



Quality Area 3: Physical environment

'Physical environments for play and learning'

The *National Quality Standard* reminds us that the physical environment plays a 'critical role' in contributing to children's 'wellbeing, happiness, creativity and developing independence; and determining the quality of children's learning and experiences' (ACECQA, 2013, p. 80).

In this set of case studies, we visit and explore the physical environments at two children's services: a long day care service in inner Sydney; and a preschool in Canberra. The settings are quite different, but they have in common a group of educators committed to creating high-quality physical environments for the benefit of the children in their care.

Case study No.2

Reid Preschool
Canberra, ACT

NQS Rating: *Exceeding the National Quality Standard*

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At Reid Preschool, the educators spend a lot of time considering how to use—and preserve—their physical environment. The oldest preschool in Canberra, the Reid site dates from 1945 and that history provides the educators with a strong awareness of both change and continuity in the local community.

For teacher Gina Nugent, 'the thing that makes me really happy about the outdoor space is the sense of history. I can see where the wading pool was that's been filled in, I can see where the old sandpit was. But I can also see, through the generations, the things that have been added by parents, by community, by staff, since 1945, to develop into this really high-quality learning environment for children.'

For Gina, acting as a custodian for a piece of Canberra's history, and working in partnership with a diverse community, is a dream job. 'I have worked across Australia', she says, 'and when I came to Canberra, I used to drive past this preschool thinking "I wish I worked there!"'

According to Gina, it is relationships that form the core of the preschool's philosophy, and its success. Reid Preschool has been commended at the highest level, receiving a rating of *Exceeding the National Quality Standard* against each Quality Area, something that Gina attributes to a philosophy that values relationships highly. 'We've had a long time to develop our philosophy, a shared philosophy, in which relationships are central and essential', she says. 'The relationships we have with one another—strong and positive and collegial; the relationships we develop with our families; and of course the relationships with the children, and the children with each other.'





Gina says the philosophy also ‘matches our practice’ and is made visible in the learning spaces: ‘All of those things that we think are really valuable and important, you can see in the environment, but also through the interactions and the relationships that we have with the children and our families.’

In planning their indoor and outdoor spaces, Gina’s team has given a lot of thought to meeting each child’s needs, and also creating challenges for them. ‘They are environments that are accessible and well-organised and filled with materials rich with possibilities’, Gina says. ‘Each of those environments has spaces for children to be alone, to be in a small group and also to accommodate large groups.’

Both the indoor and outdoor spaces also create physical challenges, through the use of different levels. ‘Outdoors you’ll see a hump, and there are garden beds and there’s height on the playground and on the verandah’, Gina explains. The educators have even incorporated physical challenge and interest into outdoor artworks. ‘We commissioned an artist to create an outdoor climbing sculpture, and another artist did some block seating. So they’re beautiful and they’re accessible and aesthetic, but also they have lots of textures and heights and levels and materials.’

Authenticity is another goal for the learning spaces at Reid. ‘In our indoor environment, we have a kitchen that you would find in your own home, and stools at the height of the bench’, Gina says. ‘Our writing area is a desk, which is the height that you would find at home and that adults would use.’ In the outdoor environment, chooks, vegetable gardens and a creek bed provide authentic experiences for the children.

The educators are highly aware of the impact of the environment on the children’s learning. As Gina puts it: ‘We think that the environment is the third teacher—that’s part of our philosophy, and so everything that we change or do or add or take away is intentional!’ This includes a large number and variety of loose parts for the children to use, including repurposed objects and materials from the natural environment. ‘So logs and tree biscuits and pipes, whatever’s come in’, says Gina. ‘We do value the natural environment and that changes also, and the children are a part of that—they’re part of the planting, they’re part of the watering, they’re part of sweeping leaves from the big heritage tree.’

‘It’s the idea that each of the spaces is rich with possibilities’, says Gina. ‘So the materials are rich with possibilities and the spaces are rich with possibilities.’

Today, the inner Canberra suburb of Reid is home to a diverse community, including a significant migrant population. The physical environment at the preschool is just as important for those diverse families as for their children, says Gina. ‘Your physical environment is the thing that everybody sees most, so we want it to be welcoming, we want it to be inclusive, we want it to reflect the children and their families and their cultures—and we want them to feel in charge of it.’

On the day of the interview, Gina had observed some of the Vietnamese families from the preschool community harvesting spinach and spring onions to take home. ‘It was really heart-warming that these adults—the families, the parents, the grandparents—were also able to access the environment in the same way the children do’, says Gina. ‘I do think they feel as though they own it, and because it’s important to them, they take care of it.’

For the educators at Reid, the physical environment is never static—even if the changes are not dramatic. ‘It’s quite evolving and organic, the changes are organic’, explains Gina. The process of deciding on changes to the environment depends on ‘a lot of documentation, observations, listening—just taking note of what’s happening, looking at those “magnetic zones” where children are congregating and asking why and what they’re doing in that space.’

‘So there are always plans in the pipeline’, Gina says. ‘But that happens in partnership and collaboration and relationships with our families and with our children at the time. So, while I might have a plan, that might be pushed aside for something else. The families are a rich source of skill and expertise and ideas. We don’t ever see ourselves as the only ones who might know.’

Reference

Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2013). *Guide to the National Quality Standard*. Sydney: ACECQA.



An Australian Government Initiative

The NQS Professional Learning Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education.



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