in both outcomes (child and family benefit) and outputs (efficiency and effectiveness) in a preschool just as it can in a commercial organisation.

4,600 words, not counting abstract or reference list

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