

School of Education

**ECEC Educator Perspectives toward Administrative Burden of
Quality Improvement Plans and its Impact on Role-identity and
Relationships**

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of
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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Human Ethics (For projects involving human participants/tissue, etc.) The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number #HRE2016-0084.

Signature:

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Abstract

In 2012 the Australian Government mandated implementation of a National Quality Framework (NQF) for services providing early childhood education and care (ECEC). Review of NQF implementation conducted between 2013-2015 (Woolcott Research & Engagement, 2014) recommended changes due to an administrative and regulatory burden on services related to the development and implementation of a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), the primary tool to measure quality (Education Council, 2014). This qualitative research study identifies the direct burden and impact of the QIP on educators, their role-identity, and their perspectives of the indirect ripple-effect of the burden on their personal and professional life. A grounded theory methodology (Bryman, 2012) examines the perspectives and practices of educators within ECEC services through qualitative interviewing, observation and document review. Data from educators who have developed their service's QIP was analysed using grounded theory approaches (such as constant comparison and theoretical saturation). Findings demonstrate that the impact of the burden includes learning, psychological and compliance costs. The findings also suggest that interpretation of policy documents, individual characteristics and situational factors within each service context influence the level of burden experienced. These findings may assist policymakers and stakeholders with insight into the ongoing impact of policy reform and implementation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

The Australian Government's *Productivity Commission Inquiry Report* (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 4) states that "almost all of Australia's 3.8 million children aged 12 or under have participated in some type of early childhood education and care". An early childhood education and care (ECEC) *service* is defined as "any service providing or intended to provide education and care on a regular basis to children under 13 years of age" (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2016c, p. 423).

The Australian Government has committed significant resources towards provision of quality care for children and mandated system-wide changes in recent years with the introduction of a National Quality Framework (NQF), resulting in an administrative burden on key stakeholders such as ECEC educators (ACECQA, 2014b; Education Council, 2014; Woolcott Research & Engagement, 2014). Related to this burden is the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), a primary tool for ECEC services to measure and assess the quality of the service they provide, implemented by educators. An *educator* is an "individual who provides education and care for children as part of an education and care service" (ACECQA, 2016c, p. 424).

Investigation is required to ascertain factors contributing to the burden, including educator role-identities across different service types. No research is currently available to indicate if there is a compounded, or ripple-effect of the impact of the burden on ECEC educators on their professional and personal life. A ripple-effect is "a spreading effect or series of consequences caused by a single action or event" (ripple-effect, n.d.). In this study, the event is the development and implementation of the QIP, and the quality rating process. The result of the relationship between them (effect or consequence) is an administrative burden.

This qualitative study, using grounded theory methodology, will ascertain educator perspectives concerning the recognised and acknowledged administrative burden. Findings of this research may highlight areas of unintentional impact of the ECEC policy reform, being the introduction of the National Quality Framework. Furthermore, comparison of the findings with recommended policy change may assist sector-wide improvement regarding policy review.

Background

In 2009 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to reform early childhood education and care in Australia. A National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda (NPNQA) for ECEC (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2008) was developed “to deliver the vision of the *Early Childhood Development Strategy* ... that by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves, and for the nation” (COAG, 2008, p. 3). To achieve this a National Quality Framework (NQF) was implemented across Australia in 2012. The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) was established as the governing body for implementation of the NQF. The NQF was mandated for long day care (LDC), outside school hours care (OSHC) and family day care (FDC) early childhood education and care services.

The National Quality Framework has been shaped by the history of early childhood education and care in Australia. When reviewing the history and development of early childhood education and care, not just within Australia but globally, two factors are present in the cause of significant change: an increased understanding of the development of children (the image of the child); and economics. These two factors are present in each milestone in the history of education and care in Australia (Press & Hayes, 2000).

As research into the development of children has progressed over time, theories of development have led to a deeper understanding of how children learn, and what factors (both internal and external) contribute to positive life-long outcomes for individuals. Ongoing research continues to reinforce that emphasis on positive early childhood development leads to positive long-term benefits for society as a whole, economically (Elliott, 2006; Press & Hayes, 2000).

Historically, there exists a divide between the terminology of ‘education’ and ‘care’, and this has flowed through to facilities that provide education and care to children (Elliott, 2006). This divide was explained by Alison Elliott (2006) who noted that due to the ‘Kindergarten movement’ there was a focus on early learning and school preparedness for young children, that being ‘education’, while other facilities such as day ‘nurseries’ existed for charitable purposes, with the welfare and ‘care’ of children the priority (Elliott, 2006). This divide has existed in the Australian context (and globally) since the first establishment of kindergartens and day-cares (also known as day-nurseries, nurseries, and crèches). Kindergarten teachers were trained with a ‘teaching pedagogy’ and a focus on curriculum based on cognitive skills required for

schooling (Elliott, 2006). Day-cares were established to care for younger children; the focus was on the health and social-emotional development of children; and they were often staffed by nurses (Press & Hayes, 2000). Ever since, kindergarten has traditionally been viewed as an educational context, the domain of qualified teachers whose focus is on curriculum and school preparedness, compared to day-care where caregivers' qualifications differ to that of teachers (Elliott, 2006).

'Day-care' was established in the early 1800s in Europe and Britain (Press & Hayes, 2000). Day 'nurseries' were created to care for children of families whose parents were poor, destitute, or unwell (Press & Hayes, 2000). The care of infants and young children was primarily provided with charitable intentions for the welfare of the children, as it was acknowledged that disadvantaged children had poorer health, life-expectancy and fewer opportunities for education and advancement (Press & Hayes, 2000). The focus in these establishments was on caring for, and nurturing of children, where "supervision and care of infants and young children during the daytime" was provided ('Historical foundations of early childhood education', 2017). The number of children deemed to be suffering poor health, poverty and disadvantage had increased in the second half of the century due to the impact of the industrial revolution ('Historical foundations of early childhood education', 2017).

In 1837 Friedrich Froebel established the first Kindergarten or 'children's garden' for children aged between four and six in Germany. Froebel's kindergarten was "a school for the psychological training of little children by means of play and occupations" ('Historical foundations of early childhood education', 2017). The success of this kindergarten founded what is known as the 'Kindergarten movement' in early childhood education in the second half of the 19th century, where many kindergartens were established for the education of children aged between four and six (Davies & Trinidad, 2012; Press & Hayes, 2000). In 1891 Australia provided its first early childhood teacher education, based on Froebel's work (Davies & Trinidad, 2012; Press & Hayes, 2000). In 1895 free kindergarten and crèche was introduced in Australia for children of poverty and a Kindergarten Union of New South Wales was established (Davies & Trinidad, 2012; Press & Hayes, 2000).

The early 1900s saw developments in the field of early childhood with much research and interest in how children develop. Many theories of development were established, and have maintained relevance during the past century. The main theorists include Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Lev Vygotsky, and Lawrence Kohlberg, just to name a few (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2016). The

relevance of their work meant that more reliable and credible information was available in relation to how children grow, develop and learn.

Globally, and within the Australian context, World War II saw the need for more care services for children, as women were required to replace men in the workforce (Elliott, 2006; Press & Hayes, 2000). The mid-to-late 1900s saw a large explosion in early childhood education globally. Kindergarten and pre-school programs became popular as they focused on school preparedness and the 'education' of children, with education recognised as a need for improvement of society with scientific and technology-based advancement (Elliott, 2006).

The Australian Government's first support of child care in Australia occurred in 1972, with the release of the *Child Care Act 1972*, where funding was provided to not-for-profit, centre-based child care services for children of families who were working or ill (Parliament of Australia, 2002). Two years later this support was expanded to include all children, not just those from families who were disadvantaged, and to other forms of care, such as family day care. This extension in support parallels the increased societal demand for government support and increased education levels, as well as a feminist movement and an increasing number of women joining or re-joining the workforce (Elliott, 2006; Parliament of Australia, 2002; Press & Hayes, 2000).

In 1988 the Australian Government released the *National Childcare Strategy* (Parliament of Australia, 2002), resulting in an increase in the number of early childhood education and care services available in Australia, mainly due to support from the government in provision of subsidies, which was extended to include all ECEC service types. In 1994 the Australian Government introduced a Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) aimed at improving the quality and standard of education and care (Parliament of Australia, 2002). The scheme received "worldwide recognition as a model of best practice" (Elliott, 2006, p. 2).

International research studies initiated in the 1960s-1970s provided a rich evidence-base for the Australian Government to use in support of policy development in the field of ECEC (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009). Evidence from longitudinal studies, such as the High Scope Perry Preschool Program (HighScope, 2017), the Carolina Abecedarian Project (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2017), the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2006), and the Effective Provision of Preschool and Primary Education (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2004) showed that the benefits of injecting resources (in the form of time and money) into early

childhood has multiple long-term benefits for children, families and the population in general (COAG, 2009). Findings continue to indicate that quality early childhood programs impact positively on children's social and cognitive outcomes, are cost-effective, and yield improved educational performance for all children, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, they are instrumental in improving social and employment outcomes for families. Successful developmental outcomes, however, are dependent on availability and quality of early childhood programs. Using these studies as a reference, the Australian Government identified the need for a systematic, collaborative and streamlined approach to early childhood education and care (COAG, 2009).

A pivotal and significant year for the field of early childhood education and care in Australia was 2009. In this year, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to reform early childhood education and care. A National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda (NPNQA) for ECEC (COAG, 2008) was developed "to deliver the vision of the *Early Childhood Development Strategy* (COAG, 2009) that 'by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves, and for the nation'" (COAG, 2008, p. 3). A key focus for reform in ECEC was 'quality and regulation', with the following quote outlining the state of the field in Australia, and the need for change:

Quality standards vary across jurisdictions, sectors and service types. Existing arrangements for setting, assessing and monitoring quality in the early childhood sectors are fragmented and complex. This limits the responsiveness of services and inhibits continuity of care and support for families. An effective early childhood development system supports best practice and continuous quality improvement in service delivery. It balances access and affordability, and raises family and community awareness about quality. Quality assurance and regulatory arrangements, covering aspects of quality such as qualifications, child-to-staff ratios and health and safety, should be straightforward, appropriate and consistent across all levels of government. The regulatory environment should ensure service providers are accountable and do not face unnecessary regulatory burdens (COAG, 2009, p. 18).

To achieve the effective early childhood development system outlined above, a National Quality Framework was implemented across Australia in 2012 (COAG, 2009). The purpose of the National Quality Framework (NQF) is to "drive continuous improvement and consistency in children's education and care" (ACECQA, 2012a). The NQF is the Australian Government's (which includes all state, territory and Commonwealth governments) means of professionalising and standardising the ECEC sector, by bringing together the traditionally separate notions of 'education' and 'care'.

The NQF is the focus of this research, namely the impact that its introduction has had on the ECEC educators and services responsible for its implementation.

Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to identify the compounded impact of administrative burden that ECEC educators (and therefore services) experience when developing a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). The study seeks to understand the impact of the QIP from the perspective of the ECEC educators responsible for its development and implementation. The following questions guide this research:

1. How do educators perceive their role in developing the QIP and implementing identified goals?
2. How do educators perceive the administrative burden related to the development and implementation of the QIP? Is it the same across different service types?
3. How do educators perceive the ripple-effect of the administrative burden on their personal and professional lives?

Significance of the Study

Identifying the factors, indicators and the compounded impact of the administrative burden related to the QIP will directly benefit educators, services and policy makers in the field of ECEC, both nationally and internationally. The findings will assist with future planning and policy reform to reduce the impact on educators and services when developing the QIP. The findings of this study will benefit a range of stakeholders in the field of ECEC who work directly with services, educators and support agencies, through highlighting factors contributing to, and the impact of, the burden. This knowledge may assist planning and delivery of support, professional learning, training, materials and resources, related to the QIP.

Stakeholders for whom this study is significant include approved providers, directors/coordinators and educators who work in ECEC services. Additionally, regulatory authorities who assess services and provide feedback about areas for improvement may find the results of this study pertinent to their role. Governing bodies, who publish materials to assist services and educators in the field, and organisations and consultants who assist educators and services to understand and develop their QIP, will also find this study relevant to their core business. Finally, tertiary and vocational education and training institutions that develop professional

learning for aspirant educators may use the findings of this research in their planning and delivery of content.

Limitations of the Study

In grounded theory research, results lead to formation of theory, and a further research process is required for formulation of substantive and then formal theory (Bryman, 2012). This additional step involves collection and analysis of data (related to the identified theory) in other settings (generalisability or transferability) to add strength to the theory identified. In this research investigation, formulation of substantive and formal theory would be dependent on the theoretical findings being proven in a wider population and more contexts than evident in this study. Therefore, this research study has identified a theoretical framework that accounts for the findings, but does not provide a substantive or formal theory.

Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. This introductory chapter provides an orientation to the study undertaken. The reader is provided with a brief overview of the research project, including the historical background to early childhood education and care, and significant events that have shaped the development of the National Quality Framework in Australia. The significance and limitations of the study, and an understanding of how the following chapters have been organised, are also components of this introduction.

Chapter two provides the reader with an overview of the current early childhood education and care policy context in Australia. It outlines components of the National Quality Framework, and explains the role of the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. This chapter also highlights the Quality Improvement Plan, which is a focus of this research study.

Chapter three explores a review of literature relevant to this research topic. It details the Australian Government's review of the implementation of the National Quality Framework, and highlights points for consideration in this study.

Chapter four addresses the grounded theory methodology utilised in this research study. The chapter describes the stages of the research study and processes conducted within. It details sampling, ethical considerations, data collection and analysis techniques, as well as measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness (quality) of the study.

Chapter five presents the findings of the study. The core categories identified in the data are explained in detail using representative quotations from participants. Within each of the categories, sub-categories are identified and relevant theory discussed.

Chapter six provides an exploration of the working theory identified from the findings. Results from the constant comparison data analysis utilised in grounded theory research lead to the formation of a theoretical framework that is explained in this chapter, underpinned by theory.

Chapter seven provides a conclusion of the study. The research objective and questions are discussed, along with an overview of the significance of the findings and recommendations for various stakeholders in the field of early childhood education and care.

Summary

This introductory chapter has demonstrated the importance of early childhood education and care. Historical developments in the field have shown the ongoing, lifelong benefits of children receiving quality education and care in the early years. As such, the Australian Government has committed significant resources into the early childhood sector to ensure all children have an opportunity to receive quality ECEC. Of significance is the introduction of the National Quality Framework within Australia. Review of the first few years of implementation has shown that an administrative burden exists on educators in relation to the development and implementation of Quality Improvement Plans, a crucial component of the National Quality Framework. The following chapter will outline the key components of the National Quality Framework that are pertinent to this research study, to assist the reader in understanding current policy relevant to the field of early childhood education and care.

Chapter 2: The Policy Context

This chapter will outline the main policy documents that underpin this research, within three elements key to the National Quality Framework. The first is the National Quality Framework, comprised of four components which are explained briefly here to provide a holistic picture of the topic under study. The second element is the Council of Australian Government's governing body for the National Quality Framework, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. This body is introduced with a description of its role and responsibilities within the field. Finally, the focus of this study, the Quality Improvement Plan, is detailed, providing information as to its purpose and how it is developed. Together, these three elements provide an understanding of the current Australian ECEC policy context pertinent to this study.

A National Quality Framework

The National Quality Framework (NQF) was mandated for implementation in 2012, in early learning centres, also known as long day care (LDC), outside school hours care (OSHC) and family day care (FDC) services as well as preschools and kindergartens (ACECQA, 2012a). These services, except for family day care, are known as centre-based services (CBCs), as they deliver their program from an approved ECEC centre (ACECQA, 2016c). Family day care is delivered from a family day care residence, defined as a "residence at which a family day care educator educates and cares for children as part of a family day care service" (ACECQA, 2016c, p. 425).

The National Quality Framework consists of four components, outlined here. Understanding each component and how they relate to each other is central to this research (the policy context). Of significance to this investigation are two of the four components: the National Quality Standard, and the assessment and rating process, and as such they are explained in further detail.

A legislative framework. The first component of the NQF is a national legislative framework, containing two documents that form an applied law system for ECEC in Australia (ACECQA, 2012a). As explained in ACECQA's *Guide to the Education and Care Services National Law and the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (2014a, p. 9) a "national applied law is a way of establishing national laws whereby a host jurisdiction ... passes a law ... and other jurisdictions adopt that law or pass corresponding legislation".

The first document is the *Education and Care Services National Law* (Australian Government, 2010). It outlines in detail the purpose and objectives of the National

Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2014a). The purpose of the document is “to create a jointly-governed, uniform and integrated national approach to the regulation and quality assessment of education and care services” (ACECQA, 2014a, p. 9).

The second article is the *Education and Care Services National Regulations* (Government of Western Australia, 2012; New South Wales Government, 2016). Its purpose is to detail the enforceable requirements for implementation of the National Quality Standard into the operation of an approved ECEC service (COAG, 2008).

A National Quality Standard. The National Quality Standard (NQS) is one standard for quality provision of early childhood education and care. It is designed to promote and support quality care and outcomes for children, through a focus on continuous reflection and improvement (COAG, 2008). The NQS currently consists of seven quality areas (QAs). Each quality area contains *standards*, which are “high-level outcomes” (Kearns, 2014, p. 12), supported by *elements* or key indicators of each standard (Kearns, 2014). In total, there are 58 elements considered to be indicators of ‘quality’ ECEC provision (ACECQA, 2013).

Relevant to this research is an understanding of the quantity and breadth (scope) of the elements and standards that make up the seven quality areas. The Australian Government stated that the NQS was “designed to ... be simple to understand and administer” (COAG, 2008, p. B-1). Table 1 briefly outlines the overall structure of the NQS. It includes a summary of the content of each quality area, including the number of standards and elements within each.

Table 1

Summary table of the components of the National Quality Standard (NQS)

Quality Areas	Description of quality practice addressed	Nº of	
		standards	elements
QA1: Educational program and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of learning frameworks in planning • documentation of children's learning • educator responsiveness to children • reflective practice 	2	9
QA2: Children's health and safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health and safety • well-being • protective practices 	3	10
QA3: Physical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • indoor and outdoor environments • service facilities etc. 	3	7
QA4: Staffing arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staffing arrangements • staff code of conduct and practice 	2	4
QA5: Relationships with children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respectful relationships with children • supporting social and emotional development 	2	6
QA6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing relationships with families and the community • establishing supportive links for families 	3	9
QA7: Leadership and service management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • administrative processes • governance requirements • reflection on practices, policies and procedures 	3	13
Total	7 quality areas	18	58

(Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2013)

The Australian Government, and all state, territory and Commonwealth governments agree and consider nationally the National Quality Standard as the benchmark for quality (ACECQA, 2013). This means that to meet the NQS, services are required to meet all 58 elements of the standard, or they are deemed to be working towards the NQS (ACECQA, 2012b). Hence, this component of the National Quality Framework is closely linked to the assessment and rating process now explored further.

An assessment and rating process. An assessment and rating (A&R) process measures the quality of an ECEC service against the 58 elements of the National Quality Standard. As explained, this is the Australian Government's standard of quality care for children in ECEC settings. The assessment and rating process is also known as the quality rating process (ACECQA, 2014a). The A&R process is intended to promote self-reflection and guide services with feedback for quality improvement. Another objective

of the A&R is to inform parents and families about the quality of education and care a service provides (ACECQA, 2013a).

Assessment and rating is an external validation process for services and educators. It relies on government agencies in each state and territory to oversee and implement many of the regulatory and compliance arrangements set out within the National Quality Framework. A regulatory authority in each state and territory is responsible for carrying out the assessment and rating of ECEC services.

Regulatory authorities. An employee working for the regulatory authority is an authorised officer (The Department of Local Government and Communities [DLGC], n.d.). The role of an authorised officer includes conducting quality rating visits; providing advice and guidance to ECEC services; monitoring and enforcing compliance with the National Law and Regulations; investigating incidents and complaints; and assessing applications for approval to operate an ECEC service (DLGC, n.d.). While the scope of responsibility for authorised officers is broad, this investigation will focus on their role in conducting quality rating visits.

Authorised officers, also known within the field as ‘assessors’, primarily use the relevant *Education and Care Services National Law and Regulations* (Australian Government, 2010) for their jurisdiction, to guide their assessment of a service. The laws and regulations are embedded in the *Assessment and Rating Instrument* (ACECQA, 2012) that is used during the A&R. This document is readily available to services should they wish to use it in preparing for their quality rating visit.

The quality rating process. The A&R process involves the relevant state or territory regulatory authority notifying services within their jurisdiction of their intention to perform a quality rating visit (ACECQA, n.d.-a). Services are notified via a letter that outlines the process and advises them of the dates that authorised officers will be present at the service. This is also known and referred to as the ‘visit’. Visits take two consecutive days to complete (ACECQA, n.d.-a).

The letter notifying services of the visit is sent approximately four-to-five weeks prior to the appointed dates. From receipt of the letter, services have three weeks in which to submit their QIP to the regulatory authority. The role of the QIP in the A&R process is explained later in more detail. After the visit, a draft report is provided to the ECEC service. The service has time to reflect and respond to the feedback with evidence to back up any discrepancies. A final report is then provided to services (ACECQA, n.d.-a). Overall, the assessment and rating process takes approximately four months (16 weeks), from the initial letter being sent to services

until services receive their final report. The final report provides services with their 'quality rating' (ACECQA, n.d.-a).

Quality ratings. Five rating classifications exist under the National Quality Framework. Until a quality rating assessment has been undertaken, a service is rated as "provisional – not yet assessed" (ACECQA, 2016c). Once assessed by a regulatory authority, an ECEC service is rated as either:

1. Significant improvement required
2. Working towards the national quality standard
3. Meeting the national quality standard
4. Exceeding the national quality standard, or
5. Excellent

To achieve a rating of *meeting* the NQS, a service needs to meet all elements within a standard, and all standards within a quality area (COAG, 2008, p. B-2). As mentioned previously, this means services must achieve or satisfactorily demonstrate all 58 elements of the NQS to be considered meeting the benchmark of quality.

The lowest rating is *significant improvement required*, with implications for closure of the ECEC service if areas of need are not addressed in a timely manner. Services given a rating of *exceeding* the NQS can further apply to be awarded an *excellent* rating, the highest that can be attained (ACECQA, 2016c). This is awarded by the governing body for the implementation of the NQF, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). To date, of the 12,286 services rated within Australia, 49 have been awarded the *excellent* rating (ACECQA, 2016b).

Once assessed, ECEC services are provided with their report and a quality rating, via a 'Notice of Rating' certificate (ACECQA, 2016a). This certificate shows the service's rating for each quality area, as well as the service's overall rating. According to law, this certificate must be visibly displayed in the entrance of the service (DLGC, n.d.). The ratings are also published publicly via government websites related to early childhood education and care (DLGC, n.d.). Publishing the ratings via government websites addresses the third intention of the quality rating process: to inform parents and families about the quality of education and care a service provides.

Approved learning frameworks. Two mandatory learning frameworks were developed to guide educators with consistent pedagogy, principles and practice that are considered the benchmark for quality ECEC (COAG, 2008). The two documents are *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009) and

My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Aged Care in Australia (DEEWR, 2011). The frameworks are a resource for educators and services when reflecting on aspects of the education and care they provide, particularly with regards to the educational programs they implement.

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) was established as the governing body for implementation of, and monitoring and reporting on the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2012a). ACECQA is the representative body for the NQF, jointly administered by the Australian state, territory and Commonwealth governments. This organisation is the conduit between the policies, procedures, laws and regulations of the NQF and all stakeholders in the field of ECEC. Therefore, ACECQA is responsible for the development and dissemination of information and resources to the sector (Education Council, 2014).

One resource that pertains to this research is the *National Quality Framework Resource Kit* (ACECQA, 2011). It contains the information a service requires for developing a Quality Improvement Plan. It holds four (non-mandated) guiding documents that provide information for the educators and approved providers about quality practice (COAG, 2008). The guides are:

1. Guide to the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2013a)
2. Guide to the National Law and National Regulations (ACECQA, 2014b)
3. Guide to the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2013)
4. Guide to Developing a Quality Improvement Plan (ACECQA, 2014a)

The frameworks *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009) and *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Aged Care in Australia* (DEEWR, 2011) are used alongside the NQF documents. The *National Quality Framework Resource Kit* (ACECQA, 2011) was provided in hardcopy to all relevant ECEC services when the NQF was introduced in 2012, and is now only available online.

As stated earlier, quality assessment of services is carried out by Regulatory Authorities in each state and territory (ACECQA, n.d.-a). ACECQA works alongside these organisations, but is not responsible for the quality assessment of ECEC services; however, they are responsible for awarding the *excellent* rating after a service has been rated as *exceeding* by a Regulatory Authority (ACECQA, n.d.-a).

Quality Improvement Plans

The National Quality Framework mandates ECEC services to develop and annually review a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) (ACECQA, 2014). A QIP is defined as “a summary of the key areas prioritised for improvement” (ACECQA, 2014, p. 5). A QIP can only be developed through a process of critical reflection within services at both an individual and organisational level. Through this, regulatory compliance is proven, areas for improvement are identified and prioritised, and strategic goals for the service are established (ACECQA, 2014).

Support material is available related to the QIP, including the *National Quality Framework Resource Kit* (ACECQA, n.d.-b). Using this, and/or other materials of choice and availability, services complete a self-assessment of their practices, policies and procedures against the seven quality areas of the National Quality Standard.

A service must submit their QIP prior to their A&R visit as it used as part of the assessment process (ACECQA, 2014a, 2016c). Regulations require the approved provider or “person who holds a provider approval” (ACECQA, 2013b, p. 196) to submit the QIP; however, this person is not necessarily the person who has developed their service QIP. Responsibility for development and implementation of the QIP can be delegated to the manager of a service (who may or may not also be the approved provider) (ACECQA, 2014a). The manager is known by a variety of titles, such as centre manager, director, assistant director, children's services coordinator (coordinator); or early childhood educator (Fair Work Commission, 2016). Regardless of their title, what they have in common is that they are all ‘nominated supervisors’, who hold a supervisor certificate. This means they are “the person with responsibility for the day-to-day management of [a service]” (ACECQA, 2012b). For the purposes of this research, the term centre manager will be used to describe this role.

The first two chapters have introduced the early childhood education and care landscape. The introduction has provided a brief overview of the history of the field of ECEC, while this second chapter has detailed the current documents mandated for use in the sector. The National Quality Framework and two of its components, the National Quality Standard and the assessment and rating process, are linked through the development of a Quality Improvement Plan. It is this feature of the National Quality Framework, the QIP, that is the focus of this research. The following chapter will explore the literature that has led to this research, and the key concepts implicit in the subject under study.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter will review literature relevant to the topic under study, which is the impact of administrative burden on early childhood education and care educators, related to the Quality Improvement Plan. Key documents related to this review are reports associated with the Australian Government's evaluation of the National Quality Framework's implementation. Findings within these reports highlight crucial concepts implicit in the topic of this study, which are explored and explained in detail within this chapter. The identified concepts include policy implementation and change management; quality improvement; administrative burden; role-identity; and perception and perspective. This chapter will detail how each of these concepts was identified within the Australian Government's review of the implementation of the National Quality Framework. Furthermore, this chapter will explain relevant theory and current understanding of the topic in relation to this study of administrative burden in the ECEC context.

Implementation Review of the National Quality Framework

Implementation of the National Quality Framework has been closely monitored by the Australian Government, with a series of reviews conducted between 2013-2015. The purpose of the reviews was to evaluate which objectives of the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda had been achieved, and what the impact of the reform has had on the ECEC sector (Education Council, 2014).

Implementation of the NQF has been reviewed in three 'waves', using a three-year longitudinal study (ACECQA, 2015). A key focus of each review has been the "experience of services under the NQF, with respect to the level of regulatory burden" (ACECQA, 2015, p. 11). Table 2 shows the timeline of the review conducted by Woolcott Research & Engagement. The percentage of respondents who perceived the QIP and Quality Rating process as burdensome is indicated to show the trend across the first few years of the NQF's implementation.

Table 2

Summary table of each wave of the NQF review conducted by Woolcott Research & Engagement

	<u>Wave I</u>	<u>Wave II</u>	<u>Wave III</u>
Year of review	2013	2014	2015
Respondents who perceived the QIP as burdensome	20%	22%	23%
Respondents who perceived quality rating visits as burdensome	16%	15%	22%

(Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2015, p. 38)

The same respondents were surveyed in each wave of the government's review, conducted by Woolcott Research & Engagement so that the impact of the NQF's introduction could be tracked over time. This was primarily so that expected issues with the sector transitioning from one structure to another could be followed (ACECQA, 2015). The government anticipated that initially the sector would encounter challenges due to the change process, and this would be evident in administrative burden, but that it should decrease as the new structure became more familiar (Woolcott Research & Engagement, 2014).

Policy implementation and change management go hand-in-hand, as policy is developed to address a required identified need for change (Cameron & Green, 2015; Hayes, 2014; Howlett, 2009). As such, these two concepts, policy implementation and change management theory, will be discussed together.

Policy implementation and change management theory. Lucie Cerna (2013, p. 4) defines *policy reform* as "a major policy change". *Policy implementation* is the acting out of the policy itself (Boundless, 2016). This study is focused on the implementation, or acting out, of the NQF. Cerna (2013) further states that "implementation dominates outcomes" in policy, as quite simply, if those responsible for implementing the policy (the ECEC educators) do not implement it, or do not implement it well, the intended outcome of the policy will not be achieved.

Studies of policy implementation (Marneffe & Vereeck, 2011; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002) show that failure of a government's reform initiative can be attributed to three main factors. These are: lack of clarity regarding the outcomes of the reform; the autonomy (control) and capacity of those responsible for implementing the policy; and finally a lack of clarity as to organisation of the policy (in terms of who is overseeing and monitoring implementation) (Spillane et al., 2002). While this current study does not seek to identify whether the NQF reform has been successful, the implementation

of the policy is a consideration, as it is through implementation that the administrative burden is experienced. Therefore, an understanding of policy implementation is warranted for consideration once the data is collected.

The first factor to consider for successful policy implementation would be whether the objectives of the reform are clear. The second factor to consider is the autonomy and capacity of those responsible for implementing the policy (Marneffe & Vereeck, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002). Spillane et al. (2002, p. 391) state that “research in political science suggests that bureaucrats tend to be hard working and they do not typically work to undermine policy or directives from above”. This relates to the autonomy and capacity of individuals to implement the policy requirements. However, it cannot be assumed that those responsible for implementing policy understand what the policymakers are asking them to do (Marneffe & Vereeck, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002).

In relation to the National Quality Framework, sound policy design that takes into account change management theory, is vital for successful implementation (Spillane et al., 2002). Change management theory provides a multitude of approaches and processes to manage change effectively, depending on the type of change required (Cameron & Green, 2015; Hayes, 2014). Change requires learning “something new, or to adjust to a new way of operating, or to unlearn something” (Cameron & Green, 2015, p. 14). Change needs to be considered according to whether it is required at an individual, small group, organisational or, in this instance, a nation-wide, ECEC sector level (Cameron & Green, 2015; Hayes, 2014).

Consideration needs to be given to “the behaviours that a policy targets for change and the magnitude of the changes sought” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 390), as the more behaviours that are required to change, the more challenging the policy reform. In this way, the policy messages need to be clear and explicit for individuals tasked with carrying out the policy requirements (Spillane et al., 2002). Consideration of the capacity of the ECEC educators in carrying out the policy is required in the design of the NQF. Capacity is defined as the “knowledge, skills, personnel and other resources necessary to work in ways that are consistent with policy” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 390).

Successful policy implementation requires clarity in the structure and organisation of how the policy is monitored, and who is charged with overseeing the implementation (Marneffe & Vereeck, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002). This is the third factor of successful policy implementation (Marneffe & Vereeck, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002). In this instance, the Australian Government has tasked ACECQA to be the organisation that is responsible for all aspects of the NQF’s implementation, and for

ACECQA to work with regulatory authorities who are charged with monitoring the implementation through the quality rating process. The people responsible for implementing the NQF at the ground level, the ones delivering the quality education and care, are the educators working within services. Monitoring of policy implementation is required if the government's policy, designed in the interest of the people it serves, is to be successful, as both the government and the ECEC sector "are motivated by self-interest" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 390). Currently, 46% of the ECEC sector in Australia is private-for-profit (ACECQA, 2016b), meaning that almost half of ECEC services are privately owned and operated as businesses for profit. The NQF mandates parameters for quality early childhood education and care for children, and it is up to individual services to provide the quality care, even though "the design of programs and activities and the choice of resources are the ambit of diverse providers having various business goals" (Tayler, 2011, p. 223).

This study will identify the impact of the government's early childhood reform on educators who are responsible for implementing aspects of the National Quality Framework (being quality improvement and quality rating processes). Findings of this study may indicate whether the policy implementation to date has been successful, determined by any identified deficits in the implementation processes outlined in this section. The identified impact on ECEC educators is an acknowledged administrative burden (ACECQA, 2015, p. 11).

As stated, a key focus of each wave of the review by Woolcott Research & Engagement has been the "experience of services under the NQF, with respect to the level of regulatory burden" (ACECQA, 2015, p. 11). The third wave of the review conducted by Woolcott Research & Engagement in 2015 demonstrated the Australian Government's commitment to addressing this issue with the statement, "Ministers have agreed that the focus of this [report] should be on administrative or paperwork burden, as a sub-set of regulatory burden"(ACECQA, 2015, p. 11). The next section will define and clarify the terms 'regulatory' and 'administrative' burden in this context.

Administrative burden. Administrative burden was originally defined by Burden et al., (as cited in Heinrich, 2015, p. 1) as "an individual's experience of policy implementation as onerous". More recently this definition has expanded to being "costs imposed on businesses, when complying with information obligations stemming from Government regulation" (Better Regulation Unit Malta, n.d.). It is a topic of much discussion worldwide, as governments consider how to reduce the recognised burden arising from mandated policy and legislation (Cerna, 2013). Government policy exists to protect, support and meet the needs of the people they serve (Better Regulation Unit

Malta, n.d.; Lunn, 2014). Therefore, governments require “businesses and private individuals to carry out or avoid certain actions or conduct (conduct obligations) ... [and provide] information on actions and conduct (information obligations)” (Better Regulation Unit Malta, n.d.).

The Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority’s *Report on National Quality Framework and Regulatory Burden – Wave III* defines regulatory burden as “the burden, or cost, imposed by regulation on business, government and the community” (ACECQA, 2015, p. 18) . This includes things such as fees and charges for operating a service, and any costs incurred through complying with legislation such as altering the physical infrastructure of a building or employing additional staff to meet new child-to-educator ratios (ACECQA, 2015). These are examples of *conduct obligations* in the field of ECEC.

In relation to this research, administrative burden is defined as the costs “of complying with information requirements such as the time spent keeping records, reporting to regulatory authorities or preparing for or taking part in inspections” (ACECQA, 2015, p. 19). It is also known as ‘paperwork costs’ or ‘red tape burden’ (ACECQA, 2015) or *information obligations* (Better Regulation Unit Malta, n.d.). Regulatory and administrative burden are often discussed together, as they are closely related – the former related to *conduct obligations* and the latter to *information obligations* (Better Regulation Unit Malta, n.d.). However, this research investigates administrative burden alone, in terms of *information obligations*. The *information obligations* relevant to this research investigation are the administrative requirements for quality improvement plans and, by default, quality rating visits.

Furthermore, ACECQA’s *Report on National Quality Framework and Regulatory Burden – Wave III* (2015) identified five factors perceived to be associated with the administrative burden: an increase in staff hours or time; a diversion from other required duties; an increase in financial costs; a perceived difficulty understanding requirements; and educator frustration and stress. These items, however, were provided as a list of responses to a question, so respondents completing the survey had these options as a possible category of answer, along with the option to respond with an answer of their individual choice (ACECQA, 2015). This justifies the need for further investigation in this research study, so that a deeper understanding of the issues relating to the administrative burden can be garnered through qualitative interviewing.

What is evident from the three waves of the Australian Government’s review of the NQF implementation is an acknowledged administrative burden on ECEC services related to the QIP. While some impact of the administrative burden has been identified

in the review, the extent of the impact (of this burden) on educators and their role-identity, and how this perception in turn may affect their personal and professional life, is not known. Role-identity, perception and perspective are explored further in the following sections.

Role-identity. This research study seeks to understand what the impact of the administrative burden experienced in development and implementation of the QIP on educators is, and how this affects their personal and professional life. Therefore, the theory behind 'identity' needs to be explored, as identity underpins the roles that educators hold, and identity influences behaviour of individuals (Burke, n.d.; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). By investigating the impact of the administrative burden and its influence on role-related behaviours in this study, the research objective may be answered.

Identity theory is based in the disciplines of psychology, sociology and social psychology (Bothma, Lloyd, & Khapova, 2015). Identity theory forms the core of related theories such as social identity, role identity and work identity (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.; Stets & Burke, 2000). Burke (n.d., p. 1) defines *identity* as "who a person is in terms of the groups or categories to which they belong (social identities), the roles they occupy (role identities) and the personal characteristics they claim (person identities)". As the definition suggests, identity is comprised of three structures or bases: social, role, and personal (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social identity is "based on group category or membership" (Burke, n.d., p. 4). Being like others, with the same beliefs, values and perspectives, instils a sense of belonging and acceptance (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.). Social identity relates to group processes and intergroup relations (Hogg et al., 1995), such as the interactions between educators in ECEC services and between ECEC services and other stakeholders in the field, including the government.

Role identity is "based on the roles a person occupies" (Burke, n.d., p. 4), or "a set of expectations prescribing behaviour that is considered appropriate by others" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 257). A role may be that of parent, friend, partner/spouse, mentor, employer, employee, ECEC educator, centre manager, colleague etc. As an individual identifies with a specific role, they also by default then assume membership into the social group that the role relates to (Burke, n.d.; Stets & Burke, 2000). For example, once an individual identifies with the role of ECEC educator, they relate to, belong and become accepted in the social group of other ECEC educators and stakeholders within the field, as they are linked by a common interest in the education and care of children.

An individual may have multiple role identities (Bothma et al., 2015; Hogg et al., 1995), and Bothma et al. (2015) explain that the more role identities an individual holds, the more enhanced their life is and therefore the stronger their overall mental health and wellbeing. This is due to the various roles being occupied offering a wide variety of skills, knowledge and opportunities, which enhance self-esteem in individuals (Bothma et al., 2015; Settles, 2004).

Personal identity is defined by Burke (n.d., p. 4), as the “meaning each person claims as defining and describing him or herself as a distinct person”. These are the characteristics or attributes of an individual that make them unique and exist regardless of situation, context, roles occupied or groups that the individual belongs to (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Regardless of which identity is held (social, role or personal), each identity has a prototype or identity standard (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.; Stets & Burke, 2000). This is defined by Bothma et al., (2015, p. 32) as “certain meanings, norms, expectations, beliefs and core values” that define the identity. It is the identity prototype or standard that forms a ‘behaviour guide’ for individuals within the social or role identity (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.; Settles, 2004; Stets & Burke, 2000). The role of centre manager, for example, implies an expected set of actions to be demonstrated by individuals with this title, and by those with a similar title in the field.

Identity is formed through interactions with others (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.), and “people act to create and maintain meanings in interactions with others to identify and reflect who they are” (Burke, n.d., p. 1). These interactions relate to the development of self-esteem or “a person’s overall sense of self-worth or personal value” (Cherry, 2016).

These concepts influence behaviour as people are “motivated to verify their identities” (Burke, n.d., p. 3). This means they seek to behave in ways that are interpreted or perceived to be in line with the identity standard or prototype of the role they are occupying (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.; Settles, 2004; Stets & Burke, 2000). This process of ‘verification’ leads to feelings of self-worth or value, self-efficacy or competence, and authenticity (being your true self), which are all components of self-esteem (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.). “Satisfactory enactment of roles not only confirms and validates a person’s status as a role member but also reflects positively on self-evaluation” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 257).

When an individual perceives that they are not fulfilling the expected norms of their role identity, they can experience a negative emotional response, such as doubt about their self-worth or distress (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.; Hogg et al., 1995;

Settles, 2004; Stets & Burke, 2000). This notion of distress is explained by Hogg et al. (1995, p. 257) as something that “may arise if feedback from others in the form of reflected appraisals or perceptions of the self, suggested by others’ behaviour is perceived to be incongruent with one’s identity”. This distress can cause a change in an individual’s behaviour and actions as they attempt to match their interactions to that of the prototype. This in turn can have an impact on the individual over time as the effort required to maintain the balance can have psychological and physical impact on the individual (Bothma et al., 2015; Burke, n.d.; Hogg et al., 1995).

As discussed previously, ACECQA’s *Report on National Quality Framework and Regulatory Burden – Wave III* (2015) identified five factors perceived to be associated with the administrative burden. This study may reveal what the impact of increased staff hours or time; diversion from other duties; increased financial costs; understanding of requirements; and frustration and stress has on educator role-identity. This in turn will reveal any perceived compounded impact of the burden on an educator’s personal and professional life.

Perception and perspective. Pradhan (2013) defines *perception* as “what you interpret”. Perception relates to the way in which sensory input is interpreted, or a person’s awareness of the information being received via sight, sound, touch, taste or smell (the senses). The brain’s interpretation of the information received leaves a mental impression, and it is a person’s awareness of this impression that forms their perception (Hiriyappa, 2008). Perception influences the way that people make meaning of their environment, and that in turn influences the way in which they act, or behave (Hiriyappa, 2008). The concept of perception is relevant to this study as an educator’s behaviour “is based on their perception of what reality is, not on reality itself. The world as it is perceived is the world that is [behaviourally] important” (CiteMan Network, 2008).

There are three factors that influence perception. The first is the person themselves, known as the perceiver (Hiriyappa, 2008). The person receiving the sensory input will have their own unique cultural background, attitudes, beliefs, motives, interests, emotions and experience (CiteMan Network, 2008; Hiriyappa, 2008). Secondly, the environment or situation in which the sensory input is being received influences how it is interpreted. Factors such as the physical environment (setting) and time are included in this aspect of perception (CiteMan Network, 2008; Hiriyappa, 2008). The third and final factor that influences perception is the stimuli itself or the target, ‘what’ is being perceived (CiteMan Network, 2008; Hiriyappa, 2008). The physical attributes or make-up of the object or item influences the way in which

people interpret information. This includes attributes such as size, shape, components, and the similarity of the item to another (CiteMan Network, 2008; Hiriyappa, 2008). As each research question guiding this investigation seeks to understand the participants' perception of the phenomena, consideration of these factors will be given to the data.

Perspective is defined by Pradhan (2013) as “an evaluation or analysis of something” or more commonly as a ‘point of view’. *Perspective* and *perception* are closely linked, as *perspectives* are formed through *perception* of phenomena (Hiriyappa, 2008; Pradhan, 2013). The terminology is often used interchangeably; however, for this investigation the terms are defined as above. This study seeks to understand educator *perceptions* of administrative burden. That is, the mental impressions, or the impact left by their experience of the burden. This in turn will inform their overall *perspective* (view-point), of the burden.

What is evident and acknowledged from the review of the NQF's implementation, is the continued administrative burden on ECEC services directly related to the QIP. While designed to be a tool for services to use in an ongoing operational sense, it is also evident that the QIP is a measure of quality directly linked to the assessment and rating process. As such, exploration of the burden from development and implementation of the QIP cannot be undertaken without consideration of the assessment and rating process as well.

Quality improvement. All components of the National Quality Framework are aimed at quality improvement. Quality improvement “is a formal approach to the analysis of performance and systematic efforts to improve it” (Department of Community and Family Medicine, 2016). Quality improvement is demonstrated in ECEC services through a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) that draws together all elements of the NQF. However, as the QIP involves a cycle of reflection, planning, monitoring, review and updating, it requires a process of ‘continuous quality improvement’. Continuous quality improvement (CQI) has been defined as “a process to ensure programs are systematically and intentionally improving services and increasing positive outcomes for the families they serve. CQI is a cyclical, data-driven process; it is proactive, not reactive” (Friends National Center, 2016).

Continuous quality improvement in ECEC requires critical self-reflection by educators and services to identify change necessary for improved outcomes for children. Self-assessment is an integral component of quality improvement, which is why the Australian Government has mandated for ECEC services to produce Quality Improvement Plans (ACECQA, 2014a). Quality of the ECEC environment, and educator

practice needs to be measured; however, some argue that “the self-report process does not provide enough critical feedback” (Ishimine, Tayler, & Bennett, 2010, p. 70).

Summary findings of the reviews by Woolcott Research & Engagement indicate that implementation of the NQF has “enhanced the professionalisation of the workforce due to ... the increased focus on ongoing professional learning ... and reflective practice” (Woolcott Research & Engagement, 2014, p. 4). Each wave of the review revealed that educators perceived an ongoing burden related to the assessment and rating process (ACECQA, 2015). As noted in the first review in 2013, “two other administrative requirements that are closely related to quality assessment and rating visits were identified as particularly burdensome-QIPs and documenting children’s learning” (ACECQA, 2015, p. 57). The *Report on National Quality Framework and Regulatory Burden – Wave III*, by ACECQA (2015, p. 15) further states “the perception of burden with QIPs ... has remained at the higher end of the burdensome scale” throughout the first three years of the NQF implementation. Later, it is explained that “while both activities involve paperwork and record keeping, the work involves a high level of reflection and critical thinking and is not simple form filling” (ACECQA, 2015, p. 57). Here, ‘reflection’ and ‘critical thinking’ relate to the idea of reflective practice required for quality improvement.

Reflection and reflective practice has existed for many years in the field of education (Herrington, Parker, & Boase-Jelinek, 2014). Hatton and Smith (as cited in Herrington et al., 2014, p. 24) define reflection as “deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement”. Most reflection centres on the idea of ‘self-reflection’ for individual insight and growth; however, for ECEC services developing their QIP, critical reflection at an organisational level is required (Rigg & Trehan, 2008).

Anecdotal evidence collected throughout the review process by Woolcott Research & Engagement showed services were collecting more information than required for the assessment and rating visit (Education Council, 2014). It also revealed that service expenditure had increased due to the perceived need for professional development and consultancy (Education Council, 2014). Services were paying for this to assist with development and comprehension of required documentation, such as the QIP (Education Council, 2014), with a finding that “documents expressed in broad terms can be helpful to give flexibility but can be difficult to understand” (ACECQA, 2015, p. 61). However, it is important to note that this issue of administrative burden, with services doing more than required, existed prior to the NQF when the ECEC sector completed self-assessments for the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

(QIAS) under the National Childcare Accreditation Council regulatory system (ACECQA, 2015; McFarlane, 2009).

Inherent in the research phenomena are the concepts of perception, administrative burden, policy implementation, change management, quality improvement and role identity. While identified as variables that may influence the study, a grounded theory methodology is justified, as these concepts do not answer the research objective itself. Identifying, defining and discussing these concepts here provides the reader with orientation and clarity, and furthermore addresses researcher bias and reflexivity, or a “self-conscious awareness by the researcher of their impact on the research and the research process” (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Walter, 2010, p. 408). This is typical of a Straussian approach to grounded theory research (Charmaz & Bryant, 2013), which is described in more detail in the next chapter on the research methodology.

Further investigation is warranted to ascertain and expand on information regarding factors contributing to the burden. To date, no evidence is available to indicate whether there is any compounded, or ripple-effect of the impact of this burden on ECEC services and educators. Exploring educator perspectives concerning these issues may highlight areas of unintentional impact of the outlined ECEC policy reform. Comparison of findings with recommended policy change may assist sector-wide improvement regarding policy review.

The aim of this research is therefore to identify the compounded impact of administrative burden that early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and educators experience when developing a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), and furthermore the relationship of this to role-identity. The study suits a qualitative research design as it seeks to understand the impact of the QIP from the perspective of ECEC educators responsible for its development and implementation. The following chapter will detail and explain the qualitative approach and grounded theory methodology employed in this research.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter will address the research strategy and method employed in this study. It will detail the various stages of the research undertaken and consideration of the methods and techniques to ensure quality of the study in question.

Research Strategy

A qualitative research strategy was chosen for this research because the study seeks to answer “questions about the complex nature of phenomena ... with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants’ point of view” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 94). In this instance, the phenomena is the administrative burden created by development and implementation of the QIP.

A grounded theory approach was employed in this research. This research design was chosen as “the theories emerge from, rather than exist before, the data ... systematically gathered and analysed” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 491). Grounded theory uses a process of “inductive analysis” throughout the various stages of the research, from selection of participants, to the data collection methods and analysis of data (Walter, 2010, p. 423). Initially a thematic analysis approach is used to data analysis, and the thematic analysis of content leads to a substantive theory, completing the methodologic requirements for a grounded theory research investigation (Evans, 2013).

Grounded theory was first discovered and explained as an approach to qualitative research by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). Over time, through experience, discussion and philosophical influences, Strauss refined his approach to their methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This research investigation follows the version proposed by Strauss and Corbin in 1990 (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach is also referred to as ‘qualitative data analysis’ or the ‘Straussian approach’ (Evans, 2013).

The reason for this research following a Straussian approach is that the research was undertaken with a general idea of where to begin, and the purpose of the research is to use grounded theory methodology to “elaborate and extend existing theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 12). Concepts implicit in the phenomena were identified early in the process and a literature review was conducted in the formulation of the research objective (Tripathi, n.d.). Identification of concepts in the literature applies logic to the study. It is through study and interpretation of the interaction and relation of concepts evident in the data, that leads to the generation of theory (Glaser &

Strauss, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this way, the grounded theory methodology comes from the data, which “resembles the reality” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 12). Coding of the data is rigorous and follows a prescribed technique which is outlined further in this section (Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994; Tripathi, n.d.). This chapter will detail the stages of the research investigation and expand on the key processes employed.

Stages and Processes of the Research

The research investigation was conducted in five distinct phases. *Figure 1* shows the research processes carried out within each stage.

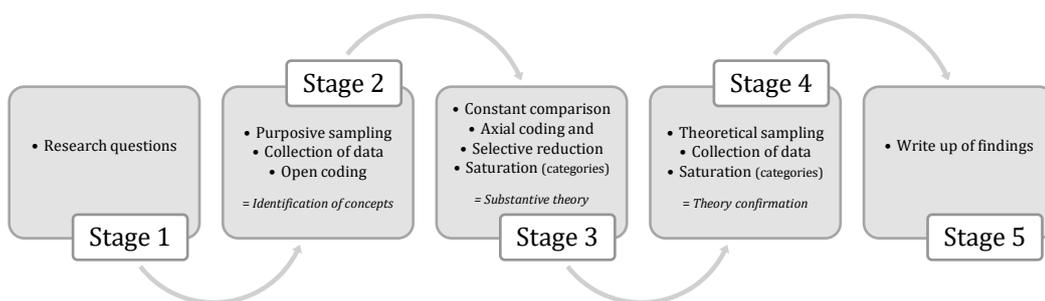


Figure 1. The five stages of the study, listing the research processes conducted within each stage.

The first stage of the research was formulation of the research question (Bryman, 2012; Walter, 2010). The research question arose from reading reports on the implementation of the National Quality Framework. Here it is prudent to disclose and explain the researcher’s background, as it relates to the formulation of the research investigation itself (Goulding, 2002). The researcher has more than 20 years’ experience in the field of early childhood education, within a broad range of educational contexts. These contexts include tertiary institutions, primary schools and early childhood education and care settings, as well as a privately operated not-for-profit organisation that delivered a government funded program introduced to assist ECEC educators with understanding the requirements of the NQF. This background and experience provides the researcher with a range of skills and knowledge pertinent to the research investigation, and assists with theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is a researcher’s “ability to perceive the research situation and the data in

new ways, especially as they relate to the development of theory” (Walter, 2010, p. 499).

The second stage involved three processes that occurred simultaneously: purposive sampling; collection of data; and open coding (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Walter, 2010). Each of these processes is defined and explained in more detail further in this chapter. These three processes, when combined with theoretical sensitivity, led to identification of concepts (Bryman, 2012; Walter, 2010).

The third stage involved a thorough analysis of the data through constant comparison of concepts (which led to identification of categories); axial coding and selective reduction; and saturation of categories (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Walter, 2010). Once this was completed and the categories had been saturated, the relationships between categories were explored, which led to identification of a theoretical framework for a working theory (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Walter, 2010).

Once a working theory had emerged, the fourth stage required further theoretical sampling; collection of data and saturation of categories (Bryman, 2012; Walter, 2010). This stage confirmed the theory developed and led directly into the fifth and final stage which concluded the investigation. This involved the write up of findings and explanation of the theory proposed.

Sampling. The settings, participants and documents reviewed were selected by a purposive sampling method (Bryman, 2012). Walter (2010, p. 491) defines this method as “selecting a sample in a systematic or purposive way based on what [is known] about [the] target population and the purpose of [the] study”. This sampling method follows Glaser’s approach to grounded theory, yet is relevant to this study as it was a “calculated decision to sample a specific locale according to a preconceived but useful set of dimensions (time, space, identity, power)...” (Glaser, as cited in Goulding, 2002, p. 66). The settings and participants were identified from a national register of ECEC providers publicly available on the ACECQA website.

In this instance, the *setting* refers to the individual early childhood education and care service, being the building or facility from which the service operates. Long day care (LDC), outside school hours care (OSHC) and family day care (FDC) services were considered as they represent the ECEC environments in which the participants of the study were located, being services that have had to implement the NQF and produce QIPs. Services were selected regardless of whether they had undergone the assessment and rating process, because regardless of the quality rating process being

completed, services are still required to produce a QIP. This information is also available publicly on the ACECQA website.

Participants across all ECEC settings, being LDC, OHSC and FDC, were eligible for the study: however, as the research investigation progressed the settings changed to reflect LDC settings only, and LDC settings that also may provide out of school hours care. As the study progressed there was a deliberate shift in service type selected from *location and type of service delivery* (e.g. LDC, OSCH and FDC settings) to the *size* of the service, as determined by ACECQA (2016c) based on the *number of service providers*. Dependent on the *number of services belonging to an individual provider*, they are classified as either a small (1 service), medium (2-24 services) or large service (25 or more services) (ACECQA, 2016b). This is a benefit of the sampling method employed as it allows the researcher to “change the emphasis early on so that the data gathered are a reflection of what is occurring in the field” (Evans, 2013, p. 67).

For this study, the *participants* are educators working within these settings. The participants’ roles varied depending on individual services, but those with the role of approved provider, director, coordinator, centre manager or educator were suitable for the study. The participants were required to be currently in a role, or have previously held a role with responsibility for completing their service’s QIP. Participation in the study was not dependent on an educator’s experience with the assessment and rating process. Table 3 shows the demographics of the participants in the study. Included are details of their gender, experience (years in the field) and their current job title, or position within their service. The type of service where the participants work as well as the service’s current quality rating (if applicable) is also shown.

Table 3

Summary table of participant demographics for the research study

Participant	Gender	Experience	Service type	Position	Service rating
Kathy	Female	17 years	LDC	centre manager	Exceeding
Janelle	Female	10 years	LDC/OSHC	Nominated Supervisor	Meeting
Andrea	Female	21 years	LDC	centre manager	Not yet assessed
Molly	Female	11 years	LDC	centre manager	Working towards
Claire	Female	6 years	LDC	Assistant Manager	Working towards

Participants were approached in person at their workplace. They were invited to join the study and provided with the participant information and consent form, and interview schedule (see appendices A and B). Participants were given a few days to consider participation, and contacted again by their preferred method of choice (being in person, via phone or email). Participants were also approached for follow-up interviews based on the direction of the research as it unfolded, and in these instances participants were not given an interview schedule, but were verbally given an indication of the types of questions that would be asked.

As the research progressed, a theoretical sampling approach was employed to identify participants. Theoretical sampling is “where the data is continually analysed as it is collected to guide the further sampling process” (Walter, 2010, p. 499) and the “sampling is directed by theory” (Goulding, 2002, p. 66). The sample size was undetermined as, applying grounded theory methodology, sampling continues until saturation of findings has been reached (Bryman, 2012).

Ethical considerations. Curtin University’s (Curtin University, 2015b) *Research management policy, Research data and primary materials policy* (Curtin University, 2015a) and the *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research* (Universities Australia, 2007) guided this investigation.

Prior to giving their consent to participate, participants were informed of how the data would be collected and used. The process for withdrawing safely from the study, should a participant wish to do so, was also explained in the informed consent document (see Appendix A).

The informed consent included a detailed description of the requirements for the interview. Participants were provided with sample questions prior to the interview (see Appendix B). The interviews were arranged for a time suitable to the participant at a setting of their choice; however, all participants nominated their workplace. Consideration was given to the choice of environment and time for the interviews, including factors such as awareness that participants may be interviewed in their working hours (and they may be employees, not owners of the service); participants may be required for other duties during the interview; participant’s peers, colleagues, employer, children or families may be present. These variables were considered when arranging a suitable time for interviews, so that participants could arrange with their employer and colleagues to be available for the interview in a private area of the service, or alternative arrangements were made to meet before or after the participant’s official work hours, still at their workplace for convenience. Participants were provided with optional consent for their interview to be audio-recorded.

Participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript within two-to-four weeks of the interview, for reviewing or amending their responses to interview questions, if they wished.

Prior to giving consent, participants were informed of the actions and behaviours that were relevant to observations and the types of documents that may be viewed as part of the document review (see Appendix B). Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity through use of pseudonyms, and truthful reporting in any reports. Where participants mentioned a colleague's name, or the name of a service or a location, these were de-identified and replaced in the transcript with an 'X' to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. As the only inconvenience to participants was an imposition on their time, this research was deemed to be of low or negligible risk.

Data collection. The main form of data collection involved qualitative interviewing via face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2012). The questions were open-ended and focused on attitudes, processes and practices related to the QIP and the assessment and rating process. An interview guide was used, and participants were provided with the questions prior to the interview (see Appendix B) (Bryman, 2012; Walter, 2010). The questions were modified during the interview in response to the participants' remarks and comments, which meant that at times, the interview became unstructured (Bryman, 2012). This was so that a rich and detailed account of the educator's experience could be gathered and opportunity existed to reveal further ideas relevant to the phenomena, that may not have been considered in the formulation of the interview schedule (Goulding, 2002). An audio-recording device was used for all interviews, with participant consent. A journal was used for jotting significant ideas during the interview.

Examination of documents in the various settings provided data relevant for the study. Artefacts, namely quality improvement plans, quality rating certification displayed and assessment reports, provided information relevant to the study. Resources such as websites and documents provided by ACECQA were also reviewed, namely the *National Quality Framework Resource Kit* (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], n.d.-b).

Observation through a semi-structured, non-participant observation method was used during scheduled visits to the services for interviews (Cohen et al., 2007). Field notes were used to ensure that researcher reflections were illuminated. Observations were conducted for understanding any reflective processes, and direct educator interaction (verbal and non-verbal) used within the setting and interview,

related to the development or implementation of the QIP. Memos were used throughout the interview process to document significant behaviours.

Memos were used in conjunction with the examination of documents, the interviews and regarding observed behaviours of participants (Goulding, 2002). The memos were kept separate from the collected data. The memos contained single words or short sentences that conveyed the researcher's thoughts and ideas or feelings (Cohen et al., 2007; Goulding, 2002).

Data was de-identified by removal of participant and service names and locations, along with any other identifying information mentioned in the interview transcripts. This included information such as the names of other ECEC services or educators, which were replaced with a 'X' in the transcript. The participants were de-identified by using pseudonyms.

Data analysis. This section will describe in detail the techniques used in the data analysis, and a summary of the results will be discussed in the next chapter. The techniques explained here are the processes referred to in the description of the research stages given at the beginning of this chapter.

Grounded theory was utilised for analysis of the data using coding, constant comparison and theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2012). Maggie Walter (2010, p. 499) defines theoretical saturation as "the point in qualitative data collection when no new information on any particular code is emerging". The analysis of data and emerging theory determined what further information was required to strengthen or disprove the forming hypotheses or theory (Bryman, 2012).

Coding. Coding involves analysis of all materials, transcripts and field notes gathered and applying labels (codes) to data that have conceptual significance to the study (Bryman, 2012). Three levels of coding were employed in the data analysis: open; axial; and selective coding which supports a Straussian approach to grounded theory (Bryman, 2012; Tripathi, n.d.; Walter, 2010).

Open coding. Analysis of the data began with open coding, defined by Walter (2010, p. 488) as "initial line-by-line examination for themes from data". This approach to data analysis allows a researcher to break up large amounts of data into smaller meaningful units, which are given a code as they are found. These smaller units can then be used in further analysis (Walter, 2010). A series of questions developed by Lofland and Lofland (1995), as cited in Bryman (2012, p. 574) was used to guide the initial line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, these being:

1. What topic is this item of data about?
2. What question does this item of data suggest?

3. What answer to a question does this item of data imply?

When identifying the initial codes, priori codes were considered (Walter, 2010). These are codes that were predetermined based on the literature reviewed prior to beginning the investigation, being perception; administrative burden; policy implementation; quality improvement; and role-identity (Walter, 2010). The codes that were expected were kept separate to the other codes identified, which are the inductive codes emerging from the data. This process enables the researcher to identify and consider theoretical sensitivity when analysing the data (Goulding, 2002; Walter, 2010).

Axial coding. Once the initial line-by-line analysis was complete for all interview transcripts, axial coding took place. Axial coding is where the identified codes were further “rigorously specified and elaborated” (Walter, 2010, p. 422), into categories and sub-categories. Axial coding is a more sophisticated technique of “abstraction [of identified codes] onto a theoretical level” (Goulding, 2002, p. 68) This means that the initial list of codes was placed into groups, based on similarities and differences. The placement of a code into a group followed a rationale, or guide as to the properties of codes within that group, determined by the comparison of similarities and differences between initial codes (Goulding, 2002; Walter, 2010). Selective reduction occurred simultaneously at this stage, which Walter (2010, p. 495) explains as the process whereby the “text is reduced to categories consisting of a word, or a set of words or phrases, on which the researcher can focus”.

Selective coding. The final stage in the coding process was selective coding. Selective coding is where all categories are unified around a core category (either by its centrality, frequency of occurrence, connection to other categories or implications for a more general theory) (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Goulding, 2002; Walter, 2010). Core categories move the researcher closer to the development of a theory, and are explained by Bryman (2012, p. 709) as “[occupying] a space between a researcher’s initial theoretical reflections on and understanding of ... data [coding] and a concept which is viewed as a higher level of abstraction”. A concept is defined as a “label that we give to elements of the social world that seem to have common features and that strike us as significant” (Bryman, 2012, p. 163).

Important to note here, is the incubation period, defined by (Walter, 2010, p. 414) as the “time taken to initially analyse and reflect on the data”. The research data was transcribed immediately, and coded within the first week. As the next interview was conducted this process was repeated and after three interviews all transcripts were re-read to see if the initial open coding applied. This ensured that the

interpretation of the data was consistent after each interview. This process was repeated several times over the period of the investigation as literature was reviewed.

Constant comparison. The data was analysed and coded as it was collected, and the codes were compared for identification of theory using the constant comparative method (Bryman, 2012; Walter, 2010). This is a process which facilitates the identification of concepts through “comparing like for like, to look for emerging patterns and themes” (Goulding, 2002, p. 68).

Theoretical saturation. Christina Goulding (2002, p. 68) explains theoretical saturation as occurring when “no new evidence emerges which can inform or underpin the development of a theoretical point”. A theme is defined by Bryman (2012, p. 580) as “a category identified by the analyst ... that builds on codes identified in the transcripts and/or field notes ... [and] provides the basis for a theoretical understanding of [the] data”.

Protection of data. The data from this study is stored by Curtin University, as per the *Research data and primary materials policy* (Curtin University 2015a). All data, records and materials will be stored for a minimum of seven years, when it will be destroyed as per the processes outlined in the *Western Australia University Sector Disposal Authority* (2011). This document states that “hard copy (paper) records should be destroyed by shredding, pulping or trammelling ... electronic records be destroyed by physical destruction of the storage medium (e.g. cutting, smashing, or pulverising) or by ... digital file shredding” and “tape (audio) ... should be physically destroyed, or the information overwritten, so that no information is retrievable.” (The Western Australia University Sector Disposal Authority, 2011, p. 15)

Trustworthiness

Bryman (2012, p. 717) defines trustworthiness as “a set of criteria advocated by some researchers as a method for assessing the quality of qualitative research”. Quality of a research investigation is measured against four interrelated criteria of trustworthiness and the rigour of the research (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Goulding, 2002). Rigour “is how researchers ensure that qualitative research faithfully represents the stories and experiences of the people being studied” (Walter, 2010, p. 494). The four criteria of quality in qualitative research are: credibility; dependability; and confirmability; which all contribute to the transferability of the

findings (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Gasson, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Credibility, dependability and confirmability. Credibility, or internal consistency (internal validity) refers to how well the research reflects the experience and perceptions of the participants of the topic under investigation (Bryman, 2012; Gasson, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Dependability or auditability (reliability), refers to the extent that the research can be replicated, in a consistent manner over time and researchers, and the findings would remain the same (Gasson, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Confirmability refers to the extent that the findings represent what the study was intended to represent, and the extent that the researcher has “acted in good faith” (Bryman, 2012, p. 392).

Measures to ensure the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the research findings in this investigation include transparent, ‘thick description’ of the research methodology, particularly related to the sample coverage, and data collection (consideration of the environment, the questioning techniques and opportunities for participants to check and amend their responses) (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Further measures include extensive use of representative quotations from participants (verbatim) and respondent validation (Bryman, 2012; Gasson, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Measures to ensure quality in the areas of dependability and confirmability include reflexivity, rigour and thick description of the research process (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Walter, 2010). Reflexivity demonstrates the researcher’s interpretation of findings, evidenced through memos, field notes and jottings (Bryman, 2012; Gasson, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Walter, 2010). These notes serve to draw the attention of the researcher and others checking, to the objectivity (self-awareness) of the researcher. In this way any researcher bias can be highlighted, addressed and the findings assessed as to any influence this may have had (Walter, 2010). Reflexivity measures also include sharing details of the researcher’s background and interest in the field of study (Goulding, 2002).

Credibility, dependability and confirmability are also ensured through internal checking of the collection and interpretation of data (Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Participants are given the opportunity to consider the research questions prior to the interview via an interview schedule, and are further given an opportunity to reflect on and amend their comments after receiving a copy of the interview transcript (respondent validation) (Bryman, 2012). Truthful reporting via thick description and use of representative, verbatim quotations ensure that readers

can interpret the data for themselves and understand how the researcher has arrived at conclusions (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Gasson, 2003; Goulding, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Walter, 2010).

Further measures to ensure quality include transparent, detailed descriptions of the research process and methodology (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz & Bryant, 2013; Goulding, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Walter, 2010). This ensures that the sample selection demonstrates it was without bias and representative of the target population of the study, being educators in the field of ECEC who develop a QIP (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The use of a constant comparison methodology in data analysis strengthens the credibility (validity) of findings and the proposed theories that emerge (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) as does the triangulation of data (between interviews, observations and documents reviewed), and theory triangulation or “looking at data from different theoretical perspectives” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 276). Respondent validation strengthens the dependability and confirmability of the findings (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Transferability. Transferability refers to how applicable the findings of the research investigation (and the theory identified) are to other settings and populations, beyond those studied in the research sample (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). What is problematic with the transferability of findings in qualitative research is that the findings reflect the perceptions, values and beliefs of a sample of people at a particular point in time. In this way, transferability in qualitative research fails to take into account the specific context and time, or circumstance of the study undertaken (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Theories derived from qualitative research using grounded theory are based on interpretation of data, one interpretation of many possibilities. Any theory suggested is only that, a suggestion, until it is proven or disproven in a wider context (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

By using thick, rich description, various aspects of the settings that are unique can be considered, and reasons for judgements made can be explained and justified. By doing so, the researcher enables others to take this into account and apply an understanding of this to other settings (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It is therefore through the quality of the fieldwork conducted; the degree to which the participants of the study represent the wider population; the quality of the analysis; and interpretation of data that the transferability of the findings can be measured (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

This chapter has outlined the research strategy in detail, highlighting the various stages of the research process. The measures taken to ensure the quality and

trustworthiness of the research have been detailed. The next chapter identifies the data collected and findings of the research through discussion of each research question.

Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter will describe the findings of the data collected and analysed. It is structured to address each of the identified categories of information. The educators' perception and experience of the burden has been grouped into six main categories identified through the coding of data. Each core category is defined and explained, with the sub-categories fleshed out in detail. Representative quotations have been used to ensure thick, rich description and a true representation of participants.

Table 4 shows the main categories of the impact of the QIP on educators, and lists the sub-categories that were identified within each. This chapter will define, explain and discuss each component in detail, using representative quotations and examples from the research data to support the findings.

Table 4

Summary table of the main categories and sub-categories identified within the research data

Core Category	Sub-categories
1. Educator experience	Educator background; role responsibilities; mindset
2. Information obligations	Regulatory compliance; programming and documenting children's learning
3. Quality rating process	Documentation of evidence; notification; regulatory officers; ratings
4. Quality improvement	Documentation (structure and writing); critical reflection
5. Support structures	Collegiality; meetings and networking; training and consultancy; physical resources; non-contact time
6. Stress	Psychological burden

Core Category 1: Educator Experience

This section will detail the three sub-categories of a core category identified as educator experience. The sub-categories identified through coding are: educator background; role-responsibilities; and educator mindset. The educator background includes an overview and explanation of each participant's experience working in the field of ECEC. The section on role-responsibilities provides an explanation of each participant's current role and details related to their individual workplace settings. The third and final category, mindset, highlights each participant's view of their role as a centre manager in their setting.

Together these sub-categories provide a picture of the educators (participants) who took part in the study. With the aim of this research being to understand educators' perception and experience of the administrative burden, it is pertinent to understand the history and background of the participants in the study.

Educator background. The first educator interviewed was Kathy (pseudonym). Kathy has 17 years of experience working in the field of early childhood education and care. Kathy works for a long day care (LDC) centre, which is one of three services owned by the same company (approved provider). Educators refer to these multiple services with the same approved provider as 'sister services'.

Kathy's role in the service is that of centre manager, and she also goes by the title of director. This service has a high number of children enrolled (known as high occupancy), and low staff turnover. Kathy works alongside a colleague, referred to as the '2IC', or the 'second-in-charge', who has the title of assistant manager. Kathy describes her role as centre manager as:

I typically do everything to do with new families, so I show people through orientations, running the whole centre, like staffing, dealing with enquiries all compliance, like policy and procedure, making sure everybody else is aware and following procedure, meetings, performance development.... I'm the educational leader as well, so I do a lot to do with the program I support the educators with everything to do with the program ... Training of the educators.

The second educator interviewed was Janelle (pseudonym) who has 10 years of experience in the field, all with the same service. She works in a small centre that operates a combined LDC and outside school hours care service (OSHC). Janelle's service is one of two owned by the same approved provider. Janelle is the only fully qualified educator at her service; she works with two colleagues who are currently training to receive their Certificate III (Cert III) in early childhood education and care. The approved provider and owner works within the service part-time and holds the

title of director. Janelle referred to herself as 'qualified'. A 'qualified' educator is an employee who holds a qualification to work in early childhood, and can include any of the following: an educator who holds a Certificate III or diploma; outside school hours care coordinators; early childhood teachers; educational leaders; certified supervisors; nominated supervisors; and family day care educators and coordinators (Queensland Government, 2015).

Janelle's experience offered a unique insight into the study as when first interviewed she had not undergone a quality rating process. However, a week after the interview the service was notified of their impending assessment and rating visit. A follow-up interview revealed Janelle's thoughts and experience after the event, which is explored further in later discussion.

The third participant Andrea (pseudonym) has 21 years of experience in the industry. She works for a LDC service, whose owner has the one approved service. This service was in the early stages of operation when Andrea was approached to participate in the study, and as such, the service was in the process of developing their initial QIP. Andrea has a broad range of experience in the industry:

I worked on the floor as a group leader and then the last 12 years I've been in management positions so I've been centre manager, area manager; I've also done a bit of Human Resources as well ...

The next two participants both work at an established LDC service, together. This service is one of more than 10 operated by the same company. The educators, Molly and Claire (pseudonyms), offered an opportunity to gain an insight into the collaborative development of their QIP.

Molly holds the role of centre manager and has 11 years of experience in the industry. She holds an early childhood teaching degree, and a degree in psychology. Claire has the role of assistant manager with six years of experience, and is currently studying a bachelor's degree in early childhood teaching.

Both educators joined the service shortly before the service underwent its first A&R. The service received a rating of working toward the NQS, and it proved to be a negative experience for them. This will be explored further in later discussion. Molly and Claire both took on leadership positions within the service shortly after their service had undergone the quality rating process. Their interview took place during their set collaborative planning time, when they were going to discuss starting their QIP.

Molly described her experience at the service in the following way:

... moved over here a year and a half ago. Into the Kindy room and took on ACM [assistant centre manager] and educational leader and stepped up to CM [centre manager] as well. I've been in the office since [date omitted] of last year, but in saying that, it was a tumultuous entry into the office.

Claire described her experience with the service as:

I started at this centre in [dates omitted, but within the past two years]. I started as a casual, did some basic casual, full-time, part-time as the lead educator in the babies' room. I completed my Diploma in 2014 so I'm a little newbie, but I had a lot of knowledge even without the qualification as I was training the staff at my previous centre for qualified positions, so just the experience of being through the centre and picking up work from the different qualifieds.

Role responsibilities. All educators held a similar position within their service, based on their role responsibilities; however, not all educators held the same job title. According to the Children's Services Award 2010, (Fair Work Commission, 2016, p. 49) a director of a service is "responsible for the overall management and administration of the service", including supervision of programs for children; recruitment of staff; all administrative duties such as day-to-day accounts; ensuring compliance with regulations and statutory requirements; ensuring the service meets or exceeds quality assurance; liaison with families and external parties; annual budgets; provision of professional leadership and development to staff; and developing, maintaining and reviewing policies and procedures for the service. The role is mainly non-contact, meaning the educators are not directly interacting with the children, which is termed within the industry as being 'on-the-floor'. The role of director is also known as centre manager, which is the term that has been used in this research study.

When asked about her official job title, Janelle's response was "I don't know what I am. I don't actually know". Subsequent follow-up comments throughout Janelle's interview demonstrated role-conflict where "conflicting information about the same role or job" exists (Newton & Jimmieson, 2008, p. 21):

I don't even know to be honest. I'm supervising officer, officially. Nominated supervisor, officially on paper. I'm the qualified, 2IC [second-in-charge], educational leader? (*pauses to think*) I don't know. I don't know where I fit. I really don't know. People ask me, and the girls, when someone rings up for something they say "I'll put you onto the manager" and I think "Am I?" I don't know. What am I? Because I am on the floor with the kids but I do handle all the office stuff as well like the paperwork and stuff.

Janelle further explained:

Even reading the job roles in our staff handbook, I'm like, okay, but I do that, but I do that, but I do that ... but it needed to be done. That's the thing, it's not that I've taken all of this on really, willingly, not necessarily, it's—I have the knowledge to do it, I have the capacity to do it, so I did.

In trying to further define her role based on responsibilities, Janelle stated, "I'm all over the place. I have fingers in many pies". She then elaborated, saying:

My day generally is cleaning, supervising children, planning programs, observations, other random paperwork such as the QIP, or parent documentation, the attendances even, like for the kids putting in who came what days, I do that as well. I'll be doing the pays this week because [the owner's] going [on holiday], so I do a bit of everything. I dabble in everything. You could say I'm the coordinator, but I'm not officially.

On the day of this interview, Janelle was observed cleaning the service prior to the arrival of the children. She was observed mopping the wet areas, cleaning the bathroom, cleaning the desks, and she had vacuumed the carpeted areas prior to the researcher's arrival.

Later in the interview, Janelle mentioned other responsibilities she has, such as, "I do the policies too"; "I handle the parent's accounts for them"; "getting afternoon tea organised and stuff, do the work shopping"; and "I'm helping [colleague] with her assignments".

Although she did not list supervision of other staff as one of her responsibilities, Janelle indicated that she does this as well throughout several points in her interviews. When directly asked, she admitted to supervising staff; however, she appeared uncomfortable when answering saying, "Not that they know it, but yeah. Yes." Her hesitancy in answering this question is likely due to the ambiguity and conflict of her role.

Janelle also demonstrated that she takes on extra responsibilities, for example:

It would honestly take me a day to go through and sit and tell you everything I do in a day, because every day is different. I mean computer work, [the owner] will ask me to type something for him ... I feel like a secretary some days ... We did have a parent come in to make a complaint about a bullying incident that I had to deal with last night, so I had finished work about 5:30 but I knew she was coming about 6:00 to pick up her children, so I just stayed. They [colleagues] were like, "Why are you still here?" and I said "Oh, just hanging around like, you know" but I stayed because I knew something was coming, and it did, but we calmed it down, no punch-ups ensued so that was good. I was mediating.

This example demonstrates Janelle's seeming uncertainty to directly manage her colleagues as she perhaps would if she had the official title of centre manager or director. By remaining and stating that she was "just hanging around", she implied that she was at the same level as her colleagues, when in fact she was demonstrating leadership, knowing that an issue was coming and that it needed to be addressed. Janelle appears uncomfortable in demonstrating this leadership in front of her colleagues as she appears to view herself as a peer, at their level within the service; although she is happy to undertake the extra responsibilities when it is required, or when the responsibility is given to her by her colleagues who are less experienced. In this way, Janelle finds a balance between being a peer and friend, and a colleague with a leadership role. This is another example of role-conflict.

When asked if she thought there was a difference between what a centre manager, director, or coordinator would do and her role responsibility, Janelle replied: "If I compare myself to my own centre manager or [the owner], who is our director, no, because he gets me to do everything". In reflecting on her changing role, Janelle stated:

Not that I've really noticed it. I mean ever since 19, I was qualified at 19, because they needed a qualified. It was Janelle, do your Diploma. We need ya [sic]. Okay. I did it. Then progressively I just took on more responsibilities without even really realising it. I mean, I'm flattered in a way that [the owner] trusts me to run the centre and he's gone to X for a week, and he knows that this place will be fine ... It's better for me in a way because it's kind of come gradually. It hasn't all just been dumped on me in one hit, I've just gradually picked up more responsibility. Gradually learnt how to do more.

Currently Andrea's role as centre manager includes a number of additional roles, as she is in a similar situation to Janelle. The service is establishing and therefore has smaller enrolment numbers, requiring fewer staff. Andrea explains her role responsibilities as:

I probably do a lot more than most at the moment. I probably do the role of a qualified educator, as well as the role of an educational leader, and then I also do centre management wise, all accounts, your bookings, marketing, constantly trying to sell the service, Facebook page, website upgrades, following up enquiries, doing tours, taking on students, looking after my trainees, following up with them, covering them so they can have their time-off as well to do their studying. Then I also do staff meetings, rostering, all the nitty-gritty I suppose.

and:

I am being the cook, I am being the educational leader, as well as a qualified in the room, things like that, whereas when our numbers pick up we'll have

someone in for those. So, when we are full and have all the staff, then I would be classified as non-contact. But at the moment I'm a contact coordinator. Jack of all trades (*laughs*).

When asked about how they view their role in developing the QIP, educators replied, "It's solely my responsibility to make sure it's updated, everybody's involved in it, but it's on me to make sure it's live, continually updated, and a useable document." (Kathy). Janelle stated:

I honestly feel like it's my sole responsibility. Even though I ask the girls their opinion, because [colleague is] only studying her Cert III, and [another colleague is] only doing her Cert III too, they've not finished their training ... I definitely feel it's my responsibility. If I feel I could give it to the girls to do, I would, but I truly, truly believe that it would just be a task and a stress that they really would just not handle. So, I feel that if they're comfortable being with the kids for me for ten minutes while I go and do this [*points to QIP on the computer screen*] fine – I'll do it that way. It's kind of making life easier on everybody.

and:

... for me to do the QIP it's a lot easier because I know how the centre runs, I know what's working, I know what's not working, whereas for [the owner] that would be more difficult and he would constantly be asking my opinion. So, it's easier just to do it myself. As much as I'd love to shove it on to someone else.

When asked about her role in developing the QIP, Andrea found it difficult to answer at first. Her body language was noted as changing when asked this question, her shoulders slumped and her head dropped down. She closed her eyes and took time to reply, and she appeared embarrassed to admit she had not developed the QIP yet:

(*long pause while thinking ... long sigh*) I honestly ... I struggle to keep up to date with it ... trying to find the time to do that. I've put more importance I think on the programs, first and foremost, making sure that what we're providing for the children is adequate, and we're living up to all the expectations of the families and things like that. We would have a lot to add to our QIP, because we've made a lot of changes since we've been here, but it's just, like, once a month at staff meetings is probably just not enough. There's things that we do every day that I need to document, we're probably lucky that we do document here a lot anyway, so I can go back through and pull things out.

What can be seen in Janelle and Andrea's situations is the variety of role-identities they have. As qualified ECEC educators, they have social membership to the field of ECEC and are 'educators'. Within their service contexts they both listed several titles, all of which have different responsibilities, such as nominated supervisor, educational leader, ZIC, centre manager, secretary, cleaner, cook, as well as that of

colleague, mentor and peer. At home they have the roles of partner, daughter, mother and friend.

Mindset. Mindset is defined as “a fixed mental attitude or disposition that predetermines a person's responses to and interpretations of situations” (mindset, n.d.). An educator’s mindset towards their role is indicative of their role-identity. If educators demonstrate a positive attitude towards their role, and demonstrate confidence, competence and self-worth, it indicates that they feel as though they are fulfilling their role as centre manager effectively (Burke, n.d.; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Kathy sees her role as set, following clear guidelines outlined in her role description. She sees herself as part of a team that is equal. When needed, Kathy works with educators on the floor “hands on, role-modelling, giving them pointers” (Kathy).

I always try to go above and beyond. There isn't anything I do, that I feel I shouldn't do.... I'm not expected to do anything that's not in my job title. We try to make everything fair, like nobody is above anybody else sort of thing, if they can change a nappy, I can change a nappy....

Kathy expressed frustration at times when discussing administrative duties, such as developing the QIP: “we feel like we need to be continuously doing more and more”. When asked about her role being mainly an administrative role, she replied:

No. That's probably what I feel I do a lot of, but no. All the compliance, and quality assurance and stuff like that is a big part of it. I guess I feel like I just do admin all the time.

Janelle’s comments show that she is a positive and optimistic person, but there are challenges in her workplace situation. Janelle’s responses indicate that she feels alone in her role: “I am the only qualified because we don't need another qualified”; “Not that I'm complaining about the hours, I mean I enjoy my job”; “I guess I'm blessed that it's a small service. I really am, I truly am, but with that and saying that, then there's also the curse of well, you're the only one”; and “I mean today the girls are doing art with the kids and I'm stuck in here doing all my bits and bobs”.

Andrea feels that she needs to be on-the-floor with her educators, for a number of reasons. Firstly, because of enrolments, she is required to be on-the-floor to meet mandated educator-to-child ratios. Secondly, as the service is establishing, Andrea sees it as her responsibility to model expectations of practice, and develop relationships:

As a centre manager, I should be following up with my trainees, I should be making sure they're getting their time. ... if I'm not out there, role-modelling my expectations of what I want, it's not going to happen. It's constant mentoring, and you can't really mentor from behind closed walls all the time. We need to see the practice, need to see what's going on, need to work out what we could do better, what we need to fix.

Molly and Claire demonstrate a different mindset to their role. Due to their prior negative experience with leadership and management in their service, they see their role as leading a team, in a positive and self-sufficient way. For these educators, they see their role as developing parent and staff confidence in what they do. After explaining how they came into their leadership positions, and the negative way they were treated by management, the following exchange indicates their mindset towards their roles:

Claire: Anyone else would have walked out of there and been like 'stuff this, I'm out', but ... we're like 'challenge accepted'.

Molly: You are going to eat your words. But we want to make the organisational change from the bottom-up. So, we can point out that whatever their practices were then, are not helpful, and that's how you're going to lose talent. We've worked quite hard in order to get there.

Molly added:

They [parents of children] were referring to my chair as the 'death chair'. They said they didn't want me to take over in the office because anybody who's there for more than a couple of months (*gestures with thumb towards door*). So, that gives you a good insight into how far we've had to come in a fairly short period and why the paperwork side of the QIP has not been a focus; it's more maintaining a customer base, educators, parents, support office. Trying to claw everybody back onside. Then we've got a team again.

Molly has a clear vision of what her role is as a leader:

You need to lead by example. You need to provide feedback. You need to be approachable. You need to practice what you preach. Basically, you need to be putting on a positive face, every day, because as soon as you're not positive that's going to leech through everybody else. That might be for the kids, for the staff You need to be organised. I think for us, previously, as soon as you look like you might drop the ball, then everybody loses confidence. So, it's about having that air of knowing what you're doing, without being arrogant about it.

These comments indicate that Molly and Claire are confident in their skills as educators, and as leaders. They attribute earlier failures to management and are

motivated to prove their knowledge and skills, using a positive approach to building their team.

Core Category 2: Information Obligations

The second core category relates to information obligations. This category of data was identified as expected to emerge (a priori code) (Walter, 2010), due to the nature and focus of the research on administrative burden.

Information obligations are “obligations arising from regulation to provide information and data to the public sector or third parties ... [and] may include a duty to have information available for inspection or supply on request” (Better Regulation Unit Malta, n.d.). Information obligations exist in regulations. One regulation may contain several information obligations, such as notification of activities; submitting reports (such as the QIP); applications; registration and/or cooperation with audits and inspection by public authorities or those appointed by them (Better Regulation Unit Malta, n.d.).

Regulatory compliance. Regulatory compliance “is an organisation's adherence to laws, regulations, guidelines and specifications relevant to its business” (TechTarget, 2016). Many information obligations require paperwork to be completed. For some educators, completion of necessary paperwork for information obligations impacts not only on educators themselves, “so many things are just paperwork for paperwork's sake” (Molly), but on the time available to interact with the children:

I think they need to look at how much paperwork is viable for child care workers and kind of realise, ok, you want us on the floor with the kids but you also want this done, and the two don't really go together. Well, especially in my world they don't (Janelle).

Evident from the research data is that information obligations impact on the administrative burden experienced by educators. These obligations appear to be constant; however, the obligation to be met is not the same each time “It's a lot of juggling balls in the air” (Molly).

...it's such a juggling act. It really is. Today, my paperwork is done ... but I had to catch up on some attendance work because we had the school holidays, so I had to be out on the floor more, so it just snowballs. Every spare minute that I have, it seems to be that there's just something else that needs doing (Janelle).

and:

We already have systems now that we put into place at the end of last year, like for archiving, where we now keep plastic sleeves separate and we file at the end of every week, or month instead of 12 months, or two years' worth, having to be done in the last two days of the year (Claire).

and:

... my to-do list for today is almost full, a double-side section of things that need to get done, but you still know you've got to get the archiving done, you still know there's things that aren't on that list that need to be done. That list can still wait until Monday but some things you know that you're actually going to feel better if you do clear out some of those folders or you do start archiving things or if you do ... get a new filing cabinet (Molly).

Further comments demonstrate that educators need to prioritise and focus management of their time on several areas of regulatory compliance: "it may not be QIP work, but it could have been. I could have been working on the QIP. Had I not have been doing attendances I probably would have been doing the QIP" (Janelle), and "I alternate between weeks, and if I don't get it done that week, then I take it home so I can finish it and start fresh the next week" (Janelle).

In comparing the data related to information obligations, it was evident that there was a difference between the context, or unique situation of the service. The difference appeared to relate to the amount of impact that information obligations had on the educators. In one instance, Janelle's service was producing two separate QIPs, "One for schoolies and one for littlies, because we're an Outside School Hours Care and LDC as well. So, when we had the two qualifieds it was fine, one did one group, the other did the other group" (Janelle). In comparison, Kathy's service indicated less of a burden with producing the QIP due to the support that they received from a central office: "Our office had a lot to do with that more, we just had to put the information in with our strengths and weaknesses, or areas for improvement" (Kathy), and "we'll just scribble on the one that we have printed and then we'll send it to our office, which we're also quite lucky to have, to have it typed up" (Kathy).

In Janelle's example, the service was small, with the educator being the only 'qualified' employee. Due to the number of children enrolled, the service only needs one person to hold this qualification to meet regulations. In contrast, Kathy's example is from a larger service that has more enrolments. This service is supported by a separate central office that assists with completion of information required for regulatory compliance. While the regulations and information obligations are the same for both services, the context of the individual service appears to be an important variable in the level of administrative burden experienced by educators. Janelle expressed more time

pressure and difficulty prioritising the QIP as a task than Kathy, as evident in use of terminology such as ‘had to’, ‘snowballs’, ‘juggling’, ‘something else’ and ‘take it home’.

Programming and documenting children’s learning. Another information obligation for ECEC services is programming and documenting children’s learning. This was identified in the review of the NQF as burdensome for educators (ACECQA, 2015). Although not a focus of this research study, this was mentioned several times by one educator, which prompted reflection relevant to the study and is therefore included in the findings.

Section 168 of the National Law (New South Wales Government, 2016) covers the requirements for the educational program and practice within early childhood settings including documentation of children’s learning. This is also relevant to Quality Area 1 (QA1) of the NQS (ACECQA, 2013b). Services are to document “assessments of the child’s developmental needs, interests, experiences and participation in the educational program; and assessments of the child’s progress against the outcomes of the educational program; ... [and] evaluations of the child’s wellbeing, development and learning” (New South Wales Government, 2016, p. 51). This documentation is to be used to develop a program relevant to the individual needs of each child.

Documentation of the educational program must be “displayed at the education and care service premises at a place accessible to parents of children” (New South Wales Government, 2016, p. 51) and “in a way that is readily understandable by the educators at the service and the parents of the child” (New South Wales Government, 2016, p. 51).

Documenting children’s learning is tied to programming, as educators observe the children to identify their interests and abilities, then use these observations to plan experiences to further develop the children’s skills and knowledge (DEEWR, 2009). This documentation of assessment, planning and teaching is known colloquially within the industry as ‘children’s learning stories’. As explained by Janelle, these learning stories create a burden on educators: “If you ask any qualified, my love, they will tell you. Learning stories. They are the two dirtiest words in child care (*laughs*)”. The impact on educators to comply with policy requirements related to documenting children’s learning is exemplified by Janelle’s comment about observations:

... instead of having one ob [sic] on that child, they now ask for three, minimum. And even though we’ve only got a group of seven littlies, that’s seven times by three obs [sic], plus 25 schoolies who require obs [sic]. That is a heck of a lot.

Reflection on memos and interview transcripts indicated that at times Janelle appeared to be unable to separate her thoughts on administrative burden experienced

with the QIP, and that of the administrative burden experienced with programming and documentation of children's learning. There were points in the interview, however, where she was clear on the difference:

Does my programming take priority? Yes. Always my program will prioritise over the QIP. I won't change that. That's just me. I know other centres will put priority of their QIP over programming but that's just personal preference to how they want to run it I guess ... it's always going to be my programming, because that's with the children (Janelle).

These comments indicate a psychological burden experienced by the educator. 'Burden' is defined as "something that is exacting, oppressive, or difficult to bear" (burden, n.d.). Janelle acknowledges that she spends more time on her programming than the QIP, and her statements could indicate that she feels she should be doing more on her QIP, as she is comparing herself and her situation to that of other centres. While she has justified her reasons for prioritising programming, her comments may also indicate a level of subconscious guilt for not placing as much importance on the QIP.

Further comments indicate that the burden of compliance with programming is quite high for this educator, such as; "it feels like they've given us the QIP, but also with the other hand they've given us another pile like this (gestures with hand above head) that needs to be seen with programming" (Janelle); and "if they lessened the load on the programming that would be great, we would have so much more time to do the QIP" (Janelle). Also,

Truth be told, I take it home a lot. Just to get it done within the week. It's more programming. The QIP I can get done here, I haven't taken home as yet, but I have taken the USB home a couple of times and typed up stuff because it needed to get done (Janelle).

Again, the context and situation for this educator was vastly different to that of other participants in the study. In this case, the educator was responsible for developing the QIP and management of the service, but also for being with the children. She was the only qualified within the service. She was assisted by other educators who were undergoing their training, and therefore were not yet qualified to assist, "which is really difficult because it feels like I'm being the big boots, lord and master over the programming, but I'm not, it's just because I can't let them" (Janelle). Therefore, programming and documentation of children's learning are high priorities and a large part of her workload. It appears that her circumstance makes it difficult to separate the three regulatory compliance obligations, here being the QIP; programming; and

documenting children's learning. The latter two are embedded within the QIP, in QA1: Educational program and practice (ACECQA, 2013b). For this educator, when developing programs and documenting children's learning, she is also addressing QA1 in the QIP, yet each requires different forms of reflection and documentation.

Core Category 3: Quality Rating Process

The third core category encompasses components of the quality rating process. Sub-categories explore educators' perception of documentation, notification of the rating visit, their experience with regulatory officers and their thoughts about ratings. This category was anticipated to emerge from the data, due to the nature of the research investigation and interview questions (again, a priori code). While it was anticipated to arise in the discussion of the burden experienced, it was not known what aspects of the quality rating process contributed to the burden experienced.

While all educators had not been through the current assessment and rating process, all had experience with the previous accreditation system under the NCAC. Educators saw the assessment and rating process as necessary, evidenced by statements such as, "as stressful as it is, I think they're extremely important because we need to know what we're doing and what we're not doing" (Janelle); "I don't think we should abolish the assessment and rating process, it needs to be done" (Janelle); "I do truly believe that it's something you have to have done" (Janelle).

In comparing the former accreditation system with the current quality rating process, educator perspectives were varied: "I feel like the old system was just basically the centre manager doing everything" (Kathy), and:

I mean we should be grateful that it's not like the old process, where the NCAC were doing it, it was we will attend between x date and x date and you had no clue what day they were going to show up - they just appeared for two days within that timeframe this time they tell you the dates that they are going to be here so in a way it's kind of better because you are prepared, they're gonna [sic] be there that day - you pull out your A game that day (Janelle).

and:

I think the new way is a bit harsher in some things, in the old way if you got one thing wrong they sort of evened it out, whereas if you get something wrong, or a staff member gets one thing wrong that brings down that whole area, which brings down the whole overall outlook of things and you know, people can slip up (Andrea).

and:

... in the old way, initially they would give you the dates of when they were coming so a lot of people I guess used to stage it, and then they stopped that and gave you a 6-week block, and that 6-week block was probably the worst because you didn't know when they were coming. So, everyone was on edge and all the rest of it. It was really horrible (Andrea).

While some of these comments were made in relation to the former accreditation system, it is still apparent from responses throughout the interviews that the sense of psychological pressure continues to be evoked in educators. There is a feeling of pressure in that "everything needs to happen in those two days" (Kathy); "for the educators who haven't [been through the process] then they're thinking that something terrible can go on, something can go wrong" (Kathy); "no matter what you do it's still someone coming to watch you, isn't it" (Kathy); "we try to make them feel like it's a positive thing, you just do your job" (Kathy); "you're nervous and things like that" (Andrea), and:

... on the day, they [educators] can feel the pressure as well, I think not just because it's hard, because we do try to involve them as much as possible, but them not understanding it, or the educators who haven't been through it, it is very daunting for them (Kathy).

Within the social context of the ECEC industry, educators awaiting their quality rating visits appeared to have knowledge of the experience from other services; "[Peer] said it was just the worst" (Janelle). Much of the pressure experienced in relation to assessment and rating visits could be attributed to emotional contagion, or how "individual's emotions, expressed in a group, can spread to others, and once spread can affect performance" (Vijayalakshmi & Bhattacharyya, 2012, p. 364).

Janelle stated:

One of our mums at [another service] ... they've got the resources, the 2ICs, the office managers, and they've asked people to come over from Melbourne, and then they didn't get an exceeding. So, it's like, what am I supposed to do then? I'm just me! I can't take on the big boys. It's just me.

This implies that Janelle believes services with 'resources' such as extra staff, a leadership or management structure, would be expected to perform well in the quality rating. She implies in her phrasing 'take on the big boys' that she sees herself as outside the majority of other services. Furthermore, it indicates her thinking that if a service with 'resources' she doesn't have, hasn't achieved *exceeding*, then it will be unrealistic for her to achieve success at this level.

For Molly and Claire, their experience indicated the influence of emotional contagion repeatedly throughout their interview, with the phrasing of how the assessment and rating process was 'sold' to the staff by their leadership:

Molly: The process was horrible, because of the way it was sold. This is going to sound horrible, but if it was being led by a person who was being positive and providing proper feedback it would have been much better.

Researcher: How was it sold to you?

Molly: It was sold to me on the phone, while I was on annual leave, in tears saying 'we're ...' *(long pause while thinking)*

Researcher: *(prompt)* getting assessed ...?

Molly: *(laughs)* That's a nice way of saying it. No. I had to guess that we had our letter from all the expletives and the 'we're screwed, we're not going to have jobs' ... and 'how are we actually going to tell people?' I'm like, 'well you're going to go home, calm yourself down and not talk to anybody today because in this frame of mind that's not going to be helpful to anyone'. That advice wasn't heeded. Apparently, she [former centre manager] walked around the centre in tears.

Claire: She [former centre manager] came into the lunch room, I was on break, there were tears all the way down *(gestures to face)*, 'we're f-ed, we just got our letter', and just that, experiencing it from someone, and hearing it – I felt sick in my stomach. My confidence walked out the second that was said.

Molly: It wasn't sold in a way of people are coming in to provide us with critical feedback on what we're doing, and how we can improve what we are doing and the quality of the centre. It wasn't sold in that way. It was 'these horrible people are coming in to tell us how bad, or to pick up all of the bad things that we're doing and then we get this overarching rating and we're going to get into so much trouble from our bosses'.

Further examples of Molly and Claire's experience was given in the following exchanges:

Molly: I think, for us, it's been sold too negatively and as soon as you get a connotation from somebody who's in a leadership position of 'oh my god, we're screwed' ...

Claire: 'I'm gonna [sic] vomit'

and:

Researcher: What were the weeks like leading up to the A&R visit last time?

Claire: Leading up, for the period that the QIP was due, so for that two weeks, we weren't approached, it was the QIP, QIP, QIP.

Molly: We had staff meetings. It was just really negative that's all. Morale was probably at one of its lowest ... yeah, it was pretty low. It did nose-dive again after that, after the wonderful staff meeting of 'this is your rating'.

Molly: I got the paperwork for educational leader the day before, and a list with a 'by the way here's some questions that you're going to be asked', to have to explain all of the programming and the programming cycle across the centre.

Claire: The manager was the educational leader, and then she's just signed off days before. *The day before.*

Researcher: You got given the paperwork, to say, this is your new role?

Molly: Yep and I didn't actually know where any of the files, or anything was.

Claire: I stayed back on that last day.... I finalised everything in my own time.

Molly: And the morning of, like the night before they [assessors] came in the manager had decided to change all of the rooms around, put out new resources *and* decide that we would do progressive meal times.

Claire: On the day of A&R.

Molly: For assessment and rating, that we weren't previously doing. So, as soon as you walked in you were like 'what is all this stuff, how are we meant to use it', the children know nothing about all these things. All of a sudden, we've got watering cans in our food area, to collect drink-bottle water, but the kids don't know about that, so of course they're just watering the ground or whatever. It was kind of like we were set up. As hilarious as it is now, at the time—*not* hilarious.

The sense of psychological pressure is also evident in responses where educators who had not undergone assessment and rating, imagined a negative scenario taking place: "could you imagine if you had a child who was new to the service, and unsettled all day, and we have days like that" (Andrea); and "my biggest fear is not having enough, because being through the assessment and rating process before [accreditation] and our programs didn't pass, after that, that just put the fear of God in me" (Janelle).

In psychology, this is known as defensive pessimism where, by "imagining the worst-case scenario, defensive pessimists motivate themselves to prepare more and try

harder” (Grant, 2013), often leading to successful performance. This was apparent in Janelle’s experience, as her concerns related to her programming. While her concerns were based on previous feedback, many of her comments showed that she was still unsure of what the expectations were for programming; she just knew that her programs were ‘not enough’ previously. By expecting similar negative feedback, Janelle focused on preparation of her programs for the subsequent assessment and rating visit. In her second interview, she indicated success, stating:

... if we had of had an ECT [early childhood teacher] on the floor, which we obviously don’t have because we only have so few little kids at the moment, we would have got *exceeding* the national quality standard on our programming so that was a bit of a ‘go Janelle!’ moment. I was pretty proud of that ... He [assessor] was really impressed with that. He took copies of it and he’s going to show it around, obviously blank ones, but my templates, so that’s good (Janelle).

Educators who had not experienced the new assessment and rating process were overall optimistic about the process and outcomes: “I don’t know, play it by ear and see what happens. You can only do your best. And hope it’s a really good day” (Andrea); “There’s no point in just marking somebody down and then not helping them out. I would hope that they would” (Andrea); and

... if you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing, and it’s not like it used to be where it’s an automatic fail, it’s you’re not meeting this area, work out your ways in this QIP on how you’re going to address it (Janelle).

Educators who have been through the process, such as Molly and Claire, were also optimistic about their service’s next quality rating:

I think my aim for the next A&R would be just, see how much difference we can make by having a positive spin. I don’t really care so much about the rating. I’m sure I will when I have a read on the internet. I want people to not be scared of it. I want people to think of it as a lovely process of inviting friends over to show them what we’re doing (Molly)

and:

I’m a competitive thinker. So, for me it’s more like I can’t wait to show them how we are now. If we got that then, imagine what we’ll get with all the changes we have done. I’m secretly excited. In saying that I’ll probably be awake the whole night before thinking (*laughs*) (Claire).

and:

This round will be good. I'm looking forward to it. We won't get worse than where we're at, it's going to be a good learning tool and I think we need to forget what the rating is and just be proud of what we're doing (Molly).

In comparing interviews between participants who had been through the assessment and rating process, and those who had not, it is evident that the burden related to the process is lessened with experience. This is demonstrated through comments from Kathy, for example, who had been through the A&R process with all three of her company's services. Kathy remarked: "that made a big difference, having the extra centres to be able to learn from" and "that was our first centre we went through it [A&R] with, so we learnt a lot from that one about how to do the QIP to make it read how we want it to be read and things like that" (Kathy); and "learning from the start ... I can imagine for the centres that are just going through it the first time it would be horrible" (Kathy).

Similarly, Janelle indicated that after experiencing the process, she would do less in preparation for her services next A&R: "there's definitely a lot less that I would do, but in my panic beforehand, it was how much do they want to see? I honestly didn't know". Later she commented, "In my head, I had pictured something completely different. If I had of thought it was that ... easy, I wouldn't have stressed out so much."

Kathy indicated that the timing of the assessment and rating for services is also a factor in the pressure and outcome of ratings:

Our [sister] centre, we had just taken over 6 months before the assessment, so that one was very different because we were still changing over the policies and the educators were still getting used to the changes and everything, compared to a centre here, like this one, we opened this one so it's been the same the whole time.

A positive outcome of the assessment and rating process was evident with Janelle's experience. When discussing her role responsibilities and the broad scope of her work, it was evident that while she took on a lot of responsibilities that she felt were not a part of her role, Janelle had acquired a lot of skills and knowledge in the process:

Janelle: With having this whole process [assessment and rating], I realise that I do know what I'm doing, and it is valuable what I've got to offer At the end of the day I can run my centre the way that I want, and the way I run my centre passed an accreditation, so I'm doing something right.

What the assessment and rating process did for Janelle was validate her role-identity. There was a subtle changing in her phrasing, with use of the words “run my centre”, indicating she has a sense of ownership and leadership. Now having the certification of *meeting* the NQS, and almost receiving *exceeding*, her role has been verified by someone in a position of power (assessor), which has given this educator’s self-esteem a boost.

The examples within this sub-category are related through the psychological impact that educators indicate in their comments. Terminology such as ‘horrible’, ‘the worst’, ‘terrible’, ‘fear’, ‘nervous’, ‘pressure’, ‘hard’, ‘daunting’ and ‘one thing wrong’ demonstrates the psychological (emotional) burden that the assessment and rating process generates within educators. Again, participants viewed the quality rating process as necessary, but a burden regardless of their experience, situation or service context.

Documentation. While educators all acknowledged that the assessment of their service was based on what assessors saw on the two-day visit, all spoke of collecting further evidence. This appears to be a practice that remains from the previous accreditation system: “see years ago, you used to be able to produce a lot of evidence as well and they would use that” (Andrea); “we would put together a file of photos and evidence to show what we do, and that was used on the validation day as well, they would go through it and see the things that we were doing” (Kathy). As indicated in the review of the NQF implementation, educators are aware that they are keeping more records and evidence than required, which was also an issue with the previous QIAS system (ACECQA, 2015).

When asked if they were collecting more evidence than required, all participants indicated an awareness that they were: “I know we are” (Andrea); “we’ve got this whole file of evidence that we’re keeping” (Janelle); “I think so, but until I get the assessment and rating process done, and I can talk to them personally, and say right what do you think, I’m just gonna [sic] keep doing it” (Janelle) and “we’ve got a whole drawer of evidence of things that we do throughout the year” (Kathy).

When asked why, participants responded with: “because it’s very hard to see things in one or two days” (Kathy); “more so to justify if they didn’t see something and marked you down for it then we can say ‘no, this is the actual practice’” (Andrea); and “I’d rather be safe than sorry. Instead of it coming back and saying sorry, you’re not doing enough” (Janelle). Further justification included:

... we've got to draw on projects and things that we've done – like community events and stuff – that won't necessarily be going on while they're here but if they're not seeing it in the rooms then, things like that, then what do you do, you can't prove it (Kathy).

When asked about the value of the QIP in quality rating visits compared to the additional evidence that was being kept, one participant explained:

... we've got the actual written QIP that they also take into consideration ... if they don't see it on the visit, like they might read what you do provide [in the QIP], but if they're not seeing it on the day that they're here ... then that's two different stories there (Kathy).

These examples show an impact on the educators, who spend valuable time collecting evidence that they know is not required, and will more than likely not be used. This is not directly caused by policy requirements, rather it is a self-generated burden by educators in the field. Phrases such as “to be sure”, “rather be safe than sorry” indicate that there is still a sense of confusion about the quality rating process and what is required to demonstrate *meeting* the NQS. In this way, this burden may be an indirect consequence of the policy. As stated previously, this is not a new issue, as educators were producing more documentation than required for the previous accreditation system (McFarlane, 2009).

What may be influencing this is the notion of a 'bandwagon effect'. This is “when the tendency of individuals and organizations to adopt a technique, innovation, behaviour, idea, process, or attitude is a function of what the sheer number of peers is doing” (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016, p. 89), and the “attitude to make decisions based on recommendations, advice, and information coming from social channels” (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016, p. 89). In short, educators may be doing this simply because other services they know of have, or are. Influencing adoption of bandwagons are the following four elements: pressure; actors; popularity; and process (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016).

Pressure to adopt or follow a bandwagon can be emotional, psychological or social. Pressure is described as “the conditioning and influence that external variables put on potential adopters so that they feel compelled, and sometimes forced, to adopt the practice, behaviour, idea ...” (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016, p. 90). Secchi & Gullekson (2016), further explain that pressure to adopt a bandwagon can come often from competition. In this instance, educators and services exist within a highly competitive and profitable market (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009) and the quality rating process strongly influences this. No longer are all services given a 'pass or fail', which kept a

measure of equality between services. Now they have a five-point rating scale that distinguishes them apart from one another, publicly. This would certainly add a measure of pressure on services to rate highly, and in turn on educators as the situation offers a 'threat' to their role-identity as an employee and leader of their service.

Actors are, as the term suggests, "individuals, organisations or both" (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016, p. 91). Related to this research, actors are both the individual and the organisation, the educators and the services. At an individual level, educators may feel the pressure to adopt the behaviour or action of collecting unnecessary evidence for social and emotional reasons, those being that others they know are doing it or psychologically they may feel insecure about how their service may rate. At an organisational level, the pressure to compete with other services may drive the need to collect more information, as other services are also doing this. This then influences the next element of bandwagons, popularity.

Popularity refers to "the sheer number of adopters" (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016, p. 91) and more-or-less defines the term bandwagon. The more who adopt or choose to follow a bandwagon, the more popular it becomes, and in turn the more likely it is to be followed by others. This also relates to the idea of 'docility' or "the attitude to lean on recommendations, advice, and information coming from social channels while making decisions" (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016, p. 92).

Lastly, bandwagons are a process, dependent on time (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016). Time plays a factor in the behaviour or practice, or idea being adopted and eventually disappearing or being altered or replaced with something new (Secchi & Gullekson, 2016). In this instance, time is required for educators to cease collecting extra evidence and documentation for quality rating visits. It is likely that once all services have been through the process they will have a clearer understanding of 'how much is enough'. This is supported by a statement from one educator who had been through the process, who said: "Once you've been through it, you've done it, you know what to expect so it's very different" (Kathy).

A follow-up interview with Janelle however demonstrated another possibility for educators collecting more information than required. After undergoing her service's quality rating visit, she was asked:

Researcher: Did he [regulatory officer] look at any of the extra evidence that you kept?

Janelle: No.

Researcher: Do you think you'll keep collecting it?

Janelle: Definitely. That's my biggest fear. I got lucky this time. He didn't ask to see a lot of it. I mean, staff meeting minutes, that was another thing that wasn't done. I had to get all of them typed up. They were written, but they weren't typed up and neat in the folder. Or like the parent notices, they were here, there, everywhere but they weren't in the folder. Another thing he just went [*mimics glancing into a folder*] and 'okay'. But if I hadn't done it – he would have asked to see it. You know what I mean. It's a catch-22.

Researcher: Will you just use your hand-written notes from now on?

Janelle: I might do. Is that enough? I don't know.

Janelle's comment indicates that the extra work carried out by educators for the quality rating process could be due to Bernard Weiner's theory of "attribution" (Learning Theories, n.d.). Attribution theory is linked to achievement, and centres around the meaning attached to one's own, or the behaviours of others (Learning Theories, n.d.). Achievement is attributed to internal causes (such as personality, motives, beliefs, attitudes) or external causes (such as features or characteristics unique to the situation or environment). Success is then attributed to one of four criteria: effort; ability; level of task difficulty; or luck (Instructional Design, n.d.; Learning Theories, n.d.). In this example from Janelle, she appears to attribute her success to 'luck', and demonstrates that she does not understand what is required. The result of this is that she will not change her practice or behaviour, which means she will still provide and collect more evidence than required – maintaining the burden.

Overall, the burden recognised here is related to an aspect of the policy reform, that being the quality rating process. What is indicated in this section is an impact on the time and energy that educators are putting into collection of evidence to demonstrate what they perceive is their ability to meet the standard for quality education and care. This is not a policy requirement and therefore not an issue of regulatory compliance. However, educators still identify this as being a factor in the administrative burden experienced, possibly due to the psychological or emotional burden of collecting this information in order to 'be sure' they are doing all they can to receive a positive quality rating.

Notification. Another aspect of the quality rating process that impacts psychologically on educators is receiving notification of their assessment and rating visit. Services are notified in writing, and this was referred to several times throughout the interviews as 'the letter'. In each instance when the 'letter' was referred to, it was

mentioned in a context that indicated it evoked a stress response in educators. This indicates that the 'letter' is a trigger for a stress response, which is known as a stressor (stressor, n.d.). This was demonstrated with statements such as; "the stress when that letter comes – is (makes a whooshing sound) our QIP has to be done and it's gotta [sic] be bang on." (Janelle) and for Kathy, "I definitely think coming up to an assessment and rating, like if we were to get our letter and things like that, definitely."

In a follow-up interview, Janelle described the moment when she found out that her service had received the letter:

It was 5:30, and I was just finishing my shift and [the owner] went 'Janelle'—and I think it was like a Wednesday—and 'we got the letter', ... I had a mini-moment of nearly fainting on the floor.

In their discussion of the previous A&R experience, Molly immediately listed the date of the visit and stated it was "etched in the mind". Similarly, other respondents also listed days, dates and times in detail, demonstrating the significance of the event. To maintain anonymity, these have not been included in the findings, but it is valid to note as they exemplify an emotional memory, a term "to denote memories for events that elicited an emotional response at the time of their occurrence" (Kensinger, 2009, p. 99).

It was also evident in the responses from educators that awaiting and anticipating receipt of the letter has a psychological impact: "that's the worst part" (Janelle), and "it's having all the paper work prepared beforehand is the daunting part, because you don't know when you're going to receive that letter" (Janelle), and:

... that letter could arrive today, I don't know, and my QIP may not necessarily be ready so then I would be focusing all my time on trying to get that ready ... so that will just ramp up the pressure (Janelle).

From these examples, the notification via letter of the regulatory officers visiting the service is a cause of stress or psychological burden on educators, regardless of whether the educator has experienced the quality rating process previously.

Regulatory Officers. Educators in the study viewed the regulatory officers, or 'assessors' in a positive way; "I don't look at them as the big scary ogres that everybody talks about. They're there, they've got the information" (Janelle), and "... to provide us with critical feedback on what we're doing, and how we can improve what we are doing and the quality of the centre" (Molly).

After undergoing the quality rating process, Janelle stated:

The whole process went really well. He was the nicest accreditor, assessor, whatever they may be called now – he was brilliant. I mean he honestly didn't make you feel like [*holds hands out and shakes them*] shaky, shaky, but he was good ... It was very different to any other accreditation process I've had in the past.

Educators demonstrated a varied understanding of the role of the assessors in the assessment and rating process, "I want people to think of it as a lovely process of inviting friends over to show them what we're doing" (Molly), and:

I figure they're there to provide the information as well, not just to see whether we're doing it. I'm hoping I can sit down with them when I have my discussions and say okay, if we're not doing it, what do you want? (Janelle)

and:

I just wonder how much they actually read into, and look into the philosophy of each service, and then take that into their practice. Or are they just basing it on what they think is good practice. Every service is different. It's how much they actually follow their philosophy (Andrea).

As to educators understanding the expectations of the NQS, it is evident that the regulatory officers have an opportunity to influence this. Their position of authority affords them power in interactions with educators. Their exchange has the potential to positively or negatively impact the educators' understanding of the NQS and the policy messages. "I've seen a couple where they just pick up totally different things so I don't know" (Andrea,) and "You don't know what assessors are looking for; all assessors are different, they don't go off a timeline of what they're exactly looking for, their criteria and things". This lack of clarity as to what is expected was indicated again by Janelle after she had been through the rating process, "Our differences in opinions were interesting. He's [assessor] marking things off to say we've met this area, but I'm thinking 'have we?"; and "I think the way we critically look at our centre and the way other people view it, it's very different" (Janelle).

What this indicates is that the quality rating process, specifically, the face-to-face interactions between the educator and the assessors, is crucial to the educators understanding of the NQS. The process of visiting the service and observing the 'quality' of care in practice is a nation-wide process of moderation. Moderation "is a quality assurance process that ensures appropriate standards" (University of Southern Queensland, n.d., p. 1). Janelle's comments above indicate that although she has been through the process, and demonstrated that their service is *meeting* the national

standard, she has yet to 'adjust' or reframe her understanding and interpretation of what *working towards*, *meeting* or *exceeding* the standard entails. As she is unable to do this, she has attributed her success to luck, as explained previously. This is not unexpected for educators who are experiencing a five-point rating system for the first time, where previously they had a system that was a 'pass' or 'fail'. What this may imply for the ECEC sector as a whole, is that it will take time, and more than one rating visit per service for educators to become confident with their own, and the assessors' interpretation of the 'levels' of quality. To date, since the implementation of the NQF in 2012, 83% (ACECQA, 2016) of services have undergone their first round of quality rating. If the ratings process continues to take four-to-five years on average for each round, the moderation process could possibly take too long to be truly effective.

Another common category identified in the data was the notion that educators perceived that the regulatory officers were 'not interested' in the evidence they had kept. Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski (2012, p. 3) explain the idea of social valuing as "how individuals develop a sense of worth on the job". They state that "interactions with others compose felt-worth at work" (Dutton et al., 2012, p. 3) and define felt-worth as an "individuals' sense of importance accorded to them by others" (Dutton et al., 2012, pp. 3-4). This perspective demonstrates how interactions can be interpreted by individuals as either valuing (positive) or devaluing (negative) (Dutton et al., 2012).

Evident from statements from all participants was the notion that 'assessors' appear almost dismissive of the work that the services and educators have done. This was particularly evident in relation to assessors using evidence that services have documented, and kept, to demonstrate they have addressed various Quality Areas. This was shown in comments such as "they don't use it for anything" (Kathy); "they don't even want to see that" (Andrea); "they are not even interested in looking at it" (Kathy); "if they don't see it on the visit, like they might read what you do provide, but if they're not seeing it on the day that they're here, they don't use it for anything" (Kathy); and "They don't even want to know the history of what was, they just want there and then" (Andrea).

It is through these interactions that educators (and by default services), receive validation of their role-identities (feelings of value, self-worth, competence) and a shared understanding of the NQF.

Ratings. The *exceeding* rating was mentioned several times throughout each interview. Participants whose services had not yet undergone their assessment and rating were more likely to hold a negative opinion or view of the *exceeding* rating,

evidenced through statements such as, “I think a lot that get *exceeding* don’t maintain *exceeding*, so I think it’s best not to get *exceeding*. It gives staff an incorrect view of where they sit. And they get too comfortable” (Andrea); “They think they don’t need to improve and they do need to improve. It’s an ongoing thing” (Andrea); “Some services I know of, that I’ve been in, that have got *exceeding*, and I just don’t think they were” (Andrea); “Every conference I’ve been to, every person I’ve spoken to, has said it’s impossible. You’re not going to do it. So, don’t even stress yourself out to try. Just get it *meeting* and be happy” (Janelle, 2016).

Alternatively, educators whose service had been through the quality rating process, and who received *exceeding*, were very positive about the rating and placed a high value on the ratings process. This is demonstrated in the following statement in reply to being asked how much importance they place on the overall rating: “Quite a lot actually. We’ve got *exceeding* here and we want to uphold that” (Kathy).

For Molly and Claire, whose service had been assessed and rated as *working towards* the NQS, the rating has had a negative impact on their experience of work.

Researcher: When you got the feedback from the draft report, were staff all informed?

Molly: We got called in for a staff meeting by the operations manager at the time and got, absolutely, grilled. Absolutely, grilled. It was quite possibly the least motivating experience of my life.

Further comments demonstrated an ongoing negative impact of the *working towards* rating in their situation; “we’re a bit of an outsider at the moment, until we make our way back in” (Molly); “we’re the notorious centre for not doing well” (Claire), and “we don’t have a very good name in the company” (Molly). This was further evidenced through the following exchange:

Claire: When our manager left, who was here for the A&R, the area manager did not offer the position to Molly, because her knowledge was that Molly wasn’t capable enough, but managed to hire someone that ... well, someone off the street could probably be better.

Molly: What you’re trying to say is that they had no experience in early childhood let alone leading a team.

Claire: When it came to the results from that, obviously, we went significantly down in profit, we had unhappy parents, we had staff who didn’t want to be here so we had staff transfer out of the service to another centre. It was that bad. And during Molly’s interview, it was this is the worst centre of them all ...

Molly: It's an embarrassment, was how it was sold. You're an embarrassment to the state, you're an embarrassment to the area, you're an embarrassment to the company, and we don't want to hire you because you are not going to be able to pull it out of the slum that it's in, but basically, we've got no other options, so let's give it a go.

What is apparent in this example is the notion that the ratings system can in some cases stigmatise services, and educators within. A stigma is defined as "a mark of disgrace or infamy; a stain or reproach, as on one's reputation" (stigma, n.d.). The impact of stigmatisation may be further compounded as the results of quality ratings are published publicly. While publishing the results publicly is designed to provide parents and families with information about services, it can be seen within the data that the ratings received are dependent on many variables, some within and some external to educator control. Another point of note is that services are required to wait for their next round of assessments to possibly improve their rating, which may take a few years.

When asked about their opinion of ratings, however, these educators demonstrated a solid understanding of the purpose for the quality rating process. When asked if they felt the ratings were a reflection of centre leadership, Claire responded:

... at that time because everyone did not get a say in a lot of the decisions that were made, I would say, at that time, yes. But because the approach is different now, and everyone is open and welcome to contribute, everyone's decisions are valued and everyone is being held accountable for their own actions, I would say that if it comes again, it will be a reflection of the whole centre. Which it should be.

When asked if they felt that the next rating of their service would therefore, reflect their leadership, they replied; "I think the rating's going to be reflective of everybody. On the day" (Molly), and:

I think it should be. But it's kinda [sic] like NAPLAN isn't it? It's a one-day snapshot that doesn't take into consideration how nervous you are, or it doesn't take into consideration any of the contextual issues ... It's one of those things, unless they're going to do it more often and take an average then it's not really giving you an appropriate reflection (Molly).

The approved provider, who is generally the owner of an ECEC service, has a financial interest in the outcome of a positive A&R (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009). A high rating, such as exceeding or excellent, provides a competitive edge in a profitable market. Of the 15,417 services operating in Australia to date, 7089 (or 46%) are

'private for profit' (ACECQA, 2016, p. 7). This adds to the psychological burden on educators to achieve a high rating.

Core Category 4: Quality Improvement Plans

The *Education and Care Services National Regulations* (New South Wales Government, 2016), states that quality improvement plans must be prepared with a statement of the service philosophy, and self-assessment against the NQS and regulations, within three months of service operation. The data again shows that the burden of compliance with development of quality improvement plans is largely influenced by situational factors.

Documenting information. For Kathy's service that had assistance from a central office, the burden of developing their QIP appeared to be less than others. When discussing the initial process of developing their QIP, Kathy stated: "Our office had a lot to do with that more, we just had to put the information in with our strengths and weaknesses, or areas for improvement". In this situation, as the service was part of a small group, their service philosophy is the same as others, so a lot of the initial work was done previously, "our policies and procedures are the same at each service so, all of that stuff they put in bulk, because that is the company's. That's where we start from, and just individualise it at each centre" (Kathy). Another way in which the head office assists this service is "as things happen we'll just scribble on the one [QIP] that we have printed and then we'll send it to our office, which we're also quite lucky to have, to have it typed up" (Kathy). Kathy again mentioned this administrative assistance the service receives, stating, "it was the process until just recently, but now we have a live document so I can just type it in, but they'll still format it for us and everything. Which makes it a little easier for us".

However, Molly and Claire's experience demonstrates that having a central office can be more of a hindrance and a factor in contributing to the burden experienced with the QIP, especially "not having much support from the office" (Claire). In their situation, central office was not useful as there was a high staff turnover within all levels of senior management, a situation that has only recently started to stabilise:

Our area manager from when we went through the A&R has also changed since then so it's been totally different. For our centre, the leading by example has been missing, from all levels of management, which is why it's hard to be able to provide best practice to the educators ... (Molly).

Further impact of their service context was shown by Molly:

We were both here for A&R this time, and questions have been raised as to whether or not the QIP was actually to do with our specific centre and how much of that was actually cut and paste from another centre. So, that's why we're kind of in the position at the moment, where from a leadership point of view, we want everybody to be part of the QIP and to know how it works and be able to contribute to it. Like we've got the idealistic, 'love the QIP, it's amazing' but it's just a matter of being able to roll it out and knowing exactly what it is that we're meant to be passing on to everybody else. Getting our head around it first before we can actually create an example for the other educators so that they *don't* freak out when it comes to either writing, or creating or adding to the QIP as well.

For Janelle's service, the administrative burden of developing the QIP appeared quite high as they were developing two QIPs: "One for schoolies and one for littlies, because we're an Outside School Hours Care and LDC as well. So, when we had the two qualifieds it was fine, one did one group, the other did the other group". In this instance, the educator lacked collegial support due to smaller enrolment numbers. What is demonstrated in this example is that the size, or number of children within a service does not impact on the requirements for completion of a quality improvement plan. All services must complete the same plan, with a self-assessment against the NQS and a statement of philosophy, requiring an investment of time that numbers of children have no impact on. Child numbers do, however, have an indirect impact on the burden experienced by educators, as in this example, smaller enrolments lead to smaller staffing numbers, which in turn leads to more workload on existing staff.

All educators referred to the QIP being developed as part of a collaborative process with colleagues, for the service as a whole. While their comments indicated knowledge or awareness of the 'ideal' process for QIP development, it was evident that making this process happen was at times a challenge. "We do ours as a team" (Andrea); "the educators aren't as heavily involved as us, but we do include everybody" (Kathy). Kathy further explained:

... we'll roster a day and do a big review of it. Generally, as things happen we'll just scribble on the one that we have printed and then we'll send it to our office, which we're also quite lucky to have, to have it typed up and as things happen we'll do an update, as things come up we'll add them to it, but then every couple of months [colleague] and I sit together and we'll do a big review. Especially if the educators do room QIPs just specifically for their rooms, and if we're noticing that there's a few-like a link-things going in more than one room, then we'll look at maybe making it a centre target ... If anything changes in the policies and procedures, we'll make sure that's part of our teaching, that it's all happening properly.

For Janelle, circumstances within her service mean that she completes the QIP by herself. As she explains:

... the other educators are fantastic though they are only doing their Cert [sic] IIIs at the moment so, they are so eager to learn and they are so willing to help and they're really good at that, but there's only so much that without their training I can let them do until they're finished.

and:

... for me to do the QIP it's a lot easier because I know how the centre runs, I know what's working, I know what's not working, whereas for [the owner] that would be more difficult and he would constantly be asking my opinion. So, it's easier just to do it myself. As much as I'd love to shove it on to someone else.

Participants acknowledged the QIP in a positive way, and referred to it often as a 'tool': "I think it's a good thing to have" (Andrea); "It is a good tool, because we do use it to guide what we're doing" (Kathy); and "it's a good tool to have because you need to have goals and guidelines" (Andrea). Janelle expressed a deeper understanding of the QIP after her quality rating process, stating "I mean this, the QIP is good. I get why we need it now ... we need to look at our own centre and see where we need to improve, but it's finding the time to do it". As stated by Kathy; "I just feel like it could be a lot simpler and still be a good tool ... it's viewed as something that's very in-depth and very wordy".

In each participant, willingness to share or allow their QIP to be sighted varied. It was observed that an educator's willingness to show the service's QIP correlated to the service's assessment and rating status. Educators who had been through the quality rating process were confident to share their QIP, and had physical copies on hand that were readily accessible. Educators who did physically share their QIP also appeared confident in discussing aspects of the QIP and were clear as to properties of the document, such as the size: "We've copies here [stands to collect a physical copy in the staffroom] ... when we did our assessment they [assessors] actually said how easy it was to understand. This one-33 pages" (Kathy). In contrast, services who had not undergone their A&R were unable or less willing to show physical copies of their QIP. When asked for details on the size of their QIP, responses were vague: "Oh, gee, must be at least 50" (Janelle).

Documenting is defined as "to support (an assertion or claim, for example) with evidence or decisive information" (documenting, n.d.). Educators expressed documenting the QIP as a challenge. For Molly, Claire and Andrea, the challenge they

experienced was in the initial process of developing the QIP: “It’s something that I’m constantly thinking about, ‘oh we can use that as evidence, we can use that as evidence’ but it’s just, finding time and doing it” (Claire) and; “It’s also difficult to know how to actually compile the documents in a way that’s going to be meaningful, and in a way that actually shows that you’re actually proud of what you’ve done” (Molly), and for Andrea;

... I’m starting one for here. It’s actually quite difficult to take over a new service. We’re like ‘how do you write a QIP?’ Especially for us, I suppose, we have more strengths, because we’re establishing ... it’s hard for me to identify weaknesses at the moment.

For Janelle, “In the beginning, like establishing it was the huge part, like the key improvement plan”; “the first three days of me implementing the QIP was me getting it set up the way they wanted it. It’s a lot of paper”. Molly and Claire’s exchange in their planning discussion was:

Claire: So, yes, the administration side of the QIP is horrible. Because clearly, if it wasn’t, we would have done it by now.

Molly: The biggest part is the unknown. I’m sure if we started on the boring template and just did it, we would have no problem. It’s just because we’re wanting something that’s all hugs and butterflies, that’s what’s going to take time for us I think. Just finding a way that we can love it.

For Molly and Claire, they appear to default to the template suggested by ACECQA, even though it is not their first choice. Janelle stated “... displaying it for them, it’s in a little flip book, and it’s all shoved together, and it’s very difficult to make it all make sense”. It appears as though the initial structuring of the document is a challenge for educators, as they learn what content the QIP requires, but also how to formulate it in a way that is useful for their purposes:

Claire: I feel very much confident in early childhood education, but when it comes to the QIP, it’s a different story, purely because we are regularly aware there’s requirements but it just gets put on hold ... the only experience I’ve had with the QIP is when we went through A&R and our centre manager used a two-week timeframe to just do it. It’s something that I’m constantly thinking about, ‘oh we can use that as evidence, we can use that as evidence’ but it’s just, finding time and doing it.

Molly: It’s also difficult to know how to actually compile the documents in a way that’s going to be meaningful, and in a way that actually shows that you’re actually proud of what you’ve done. Not just, shove it in the folder, shove it in

the QIP folder. If we're going to spend so much time on compiling it then we want to have it being showcased, rather than it just being in a folder. So, for me, it's trying to figure out a way we can create a living document that's something you can treasure ... you want it to be something that people are actually going to look at. So many things are just paperwork for paperwork's sake, for the one day that we have people who are going to come out and check, that's what we'll use it for, as opposed to ... *(pauses to think)*

Claire: For the purpose of a quality improvement plan.

Molly: Yeah. And you want parents to take part in it and you want them to be able to look through things, I don't know, maybe I'm too idealistic, but you want it to be something that you can track your progress, with lots of pictures, so you can see where you've done throughout the whole year, like a learning story but for the whole centre *(looks at Claire)*. Maybe that's what we should do. Set it up like a centre yearbook. Like we do for the kids with their portfolio.

Claire: Have different dividers in it with like the quality areas?

Molly: Na! *(laughs)*

Claire: No?

Molly: The quality areas make it suck. They really do.

Researcher: Okay *(laughs)*. Why?

Molly: *(laughs)* You always know what you're working towards, you know the bits you need to be improving, you know what you're attempting to do, but if it's a document that you want people to actually engage with, then the *least* exciting part is to open up something and see *[sits up straight and adopts a deep, authoritative tone]* 'Standard 1.1'. As soon as you read that, I cut off. Like if it's wordy and explains what you're doing, and why you're doing it then that's fine ...

This initial set-up of the QIP is burdensome for educators in terms of time and the mental effort to understand how it will be useful for their service, and meet the expectations of the NQF. Molly explained her intended process, which demonstrates that there will be a lot of collaboration required:

So, for us the QIP that we currently have, we'll use it as a reflective tool for creating the new one. We'll probably have a look at what sort of template we want to use, but we'll probably use the ACECQA one for writing it up because that's the one they give you. We're gonna *[sic]* give that a crack, but the way that we present it, we'll be opening that up to a lot of the educators so it's a document for them, by them. I think that's what we kind of need at the moment, in order to get everybody engaged and on board and not freak out.

When asked to identify which Quality Area educators found easier or more challenging to document in the QIP, answers were varied. Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities (ACECQA, 2013b) was highlighted as an area more challenging to document; “I guess it’s the relationship with families and children and things, because you can’t document it, it’s just something that they just have to see” (Kathy) and:

I mean, we have the flowers here. They’re our community link. We have a local florist we get flowers from every week. And that’s the thing, we’re only just starting so we don’t have a lot of community links yet. And that’s one of the biggest one’s they look at, and that is the hardest one that people struggle with (Andrea)

Quality Area 7: Leadership and service management (ACECQA, 2013b) was also mentioned as a challenge to document in the QIP:

The one I have the most difficulty with is seven. The managerial part. That is hard, because I do both, you know. I’m on the floor and here [*referring to the office*], but I’m not really an office manager. I kind of dabble in it so it’s really hard for me to fill that bit out, even when I do both (Janelle).

and;

Quality area seven, management side of things, I know other people have struggled with, and that’s more so because it’s larger corporations, so they don’t have that close relationship, whereas with us and you’re smaller, the management is different (Andrea).

Data from ACECQA (2016c) shows that for services who have been rated, 18% are *working towards* the NQS for QA7, 52% are *meeting*, and 30% are *exceeding*. In comparison services are achieving higher ratings in QA6, with 10% *working towards*, 54% *meeting*, and 37% *exceeding*. What this data indicates is that although educators find it challenging to document their practice in QA6, based on observable behaviours of educators with children and families, they are successful in this area. The higher percentage of services receiving a rating or working towards in QA7, however, indicates that services are challenged more with documenting or demonstrating leadership and service management skills. This is possibly due to the critical self-reflection required for this area.

Critical reflection. Each educator could articulate their process for reflection on the NQS. All educators referred to working through the NQS file, and measuring their practice against each of the 58 elements.

Kathy's service was assisted in their development of the QIP by a head office: "Our office had a lot to do with that more, we just had to put the information in with our strengths and weaknesses, or areas for improvement". She also independently completes aspects of the QIP as part of her role: "I sit and read through all the criteria, and where I feel we need to do some extra things, then I just put those in" (Kathy). The service also operates where each room within the service develops a 'room' QIP, and this information is shared and used to develop the QIP for the service:

We are quite lucky that we're able to give them [educators] quite a lot of non-contact time and the educators that we have are really good at reflecting on where they could improve and everything and understand the importance of it and for them to document it so that we can see stuff that's going on in their room, we can see it going on in others and we can do something as a centre, so I think it's quite good for them.

Janelle described her process as:

I went through every single standard, element, 1.1.1, 1.1.2 and I just made notes. I kind of put myself in the mind frame of 'okay, I'm an assessor, I'm coming to have a look, are we doing this? Are we not doing this?' and I kinda [sic] felt a bit cocky because I felt, 'yeah, we're doing that, we're doing that', and then I'm thinking, 'hang on a minute we could be doing better', so that's kinda [sic] my process, and then I read through every single thing that said 'assessors may observe, assessors may observe,' and thought, okay they're looking for that, and I've highlighted that book, I've drawn on it, there's scribbles in it – it doesn't look very pretty anymore.

Andrea's service was still in the process of establishing their QIP, but she explained:

Previously how I've always worked is that we've always done room QIPs as well, so each of the rooms develops what areas they think are lacking and then we bring them to the staff meetings to discuss and if it's something that is lacking overall, then that would be put into the QIP.

Molly and Claire were also in the initial stages of developing their QIP, and had started their service's self-reflective process:

At the last staff meeting we had, we printed off the NQF guide for each of the educators to go and have a look at, we did a room environments audit, and attached some reflective questions about the learning environments in each of the ages, and we've asked the educators in each of the rooms to jot down any responses to what we are currently doing and where we think that we can improve and then at the next meeting we're going through those. We'll probably go through the booklet in accordance with the reflective questions and do a lot

of critical reflection to start with before we create a workable action plan (Molly).

When talking about their processes of reflection, a common category of data began to emerge. Educators all expressed difficulty with identifying strengths and weaknesses with their own practice. This was evident in comments such as, “I found that really difficult to identify our strengths; I’m used to being told what we’re doing wrong, not what we’re doing right” (Janelle); “It’s difficult. I found that part difficult in identifying our strengths, because I’m not used to that. That’s all new to us” (Janelle); “a lot of people struggle with identifying what their weaknesses are but if they have new eyes come in then it’s generally easier to pick up” (Andrea); “we have more strengths, because we’re establishing, whereas if I’d come in and the service was already operating, then it’s hard for me to identify weaknesses at the moment” (Andrea); and

I feel cocky, because I think ‘well we’re doing this’. Why am I trying to find issues with something that we’re doing? But I don’t know because we haven’t been through the assessment process. So, okay, find something that’s wrong Janelle. What’s wrong? I don’t know? (Janelle)

and later:

... am I fabricating problems that aren’t there? Am I coming up with issues to be addressed that aren’t, really, there? Am I coming up with unnecessary work? I don’t know? Am I saying that we’re better at this than we are? Am I saying we’re good at our job when we’re not? (Janelle)

What this indicates is educators find self-assessment challenging. As shown in comments, when educators can collaborate with others and discuss the QIP, it is easier to identify what may be a strength or a weakness in comparison. This is not an opportunity for all educators, however, as not all services belong to a group that can share in this way. For Janelle, her sister service received a rating of *working towards*, and therefore their ability to share quality practice from their experience was perhaps limited. For Andrea, she doesn’t have another service to collaborate with. For many smaller services, there is an additional challenge of competition, each is a business vying for enrolments. In certain cases, the manager of a service may have various reasons for bias in the self-assessment required for completion of the QIP (Chivers, 2003; Ishimine & Tayler, 2012). As identified by Tayler (2011, p. 223) the Australian ECEC context is one in which “the design of programs and activities and the choice of resources are the ambit of diverse providers having various business goals”. To date, no

data exists relating to who has developed the QIPs. This information is useful as “the fact that assessment scores are linked to funding causes childcare providers anxiety and reduces their openness or willingness to engage in thoughtful conversations about the results of the assessments” (Park, Ferretti, & Ames, 2012, p. 67).

An important aspect of the quality improvement process is to monitor and evaluate the QIP, as it is a tool for continuous improvement (ACECQA, 2013b). Educators demonstrated a variety of strategies for self-tracking and monitoring targets in the QIP, such as Kathy who had developed their own checklists to support the QIP. Some participants also demonstrated that this was an area of difficulty: “... the thing that gets me, is the dates ‘cause [sic] it says ‘date to be rectified’, you know, I forget” (Janelle).

For Janelle, the size of the QIP also impacts on her ability to monitor and track the progress of identified outcomes: “Tracking. Yeah, ‘cause [sic] it’s so large, I could go through QA1 and I’ve forgotten that I’ve identified issues in QA2 that needed addressing”; “That’s one thing I do find difficult. Constantly remembering to check it, check what needs doing”; “See like the 2016 progress notes, I haven’t even filled that in yet. Because I haven’t gone to the – [*groans*] I’m too busy trying to get the outcomes and things like that, things get left behind”, and:

I mean, I wish, I’m trying to think of a way that I could put a spread sheet up in my staffroom. You know and have it up there. Like maybe a whiteboard or something like I can write it up there and then I know, I can see it every day (Janelle).

In order to complete the necessary self-assessment and reflection to develop a quality improvement plan, academic skills or cognitive processes of reading, writing and thinking are required. All participants referred to these skills when discussing the administrative burden of the QIP.

Thinking. Thinking is defined in a very broad sense as “the action of using one’s mind to produce thoughts” (thinking, n.d.). Kathy expressed the challenge that ‘thinking’ provides when working with the QIP:

It’s not like you think of something and just write it down, you have to actually think about it and have the right wording in there and make sure that it’s written so that there is, like an outcome, and how you’re going to prove that it was achieved—it’s so lengthy, you know that you do it, but it’s getting it on paper.

This frustration was further evident in the statement from Kathy: “sometimes it’s just um ... not draining–just to think of extra things that you can continuously put in your QIP once you’ve already met that *exceeding* level – that sometimes gets a bit over the top”.

Writing and reading. Kathy also expressed frustration with documentation of the QIP due to writing. Writing is defined as “the act or process of producing and recording words in a form that can be read and understood” (writing, n.d.). As Kathy states, the frustration stems from “when the tasks that we are doing could be written so simply that we don’t have to go through to check the wording is enough evidence to show what we want it to ...”; “We’re constantly doing updates and we’re writing on it constantly ...”; “...it’s just the way that we have to write it”; and “... have to go through to check the wording is enough evidence”.

It’s difficult in making sure we’ve got all areas covered and then you know, you have to be cautious of what you’re putting into the QIP as well, because you don’t want to write too much, because if you write too much in one area then they’re gonna [sic] think ‘Geez, what’s going on there?’ (Andrea).

Kathy demonstrated the learning process she underwent after experiencing the quality rating process and receiving feedback:

... then we learnt from that and in other centres we’ve written ‘we do, do [sic] this, and this is what we’re continuing to do’, and we might have been doing the exact same thing at the other centre, but it’s just the way that we wrote it, they’re [assessors] like ‘yeah okay, you are doing this’, like ‘you’re doing more, so you’re achieving’ (Kathy).

Writing was also an issue identified by Andrea, who mentioned the use of professional ‘terminology’ in the QIP: “Some companies want you to use the terminology because they believe it makes you sound more professional”;

... I think the hardest thing with the QIP is that people always struggle with the terminology, and I think they focus too much on the terminology. And when they do that, they don’t understand what they’ve written, so I’ve always said you’re better off just writing it basic–how you understand and go from there (Andrea),

and:

... if your educators don’t understand you, it’s no good to them. It’s better off in plain old English, so they know exactly what the goal is, and how they’re going to get there to achieve it (Andrea).

Janelle also referred to writing as a source of burden; “I’ve constantly got my file in my lap. Writing, writing, writing to get it all done”; “It’s a long day, and a lot of that is writing. A lot of it”; and “I feel like it’s just filler. You’re just writing it for the sake of writing it really. To put something in there” (Janelle). Janelle referred to reading:

I will admit having ten years’ experience against two or three years’ experience, it makes a big difference. I can read something and understand it but someone else could read it and go ‘huh?’ So, that’s where it makes it very one-sided. (Janelle).

With any form of change, there is learning required. New documents are produced, new procedures and policies are put into place, and information needs to be shared with relevant stakeholders.

I guess it’s a blessing that I have had so much experience, I’ve been doing it for a long time, but this QIP is new to me. It’s kinda [sic] thrown a curve ball at me. It’s kinda [sic] one of those things that’s there, you need to do it, you need to get it done (Janelle).

and:

... even learning how to do the new observation process took me a good year. I look at their learning stories and I go, but that’s my anecdotal stuff, so what’s the difference? It drove me nuts, absolutely nuts. (Janelle).

and:

I just wish, my biggest wish, is that they would just give us all one lot of paperwork. For everyone. This is your template. This is the way you do it. This will pass. Not, you make it up, you figure it out and cross your fingers that it passes (Janelle).

The final comment from Janelle demonstrates it is more than just the need to understand new terminology, and processes such as the QIP, educators have to be able to understand and apply the content and knowledge into their everyday practice. Janelle saying “you figure it out” shows that she feels isolated and uncertain of the requirements. This application of knowledge requires the skill to identify the requirements, and then apply it to a setting, taking into account contextual issues which may involve problem-solving skills.

This has led to another issue identified in the data. Janelle expressed concern about the learning and transferring her knowledge, and in order to feel more self-assured she is considering updating her qualifications, “I’m considering doing my

Diploma just so I've got it in my own mind so I can go 'Yeah, you are doing it right. It's all good.'" (Janelle). Janelle expressed this in her comment "... unless I'm taught I don't know that I've got it right", indicating that for her, formal training is required for her to feel confident in her abilities.

It was evident from comments and phrasing within the transcripts that the QIP placed a psychological burden on the educators, who often referred to it with the word 'constantly'. Comments that demonstrate this include; "We're constantly doing updates and we're writing on it constantly, whether it's completed or adding things to it and then every quarter we'll do a full update to it" (Kathy); "just knowing that it has to be updated is just another thing that is added to my workload" (Kathy); "we feel like we need to be continuously doing more and more" (Kathy); "but having to document it so that it's evidence for somebody else is just frustrating" (Kathy); and

It's just another thing that is constantly in the back of your mind even though you may not address it every day, it's there and you know that it's there and as much as you want to put it off, it will still be there next week and still need to be done (Janelle).

and:

Molly: It's just a little reminder in the back of your mind of how are we going to do it justice ... and feeling guilty because we haven't done it.

As the QIP is designed to be a living document that constantly changes and updates, it would be expected to be a 'constant' in educators' lives. However, given the way that educators phrased their comments about the QIP, it is apparent that the QIP has a significant impact on the mental or psychological burden they experience.

Overall, it appears that the QIP is a burden on educators in terms of the learning involved in understanding the requirements of the National Quality Framework, the National Quality Standard and how service reflection and quality is represented in a Quality Improvement Plan. Although implemented almost five years ago, the data from this study shows that educators are still unsure of the skills, knowledge and language required for developing and maintaining a QIP. More so, the educators seem unsure of how to apply these to everyday practice. There is an indication from Kathy's experience that after being through the quality rating process, aspects of the QIP became clearer "now that we've been through it, it's continuing, it's a lot easier, and it's not as long ..." (Kathy).

Not only has there been change with the introduction of the NQF at a national level, educators also encounter change at a service level, which again adds to the burden of learning. As shown in Andrea, Molly and Claire's situation, services undergo change of ownership and management. In Janelle's situation, she underwent change when staff left the service and were not replaced, meaning she had to pick up extra responsibilities. Kathy indicated the difficulty with staff adapting to change in her comment:

Our [sister] centre, we had just taken over 6 months before the assessment, so that one was very different because we were still changing over the policies and the educators were still getting used to the changes and everything ...

For the ECEC sector, this may be an issue that adds to the burden of the QIP. As discussed in this section, establishing the QIP is challenging for educators, and every time there is a change in ownership or leadership of a service, a QIP needs to be established that reflects the new leadership's policies, procedures, practice and philosophy.

Core Category 5: Support Structures

The fifth main category identified in the data relates to support structures in the educators' environments. This theme was evident throughout the data in sub-categories of collegial support; meetings and networking; training and consultancy; physical resources; and non-contact time. Each of these subcategories could further be grouped into examples of internal support structures (within the service) and external support (accessible outside of the service).

Collegial support. All educators expressed positive feelings and thoughts about their colleagues, demonstrated through statements such as: "All the educators are fantastic" (Kathy); "the educators that we have are really good at reflecting on where they could improve" (Kathy); "the other educators are fantastic ... they are so eager to learn and they are so willing to help ..." (Janelle).

Again, situational and contextual differences are highlighted as a variable that impacts on the burden experienced by educators. For the smallest service in the study, the educator without another qualified colleague (only those undergoing training), Janelle, expressed feelings of isolation, "everything's kind of fallen to me". For Janelle, there was a lack of trained and experienced staff within the service, which meant that she was often required to complete the QIP and service reflection alone: "with the girls

because they're only studying Cert IIIs, it's so *woof* over their heads that sometimes I feel that I just shouldn't bother", and:

His [the owner's] knowledge of the process and things ... It's not [his] fault, I mean he's here to do school runs and office managerial work ... he's not out on the floor running the centre, so for me to do the QIP it's a lot easier because I know how the centre runs, I know what's working, I know what's not working whereas for [him] that would be more difficult and he would constantly be asking my opinion so it's easier just to do it myself (Janelle).

For Kathy, who manages a service with numerous qualified educators, there are systems in place for all educators to participate in the reflective processes required:

In our rooms, we have what we call monitoring books, so each room leader has their own room QIP, so there might not be things we are working on as a centre, but they are things they are working on in their room, so they have those as a team, and things that we are working on as a centre (Kathy),

and:

... the educators that we have are really good at reflecting on where they could improve and everything, and understand the importance of it and for them to document it so that we can see stuff that's going on in their room, we can see it going on in others and we can do something as a centre ... (Kathy).

This is a process also mentioned by Andrea, who mentioned collegiality and sharing of goals and information at staff meetings:

... previously how I've always worked is that we've always done room QIPs as well, so each of the rooms develops what areas they think are lacking and then we bring them to the staff meetings to discuss and if it's something that is lacking overall, then that would be put into the QIP (Andrea).

Highlighted in memos was the notion of collegiate support both within and external to the service setting. This was demonstrated through statements such as: "We also have team leader meetings once a month so all the leaders get together to discuss things" (Kathy); "that made a big difference having the extra centres to be able to learn from" (Kathy); and "I have other friends that are centre managers at other places and are left to just work it out by themselves. I couldn't imagine doing that" (Kathy).

After an interview with Janelle, it was noted that the educator appeared to be 'thinking aloud' for the first time regarding her reflective processes. The memo created indicated that the educator appeared to be engaging in a professional conversation about her reflective processes for the first time. Analysis and re-analysis of the

interview transcript, coupled with observation of the educator's facial expressions and conversational manner, maintain the interpretation of this statement:

I mean, I wish, I'm trying to think of a way that I could put a spread-sheet up in my staffroom. You know, and have it up there. Like maybe a whiteboard, or something like, I can write it up there and then I know, I can see it every day?

In this instance, the educator was the only qualified individual in the setting, and appears to lack support from a colleague who understands, knows and could engage in a professional conversation with her about the requirements. Collegiality is a valuable component of a work environment, as:

In a team context, for example, individuals bring in their experiences rich in beliefs, values, and feelings that have high propensity to get transferred to others in the team. An individual's emotions can have a particular intensity which can undergo transformations when combined with others' emotions (Vijayalakshmi & Bhattacharyya, 2012, p. 364).

Janelle stated that she had some collegiate support for the QIP from another service owned by her service provider (a 'sister' service). Their sister service had been through the quality rating process and received an overall rating of *working towards* the NQS. "I've got the [other] centre and they're really good, if I have any questions", and:

I'm very lucky, touch wood, in that I've had time per-se to tackle it and jiggle it and attack other centres and say 'what are you doing?' and readjust my own. Because [the owner] ended up bringing me down their template because they've been through the assessment process and he said 'here'. So, I read through that and said 'okay, this is what they're doing' but other than that you're on your own (Janelle).

Collegiality is an integral resource and support for educators within services. The socialisation between peers and colleagues enables knowledge sharing, and "social reflection generates changes in the participants' perspectives" (Venninen, Leinonen, Ojala, & Lipponen, 2012, p. 2). Through the sharing of experiences and subsequent discussion and reflection, educators have access to the experience, knowledge and perspective (interpretation) of others to assist in the development of their own (Venninen et al., 2012). This sharing of knowledge is invaluable for educators who have limited access to other sources of information. Knowledge is considered to be "information that has interpretation and meaning attached to it" (Anwar & Prasad, 2011, p. 8). Knowledge sharing can occur between individuals, as would take place

within a service, or between teams within an organisation, such as when services gather together and network; or knowledge sharing can take place between organisations such as at large events, for example a conference (Anwar & Prasad, 2011).

Meetings and networking. When discussing their process for developing their service's quality improvement plan, all educators referred to staff meetings as a means of sharing and gathering information: "we have our staff meeting log book where we record our minutes" (Janelle); "... at our staff meetings we'll discuss it also ..." (Kathy); and "... at the last staff meeting we had, we printed off the NQF guide for each of the educators to go and have a look at ..." (Molly).

Further statements demonstrate the usefulness of networking between other services for educators:

Twice a year we have a networking week where we meet in our [head] office, and the managers get together ... and that gives us an opportunity to get together and discuss it between the centres too, so they might have information that we've not thought of, or different things that they've been able to achieve so it's good to network as well (Kathy).

This is a time when a service pulls together all managers and set time is devoted to discussion of each service's QIP, "generally, one session in the week, so a three-hour session, and we stay together in accommodation so we're always talking about stuff between managers as well" (Kathy). For another service "once a month we used to have meetings all together and groups would come together. So, then they'd collaborate and work out ideas together" (Andrea).

Again, this is a variable that is dependent on service context. Not all services were able to participate in a networking experience, and it appears that the larger services were more likely to have networking meetings. However, Kathy's service is a smaller service and she was able to attend regular networking meetings. This indicates that it is at the service providers' discretion to enable opportunities for educators to meet and collaborate.

Training and consultancy. Internal support through training was a common unit of meaning evident in all interviews. Again, this varied based on the context of the service. A service existing as part of a group indicated "we've been quite lucky in that we get lots of internal training through our [head] office, so we're good in that respect" (Kathy). In contrast, a service that had another centre, but no central office to coordinate training, stated, "in the beginning we weren't really offered much training. It was kind of like, here you go, here's a book, read this" (Janelle).

Additionally, Kathy's service with central office support had internal structures in place for the centre manager to be fully engaged in the role of manager, 'off the floor', enabling them to move through the centre to upskill educators on an informal basis: "It's lots of hands on, role-modelling, giving them pointers" and "if anything changes in the policies and procedures, we'll make sure that's part of our teaching, that it's all happening properly".

Molly and Claire also indicated they used 'non-contact' time to be in the rooms with educators, "we're on the floor a lot, but not necessarily because of numbers" (Claire). Later Claire elaborated, saying:

... a lot of the times that Molly has been out on the floor, it's due to staffing reasons. I think it's just because we did hit rock bottom and they [educators] didn't feel either valued, or they didn't want to be here because we weren't going anywhere, we were going backwards. We had a lot of sick staff, we had a lot of staff who would just call in sick in the morning or something, and it's too late to find relief, we already had most of our relief on the floor, so those times where Molly or I were in the office, the office work gets sacrificed because the children come first and we're on the floor (Claire).

As stated by Molly:

For our centre, the leading by example has been missing, from all levels of management which is why it's hard to be able to provide best practice to the educators when they're used to not having the leadership from there.

When adopting her leadership role Molly stated:

I was provided with no training, and no responsibility. I was given the piece of paper you need to sign off on, no training, but 'if I'm sick, then you need to be in the office'. With no actual training on how to do anything.

When asked about internal training practices within the organisation, Claire stated, "Well there was, but it was by another manager who had learnt the wrong thing from a different manager. Everyone's just picked up the wrong way to do things."

Kathy, Molly and Claire's example shows that although both services had support from a central office, the support received was very different. In Kathy's situation, the support lessened her experience of the burden, whereas for Molly and Claire, the support (or perceived lack of) added to the burden. Their examples also indicate that when there is staff turnover, a period of establishment is required at the service. As seen in both Molly, Claire and Andrea's examples, this means that as centre

managers, technically 'non-contact', they are required to be on the floor with educators modelling best practice and undoing learnt practice, before the QIP can be established.

As identified in the NQF review (ACECQA, 2015), services are seeking external opinions through consultants in order to prepare for the assessment and rating process. While none of the participants in the study had used consultancy themselves, all were aware of other services who had, and that support such as this existed. This was evident in this study with statements such as: "... they've got the resources, the 2IC's, the office managers, and they've asked people to come over from Melbourne, and then they didn't get an *exceeding*" (Janelle); and:

There's independent people that they can get to come out, but they cost like about a thousand dollars. I know of a centre manager who actually paid her own money for a service appraisal, just to see where they are at, what to work on, but that's their opinion. What the ratings people, the assessors see, is gonna [sic] be different (Andrea).

One service demonstrated accessing external consultancy in an informal capacity, stating: "X ... was my supervisor for my diploma, so I literally throw my programs at her every time she comes in and ask her 'Are they right?'. She's like, 'They're fine'" (Janelle).

This indicates again the sense of pressure educators feel about the A&R process, and the need for collaboration, or another 'set of eyes' to help them identify strengths and weaknesses in their service. This is receiving collaboration from a third party not associated with the A&R process, which may be less threatening for some educators. However, the risk is as Andrea stated, "... that's their opinion. What the ratings people, the assessors see, is gonna [sic] be different".

Externally, support via training is available through registered training authorities and various stakeholders who provide professional development to the sector. Janelle indicated her need for being formally upskilled, "I've actually been considering redoing my diploma to retrain myself", "I find that unless I'm taught I don't know that I've got it right".

When asked about the professional development educators have attended and received, responses varied. Janelle, who stated above her preference for formal learning of content, expressed:

We've been to a few, and you hang on their every word like it's gold while you're in there. When you come out you kind of go, 'I knew that already'. The few seminars that I've been to about the NQF and everything, while I'm sitting in there I am glued to them, and you are sucking up every word and like, 'oh my

god yes' and writing furiously, and when you come back and read your notes, you're like, 'I'm already doing that'. You feel like you've wasted your \$120.

and:

The first few months they started offering these information seminars, and training and what-not, we tried to go to every one, but when we realised that it was the same information being covered every time we thought ... that one of us will go from one of the centres and take notes and pass the notes on to the other because there's no point in the two of you going. Taking two staff off the floor.

For Kathy, Molly and Claire, their head offices arrange the professional development for staff. "They weren't run by people who were employed by the company, they were still outside people" (Molly). For Kathy, this has been a positive experience, "we've been quite lucky in that we get lots of internal training through our [head] office, so we're good in that respect". Molly and Claire indicated some frustration with the process, as it did not suit their particular service's needs: "on a global scale, that [the professional development] would have suited a majority of the centres very well. So, they can't really tailor it specifically just to us" (Molly).

When discussing professional development that would assist them with development of the QIP, Molly and Claire expressed:

Molly: Maybe what they should be doing is doing an actual training from ACECQA, where all of the centres can actually go to a training on how to actually put it together, give us examples of ways of doing it, or exactly what they want. Instead of it being interpret it any way you like.

Claire: Yeah, and now we're gonna [sic] judge you on that.

Molly: And then, why didn't you include all these things?

This exchange indicates that educators are aware that the QIP can be flexible to meet service preferences and needs; they also feel as though they must use the template given, as it will ensure they cover what they need to.

This again shows that even though the support exists with external and internal training, the success of the training in meeting educator needs is dependent on contextual variables. Molly receives training that is deemed suitable for the majority of centre managers, whereas her actual needs were very different. Janelle attended external professional development that again did not address her needs; the knowledge she received validated her existing knowledge but did not fill in existing gaps in her

knowledge, or enhance and further her understanding of the NQF or policy requirements. Again, for Janelle, receiving feedback in her setting, where she can directly apply the knowledge she learns, is more effective. Internal training (such as hands on role-modelling) appeared to be effective in helping educators understand requirements, if—and only if—the role-modelling was indeed best practice. Molly and Claire’s situation showed that learning poor practice from leadership caused an additional burden on their leadership role, as they had to undo a lot of prior behaviours and understandings.

Physical resources. Each participant referred to the *National Quality Framework Resource Kit* (ACECQA, n.d.-b), as part of their process when developing their QIP. Each educator referred to the hardcopy file that was provided to each service upon implementation of the QIP, although they each used a variety of language to describe it, such as “we really started with the national quality framework file that we were provided with” (Kathy); “... we call it the bible. This big NQS folder from ACECQA” (Janelle).

Educators referred to the template provided for a QIP within this folder: “The big blue one. In the very back there is a plan, like a guide that we are basically given” (Janelle); “... they gave us the template which was great, as you can see, I’ve used the template” (Janelle); however, “... they haven’t given us, like a guide to say, well this is passable, this is not” (Janelle).

For Molly and Claire, who were in the process of discussing the physical structure of their QIP, they appeared to dislike the QIP template. They also said however, that they would present their QIP in that format when requested, and have another ‘living’, active document that they used daily at the centre:

Researcher: So, what is your initial reaction when you look at the ACECQA template?

Molly: My initial reaction is that it’s a dead document that nobody’s going to look at.

Claire: That we’re teaching children to be different and all of that, but they’re expecting us to be the same.

Molly: But in saying that, in the same breath, we want a template that we know is going to be checked off properly so we know we’ve got all the stuff. I think for us it needs to be, the wordy stuff that they want, in the template form that they want, but then a living document that we can actually have.

Claire: That everyone’s confident in and contributing to.

Janelle referred to the learning frameworks, but again demonstrated that she learnt best from a formal setting with collaboration. When asked about the support she received when first given the policy documents, she stated:

Honestly there wasn't. We got these documents from the government, I've got them here in the staffroom still because they're really valuable, they are actually really valuable resources, but it was just about the belonging, being, becoming. I'm not a smarty-pants, but I really struggled to understand some of it. It just felt like, here you go – do this.

Consideration needs to be given to the *National Quality Framework Resource Kit* (ACECQA, n.d.-b) document itself. In all, this resource contains more than 500 pages of separate, yet interrelated content that educators need to access, utilise and understand. Not included in this resource are the mandated learning frameworks *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009) and *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Aged Care in Australia* (DEEWR, 2011). The *Guide to the National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2013b), which lists the 58 elements, is 212 pages, and is just one of the four components within the resource kit. The study shows that this component of the document is used by educators, who systematically read through every page and compare their practice to the examples listed that indicate what assessors may observe, discuss or sight (ACECQA, n.d.-b).

This leads to consideration of educators' interpretation of the document. Recalling salient points from the earlier literature review, three factors influence an individual's perception: the attributes of the perceiver; attributes of the object being perceived; and the environmental conditions at the time when the stimulus is being experienced (CiteMan Network, 2008). Related to this study, educators such as Janelle (the perceiver) indicate that the QIP is new, and that while she is experienced, she was not formally trained with the learning frameworks and NQS, so "this QIP is new to me. It's kinda [sic] thrown a curve ball at me" and "I really struggled to understand some of it". Further attributes specific to Janelle include, "Always my program will prioritise over the QIP", and "it just feels like it's another thing that we have to do on top of all of the other stuff". Related to the actual physical document and process of developing the QIP, Janelle states: "we call it the bible. This big NQS folder from ACECQA ... so the first three days of me implementing the QIP was me getting it set up the way they wanted it. It's a lot of paper." For the final aspect of perception, the environment and setting in which Janelle has to use the document, she states: "I mean even though I'm with them [the children], I'm not necessarily interacting with them as much as I would be because I've constantly got my file in my lap. Writing, writing, writing to get it all done". In these

examples, it can be seen how Janelle interprets the physical policy document that is the NQF Resource Kit, and the sense of burden she experiences is evident.

For Kathy's service, they had a QIP using the current ACECQA template, but had also developed further checklists that were used within their service:

We then had a separate checklist ... because all the things they were saying we do, do [sic] really well, all our strengths, we wanted to make sure they are still our strengths, so we made ourselves another checklist, and we were going through and making sure that it all still was current and then we're still working on the things that we were actually putting in the table (Kathy).

What these comments could suggest is that while the educators use the ACECQA template, their motivation for doing so is purely for assessment and rating, as they think this is what the assessors 'want'. For Molly and Claire, their discussion indicated that they may end up producing two separate documents for the same outcome, which would add unnecessary workload. The examples also indicate that the template is useful for identifying and writing a target for improvement; however, it is not easily used for monitoring and updating of the document as needed.

Non-contact time. Another recurring unit of meaning identified in the data was non-contact time. Non-contact time is defined in the *Children's Services Award 2010* as time in which an "employee is not required to supervise children or perform other duties directed by the employer, for the purpose of planning, preparing, evaluating and programming activities" (Fair Work Commission, 2016, p. 26). Employees who are responsible for planning and delivering educational programs with children are entitled to a minimum of two hours per week of non-contact time. This was an unexpected variable, as centre managers are, for the most part, 'non-contact'. However, as demonstrated, this is not the case for most of the centre managers who participated in this study. It is another variable that impacts on the burden experienced, as it impacts on the time that educators have to focus on administrative work.

This issue varies from service to service, depending on the unique characteristics of the service such as the size of the centre, based on enrolments. This impacts on the staff required and therefore the flexibility of an employer to provide non-contact time to employees. Kathy's service has the capacity for provision of more non-contact time than required: "We are quite lucky that we're able to give them quite a lot of non-contact time". In Janelle's case,

My biggest issue is not having the non-contact time. So, I often find that I'm sitting supervising the children with my file in my lap doing my obs [sic]. One

eye on them, one eye on that, you know. That's my day. That's the norm for me. When staff go 'non-contact time', I go 'what's that?'

and:

Our other centre, [colleague], she's their office manager, but she's also on the floor, but her non-contact time may be about sixty percent of her day, when she's in the office. Whereas mine may be like one or two. Big difference. So, she's got time to do it and I don't (Janelle).

The issue of non-contact time was further explored with Janelle in her second interview, which took place at 6am on a weekday. The exchange again indicated the burden that a lack of time has on her role, where she often spends break-times on work-related tasks:

Researcher: How much [non-contact] per week would you say you get?

Janelle: It depends on the circumstances, as to what other things I've got to get done. I could say my non-contact time, like I have now, okay, I've finished the cleaning, I could pick up my file and do some programming. Or if there was a note left for me about a parent needing something, I'd go in the office and sort that out. Like tomorrow morning ... I don't start work until 11, but I'll be in early to get the attendance done. Because that's my non-contact time ...

Researcher: You would call now non-contact time?

Janelle: I would, because there's no children.

Researcher: What if there were children here?

Janelle: On a different day, there might be children here, so my non-contact time might be my lunch break from 12 till 1. The girls, they do support me, bless them, even though they leave the centre to have a lunch break – I don't, because I choose to stay and get something done.

In every interview, it was noticeable from the responses that each service setting varied in terms of the 'support' available to educators. It was also noted that the support available also had an influence on the degree of the perceived burden experienced.

Core Category 6: Stress

When asked about the impact of the QIP on their professional life, all participants stated that it added stress, but this was generally followed with another statement about their role in general: "Stress. Definitely. Just with the day-to-day

running of the centre as well” (Kathy); “Not so much throughout the year or anything – that’s just general centre manager stress” (Kathy); and,

... it’s just managing all those timeframes and where you’re at and as it is with day-to-day running of things, depending on the size of the service too, you’ve got a lot of staff goals you’ve got to achieve as well, as well as the children’s developmental goals (Andrea).

When asked to explain the stress that was experienced in terms of thoughts, feelings, or actions, educators stated: “Things just pile up I guess” (Kathy); “I sort of keep putting it off and putting it off and, like, I get to a point where I just need to hide away and get this done” (Kathy); “I work from 6.30 to 5.30 every day. It’s a long day, and a lot of that is writing. A lot of it” (Janelle); “... I don’t want to look at it” (Janelle).

When talking about the burden of the QIP, educators all expressed awareness, or the continual presence of the QIP in their minds: “It’s always there. Always there. In the back of your mind” (Janelle); “It’s just a little reminder in the back of your mind and feeling guilty because we haven’t done it” (Molly). Andrea’s response and body language during the interview also indicated she felt guilty for not having documented any of her QIP; “I honestly ... I struggle to keep up to date with it”.

The stress identified by educators in relation to their job, as well as to the QIP, is important to acknowledge, as it relates to their psychological wellbeing, which is a general feeling of positiveness and wellness (Hughes, Kinder, & Cooper, 2008). Psychological wellbeing affects not only individuals in a personal capacity, but also organisations (Hughes et al., 2008). It is in an employer’s or organisation’s interest to ensure the psychological wellbeing of its employees. Organisations typically want an engaged and productive workforce, demonstrated through high productivity; positive customer/client interactions; the retention of talent; quality job applications for positions; low absenteeism or sickness of employees; and overall high levels of positive organisational citizenship (Hughes et al., 2008). Employees or individuals in return, want, and are motivated to, feel ‘good’ (psychological wellbeing) (Hughes et al., 2008).

The development of psychological wellbeing is “dependent on having an overall ‘sense of purpose’ that gives direction and meaning to people’s actions” (Hughes et al., 2008, p. 45). It develops through achievement, and psychological wellbeing can be increased by “measured degrees of challenge and from achieving goals people think are important” (Hughes et al., 2008, p. 42). Detrimental to psychological wellbeing are six sources of pressure: lack of control or autonomy; overload; lack of resources and communication; poor work relationships; pay and benefits; and work-life balance

(Hughes et al., 2008). These sources of pressure are evident in the research data and indicate that the burden of the QIP and quality rating process is detrimental to educators' psychological wellbeing.

Lack of control or autonomy is evident in the data when educators use phrases such as 'have to', 'need to', 'they want'. For example, "I have no choice, I have to be here for 12 hours" (Molly); "I *have* [emphasis] to think differently about it [the QIP] now" (Claire); "getting it set up the way they wanted it" (Janelle); "how much do they want to see?" (Janelle); "it needs to be the wordy stuff that they want, in the template form that they want" (Molly); "having to document it so that it's evidence for somebody else is just frustrating" (Kathy).

'Overload' is evident throughout the research data. Newton & Jimmieson (2008, p. 21) define role-overload as having "too much work to complete". Janelle's responses indicate she experiences role-overload:

It's just finding the time. It really is. I mean even though I work 11 hours a day I am so time poor. I really am. Centres in general, we really are. We do long shifts but a lot of that we're on the floor with the kids, but when we are with the kids, I've got a file in my lap or I'm thinking about something else. We're not doing our job. We're not with the kids. It's frustrating.

Lack of communication and resources is apparent in a variety of ways, and relates to situational factors such as collegiality and access to training. As Janelle stated; "in the beginning we weren't really offered much training. It was kind of like, here you go, here's a book. Read this."

Poor work relationships were clearly evident in Molly and Claire's situation with a high staff turnover and low occupancy. For example, "When I first started, there was such a high turnover that the parents were asking us why" (Claire); and, "They [parents] were referring to my chair as the 'death chair'". Poor staff relationships were also described by Claire:

... we did hit rock bottom and they didn't feel either valued or they didn't want to be here, because we weren't going anywhere, we were going backwards. We had a lot of sick staff, we had a lot of staff who would just call in sick in the morning...

For Janelle, the impact of the administrative burden on her professional life was made evident through the following comments: "I find that I miss out on a lot with the kids. I mean, I work from 6.30 to 5.30 every day. It's a long day, and a lot of that is writing. A lot of it. (Janelle); and,

I find I miss out on a lot with the kids, I mean even though I'm with them I'm not necessarily interacting with them as much as I would be because I've constantly got my file in my lap. Writing, writing, writing, to get it all done (Janelle).

The statements demonstrate the impact of administrative burden on her time, and job satisfaction. Statements such as "constantly got that file on my lap" and the use of terminology such as 'constantly', and 'it's a long day' suggest it is an ongoing burden. The statements also demonstrate the emotional impact the QIP has on her role satisfaction, with repetition of the phrasing "I miss out on a lot with the kids". This phrasing appears to indicate that the educator is passionate about working with the children. If she had worded it differently, for example, "the kids miss out on a lot", it would not have been as powerful in demonstrating the personal emotional impact of the burden.

Pay and benefits were not directly addressed in the research investigation; however, it was raised by Janelle in one instance, and it was in relation to her role overall. Role-ambiguity, role-conflict and role-overload lead to increased tension and indicators of burnout such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and diminished feelings of personal accomplishment (Newton & Jimmieson, 2008). Role-ambiguity also leads to a reduction in positive job-related attitudes such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Newton & Jimmieson, 2008). This was shown in Janelle's follow-up interview where she shared her conflicted emotions about staying in her role:

... they [another service] offered me a job. They wanted me to go work for them, and I was really torn. Part of me was like, do I go? Do I get better pay? Do I get better hours? But, do I give all this up? This is mine. This is my baby. My very stressful baby. I didn't. I didn't follow it up ...

and:

Ten years is a long time. Part of me, like last night, with the situation, you know being stressed out and everything, part of me feels like day cares should have an expiration date on the job, because you just get to the point of – you've just had enough. Like, it's the same every day. I s'pose [sic] it's like with any job, you do it for so long you just get fed up. You really do. The stresses of it, but then I have a lot more [stresses] than some people do, in their day care jobs, and they whinge about it and I go 'really, that's all you've got to worry about, really?' I muddle through.

Work-life balance was explored in this research study to ascertain whether and, if so, how the administrative burden impacted on the professional and personal life of educators. While some educators stated that the QIP did not impact on their personal

life, some felt that when undergoing assessment and rating it did: "I definitely think coming up to an assessment and rating, like if we were to get our letter and things like that, definitely. Not so much throughout the year or anything – that's just general centre manager stress." (Kathy); "I was told, on the phone, in tears, while I was on annual leave"; "the last one I went through I had actually called in sick on the day, I was really, really sick and they said 'they're here, the assessors are here", so I said 'okay I'm coming'. I was so sick." (Andrea); and "on the day of the rating I got a phone call, to the school I was placed at" (Claire).

While the QIP may not directly impact on their home life, many of the educators interviewed stated that they completed work in their own hours. The reason for doing so is because they are time-poor, which is also the reason why they cannot develop and document the QIP. Examples include, "Last weekend was not a good example. I was here for eight hours on Saturday and nine-and-a-half on Sunday" (Molly).

... sometimes you don't get that time during the day, but both of us would stay back and discuss things or she'll teach me how to do things on a Sunday or like, not that we recommend doing things out of hours, but when it's necessary, it's necessary. If that means that I'm going to have a smoother week when Molly's not there then I'd much rather come in on a Sunday and do it. Rather than sitting here and pulling my hair out for the rest of the week ... (Claire).

and:

I don't really spend much time in the office to be honest. The time I spend in the office is in my own time. I come into work early and I leave late. But that's the sacrifices I have to make at the moment. I know it's not going to be forever, it's just what it is (Andrea).

Janelle stated that she felt that the administrative burden impacted on her personal (home) life:

Sometimes, some days Mum knows I'm stressed out to the max. I'm normally a happy person, like I'm bubbly and you know, not much gets to me, but you can tell when I've had enough, and just had it. Yeah sometimes it can do, some weeks are better than others obviously. Some weeks I have time to sit and do my writing, other weeks its chaos and I've got to take work home, and get the washing done and clean the house.

In discussing Janelle's experience of the quality rating process, she shared her personal experience of being hospitalised for a week shortly after receiving their service's quality rating:

Researcher: Do you feel as though those weeks were more stressful than others?

Janelle: Yes, those weeks, definitely. Honestly, the day we got this [*picks up draft report*] [details of dates omitted] is when I ended up in hospital. The day we got this, I remember [the assessor] ringing me and saying 'Janelle, have you checked your emails?' I'm thinking 'oh my god'. You don't expect a phone call from the assessor to say check your emails. I'm like, what's happened, what have we done, what's gone wrong? I ran in the office, booted [the owner] off the computer, saying 'I need the emails' and he's saying, 'what's wrong' and I said 'we've got something from [the regulatory authority]' and his face went white. So, I checked it and [the assessor] is chuckling away on the phone ... he said 'skip everything and go to the last page'.... this is all on the phone to the assessor. Who does that? Anyway, I went out the back to tell the girls, and it was literally, like from my head to my toes [*gestures down her body*] just this *whoof* feeling. It was the weirdest physical feeling. [Colleague] was like, 'are you alright?' and I said 'I feel like I've been hit by a truck'. It literally was just this feeling of *wham!* Everything just went out of me ... I need to go home ... they said, 'you need to go to hospital now' ... I think accreditation was a catalyst. It made it 'pay attention to your body Janelle'...

The relevance of understanding psychological wellbeing in this instance is that in order to maintain psychological wellbeing, educators experiencing stress have to 'cope' (Hughes et al., 2008). Coping is defined as "the cognitive and behavioural effort a person makes to manage demands that tax or exceed personal resources" (Hughes et al., 2008, pp. 91–92). An educator may perceive a situation as stressful, or demanding, when it represents a threat (in terms of loss, harm or challenge to their identity). A threat to identity, as previously discussed, poses a threat to psychological wellbeing (Hughes et al., 2008). When stress or demands are encountered, action is required in response (cause-and-effect). Resources are required to assist with the response, such as social and personal characteristics of individuals, or physical, financial and organisational resources that can be accessed (Hughes et al., 2008). Coping is therefore the "balance between the demands of the situation and individuals' resources for dealing with them" (Hughes et al., 2008, p. 92).

Hughes et al. (2008) refer to three types of coping. The first is reactive coping, where an individual deals with a situation as or after it has happened. Related to this research, this can be seen with Molly and Claire's experience, and their description of having to "put out spot-fires". The second type of coping is anticipatory coping, where an individual deals with an impending demand (Hughes et al., 2008). This can be seen in the data where educators receive notification of their service's quality rating process. Lastly, preventative coping is where individuals prepare for possible demands they

may experience (Hughes et al., 2008). In relation to this study, preventative coping may be evident in the excess collection of evidence for assessment and rating visits.

Coping involves a level of awareness, because in order to cope, an individual needs to apply effort, purpose and planning to the stressful situation. There are two main types of coping strategies identified by Hughes et al., (2008): problem-focused strategies that require 'action' (behavioural responses); and emotion-focused strategies that provide emotional or psychological 'relief'. Both types of coping strategies can be seen within the data collected for this study.

Problem-focused strategies include behaviours and actions such as planning, information gathering, prioritising, rationalising and seeking additional information (knowing where and how to access this information); essentially they are problem-solving skills (Hughes et al., 2008). Examples from the data include: "It's the first time we've really assigned time for the QIP" (Claire); and "We're constantly doing updates and we're writing on it constantly, whether it's completed or adding things to it and then every quarter we'll do a full update to it". In these examples the educators have set aside a specific time to ensure that the QIP is either started or updated.

Emotion-focused strategies include such things as venting to colleagues, finding distractions or avoidance activities, seeking support from colleagues, family and/or friends at home, or passive attempts to tolerate (such as doing nothing, and essentially ignoring the demands) (Hughes et al., 2008). This is evident in the data, for example, "Things just pile up I guess. I sort of keep putting it off and putting it off and like I get to a point where I just need to hide away and get this done" (Kathy); "... the QIP came and I kind of buried my head in the sand for a while and ignored it for as long as I could ..." (Janelle); "... shoved under the table sometimes because I don't want to look at it" (Janelle).

The burden in Janelle's professional (work) life was further evident in comments such as "I am time poor"; "everything's kind of fallen to me"; "it's really difficult to try and find the time to get to do it. I mean like today, I'm not technically on the floor and I've got attendance stuff to do, so it's just like, aarrggghh"; "I take it home a lot. Just to get it done within the week"; "my biggest issue is not having the non-contact time. So, I often find that I'm sitting supervising the children with my file in my lap...". Janelle's role also appeared to take her away from aspects of her job that she enjoys, which is being with the children.

What this indicates is that again, the context and situational factors within each service setting prove valuable in determining the level of burden experienced by educators. "There's different circumstances within each individual centre as well, that

would really impact it I s'pose [sic]" (Janelle); "If you ask a qualified who focuses on one room, like a toddler room, their stress level may be completely different to mine because I have to do the whole lot" (Janelle). For educators who have collegiate support, networking opportunities, assistance from a head office, access to training, information, and time – they have a rich bank of resources to draw on when they encounter burden. In essence, they have resources to 'cope' more successfully, behaviourally and emotionally with the demands of the QIP and quality rating process, reducing the impact of the burden.

This chapter has explored in detail the six main categories and related sub-categories of information present in the research data. Relevant theory has been detailed in relation to each category, to ascertain what may be influencing ECEC educators' experience of the administrative burden. Through detailing their experience, information obligations, the quality rating process, quality improvement plans, existing support structures and experience of stress, some common themes or threads started to emerge in the research data. Through the process of constant comparison, a working theory and theoretical framework emerges. These themes are explored in the next chapter, which outlines results from the constant comparison method employed in the study.

Chapter 6: Theoretical Framework

Within each of the main categories identified and discussed in the previous chapter, there are common threads, or themes, which lead to the emergence of a working theory, based on a theoretical framework. The six identified core categories are educator experience, information obligations, quality rating process, quality improvement plans, support structures, and educator stress (or burden). Through the process of constant comparison, key concepts recur throughout the data, which are discussed in this chapter. The working theory that emerges is outlined along with further explanation of how the research data fits with the proposed theoretical framework.

Using the constant comparison method, six recognised themes have been identified within each of the (six) core categories. The first three themes are the identified psychological impact of the QIP on educators; the characteristics of learning involved in developing and implementing the QIP; and aspects of compliance requirements. These three areas are influenced by three more recurrent threads, being the individual educator's role and responsibilities (referred to here as factors related to the 'educator'); their situation and service context (workplace); and finally, the policy documents themselves.

Each of these themes will be justified and exemplified using a table of representative quotes from the data. Each table will demonstrate the themes present in the data, and how they relate to the categories already identified and discussed in the previous chapter.

Psychological Impact

Evident throughout the data was the perceived sense of psychological (mental and emotional) impact of the administrative burden on educators. The psychological impact could be identified in several areas, such as when discussing the quality rating process; development of the QIP; and factors within the workplace that may have added to the burden felt. The psychological burden also considers the educators' mindset about their role. Educators who have a positive outlook (mindset) towards their job and role demonstrate a stronger role-identity and feeling of self-esteem related to their role requirements. Table 5 demonstrates the psychological burden experienced by educators. It uses representative quotations from the research data to justify the burden perceived by educators.

Table 5

Representative quotations related to the perceived psychological impact experienced by educators

Subject	Representative quotations from the data
Quality rating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “as stressful as it is” (Janelle) • “grateful that it’s not like the old process” (Janelle) • “the new way is a bit harsher” (Andrea) • “everyone was on edge ... it was really horrible” (Andrea) • “something terrible can go on, something can go wrong” (Kathy) • “you’re nervous” (Andrea) • “The process was horrible” (Molly) • “I felt sick in my stomach. My confidence walked out.” (Claire) • “Once you’ve been through it, you’ve done it, you know what to expect so it’s very different” (Kathy). • “on the day, they can feel the pressure as well, I think not just because it’s hard, because we do try to involve them as much as possible but them not understanding it, or the educators who haven’t been through it, it is very daunting for them” (Kathy).
Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “my biggest fear is not having enough, because being through the assessment and rating process before and our programs didn’t pass, after that, that just put the fear of God in me” (Janelle) • “The stress when that letter comes – is (<i>makes a whooshing sound</i>) ...” (Janelle). • “that letter could arrive today, I don’t know, and my QIP may not necessarily be ready so then I would be focusing all my time on trying to get that ready for them and not necessarily doing everything else that needs to be done, so that will just ramp up the pressure” (Janelle). • “But it’s having all the paper work prepared beforehand is the daunting part. Because you don’t know when you’re going to receive that letter” (Janelle).
Situational factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “All the educators are fantastic” (Kathy). • “Not that I’m complaining about the hours, I mean I enjoy my job, and the money’s good because obviously, you need to pay the bills” (Janelle). • “If you ask a qualified who focuses on one room, like a toddler room, their stress level may be completely different to mine because I have to do the whole lot” (Janelle).

Characteristics of Learning

Another common theme throughout the data was ‘learning’ involved in the development and implementation of the QIP. This includes academic skills such as reading and writing, as well as skills required for reflection and accessing unknown information. Variables such as educator experience have an impact on learning requirements and, as seen with Kathy’s situation, having prior experience of two quality rating visits greatly reduced the learning required for each: “that made a big difference having the extra centres to be able to learn from” and “our first one would have been a lot lengthier”. As Janelle reflected after her visit, “There’s definitely a lot less that I would do”. Table 6 demonstrates the perceived burden associated with learning, that was experienced by educators, using quotations from the research data to justify the burden perceived.

Table 6

Representative quotations related to the perceived impact of learning experienced by educators

Subject	Representative quotations from the data
Quality ratings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "... not understanding it ..." (Kathy) • "that was our first centre we went through it with, so we learnt a lot from that one about how to do the QIP to make it read how we want it to be read ..." (Kathy) • "that made a big difference, having the extra centres to be able to learn from" (Kathy) • "there's definitely a lot less that I would do, but in my panic beforehand, it was how much do they want to see? I honestly didn't know" (Janelle)
Quality improvement plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I think the hardest thing with the QIP is that people always struggle with the terminology ... they don't understand what they've written ... you're better off just writing it basic - how you understand and go from there" (Andrea) • "It's not like you think of something and just write it down, you have to actually think about it, and have the right wording in there, and make sure that it's written so that there is like an outcome and how you're going to prove that is was achieved - it's so lengthy, you know that you do it, but it's getting it on paper" (Kathy) • "A lot of people struggle with identifying what their weaknesses are but if they have new eyes come in then it's generally easier to pick up" (Andrea) • "... you have to be cautious of what you're putting into the QIP as well, because ... if you write too much in one area then they're gonna [sic] think 'Geez, what's going on there?'" (Andrea).
Role responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I didn't actually know where any of the files, or anything was" (Molly) • "... it's kind of come gradually. It hasn't all just been dumped on me in one hit, I've just gradually picked up more responsibility. Gradually learnt how to do more" (Janelle).
Policy requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "... we were still changing over the policies and the educators were still getting used to the changes" (Kathy) • "... unless I'm taught I don't know that I've got it right" (Janelle) • "the tasks that we are doing could be written so simply, that we don't have to go through to check the wording is enough evidence to show what we want it to" (Kathy). • "I've constantly got my file in my lap. Writing, writing, writing to get it all done." (Janelle) • "I work from 6.30 to 5.30 every day. It's a long day, and a lot of that is writing. A lot of it." (Janelle)

Compliance Requirements

Compliance with the National Law and Regulations (New South Wales Government, 2016) means that there are aspects of educators' roles that are non-negotiable. Developing and maintaining a QIP and participation in the quality rating process are only two of the requirements that ECEC services carry out in order to comply with policy. The impact of compliance requirements is demonstrated in the following table. Table 7 demonstrates the perceived burden associated with complying with mandated requirements. It uses representative quotations from the research data to justify the burden perceived by educators.

Table 7

Representative quotations related to the perceived impact of compliance experienced by educators

Subject	Representative quotations from the data
Quality improvement plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "it's just managing all those timeframes and where you're at and as it is with day-to-day running of things, depending on the size of the service too, you've got a lot of staff goals you've got to achieve as well, as well as the children's developmental goals" (Andrea) • "Some companies want you to use the terminology because they believe it makes you sound more professional" (Andrea) • "Personally, for me, yes, the biggest impact is that it takes away from me being with the kids" (Janelle).
Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I think they need to look at how much paperwork is viable for child care workers and kind of realise, ok, you want us on the floor with the kids but you also want this done, and the two don't really go together. Well, especially in my world they don't" (Janelle). • "We're constantly doing updates and we're writing on it constantly, whether it's completed or adding things to it and then every quarter we'll do a full update to it" (Kathy) • "it feels like they've given us the QIP, but also with the other hand they've given us another pile like this (gestures with hand above head) that needs to be seen with programming" (Janelle). • "Today, my paperwork is done. This week I am done, it's all done so it's all good, but I had to catch up on some attendance work because we had the school holidays so I had to be out on the floor more so it just snowballs" (Janelle).
Non-contact time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "But my biggest issue is not having the non-contact time. So, I often find that I'm sitting supervising the children with my file in my lap doing my obs. One eye on them, one eye on that, you know. That's my day. That's the norm for me. When staff go non-contact time, I go 'what's that?'" (Janelle). • "we are quite lucky that we're given, able to give them quite a lot of non-contact time" (Kathy).
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "So, when we had the two qualifieds it was fine, one did one group, the other did the other group, it was all ding-dang-dandy" (Janelle). • "Our office had a lot to do with that more, we just had to put the information in with our strengths and weaknesses, or areas for improvement" (Kathy).

Educators

Individual differences between educators were evident throughout the data. These differences are variables that impact on the level of burden each educator is perceived to experience. Individual characteristics such as their attitudes, beliefs and knowledge impact on their behaviours and actions. Table 8 demonstrates factors related to individual educators that may impact on the educators' perception of the administrative burden.

Table 8

Representative quotations related to the perceived impact of educator roles and understanding on the administrative burden experienced

Subject	Representative quotations from the data
Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Always my program will prioritise over the QIP. I won't change that. That's just me." (Janelle). • "... it's always going to be my programming, because that's with the children." (Janelle).
Quality ratings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I just wonder how much they actually read into, and look into the philosophy of each service, and then take that into their practice. Or are they just basing it on what they think is good practice. Every service is different. It's how much they actually follow their philosophy" (Andrea).
Quality improvement plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I feel very much confident in early childhood education, but when it comes to the QIP, it's a different story" (Claire) • "I guess it's a blessing that I have had so much experience, I've been doing it for a long time, but this QIP is new to me. It's kinda [sic] thrown a curve ball at me, it's kinda [sic] one of those things that's there, you need to do it, you need to get it done" (Janelle).

Workplace Context

The most significant theme to emerge from the data was differences in workplace contexts, and the influence these differences have on the burden experienced. These differences related to the support available to educators, both within and externally to services and educators. This support includes human resources (colleagues, peers) as well as physical resources such as administration assistance, and non-contact time. Within this category is role responsibilities of educators, as each workplace environment required differences in the range of roles and responsibilities of participants, and this has a significant impact on the burden experienced. Table 9 demonstrates variables in the workplace settings that may impact on the educators' perception of the administrative burden.

Table 9

Representative quotations related to the perceived impact of situational factors on the administrative burden experienced

Subject	Representative quotations from the data
Quality rating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "... educators who haven't been through it ..." (Kathy). • "The process was horrible, because of the way it was sold. This is going to sound horrible, but if it was being led by a person who was being positive and providing proper feedback it would have been much better" (Molly).
Meetings and networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "we also have team leader meetings once a month so all the leaders get together to discuss things and then at our staff meetings we'll discuss it also as well" (Kathy). • "twice a year we have a networking week where we meet in our Perth office and the managers get together with the Perth office and that gives us an opportunity to get together and discuss it between the centres too, so they might have information that we've not thought of, or different things that they've been able to achieve so it's good to network as well" (Kathy). • "Generally, one session in the week, so a 3-hour session, and we stay together in accommodation so we're always talking about stuff between managers as well" (Kathy). • "So how we used to do it was we used to have once a month we used to have meetings all together and groups would come together. So, then they'd collaborate and work out ideas together" (Andrea).
Collegial support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "with the girls because they're only studying Cert IIIs, it's so woof over their heads that sometimes I feel that I just shouldn't bother" (Janelle). • "... I mean he's here to do school runs and office managerial work, I mean he's not out on the floor running the centre, so for me to do the QIP it's a lot easier because I know how the centre runs, I know what's working, I know what's not working whereas for [the owner] that would be more difficult and he would constantly be asking my opinion so it's easier just to do it myself. As much as I'd love to shove it on to someone else" (Janelle). • "the educators that we have are really good at reflecting on where they could improve and everything and understand the importance of it and for them to document it so that we can see stuff that's going on in their room, we can see it going on in others and we can do something as a centre, so I think it's quite good for them" (Kathy). • "In our rooms, we have what we call monitoring books, so each room leader has their own room QIP, so there might not be things we are working on as a centre, but they are things they are working on in their room, so they have those as a team, and things that we are working on as a centre" (Kathy). • "we were able to put it together and then from that we then had a separate checklist that we—because all the things they were saying we do do [sic] really well, all our strengths, we wanted to make sure they are still our strengths, so we made ourselves another checklist and we were going through and making sure that it all still was current and then we're still working on the things that we were actually putting in the table" (Kathy). • "previously how I've always worked is that we've always done room QIPs as well, so each of the rooms develops what areas they think are lacking and then we bring them to the staff meetings to discuss and if it's something that is lacking overall, then that would be put into the QIP" (Andrea).

Table 9 Continued

Subject	Representative quotations from the data
Training and Consultancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “we’ve been quite lucky in that we get lots of internal training through our Perth office, so we’re good in that respect” (Kathy). • “It’s lots of hands on, role-modelling, giving them pointers” (Kathy). • “in the beginning, we weren’t really offered much training. It was kind of like, here you go, here’s a book, read this” (Janelle). • “I’ve actually been considering redoing my Diploma to retrain myself, because I just feel, I’m constantly – I mean [colleague] the young one is just doing her Cert III now, so [consultant] who’s her supervisor was my supervisor for my Diploma, so I literally throw my programs at her every time she comes in and ask her ‘Are they right?’ She’s like ‘They’re fine’” (Janelle). • “... oh my goodness, they’ve got the resources, the 2ICs, the office managers, and they’ve asked people to come over from Melbourne, and then they didn’t get an <i>exceeding</i>” (Janelle). • “we’ve got parents who work in child cares and one of our mums just recently went through hers [A&R], and they’ve got people from Melbourne who have come over to get the centre ready and even then, they didn’t get an <i>exceeding</i>. And they were so disappointed” (Janelle). • “There’s independent people that they can get to come out, but they cost like about a thousand dollars. I know of a centre manager who actually paid her own money for a service appraisal, just to see where they are at, what to work on. But that’s their opinion. What the ratings people, the assessors see is gonna [sic] be different” (Andrea).

Upon reflection, one statement proved to be provocative in the direction of the research:

I think they need to look at how much paperwork is viable for child care workers and kind of realise, ok, you want us on the floor with the kids but you also want this done, and the two don’t really go together. Well, especially in my world they don’t (Janelle).

This quote resonated strongly, particularly the phrasing *‘in my world’*. It forced attention to two key variables evident in the research data: differences between like services (for example, all participants at this point were in long day care services); and the role responsibilities of educators within the services. All participants held a similar level of position within their service, yet their role responsibilities varied greatly. The common thread here is that of each educator’s unique situation or workplace context.

Policy Interactions

The final common thread in the data was educators’ opinions and experience with the various components of the NQF itself. This includes the QIP, the assessment and rating process and their interactions with regulatory authorities and officers, and resources available. Table 10 demonstrates factors related to the NQF (being, the policy) that may impact on the educators’ perception of the administrative burden.

Table 10

Representative quotations related to the perceived impact of policy stimuli on the administrative burden experienced

Subject	Representative quotations from the data
NQF Resource Kit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The big blue one. In the very back there is a plan, like a guide that we are basically given. And it’s like, okay, muddle through so the first three days of me implementing the QIP was me getting it set up the way they wanted it. It’s a lot of paper” (Janelle). • “We really started with the national quality framework file that we were provided with to see the example documents and things like that” (Kathy).
Quality ratings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “As stressful as it is, I think they’re extremely important because we need to know what we’re doing and what we’re not doing” (Janelle). • “Whereas this time they tell you the dates that they are going to be here so in a way it’s kind of better because you are prepared, they’re gonna [sic] be there that day – you pull out your A game that day” (Janelle). • “I think the new way is a bit harsher in some things, in the old way if you got one thing wrong they sort of evened it out, whereas if you get something wrong, or a staff member gets one thing wrong that brings down that whole area, which brings down the whole overall outlook of things and you know, which - people can slip up” (Andrea). • “Everything needs to happen in those two days” (Kathy).
Regulatory officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I mean they’ve done their time in child care, all the assessors, they’ve gone up the ranks, but have they forgotten what it’s like on the floor?” (Janelle). • “I’ve seen a couple where they just pick up totally different things so I don’t know” (Andrea). • “You don’t know what assessors are looking for, all assessors are different, they don’t go off a timeline of what they’re exactly looking for, their criteria and things” (Andrea).

Table 10 Continued

Subject	Representative quotations from the data
Collecting evidence for visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We’ve got a whole drawer of evidence of things that we do throughout the year, because it’s very hard to see things in one or two days” (Kathy). • “I know we are. And that’s more so to justify if they didn’t see something and marked you down for it then we can say ‘no, this is the actual practice” (Andrea). • “See years ago, you used to be able to produce a lot of evidence as well and they would use that” (Andrea). • “We’ve got this whole file of evidence that we’re keeping” (Janelle). • “We’ve got to draw on projects and things that we’ve done – like community events and stuff – that won’t necessarily be going on while they’re here but if they’re not seeing it in the rooms then things like that, then what do you do, you can’t prove it” (Kathy). • “We would put together a file of photos and evidence to show what we do, and that was used on the validation day as well, they would go through it and see the things that we were doing” (Kathy). • “... until I get the assessment and rating process done, and I can talk to them personally, and say ‘right what do you think’, I’m just gonna [sic] keep doing it because I’d rather be safe than sorry. Instead of it coming back and saying ‘sorry, you’re not doing enough” (Janelle).

Language in the review findings suggest that both educators and the Australian Government’s representatives consider the administrative burden to be caused by the policy and legislation itself. As stated in the Education Council’s (2014) *Regulation Impact Statement*:

A type of action that can address national consistency and clarity is for specific areas of the National Law, National Regulations and guidance material to be altered to encourage consistency and clarity. In some areas, it may be appropriate to simply provide better information to assist the sector in understanding current requirements and ensuring they are clearly communicated.

However, it is evident that there is a lack of consideration to the educators themselves, and their individual and collective understanding of the National Quality Framework. Reflecting on the literature reviewed in initial chapters, consideration needs to be given to each educator’s understanding of policy implementation. Revisiting the notion of perception, and the factors that influence perception, is pertinent to consider in relation to the administration burden experienced.

As detailed previously, the National Quality Standard was intended by the Council of Australian Governments to be “simple to understand and administer” (COAG, 2008, p. B-1). Yet, the review of the NQF implementation has shown that “documents

expressed in broad terms can be helpful to give flexibility but can be difficult to understand” (ACECQA, 2015, p. 61). In both quotations the term ‘understand’ is used. The word ‘understand’ is defined as “to perceive the meaning of; grasp the idea of; comprehend” (“understand”, n.d.). It is the educators who need to understand the documentation; they are essentially the ‘end users’. The documents themselves may not be the issue as discussed above, but the educator’s interpretation of the documents may be a significant factor influencing the administrative burden experienced.

This chapter has outlined the findings of the research and addressed the main themes constant in the data, being the psychological impact of the administrative burden; the characteristics of learning that are burdensome for educators; compliance requirements adding to the perceived burden; the impact of the educator background; their work environment (context); and their interaction with aspects of the policy. The next section will explore these themes in greater detail and expand on the working theory now identified.

A Combined Framework

The six identified themes discussed fit within two broader, conceptual (theoretical) frameworks. The first relates to administrative burden, caused by policy. The second is the notion of how policy is interpreted, or understood (perceived) by those responsible for implementing it. Drawing on theory in the disciplines of psychology, economics and sociology, these two theoretical frameworks can be combined. This section will define and explore each framework in detail with reference to existing research, and demonstrate how elements of these two frameworks relate to this study.

Administrative burden and policy. Considerable research exists related to policy implementation and the impact of administrative burden. Much of the existing research is linked to theory based in the discipline of economics, and more recently behavioural economics (Lunn, 2014; Samson & Ariely, 2015). Behavioural economics is “the incorporation of psychological insights into the study of economic problems” (Lunn, 2014). Theory underpinning behavioural economics (BE) explains how psychology influences economic decision-making, and is increasingly being applied to research in the social sciences (Lunn, 2014; Samson & Ariely, 2015).

As previously identified, administrative burden is the “costs imposed on businesses, when complying with information obligations stemming from Government regulation” (Better Regulation Unit Malta, n.d.). Traditionally, administrative burden has been calculated to convey to governments in financial terms what the cost of

burdens amounts to. This is due to the fact that administrative burden is deeply rooted in the field of economics (Lunn, 2014). Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey (2014) introduced a widely referenced behavioural economic viewpoint of the costs associated with administrative burden. Their framework does not consider 'costs' of administrative burden in terms of financial expenditure. They consider the 'costs' of administrative burden in terms of *psychological*, *learning* and *compliance costs* (Moynihan et al., 2014). These costs are considered as resulting from an interaction between a citizen, or in this case the educator, and the government, which includes policy-related materials (Moynihan et al., 2014). It is through these interactions that a perception of the government and its policy agenda is developed, and through studying this, an understanding of what makes an interaction more, or less, onerous (or burdensome) is established (Moynihan et al., 2014).

Psychological costs are defined as costs that “include the stigma of applying for or participating in a program with negative perceptions, a sense of loss of power or autonomy in interactions with the state, or the stresses of dealing with administrative processes” (Moynihan et al., 2014, pp. 45-46). In the context of this study, psychological costs relate to the impact of quality improvement plans and the quality rating process on thoughts, feelings and emotions experienced by educators. This directly links to the identified recurrent theme of the psychological impact educators experience, as shown in Table 5.

Learning costs are defined as those that “arise from engaging in search processes to collect information ... and assessing how they are relevant” (Moynihan et al., 2014, p. 45). This relates to the characteristics of learning educators identified as part of their experience (see Table 5). In the context of this research, learning costs include such things as searching for information related to the QIP (either online or in hardcopy formats), time engaged in reading said information, time spent reflecting on practice, time engaged in writing notes or documenting information in the QIP, and professional discussion with colleagues related to the QIP or assessment and ratings.

Compliance costs are “the burdens of following administrative rules and requirements” (Moynihan et al., 2014). These costs link to the identified theme of compliance requirements (see Table 7). In this investigation, this includes information obligations, such as submission of the QIP, and implementing strategic goals identified; time and action taken to ensure educator-to-child ratios are planned for and enacted; documenting relevant compliance requirements, such as attendances, programming and documenting children's learning.

Moynihan et al. (2014) continue to expand on the aspects of human behaviour that relate to administrative burden. They identify that “individuals have a basic need for autonomy over their self and actions and the importance of procedural justice” (Moynihan et al., 2014, p. 47). In psychology, this relates to the human need for autonomy and respectful treatment (Moynihan et al., 2014). This means that by introducing policy and legislation that educators and services must comply with, the government has imposed an extrinsic motivation for compliance (Moynihan et al., 2014). If educators and services were intrinsically self-motivated to assess their quality of practice and set strategic targets for improvement, the burden experienced with the task would be less. An example of this is evident in Kathy’s statement: “we know we are doing all of the things that we need to do, but having to document it so that it’s evidence for somebody else is just frustrating”.

The assessment and rating process offers a threat to an educator’s self-identity as a leader of quality practice. The process itself, of having an assessor in the service for two days, watching, can be “degrading, intrusive, and directive, it erodes the basic need for autonomy” (Moynihan et al., 2014, p. 49). This is further enhanced if the educator feels that they must re-adjust their behaviour and actions to meet the ‘identity’ implied by the assessors throughout the interaction. This can be seen in the example given by Molly and Claire, where their centre manager made large-scale changes to their service on the day of the rating visit: “... the morning of, like the night before they came in the manager had decided to change all of the rooms around, put out new resources and decide that we would do progressive meal times” (Molly). The imposed requirement for a quality rating, which is publicly acknowledged, is an ‘administrative practice’ that “can reinforce the effect of stigma” (Moynihan et al., 2014, p. 49). The stigma of leading a service that receives a lower rating can be damaging to an educator’s sense of self-esteem, self-worth and role-identity. Again, this was evident in Molly’s experience where the service she was working in had received a rating of *working towards*. Molly was told in her job interview:

You’re [the service] an embarrassment to the state, you’re an embarrassment to the area, you’re an embarrassment to the company, and we don’t want to hire you because you are not going to be able to pull it out of the slum that it’s in, but basically, we’ve got no other options, so let’s give it a go.

Related to this is the sense of ‘procedural justice’ that educators experience during the process of their quality rating visit, compared to the overall outcome and rating. This is tied to the feelings expressed by educators when they discussed the

regulatory officers' (assessors) non-use of the evidence they had kept: "they don't even want to see that" (Andrea); "they are not even interested in looking at it" (Kathy). While seemingly small issues, the fact that they have been imposed on educators and their sense of autonomy has been reduced, the burden experienced is amplified.

A final finding of Moynihan et al.'s. (2014) research into the costs of administrative burden is pertinent to, and supported by, this research investigation, that being "burdens may have the most dramatic effects on those with lower financial resources and human capital assets" (Moynihan et al., 2014, p. 63). This is evident in the findings of this research, as it has been identified that educators who work within smaller services experience a greater sense of burden as they lack the support structures within their service environment that can reduce or lessen the burden. This includes collegiality, networking, training, access to time and physical resources.

Moynihan et al.'s. (2014) research suggests that it is the relationship between policy and the educator-and-government *interactions* that leads to the overall success of policy. The relationship and nature of the interactions leads to the educator's experience of policy, which in turn influences the educator's perception. Moynihan et al. (2014, p. 46) state that "the impact of burdens depends upon on how individuals construe the world, not on objective measures of costs and benefits", and further explain that contextual factors, and cognitive processes and biases, are an important variable to consider when assessing the impact or success of policy.

Interpretation of policy. Similar to the viewpoint of Moynihan et al., (2014) above, Spillane, Reiser & Reimer (2002) also suggest that successful implementation of policy reform is influenced largely by an individual's understanding of the reform initiatives. By this, the 'individual' is the person responsible for implementing the policy. Although closely related, Moynihan et al.'s., (2014) idea centres on policy success being influenced by a person's *experience* with the policy and government, and Spillane et al.'s. (2002) viewpoint focuses on a person's *cognitive understanding* of the policy.

Spillane et al. (2002) developed a framework called the *cognitive framework of human sense-making*. The framework explains three key aspects or variables that influence a person's understanding or 'cognition' of policy: the individual's experience and beliefs; an individual's situation or context; and lastly the role that external representations of the policy play (being policy stimuli such as documentation, legislation, resource materials etc.) (Spillane et al., 2002; Virant & Kovač, 2010). This framework was not intended to be used as an alternative to existing models of policy implementation, but developed to explain "the way that natural sense-making

processes can lead to ... challenges observed in reform efforts” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 389). In this study, their framework has been used to explain how variables present in the research findings influence the educator’s experience of administrative burden.

The three aspects identified by Spillane et al. (2002) parallel the three factors that influence perception discussed in the literature review. Therefore, in this study an educator’s *perception* is also understood to be their *interpretation* of policy. Like perception, research in policy implementation and understanding lies in the field of psychology. The focus now shifts from a general understanding of perception to a deeper study of the cognitive processes used by individuals when making sense of policy requirements. As explained by Spillane et al. (2002, p. 391), “sense-making is not a simple decoding of the policy message; in general, the process of comprehension is an active process of interpretation that draws on the individual’s rich knowledge base of understandings, beliefs and attitudes”.

The first aspect or variable influencing cognition is *individual cognition*, which relates to “how individuals notice and interpret stimuli and how prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences influence construction of new understandings” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 388). This can also be viewed as aspects of the ‘perceiver’, which influences perception (CiteMan Network, 2008; Hiriya, 2008).

With *individual cognition*, an educator’s experience, beliefs and knowledge “about how the world works, serve as a lens influencing what [is noticed] in the environment and how the stimuli that are noticed are processed, encoded, organised and subsequently interpreted” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 394). The cognitive processes here relate to Piaget’s theory of accommodation and assimilation (McLeod, 2015), whereby people take in new information by matching it to existing, known information and adjusting their existing knowledge when incongruence is encountered (Marneffe & Vereck, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002). People tend to look at new information or stimuli and quickly assess it for similarities with the ‘known’ (Spillane et al., 2002). This aids in accessing and retrieving information from stored memory (Spillane et al., 2002). For this reason, sound policy design should supplement, not supplant existing policy in an area to assist with successful implementation (Spillane et al., 2002). This aspect also relates to variables identified in Table 6.

The Australian Government’s reform of ECEC and introduction of the NQF has not introduced any dramatically new information. Prior to the NQF, ECEC services worked with a system similar to that of the NQS, where they had 10 Quality Areas (compared to seven with the current NQS) (Rowe, Tainton, & Taylor, 2006). While the

content itself is not different, the structure of the newer NQS has altered, with quality areas being integrated and streamlined (Rowe et al., 2006). The caution with policy and documents being similar to the previous system is that “ideas may seem more familiar than they actually are” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 397). On the surface, the content may seem familiar to educators and as they read through they are not drawn to new knowledge or “features that violate expectations” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 398) that capture their attention. What this means for educators is that they need to actively and consciously spend time reading and reflecting on content of policy stimuli, and restructure their existing knowledge base or framework of understanding (Marneffe & Vereeck, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002). This adds an element of administrative burden in the form of learning costs (Moynihan et al., 2014).

The second element identified by Spillane et al., (2002) as influencing an individual’s interpretation of policy is *situated cognition*, which addresses “how knowledge, embedded in social contexts as the practices and common beliefs of a community, affects sense-making and action” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 404). This is also the second aspect that influences perception, the environment or situation (CiteMan Network, 2008; Hiriyappa, 2008) and relates to Table 9 discussed previously. By this, educators draw on the collective knowledge and experience of their colleagues within their particular service, and that of peers within the field of ECEC. This collective knowledge is gathered and shared during collegial discussions and, as individual insights are raised, questioned. The group together then form a common understanding. In this way, however, “the meaning of policy messages shifts with local contexts” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 406) as each group of individuals will perceive policy in a different way, and the most relevant and pressing needs of their context may influence their collective perception of policy requirements and messages (Marneffe & Vereeck, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002).

Within *situated cognition*, Spillane et al. (2002, p. 407) highlight the importance of ‘enactment zones’, defined as “spaces where the world of policy meets the world of practice”. For a policy to be successfully implemented, three features must be evident within the setting. The first is that the setting, in this case the service, must be collegial and not individualistic. All educators must work as a team and have a shared common goal for improvements. Secondly, influenced by the first facet, there must be rich discussion among the group regarding the policy messages and their relation to practice. Thirdly, the service setting must include materials such as policy documents, examples and templates to support collegial discussion and understanding (Spillane et al., 2002). The development and implementation of a QIP requires all three of these

'enactment zones' to take place within a service. This also relates to the findings of this study, where the largest influence on the burden experienced is based on situational factors such as collegiality, networking, administrative support and training.

The final element of Spillane et al.'s (2002) framework explores "the role of external representations [of policy] in the sense-making process" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 389), called *representations* of policy. Again, this relates to the 'target' in the formation of perception (CiteMan Network, 2008; Hiriyappa, 2008) and Table 10 previously introduced. It is in this aspect of sense-making that the language used in policy (and supporting materials) is important "because it frames the way people understand their world" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 407). If the language used is too specific, policy failure is feasible as it runs the risk of not being accessible or inclusive of the audience (in this case all ECEC contexts or service types). If the language is too general, it risks the audience creating broad and varied interpretations of the policy message (Spillane et al., 2002). This supports earlier discussion of the NQF review, where it was acknowledged that "documents expressed in broad terms can be helpful to give flexibility but can be difficult to understand" (ACECQA, 2015, p. 61). As mentioned in the paragraph on *individual cognition*, people tend to look at stimuli in terms of searching for similarities to the known and familiar (Spillane et al., 2002), which means that they may often miss new or deeper understandings of content within the policy.

When considering the data from both theoretical frameworks, a working theory emerges. The administrative burden experienced by ECEC educators in developing and implementing the QIP can be identified in terms of *costs* (*learning, compliance* and *psychological costs*). The impact of the costs (burden), is related to (at least) one, two or all three factors of policy interpretation (*individual cognition, situational cognition, and cognition of policy representations*). It is further suggested that the administrative burden experienced is directly related to *situational cognition* in every instance. The level or degree of the costs experienced in turn influences the impact of the burden on ECEC educator's personal and professional life (the ripple-effect).

Relationship between theory and the research. Firstly, the 'individual cognition' recognised by Spillane et al. (2002) is identified in this research study as *educator cognition*. Applied to this study, *educator cognition* relates to the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and experience of the educators who participated. Educators have minimal control over their individual attributes, such as beliefs and experience. They may have control over the range of role-experience they have, but the length of time they have worked in the industry is what it is, nothing more, nothing less.

The *situational cognition* (Spillane et al., 2002) here refers to the characteristics of the service and the environment that the participants work in. Characteristics considered include the size of the service, access to additional resources and assistance (internally and externally), the role and responsibilities of the participants within their service, and the service's assessment and rating status. Educators in the research study have no control over the context of their workplace. They can choose to undertake employment within the setting; however, unless they are the approved provider (the employer) they have limited control over the size and location of the service, as well as employment of others or the expenditure of finances in accessing additional support.

The third and last component of Spillane et al's. (2002) cognitive framework is the external representation of policy, or *policy stimuli*. In this study, the external representations of policy are the tools and resources that educators use as well as the interaction they have with external agencies responsible for the development and implementation of the NQF. This includes ACECQA, the regulatory authorities and any additional providers of support such as training institutions, and consultants (ACECQA, 2015). For application to this research, this has been termed *policy stimuli* (Spillane et al., 2002). Educators have no control over the policy, legislative documents or resources they were provided with to implement the NQF. These were developed and made available to educators by the Council of Australian Government's representative body, ACECQA (ACECQA, n.d.-b).

The three *costs* of administrative burden identified by Moynihan et al. (2014) and Spillane et al's. (2002) cognitive framework are not exclusive but interrelated ideas. The three components of Spillane et al's., (2002) cognitive framework are essentially out of the control of an individual person (without a significant personal or professional change in circumstances). Educators do, however, have control over the impact of costs, or the burden they experience.

Educators have control of their actions, behaviours, and management of their time. They can control how much time they spend using the NQF resource kit, for example. This may include accessing, reading, reflecting, jotting notes or discussing the resource with colleagues. The *costs* are based on the perception and experience of the burden evident in the research data, as to educator's expenditure in terms of time, effort and emotion, not costs in a traditional financial sense.

Applied to this research, learning costs refer to the expenditure of time and effort to locate and read policy materials, attend professional learning, network and/or engage with others to learn and understand requirements. Compliance costs in this

context refer to expenditure of time and effort related to activities such as preparation and ongoing documentation of the QIP and other evidence required for the assessment and rating visit. Psychological costs apply in this research context to the human expenditure of time, effort and emotion perceived by participants when engaged in activities related to the preparation and ongoing documentation of the QIP and other evidence required for the assessment and rating visit.

As a further example, educator cognition, or an individual's beliefs, experience, attitude and knowledge, could influence the degree to which an educator experiences each cost. It is likely that an educator new to the profession would experience more learning costs (time taken to read documentation), psychological costs (such as stress), or compliance costs (time taken to complete written documentation), than an educator with years of practice. This is apparent in Molly and Claire's experience, where Claire states:

Claire: At the start when I became 2IC it was more just because Molly was away a lot, she needed to help me, and for her to help me that meant staying back, that was fine.

Molly: We were easily pulling 12-hour days more often than not. But when you're starting out, and trying to get yourself into a routine and getting your head around where everything is and trying to change things around a bit ...

and:

Claire: ... sometimes you don't get that time during the day, but both of us would stay back and discuss things or she'll teach me how to do things on a Sunday or like, not that we recommend doing things out of hours, but when it's necessary, it's necessary. If that means that I'm going to have a smoother week when Molly's not there then I'd much rather come in on a Sunday and do it. Rather than sitting here and pulling my hair out for the rest of the week. And that makes a difference for the girls ...

Likewise, the context in which an educator works, or situational cognition, could influence the amount of psychological costs, learning costs or compliance costs experienced. Here, factors such as the size of the service, the level of access the service may have to additional support structures, individual roles and responsibilities are variables to consider. Also, the policy stimuli, or availability and range of tools and resources accessible, could impact on the degree to which an educator experiences psychological costs, learning costs or compliance costs. This can be seen in Janelle's examples, compared to Kathy's. Both had sister services, yet only one had support from a central office that arranged networking opportunities, internal training, had enough

staff to ensure clear role responsibilities and time for administrative duties to be performed.

Applying research data to the framework. The research data can be explained in terms of this framework. In considering the data, elements of Spillane et al's. (2002) cognitive framework can be mapped against, or compared to the three administrative burden costs. The following example illustrates how an aspect of the NQF implementation links to the framework.

As part of the NQF implementation, all educators in relevant services were provided with the *National Quality Framework Resource Kit* (ACECQA, n.d.-b). The resource kit is a physical, external representation of the policy (more than 500 pages of interrelated content). When educators were provided with the resource kit, they were given the *policy stimuli*. This in turn caused a reaction within educators. If the resource kit was new and unfamiliar to educators, *learning costs* would have been encountered, as educators would need to spend time reading and learning the new content, layout and structure of the information within. This in turn may have stimulated *psychological costs*, as the educator may not have the time, support, desire or confidence in their skills to learn the new material. The time now required to focus attention and energy in learning and understanding the resource kit and how it applies to regulated requirements for developing a QIP, may add elements of *compliance costs* to the educator's experience. Over time, as the initial burden (from newness) is lightened, and educators become familiar and confident with the documents, the policy stimuli becomes less of a cause for all three types of costs experienced. Using this construct, the impact of the burden can be represented, while accounting for the identified educator, situation and external policy variables.

Table 11 demonstrates how each of the *six core categories* identified in the data (see Chapter 5) relate to the two identified frameworks. Core categories and any identified sub-categories are listed within each aspect of the costs of administrative burden, and related element of the cognitive framework.

Table 11

Summary table showing how the core categories (and sub-categories) fit with the identified theoretical frameworks

		Moynihan et al's. (2014) Costs of administrative burden		
		<u>Psychological costs</u>	<u>Learning costs</u>	<u>Compliance costs</u>
Spillane et al's. (2002) Cognitive framework	Individual cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stress Educator experience (<i>role responsibilities, mindset</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality Improvement Plans (<i>critical reflection</i>) Educator experience (<i>background</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experience (<i>role responsibilities</i>) Information obligations (<i>regulatory compliance</i>)
	Situational cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support structures (<i>collegial support, non-contact time</i>) Experience (<i>role responsibilities, mindset</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support structures (<i>collegial support, meetings and networking, training and consultancy, physical resources</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality Improvement Plans (<i>service type/size</i>) Support structures (<i>physical resources, non-contact time</i>)
	Cognition of policy representations (policy stimuli)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality Improvement Plans (<i>documenting information</i>) Quality rating process (<i>ratings, notification and regulatory officers valuing evidence</i>) Information obligations (<i>programming and documenting children's learning</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality Improvement Plans (<i>documentation</i>) Educator experience (<i>background</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality Improvement Plans (<i>documenting information</i>) Quality rating process (<i>regulatory officers</i>) Support structures (<i>physical resources</i>) Information obligations (<i>regulatory compliance</i>)

Validation of the theoretical framework. In this investigation, the proposed theoretical framework (working theory) identified is that the cost of administrative burden is related to at least one factor of policy interpretation (situational cognition). Furthermore, the degree of the costs experienced, influences the impact of the burden on ECEC educators' personal and professional life (the ripple-effect).

Additional data was collected and examined to provide further evidence for the appropriateness of the theoretical framework. It was anticipated that to prove the framework identified, each additional service setting would indicate a burden (psychological, learning and compliance costs) on the educators, which is *influenced or caused by situational factors*. This was proven, with the educators who participated demonstrating they experienced all three costs associated with the burden, due mainly to variables in their workplace context.

Furthermore, the settings chosen for further data collection included a small setting (one provider, one service) and a large setting (one provider, multiple services). These settings were purposively selected to ascertain whether there was a connection between *provider size* and the *burden experienced* that could be attributed to administrative support, and support within the service context. This was disproven in the interviews held; and, as stated earlier, further exploration of this is warranted to identify trends.

In summary, the core categories identified in the data are linked through six common themes. Three of these six themes relate to theory in behavioural economics, while the remaining three relate to theory in psychology. Using a behavioural economic framework, the administrative burden experienced can be categorised into psychological, learning and compliance costs. Using a psychological framework based on human cognition, factors relating to individual educators, their workplace context and interaction with policy can account for the level of burden experienced by ECEC educators. From the findings and theoretical framework identified, the research objective can be answered. The following chapter will provide a conclusive answer to the research questions and provide recommendations based on these conclusions.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter will review the aim of the research by summarising each research question. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations will be provided for further research and consideration of administrative burden in the field of early childhood education and care.

Research Objective

The aim of this investigation was to identify the impact and compounded impact of administrative burden that ECEC educators (and therefore, services) experience when developing a Quality Improvement Plan, and the relationship of this to role-identity. The study sought to understand the impact of the QIPs burden from the perspective of ECEC educators responsible for its development and implementation. Firstly, the research explored educator perceptions of their role in developing their service's QIP. Secondly, the study identified how educators perceived or experienced the administrative burden, and whether the burden was the same across small, medium or large service providers. Lastly, the ripple-effect of the perceived burden on the professional and personal lives of educators was examined to ascertain if there was an unforeseen, compounded impact of the QIPs burden.

How do educators perceive their role in developing the QIP and implementing identified goals?

To answer this question, the concept of role-identity was examined in relation to ECEC educators. The burden impacts on an educator's role-identity in that, as the degree of burden experienced increases, the psychological wellbeing and self-esteem of educators decreases. Psychological wellbeing and self-esteem (feelings of self-worth, competence and authenticity) are linked to positive role-identity.

The purposive sampling method employed in the study ensured that all participants held the role of centre manager. As such, all educators were responsible for the development and implementation of their service's QIP. Qualitative interviewing using an interview guide ensured that participants had time to reflect on the types of questions they would be asked in relation to their role in developing the QIP. Findings showed that educators felt the QIP was their sole responsibility to develop and enact as part of their role as centre manager; however, they also felt it required a collaborative, team effort to develop and implement. While educators expressed these beliefs, findings identified factors that impacted on their role in carrying out their 'ideal' perception of the QIP's collaborative development and implementation. Situational

factors such as support structures available to educators impacted on the time and resources required for educators to produce their ideal, collaborative service QIP.

Furthermore, the context of each workplace influenced educator perception of their role in general. Findings showed that the role of centre manager within ECEC services was defined and recognised by day-to-day responsibilities associated with the role (the role prototype), rather than the official title in some instances. Findings further demonstrated that where this was the case, there was a recognised role-ambiguity and/or role-overload. This role-ambiguity, caused by situational factors, was shown to strongly influence educator perception of the administrative burden addressed in the second research question.

How do educators perceive the administrative burden related to the development and implementation of the QIP?

Overall, all participants perceived an administration burden related to the QIP, and the quality rating process that drives its development and implementation. For this reason, the burden with the quality rating process was investigated in this study, as the two are closely linked.

Various facets of the administrative burden were explored to determine what may be causing the burden, and what the impact of the burden is on educators. The findings and subsequent discussion found that causes of the administrative burden exist within six core categories. These included aspects of educator experience; information obligations; the quality rating process; Quality Improvement Plans; and support structures available to educators. A result of the burden perceived from these categories was educator stress, again confirmed using representative quotations from the data. The research data exposed two themes present within the six core categories, identified through constant comparison and theoretical saturation.

Three variables were found to influence educator's understanding of the QIP and assessment and rating (A&R). These were educator cognition; the policy stimuli; and situational cognition. The findings suggest that situational cognition, or factors within an educator's service setting, strongly influence the degree to which an administrative burden is perceived. Educators within service settings with high levels of collegiality; clear roles and responsibilities; networking opportunities; positive and effective administrative support; and access to training and resources experienced less of an administrative burden related to the QIP and A&R.

This study has demonstrated that the identified burden can be explained in terms of costs. Developing and implementing a QIP, initially for the purpose of

assessment and rating, has been shown to burden educators in three areas: psychological costs, learning costs and compliance costs. The degree to which these costs impact on educators depends on several variables, unique to each educator, and notably includes situational cognition.

Qualitative interviewing has revealed that the degree of impact, or cost of the administrative burden, is dependent on the educator's interpretation of the policy requirements. This interpretation is influenced by characteristics unique to each individual, such as their experience; the policy stimuli itself, being their interpretation of documents, for example; and most significantly, the situation and context of the workplace environment.

Is the burden the same across different service types? Originally, the second part of this research question was intended to compare the administrative burden between different service types such as long day care (LDC), family day care (FDC) and outside school hours care (OSHC). These three service types all implemented the NQF at the same time, yet are very different contextually. The process of constant comparison identified variables in services of the *same type* (e.g. LDC) that were impacting on the administrative burden perceived, such as the amount of non-contact time available to educators and staffing numbers, due to enrolments. Following this, the administrative burden perceived was compared across *small, medium and large service types* operating a LDC or LDC/OSHC combined, to ascertain if larger services provided support systems for educators that reduced or lessened the administrative burden identified. Adjusting the scope to small, medium or large service types, enriched the data gathered, with a narrower focus on the types of issues experienced in these services.

Overall, educators from all service types (small, medium and large) perceived an administrative burden related to the QIP. Educators within small services demonstrated a higher perceived level of burden due to situational factors related to their service size. Educators in small services were more likely to perceive a higher level of administrative burden, due to limited support structures such as collegial support; availability of networking opportunities; access to training and consultancy; physical resources; and non-contact time. Additional data exposed further evidence of situational factors, such as a lack of organisational systems and leadership, that added to the burden for educators in larger services that did have access to these support structures.

Answering the first two research questions confirmed that there is a perceived administrative burden related to the QIP, and identified aspects that influenced the

perceived burden. This in turn allowed the third research question to be answered, which is how educators perceived any ongoing, compounded impact of the burden.

How do educators perceive the ripple-effect of the administrative burden on their personal and professional lives?

The data collected and analysed using grounded theory methodology showed that the administrative burden experienced by educators impacted on their professional and personal life. The level of compounded burden was directly related to how educators perceived and experienced their role (role-identity). The largest factor contributing to the burden experienced was role-ambiguity and role-overload, caused by situational factors within services.

Educators expressed working extra hours and taking work and 'stress' home. Representative quotations demonstrated that stress from the quality rating process contributed to symptoms of emotional and physical burnout.

Overall, the findings consolidate that an administrative burden is experienced by ECEC educators, acknowledged by the Australian Government's review of the implementation of the National Quality Framework. This study has demonstrated how the administrative burden experienced by educators can be explained in terms of psychological, learning and compliance costs and that educator cognition, interactions with policy stimuli and, notably situational cognition, influence the degree of burden experienced by educators. Furthermore, the findings identified that there is an ongoing, compounded impact of the administrative burden on educators, particularly those who experience role-ambiguity and in some instances a role-overload in their professional life (influenced by situational factors), that in turn impacts on their personal life.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has identified causes and costs (i.e. the impact) of the administrative burden related to the QIP and the quality rating process. The findings will directly benefit educators, service providers, regulatory authorities, governing bodies and policymakers in the field of ECEC. Therefore, the following recommendations are of relevance for consideration in further research.

The first is for promotion of collegiality and networking between ECEC services. The findings showed that peer sharing and collegiality were key to educators identifying strengths and weaknesses in service delivery, and to a shared understanding of the NQF (interpretation of policy messages). Ideally, services that achieve high ratings would provide a model of practice for other such services; however, this is not feasible in the current ECEC environment where 46% (ACECQA,

2016b) of services are 'private for profit'. Businesses could not be expected to open their doors and share their policy, practices and procedures with their competition. Educators, however, need the time and opportunity to access professional networks, to develop their shared knowledge and understanding of the NQF. Teachers in Western Australia, for example, are required to register with the Teacher Registration Board in order to be employed, and this includes early childhood teachers (ECTs) who work within long day care services (Government of Western Australia, 2017). To maintain registration, every five years teachers must demonstrate and record their professional learning, and currently the requirement is for teachers to demonstrate that they have participated in 80-100 hours of additional learning that enhances their knowledge, practice and competencies (Government of Western Australia, 2017). Further research could examine whether a similar system could be introduced for educators within the field of ECEC, who hold undergraduate level qualifications to meet a minimum requirement of professional learning. A focus of the professional learning could include collegiality and networking opportunities.

Based on the findings, a second recommendation for further exploration is the impact of an increased number of regulatory officers. The government implemented changes to the assessment and rating process (streamlining documentation for assessors and the timeline for visits), to increase the speed of services being rated (Education Council, 2014). While this has benefited the sector with more services being rated, it has possibly unintentionally contributed to the administrative burden experienced by educators. This study has shown that the quality rating process assists educators in understanding and interpreting the NQS effectively, as the interactions take place within their service setting, assisting services to address issues unique to their service environment. Increasing the number of regulatory officers could offer an opportunity for regulatory authorities to consult with services, without the pressure of a quality rating visit. Findings from this study show the positive effect of direct feedback to educators during the quality rating visits and this could assist educator interpretation of the NQS, from those responsible for moderating it. It would provide an opportunity for educators to interact with the policy directly (policy stimuli), assessors could form relationships with services and, as stated by Molly, "unless they're going to do it more often and take an average then it's not really giving you an appropriate reflection". This could reduce the burden experienced with the quality rating process; lessen the 'need' educators feel to collect unnecessary evidence; and validate opinions of how accurately ratings reflect service quality.

A final recommendation for further research is a study into role-ambiguity experienced by educators in the ECEC field. Evident in the findings of this research is that role-ambiguity exists in the industry, and there is a direct increase in the pressure and burden experienced based on an educator's level of role-ambiguity. While the NQF has increased the professionalism of the ECEC workforce, it is still an industry that lacks the remuneration and work conditions of educators within school systems. A study into the various roles that ECEC educators occupy as part of their employment may lead to clearer role definitions, and a salary suited to the duties of each role. It may also lead to further resourcing for services whose educators experience role-ambiguity or overload based on situational factors out of their control.

Further research is warranted to ascertain trends in the situational and contextual landscape of the ECEC field, on a larger scale than covered in this study. In order for the Australian Government to explore further policy, regulation or legislative changes that may reduce the burden on educators and services, a deeper understanding of the variables at play within service settings is required. Without addressing these, any policy changes run the risk of failure, as these factors influence the educators' (who implement the policy) understanding or interpretation of the message. Without addressing situational factors, those who are presently unfairly burdened with administrative requirements, compared to their peers, will continue to be burdened. This defeats the purpose of policy, which is to benefit the people that the government serves.

The purpose of the National Quality Framework was to enable the Council of Australian Governments to deliver the vision of the *Early Childhood Development Strategy* (COAG, 2009) that "by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves, and for the nation" (COAG, 2008, p. 3). To achieve this, the focus of policy might be better suited to identifying and addressing the needs of educators as individuals, working within services, rather than the needs of services. This study has demonstrated that it is the educators who are the key instruments to policy success (as the implementers of policy) and their success is hindered or enhanced by factors within their service. It is the educators within the field of early childhood education and care, those 'on-the-floor' with the children, who will ultimately contribute to children having the best start in life.

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Every reasonable effort has been made to acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.

Appendix A

Participant Information Statement

HREC Project Number:	HRE2016-0084
Project Title:	ECEC Educator perspectives on the QIP administrative burden.
Principal Investigator:	Professor Rob Cavanagh
Student researcher:	Deborah Bullock
Version Number:	1
Version Date:	May 2016

What is the Project About?

- In 2012, the Australian Government mandated implementation of a National Quality Framework (NQF) for services providing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), with the first review of its implementation conducted in 2014.
- Findings of the review recommended policy changes due to an ‘administrative and regulatory burden’ on services when developing a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).
- This research aims to identify how the QIP affects Educators personally and professionally, from the perspective of those responsible for its development and implementation.
- The study seeks to understand the impact of the QIP’s administrative burden on an Educators role within their service, and family life.
- The project seeks to ascertain if there are any ‘ripple-effects’ of this burden on Educators that transfer into their professional and personal life.
- People who have developed a QIP will be invited to take part in this research. This could include an approved provider, director/coordinator or educator (hereby referred to as ‘educators’).
- Educators from Long Day Care, Family Day Care and Outside Schools Hours Services will be invited to participate.

Who is doing the Research?

- The project is being conducted by Deborah Bullock as part of her Master of Philosophy thesis.
- This project is supervised by Professor Rob Cavanagh (PhD, Professor of well-being metrics) and Dr Sharon Davies who holds a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education, (Hons)) and a PhD.
- There will be no costs to you and you will not be paid for participating in this project.

Why am I being asked to take part and what will I have to do?

- You have been asked to take part because you work in an ECEC service and have experience with developing a Quality Improvement Plan.
- Your participation will involve:
 1. Participating in an interview.
 - The interview should take no more than 1 hour, and will be arranged for a time that is suitable to you.
 - With your consent, I will make a digital audio recording during interviews so I can concentrate on what you have to say and we are not distracted with taking notes. After the interview I will make a full written copy of the recording. You will be invited to review the transcription to ensure all the information is correct.
 - There may be a need for a single follow-up interview if more information is required; however this will be discussed and negotiated with you.
 - I will ask you questions that focus on attitudes, processes and practices related to the QIP.
 - You will be provided with the questions prior to the interview.
 2. Agreeing to an informal observation.
 - Observations will be for the purpose of understanding any processes, direct Educator interaction (verbal/non-verbal) used within your setting relating to the development or implementation of the QIP.
 3. Allowing an examination of documents in your setting.
 - Documents such as QIPs, policies, newsletters, meeting minutes, checklists, evaluation reports, and promotional material displayed could provide information relevant to the study.

Are there any benefits to being in the research project?

- There may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this research.
- Sometimes, people appreciate the opportunity to discuss their opinions on the subject in question.
- I hope the results of this research will assist policy-makers and stakeholders in Early Childhood Education and Care to understand any on-going impact of the National Quality Framework implementation.

Are there any risks, side-effects, discomforts or inconveniences from being in the research project?

- There are no foreseeable risks from this research project.
- Apart from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any risks or inconveniences associated with taking part in this study.

Who will have access to my information?

- The information collected in this research will be re-identifiable (coded). This means that I will remove identifying information on any data or sample and replace it with a code. Only the research team have access to the code to match your name if it is necessary to do so. Any information collected will be treated as confidential and used only in this project unless otherwise specified. The following people will have access to the information we collect in this research: the research team and the Curtin University Ethics Committee.
- Electronic data will be stored in Curtin University's secure Research Drive and hard copy data (including audio tapes and field notes etc.) will be in locked storage at Curtin University. Only the Research team will have access to the locked storage.
- The information I collect in this study will be kept under secure conditions at Curtin University for 7 years after the research has ended and then it will be destroyed in accordance with Records Disposal Guidelines.
- You have the right to access, and request correction of, your information in accordance with relevant privacy laws.
- The results of this research may be presented at conferences or published in professional journals. You, or your Service will not be identified in any results that are published or presented.

Will you tell me the results of the research?

- I will write to all participants at the end of the research (in about 12 months) and let you know the results of the research.
- Results will not be individual but based on all the information I collect and review as part of the research.
- Individuals and Services will not be identified.

Do I have to take part in the research project?

- Taking part in the research project is voluntary. It is your choice to take part or not. You do not have to agree if you do not want to.
- If you decide to take part and then change your mind, that is okay, you can withdraw from the project. You do not have to give me a reason; just tell me that you want to stop. Please let me know you want to stop so I can make sure you are aware of anything that needs to be done in order for you to withdraw safely.
- If you choose not to take part, or start and then stop the study, it will not affect your relationship with the University.
- If you choose to leave the study, I will use any information collected unless you tell me not to.

What happens next and who can I contact about the research?

- If you have any further questions related to this research, please contact:

Professor Rob Cavanagh (PhD)	Dr Sharon Davies	Deborah Bullock
School of Education Curtin University Kent St Bentley, WA, 6102	School of Education Curtin University Kent St Bentley, WA, 6102	School of Education Curtin University Kent St Bentley, WA, 6102
P: (08) 9266 2162 R.Cavanagh@exchange.curtin.edu.au	P: (08) 9266 5850 Sharon.Davies@curtin.edu.au	P: 0408 810 057 Deborah.Bullock@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

- If you decide to take part in this research we will ask you to sign the consent form.
 - By signing, it is telling me that you understand what you have read and what has been discussed.
 - Signing the consent indicates that you agree to be in the research project and have the information used as described.
 - Please take your time and ask any questions you have before you decide what to do.
 - You will be given a copy of this information and the consent form to keep.
- All research in Australia involving humans is reviewed by an independent group of people called a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The ethical aspects of this research project have been approved by the Curtin University HREC. This project will be carried out according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). If you have any concerns and/or complaints about the project, the way it is being conducted or your rights as a research participant, and would like to speak to someone independent of the project, please contact: The Curtin University Ethics Committee by telephoning 9266 2784 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Consent Form

HREC Project Number:	HRE2016-0084
Project Title:	ECEC Educator perspectives on the QIP administrative burden.
Principal Investigator:	Professor Rob Cavanagh
Student researcher:	Deborah Bullock
Version Number:	1
Version Date:	May 2016

- I have read the information statement version listed above and I understand its contents.
- I believe I understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of my involvement in this project.
- I voluntarily consent to take part in this research project.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.
- I understand that this project has been approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and will be carried out in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014.
- I understand I will receive a copy of this Information Statement and Consent Form.

Participant Name		
Preferred email		Contact number:
Participant Signature		
Date		

I do I do not consent to being audio-recorded

Declaration by researcher: I have supplied an Information Letter and Consent Form to the participant who has signed above, and believe that they understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of their involvement in this project.

Researcher Name	Deborah Bullock
Researcher Signature	
Date	

Please return the signed consent form to:
Email: deborah.bullock@postgrad.curtin.edu.au (please attach your scanned, signed consent form)
Post: Deborah Bullock
C/O Dr Sharon Davies
Curtin University
School of Education (Building 501)
Kent Street
Bentley, WA, 6102

Appendix B

Interview Guide

These are the types of questions that you may be asked during the interview.

1. Tell me a little about yourself. What roles and experience do you have at work, and in life? What the best or most challenging aspect of your role?
2. Tell me about your experience with Quality Improvement Plans (QIP), (e.g. how many have you prepared? How do you explain the QIP to others? How do you feel about the process?)
3. Tell me about your experience with the Assessment and Rating (A&R) process. Would you say your experience with A&Rs (either the visit or preparation for the visit) is positive or negative? Why?
4. If you could change anything about the QIP, what would it be? Why?
5. What impact do you think the QIP has on you as an Educator, and other people you work with? Why?
6. When developing the QIP, how did you gather the facts you needed? Where did you seek the information from? How would you compare your knowledge in this area to those of your colleagues?
7. Which quality areas did you find were easier or more difficult to document in the QIP? Why?
8. What was it about this/these quality area(s) that led you to seek a lot of information?
9. How does the burden of the QIP affect your professional life? How does it affect your personal life? Why? What makes you say/feel that?
10. What would it look/feel/sound like at work/home if there was no administrative burden with the QIP?

Observation Guide

Observations are a useful method of collecting information related to the study. This method of data collection aims to examine behaviours employed by ECEC Educators when planning and discussing QIP development with colleagues.

The focus of the observations will be the behaviour of the Educator (the research participant only). This may include actions, gestures, interactions and delivery of information related to the QIP. This may be with colleagues in the Service. The setting, other Educators in the Service, activities and conversations will also be noted, if relevant to the purpose of the study. No names or identifiable information will be recorded to ensure anonymity.

This will involve short written observations only. All data from observations will remain strictly confidential and anonymous.

Document Review

This will involve the researcher having access to written documentation relating to the Educator's development of the QIP.

This may include such things as the QIP, minutes of meetings (related to the QIP, that may give an indication of time spent discussing the QIP), information shared with families related to the QIP or documents that Educators use when planning and developing their QIP.

The purpose of this data collection is to gain an insight into the time, amount of information documented, and used in relation to the QIP. No information that identifies the Service or Educators will be recorded to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.