Concerns And Strategies Regarding The Issues Of Accountability And Quality Practices For ECEC

Leadership and advocacy within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings involves leaders to provide high-quality and effective programs (Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd, 2018). With regards to leadership and advocacy, this essay will outline the issues and concerns of accountability within ECEC practices. This will be explored through highlighting what accountability and quality practices is conceptualised within ECEC settings with links to theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, my values and beliefs as a future educator will be identified through outlining my concerns and strategies regarding the issues of accountability and quality practices for ECEC.

Leadership within ECEC is identified as an educator's professional responsibility to provide and implement quality, effective and meaningful practices (Waniganayake et al., 2018). Additionally, leadership as a professional responsibility involves educators being held accountable with regards to meeting legislative frameworks and relevant standards to provide quality education and care for children, families, the community and governments (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2004; Waniganayake et al., 2018). Accountability within early childhood is based on the assumption that the workload leaders encounter is too complex to be controlled and therefore implies that leaders should be held accountable of making decisions regarding the educational needs of the children in their care (Barblett, 2000; Waniganayake et al., 2018). Additionally, accountability is noted as a multi-faceted issue that educators need to address directly to provide a quality ECEC setting (Barblett, 2000). According to Barblett (2000), leaders need to be aware of the current trends within ECEC so that all children's needs in their care are catered for in an appropriate, quality and meaningful way. Within everyday practices, accountability is identified as a legitimate and required aspect of providing quality education for young children (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2004). Therefore, it is imperative that leaders critically consider and apply their accountabilities with connections to their environment, their vision of quality practice and their personal professional philosophy (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2004).

Providing quality ECEC requires leaders and educators to understand and meet the legal and professional requirements for which they are held accountable for (Waniganayake et al., 2018). Within early childhood education, there has been an ongoing international debate about the exact meaning of what quality is and therefore has been identified as an ongoing issue of accountability in ECEC (Cottle & Alexander, 2012; Tanner et al., 2006). According to Moss and Pence (1994) there are two ways to define what quality is, one being descriptive and the other being evaluative. The descriptive meaning of quality refers to quality being used to examine, describe and be aware of what makes something the way it is (Moss & Pence, 1994). In the lens of an early childhood service, this definition is applied as a holistic approach where the distinctive and unique characteristics of a centre is what defines the overall quality of the service (Moss & Pence, 1994). The evaluative meaning of quality focusses on how well an early childhood centre performs with a more specific focus being based on if the centre is meeting the goals and objectives outlined (Moss & Pence, 1994). With regards to the definitions of descriptive and evaluative, they both complement each other when labelling a service as being good quality (Moss & Pence, 1994). In addition, quality reflects the values, beliefs, needs and empowerment of leaders who are in power and is held accountable for how the EC setting is

constructed (Moss & Pence, 1994). Therefore, accountabilities within ECEC plays an important role in supporting the provision of quality education for young children to assist in promoting an inclusive practice that caters for their rights, interests, development and well-being (Waniganayake et al., 2018).

Quality practices within ECEC settings is conceptualised as being a powerful tool in controlling, governing and managing the performance and overall outcomes of children in care (Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2013). In terms of leadership and advocacy, it is identified that leaders are the advocates of providing high quality education which assures high quality outcomes for all children within the centre (Waniganayake et al., 2018). Additionally, Waniganayake et al., (2018) outlines that leaders who demonstrate effective management skills can provide children, their families, the government and the community with quality and meaningful practices. Effective management involves governance, financial management, community engagement, pedagogy, leadership, advocacy and careful planning (Waniganayake et al., 2018). Governance within ECEC organisations is recgonised as a critical aspect in providing quality practices by leaders being held accountable to take on decision-making responsibilities whilst acknowledging the management structures, procedures and policies set in place by the government (Waniganayake et al., 2018).

In addition to governance, Waniganayake et al., (2018) mentions that intentional leaders position their accountabilities with links to policies and procedures within the context to influence the quality setting they are striving to be. It is also outlined by Waniganayake et al., (2018) that intentional leaders achieve their accountabilities by acknowledging their vision, philosophy, community and the needs and interests of the children and families they are working with. Additionally, educators who act as an intentional leader are identified as being confident in their decision-making skills and can confidently collaborate with others to achieve collective goals (Hard, Press & Gibson, 2013). With reference to a critical theory lens, intentional leaders play an important role in ECEC settings as they focus their accountabilities on creating an inclusive environment and providing opportunities for children and families (Hard et al., 2013). Such leadership in EC education involves positional and distributed elements of leadership, articulation of values and beliefs, and careful decisions that provide respect to others and influence high quality practices (Hard et al., 2013). Therefore, it is imperative that leaders within ECEC develop a conceptual understanding of the professional, regulatory and legal requirements of which they are held accountable for as well as are aware of their roles to provide a quality and meaningful environment for children (Hard et al., 2013; Waniganayake et al., 2018).

With regards to high quality, ECEC settings have been influenced through the promotion of national standards, goals and various quality assurance processes (Cottle & Alexander, 2012). The National Quality Framework (NQF) is recognised as being a useful tool to guide the accountabilities leaders face within Australia in order to provide quality practices for children, families and the community (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, [ACECQA] 2019; Tanner, Welsh & Lewis, 2006; Waniganayake et al., 2018). The NQF consists of four components which include National Law and National Regulations; the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF); a national quality assessment and rating process; and National Quality Standards (NQS) (ACECQA, 2019; Waniganayake et al., 2018). Each of these components is acknowledged as being important to leaders within ECEC as it is regarded as being a legal and required accountability (Waniganayake et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential that leaders understand these legal requirements and inform them within their everyday

practices in ways which promote and influence high-quality educational experiences for children (Waniganayake et al., 2018).

Within ECEC settings, it is important that leaders assure high quality practices and outcomes to promote children's rights, inclusion, development and wellbeing (Waniganayake et al., 2018). With regards to achieving this, it is identified that leaders being held accountable is a legitimate means of supporting and meeting the legal requirements of providing a quality education for children (Waniganayake et al., 2018). As a future leader, I was concerned about the idea of being held accountable within ECEC practices, however, after conducting research and developing my understandings of accountabilities my concerns have shifted. I strongly believe that being held accountable to assure high quality practices and outcomes for children within EC settings is vital in being a successful leader and advocate. As a future leader, I would like to promote an awareness of accountability within ECEC as being a positive aspect rather than negative. This would be achieved through promoting strategies which assist in developing a conceptual understanding of what being held accountable involves and the benefits it has on the practices of the EC centre itself. The first strategy I would integrate is to provide educators and leaders with regular Quality Improvement Plan meetings (QIP) to review and evaluate the NQF (ACECQA, 2019; Waniganayake et al., 2018). This strategy would lead on to building discussions about what can be achieved to improve the overall practice and how this can be achieved. In addition, another strategy I would integrate is providing all educators and leaders within the EC setting a more conceptual understanding of ethics and ethical practices in order to influence a high quality and inclusive practice for children and their families. Through the implementation of these strategies, I strongly believe that the belief of what accountabilities and quality practices means will be shifted to a more positive understanding where leaders and educators are encouraged and supported to provide a high-quality and meaningful practice (Waniganayake et al., 2018).

Overall, it is evident that accountability and quality practices within ECEC settings faces an ongoing issue of being misunderstood. This was explored by identifying accountability and quality practices within ECEC with links to how it is conceptualised. In addition, it is evident through research that leaders need to be aware of and understand the NQF in order to provide high quality practices for children within EC. Furthermore, as a future leader I was able to highlight my values and beliefs on accountability and quality practices by discussing my concerns and strategies with regards to the issue.