

# The Educational Leader Role (I)

## Do we place enough value on the responsibility the role has in the delivery of quality educational programs?

In Australia early childhood standards and regulations have established the requirement for every service to delegate an 'Educational Leader'. The Education and Care National Regulations 2011 (Reg118) don't give a lot of guidance on the role, simply stating the position will be filled with 'a suitably qualified and experienced educator...[who will] lead the development and implementation of educational programs in the service". However, the National Quality Standards (ACECQA, 2018) places a lot of emphasis and onus on the role of the educational leader (EL). As these are our quality guide in the early childhood sector, we must then view the role of the educational leader to be much more complex than someone who simply leads the programs.

## Why ask the question?

Anyone who knows anything about the provision of quality educational programs knows this entails a lot more than ensuring a quality documentation process. Providing truly high quality educational programs requires consistently strong and intentional practice. Program and practice make up the first area of the National Quality Standard (NQS) because they go together and are furthermore inextricably linked with the other 6 quality areas. For this reason, an educational leader must have a good working knowledge of all 7 quality areas and be influential over the provision of high standard practice *and* documentation. These responsibilities will allow the EL to meet the quality standards; but to achieve an exceeding rating they will need to go above and beyond through mentoring, driving reflective practice and change, leading collaboration and advocacy and much more.

In a recent Facebook poll surveying 80 Australian educational leaders, it was determined that of the ELs surveyed 47.5% only received a few hours non-

contact time a week to implement the role. Even more shockingly, 24% of educators reported they didn't receive any non-contact time at all to dedicate specifically to the educational leader role. The latest NQF Snapshot (ACECQA, 2018) shows that the top elements in which services are receiving 'not met' at the Assessment and Rating visit are the 'assessment and planning cycle' (1.3.1) and 'critical reflection' (1.3.2). Not far behind is the element 'educational leadership' (7.2.2). Thus it is important to ask the question – are we valuing and supporting our educational leaders in Australian services to lead quality educational programs and practice which promote best outcomes for children? One of the most important ways we can support the EL is to ensure the person has enough non-contact time to complete their role to their greatest potential. For the purpose of this article we will examine some recommended techniques for quality educational leadership and how much non-contact time would be needed by the EL to implement these strategies effectively. Estimated times will be based on the average service size of 60 children per day and a team of 15-20 educators.

## Strategies for effective implementation of the educational leader role

### Promoting a culture of critical reflection

There are many ways an educational leader can drive critical reflection in the service, but the first is perhaps the most overlooked guidance in the NQS – providing a platform for collaboration and professional debate.

Of course, many services provide an online platform for this which is certainly helpful, but it is also important to allow opportunities for educators to engage in this practice on a face to face level which will incite scaffolding of each other's knowledge and skills. One way to achieve this would be to engage in weekly meetings with the leaders of the service (ideally, we'd like to include everyone but that simply isn't a financially viable option for most services) to discuss current educational events, trends and theories of practice. To truly allow for meaningful discussion on any two topics this would mean the EL (and all room leaders at minimum) would require 1hr non-contact time each week.

To effectively promote a culture of reflection and drive best practice, the educational leader would need to ensure they have time to engage in educational research which can guide the reflective practice at the service. They need to be up to date on all the current theories emerging in child development. The greater their knowledge of practice, the higher the quality of practice. They also have to lead by example if they would like other educators to be engaging in the idea of the 'teacher as a researcher' promoted in the Reggio Emilia Approach founded by Loris Malaguzzi (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). Part of being an effective educational leader is being innovative and completing your own data collection and research to prove and disprove ideas. To do all this well the EL would require a minimum 1hr non-contact time each week.

Demoralisation is high in the early childhood sector and to promote enthusiasm, drive change, and keep inspiration levels high mentorship programs can be extremely effective. In a successful mentorship program all educators would choose a mentor who they enjoy collaborating with and would engage in mentorship meetings and the setting of professional goals. The educational leader would be responsible for driving such a program through the service, ensuring everyone is participating. It is also likely they will be chosen as several educators' mentor. To drive an effective mentorship program the EL would require at least 1hr non-contact time per week.

## **Leading the design and implementation of educational programs**

This is the strategy most services are focusing on, and although the term 'educational program' really refers to a combination of things including routines and practice, let's just focus for now on the pedagogical documentation. To ensure the planning cycle is being observed to a high-quality standard the EL will need to support educators around observation, analysis of learning, curriculum planning, reflection of children's learning, and the planning of intentional extensions. Support around documentation should be consistent and ongoing. To ensure the EL has time to talk to each room about their programs and any issues which may be arising, they would need to be provided a minimum of 1hr non-contact time each week.

Part of leading the implementation of educational programs which has been observed since before the introduction of the National Quality Standard, is what is commonly known as 'program audits'. The terminology here is perhaps no longer appropriate as assessing the educational programs should now be about more than simply ticking boxes to ensure everyone is completing their programs. Instead the EL should be providing constructive feedback on the program design and execution. A better way of viewing these may be as 'curriculum assessments'. To complete a meaningful curriculum assessment the EL would need to read samples of the program, assess the observations against the outcomes of the EYLF, provide documented feedback on each step of the planning cycle and allow a chance for each responsible educator to reflect and ask any questions which may arise through the process. With a focus on quality over quantity, curriculum assessments like this would need to be completed at least once a quarter for each room in the service. This would require the EL to have at least one full day non-contact time each quarter, averaging approximately 40 minutes non-contact time each week.

## **Contributing to a process of self-assessment and quality improvement**

As a recognised leader in the service, the EL should provide contributions to the service's self-assessment and quality improvement processes, particularly around QAI (which again, is much bigger than the documented programs). Self-assessment can be performed in part through the strategies listed under critical reflection; however there needs to be a more formalised leadership approach to this also. One way is to complete quarterly mock assessments. This would require the EL to observe and take note of all the practice surrounding quality area one against the elements in the NQS. To be a truly effective EL one would also need to focus on the practice around physical environments (QA3), relationships with children (QA5), and collaborative partnerships with families and communities (QA6). Like curriculum assessments this would require the EL to be provided at least one day non-contact time each quarter, averaging approximately 40 minutes non-contact time each week.

One cannot consider themselves a true contributor to the quality improvement

process unless they are helping to develop and drive the quality improvement plan itself. This means they would need to be taking all the information they are gathering through their process of reflection and assessment and using it to inform the quality improvement plan. The EL should not only be writing in the plan, but helping to, or even leading the development and implementation of steps to achieve their quality goals. This strategy involves the writing of the plan, the gathering of evidence and feedback, as well as driving the changes that are to occur. To meaningfully contribute to this process the EL would require at least 1hr non-contact time each week.

## **Additional responsibilities**

In addition to the aforementioned strategies, there are a range of different responsibilities which are often added to the EL's role throughout the year. For example, family information evenings are generally expected to be driven by the educational leader. And the end of the year brings with it the transition to school information evening and transition to school statements, not to mention graduations and parties. Furthermore, there are the expectations placed around Assessment and Rating in which the EL will be expected to be able to answer a range of questions around program and practice and the implementation at the service. They are more than likely going to be involved in policy review related to program and practice, as well as the development and review of a meaningful service philosophy. It goes without saying that the strategies listed do not cover the entirety of the EL responsibilities. For the sake of argument let's say the EL would require an additional 1 hr non contact time each week for any added responsibilities or issues which arise.

## **Conclusion**

The strategies listed above are based on the bare minimum that is generally expected of an educational leader within services and throughout the NQS. It is important to recognise that to go above and beyond and truly achieve an exceeding quality level, the EL would require a lot more support than the time listed above. However, for the purpose of simply completing the educational leader role effectively in a small to average size service, an absolute minimum of

7hrs and 20 minutes (or one full day) non-contact time each week is required.

As mentioned previously 24% of ELs surveyed said they didn't receive any non-contact time at all to fulfil the responsibilities outlined. We also saw 47.5% receiving only a few hours each week to complete the role. There were very few ELs that were given a full day to effectively implement the role or additional time to take it even further. Furthermore, the ELs surveyed were not asked to specify their service size. Any service with over 20 educators employed would automatically need to provide more than this one day non-contact time, to simply achieve the strategies listed. It becomes clear that we are not recognising the importance of the prominent role, which, given they are the *educational leader* for an early childhood *education* provider, seems somewhat ludicrous.

Perhaps it is due to the fact that this role is not recognised by the national award. But unfortunately the award has never really supported our standards within the sector. It does not reflect the expectations placed on educators and we know that. We should be defining roles and responsibilities against the National Quality Standard and Early Years Learning Framework. If we were doing so, we would be forced to recognise the educational leader to the degree the role deserves and actually demands. Or perhaps this simply reflects the lack of import shown to early childhood education, despite knowing that children's brain development is most sensitive in the first five years of life. Either way, there needs to be a shift in focus so this most significant and exciting role is supported appropriately in Australian services, ensuring best outcomes for Australian children.

## References

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2017) *National Quality Standards*. ACECQA: Sydney.

Education and Care Service National Regulations 2011 (Aus).

Edwards, C.P., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. E. (1998). *The Hundred Languages of Children*. Greenwich, Conn: Ablex Pub. Corp.