



Planning and programming for children's learning and development

Quality Area 1 of the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) deals with educational program and practice. The individual Elements of the Quality Area—nine in all—aim to ensure that children participate in 'stimulating and engaging' educational programs that enhance their learning and development. While the NQS provides clear markers for quality, it doesn't tell services what their programs should look like, and for good reason: curriculum development and practices at each service are to take their cues from 'each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests' (Element 1.1.2).

So there are no templates for curriculum in early childhood settings. But that doesn't mean educators are on their own. In fact, it's well worth taking a look at how different services approach the work of planning and programming for children's learning and development. In this series of articles, we visit three centres to find out how they plan and program, and what the NQS means for their work.

Case study No.1

il nido Children's Centre for Early Childhood Development and Parenting

Long day care and preschool,

Paradise, north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia

'At the core of what we do, in all aspects of our integrated site, is relationships'

Rebecca Heath is the Director of *il nido* ('the nest'). In her 13 years at the centre, Rebecca has seen it grow from 50 approved places to 100, at the same time becoming part of an integrated education and health service.

In the days before the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the NQS, the centre used the South Australian Government's 'Birth to 18 years' curriculum, which, according to Rebecca, gave its educators a good understanding of early childhood learning areas and developmental outcomes. So have the EYLF and NQS changed the programming and planning at *il nido*? 'I wouldn't say there's been an enormous shift,' Rebecca says. Nonetheless, the centre's educators have undertaken a lot of reflection on their practices under the EYLF and NQS, partly through a two year research project—self-funded by the centre—that explored curriculum development.

'Some of the things we've changed are that we've adapted our learning stories to better reflect the EYLF, with each story having a direct link to a learning outcome,' Rebecca says. 'Our program is also more focused on children's learning dispositions, rather than skills development. We now set individual goals for each child based around the learning outcomes of the framework.'

The *il nido* centre had been a trial site for the development of the NQS back in 2010. During the trial, the centre received surprising news: although it was assessed as 'Exceeding the NQS' for six of the seven Quality Areas, it missed out on the top rating for Quality Area 1, 'Planning and programming.'

'That was a bit of a shock to us, because we had always felt that we'd done our programming and planning to a high-level,' Rebecca says. While Rebecca and her team could articulate their cycle of planning and assessment clearly, the trial assessors wanted to be able to track it themselves, using documentation alone.

As a result, the *il nido* educators strengthened the links between their planning documents, and then tested them to ensure that educators from other settings could follow the programming folder in detail.

The team at *il nido* follows a primary caregiver model, using secure attachments as a basis for learning about each child and programming for them accordingly. 'Each child has an individual program each term, which is based on a goal that comes from parent input, learning stories, observations or the child's interests,' Rebecca says. 'Each term, the program is evaluated and a learning story written as an assessment of how the child is undertaking significant learning.'

Each room also produces a group program for the term, which—for the older groups—is usually an inquiry-based project. 'Currently our preschool project is focusing on the performing arts,' Rebecca explains.



'The educators spent time at the start of the project brainstorming with the children, using the provocation questions around the project to have a better understanding of the children's current knowledge base.' This fits with the *il nido* philosophy that educators should 'work alongside our children as co-constructors of the curriculum,' she says.

Rebecca identifies the broad definition of 'curriculum' as one of the strengths of the EYLF and NQS. 'It provides a starting point for us, as educators, to put our own stamp on what we believe is the curriculum in our individual sites,' she says. The *il nido* team has worked hard to produce a curriculum that has 'a local context' and reflects the centre's philosophy and priorities.

Rebecca explains: 'We've done this by brainstorming about each of the learning outcomes. What has become evident to us is that, at the core of what we do, in all aspects of our integrated site, is relationships. So relationships are the most important work we undertake, and if we have educators who have the knowledge of individual children and their families, and have a genuine interest in them, then I believe this indicates a high-quality service.'

Reflection and evaluation complete the cycle of programming, and help the educators to stay focused on their particular environment and goals. 'Each term, each room evaluates the program against our statement of philosophy and belief statements, to ensure that our program has clear links to the philosophy,' Rebecca explains. 'This cycle of programming is continually reviewed by the educational leader, to ensure that it's meeting the requirements of the NQS.'

While there have been changes and in-depth reflection at *il nido* as a result of the EYLF and the NQS, Rebecca says that 'we've kept certain things as priorities that we'll probably never change.' These include the four principles that guide her team's work:

- Our programs need to be individualised and strength-based.
- Children's programs should be developed in partnership with the families.
- Children's voices should be valued and encouraged in the program.
- Relationships should be at the core of everything we do.

Rebecca also highlights the importance of providing educators with the necessary time, resources and direction to 'regularly review their pedagogy' and to 'create programs and implement a curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, challenging and engaging'.

And one further tip? 'Remember that it's not necessary to document everything that occurs in the day, because it just results in overloaded educators. Record what is significant learning for the children and the educators.'

The next article in this series will visit Bagdad Childcare and Early Learning Centre, a 16-place, mixed-age service in Tasmania.



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