In the second case study in our three-part series on ‘Educational program and practice’, we visit an outside school hours care service in northern Melbourne and find out how the children participate in planning the program.

‘Using each child’s knowledge and ideas in the program’

In the second case study in our three-part series on ‘Educational program and practice’, we visit an outside school hours care service in northern Melbourne and find out how the children participate in planning the program.

Case study No.2  YMCA Craigieburn West OSHC
Melbourne, Victoria
NQS rating: Exceeding the National Quality Standard

‘The biggest benefit is that the children are happy. They feel important, they feel like their opinion matters and they belong totally to the room, to the whole service—they’re their own little community.’

YMCA Craigieburn West, in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, shares a campus with Aitken Creek Primary School, where it provides long day care, before and after school care and vacation care in its own purpose-built centre. The centre has been open for only three years, but with ratings of Exceeding the NQS in each of the seven Quality Areas, the hard work by the team of educators is already paying off.

Tracey McGill, the OSHC Coordinator, has been closely involved in shaping school-age programs for the Aitken Creek students for the past two-and-a-half years. She arrived at the centre when it was only a few months old and has watched the OSHC program grow from 10 children to more than 50, spread across two locations on the campus. ‘I thought, “I’d like that challenge”,’ Tracey says. ‘It was a new service, getting it all up and running, that was a bit exciting.’

For Tracey, the key to providing high-quality school-age care programs is drawing out and building on the children’s knowledge and ideas. ‘I think it’s really important that they are involved,’ Tracey says. ‘You can’t just say, “I can observe them and see what they’re doing, so I’ll plan for that.” My philosophy is that they need to be involved for their own benefit; it’s how they learn.’
Tracey and her team use several ways of gauging the children’s knowledge and interests and collecting suggestions for experiences. ‘We have student surveys that are done annually,’ she explains. ‘Obviously, we’re also going around and chatting to the children. We quite often will plan in the room—I’ll have a blank planning sheet and we’ll talk to children individually and as a group about what sort of activities they would like. We change that fortnightly, as part of the program.’ The children can also flip through resource books, looking for topics and activities.

In addition, when the educators get together for planning meetings, they share observations about the children’s knowledge. After recent bushfires in Victoria, the educators focused on the experiences of one particular child, whose father is a fire fighter and developed new elements of the program as a result, including teaching the children about evacuation procedures during bushfire emergencies.

‘So it’s a lot of sitting down, chatting to the children, finding out what they want,’ says Tracey. ‘And I think they really value the fact that they can ask us for an activity and we actually do it. So we’re talking with them, not at them.’

Tracey describes the Craigieburn West OSHC program as being substantially child-led, with intentional teaching ‘blending in’ quite naturally. One of the intentional elements created by the educators last year was a cross-cultural cooking program, which drew on the children’s knowledge and then extended it. ‘We took all the cultures in the room and a few more, and each week we did the cooking from that culture,’ Tracey says. ‘We picked out and talked to the children about what’s their favourite meal and we had a go at making it—I don’t know if it tasted quite right, but we had a go!’ The educators followed up by looking at maps of the world with the children and talking about other aspects of the cultures in focus.

The OSHC program at Craigieburn West has also changed in response to rapidly growing usage. With more than 50 children regularly attending after school care this year, including an increasing number of Prep students, the educators have split the program across two sites for part of the afternoon. Older children begin

the program at the school, using the first 30–60 minutes to use the school’s resources, including laptops and iPads™, and to play outdoors. The younger students begin the program at the YMCA site, and are joined by the older students once the numbers have dropped a little, to avoid ‘congestion in the room, Tracey explains.

Tracey says the environment at Craigieburn West OSHC is designed to meet the range of needs in a multi-age group. ‘We have an area set up with a lounge and a gazebo, so you’ve got a quiet area,’ she says. ‘There’s quite a vast range of books, so the children can sit there and have a look through the books, they can read them—and we’ll sit and read to them as well!’
To Tracey’s surprise, one of the most popular spaces—for all ages—has been the home corner. ‘We didn’t have it when we first started,’ she explains. ‘When we introduced it, you found that everybody went and that they all did role play. Boys, girls, it doesn’t matter, they’re all there. We just have sheer curtaining and they use that for dress-ups. They ended up doing a play of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves” last year—that was just an impromptu thing and they all got into it, which was really cool.’

Using the children’s own knowledge and ideas has clear benefits for both the children and the educators, according to Tracey. ‘The biggest benefit is that the children are happy. They feel important, they feel like their opinion matters and they belong totally to the room, to the whole service—they’re their own little community.’

For school age services wanting to incorporate children’s knowledge and ideas more deeply into their programs, Tracey suggests that ‘follow-through’ is critically important. ‘You’ve got to not only talk to the children, but you’ve actually got to let them know that what they’re saying is important, and follow through with it,’ she says. ‘Get to know your children, but really listen to them and then follow through with that and implement the ideas that they come up with.’ If their suggestions are placed continuously on the backburner, ‘eventually the children will stop asking.’

In the next case study in this series, 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.