

QUALITY INTERACTIONS – A CLASS ACT

Exploring interactions between educators and children using the CLASS system

By Dinah Humphries

Dinah Humphries is the Kindergarten Program Coordinator at bestchance. She shares with us an innovative observation tool – the CLASS system – and how it has made a difference to quality education programs at bestchance kindergartens.

Who we are...

bestchance Kindergarten Cluster Management supports kindergartens to operate within the National Regulations, Law and National Quality Standards, and provides high quality programs to enhance children's learning and development. bestchance is the approved provider for 62 Kindergartens across 9 municipalities in Melbourne. Within the Kindergarten Cluster Team there are 7 Kindergarten Program Coordinators (KPC) whose role is to provide direct support to individual kindergartens; overseeing the management of staff and the quality of the program provided to children and families.

Research tells us that children learn best in an environment where the educator-child relationship is strong and built on a foundation of warmth, trust and respect. "Relationships are the foundations for the construction of identity – 'who I am', how I belong' and 'what is my influence?'" (EYLF, 2009, p20). It is through the quality of this integral relationship that children feel comfortable to explore, experiment and extend their own learning.

The CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) tool aims to provide a common vocabulary to describe quality across early childhood education and care settings. The tool assists line managers to observe and provide objective, constructive and consistent feedback and which leads to mentoring educators to promote quality interactions with children for enhanced learning opportunities.

The feedback gathered then supports educators to be increasingly reflective and understand the critical impact of their daily interactions with children.



What CLASS is....

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is based on the developmental theory and research suggestion that interactions between children and adults are the primary mechanism of children's development and learning (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008).

It is an observation tool that focuses on the effectiveness of classroom interactions among educators and children, "because it is these daily interactions that promote children's social and cognitive development. Children thrive when educators create nurturing, well-managed settings and provide frequent and engaging opportunities to learn" (Pianta, et al, 2008).

The tool is divided into 3 domains which make up classroom quality – emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support. Within each domain are dimensions – for example, the emotional support domain includes the dimensions of positive climate, teacher sensitivity and regard for student perspectives, while the instructional support domain includes the domains of concept development, quality of feedback and language modelling.

The kindergarten program is viewed as a whole – every adult educator (including students and volunteers) is considered in the process of observing the number and quality of interactions with children.

What we did....

It is the bestchance Kindergarten Cluster Management (KCM) team's vision that all children and families have access to high quality kindergarten programs and to this end, it is the KPC's role to support educators to provide the best possible program that enhances children's learning and development.

It is important that the KPC has the opportunity to observe the practice of educators directly and provide constructive feedback. From an educator's standpoint, it can be somewhat intimidating to be observed.

The CLASS tool examines the number of interactions children have with adults in a particular time period (say, 1 hour or 1 session), and also looks at the quality of those interactions. Through using CLASS, bestchance hoped to find a way for KPCs to start reflective conversations with educators about their practice which were non-threatening, non-personal and non-subjective, and establish strategies to increase the quality of interactions that children experience daily in the educational environment. "The benefits of experiencing high-quality interactions with teachers, peers and learning tasks in preschool settings are well documented: children who experience higher quality interactions show greater academic and social