



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.1

Betty Spears Child Care Centre
Sydney, NSW

NQS Rating: Meeting the National Quality Standard

'It's one thing to look at the gumnuts on a table, in a bowl, but it's quite another thing to see them growing and actually watch how they change over time. That sort of insight is beautiful to offer children.'

When it was established 30 years ago, the Betty Spears Child Care Centre was a trailblazing service: one of the first 24-hour child care centres in Sydney, it served the staff of the Tempe bus depot and other working families in the inner-city. Today, the 24-hour service is long gone, but the centre's history still shapes its physical environment. Inside, the building is 'a bit of a rabbit warren', in the words of director Cathy McCarthy. A series of sleeping rooms, plus a television room, divided some of the space into small boxes; modifications and additions over the years have changed the layout, but it still provides challenges for educators: 'There's limited storage and there's very little adult space', Cathy explains.

So the outdoor environment at the Tempe centre comes as a real surprise. On a huge parcel of land—around the same size as the local primary school—untouched bushland and landscaped play spaces provide children and educators with a wealth of possibilities. For Cathy, who came to the centre almost three years ago to fill a short-term vacancy, this was the number one reason to stay. 'When I came to the centre, I was quite inspired and excited by such a big space and so much potential', she says. 'It was just lots of land, which is pretty unheard of in the inner city. It's very natural as well, lots of trees, lots of grassy areas—it's lovely to have fresh grass in a centre.'

Cathy describes the outdoor space: 'We have a really big area, what we call a lower yard, which is very natural: it's sloping, it has lots of trees, lots of little bushy areas. It's got a little amphitheatre and a grass area, it has a beach house. We have a new sandpit with large natural sandstone rocks around it.'

Landscaping work last year created a new area, which the children call 'the park'. 'That's kind of the feel that we were aiming for', Cathy explains, 'that sort of open, relaxed environment. It's got a water

Before



After



causeway that goes into a dry creek bed, and a really big open area. It's got lots of boardwalks and gardens, a little tepee which children enjoy sitting in.'

For the children and educators, the outdoor environment means a world of possibilities. Cathy says there are 'lots of areas where children can hide, lots of areas where children can actually have some privacy and some time to themselves or to sit with a small group'. The landscape upgrade, involving lots of large stones, created new opportunities for children to take risks in constructive ways. Cathy explains: 'Before we did this new upgrade, children used to make their own challenge—and they used to push the limits. We had all these terrible plastic cubes and the children used to really confront adults by jumping off them in various ways and back flipping—but they were actually just making their own challenge. With this new environment, they haven't needed to do that. That's been really nice to see.'

Opportunities for children's learning also stem from the wider, industrial environment around the Betty Spears centre. Located close to the Tempe bus depot, with Sydney Airport and a railway line very close by, the centre provides children with plenty of connections to the city. 'There are planes going over all of the time, so close that the children can identify and comment on different airline logos. There are trains that children can observe if they stand on our hill', Cathy says. 'I like the way these things connect us with the wider community.'

Cathy says the outdoor environment encourages child-initiated learning, especially on the basis of exploration and observation skills. 'Gumnuts have been really amazing', she says. 'We've got beautiful new trees that have gumnuts on them, and they've been growing from small to large, and the children have just been so excited to watch that. It's one thing to look at the gumnuts on a table, in a bowl, but it's quite another thing to see them growing and actually watch how they change over time. That sort of insight is beautiful to offer children.'

Numeracy and literacy learning are also frequently on display. 'For example, the preschoolers took the rocks out of the dry creek bed area and, firstly, they set them up in different patterns and shapes, and then someone, accidentally almost, made a number eight—and they were really excited about that', says Cathy. Small group experiences can also be more interactive and imaginative. 'There's nothing quite like reading *Who Sank the Boat?* in the boat', Cathy laughs. 'The boat, which is kind of a bit wobbly on our stones, is a beautiful place to actually read *Who Sank the Boat?* and to have a fuller experience.'

But Cathy says there is still work to do. The designated outdoor area for the babies is full of soft fall material, a far cry from the philosophy being developed at the centre, which supports natural materials and experiences. So Cathy and her team have established a sensory garden in an area off the playground. 'We've just added lots of trees,



lots of herbs, lots of things hanging in the trees, and a path so the babies can have a little crawl or a little walk in that lovely sensory area', Cathy says. 'It has become a real place of discovery for the children. The children also like to sit in the fork of the tree and see the world from a different perspective.'

The educators also have plans for more work to integrate the outdoor environment and the educational program. 'I'm really keen to have an outside art area off the preschool rooms, so children can actually be inspired by nature and respond to it while they're being creative', says Cathy. 'And we're really lucky to have an educator here from Scotland. She's experienced a forest school, so we're a little bit excited about that. We're looking at ways we can fit a forest school program into what we do here, ways that we can make it fit our centre experience and our Australian experience.'

And beyond the opportunities for learning and teaching, Cathy says the outdoor space at the centre simply feels good. 'For me, environments are not only about what you do in them, but how you feel when you're in them', she says. 'So that's really significant for me and it's what I love about our outdoor environment. It promotes emotional wellbeing, which is really important for children, families and educators alike.'

In the next case study, we visit Canberra's oldest preschool.

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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