



Dr Marina Papic

Manager Kids' Early Learning, Blacktown City Council (NSW)



My vision for high-quality EC education is based on several factors. First, I bring to this role as the Manager of Kids' Early Learning at Blacktown City Council over 30 years of practical and leadership experience including researching and working with communities. I use this expertise for raising the quality and pedagogy of our EC services. I believe whatever we do must be evidence based, research informed and evident in all of our documentation about children's learning. This is quite a different focus for the local government context and has required a rethinking about incorporating research evidence in our programs, and engaging with research is new for many staff. For example, the staff developing our 'Ready for School and Ready for Life Programs' are considering current research and are investigating innovative practices so that the program we deliver will be of the highest quality.

Second, I believe that engagement with the community—linking with, for example, allied health, education, other children and community services—is essential. I believe this is a more effective way for us as a council to operate. For instance, we are engaging with varied community and health services in a project that will see a speech pathologist employed to come into a number of services as a member of staff to work with the children, families and educators. Another example of working closely with the community has been a project funded by Family and Community Services (FACS) looking at how we can engage families from low socio-economic and diverse cultural backgrounds. By working with many stakeholder agencies including the NSW Department of Education, BOSTES, parenting support services, university representatives and other EC organisations and providers we can start to think about what is best for the children in this community and how we can make our services more accessible and appropriate for all children and families in our community. For instance, I know EC qualifications do matter in EC settings; my research background informs me of this. So I want the best and most qualified EC teachers working in our services. So it is about planning for this: what are our current levels of qualifications, who in the organisation wants to upskill and complete further studies and how can we attract high-quality EC teachers and educators into our services? This requires us to engage with universities and TAFEs for professional experience placements and traineeships. We want to support their work as well as give students a good experience while they are studying EC.

Third, staff need to be provided with opportunities to be in positions of leadership. This could be working on projects with the community, sitting on committees that engage with our community partners, and also having a voice and say about our organisation. By providing staff with professional development they can become the advocates and leaders for EC and our sector. For example, at the moment staff are involved in developing a practitioner inquiry project with some external academics with the plan for staff to present at a conference later this year. This means they can share what they are doing, what they learnt, and strive for best practice in their work with young children. Our commitment to research-informed practice and to leadership is evident in our successful educator conference 'Leading the Way', where 10 internationally renowned EC researchers and experts presented current research and approaches to innovative practice.

Family engagement is also linked to high-quality EC settings and the research again provides evidence for us on this. We are currently looking at what services families engage in within the community to see if we can tap into them that way. We found that some families take their children to

library sessions such as the interactive, early literacy program Baby Rhyme Time for children from birth to two years of age. This program is designed to support parents and carers to enhance their child's early literacy. We are working with library staff to look for opportunities for our EC staff to attend and support those sessions to build our connections with these harder to reach families so they can feel more comfortable coming into our services.

Engaging with families is a big goal and we are working with other services within the council and across the community to engage more effectively with our diverse families. So, in many different ways we are trying to engage with the community to ensure we have the best services for the children and families in our community. We are one organisation, one team, and we have a shared vision and mission. Our staff are reporting they do feel like they 'belong' and this is critical—it's not just about children and families belonging, but the staff need this too. Rebranding to Kids' Early Learning has been successful in supporting this sense of belonging. Working with many stakeholders and even ones traditionally viewed as competitors is making a difference for our community. We have relationships with health organisations, the Department of Early Childhood, FACS, other local children's services, universities, TAFE and national organisations such as Goodstart. This ensures a united and integrated approach to meeting the needs of the children and families in our local government area.