Setting the scene

Believe it or not, it is four years since 2010, when e-Newsletters were initiated to support educators in getting to know and use the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). Then, in 2011, My Time, Our Place (MTOP) (DEEWR, 2011) was published and at the start of 2012 the e-Newsletters incorporated the incoming National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011).

The National Quality Framework (NQF), of which the EYLF, MTOP and the NQS form part, changed the face of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia. It highlighted ‘quality’ as a serious matter in provision for young children and identified hallmarks of quality for educators to aspire to and families to reference as they make choices about the early learning setting that best suits their child.

The EYLF provided the philosophical, theoretical and curriculum framework underpinning quality. The NQS defined criteria against which ECEC services could be assessed.

This aspiration for early childhood practitioners to be thoughtful, collaborative, informed and reflective was exciting and uplifting for many in the ECEC community; it also presented some challenges for educators and settings. Not all settings had the continuity of staffing and instructional leadership that assist in grappling with new ideas. Not all educators had the qualifications and/or experience to be confident to take risks and try new ways of doing things.

This final e-Newsletter in the current funded series will encompass some key aspects of professional practice that preoccupied educators back in 2010 that continue to do so today.

Newsletter No. 75 will focus on:

- dealing with the challenges of less-than-ideal environments
- recognising, valuing and building on the amazing learning of babies
- supporting children’s additional needs
- communicating with families.
Making the most of your environment

Quality Area 3—Physical environment

3.1.3: Facilities are designed or adapted to ensure access and participation by every child in the service and to allow flexible use and interaction between indoor and outdoor space.

3.2: The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play.

3.2.1: Outdoor and indoor spaces are designed and organised to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments.

The services featured in this e-Newsletter comprise two long day care centres, one pre-kinder and outside school hours care (OSHC) program on a school campus and a family day care setting. Each is dealing with different environmental advantages and issues.

Setting No. 1

The Lady Gowrie Education and Care Service in Battery Point, Tasmania has an award-winning playground that maximises the site’s significant slope. There is excellent use of natural and built materials and different ‘outdoor rooms’ have been created for small groups of children to engage in collaborative tasks and imaginative play. Even two- and three-year-olds are using rocks and logs to take carefully managed risks and extend their agility and physical confidence.

However, the outdoor environment is not easily accessed from all indoor spaces. Secheron Room, for example, which caters for 12 babies aged from three to 12 months, is upstairs in the centre. It is a warm, homely room which is perfect for infants, allowing the size of each group, with its primary carer, to be kept small and security and attachment to be fostered. The room location means that educators have to schedule to use the downstairs outdoor and patio spaces. With a ratio of one adult to four children, educators are able to respond to babies’ indications that they are ready to expand their sensory experiences and consolidate their gross motor skills in the outdoors. This takes planning and deep knowledge of each child’s development and needs. Across the service, educators are ‘listening to children’, enabling older children to choose when they want to transition to outside and to organise their own outdoor clothing.

Setting No. 2

Lady Gowrie at Campbell Street inherited a playground which educators felt had too much commercial equipment, so they are working on increasing the range of natural materials. In collaboration with families, river stones and large, hollow tree stumps are being installed (making sure no animals are being displaced), a bark tepee is under construction and ribbons are being attached to wind chimes, so that even the youngest toddler can enjoy the sounds they make. In the Letitia Room, where the bags belonging to the two- and three-year-olds are stored away from the room, a sense of belonging and independence is fostered by providing each child with a photo-labelled box for their personal items, jackets, toys etc. that they can access during the day.

Both centres make the most of nearby parks and gardens and connect children to ‘the real world’ through excursions to local shops and work sites.

Setting No. 3

At the Fahan Pre-kinder setting, the teachers and children enjoy using the school’s facilities for music, library, gym and the Artist in Residence program. This means that the children have access to a rich curriculum and are acclimatised to school life before they start. They can attend assembly and connect with their friends from OSHC. It also means that the children’s day is often quite timetabled, so the teachers have to ensure a flexible flow between self-chosen activities over the day, enabling children to develop a sense of agency.

Setting No. 4

The family day care service utilises the advantages that come from being based in a home; the four children aged between 10 months and two years enjoy cooking and eating together in a comfy kitchen, sleeping in regular cots and beds and moving freely between the indoor lounge area and the sunny patio; when intrigued by sand and water, it’s easy to follow your interests. There is an ‘upper garden’ with rabbits, guinea pigs and fruit trees. To comply with regulations, this upper area is being given a distinct shrub border and Karin must accompany the children. A sensible solution to the space and supervision issue is to bring the pets to the children sometimes, rather than vice versa!
Taking sustainability seriously

Throughout Lady Gowrie Battery Point, there is an emphasis on sustainability. Children keep food scraps for a staff member’s dog and a family-owned set of piglets; they save water from lunch for the seedlings they are growing inside and one room has a worm farm. Even the youngest children are learning about gardening.

As Tracy Young and Sue Elliott explain in e-Newsletter No. 60, 2013, direct experiences with nature build children’s respect and care for the natural world, which is the foundation for a commitment to sustainability. The authors suggest that educators should:

- Engage children in real work outdoors—for example gardening, monitoring water conservation and building bird boxes and feeders.
- Take advantage of natural aspects outdoors, such as shade, wind, sunny corners, slopes and natural puddles.
- Establish systems for learning about worm farms, compost bins, vegetable and herb gardens and water tanks.
- Ensure there are props available to promote investigation ... for example binoculars, magnifiers and books and posters to help identify animals and plants.

For example, when Judah found a moth in his bathroom at home, he brought it to show his educator. They examined the moth, talked about its needs, borrowed a bug catcher and used the internet to investigate insects.

When other children in Runnymede Room became involved, an interest table was set up with magnifying glasses, photos and ‘bugs’. With an A–Z of insects book, and a family-contributed ‘Bug DVD’, children explored the features of different types of insects.
Reflections on babies’ learning

As Anne Stonehouse, in her ECA publication Everyday Learning about babies as amazing learners (ECA, 2012) commented:

Babies’ learning hasn’t always been widely recognised and appreciated … many people thought that babies just needed … to have their physical needs met, be given love and attention and then one day they would turn three years old and learning would become important.

Through their own professional endeavours, discussions with team colleagues, the guidance and inspiration provided by the EYLF and educational leadership on site and in professional learning programs, today’s educators seem—fortunately—to hold very different views:

We realise the richness of talking with babies. We don’t just take them to nappy change, bath, feed or sleep; we talk as we do things. We watch what they’re interested in and hold a conversation.

Babies’ understanding far outstrips their expressive language, so we’ve begun using photos with spoken language to ask babies ‘would you like a drink?’ We give them an early symbol system to communicate with.

We understand how important gesture is, so we learn each baby’s individual signs and cues; we mirror their communication, check and respond. Their gaze, their eye movements, their giggling, smiling and rolling to look, all give us messages.

We adapt home routines to the larger care environment, so sleeping and eating patterns involve responding to individual needs rather than ‘everyone needs to do this now’.

The routine used to dominate. Now, we give them undivided attention and they can have lunch later—Why interrupt the magic moment?

Quality Area 1—Educational program and practice

1.1.2: Each child’s current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program.

1.1.3: The program, including routines, is organised in ways that maximise opportunities for each child’s learning.

1.1.6: Each child’s agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and influence events and their world.

Supporting children with additional needs

We tend to think of ‘additional needs’ as referring to a disability or developmental delay. In fact, many children have ‘additional needs’ from time to time. The examples below illustrate how educators take special steps to ensure that children are supported and their wellbeing and learning are maximised:

Example 1

Two children under age two are dealing with a family separation. They are revealing their distress through clinging to the educator, regressing slightly in their language development and requesting reassurance and comfort. The educator is responding to these needs, making sure that they are settled before she moves around the room in the mornings and emphasising the comfort of familiar routines. She is also working with both parents to facilitate the children’s moves between home bases.

Example 2

Educators noticed that a toddler did not like eating many kinds of foods. They sought the advice of the Inclusion Support Team, who suggested that the little girl had problems with the texture of some foods. The child’s family collaborated with educators to transition her to experiencing textures through sensory experiences with sand, water, paint etc. as well as gradually adding new textures to her food. She now eats anything! Working with families on matters like this requires building trust and acting with sensitivity. It helped that the focus was on the underlying issue, rather than implying anything was ‘wrong’ with the child.

Example 3

Another little boy, aged three and a half, is ready to join an older group in a different room. Initially, he found this transition disturbing, so educators arranged for him to spend part of each day in each room, becoming familiar with staff, peers and play equipment. He is now moving fully into the older group, but an educator he is attached to will ‘swap’ for part of the day to be with him for a while.

Example 4

A child who has been diagnosed with Autism is turning five and educators who have come to know him over three years and who recognise his cues, are planning to support his transition to school. They will develop a set of ‘early alerts’ about when a problem is likely to arise and a ‘what worked for us’ set of advice.
Communicating with families

Quality Area 6—Collaborative partnerships with families and communities

6.1.2: Families have opportunities to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.

6.1.3: Current information about the service is available to families.

1.1.4: The documentation about each child’s program and progress is available to families.

In the settings featured here, educators use a variety of ways to keep families up to date with the general program and their child’s learning such as:

- room programs are displayed at least weekly, with additional displays about special events
- photo montages are annotated by educators and include children’s voices about their experiences
- Room News is emailed regularly to families
- individual portfolios are shared with children and families and reviewed
- staff make time for informal conversations as families pick up and drop off, with the emphasis on sharing ‘important stuff’, not just ‘he’s had a great day’
- a Facebook page with photos and questions is published, inviting comments.

The main change is that educators are articulating their practice with a strong sense of audience, striving to avoid jargon and keeping messages clear, accessible and informative.

They show the links to the EYLF and the NQS so that families become familiar with the reasons behind what educators are doing and can support their child’s learning at home.

For example, an educator noticed that Olive (aged 18 months) was absorbed in the sandpit for 45 minutes, exploring the texture of the sand between her fingers, squeezing and sprinkling it. Stacey extended this sensory interest and learning by providing:

- wet and dry sand
- water and equipment to smooth and ruffle water
- art experiences including ‘goop’ and finger painting
- natural resources in the outdoor kitchen area
- the language for Olive to describe what she was touching and how she felt about the experience.

Stacey made a note for herself, other educators and the child’s family that Olive was particularly demonstrating learning in Outcome 4 (EYLF, pp. 34–37):

4.1: Children develop dispositions ... such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, persistence ...

4.2: Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating

4.4: Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials.

She referred to NQS Area 1, especially 1.2.2: Educators respond to children’s ideas and play and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child’s learning.
Conclusion

It would seem that these educators have developed skills in noticing and planning on from children’s interests and abilities. They report that it is still a challenge to assess individual progress ‘when you see 58 children over two weeks and some children may only attend one or two days per week—the wow moment just might not occur while she’s with you!’ And, it can be even harder to follow a child’s interest when they’re only in outside school hours care for an hour each day—‘You have to spend time outside with him, let him have space, quiet and solitude before you open a conversation’.

On the other hand, educators value their new professional capacity to observe, notice and respond: ‘It’s empowering to be allowed to interpret. We used to be told to stand back, but you never really could be objective. Just documenting what was happening never told us enough. Now, we use collaborative conversations to unpack and wonder what an observation might mean and where we might take learning from here.’

In an article in the Australasian Journal of Early Childhood (Sumsion et al, 2009, p. 7), the architects of the EYLF expressed the hopes that:

... the EYLF will lead to increased valuing by society of the important role of early childhood settings and enhanced professional status for early childhood practitioners through public recognition of the complexity of their work.

While these hopes about public recognition remain a ‘work in progress’, the comments of educators and their growing professional confidence in everyday practice, demonstrate that significant progress has been made:

The EYLF is now a well-used document. It makes you think. It scaffolds your reflections. It stops you doing things ‘just because you always have’.

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- Lady Gowrie Campbell Street E&C Service
- Lady Gowrie Fahan E&C Service
- Lady Gowrie Family Day Care Scheme

References


Biography

Jenni Connor has written, co-written and edited the e-Newsletter series from 2010–2014. She is a regular author of ECA publications, including Your Child’s First Year of School (with Pam Linke, 2012) and the forthcoming Everyday learning about Maths and Numeracy (with Denise Neal, in Press, 2014). Jenni works as an early childhood consultant, presenting workshops, lectures and master classes.