

Is Your Service a Fishbowl?

I had a great childhood. There are no photos of my elaborate cubbies, my tree climbing, the ABBA concerts in my garage nor of the wild adventures I had in the canoe in my backyard pool, but that is what makes it great. There were no adults in my childhood charged with responsibility to observe and document me. I had no expectations or self consciousness in my play, it was just me, my friends and being present in the moment.

I did not need an adult to unpack those experiences for me or to analyse them... in fact if you were there, waiting to observe me, you would NEVER have seen me do the things I did. Why? I would have modified my behaviour as I was 'a good, cautious girl' to adults whereas I was 'ruthless fun' to my playmates... and to this day I am frequently told by my mother "Oh, you never behaved like that".

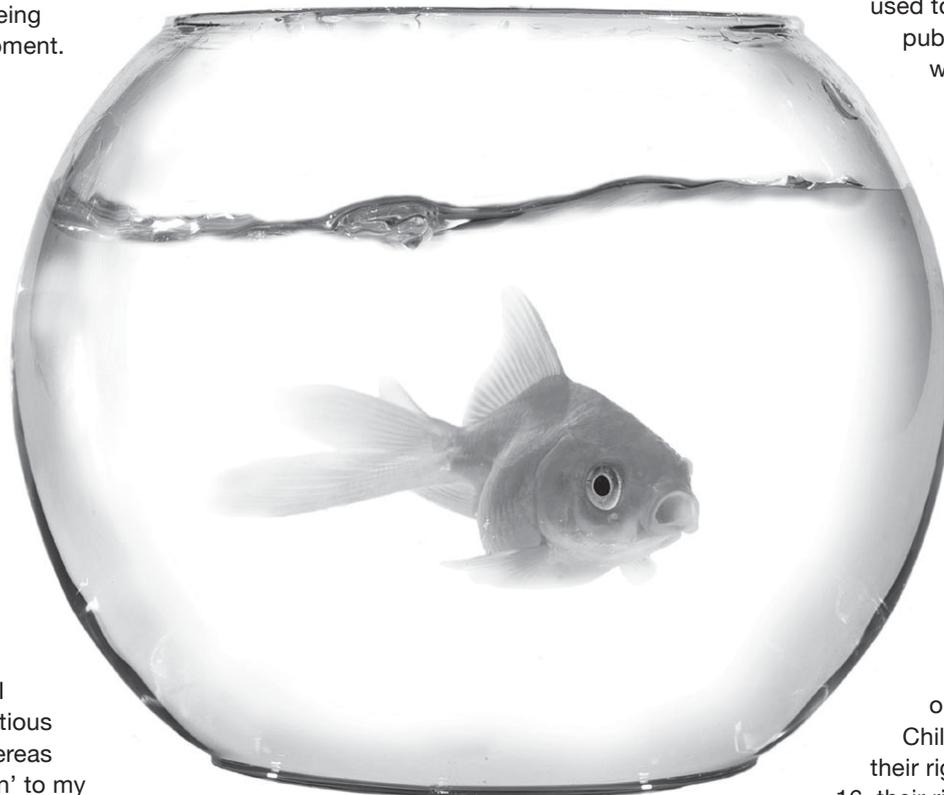
Observation and documentation of children destroys play and a child's ability to be authentic. It destroys a child's ability to be in the moment and to test or respond to their surroundings as they wish to. When you destroy play you deconstruct childhood.

Free, unadulterated play is just that – free and unadulterated.

The greatest unintended risk posed by the National Quality Framework

to the healthy development of our children is the distorted view that quality service provision is about documentation. Quality service provision is not about documentation, it is about relationships. How well you document or how much you document is irrelevant.

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Documentation of our children's free time is at dangerous levels. Many children using Children's Services in Australia are growing up in human fishbowls. Their every move documented, photographed or analysed. Pity the poor child who can read and write, for some services make them do their own review and analysis of their free time. "Oh, but the children love it", I hear them cry. Yes, institutionalised children do. We have created this environmental bubble which surrounds our children so that many are so used to living life

in this way they have lost the ability to do otherwise.

Our documentation of children has the potential for long term detrimental impacts on the value or respect our society places on privacy. How can we justify concerns about the danger of social media for children and

adolescents when we have created environments where from a young age our children are

used to being "exposed" for public scrutiny? How do we criticise paparazzi and invasion of privacy when we are condoning this across Australia on a daily basis in our Children's Services sector?

This documentation of our children has the capacity to breach a number of articles in the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 31, their right to play and Article 16, their right to privacy, are central to these breaches.

The paradox is that the National Quality Framework is underpinned by the Convention and was never intended to be implemented in a way that required the levels of documentation now being provided by services.

The "My Time, Our Place" Framework was a set of principles and information to guide the educators in their work. The system was never meant to be "unpacked" to the extent where "My Time, Our Place" is displayed on walls and children made to 'perform'

against the outcomes where every childhood experience in the service is plotted against which outcome is achieved. It appears common sense and shared understanding of practice has been replaced by a documentation fuelled hysteria for public displays of evidence and an obsession with product rather than process or practice.

This unhealthy preoccupation for documentation has been fuelled by a new industry of consultants peddling strategies and practices for documentation of our children. The marketing strategies fuel paranoia and fear amongst educators and build expectations of some inexperienced regulatory and compliance officers who fail to identify that the regulations do not require such extensive documentation of children, nor it is appropriate in a school age care environment.

Whilst trading on fear, consultants are charging services for their advice, and money that should be invested into resources and experiences for children is being channelled into quick fix documentation resources and consultants.

The result is a fearful group of educators, the misuse of funds that should be directed to the needs of children and the creation of a new type of service environment that is less about children and play and more about documentation and adult agendas.

My plea to you – if you really believe in children, if you really care about their healthy development - put away your folders, your note pads, your portfolios, your cameras and your wretched little ipads and step back.

Is gaining a high rating in the National Quality Framework worth what you are doing to the lives of children?

If we know what is required to create healthy environment for children, is it not time to say that is important?

The best indicator of a quality service is the happiness of your children, the satisfaction of the staff and families, and the ability of your children to be exposed to new and different experiences.



If we take a stand now as a sector for what we know is best for children, then we must rally against the demands of over documentation of their lives and the adult colonisation of their play time. If we commit to this then your service rating in the NQF becomes less important.

Let your focus be on the needs of the children in your service and relationships you have with them. ... if it is a choice between being rated “high quality” at the expense of our kids then give me a “working towards” every time.

Because our kids mean more to us than that a piece of paper on the wall.

This editorial, by Robyn Monro Miller, originally appeared in the March 2014 issue of *Network News*.



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