



## Quality Area 1: Educational program and practice

### 'Using each child's knowledge and ideas in the program'

In the final case study for our three-part series on 'Educational program and practice', we visit a school-based early learning centre in Adelaide and find out how the educators build relationships with families to learn about children's knowledge and ideas.

### Case study No.3

#### St John's Lutheran Highgate Early Learning Centre

Adelaide, SA

NQS rating: *Exceeding the National Quality Standard*

'The children's actions provide us with a lot of information about what they know and can do—knowledge we may not have gained if we had directed the learning.'



At the Early Learning Centre at St John's Lutheran School in Highgate, educators use an array of methods to gather information about each child. The small centre, which has 24 children each day, places great importance on 'the quality of relationships that we build with families', says Kate Wood, the director. The process of learning about each child's knowledge and ideas starts with building relationships and communication with their family.

'We are proactive about our communication with the families and in building relationships with them', Kate explains. 'Some of the ways we do this are: greeting parents individually each day, organising social gatherings through the year, providing formal opportunities for parent-educator interviews twice a year and regularly being available for informal chats. By doing these things, we can gather information about the children and their families and get to know them better so we can best support them.'

The first opportunity to learn about children starting at the centre comes with the enrolment interview, where families are taken through a questionnaire about their child's development, interests, strengths and areas for growth. At the child's initial visit to the centre, educators are already 'observing their interests, knowledge and skills', Kate says. Once the school year has begun and the children have had a few weeks to settle in, educators interview each of them. 'We ask them what the activities or experiences are they most enjoy, who their friends are, what the best things are about ELC, what they don't like, how they feel when they're here', Kate explains.

'We spend a lot of time, particularly at the beginning of the year, finding out what children's interests are', says Kate. 'So we ask the children, we ask the parents, we observe and we incorporate their interests into the program. We do lots of assessments about children's knowledge and skills and their dispositions for learning.'

The information gleaned during these processes is transferred to a spreadsheet, which is kept 'in a fairly visible place' for the educators. 'When we're planning we can use the children's interests which adds more meaning to their learning', says Kate. 'We're always updating that spreadsheet so it's a reflection of their current interests'. The educators also produce individual learning plans for each child, which contain numerous learning goals and are reviewed over the course of the year.

Kate emphasises that the most important aspects of planning the program at St John's ELC are the guiding principles that focus on play based learning and the belief in 'teacher-child interactions that support and challenge children'. 'We do units of work that encourage really deep thinking', says Kate. 'We make sure that our program is open so that those deeper ideas can evolve. So we're making sure that our program isn't based primarily on specific activities and experiences, but reflects bigger picture concepts.'

The process of planning the program at the centre also involves three curriculum frameworks: the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (PYP) and the Lutheran Schools Christian Studies Framework.



Kate says the three frameworks ‘absolutely complement each other’, and it’s clear that her team is using them very well—the centre has been rated as *Exceeding the NQS* in every Quality Area.

While a lot of philosophy and structural guidance goes into planning the program, the process of delivering the program is very responsive to the children’s ideas and interests. ‘Our written program is very much an evolving, working document’, Kate explains. ‘We plan for four weeks at a time, but by the end of the four weeks, it has writing all over it and it’s several pages longer. We add activities that have happened, knowledge gained and things that we’ve observed and then planned further.’

According to Kate, the benefits of using each child’s knowledge and ideas in the program are immense. ‘For children, the learning is more meaningful and therefore more likely to be retained and also to be able to be transferred to other contexts’, she says. ‘Children feel ownership of their work and it develops self-esteem and confidence in their capabilities. It develops a sense of belonging—they know that their ideas are valued.’

The child-centred approach is also highly beneficial for educators. ‘For the educators, it enables them to scaffold children’s learning. It builds better relationships between the child and educator, as the child feels respected and valued and has a sense of agency, a sense of power’, Kate says. ‘And the children’s actions provide us with a lot of information about what they know and can do—knowledge we may not have gained if we had directed the learning.’

Kate says the experience and qualifications of the St John’s ELC educators are also vitally important in planning and delivering the program in a child-centred way. When she started at the centre eight years ago, none of the educators (apart from the early childhood

teacher) had formal qualifications. ‘But they were willing and in fact very enthusiastic, to improve their qualifications’, Kate says, and now each educator has a Diploma as a minimum.

Kate suggests four things that services can do to incorporate children’s knowledge and ideas more deeply into a program. First, ‘get to know the children really well’ and keep all the information you’ve gathered about a child—including assessment, samples of work, individual goals—in one place.

Second, use ‘flexibility and accountability’ in the program and don’t over-plan specific activities: ‘Allow for that child-led learning and that deep inquiry that’s really meaningful to them.’

Third, ‘value and educate your educators’: ‘Even the very best program is just words on paper without the competent and caring educators who deliver that program.’

And finally, ‘build successful relationships with families’: ‘Be intentional and make the time to build relationships, as those parents know their children so much better than we do, and they’ve got so much valuable information about their child’s interests and knowledge and abilities.’



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