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Quality Reforms Are Worth Celebrating – But Only If They Are For Everyone

It's time to challenge institutionalised racism

Prue Warrilow, National Convenor

Late last year ACCS hosted a national celebration of the commencement of the reforms that bring national minimum standards and quality assurance to all early childhood education and care services in Australia. We met with members from around Australia and other national peak bodies to reflect, share experiences and ultimately celebrate the significance of these reforms for our sector and for Australian children. We also acknowledged and expressed our gratitude to the National Childcare Accreditation Council for its 18 years of hard work building the first ever quality assurance system for children's services in Australia.

The celebration of the new National Quality System (NQS) brought together over 130

educators, experts and passionate people from our sector on a rainy day in Melbourne on 30 November 2011. We heard from Minister Garrett on the commitment of the Australian Government to early childhood education and care, recognising investment in the early years as investment across a person's lifetime. He spoke on the Productivity Commission Research Report on Early Childhood Workforce Development and took questions from the audience on issues such as wages, universal access to preschool, quality and shortage of qualified staff; and afterwards he engaged in informal discussion with participants. For many in our sector this was their first opportunity to spend an extended time with the senior Minister in the Commonwealth Government, a very empowering experience.

Inside this Issue

Your Peak Body in Action 2

National Children's Commissioner for Australia's Children 2

ACCS meets with Minister Ellis 3

Parent Speaks out in Support of NQR 5

A Report on the National Children's Services Forum 6

How to contact ACCS State and Territory Branches 8



Left to right: Prue Warrilow, (ACCS National Convenor), David De Silva (DEEWR), Geraldine Atkinson (SNAICC), Robyn Munro Miller (NOSHSA Chairperson) at the NCAC Farewell, October 2011

Four peak body organisations spoke on the significance and importance of the NQS. Pam Cahir from Early Childhood Australia spoke eloquently of the strategic benefits of the quality reforms and the complex process of each state introducing its own respective laws in order to bring about a consistent national standard. She highlighted the momentum and excitement this process has created and the years of lobbying that brought it into existence.

A passionate parent and child care committee member, Melissa Jacka spoke on the sensitive subject of increased costs brought about by improving quality. While acknowledging the complexity of the issue she said that having more highly qualified staff working with smaller groups of children was a priority for her and should be a priority for all – quality is worth the cost! Further details of Melissa's inspiring address are inside this newsletter.

But the speech which attracted the strongest response from the audience was Geraldine Atkinson of the Secretary of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), who gave a stirring speech which described as institutionalised racism the placing of services such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children Services (MACS) as out of scope of the NQS. Once again Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being put in the 'too hard basket', a practice that must cease immediately if the NQS is to narrow the gap between outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and those of other Australian children.

In Geraldine's words 'Aboriginal Child Care Services were not encouraged by the Federal Government to participate in the NQS because they are too difficult to work with and would require additional funding for upgrades and maintenance to get them to the required standards to meet NQS, hence the saying that they are put in the too hard basket.

'Governments find it too difficult to assist in creating change within Aboriginal services and families - this to me is institutional racism. Aboriginal Child Care Services particularly the MACs work with some of the most vulnerable children in society and do a wonderful job considering the lack of resourcing that they have. These services should be resourced to enable them to build their capacity to provide the quality standards that the rest of society's children enjoy.

'We work within a cultural context in our early years services; this does not mean that our service is second rate or poorly run. During my time on the NQS stakeholder reference group I have advocated that Aboriginal context and child rearing principles be taken into account.'

The audience was moved by Geraldine's call to action, for the sector to unite and lobby for immediate investment in the capacity of out of scope services to successfully participate in the NQS, to prevent the children in these services from receiving a lesser standard of quality than others.

ACCS has resolved to focus on this issue into 2012, working in partnership with SNAICC and others in our sector to ensure the government hears that national standards are for all Australian services and children.

One of the opportunities to advocate will be when Australia reports to the United Nations on the Convention of the Rights of the Child in April/May this year. Every five years the Government has to front the United Nations to detail how it is meeting its obligations to children in Australia. ACCS wonders what our Government will be saying about out of scope services in the NQS – "Well – we're trying but it's

really hard. It needs a lot of work, it needs a lot of resources. We've got Closing the Gap, we've got the Intervention, we're doing stuff".

We say that's not good enough – not good enough for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families, their communities and the MACS services that work hard to meet local needs. That's not good enough for other budget based funded children's services like mobiles who go into those hard and often tricky to reach places in rural and remote areas providing a vital link to education and care services to children and families who live there. We wonder what SNAICC will be saying when it presents its report on how Australia is going in meeting the UN Convention obligations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Your Peak Body in Action

Barbara Romeril, National Secretary

ACCS is making progress in implementing our national action plan from last year's face to face meeting in Sydney. We have successfully commenced planning for a biannual survey of member services to gather ongoing data on trends and the impacts of government policies in the real world. Our internal operations are improved, with increased participation by members of the national executive in fortnightly telephone planning sessions and some research into potential sources of funds to support our work. We have also started reviewing options for a national brand for non-profit community children's services

But there is still much to be done and the action plan will continue to guide our planning to ensure we stay on track to be an effective voice for the community children's services sector across the nation. The AGM and National Council meeting in late February reviewed progress and gathered initial feedback on how the roll out of the National Quality System (NQS) is going in each state and territory.

Hosting the national celebration of the NQS was a major priority in late 2011 – we are now focussing on follow up advocacy in support of government investment in building the capacity of Aboriginal children's services and other 'out of scope' services to successfully participate in the NQS.

We are seeking meetings with relevant Members of Parliament and senior DEEWR officials to keep up the dialogue on the key policy initiatives which ACCS has identified as making a real difference to children, families and the community services they rely on.

ACCS Advocacy

National Children's Commissioner for Australia's Children

Recently, ACCS joined 33 organisations, representing the leading children and youth organisations across the country in advocating for a National Children's Commissioner. Together the 34 organisations submitted an NGO position paper to the Australian Government (available on the ACCS website) outlining the proposed role and responsibilities of a Children's Commissioner in Australia. This included a

complaints mechanism that would allow children and young people to bring forward complaints of violations of their rights. Additionally it proposed the Commissioner to replace the current Minister for Immigration as the legal guardian of all unaccompanied minors entering Australia. ACCS believes this would ensure that children and young people in this situation are not negatively impacted with the conflict of interest that takes place with the current process.

The need for a National Children's Commissioner has been long discussed in Australia and falls under Australia's obligations as a signature to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child.

In 2010, ACCS lent our support to the Commonwealth Commissioner for Children and Young People Bill, put forward by Greens Senator Hansen Young. While the Bill was not initially successful in 2010, we still see this work as critical to ensure that all Australian children have their voices and concerns heard at all levels within Australia and will continue to work towards it.

Research in 2012

ACCS members have a strong history of involvement in informing ACCS policy positions and advocacy focuses. In 2012 we will be starting a new way to ensure that your voices are heard by government and the media. Starting soon we will be sending out invitations for you to participate in a short biannual survey that will track trends on workforce retention, recruitment trends, fees, implementation of NQS and much more.

We are very excited about this work and hope that when you receive the email you will take the 10 minutes to get involved!

ACCS Meets with Minister Ellis

Prue Warrilow, National Convenor

ACCS held a very positive meeting with Minister Ellis in December.

We briefed her on our proposed 6 monthly survey and undertook to provide her with information as it emerges including any issues with National Quality Framework (NQF) and the real fee increases in the community-owned sector.

ACCS also raised our support for bringing out of scope services into the NQF as soon as possible, including Aboriginal services and mobiles. We proposed strategies to ensure there are adequate early childhood teacher numbers for 2014 requirements, for example by expanding the HECS exemption with bonded places back into long day care.

We also discussed ways to expand the community sector and the history of the Commonwealth loan scheme paid back over 15 years by not-for profit organisations.

Minister Ellis is interested in looking at how community children's services help support and build local community and economic infrastructure. She reiterated her appreciation of ACCS' support for the National Quality Reforms.

Productivity Commission

A major piece of ACCS' work in 2011 was inputting into the Productivity Commission's (PC) Research Report on the Early Childhood Development Workforce. This report

requested by Minister Garrett, was intended to provide an additional economic perspective to the mix of predictions of the sector's workforce capacity under the new reforms. To inform our submission to the PC we surveyed ACCS members to gather evidence on recruitment, qualifications, staff retention and quality of qualifications. We thank all members who participated in this process; your participation ensured that the leadership of the community not for profit sector was reflected in our submissions.

Released on the 1 December 2011, the Report directly contradicted other modelling, predicting that the reforms will bring about a 15% increase in cost of care and that families will leave services due to financial strain.

To come up with this prediction the PC used an approach that ACCS believes is misleading and is adding fuel to the propaganda being distributed by the commercial sector. ACCS strongly believes that the PC method fails to acknowledge the staggered approach to implementation of the national reforms while also ignoring the work of the sector to prepare for the changes since 2009. In our eyes, the modelling produces misleading estimates of costs of care and ignores the Government's capacity to respond to ensure all families can access and afford quality services.

ACCS welcomes the PC findings and recommendations for investment in out of scope services including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, so they can participate as soon as possible in the NQS – the PC rightly points out that this is vital if we are to reduce the gap in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. As mentioned in the front page article ACCS is working closely with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) to ensure that all Australian children equally receive the benefits of the NQS.

A Parent Speaks Out in Support of National Quality Reform

Melissa Jacka, a parent on the Committee of Clarendon Children's Centre Co-operative in South Melbourne spoke passionately in support of quality at the ACCS national celebration of the National Quality Reforms in November 2011. Here are highlights of her speech.

Good Morning - it is a real privilege to be a part of today's forum, to celebrate the introduction of the National Quality Framework alongside key leaders in early childhood education and care from across the country.

Like many parents, my husband and I work full-time in fairly demanding jobs. It's surprising how often people say, "I don't know how you do it!" My usual response is that I'm very lucky because my kids attend this wonderful community childcare centre that's just around the corner from home. What I really mean is that I'm not crippled with guilt when I go off to work because I know that they are getting the best start in life – and they are.

Our centre has an excellent reputation for providing the highest quality early childhood education and care, and it's something that we are immensely proud of.

continued on pg 5



**Change &
Leadership...**
**"Who's the
Ringmaster?"**



ACCS National Conference

Friday and Saturday 18 & 19 May 2012

Novotel – Northbeach – Wollongong

Keynote – Craig Rispin – CSP Business Futurist & Innovation Expert

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continued from pg 3

Ours is a small centre of just 40 places and yet we have a waiting list of 248 at last count. I really do feel lucky that I made it to the top of that waiting list six years ago, because I know how many others missed out.

But really, it shouldn't be about luck. All parents and children should have access to high quality, affordable early childhood education and care services.

As parents we want the best for our kids. We'd like to be able to make informed choices about where to send them when we resume work (or whatever we decide to do), but in reality, or at least in the community where I live, very few parents get to choose which children's service their child attends. There are limited places available, so simply getting to the top of the waiting list is an achievement. Many parents have to compromise on quality, or affordability or both just to gain access.

Having a National Quality Framework that elevates the standard of early childhood education and care for all children across the country is a big step in the right direction.

I understand that improving quality will increase costs. But having more highly qualified staff working with smaller groups of children will mean that each and every child will get more individual attention from educators that have the skills and expertise to support their learning and development. That sounds pretty good to me!

As a parent, I think that if we have to pay more to ensure better outcomes for all Australian kids, then it's a price well worth paying.

Our centre has embraced the National Quality Framework. I'm really proud of what we have achieved and what we represent. We're already ahead of the game on ratios. We have a stable workforce of highly qualified and experienced educators that are passionate about their work with children. They are our biggest asset.

We understand how important it is to attract and retain the right people. We have our own enterprise agreement in place with wages and conditions that go well beyond the industry standard for the community childcare sector, and a career structure that encourages and rewards staff for the attainment of higher qualifications. We have a strong culture of continuous improvement and learning.

And yet, we've maintained reasonable fees for families.

I get a little anxious each year when we present the budget to our parent community and propose a fee increase. We always strive to maintain the balance between quality and affordability, but we also want to be better than the minimum standard. Each year I worry, and each year it goes through without a hitch, because our families understand how important attracting and retaining good quality, committed educators is to quality of care.

Our centre should serve as an example to others that high quality, affordable early childhood education and care can be provided. Admittedly, we have a pretty remarkable coordinator in Linda Davison. She's an amazing leader who has dedicated more than 23 years of her professional life to nurturing the development of our centre. Nevertheless, we are a small, parent-managed, community children's service, so if we can do it then I'm certain that others can too.

I think that the greatest challenge for everyone will be striking the balance between quality and affordability, and importantly ensuring that Australian families are better informed about the key indicators of quality in early childhood education and care.

As a parent who is passionate about early childhood education and care I welcome the introduction of improvements in quality across the children's services sector. If improving quality means that it costs a bit more, then so be it. Our kids are worth it!

Keeping an Eye on Corporate Childcare

Banks Lose battle over documents

*Sydney Morning Herald - Leonie Lamont
Feb 4, 2012*

A Syndicate of banks which secured an \$800 million charge over assets of ABC Learning just months before the childcare empire collapsed has failed in its bid to keep confidential thousands of documents sought by the litigation funder IMF.

Westpac, NAB, ANZ, Bank of America, Citibank, Mizuho Corporate Bank and Bank of Western Australia had fought an application by ABC Learning's liquidators, Peter Walker and Greg Moloney, to hand over 10,000 bank documents to IMF so it could consider whether it would fund a case against the banks.

The documents were obtained by the liquidators during public examinations of ABC Learning and bank officials last year. The liquidators claim the charge is a voidable transaction under the Corporations Act.

In the Federal Court yesterday, Justice Dennis Cowdroy recounted that the bank syndicate had loaned ABC Learning \$1.3 billion without security. In June 2008, ABC Learning gave a fixed and floating charge to the banks, five months before administrators were appointed.

Justice Cowdroy agreed there may be confidential information in the documents. "Nevertheless such consideration does not outweigh the greater public interest in ensuring that the liquidators fulfil their statutory obligations, to make recovery for the interest of creditors and shareholders of ABC Learning and to institute proceedings wherever a valid cause of action may exist."

As well as securing the charge over assets, in the months before the collapse the banks received \$500 million in debt repayments funded by the sale of ABC Learning assets.

Australia's big banks still took heavy losses on their combined corporate loan exposure. ANZ, National Australia Bank, Westpac and the Commonwealth Bank accounted for the majority of the funds owed, with debts totalling \$760 million.

Outside the court, IMF's executive director, John Walker, said the win had been fundamental, as he needed to see the documents to make sure the liquidators had a good claim.

"The banks have been unsuccessful in their attempt to seek to limit the financial resources available to the liquidators," he said.

Reports from ACCS representatives

National Children's Services Forum

The ACCS national executive attended the National Children's Services Forum meetings in November and March. The national peak bodies that make up the Forum appreciated the opportunity to meet with the new Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) - Karen Curtis, the CEO of at the November meeting and Rachel Hunter, Chairperson in March.

Karen updated us on progress in establishing ACECQA and informed us that assessors will be known as 'authorised officers'. State difference in approved qualifications will be eliminated. NCAC quality assessments will be available on the ACECQA website.

Rachel provided an update on establishment of ACECQA and its current priorities. They expect to publish criteria for the Excellent Rating by 1 July.

In relation to qualifications of authorised officers (assessors) they have set the targets for 2014 (published on ACECQA website) and will conduct research to find evidence to help decide targets for 2020. ACECQA will look into what qualifications profile best delivers consistent and reliable assessments within and between jurisdictions.

A National Consistency Plan is being developed by the Quality and Consistency Committee (QACC); to ACECQA consistency does not mean the same, it means reliability and validity in regard to outcomes for children ie the system consistently enables children to achieve outcomes that demonstrate progress.

NOSHA continues to express strong support for nationally consistent qualifications and staff:child ratios for outside school hours care and its intention to lobby for this to be introduced in 2014 after the review of the current scope for the National Quality System. The Forum advocated for 'out of scope' services to be brought within scope as soon as possible with investment in building the capacity of services to meet the National Quality Standard.

Rachel undertook to discuss with the ACECQA Board the NCSF's request for urgent research to establish nationally consistent qualifications and ratios for OSHC.

ACECQA is forming an ACECQA Forum to enable national peak bodies and other stakeholders to provide input as well as ad hoc working groups on specific cohorts or issues. NCSF offered itself as a key vehicle for collective input to ACECQA including peaks representing service types which are currently out of scope of NQS.

The Assessment and Rating system will be reviewed later this year after the first tranche to inform a report to the Ministerial Council in September; Rachel undertook to investigate how this could be made public.

ACECQA has agreed to attend the Forum regularly so we can continue this important dialogue.

DEEWR updated the Forum on progress on the next tender for the Inclusion and Professional Support Program. They nominated the next priorities of the department as looking at what services to bring into the NQS and an examination of how inclusive services are for children with special needs and disadvantaged children. They are seeking ideas for strategies to achieve the best impact in sector development with modest funding, noting their inability to fund face-to-face training to each individual service.

DEEWR is losing 500 staff by 30 June and a further 1,000 staff are moving to another department; they are gradually handing over relevant responsibilities to ACECQA such as training of authorised officers.

In response to issues raised by NCSF about limitations on Special CCB DEEWR agreed to receive detailed case studies and other evidence and to work with NCSF members to explore potential solutions.

In regard to investment in Budget Based Funded services to build capacity to participate in NQS DEEWR briefed the Forum on the \$60m currently available over 4 years for centre based BBF services providing long day care for physical facility replacement/upgrades (especially NT and Qld), workforce development (through brokering and leveraging apprenticeship) and governance support. It was unclear that the government's intentions are in regard to other BBF services including occasional care, mobile services and Aboriginal OSHC.

In regard to inadequacy of Inclusion Support Subsidy DEEWR advised that the limitation to a contribution to the full cost is government policy and any increase would need to be matched by savings elsewhere; the total funds of \$100m per year are unlikely to change.

Minister Kate Ellis attended the National Children's Services Forum in March and thanked the forum members for our support of the National Quality Reforms. She believes a key issue is the variation between services in how they engage with families and the need to bring families along in valuing and engaging with the educational goals of ECEC.

Branch Reports

NSW Branch

Gerard Moon

NSW ACCS has had a busy start to the year with the implementation of the National Quality Framework. The major work being undertaken by the executive at the moment is gathering information from our members regarding their successes and challenges when implementing the changes required under the NQF. Our aim is to gather this information and relay it to ACECQA; not concentrating on undermining the process as we are excited about the potential of the new law and regulations but to highlight issues that are coming from services and work to get these resolved.

Also, through the work of one of our members we will be making a submission to Fair Workplace Australia regarding the Modern Awards. This submission was drafted by a member, is supported by the Executive and was created in response to concerns raised by a number of members with the Modern Awards.

Our sub-committee has been continuing to work with other national ACCS members to plan the National ACCS Conference to be held in May in Wollongong NSW on Friday and Saturday 18 & 19 May 2012. Building on the reform environment of the early childhood education and care sector, the conference theme is "*Change and Leadership: Who is the ringmaster*". For more information on the conference please see advertisement on page 4.

Additionally the Executive is currently working on updating the ACCS NSW constitution to reflect legislative change. We also see this as an opportunity to review a few processes.

Lastly, during our last general meeting, Debra Clarke (CEO, UTS Children's Services) was elected to the position of Secretary on the ACCS NSW Executive. Debra brings many years experience in the management of quality Community Based Children's Services.

SA Branch

Verity Bierenboim

SA has a new Minister for Early Childhood Development the Hon. Grace Portolesi, who we will be meeting with in March to introduce ourselves as the State group of our National Body with a lot of knowledge of what is important in the sector and to discuss relevant issues that affect Community Children's Services.

As a new Minister one of her first jobs was to push through SA parliament the Education and Care Services National Law and the Education and Care Services National Regulations Bill 2011. A small group from the private sector wanted changes made to the Bill which would have put SA in legislative limbo. Robyn Geisler, Verity Bierenboim and other members from the Community Children's Sector spent quite a few days lobbying Independent and Liberal Party MPs about the Liberal Party Amendments. We were successful and the Bill was passed through parliament without any amendments on the 23rd of November 2011.

It is now the end of February and we have had a chance to see the NQS in action. Members have reported there are some very broad areas of the regulations that can make it difficult to make decisions, especially with ambiguous or lack of response coming from the State regulatory body. There is also some concern with the short length of time given to develop the Quality Improvement Plan on top of all the other changes.

Robyn Geisler our state Treasurer/Secretary has been nominated to sit on the SA Regulatory Authority, which is to be called Education & Early Childhood Services Registration & Standards Board of South Australia and will be established under the Act. We hope she is successful.

We had our first meeting on the 1st of February and we invited Paula Pittam, the State Manager for GoodStart Early Learning in the hope that she would like to join the committee, and has since informed us she would. We hope that this will encourage all GoodStart centres across South Australia to become members of ACCS.

Victorian Branch

Barbara Romeril

CCC continues to promote the positives of the new National Quality System while acknowledging the challenges it

brings. We are pleased to be resourced by the Victorian Government to support the sessional kindergarten sector in going through the steep learning curve in their first experience of a compulsory quality assurance system which we believe they will find affirming, just as various child care service types found as each of them came into the previous NCAC Quality Assurance systems.

The sector in Victoria is keenly embracing training opportunities to prepare for their first ever Quality Improvement Plans.

CCC was pleased to host the national celebration on the eve of the National Quality System on behalf of ACCS. This came hot on the heels of the CCC Annual General Meeting which was another lively and well attended event, with over 80 members, staff and other stakeholders attending to hear from Karen Curtis, the CEO of Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority and Sue Lines, the National Assistant Secretary of United Voice the Childcare Union.

ACCS in the Media

Childcare centres closing their doors

Jessica Marszalek – Herald – Sun Nov 16, 2011

Two Melbourne childcare centres have blamed government changes to care ratios for their imminent closure.

Hampton and Sandringham childcare centres will begin a progressive closure from January, finally shutting their doors in December 2013. Bayside City Council said a drop in childcare places it could offer, from 80 to 65 by 2016, would render the centres unviable.

New laws are phasing in better childcare class ratios and carer qualifications. And new national standards will take effect from January.

A nationwide petition calling for the federal reforms to be postponed until the Government can increase rebates for parents and fully pay for the changes has gathered 17,000 signatures. The petition, to be presented to MPs in Canberra on Monday, says increased expenses will force parents to quit their jobs and pull their children from long-day childcare.

But proponents of the changes argue the petition is part of a fear campaign and the changes will cost as little as \$2 a day after government rebates are factored in.

Australian Community Children's Services national secretary Barbara Romeril said only struggling centres would be at any risk.

"Our children deserve better than cheap childcare," she said.

Online Reviews Worry Some Operators

SMH Cosima Marrine January 8, 2012

Parents will soon be able to rate their childcare centre online and share their reviews with others.

The online childcare directory CareforKids is preparing to launch the Trip Advisor-style ratings system for users of childcare services, the first system of its kind in Australia and two years ahead of a promised federal government rating website.

But some childcare operators are refusing to support the ratings, warning they will be entirely subjective.

In a report for the industry, CareforKids said: "We are developing the rating system as a way for parents to provide informed comment which will hopefully assist other parents make their childcare decision."...

Barbara Romeril, the national secretary of Australian Community Children's Services, which represents non-profit centres, said: "Parents' subjective experiences of services are valid [but] it is really crucial that readers are aware this is parents' experience."

Exclusive ACCS Member Discussion Board

You are invited to join in the discussion!

We have created an exciting new space, the ACCS Member Discussion Board, exclusively designed for members to engage in discussions with other like minded ACCS members across all states and territories of Australia.

Perhaps you'd like to raise concerns about implementing the National Quality Frameworks? Or you'd like to brainstorm lobbying strategies to advocate for a professional children's services workforce? Perhaps you'd like to launch into a robust debate about ACCS' current policy positions?

We hope you'll join us in the discussion. Please contact your ACCS state or territory Delegate who will verify your membership and provide you with how to access the site.

How to Contact ACCS State and Territory Branches

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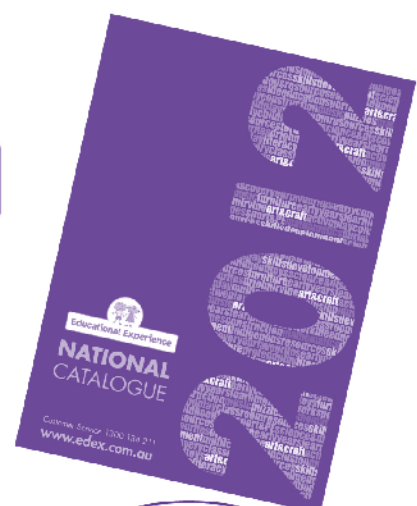


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