

The most important step in Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) is self-study, as it involves staff, families, children and management examining current practices in the service and considering why things are done in certain ways. It is important to remember that practices in the service are guided by beliefs, values and attitudes about children, families, child rearing and education. Therefore the starting point for effective self-study is to describe these beliefs, values and attitudes in a statement of service philosophy that guides interactions, relationships, practices, policies, procedures, children's experiences and the service environment.

Developing a philosophy

A service philosophy is far more than a mission or business statement. The content of a philosophy guides practice and provides a clear vision for the service. This means that it must contain information that is specific enough to guide the day-to-day decisions made by staff and

Diagram 1

1. Philosophy, beliefs, values, attitudes
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2. Informs understanding of staff, children, families and the community
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3. Leads to practices, relationships, policies and procedures

management. Diagram 1 shows the way in which the philosophy is central to service operations, shapes the identity of the service and helps to inspire the work of staff and create a service culture of self-study and reflection.

As the philosophy describes the service values, it is important that staff,

families, community members and children are involved in its development. In this way, the philosophy can help to draw stakeholders together as a community. The challenge is balancing the variety of ideas, goals and values of all stakeholders. Meeting this challenge requires collaboration, consultation and the ability to acknowledge different viewpoints. It will involve:

- Reflecting on personal beliefs and values and exploring how these are shaped by family, friends, colleagues and experiences
- Considering what the central focus of the service is. For example, a particular theoretical approach, mixed age grouping, technology or environmental issues
- Listening to children to gain their ideas and perspectives
- Listening to and considering other points of view
- Learning from colleagues, families, children and community members

Involving families, children and community members in philosophy development can be difficult. However, their involvement will help develop a philosophy that reflects the whole service as a community. Discussing the following questions with staff can support them to involve families, children and the community in developing a philosophy:

- How do staff get to know and understand families and the values families have for their children?

- What role does the service play in the community?
- What are significant issues in the community?
- How does the community see the service?
- How do staff listen to children and find out what is important to them?

Using the philosophy

The philosophy should be used as a daily guide for all aspects of practice. As Diagram 1 shows, this includes developing an 'understanding of staff, children, families and the community'. Therefore, self-study should identify key statements in the philosophy and distinguish understanding that each staff member has of these statements. This could involve:

- Identifying key statements in the philosophy
- Developing a series of questions to guide discussion about the key statement. These could include:
 - What does the statement mean?
 - How does the statement help me to understand children, families, community and colleagues?
 - Is my understanding the same or different to others? Is this significant?
- Documenting the discussion and referring back to it throughout self-study

An example of using the philosophy

Staff identified the following extract as being a key statement in their philosophy: *We value the social nature of children's learning.* The following questions were then discussed by staff:

- What does the 'social nature of learning' mean and how does it occur?
- Do all staff have the same understanding of this statement? If not, in what ways do their understandings differ? How do these differences affect the way children are understood?
- How would you expect to see learning occurring socially in young children?
- Does this statement apply to adults as well as to children? If so, how?

Staff found that documenting the resulting discussion helped to clarify their understanding. They also found the documentation useful to refer to when discussing the philosophy with families and new service staff.

An example of linking understandings and practice

In discussions about the key philosophy statement the following staff understandings were identified:

- Children seek out others to share experiences and discuss their points of view
- Children are influenced by the views and knowledge of others
- When discussing an idea children become enthused when others show an interest and offer further ideas
- Children's ideas often change and grow as they try them out and discuss them with others
- Even after working alone children will often wish to share and discuss their finished creation or experience with someone else
- These points relate to adults as well as children

Staff found that these could affect the following Principles in the *QIAS Quality Practices Guide*:

- 1.3 Staff initiate and maintain respectful communication with each child
- 1.6 Staff communicate effectively to promote respect and professional teamwork
- 3.3 The program assists each child to be a successful learner
- 4.1 Staff encourage each child to make choices and participate in play

Staff then considered the following questions about service practice:

- How is the space arranged to assist children working in groups?
- How does the choice and arrangement of materials invite children to share and use them together?
- How are children supported to form social groups? How are the contributions of each child to the group acknowledged and valued?
- How are children supported to work on projects together? How does each child influence the direction of the project?
- What value is given to staff observing the learning processes children are using in social situations?
- How do staff involve children in decision making and use their ideas as the basis for the program?
- What value is placed on adults modelling working together and valuing each others ideas?

The philosophy and everyday practice

After staff have identified their individual understanding of key statements it is important to recognise the relationship and constant interplay between their understanding and everyday practice. Staff understandings of key philosophy statements establish the common ground on which practice is formed and affect the way staff:

- Relate to others
- Arrange the environment
- Construct procedures and policies
- Ask questions
- Involve others in decision making

Finding the relationships between understandings and everyday practice may involve:

- Using understandings of the key statements in the philosophy to examine their impact upon practice
- Linking these understandings and practices to Principles and indicators in the *QIAS Quality Practices Guide*

Evaluating the philosophy

It is important that the philosophy is regularly evaluated to ensure it continues to include the beliefs and values of all service stakeholders. This could involve:

- Referring to the questions that were discussed during the development of the philosophy
- Re-examining these questions in light of new experiences
- Discussing observations of children, interactions with families and current knowledge of issues in the community
- Deciding how the philosophy may need to be changed

Self-study will continue to challenge staff and provide them with new insights. It is important for staff to take the opportunity to learn from everyday interactions and experiences with children, families and the community and to use these to reshape their thinking about their practices. Revisiting and reflecting on practice allows everyone to be active in rebuilding their understandings about working in children's services.

Further Information

- National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc. (2005). *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Quality Practices Guide*. 1st ed. National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc: NSW.
- Ruchel, J. (1995) 'Becoming a Learning Organisation'. *Every Child*. Vol 1 (6) Australian Early Childhood Association Inc: ACT.



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