



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



The educational leader

Setting the scene

The *National Quality Framework* (NQF) has highlighted the role of the educational leader in the National Law and Regulations relating to the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) which provide the regulatory framework for most long day care, preschool/ kindergarten, family day care and outside school hours care services, (ACECQA, 2011, p. 7). Under the Regulations, the Approved (service) Provider is required to appoint an educational leader to '... guide other educators in their planning and reflection, and mentor colleagues in their implementation practices' (ACECQA, 2011, p. 85).

The thinking behind this focus on leadership is guided by recent research demonstrating the impact of educational leadership on outcomes for children.

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study (Sylva et al.) is one of the largest and most significant studies examining the effects of early childhood settings on children's learning and development.

In the follow-up study that focused specifically on leadership effectiveness, Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) found that:

In the most effective settings better leadership was characterised by a clear vision, especially with regard to pedagogy and curriculum (p. 13).

Early childhood settings often pay attention to administrative and management leadership; however, these studies reinforce the need for close attention to curriculum and pedagogy and the importance of having a designated leader in this area. This newsletter, which explores the role of the educational leader, is based on some of the experiences of a small group of early childhood educators who have been meeting regularly over the past two years to discuss ideas about their leadership and share their successes and challenges. The group comprises educational leaders from UTS Childcare—Blackfriars, Magic Pudding and Kids Campus, the University of NSW (UNSW)—Tigger's Honeypot, and Marrickville Council's Cavendish Street and Tillman Park Early Learning Centres. I have been fortunate to be the academic mentor for this group and enjoyed the opportunity to work with such inspiring educators to better understand the relationship between leadership and learning outcomes for children.

Who is the educational leader?

While the NQF requires one person to be formally appointed to the position of educational leader, it does not specify who that person should be. Approved providers are able to make decisions about this position based on:

- the setting context, the size of the setting and the type of service
- the relative strengths and needs of educators, and
- the qualifications, experience and personal qualities of educators who might take on this role.

The nominated supervisor might be a natural choice for this position but there may be another educator with particular qualities and a passion for curriculum who might have more time and energy to devote to the position.



Example 1:

Kelly is the teacher at Cavendish Street Early Learning Centre and has for some years operated as the centre's educational leader. She is supported in this role by the nominated supervisor and the management team at Marrickville Council. The nominated supervisor at the centre takes responsibility for administrative and management leadership and is the mandated educational leader under the Regulations. Kelly's role is to be a guide and support to the team in developing curriculum. The centre is a 40-place multi-age setting with children from birth to five years sharing the rooms of an historic house in Sydney's inner west. Over the past year Kelly has focused on embedding the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) into all aspects of the centre's planning and documentation. She works alongside educators in the children's rooms, meets with individual educators in their planning time and guides small groups of educators to tease out ideas or reflect together on children's records. Her role has evolved to make the most of an allocation of programming and admin time provided for Kelly to support the whole team. One of the ways Kelly supported educators recently was in planning for the centre's annual art show. Kelly recognised that the art show in 2011 offered an opportunity for educators to think critically about the learning children gain from their involvement with the arts. Kelly raised key issues for all educators to think about as they planned with a focus on EYLF Learning Outcome 5: *Children are effective communicators*. Educators were asked to engage deeply with the EYLF and consider the learning potential of art experiences rather than focusing on the final product—the display of art for parents and community. Having an educational leader to guide this project resulted in a deeper and more meaningful engagement with children's learning.

Qualities of an educational leader

Ideally the educational leader needs to be someone with qualifications in early childhood education. It generally makes sense for that person to have acquired the greatest knowledge of education theories and research. However, more broadly, when appointing an educational leader consideration should be given to an educator's:

- knowledge of theories of learning and development—someone who has an interest in reading widely and sharing information with other educators in bite-sized chunks
- knowledge of curriculum approaches and the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in particular settings or with particular children
- access to current research about curriculum and a desire to guide others in reflecting on their practice
- knowledge of individual children and learning styles so that approaches can be differentiated to meet complex needs of children from a range of backgrounds and abilities, and
- personal qualities and a willingness to listen as well as coach, mentor and reflect alongside their team.



Example 2

Sally is the nominated supervisor and designated educational leader at UTS Magic Pudding in inner city Sydney. While she is the designated educational leader, she is currently working closely with one of the other teachers, Kylie, to make the most of the skills, knowledge and interests of another experienced educator in the setting. Together they have a range of strengths and can take responsibility for different aspects of the educational program. While Sally is currently focusing on developing the idea of 'sustained shared thinking' (see Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004) particularly with educators in the babies' room, Kylie is focusing on quality routines and drawing educators' attention to the EYLF Principles, Practices and Learning Outcomes as they apply to their everyday organisation of routines. The ideas about which areas to focus on have come from team discussions as the centre develops its *Quality Improvement Plan* (QIP).



Creating a shared vision for children's learning

A key aspect of the role of educational leader is to create an inspirational vision for children's learning and curriculum collaboratively. A clearly articulated vision for learning can motivate and connect educators to work toward shared goals for children and their learning. Using the EYLF as a starting point for discussions, the big ideas of Belonging, Being and Becoming are often used to guide thinking about providing for the best educational outcomes for children. As well, understanding how each of the EYLF Principles and Practices contributes to a high-quality learning experience builds a collective set of values and agreed approaches.

Example 3

Sylvia is the nominated supervisor and educational leader at UNSW Tigger's Honeypot Childcare Centre in eastern Sydney. Up until recently, Tigger's Honeypot operated as two separate, but co-located services—one providing long day care and the other occasional care. They shared the same building with an interconnecting veranda. In 2010, the University made the decision to combine the two services and operate them as one early childhood setting. Sylvia was appointed the director of the combined setting and immediately recognised the need to unite the two staff teams and create a sense of agreed direction for the new Tigger's Honeypot. Many months were spent in conversation and debate about a new vision for this setting. It was timely that the EYLF had just been released as it provided the opportunity to reflect on all aspects of the two programs. The imperative that the *National Quality Standard* would begin in 2012 meant that it was essential to be operating as a united service and so much time was spent reaching agreement on a shared vision for the new entity. One aspect of the program that has been carefully considered is that of the daily diary and the role it plays both in communicating to families, and as evidence for the NQS of curriculum decision making and planning for children's learning. Ciara, one of the teachers, explained that centre staff decided that for the immediate future the qualified educators in each room would take responsibility for writing up the daily diary (this used to be a shared task with all educators contributing) to enable strong connections to be made between the EYLF and evidence of children's learning. Rather than describing daily events, the qualified educators endeavour to reflect the *curriculum decisions and learning* that is happening across the day in documentation. Establishing desired standards for documents such as the daily diary required each of the team leaders to take on a new challenge and demonstrate leadership in their room. The long-term plan is that each team leader will act as a mentor to other educators in producing documentation that demonstrates a strong commitment to providing *evidence of children's learning* in communication with families. This is quite different to simply reporting on the events of the day to families.





In conclusion

The role of educational leader will vary from setting to setting according to the context and the needs and desires of the setting. A strong vision, which guides pedagogical decisions and a shared approach about how to achieve best learning outcomes for children, will enable the educational leader to effectively unite a team of educators to work towards a consistent approach to curriculum. As the examples in this newsletter show, the role of the educational leader responds to where a setting is currently at and what it aims to achieve. It is about building on current strengths but also about addressing weaknesses and concerns relating to curriculum. Ultimately the role of the educational leader is to motivate other educators to achieve the very best learning outcomes for young children.

Sandra Cheeseman
Newsletter author

References and further reading

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Biography

Sandra Cheeseman is a lecturer in early childhood at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. She was a member of the writing team that developed the EYLF on behalf of the Australian Government.

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Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2012 series.



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