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## Being in sync: Strategies to support centres' retention of childcare teachers

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**Abstract:** Australia's *National Quality Framework (NQF)* is seeking to improve teacher qualifications and ratios to lift the quality of education that young children access (COAG, 2013). The retention of childcare teachers, however, remains a constant challenge as this work continues to be poorly paid, and its importance is frequently misunderstood (Productivity Commission, 2011). Recognising that infant and toddler wellbeing is inextricably linked to the consistency and wellbeing of the teachers who care for them, this article considers the relational factors which created team cohesion and teacher retention across four Long Day Childcare (LDC) services in South Australia. When childcare teachers are able to negotiate a common approach to their practice, they feel able to share their feelings and work in ways which are both professionally gratifying and personally fulfilling.

**Keywords:** Teamwork, childcare, teacher retention

## **Introduction: Supporting teaching quality and viability**

Over the past three decades there has been continuing political, social and academic concern over the organisational dimensions that can shape and influence the quality of education and care young children encounter in Long Day Childcare (LDC) services. A focus on *structural* dimensions like group size, ratios, teacher qualifications and experience are typical, as are *procedural* factors like relationship-building, leadership approaches and reflective practice, which underpin most quality assurance processes (Carson, Maher & King, 2007, Cheeseman 2007; Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004; Rush, 2006; Sims, Guilfoyle & Parry, 2005). Quality assurance requirements and mechanisms usually focus on teaching content and program standards, as well as operational controls like teacher qualifications, ratios and documentation (Andrew, 2013; Brown, 2007; Jovanovic, 2012). Influential longitudinal studies suggest, however, that staff continuity is an equally important quality assurance measure (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1998).

Childcare teachers need space and time to create trusting and meaningful relationships with young children that are pivotal to quality early childhood education and care. Long-recognised by childcare teachers, Australian workforce investigations have begun to take note of the role teacher retention plays in this continuity of care (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2013; Productivity Commission, 2011). These studies typical focus on issues around pay, status and career prospects, failing to account for the role relationships with colleagues and families can play in the childcare teacher's sense of wellbeing, teamwork and job satisfaction (Bretherton, 2010; Manning-Morton, 2006; Rolfe, 2005). The skills involved in this relational work are often subsumed under the guise of 'communication', 'reflection' or 'self-management' rather than being acknowledged as the complex handling of emotions and relationships (Andrew, 2013; Lovat & McLeod, 2006; Osgood, 2010). As such, this study sought to understand the relational dimensions of 28 childcare teachers' work with their fellow LDC service colleagues and families.

Over two years and across four South Australian LDC services (see *Table 1*), teachers discussed the dimensions of team cohesion that had influenced their sense of job satisfaction and intent to remain (in their job). Each service had human resource policies that aimed to guide their approach to professional working relationships, in ways that showed respect, trust, worth and support for one another. Participating childcare teachers indicated, however, that this guidance was not an accurate depiction of what was at the heart of forging and maintaining collegial relationships with others in their daily working lives. Descriptions of what helped them to forge and maintain such connections are shared in this paper, grounded in the participating childcare teachers' voices, with regard to how they experienced or would like to experience working with others in their LDC service.

*Table 1: Demographics of participating LDC services*

<b>Service pseudonyms</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Places</b>	<b>No. of staff</b>
Blanchview	Community-based (non-profit)	53	22
Greenmount	Corporate (for-profit)	100	20
Eva Valley	Community-based (non-profit)	25	6
Collinsvale	Corporate (for-profit)	62	13

## **Negotiating beliefs & expectations**

Each of the four LDC services had goals or philosophies that aimed to unify and guide teacher practices. Hands-on, play-based and developmentally appropriate approaches were emphasised, shrouded in aspirational statements like “each child has the right to reach their full potential”. How teachers could or should share, negotiate and enact their own particular teaching beliefs (as a teaching team member) was less clear. For example, Blanchview offered “staff development and the provision of a supportive environment for individual staff”; while Greenmount noted that their approach “[is] also reflected within each room’s team leader’s personal philosophy and goals.” Centre discussions and observations revealed how these childcare teachers came to share and negotiate their beliefs with their colleagues and what impact this had on their work together in- and across-teams.

Primarily, participating teachers saw effective team communication as key to working together in unison. By speaking with each other about their beliefs and expectations, Kelly emphasised that “You don’t have to tell people about how people are working or they don’t do their job”. But, in Ned’s words, we do “... just have to tell people how you’re feeling, you know?” Like these Blanchview teachers, Collinsvale’s Kayla, Emma and Callum noted the importance of developing and sustaining a team culture where people are open to each other’s ideas and are flexible in the negotiation of team roles. When such a culture exists, Callum noted that we can then “... provide those needs for the children as a whole, which is what we’re there to do ...”. The team-based negotiation of beliefs and expectations in working with young children was undermined, however, by two main barriers in these LDC services.

First, when agreeing to what beliefs and expectations should guide their work, observations of teacher practice showed how such expectations must be fluid enough to best support young children’s needs in-the-moment. For instance, Blanchview team-leader Carrie said that one key dimension of her team’s approach was that “... nobody is allowed to carry babies around all day. It’s

bad for their back, [and] for the child's sake, for their development." In implementing this approach, fellow team-members Kelly and Sarah were seen doing everything they could to settle an upset child settle to sleep (see Observation 1). In doing so, they appeared to ignore the possibility that the child was seeking physical comfort.

• A third teacher decides to put the transitioning child who is crying in a pusher. Sarah wheels him inside and asks him if he'd like a biscuit. Kelly asks what needs to be organised, as Grace is finishing the day in babies. Kelly talks with the teacher about the child she is helping to get to sleep in a pram. Sarah at the same time continues to talk softly and only occasionally to the transitioning child – showing him an a-frame toy and talking with him about the colours of the beads and how they move. The transitioning child stops crying and touches the beads. Sarah then talks with Kelly about packing up outside before Grace comes. When transitioning child begins crying again, Sarah says, "I'll check his nappy." Kelly adds, "See if he has a dummy." Sarah comes back and gives him a dummy, saying, "He's dry." The child continues crying. Kelly calls out, "Don't worry, Mum's back soon."

#### Observation 1: A hands-off approach

. The consequences of sticking so rigidly to the team's agreed-upon beliefs and expectations needs us to be cautious, to ensure that such a focus does not act as a barrier to the responsiveness of caregiving with young children.

Second, when staff changes take place, a number of new and/or casual relief childcare teachers experienced greater difficulty in developing a unified team approach in the (short) space of a few weeks or months. Working across a number of teams at Greenmount, experienced relief teacher Willow explained the effect that such change had on one of her teams:

*... because the team leader is quite new and the other worker is very quiet, they don't talk much at all. And I know that's a problem for the other staff, you know, because these two are not pulling together and creating a team, you know, they pretty much look after the kids and do what they want without communicating to each other about, you know, "We've got this plan, let's implement it, and this is how we're going to do it." It just doesn't happen.*

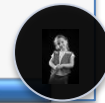
Collinsvale teachers Cathy, Di and Kayla faced similar barriers in their work after the baby-room team-leader had left. Expressing the effect of this change on her work, Cathy noted:

*... you get used to one team-leader and then you've got another coming in who's got different ideas. So that's been a bit (pause) just because they work differently and how they do things, just getting used to that (shakes head).*

Consequently, Cathy and her colleagues described how they subtly and covertly handled team discord. For example one teacher turning music on as she left the room and another immediately turning it off, under the muttered guise of "It's not really calming them [the children] down." Where there was staff-consistently over a sustained period of time, childcare teachers were able to meaningfully focus on the needs of the children in their care. For example, Greenmount's preschool teacher, Sasha, said that her long-established team's preschool program offered a range of educational experiences (see Observation 2).

•A colleague hands out a pencil to each child as Sasha tells the children how to put their paper, to make sure they all have space near each other, and to put their pencils on the ground. Sasha then asks all the children to check again, going through the instructions again. Sasha begins to explain how the different shapes represent the steps to drawing the dragon. Sasha draws the same shapes on the blackboard as she draws and explains. A fellow teacher sharpens pencils over a bin. Maria writes on the observation clipboard nearby the circle. The drawing instructions last for several minutes. Sasha praises individual children and responds to their questions. Sasha also comments on the children's comments about the dragons. Sasha says under her breath, "You can see who is ready for more, who's done this before." Maria nods and laughs.

Observation 2: Offering a preschool program



A lack of time for teacher colleagues to meld, culture and sustain such shared approaches to their work [with young children] was thus a second significant barrier to the negotiation of team beliefs and expectations.

### Sharing feelings: Interdependence

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Each LDC service in this study had broad policies about the importance of teachers working well together to ensure continuity between staff over time: “Staff will be trained and work together as a team” or “all staff should work together as a team along with families of the children and other professionals ... [to ensure] continuity between all staff.” Eva Valley’s and Collinsvale’s grievance procedures stated more specifically how childcare teachers must take responsibility for their feelings and the working environments they subsequently create:

*Don’t dwell on the personal, concentrate on solving the problem immediately. Gossip, backstabbing, malicious and negative discussion is destructive, and cannot be tolerated. It is important to be a team player. If you feel unable to negotiate with or express your feelings and needs to another staff member or parent, the Director is able to act as a facilitator or confidential sounding board.*

Across each LDC service, participating teachers appeared to take this responsibility seriously, by asking each other if they were okay or needed help, relevant to their workplace context and the reading of their colleagues’ emotions, in-the-moment.

This ethic of interdependence was observed on numerous occasions. At Eva Valley, a very small team of five teachers (across the service) needed to work together closely when making decisions about issues like teacher-to-child ratios or effectively supporting children’s routine needs (like toileting). Similarly, teachers at Greenmount and Collinsvale were observed asking each other how they were feeling after a rising sense of frustration was noted after busy mornings or when grappling with personal issues outside of work that may be causing stress. In doing so, these teachers momentarily prioritised the expression and support of each other’s emotional needs and wellbeing ahead of the children’s.

Teachers explained that there were two key reasons why such interdependence in teams was necessary and emotionally-sustaining in their work with each other (as well as with families and the children in their care). First, it offered a foundation of ‘rapport’ that supported teachers to easily and effectively communicate with each other about potential issues or disputes in the team’s work



before they escalated into “bigger problems”. Blanchview teacher Samantha gave a highly emotive example of how her lack of rapport with a colleague led to continued poor communication about their decision-making [for teaching and learning], and in turn, to her feeling disempowered and stressed over time:

*I know the routine really well, and I just do it, but she sort of asks you what you want to do, like instead of just letting you do it, and if you say you have to think about what she wants you to say cos if you say the wrong thing she'll be like, “Well I did that yesterday” or something, then, “Oh, can I do this?” So I'm like, well why didn't you just say that in the first place? She sort of asks you but then she's very manipulative and she tells me off. But when she tells you off she doesn't tell you off and move on, she bring it back up all the time. So it's a bit stressful.*

Samantha's colleague may have had good intentions about teaching collaboratively as a team, but when this sense of interdependence was missing there was no common understanding from which to build from when communicating with each other.

When interdependence was fostered through effective communication, however, teachers discussed how they had a sense of belonging that was empowering and unifying, despite some marked differences in their views and approaches. Participating teachers like Alana, Leanne and Gemma explained that when you feel you know everyone, you know where things are and how the day “runs”, then this makes you feel like “an important part of the team”. Such socio-emotional connections were a source of pleasure and when this was missing Maria aptly noted “... you tend to learn to step back a bit and do as much as you can within your own sphere and just get on with it because you know you're not being listened to.” It is this sense of rapport and belonging that was one of the single most important reasons that participating teachers continued their work in LDC. Such positive working relationships offered a sense of shared understanding and mutual support that was emotionally-rewarding.

### **Using humour**

Participating teachers were also observed using humour as a subtle way of fostering rapport, camaraderie and belonging amongst teams. Specifically, humour was used to cope with the work challenges teachers were facing. Participating teachers joked with each other about individual children's idiosyncrasies, for instance (see Observation 3; Blanchview). Humour was also used as a means of conveying their sense of anger or frustration whilst keeping the tone light (see Observation 4; Greenmount). Consequently, humour became a way for teachers to alert their fellow team-mates to problems and issues on-floor in a way that minimised any sense of alarm or discontent for the children in their care (see Observation 3; Collinsvale).

- **Blanchview:** Kelly says "I can smell someone", as she comes back outside. Sarah and Kelly swap. Sarah asks the children about what they are doing. Kelly says to a child, "It's you!" Sarah says, "Let's go then, poppet." Kelly brings in another child and says "I'll do this one next." Sarah goes back out and says, "Actually, it's not this one." Carrie and Sarah laugh. "It's the weather," says Carrie. "Very *win-dy* weather today!" They laugh together even harder.
- **Greenmount:** Jackie and her colleague talk about how the last cushion had a jammed zip and couldn't be used after washing them. Jackie says, "Well, I think I'm clever enough to fix that." Jackie tries and then puts it in the middle of the circle of children. Jackie says "Ta-da!" Her colleague laughs - "That's not right!". She then fixes the cover whilst singing songs with the group that have gathered for morning tea.
- **Collinsvale:** Kylie walked into the infant room in the last half an hour before the service was due to close. Looking around the room at more babies than usual, Kylie commented "Aren't there too many people in here for this time of night." The two educators who were remaining behind due to numbers laughed in unison.

### Observation 3: Laughing it off!



Humour was thus used as a more covert way for teachers to share their feelings that supported their development of team rapport and connection, and helped them sustain their teamwork.

Discussions with participating teachers gave further insight into the key role that humour played in their effective work in teams. In particular, sharing a joke or a laugh together was noted as one way of showing understanding of each other's personalities and ways of working, to [in Tessa's words]:

*.... adjust to the place that they are working at and the people that they are working with as well. It's really sort of a personality-based thing as well, I think. I mean, you can do things as a team, but you need to acknowledge that everyone has got different needs in that team.*

Humour allowed them to form a shared appreciation for individual colleague's, team's and service's "idiosyncrasies", perhaps even allowing them to down-play or defuse the personal or shared difficulties they were encountering in their day-to-day work (Adams, 2007). Blanchview's Grace remarked that having a laugh together [like this] was one way for teachers to be "... more in tune with the children and the caregivers that we use" so that teams "all just seem to gel and to move" in synchrony. Consequently teachers Emma, Kate and Sandra noted that working relationships forged with humour were more like "a friendship between the whole group" as "people socialise together and not just work together." Childcare teachers appear to use humour both to "soldier on" and to nurture camaraderie, understating and defying the challenges they frequently described in their work by jesting together.

#### **Conclusion: Building & retaining team cohesion**

To think practically about the implications of the participating teachers' thoughts and experiences of their working relationships with their colleagues, the following framework is intended to scaffold childcare leadership and management's thinking about the possible ways in which they could cultivate teachers working relationships with colleagues (see Figure 1):

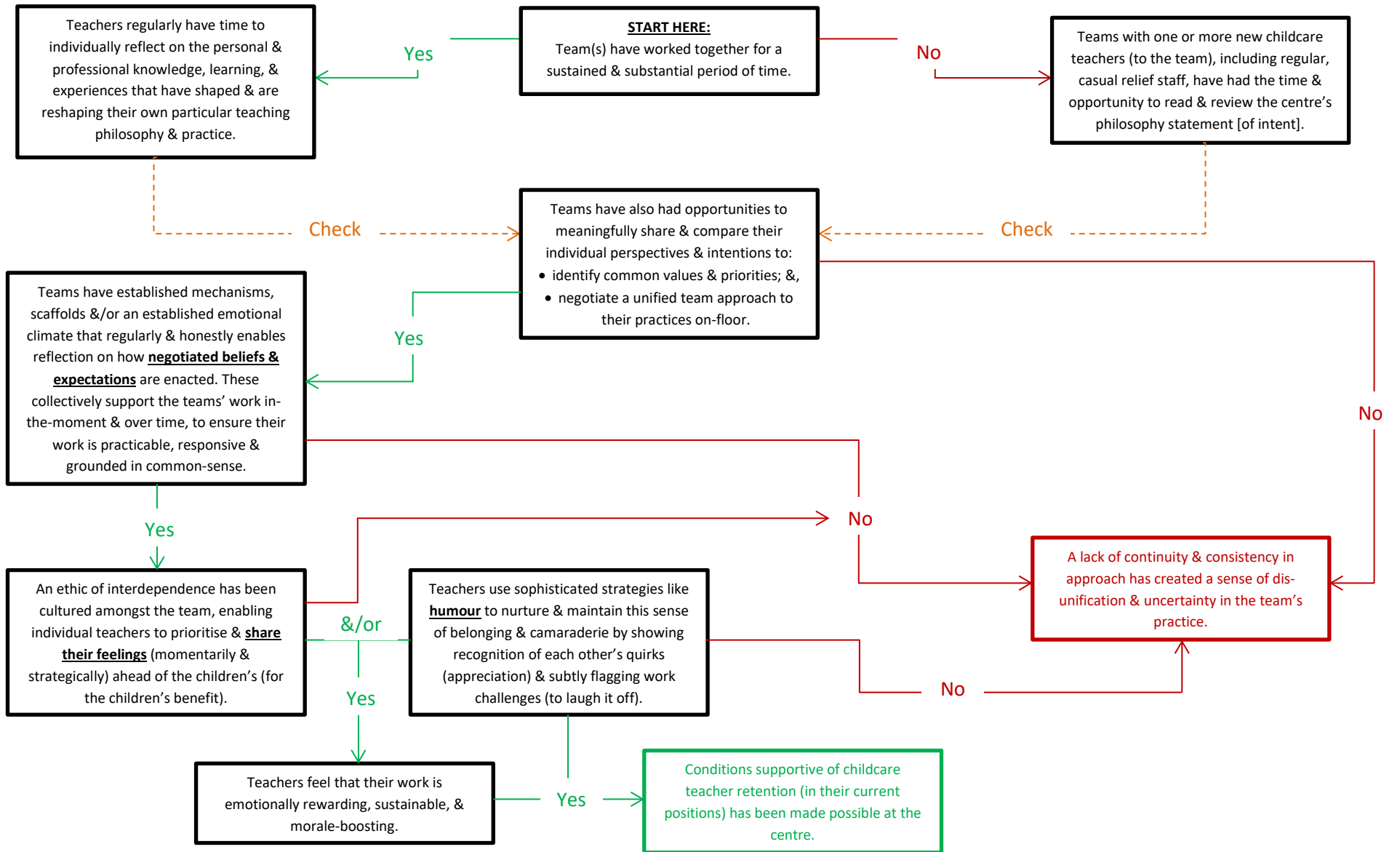


Figure 1: Framework for Building & Retaining Team Cohesion

This study's findings suggest that three interrelated factors may, in part, create conditions supportive of childcare teacher retention:

1. **Negotiating beliefs & expectations**

Participating childcare teachers noted the importance of sharing and negotiating a common approach to their work, as they each bring complex values and approaches that are shaped by their own unique experiences [personally and professionally]. But if the Early Childhood field, more broadly, cannot define common beliefs and expectations like “best practice” and “high quality” that are often used in LDC (Kummon, 2010; Osgood, 2010), it is likely to be particularly challenging for individual teams to do so when they are also faced with difficulties associated with poor staff continuity and the dynamics of working with young children.

2. **Sharing feelings**

However, participating childcare teachers reported that when they had this sense of a shared approach, they had had more time to regularly reflect on and review their own contributions to the team's work on-floor; a finding supported by previous research (Jovanovic, 2012; Manning-Morton, 2006). Being open and reflective collectively created an emotional climate that enabled them to candidly share their feelings [with each other] and shift team priorities together. As a result, such teams owned their shared approach rather than following something that was externally created in policy (e.g. centre philosophy statement), reportedly fostering feelings of empowerment, belonging and purpose.

3. **Using humour**

As Adams' (2007) work in aged-care has similarly noted, participating teaching teams that had successfully negotiated their shared beliefs and expectations, and consequently shared their feelings openly, used humour as a covert and sophisticated mechanisms for:

- flagging work possibilities and challenges;

- readily show appreciation for and tolerance of each other's quirks at work; and,
- conveying anger or frustration, alerting their colleagues to issues and effectively sharing their feelings.

To sum, this study sought to better understand how the dimensions of childcare teams' work may affect individual teachers' feelings about their work and their intent to remain in their positions. At the heart of this issue is an acknowledgement that positive working relationships with colleagues are an integral part of childcare teacher retention. Centre leaders and management must note: childcare teachers' camaraderie at work cannot shift to become more emotionally-rewarding, sustaining and morale-boosting without mechanisms for them to individually and collectively consider their values and approach on- and off-floor, and over time.

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