



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Revising the service philosophy

Using the guiding principles of the EYLF and the NQF

The first e-Newsletter for 2012 discussed preparing for the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (COAG, 2008) and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (DEEWR, 2009b). One of the requirements of the NQS is that each service has a *Quality Improvement Plan* (QIP) in place by 30 April this year and that every QIP needs to include a statement of philosophy.

A statement of philosophy is more than a mission statement. The philosophy is the 'why' behind your work with children, their families and each other. It is the combination of your beliefs, values and hopes for the educational program that you provide and its outcomes.

The service philosophy needs to be a 'living document' that reflects the values and beliefs of the current management, educators and families that belong to the service. It should be revised annually to reflect those views and be put into active use to guide every aspect of operation, practice and curriculum in a setting.

The beginning of the year is always a good time to reflect on what you believe is important, and to revise your philosophy so that it provides a sound foundation for practice. Services that have a clear, shared vision about what is important for children and families create a positive climate and clear, shared intentions that lead to quality outcomes.

Most services already have a philosophy statement but such statements may not yet reflect the guiding principles underpinning the NQF and the NQS. The *Guide to the National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2011, p. 7) requires that:

'In making decisions about operating education and care services and working to achieve the *National Quality Standard* to improve quality at services, the guiding principles of the *National Quality Framework* apply.'

These principles are:

- The rights of the child are paramount.
- Children are successful, competent and capable learners.
- Equity, inclusion and diversity underpin the framework.
- Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued.
- The role of parents and families is respected and supported.
- Best practice is expected in the provision of education and care services.

The *Guide* states (element 7.2.1, p. 181) that:

'A written statement of philosophy outlines the principles under which the service operates. This philosophy reflects the principles of the National Law, the Early Years Learning Framework and/or the Framework for School Age Care (or other approved learning frameworks).

It underpins the decisions, policies and daily practices of the approved provider, nominated supervisor, educators, co-ordinators and staff members and assists in planning, implementing and evaluating quality experiences for children.

It reflects a shared understanding of the role of the service with children, families and the community.'



Getting started on a review

One way to begin the revision of the philosophy might be to examine where the vision, principles, practice and learning outcomes in an existing philosophy fit with the guiding principles of the NQF.

It is important to engage everyone in the revision process, as people who have been involved are more likely to understand the intent behind the reviewed statement of philosophy and use it to guide practice.

The *Educators' Guide* (DEEWR, 2010) reminds us that skilful educators are aware of their beliefs and knowledge.

Consider asking everyone to think about their personal professional philosophies and to note down some of the key aspects that they have identified for open, courteous discussion.



- These personal philosophies may be influenced by childhood and life experiences, personal values, professional studies, professional mentors and ongoing professional development.
- Usually there are similarities and differences in views among professionals.
- Views may differ about how children learn and develop, and about relationships between educators and families.
- Educators and management need to talk about how the diversity of families and lifestyles should be recognised and reflected in the philosophy and policies, and about issues of equity and social justice.
- These issues impact on the daily 'business' of a setting in quite unconscious ways and may need critical reflection and mediation to achieve consensus and consistency within the setting.

Discussing these as a team will help to identify the key aspects that everyone believes are important, as well as helping individuals to examine how they arrived at their beliefs.

There may be quite different views about how children learn; how the curriculum should be developed and documented; how children should spend their days and the importance of play; and how families are involved in the life of the service.

For example, if a staff member believes that 'children should be seen but not heard', they are unlikely to live a philosophy based on children's rights and agency; if they think 'families hand their children over for care and education' they are unlikely to seriously consult with them about goals for children's learning; if they think 'children should just grow and be free' they might not see the value of adult-child interaction and intervention.

Unless these views are discussed and a common direction reached, it may affect positive outcomes for the children in the service. The EYLF will be helpful in guiding these discussions.

Using the EYLF to reflect on philosophy and practice

The *Educators' Guide* (p. 14) reminds us that 'the Principles and Practices of the *Framework* are founded on beliefs that:

- children are capable and competent
- children actively construct their own learning
- learning is dynamic, complex and holistic
- children have agency; that is, they have capacities and rights to initiate and lead learning and to be active participants and decision makers in matters affecting them.'



Being familiar with the core elements of the EYLF will assist in developing a shared statement of philosophy that is consistent with the *Framework*. It will guide decision making about:

- how relationships are established and maintained with children and families (p. 12)
- how information is gathered and recorded about children (p. 17)
- how the curriculum is planned, the environment set up and equipment and resources chosen (p. 15)
- how teaching and learning strategies are identified and used (p. 17)
- how assessment of children's learning is carried out (p. 17)
- how professional reflection is undertaken (p. 13).

One method used by some services to stimulate reflection and discussion is to ask questions such as 'What might your ideal service look like, sound like, feel like?'; 'What would that mean for children, families and educators?'; 'How would that impact on decision making about the timetable, routines, group opportunities?'

Other questions might be:

- What is unique about your service?
- How is it different to other services?
- What is your role in the community?
- What role(s) do children, families, educators and management play?
- What opportunities are there for all parties to be involved in decision making?

'The beliefs of educators are a major factor in how a curriculum is planned, what goals are established, and how relationships and the learning environment and experiences are established.'

Educators' Guide to the EYLF (p. 14)



Educators need to ask: How will we consult with children and families to gain their views about what they like about the service, what improvements they would like to see and the aspects they would like included in the statement of philosophy? Other questions might include:

- Will we use surveys?
- Informal discussions or meetings?
- E-mail correspondence?
- Focused interviews?

A philosophy is such an individual thing for each setting; it deeply reflects the views, commitments and experiences of those who develop it. The process of developing a statement of philosophy therefore, is an essential one; we can't just pick up someone else's and run with it. Services starting out on a major review however, may find some headings that other settings have used helpful:

- Our place—a brief summary of the location's history of provision of early childhood services
- Our beliefs—about Belonging, about children and learning and about the role of families and of the educator; about identity and contribution
- Our commitments—e.g. to the rights of the child and to respect for culture
- Our goals and aspirations ...
- Our intentions for action ...

Drafting the Statement of Philosophy

1. Once the discussions have been concluded, consider forming a small sub-committee to take the lead in drafting the philosophy statement. If possible have educators, families and management represented.
2. Review all feedback and determine the key areas that need to be included in the statement.
3. Develop sentences to support each key area.
4. Edit the document:
 - Are the terms and words going to be easily understood by families and all educators?
 - Is the document short enough to be read in a reasonable length of time?
 - Is the style in which it has been written user-friendly?
 - Will it need to be translated into community languages?
 - Does it reflect the socioeconomic, physical and cultural diversity of the community?
 - Does it reflect the guiding principles of the NQF as well as the core elements of the EYLF?
5. Circulate the draft and ask all educators and families for comments and suggestions.
6. Discuss feedback and edit again if necessary.
7. Approve and display the final document.
8. Incorporate a copy into the QIP.



Links between the Philosophy and the NQS

Because the NQS (p. 181) explicitly requires a statement of philosophy, it states how assessors may approach discussions with the leaders and educators within settings.

'Assessors may **observe**:

- the availability of the service's statement of philosophy to educators, co-ordinators, staff members and families
- the extent to which practices undertaken and decisions made by educators, co-ordinators and all staff members are informed by the service's statement of philosophy.

Assessors, with the nominated supervisor, educators, co-ordinators and staff members may **discuss**:

- how a shared understanding of the service's statement of philosophy underpins everyday practice and decision making
- how families are encouraged to be meaningfully involved in the development and review of the service's statement of philosophy
- how the statement of philosophy is used to set directions, build commitment and align actions with the service's goals and outcomes, asking for examples.

Assessors may **sight**:

- the service's statement of philosophy
- evidence that the service's statement of philosophy is readily available and included in the induction process for all staff members and in the enrolment and orientation process for families.'

Remember the statement of philosophy is a living document, one that should not only guide every aspect of practice, but also reflect changing circumstances or new ideas.

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Biography

Heather Barnes is based in Victoria and works as a consultant and trainer. She travels all over the country delivering professional development training sessions to educators. She is a passionate advocate for the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the stronger focus on quality improvement that is a key aspect of the *National Quality Standard*.



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