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What was the background to the development of the position of national education leader at ACECQA?

The role of educational leader in an EC setting was first introduced in 2012 in the National Quality Standard (NQS) and underpinning the National Law and Regulations. We have long had positional leadership roles such as director and coordinator, but for the first time the important role of educational leader was recognised, acknowledged and embedded in the National Quality Framework (NQF). As a part of that commitment to educational leadership, the ACECQA board and CEO identified the need for someone to take on such a role nationally as national education leader at ACECQA.

I was appointed in early 2014 as the first national education leader. This role has evolved over time in response to changing needs of the sector and government agencies. The key emphasis of the role is building a shared understanding of the expectations and requirements of the educational leader role as outlined in the NQS and underpinning regulatory standards. There is a strong focus on supporting educational leaders in their important role.

More broadly, I work collaboratively with our colleagues in state and territory governments and the Australian government to build a shared understanding of the expectations of the NQS, underpinning regulatory standards and learning frameworks. The focus is on working collaboratively to support educators, service leaders, approved providers and others to meet or exceed the standards and continually improve quality for children and families.

I draw from my experiences in the education and care sector (now spanning more than 30 years), which have included a range of roles in preschool and long day care, including as a service director; being an assessor of programs and services for both the government and a community association; undertaking a range of funding, policy, program, training and leadership roles in government; and, for a short time, being a sessional academic with a university.

I feel very privileged to be part of the small group of skilled and knowledgeable officers from around Australia who worked on the development of the NQS and the related policy and assessment and rating tools, guides and resources as well as the training and testing program of authorised officers.

What is your vision for the role of educational leaders in EC settings?

I think an important part of the educational leader role (and indeed our collective responsibility) is to build confidence and empower educators to discuss their practice and think about how theory can inform their practice. I work collaboratively with colleagues in government and peak organisations to provide educators and leaders with access to information, resources and professional development opportunities. It is part of my vision that the EC profession proudly showcases and leads the way in terms of best practice in education and care.

Qualifications and knowledge of children's learning and development along with attitudes, dispositions and leadership attributes are all key qualities for educational leaders. I think it is important for educational leaders to:

- be inclusive

- identify and acknowledge strengths of educators and build on those strengths
- empower educators and identify opportunities for them to succeed as well as opportunities to build on these strengths and extend their thinking
- be open to learning and other ways of knowing and doing and keeping abreast of changes, research and best practice approaches
- drive continuous improvement by setting a positive example
- mentor, support, inspire, encourage, affirm and challenge pedagogy and practice in the role of a critical friend.

What are some of the key issues currently educational leaders are dealing with?

Importantly, effective educational leaders are skilful change managers. Change is inevitable if we want to move forward and learn from our experiences. I think one of the key challenges at the moment for educational leaders is supporting educators to meet the elements and standards in Quality Area 1—Educational Program and Practice. NQF Snapshot data suggests this is the most challenging area for services and educators to achieve, particularly the requirements related to critical reflection and the cycle of planning. Helping and empowering educators to identify strategies to document children's learning and development in a way that is meaningful and relevant, and importantly achievable, is imperative.

Recognising that documentation is just one part of the planning cycle, educational leaders can play a crucial role in supporting educators to develop skills and strategies to collect, analyse and interpret information and use it to reflect on their pedagogy and inform further learning opportunities for children. A key part of this process is supporting educators to understand the value of critical reflection—what it is, how to do it and how it contributes to quality outcomes for children and families. A great place for educational leaders and educators to begin is looking at the reflective questions in the approved learning frameworks. For example, in the EYLF, engaging in a discussion around 'Who is advantaged when I work in this way?' and 'Who is disadvantaged?' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13).

While we caution about causal links, the latest NQF Snapshot data results indicate a correlation between educational leadership and Quality Area 1, which focuses on the educational program and practice. A high percentage of services that met the element relating to educational leadership (7.1.4) received a rating of 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding NQS' for educational program and practice (NQS Quality Area 1). I believe these assessment and rating results highlight the importance of the educational leader's role and the impact they can have on the educational program and practice as well as the value of their work within services and communities.

I would like to finish by congratulating all those who are leading educational programs, practice, research and reforms across Australia, whether they be working in education and care services, regulatory authorities, peak organisations, training institutions or universities; and whether they are professional development providers or myriad other individuals working to support the NQF vision: all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation.