

Leading for quality in Western Australian early childhood services: An emerging framework

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All Australian children and their families have an equal right to access quality early years education. To achieve this, rationalisation of the Australian early childhood (EC) sector in 2007 saw the introduction of mandated governing frameworks, including the National Quality Framework (NQF), designed to regulate and assure quality practices across the sector. Understanding what quality is and how it is demonstrated in EC services is critical to young children's learning and development. However, issues engrained within the sector exacerbate challenges in leading, achieving, and planning for quality improvements. This research analysed Western Australia's NQF service ratings across geographic locations and governance of organisational structures for the most recent publicly available figures. It became clear that Quality Areas One (educational program and practice) and Seven (governance and leadership) held the greatest number of Working Towards ratings, with particular attention drawn to regional EC services. Given the link between programs and leadership, this research makes recommendations for improving EC service leadership and quality through enhanced professional learning and clarification of the early childhood educational leader (ECEL) role. This article proposes an emerging framework of leadership that emphasises the impact of leadership on quality ratings.

Introduction

Every Australian child and their family have the right to quality early childhood education and care, regardless of where they live. Expectations in relation to quality service delivery were established under an extensive reform agenda, initiated in 2007 by the Australian Government and translated through the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (ACECQA [Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority], 2020); Council of Australian Governments, 2009). This shift was driven by a growing understanding of the importance of quality education in young children's achievement of positive developmental and learning outcomes, juxtaposed with Australia's unsatisfactory ranking in the 2006 Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) standards (United Nations Children's Fund, 2008). Not only is quality education important in young children's lives, but it is fundamental to increased economic growth through national capacity building (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010; Hanushek & Woessman, 2021; Robinson et al., 2021). It is therefore important that educators, service providers, families, and policy makers understand what quality within the early childhood (EC) sector is, what it looks like, and understand the influence that leadership has on practices that ensure quality outcomes for all children, as defined by the NQF. For this article, EC services are defined as "Centre-Based Long Day Care" providers who deliver education and care to children between and from birth to five years of age (ACECQA, 2020).

This article exclusively explores the nature of quality in the Western Australian (WA) EC sector, as set out in the NQF, and the role of EC leadership in helping services achieve

National Quality Standards (NQS). Perth has long been considered the world's most isolated capital city, and a significant amount of WA is classified as regional (Department of Home Affairs, 2022), which in turn presents unique challenges for the WA EC sector.

This study investigated the relationship between service's achievement of quality, as identified through Education and Care Regulatory Unit (ECRU) awarded quality ratings, and leadership through a review of leadership literature. The research question that framed this study was: What is the relationship between quality, as defined by the NQF, and leadership in the achievement of NQS in WA EC services? While this research is situated within WA, it is of relevance to the EC sector more broadly, across national and international contexts, in terms of how quality and leadership is framed, understood, and enacted.

Background

To guide quality service delivery, the NQF was introduced in 2007. It comprises seven *Quality Areas* that are informed by research and practice based on national laws and regulations. These were elaborated into the NQS and systems for ECRU's identification and assessment of quality in EC services (ACECQA, 2020). However, in practice it is what happens on the ground in services that shapes learning environments and facilitates children's achievement of both developmental and learning outcomes. Efficient operational service management is only one element of quality service operations; the impact of effective service leadership within EC services must also be considered. Specifically, leadership that inspires and promotes excellence in education is a key driver of quality. This notion is alluded to within the NQF, Quality Areas One (educational program and practice) and Seven (governance and leadership), which describe leadership with specific reference to distributed and pedagogical models. Within the NQF, both quality areas refer to concepts of positional leadership. It is the service's context that defines and is defined by EC leadership practices, highlighting the importance of understanding the contextual factors that underpin each individual EC service to fully realise the nature of their leadership practices (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2012).

The rationalisation of the Australian EC sector

Following rationalisation in 2007 by the Australian Government, reform agenda resulted in the creation of the *Australian Early Years Learning Framework* and NQF, which is unpacked into comprehensive elements through the NQS (ACECQA, 2020; Council of Australian Governments, 2009; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009; Robinson et al., 2021). Assessment conducted by ECRU considers EC services' achievement of the NQS across seven Quality Areas. This assessment forms the basis of awarding a service a rating ranging from *Excellent* to *Significant Improvement Required*. Consequently ECRU will take immediate action to support those services awarded *Significant Improvement Required* (ACECQA, 2020; Neylon, 2015). EC Leadership has been identified as a key contributor to the quality of the service provided and hence may have direct impact on the service's quality rating (ACECQA, 2020; Sims et al., 2017).

Australian NQS

The NQS, revised in 2018, encompass seven quality areas that serve to support education practitioners, service operators, and assessment processes (ACECQA, 2020). The seven quality areas elaborate on all areas of service operation, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The seven Australian national quality areas

Quality Area	Description
Quality Area 1	Educational program and practice
Quality Area 2	Children's health and safety
Quality Area 3	Physical environment
Quality Area 4	Staffing arrangements
Quality Area 5	Relationships with children
Quality Area 6	Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
Quality Area 7	Governance and leadership

Leadership concepts are consistently referenced across Quality Areas One and Seven and set out the role of the Early Childhood Educational Leader (ECEL) in leading educational programs and practices (ACECQA, 2020). While this study initially focused on all Quality Areas, scope was narrowed to examine Quality Areas One and Seven in more detail because of their emphasis on EC leadership. In Quality Area Seven, ECEs are emphasised as the primary source of leadership in an EC service, and this leadership is defined by pedagogy (ACECQA, 2020b; Sims et al., 2017). The responsibility of ECEs for mentoring educators to provide curriculum guidance, implement cycles of planning, develop educational programs, and integrate the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is emphasised explicitly by ACECQA and thus underpins the achievement of Quality Area One (ACECQA, 2020b). However, despite the importance placed on the role, the current sector-wide guidance provided to ECEs is insufficient; there is no indication of the qualifications, skills, and experience from ACECQA or ECRU to form the criteria for selecting an ECEL. Position descriptions are generated at a service level with no mandated state or national involvement in what the role entails (ACECQA, 2020; Sims et al., 2017). As a result, ECEs lack clarification as to their role, their responsibilities, and the expectations of the ECEL (Fleet et al., 2015; Sims et al., 2017; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). This is potentially a challenge for the delivery of quality educational programs and practices as the ECEL is expected to lead this quality within their service (ACECQA, 2020).

The NQS Quality Area One considers three components: program, practice, and assessment and planning (ACECQA, 2020). Quality Area One focuses on educational programs and practices that are child-centred and stimulating, and advocate play-based approaches to education. Through these pedagogical approaches, ACECQA (2019) suggested that quality programs support children's development of knowledge, skills, and capabilities that have long term benefits for the individual child and broader community. Throughout Quality Area One, the approved provider, nominated supervisor, and ECEL are responsible for overseeing all programs and practices,

ensuring they promote the NQS (ACECQA, 2020). Importantly, the ECEL is promoted throughout Quality Area One as the key driver behind quality assurance and improvement of individual educator and team competencies working with programs and practices (ACECQA, 2020). The responsibility of the ECEL and their impact on quality educational practices and programs, as indicated by ACECQA, is undeniable, despite the limited support provided to those in ECEL positions.

Quality leadership, driven by ECEs, is considered central to improving organisational culture and supporting ongoing professional learning for educators (ACECQA, 2020). Moreover, Quality Area Seven described three facets of leadership in an EC context: continuous improvement, educational leadership, and professional development (ACECQA, 2020b). However, it can be argued that these components, as set out in the NQS, only superficially frame support for leaders in a complex EC context (Klevering & McNae, 2018). Additionally, ACECQA's available resources reflect a limited conceptualisation of leadership in EC education as the literature provided is narrowly focused on the leadership associated with distributed and pedagogical leadership approaches (ACECQA, 2018a; ACECQA, 2018b; Green & Bickley, 2013; Workforce Council, 2018). Therefore, ECEs may not have the support they require to become quality leaders and in turn may be under-prepared to effectively lead their service to achieve high-level quality ratings.

Education providers, such as long day care services, endeavour to promote pedagogy as their key operational purpose. Educational leadership has accordingly received much research attention throughout the history of education, with various theories emerging (e.g. Gibbs, 2021; Male & Palaiologou, 2015; Myran & Masterson, 2020). Careful document analysis of the NQS indicates reference to three approaches to leadership in the EC sector, namely: pedagogical, distributed, and positional leadership. Literature in these areas is now discussed in relation to the principles of leadership alluded to in the NQS.

Pedagogical leadership

Pedagogical leadership in the EC sector is emphasised by ACECQA (2019), who highlighted the responsibility of the ECEL to lead the EC service's achievement of quality outcomes within Quality Areas One and Seven. As a result, it is assumed that education providers must support leaders who subscribe to pedagogy and as such are considered pedagogical leaders (Male & Palaiologou, 2015). Past research has explored pedagogical leadership through teaching and learning with ambiguous and limited discussions about the relationship between leadership and pedagogy (Male & Palaiologou, 2015; Sergiovanni, 1996; Van Manen, 1991). Male and Palaiologou (2015) described leadership as a process shaped by context, rather than a prescriptive model. Complications in employing a pedagogical leadership approach were examined by Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) who suggested that pedagogical leadership cannot comprise a siloed approach. Rather, pedagogical leadership must be considered in the context and expectations of the leaders in focus. Interpretations of pedagogical leadership in the EC sector are highly political and emphasise the role of teachers as leaders as they guide children on their academic journeys (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Katz, 1997; Robinson et al., 2021; Sergiovanni, 1996).

The connections between distributed leadership and pedagogical leadership demand consideration, drawing attention to the collaborative nature of pedagogical leadership practices (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). Thus, Gronn (2011) posed a hybrid leadership framework in which both pedagogical and distributed leadership approaches are key components to the complex leadership roles within the EC sector.

Distributed leadership

Pedagogical leadership, frequently referred to within the EC sector (ACECQA, 2020; Male & Palaiologou, 2015; Sergiovanni, 1996; Van Manen, 1991), is arguably embodied through a distributed approach. Research literature emphasises the importance of sharing tasks and responsibilities across the EC service rather than focusing on those in an organisational role, such as the ECEL (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Male & Palaiologou, 2017; Sims et al., 2017). This EC leadership approach is affirmed by ACECQA (2019b, p. 96) who stated, “of the many different styles of leadership, distributed leadership has been found to be most effective in education settings.” However, a distributed approach to leadership is more complex than simply shared leadership (Gibbs, 2021; Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2012), with no agreed clear definition (Tian et al., 2016). Discussions are often prematurely concluded at this point of shared leadership but should be expanded to include the collective interactions among leaders, followers, the context (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2012) and considerations of broader changes and impacts that a successful shift to distributed leadership requires (Huffington et al., 2019). It has been assumed that leadership comes from those in positions of power, such as a chief executive officer or school principal. This contradicts distributed leadership principles, which suggest that leadership should not exclusively fall to those in positions of power (Spillane, 2012). Rather, those at the helm require trusting partnerships that nurture emerging leaders and co-leaders to harness optimal organisational performance and success (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2012). Theories of distributed leadership acknowledge the requirement for multiple leaders in educational environments, in both formal and informal positions (Gibbs, 2021; Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2012).

A distribution of leadership is a key concept and underpins the essential empowerment of employees by encouraging their independent leader identity development and qualities (Carson & King, 2005). Klevering and McNae (2018) discussed the influence of the ECEL position in relation to a distributed leadership model, noting that it caused reluctance among educators when identifying leadership themes within their work. Specifically, many educators did not identify as leaders, felt inadequate, and were resistant to embracing leadership opportunities (Klevering & McNae, 2018). These findings raise important questions about the empowerment of educators within a positional leadership structure derived from the ECEL position as described in the NQS. Developing educators' leadership competencies is of great importance in driving ongoing quality improvements and involvement within a distributed leadership approach, as described within the NQS (ACECQA, 2020; Rodd, 2013).

Positional leadership

Due to the potentially disempowering nature of leadership positions within EC services, it is important to understand the nature of positional leadership. This style of leadership refers to the individuals who are identified by their positions of power or authority within the workplace. Individuals may assume these positions through election or appointment, and subsequently provide the vision for the workplace (Brannon et al., 1989). Positional leadership is a common leadership approach in the EC sector because ACECQA (2019) prescribed the ECEL as a leader, with responsibility for overseeing ongoing quality improvement processes across the seven Quality Areas, through the educational programs and practices. However, positional leadership has been shown to disempower employees in their work with the belief that thinking is the manager's job and they simply do as they are told (Sanders, 2014). This places full responsibility for organisational success on managers, hindering innovation and achievement (Sanders, 2014; Weinsten et al., 2020). Positional leadership approaches contradict research conducted by Sanders (2014), which identified that the source of new ideas and innovation in an organisation often comes from the outskirts or through interactions between staff, not those in top positions (e.g. managers and ECEs). The limitations of positional leadership are expressed through a variety of education and business leadership literature, yet remains embedded within the NQS as an advocated approach to leadership in the Australian EC sector.

Despite its limitations, positional leadership in the EC sector has been identified as potentially playing a critical role in fostering distributed leadership across the organisation (Colmer et al., 2015 ; Denee & Thornton, 2021). In this context, positional leadership is viewed as a coordinator role rather than a position of power. Positional leaders are expected to facilitate leadership opportunities for those in their teams and support change, growth, and access to current information (Denee & Thornton, 2021). This leadership perspective suggests the potential for a hybrid approach, whereby positional models support one component of distributed leadership: responsibility delegation (Spillane, 2012). Denee and Thornton (2021) investigated the impact of positionality in the New Zealand EC Sector, and identified key practices demonstrated by successful leaders, including developing trusting relationships with colleagues, coaching and mentoring educators, and providing opportunities for individual leadership development through inquiry and innovation. While some research literature has emphasised the disempowering nature of positional leadership approaches, the Australian EC sector demonstrates a hybrid approach, valuing positionality for the facilitation of distributed leadership.

Management and leadership: Interwoven roles

Despite the growth in the volume of literature exploring leadership in EC education, a disconnect remains between research and the elaborations of leadership concepts within the NQS. The privatisation of EC services has created a unique situation, consequently placing great emphasis and focus on operating a profit-driven business. Like all businesses, Western Australian EC services have an organisational structure that facilitates operations. In general, Western Australian EC services are organisationally structured featuring a centre director, the NQF mandated ECEL role, and a range of educators

working across diverse educational positions (ACECQA, 2017). Operating EC education businesses has developed an interwoven role between leadership and management, with unclear distinctions between the responsibilities, extending confusion as to the ECEL role (Klevering & McNae, 2018; Rodd, 2013). However, distinguishing the roles of manager and leader is a challenge as both roles may be seen as essential for the optimal performance of an EC service and are often assumed by one person (Klevering & McNae, 2018; Krieg et al., 2014; Rodd, 2013). This contradicts definitions of leadership, as managers may be leaders but must not be assumed as such (Heikka et al., 2020; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Krieg et al., 2014; Rodd, 2013). The complexities of this situation have been emphasised by Sims et al. (2019) who identified the unclear division of authority between ECEs and centre directors, particularly in situations that the roles are undertaken by one person. The centre director and ECEL positions must be distinguishably different, as one entails line management of staff and financial and operational management, whilst the other places responsibility of mentoring, supporting, and developing staff on the ECEL (Sims et al., 2019).

Further complicating leadership and service quality are issues pertaining to funding and geographic context. Despite rationalisation of the Australian EC sector, each state and territory receives varied amounts of funding, determined by each state government. During the 2019-2020 period, the Northern Territory received the highest amount at \$7,651,790 per 1000 children enrolled in long day care services and WA the second lowest nationally, receiving just \$199,200, as depicted in Table 2 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], n.d.; Australian Government Productivity Commission [AGPC], 2021).

Table 2: State and territory expenditure on child care services 2019-2020

	Unit	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
Total exp.	\$'000	135,333	16,148	86,465	9,761	17,544	6,747	9,112	29,842
No. children in LDC	'000	202.6	150.7	139.3	49.0	33.9	10.2	11.2	3.9
Total exp. per 1000 children	\$'000	668	107	621	199	518	661	814	7652

Notes: exp. = expenditure. LDC = Long day care. Figures displayed in this table are only relevant to child care services in Australia and does not include Federal funding. Total expenditure per 1000 children was rounded to the nearest whole number, calculated using the formula: Total exp. per 1000 children = (Total exp.)/(Total children in LDC)

A range of factors have been identified for the unequal participation of families in EC services across Australia. These include geographic location, family socio-economic backgrounds, family cultural background, and specific child health and physical needs (Baxter & Hand, 2013; Molla & Nolan, 2019). Despite much attention from political agendas, inequality in Australia has persisted with particular areas of concern traversing those families from low socio-economic backgrounds, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (Molla & Nolan, 2019). Moreover, significant accessibility and quality variations in EC services have been identified across diverse geographic locations (Raban & Kilderry, 2017). Since 2008, Australian Government have been working to

improve the quality of ECE and accessibility of families by increasing funding allocated to EC services (Molla & Nolan, 2019). However, despite increased federal funding, disparity in cost and quality of EC services across Australia remains across the diverse organisational structures of services (Molla & Nolan, 2019). This may be of particular concern for community EC services who rely on state government funding, grants, and community involvement, compared to those services structured to maximise profits. While implementation of the NQS has been a positive step in assuring quality across the EC sector, issues surrounding the role of the ECEL in Quality Areas One and Seven in leading this quality are exacerbated by funding and geographic conditions in Western Australia.

Method

This study set out to explore the relationship between quality and leadership within the Western Australian EC sector, as defined by the NQS and contextualised by the low levels of funding and the unique geography of the state. Data was explored through a critical theoretical lens, aiming to not only interrogate quality ratings within the Western Australian EC sector but to question how geographic location and governance of organisational structures impact quality early years education and care (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Through a critical theoretical lens, researchers question the boundaries of competing disciplines and stress their interconnections, promoting the development of new theories to represent emerging social phenomena (How, 2003; Kellner, 1989). While critical theorists use the word ‘critical’, the semantics relate to a theorist’s critique as they do not seek to provide criticism but rather to emancipate the disempowered from fragmented phenomena caused by dominating factors, providing a voice, power, and representation to all members of the social group (Cohen et al., 2007; How, 2003; Kellner, 1989). This theoretical lens was employed to consider the overarching research question that formed the foundation for this research.

Data source and analysis

This research involved an interrogation of the Western Australian Service Register (ACECQA, n.d.), to understand the distribution of quality ratings attained by services across all regions of Western Australia and diverse organisational structures, including for profit, not for profit, publicly listed, and community services. While the research initially focused on all Quality Areas, emerging findings resulted in the scope narrowing to explore Quality Areas One and Seven. Both areas were identified due to their significantly higher percentages of *Working Towards* ratings and the responsibility of the ECEL across both areas.

The Western Australian Service Register provided by ACECQA (n.d.) was used to facilitate the collection of data relevant to this research. This information is publicly available on ACECQA’s website, providing up-to-date data about Western Australia services’ operations and quality ratings. To ensure complete transparency, approval was sought from ACECQA to analyse the data and disseminate research findings. Criterion sampling was used to filter data. This included considering the date of assessment and

rating, location, and offerings of the EC service (ACECQA, 2020; Palinkas et al., 2014; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Sampling criteria are elaborated in Table 3.

Table 3: Criteria for sampling

Criterion	Explanation
Date of assessment and rating	As the NQS was amended and implemented in 2018, changing the criteria for the assessment and rating processes (ACECQA, 2020), Date of Assessment and Rating criteria was established, only including services rated from 2018 onwards.
Location	This research exclusively considered services operating in Western Australia as a location criterion due to the state and territory government's funding responsibilities and variation in the structures and service offerings between states (AGPC, 2021; Parliament of Australia, 2019).
Offerings	Due to the diverse nature of service offerings in EC services, it was important to clarify the type of service in focus. For this study, only centre-based long day care services were included in the data set (AGPC, 2021).

This study employed a quantitative data analysis method, using univariate descriptive analysis, with both ordinal and nominal categories being used. Specifically, frequency counts and percentages were used to describe the nature of the Western Australian EC sector emerging from the data (Blaikie, 2003; Punch & Oancea, 2014). The Western Australian Service Register data is downloadable in Microsoft Excel file format. This data was organised and analysed through Microsoft Excel and cross checked to ensure data was not lost or altered through the process. A large quantity of data was extracted from ACECQA's service registers for Western Australia. For the purpose of this article, the data was reduced to focus on services with low achievement, observable through ECRU awarded *Working Towards* the NQS ratings. This data was analysed across all Quality Areas, geographic distributions, and organisational structures.

Results

The quantitative results from this research were represented through figures and descriptions of emerging findings. These results share the distribution of *Working Towards* ratings across all quality areas and geographic locations with closer attention to Quality Areas One and Seven in regional Western Australia. Following this, Quality Areas One and Seven's *Working Towards* ratings were examined through varied governance of organisational structures. Finally, correlations between Quality Areas One and Seven were calculated and demonstrated. Through criterion sampling, 448 services were deemed eligible for this research, with 111 classified as regional services (ACECQA, n.d.). At the time of data collection, the ratings of Western Australian EC services ranged from *Working Towards* to *Exceeding*, whereby there were no services holding a *Significant Improvement Required* or *Excellent* rating. The *Working Towards* ratings across all Quality Areas, geographic distributions, and organisational structures is presented in Figure 1.

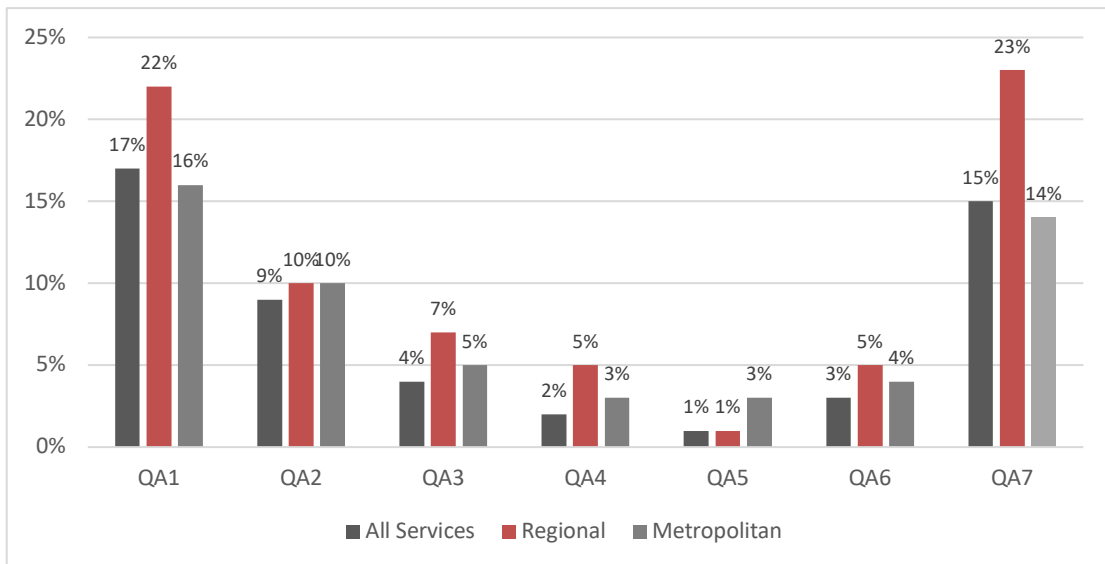


Figure 1: Distribution of Working Towards ratings across all quality areas and geographic locations in WA

Figure 1 indicated that Western Australian regional services contained the highest percentage of *Working Towards* services compared to the broader Western Australian sector. Additionally, it was evident that the percentage of services rated *Working Towards* in each geographic location was significantly higher in Quality Areas One and Seven.

When considering regional services in Western Australia, it was important to further refine and narrow analysis to the specific regions, as defined by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (2017). This refined view with focus on Quality Areas One and Seven in regional locations is presented with percentages of services with a *Working Towards* rating in Table 4.

Table 4: Working Towards Ratings in Quality Areas 1 and 7 by region

Quality Area	Gascoyne (n=1)	Goldfields-Esperance (n=9)	Kimberley (n=7)	Mid West (n=10)	Peel (n=24)	Pilbara (n=10)	South West (n=24)	Wheatbelt (n=17)
QA1	0%	22%	43%	20%	8%	50%	13%	29%
QA7	0%	33%	43%	30%	4%	40%	13%	35%

Table 4 demonstrates that the Peel and South West regions had the highest number of EC services (24 per region), reflective of their higher populations and closer proximity to Perth. Table 4 also indicates that a greater percentage of *Working Towards* ratings occur in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions, with almost half of the services rated *Working Towards* in Quality Areas One and Seven. These regions are followed by the Wheatbelt, Goldfields-Esperance, and Mid West, with 20-35% of services holding a *Working Towards* rating in Areas One and Seven.

The data collected was further refined to look beyond geographic locations and include the governance of organisational structures within Quality Area One, as set out in Figure 2. Services were categorised according to organisational structures: community, for profit, not for profit, and publicly listed services.

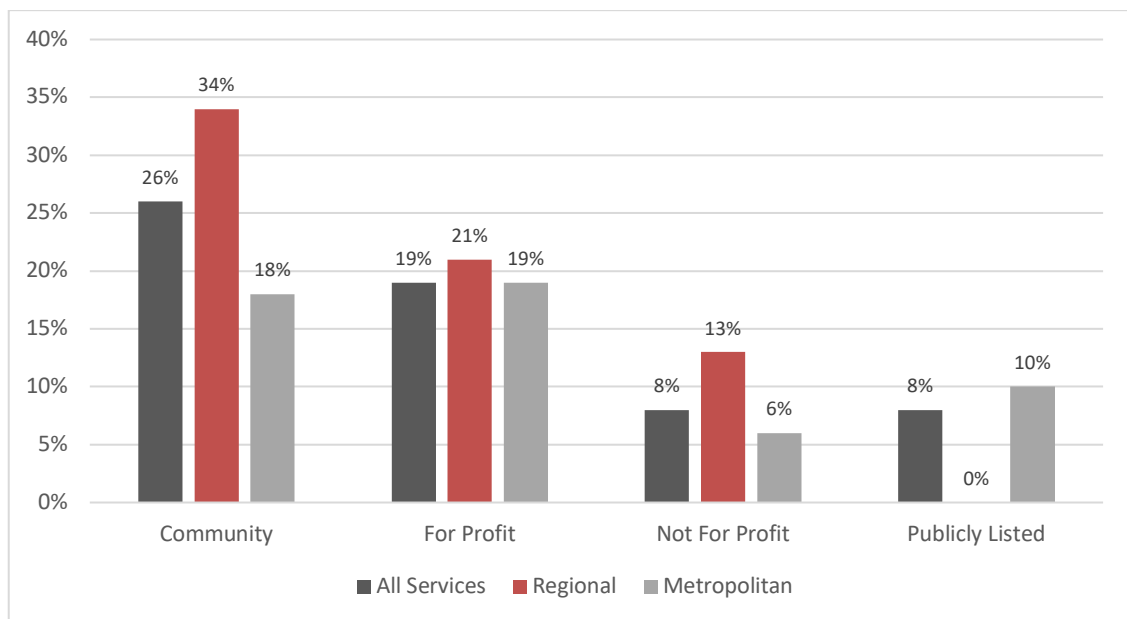


Figure 2: Working Towards ratings in Quality Area 1 by organisational structures

Analysis of data presented in Figure 2 highlighted a higher percentage of *Working Towards* ratings in community services, on average. Specifically, 26% of all community services, 34% of regional community services, and 18% of metropolitan services in Western Australia hold a *Working Towards* rating in Quality Area One. Figure 3 presents the percentage of *Working Towards* ratings in Quality Area Seven categorised by governance of organisational structures.

Figure 3 illustrates the percentages of *Working Towards* community services, which were slightly lower in Quality Area Seven as 21% of all services, 31% of regional services, and 12% of metropolitan services in Western Australia held a *Working Towards* rating. Alarming, the highest percentage of *Working Towards* services in Quality Area Seven involved For Profit services in Metropolitan areas with 56% of services rated *Working Towards*.

As *Working Towards* ratings were higher overall within Quality Areas One and Seven, it was essential to determine the relationship between these ratings. This was realised by identifying services rated *Working Towards* in Quality Areas One and Seven, highlighting those that were rated *Working Towards* across both areas as opposed to those rated *Working Towards* in only one of these areas. This data is presented in Figure 4, where 69% of services were rated *Working Towards* in both Quality Areas One and Seven.

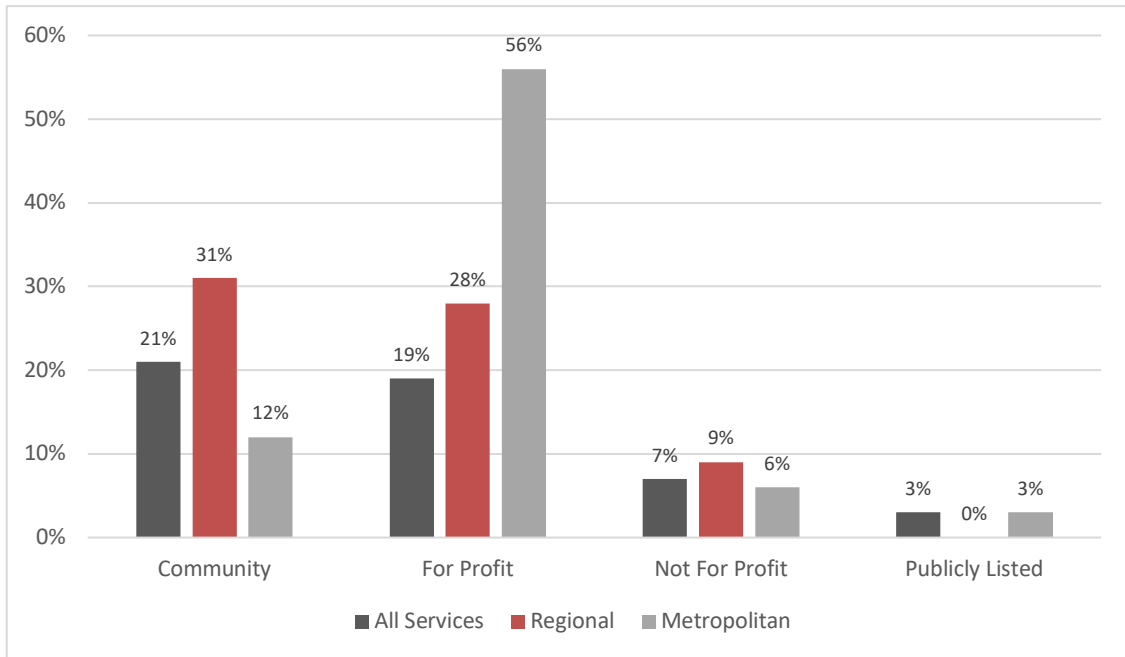


Figure 3: Working Towards Ratings in Quality Area 7 by organisational structures

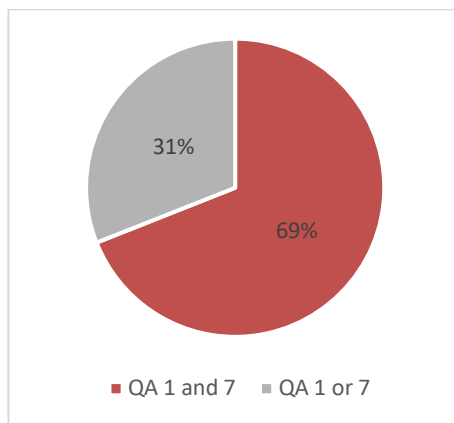


Figure 4: Correlation of Working Towards Ratings between Quality Area 1 and Quality Area 7

Statistical correlations of Quality Areas One and Seven were also calculated by assigning a numeric representation for each quality rating with *Exceeding* represented as 1, *Meeting* represented as 2, and *Working Towards* represented as 3. These calculations returned a correlation of 0.75 suggesting that Quality Areas One and Seven were positively correlated. Results emphasising the high correlation between ratings in Quality Areas One and Seven, suggest a common concern across both areas. Given the role played by leadership in driving and determining quality ratings, it could be assumed that issues surrounding leadership directly influence ratings in Quality Areas One and Seven.

Discussion

This research found the percentage of services across the Western Australian sector with a *Working Towards* rating to be significantly higher in Quality Areas One and Seven. Specifically, 69% of *Working Towards* services in Quality Areas One and Seven hold this rating, indicating a high correlation (0.75) between both. Quality Areas One and Seven are reportedly overseen and promoted by the ECEL as part of their pedagogical leadership role defined within the NQS. (ACECQA, 2020). However, acknowledging the ECEL as a positional leader potentially disempowers other employees and could reduce their reception of distributed leadership opportunities, subsequently impacting quality ratings (Sanders, 2014; Weinsten et al., 2020). Moreover, the privatisation of the Australian EC sector has created a unique situation with tension between meeting key profit incentives and educational outcomes (Klevering & McNae, 2018; Rodd, 2013). The operation of EC education services as businesses has developed conflicting roles between leadership and management and it is difficult to separate roles as both are deemed important for the performance of an efficient EC service (Klevering & McNae, 2018; Krieg et al., 2014; Rodd, 2013). These tensions exacerbate the challenges faced by ECEs while trying to promote quality and improvement, as outlined in Quality Area One (ACECQA, 2020; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Krieg et al., 2014; Rodd, 2013) and evidenced in Figure 3. As a result, the support and professional learning provided to ECEs in a complex environment may not be sufficient and could lead to ECEs being underprepared to effectively lead teams to achieve high quality outcomes, as defined by the NQS (ACECQA, 2020).

Data analysed also indicated a higher percentage of *Working Towards* services in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions across Quality Areas One and Seven. These figures draw focus into Western Australia's remote regions and the nature of EC services provided. Specifically, the Pilbara and Kimberley regions are geographically the furthest regions away from Perth, which may present geographic challenges to service operations. Moreover, the percentage of services holding a *Working Towards* rating in the regional areas are significantly higher in community operated services. These findings are concerning and highlight the need for further investigation into how to support regional communities and their EC services to improve their quality. This is of particular concern in the Kimberley with a population of approximately 50% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the Pilbara with a population of 16% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples compared to the state's average of 3.8% (Kimberley Development Commission, 2021; Rural Health West, 2015). The challenges faced in these areas may result from staffing difficulties in regional areas, whereby the State Government has committed an additional \$1 million towards supporting EC services to attract and retain early childhood educators (Government of Western Australia, 2022). However, funding to the Northern Territory (Table 2, \$7,652 per 1000 children) is currently 38 times higher than the funding received in Western Australia (Table 2, \$199 per 1000 children), indicating potential opportunity for further inclusion of the EC sector in Western Australia's state budget and funding allocations.

While the NQF supports stakeholders' understandings of quality and how this may be demonstrated in EC services, the significant number of *Working Towards* ratings in Quality Areas One and Seven indicates a need for further investigation into why this is occurring. The results of this study reveal a strong correlation between Quality Areas One and Seven and suggests that leadership complexities and challenges may play a major role in determining these ratings. Despite guidance provided by the NQF, it may be that the implementation of supporting information, guidelines, and frameworks is insufficient. Additionally, the leadership approaches articulated and alluded to in the NQF may not be explicit enough, reflective of the sector's complexities, and/or applicable to all services. Based on the interrelations between leadership approaches set out within the NQF, the impact these may have on quality ratings, and the literature review that underpinned this study, an emerging EC leadership framework is proposed and illustrated in Figure 5.

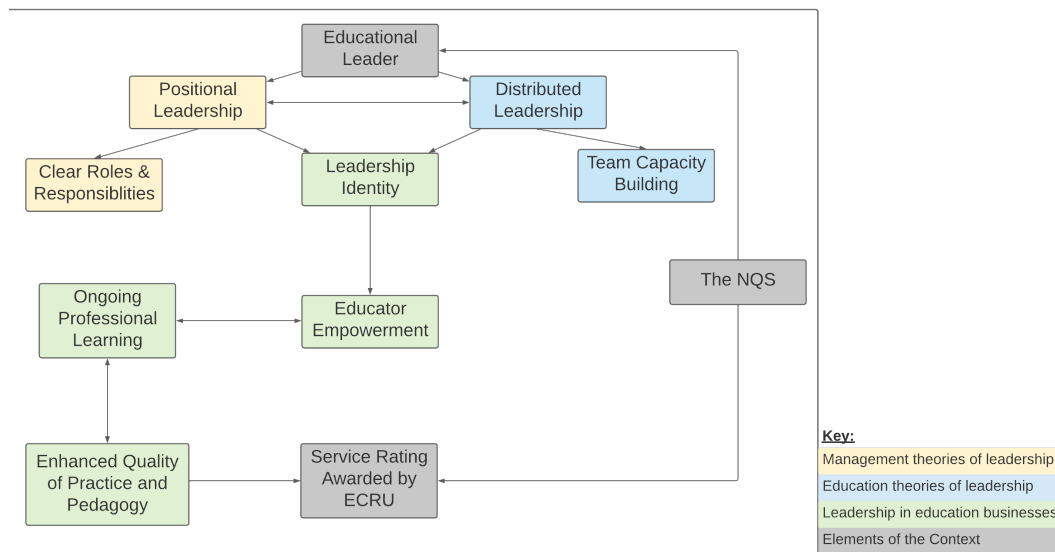


Figure 5: Leading for high quality ratings in the Australian EC Sector
(use web or PDF reader 'zoom in' function to facilitate reading)

The proposed framework highlights the leadership approaches required by those in ECEL positions and the direct impact that this could have on educators and subsequent quality ratings. The literature review underpinning this article highlighted the implications of leadership in the Australian EC sector, where positional leadership facilitates the distribution of leadership opportunities (Colmer et al., 2015 ; Denee & Thornton, 2021). It is then understood that quality EC leadership empowers educators and promotes ongoing professional learning and enhanced quality of practice and pedagogy. As evidenced by analysis of the Western Australian Service Register, these practices potentially impact a service's awarded rating and appear directly influenced by leadership. The framework presented in Figure 5 could be employed to inform the development of EC leadership professional learning opportunities, as well as used diagnostically to understand and explain the percentages of *Working Towards* ratings reported in the

Western Australian EC sector. Understanding the importance of leadership practices across the Western Australian EC sector is critical to service's achievement of the NQS and overall quality improvement. Based upon the implications of this study, it is the leadership of these services that supports or hinders the achievement of quality outcomes and ratings across diverse operational structures and geographic locations.

The findings of this study highlight cause for concern regarding quality ratings across the sector, particularly in regional EC services in Western Australia. Specifically, this research has revealed a correlation between Quality Areas One and Seven, and thus calls attention to the influence of leadership and the ECEL role in service's achievement of quality ratings. It is undeniable that quality EC education and care is essential for children, families, and the broader society and economy. In order to continue to realise this, Western Australian EC services need to acknowledge the fundamental role of leadership in guiding services to achieve high NQS quality ratings and identify opportunities for leadership growth and development within the sector.

Conclusion

In summary, analysis of the Western Australian Service Register data has highlighted Quality Areas One and Seven as the most problematic. Specifically, it has identified services located in regional locations as having the highest percentage of *Working Towards* ratings across Quality Areas One and Seven, with community-based services leading this trend. Given the emphasis on leadership stressed in Quality Areas One and Seven, a key reason for these low ratings may directly relate to the quality of leadership currently demonstrated in Western Australian EC services and exacerbated by issues related to funding and geographic context. Confusion over the ECEL role is potentially worsened by conflicting pedagogical, distributed, and positional leadership approaches alluded to in the NQS and mediated by difficulties of interwoven managerial and leadership roles.

Recommendations resulting from this study include the need for further development of professional learning resources, and the need to ensure the accessibility and transferability of these resources and opportunities to all services regardless of their organisational structure and geographic locations, particularly to those in remote and regional areas in Western Australia. This may be achieved through targeted training courses, facilitation of mentorship, and regular support sessions hosted by ACECQA. Equal opportunity and access to professional learning in remote and regional areas may in turn support ECEs in these services and enhance their understanding and ability to achieve quality outcomes and improvement plans. Additionally, it is recommended that there is a clearer definition of the scope and function of the ECEL role within the NQS, supporting these educators to lead quality improvements. ECEs need to be supported to understand how their leadership positions within a service can potentially be a key source of educator empowerment, facilitating distributed leadership approaches and as such meeting ACECQA's expectations of distributed models. It is hoped that the emerging framework presented in this article can help create a path forward for educational leadership in the EC sector by clarifying the ECEL role and supporting professional learning and engagement.

While the Western Australian context is potentially unique due to its geographical size and relatively low levels of state funding, exploration of national data may highlight similar issues across other states and territories. It is recommended that follow up research be conducted across all states and territories, with particular emphasis on remote and regional areas, and the impact this potentially may have on the provision of quality EC services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The findings of this article also contribute to ongoing research into the leadership challenges faced by the EC sector, internationally, and offers one pathway for quality improvements through enhanced leadership practices (Guo & Kuramochi, 2019; Ho et al., 2010; Qi & Melhuish, 2017; Sylva & Pugh, 2020). Further explorations within these significant and internationally important spaces are required.

With specific reference to the Western Australian context, further work is required to improve outcomes in relation to Quality Areas One and Seven, particularly in remote regions. Within the wider international context, exploration of leadership practices in EC services are of benefit and can help inform the attainment and continuation of quality practices and pedagogies across diverse contexts and settings. Further exploration of effective leadership in international contexts can potentially contribute to international research exploring quality and improvements in EC services (Guo & Kuramochi, 2019; Ho et al., 2010; Qi & Melhuish, 2017; Sylva & Pugh, 2020). The quality of EC education and care is inextricably linked to the quality of EC service leadership. It is therefore inherent that EC leaders be better supported, for the benefit of children, families, educators, communities, and ultimately, future generations.

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Please cite as: Cross, E., Dobson, M., Walker, R. & Lowe, G. (2022). Leading for quality in Western Australian early childhood services: An emerging framework. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(4), 1321-1341. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier32/cross.pdf>