

# LEADING EXCELLENT PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADER



## BACKGROUND

**Acknowledging the link between leadership and high quality practice, the National Quality Framework (NQF) requires the appointment of an Educational Leader to all education and care services.**

A group of educators from the Early Years sector came together for a 12 month period to research the role of the Lead Educator and how this could work best within our services. Funded by the Professional Support Coordinator for Queensland and undertaken in collaboration with Queensland University of Technology and TAFE Queensland (Brisbane), the project involved educators from a range of education and care services, including centre-based care, family day care and school age care. Participants met on a monthly basis as a community of learners to share knowledge skills and to listen and critically reflect on the perspectives of others and to plan, implement and share their research.

This poster details the journey of our action research into the Educational Leader's role. Current policy and literature states the Educational Leader leads the overall educational program within a service. (Cheeseman, 2012; ECA & NQF PLP, 2012) but there is little guidance as to how this might work within services. Our project sought to address this gap, asking: What does the role look like in our centre now? How might it look and work in the future? How can this role be used to embed best practices and ongoing learning within our centre?

As members of the project, we adopted Moss's (2006) image of 'educator as researcher'. Within this context, the educator is constantly seeking deeper understanding and new knowledge. Research is seen to be part of everyday practice and can be conducted by everyone. "It is a habit of mind, an attitude that can be developed or neglected. It constructs new knowledge, it makes for critical thinking" (Moss, 2006, p.36). *The Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009) identifies reflective practice and ongoing learning as an underpinning principle for quality practice and places emphasis on the power of collaborative reflective practice to enhance thinking and practice. This necessitates a collaborative approach involving all the stakeholders, (children, educators, families and management). Reflecting on the image of the educator as a researcher and current policy expectations, we decided upon this research focus because we were interested in identifying ways to embed the Educational Leader role to support continuous quality improvement and high quality outcomes for all stakeholders.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While the Educational Leader is to be a suitably qualified and experienced educator, the role is not clearly defined. It is also recognised that this role will look and work differently in different ECEC services and may change over time as service strengths, interests and needs change. Our overarching focus was:

**What is the role of the Educational Leader and how can it be implemented in our service?**

As the project progressed, our research became centred around the following key questions:

- ⇒ How do educators within the service see the role and how this role will assist them?
- ⇒ How are other services implementing the role?
- ⇒ What are the opportunities and the challenges in implementing this role in our service?
- ⇒ What are the best ways to lead and motivate educators?
- ⇒ How do we embed professional conversations that support reflection and ongoing learning?

## RESEARCH METHOD

Our project applied an action research approach to learning and improved practice. As McAteer (2013) observes, the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice. Following MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) action research cycle, our project involved planning, thinking, action, evaluation and critical reflection to inform practice change and continuous quality improvement.

There are 12 educators within the service, working in a range of roles with diverse qualifications and experience within the early childhood field, and all agreed to participate in the project. Key steps included:

- ⇒ Two senior leaders participated in the group learning days (6 full days and two core learning days); discussions centred on the role of Educational Leader, critical reflection, team strengths and challenges and motivation.
- ⇒ Surveys were given to our educators seeking their responses to the following questions: *What expectations do you have of the role? How can the Educational Leader support you? What do you see is an Educational Leader role?*
- ⇒ A literature review was undertaken on the role of Educational Leader.
- ⇒ Collaborative development of a Position Description for the Educational Leader to be reviewed annually to ensure relevance as centre requirements change.
- ⇒ Professional networking with other educators and services during the research project, to seek information about their educational leader roles, ways to strengthen and embed this role and how some challenges were solved. Networking and listening to ideas that have worked in other services – listening to ideas and thinking about how this would work with us
- ⇒ Seeking to strengthen adult learning within the centre, we surveyed team members about their learning styles and preferences. We used Fleming's (2001) Visual Auditory Kinesthetic (VAK) model of learning. According to this model, most people possess a dominant or preferred learning style, however some people have a mixed and evenly balanced blend of the three styles. At a team meeting, educators answered a questionnaire (Chilslett & Chapman, 2005) about their learning styles devised
- ⇒ Starting Professional Conversations with educators to promote learning, reflection and discussion about our practice.

## FINDINGS

Our project developed over the course of the action research. We sought to define the role of Educational Leader and how to implement this role in a high quality service To begin with we explored other educators' views on educational leadership. Key issues were: **support, leadership and mentoring.** Defining the role was also important for all stakeholders. Issues included: Time and how this support would occur - would it be weekly, daily or monthly and how long? How would this support look? Findings informed the development of our Educational Leader Position Description.

Research and reflection over the course of the project resulted in some changes to our research focus, including the identification of other areas in which the Educational Leader could support professional learning (e.g. team and individual motivation, communication methods).

We used Fleming's (2001) VAK model to get to know our team more, our individual and collective strengths and needs, as well as acknowledging that people learn in different ways. We then looked at how these strengths could be used to motivate and support learning and improved practice. This is an ongoing process.

We looked at ways to strengthen Professional Conversations with and among educators, and sought to identify the possible barriers that prevent all to participate in these conversations. During team meetings, tables were taken away and seating was placed in a circle to create a more open space for conversation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Reflecting back on the action research, the role of the Educational Leader seems less daunting and more of an exciting new challenge - one that will greatly enhance outcomes for all stakeholders. It was good to explore this topic with other educators and services. When all educators met for the first time, we shared views and experiences relating to the actual and desired role of Educational Leader, and enablers and challenges in implementing this role.

As we started this research, our service simply wanted to define the role of Educational Leader and develop a supporting Position Description. But the project expanded to look at how the position could support our team of educators to enhance their professional knowledge and skills.

We explored the way our educators (as adults) learn. Completing the VAK questionnaire, we found that the majority of our educators were visual and kinaesthetic learners. Drawing on this knowledge and the principles of adult learning - intrinsic motivation, seeing the connections, reflecting, mutual respect and cooperation, we are striving to create a supportive learning environment for all staff. Professional discussions then led into how children also have different learning styles and the implications of this for effective teaching and learning within the centre.

Reflecting on the need for continuous quality improvement, the role of the Educational Leader requires knowledge of learning and development, curriculum approaches, how to access current research, individual child and adult learning styles as well as willingness and capacity to mentor and reflect with other team members. This role is seen as an integral factor within a quality ECEC service

## MOST SIGNIFICANT LEARNINGS

- To successfully implement the Educational Leader role it is vital for the role to be a supportive mentoring role for all educators.
- There needs to be sufficient time allotted to support and mentor educators.
- Supporting educators in accordance with their learning styles promotes deeper learning and improved practice.
- The journey towards best practice continues and therefore the Educational Leader role is forever changing.
- It is important to keep challenging ideas and ways of working.

Appointment of **Educational Leader** (separate from nominated supervisor)

Dedicate time allowed for **mentoring** and supporting educators.

**Professional development** – focusing on team skills and motivating educators



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Nash Street Child Care Centre



# EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS A TOOL FOR EXCELLENCE IN PEDAGOGY



## BACKGROUND

The focus of our study was to make the Educational Leader role a meaningful and valuable strategy to support and improve quality practice in a Family Day Care context.

Effective Leadership can drive change and increase individual capabilities and internal motivation to excel. Effective leadership grows new leaders benefitting the entire team. The team and individuals continue to grow and are always evolving and experimenting.

The theoretical perspectives that influenced our thinking about this topic included:

- Dewey's meaning of 'purpose' – *There is freedom and power in framing purpose* and initiating action on those purposes (Creating the Vision Statement voiced our purpose, actioning processes to share it with Stakeholders)
- Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Theory of Ecological Systems* – being aware of individual and interpersonal experiences and relationships and how they affect responses and learning – and how that is then shared among relationships...the importance of bringing stakeholders on board with the Vision and being aware of barriers.
- Vygotsky's (1978) *Social Constructivism Theory* – working alongside educators to reflect on and improve practice.
- Gardner's (1983) *Multiple Intelligences Theory* – looking for strategies to explore the Vision and practice in a variety of formats so that everyone reaches understanding and goals.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Original Question:

**How do we encourage educators to be committed to their own growth and development?**

On reflection we found this question too broad, too big a place to start. We felt we needed to refine and focus on a specific target. How can we expect educators to meet expectations when they have not been made explicit? We felt all stakeholders needed to be involved in defining these expectations and needed to start from the same place. **The delivery of the Vision needed a foundation.** A new Research Question was created:

**How do we ensure that all Stakeholders have a shared vision?**

## RESEARCH METHOD

The aim of the study was to investigate ways to ensure that all stakeholders have a shared vision.

- ⇒ The participants – Janet and Kristy took our action research back to the Office staff. We commenced Vision meetings to explore individual understandings and to collaborate on a joint vision. These have been ongoing and have led to many new ways of thinking and working such as the Social Contract/ Team Agreement, strengths-based approaches, team building and team professional development. We have also reviewed Role Statements and tailored KPI processes to individual staff.
- ⇒ We knew we needed to first implement strategies within the Educator Support Unit (ESU) to ensure a cohesive team with tools to support our educators and to deliver a wider message.
- ⇒ We rolled out our shared Service Philosophy and Vision at a compulsory information session facilitated by Alisa Hough; creating a foundation for new expectations and goals.
- ⇒ We also recognised a gap in building meaningful and sustained relationships with families to ensure our vision is shared – the new role of Family and Community Liaison was established and rolled out in January 2014.
- ⇒ Educators were approached one on one and their understanding and requirements for the role of the Educational Leader were noted on a survey that was collated and the findings were the basis for the Educational Leader role requirements.

## FINDINGS

From our investigations we found...

- ⇒ Our response to a compulsory Information session to roll out our Service Philosophy and Vision was well taken and we had close to 95% participation; more than ever before.
- ⇒ Everyone received the same message and stepped forward as united professionals.
- ⇒ We also discovered that it is ok to have big dreams and goals but that our expectations need to be smaller and manageable. So we walk - not run!
- ⇒ The ESU Team also learnt that by meeting together on a regular basis we become more united; and the message that we are taking back into the field is consistent.
- ⇒ In a large FDC scheme with 80+ educators, there are challenges to one person being the Educational Leader – the role needs to be systemic to be meaningful and sustainable.
- ⇒ Good leaders grow new leaders; they mentor others, not simply monitor performance.
- ⇒ Our understandings will evolve as we continue to learn more.
- ⇒ Collaborative approaches deliver richer outcomes.

## MOST SIGNIFICANT LEARNINGS

*Think Big, Act Small, Show Impact.*

We recognised the importance of all stakeholders starting from the same place of understanding; and that it is ok to go backward in order to move forward with a shared vision.

**Mentor NOT Monitor**



FDC Educational Leader role is systemic – refine strategies to support ongoing learning.

Honour significance of **Vision Meetings** and keep separate to Monday Morning Check In's (Administration/minor matters resolved via team emails).

**Refine processes and tools.**

**Action Research strategies** as an ongoing method for operation.

What do we question?

What do we need?

What can we do?

What can we change?

**Reflect, Reflect, Reflect....**



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# LEADING EXCELLENT PRACTICE IN ECEC: EMBEDDING A CULTURE OF LEARNING



## BACKGROUND

**Recognising the link between effective leadership and high quality practice, the National Quality Framework (NQF) requires the appointment of an Educational Leader within all education and care services.**

Facing some uncertainties, but eager to get the most out of this new position, a group of senior and experienced Queensland educators, including many nominated Educational Leaders, have worked together on a 12 month action research project to determine how this role might work best in their service.

Funded by the Professional Support Coordinator for Queensland, and undertaken in collaboration with Queensland University of Technology and TAFE Queensland (Brisbane), the project involved practitioners from a range of education and care services, including centre-based long day care, family day care and school age care. Participants met on a monthly basis, as a community of learners, to share knowledge and skills, to listen and critically reflect on the perspectives of others, and to plan, implement and share their research.

This poster details one of these action research projects. The Educational Leader position had been implemented in our service, but there was general consensus that the role was not working as well as it could.

With a view to supporting quality educational programs and continuous quality improvement at our centre, we embarked on an action research project to investigate ways to strengthen professional conversations and professional development within our centre. Our action research project was strongly influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) theory about learning through social interactions. Applying this to adult learning, we set out to build a community of learners.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our action research project was guided by the following two research questions:

**How effective is our current culture of learning within the centre?**

**How can this be strengthened?**

## RESEARCH METHOD

Following McNaughton and Hughes (2009) action research cycle, our project involved planning, thinking action, evaluation, and critical reflection to inform practice change and continuous quality improvement. The study had two interrelated aims:

- ➔ to strengthen and embed a culture of learning within the service to assist educators with professional development; and
- ➔ to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of the Educational Leader to lead quality educational programs within service.

As often happens in action research, our research question changed over time. We originally worked on the questions: "What do professional conversations look like in the centre and how can their productiveness be improved?" However, as we engaged with these questions, we decided that what we were really interested in was how to build and sustain a culture of learning and continuous quality improvement within our centre.

The project targeted all educators working in our centre. Ten educators, working in a range of roles with diverse qualifications and experience in ECEC, agreed to participate in the action research project. Key steps included:

- ➔ Collaborating with all educators to build relationships, identify individual and team strengths and interests and learning styles.
- ➔ Creating learning spaces - Facebook group; change in title and structure of meetings from staff to team meetings.
- ➔ Implementing a range of proactive strategies to suit individual adult learners including: Professional Conversations instead of Staff Meetings; Knowledge of educators communication and learning styles; Learning spaces adapted to suit needs of educators; Increased variety of collaborative learning tools for educators to access.
- ➔ Educational Leader supporting educators and monitoring learning and practice change to determine whether changes were effective.



## FINDINGS

Key findings included:

- ➔ The Educational Leader needs to be present to support and mentor educators. In line with this, we believe the Educational Leader is not a supervisory role; it is more a mentoring support role.
- ➔ The role is best fulfilled by an experienced 'on the floor' educator, who works in collaboration with other senior staff (e.g. Director; Area Learning Consultant).
- ➔ The Educational Leader needs time and support to fulfil their role and for their own professional learning (e.g. Bi-Monthly Goodstart Educational Leader Network Meetings).
- ➔ Educators need to have responsibility and work in collaboration with the Educational Leader in relation to their own vision, goals and expectations.
- ➔ Team Meetings play a major role in building the cohesiveness and professional motivation and commitment of educators within a service.
- ➔ Professional conversations and the role of Educational Leader cannot be implemented effectively without a shared culture of learning.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our action research project has made us rethink the role of Educational Leader, and, in particular, to think of this role in terms of building and embedding a culture of shared learning and continuous quality improvement within our centre.

We have also developed skills in action research and learned that you only get out as much as you put into an action research project. We also see a place for action research to support ongoing learning and improvement in our centre. It is our view and experience that the underpinning foundation of shared inquiry and collaboration can be used to strengthen motivation, learning and practice within the service.

## MOST SIGNIFICANT LEARNINGS

- A culture of learning is the backbone to quality practices in ECEC.
- The Educational Leader role can not be implemented effectively within service without a shared culture of learning.



Continue **professional conversations** and reflective activities.

Incorporate **team building** activities into meetings.

Recognising and celebrating **individual** and **team successes**.

Continue to build educator's knowledge and **confidence** through team meetings.

Continue to **motivate educators** to try new ways of working.



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# LEADING EXCELLENT PRACTICE IN ECEC: STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADER THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

Next Steps

## BACKGROUND

**We embarked on our research journey with the intent of expanding our knowledge of the role of Educational Leader and how this could lead to better outcomes for our staff and therefore the families at our service.**

For years we had been providing the same type of professional development and transference of information by using the one format for all staff. However, we had always noticed that some staff took the information on while others seemed either unwilling or unable to absorb new information. We felt that our staff would benefit from more specific stylised training and mentoring that would suit their individual learning style. This required us to gain a deeper understanding of our staff, with particular focus on individual educator learning styles and potential knowledge and skills that could be shared for communal benefit.

To support our educators to provide high quality child focused educational programs, we felt the Educational Leader needed to build trusting relationships with and between the educators. To do this, information about staff learning styles, strengths, knowledge and what motivates them was required. Just as the children we care for are individuals, our staff are also unique. What may work for some may not work for others. Our continuing goal is for everyone to feel they have a voice in service decision-making, are respected for what they are doing and are provided with a suitable level of support.

Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligence Theory was a driving force behind our research project. We felt that if the Educational Leader had a better knowledge of staff learning styles this would lead to enhanced outcomes for staff, children they care for and the service as a whole.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**How can we best perform the role of Educational Leader to ensure ongoing learning and support for educators and provide a high quality service for children, families and educators?**

## RESEARCH METHOD

The action research process (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009) enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of the role of Educational Leader while being in a supportive learning environment with like minded professionals. Our primary aim was to build relationships between all educators and the Educational Leader by gaining a greater understanding of our staff and how we could best support them in their professional practice. The idea of action research was introduced at our team meeting and discussed informally over lunch each day. When discussing the intent of this project with staff we used phrases such as... "You have a voice, this can be your opportunity to have it heard." "You are all individuals and have different interests and skills that we want to learn about, use and appreciate". When considering ethical practice we were conscious to ensure that all staff understood that participation was desirable but not essential in the research project. To date, our project has comprised five stages:

- ➔ The first stage in our action research was to utilise an electronic survey specifically designed to gather information about each educator's learning style, preferences for receiving new information, how they felt about change and what they envisioned would be the role of Educational Leader.
- ➔ Our second stage involved professional conversations (Irvine & Price, in press) with groups and individuals. We also developed a 'Superhero wall' and displayed the results of one of the survey questions - Which staff member do you find inspirational and why? We found that by identifying strengths and sharing this information that staff felt acknowledged, appreciated and valued.
- ➔ Our third stage was to find ways of delivering information and professional development to all staff in a way that suited the combination of learning styles that we had amongst our staff. While this does take more time, it is a valuable investment, strengthens learning and supports improved practice.
- ➔ Our fourth stage involved the Educational Leader attending training relating to mentoring skills. Professional development enhanced skills to further the effectiveness of professional conversation with staff.
- ➔ Our next stage was to further analyse and use information from the staff survey. We discovered that many staff do not recognise their value as part of our team and their contribution to the success of the centre and outcomes for all children and families. To explore this we employed a 'Wellness Coach' to help staff to recognise why they are valuable to the team and what a unique and integral part they are to the success of our centre.

## FINDINGS

When beginning the action research project, we wanted to discover how the role of the Educational Leader could support and enhance the quality of practice at our service through enhanced knowledge of educators individual learning styles.

The staff survey was extremely effective. The information gathered identified how staff learn best and prefer to be approached when discussing their professional practice. Copies of the surveys have been placed in a folder that the Educational Leader can refer to when approaching a staff member. This ensures that each staff member is treated as an individual and our hope is this leads to a more respectful and effective working relationship between the Educational Leader and staff. Our survey is now going to be done on a regular basis; the questions may be changed pending team growth and emerging needs.

Based upon information gathered from the surveys and professional conversations, we are taking a new approach to professional development and training. We are looking at accessing information about a needed topic but having it available in several different formats, such as a video/reading/small group discussion to try to encompass all types of learners.

From the information gathered, we have clustered together like-minded staff who have a particular skill/passion they are willing to share. The aim was to enable these staff to work together to create either a usable reference folder or present a short information segment at a team meeting or enable them to have time in each other's classrooms to share their passion (such as streamlining documentation). By enabling staff to do this, we have seen the establishment of a more cohesive team, and lightened some of the load of the Educational Leader through peer mentoring and support. Importantly, this has also enabled staff to receive the praise and recognition that they deserve and have said they desire.

Our 'Wellness Coach' assisted staff to recognise what an integral role they play in each child's life. We explored the need to be 'present' in mind as well as body when at work and how a positive attitude and willingness to embrace change could lead to amazing results. It was beneficial for the Educational Leader to be able to identify staff who require reassurance and support to reach their potential and to gather skills to assist staff to view change as beneficial.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Action Research process was beneficial in providing a platform for collaboration with other professionals. It provided opportunities for shared learning and the exchange of information from other services and early childhood professionals.

Howard Gardner (1983) described the benefit of understanding an individual's learning style; this has proved true for us. We have noticed that our staff have a much higher uptake and retention of new information and ideas because of our more targeted and specialised delivery system. We have also seen a lift in general morale and willingness to attend training.

The relationship that the Educational Leader now has with staff has been enhanced due to her expanded knowledge of staff and the way in which they liked to be approached about their work and the delivery of new information. This has led to enhanced job satisfaction for our Educational Leader, who feels better able to support staff to achieve high quality education and care within our service. Tailored information, support and professional development opportunities are leading to greater professional fulfillment for our staff.

## MOST SIGNIFICANT LEARNINGS

- By tailoring our professional development and training based upon our knowledge of each staff member's learning style, we have achieved a greater level of staff participation in professional development activities and enhanced communication between the Educational Leader and individual educators.
- We have discovered that our staff have a diverse set of skills, knowledge and interests that they are very willing to share with others when approached in a respectful and appreciative manner. This has led to increased communication between educators and enhanced professional practice within our service.
- We were able to share peer comments about other staff members they find inspirational which led to an enhanced team morale.
- Our most unexpected result was greater appreciation of the importance of professional conversations to support thinking, critical reflection and learning.
- It is also clear the Educational Leader needs to be actively present in classrooms to continue to develop the relationship, to gain a deeper understanding of strengths and practice issues and therefore the opportunity for effective and helpful mentoring with educators.
- We also acknowledged the need for time each week to be designated for both the Educational Leader and individual staff to have non-contact time together. This has been very beneficial in staff feeling valued and understood. It has also enabled uninterrupted time for effective mentoring.

Continued to strengthen **collaboration** between staff members.

Continue to look at a variety of professional **development opportunities** to meet the varied needs and learning styles of each educator at our service

Our Action Research Project has taken us into another area of interest... we are now exploring the value of professional conversations in relation to **improving our reflective practices**.



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# EMBEDDING A CULTURE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AT OUR CENTRE

Next Steps

## BACKGROUND

**Recognising the link between effective leadership and high quality practice, the National Quality Framework (NQF) requires the appointment of an Educational Leader within all education and care services.**

Facing some uncertainties, but eager to get the most out of this new position, a group of senior and experienced Queensland educators, including many nominated Educational Leaders, have worked together on a 12 month action research project to determine how this role might work best in their service. Funded by the Professional Support Coordinator for Queensland, and undertaken in collaboration with Queensland University of Technology and TAFE Queensland (Brisbane), the project involved educators from a range of education and care services, including centre-based long day care, family day care and school age care. Participants met on a monthly basis, as a community of learners, to share knowledge and skills, to listen and critically reflect on the perspectives of others, and to plan, implement and share their research.

This poster details one of these action research projects. The focus of our study was strengthening reflective practice to improve professional practice. The concept of the reflective practitioner stems from the work of Donald Schon (1983) who proposed that teachers who are capable of critical reflection on their beliefs will be more effective practitioners. Moss (2006) also promoted the image of 'educator a researcher' in a practice context, and advocated reflection as the means to promote effective teaching and professional growth. The connection between reflection, professional learning and quality practice is also promoted in contemporary policy and curriculum documents. For example, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009) identifies reflective practice and ongoing learning as an underpinning principle for quality practice and places emphasis on the power of collaborative reflective practice to enhance thinking and practice.

We decided on this topic after reviewing some of the reflective diary entries made by educators within our team. Recognising there are different levels of reflection, spanning description to critical reflection (Nolan & Sim, 2011), we determined that some of our reflections really provided a general summary of the day and did not go into sufficient detail or look deeply into educator's thinking and practices. We believe that meaningful and critical reflection is the starting point for quality programs and services and continuous quality improvement. As we reflect, we learn about ourselves, the children, the culture of our families and of our service. Drawing on the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009), we question why and how we are doing things. Is it because we always have worked this way? Who do these practices benefit – children, families and/or educators? Who might be disadvantaged? Questions such as these prompt deeper and more critical reflection. They provide opportunity to identify what is working well and why, to consider different ways of thinking and working, and to make changes as we strive for best practice for the children, families, educators and service community.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our action research project was underpinned by the following broad research question:

**How can we develop a culture of reflective practice and embed this in our daily work to support continuous quality improvement?**

## RESEARCH METHOD

Action research is often described as practitioner research; research conducted by practitioners to help them in their work (Lewin, 1946). As McAteer (2013) observes, the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice. We decided to use this research approach because we wanted to improve upon our reflective practices, and, in particular, to strengthen our capacity to engage in collaborative and critical reflection to strengthen our daily work with children, families and each other. Following McNaughton and Hughes (2009) action research cycle, our project involved planning, thinking action, evaluation, and critical reflection to inform practice change and continuous quality improvement.

Our research aim was to explore how the role of Educational Leader could help to embed a culture of reflective practice and ongoing learning within our centre. All educators at our service (n=14) were encouraged to participate in the action research project to strengthen their reflective practices. Their levels of experience varied as did their qualifications (from Certificate III to Early Childhood Teacher) and length of service (from 2 to 20 years experience in Early Childhood Education and Care). Reflective practice has long been a professional expectation at our centre, however, the focus has been on lead educators engaging in reflection. Participation in this project led to a change in focus and expectations of our educators. In 2014, all educators began to reflect upon their practices.

As a starting point, the Educational Leader supported educators to look more closely at their educational practices, routines, interactions and the learning environment. To support their learning and build reflective capacity, we implemented the following steps:

- ⇒ We offered examples of documentation that showed different approaches to reflection.
- ⇒ We directed the educators to the reflective practice principle in the Educator's Guide (DEEWR, 2010).
- ⇒ Some educators found this too jargony so we provided some prompt questions to help the educators to build upon their reflections.
- ⇒ We built up a library of resources around reflective practices and how critical reflection is part of an ongoing planning cycle.
- ⇒ We encouraged reflection through professional conversations; even brief chats in the staff room.
- ⇒ Whenever educators began to recount ideas or events, they were encouraged to write these in their reflection diary – 'you are reflecting'.

## FINDINGS

Through action research, we worked towards embedding critical reflections in our daily work to support quality improvement.

- ⇒ We found that while most educators were doing some reflections about their day, that these were not indepth and critical. The documentation was mostly descriptive, about the running of routines and activities, children's enjoyment and the occasional comment about behavioural issues.
- ⇒ We identified that these types of reflections did not offer sufficient information to provide a basis for learning and practice change, and without this opportunity, there could be no professional growth or cycle of continuous improvement.
- ⇒ We also discovered that some educators were unsure of the term 'critical reflection' but during conversations were doing just that. Once this was highlighted to them, they could identify more easily what we were looking for in their documented reflections.
- ⇒ We found that, with encouragement and practical support, all of our educators (regardless of seniority and position) can and should engage in reflective practice.
- ⇒ We are continuing to implement active strategies to build our educators' confidence and capacity to be reflective practitioners, and to embed a culture of reflective practice within our centre.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have discovered that critical reflection has long been thought of as a significant and integral part of all educator's work. This isn't a new idea. It is supported by research (Moss, 2006; Schon, 1983) and is an expectation in current curriculum. However, we believe that the expectation for indepth critical reflection has increased with the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009).

It is our view and experience that it is a new practice for educators to be truly and deeply reflecting on themselves and their work. This can be confronting for some educators and we feel it can lead to educators not being truly honest in their reflections if they are feeling judged by others.

It also requires knowledge and skill to be able to look at our practices from a range of different perspectives. Educators need to be taught how to reflect and provided time and support to develop and refine this professional skill.

The aim of our project was to support more indepth and critical reflection and, as a result, for our educators to be confident in what they do and to know why they do it.

## MOST SIGNIFICANT LEARNINGS

**Educators who were hesitant at first and didn't know what 'critical reflection' was or how they could do it, soon began to realise that they did critically reflect, often on a daily basis as they discussed their programs and practices within their teams or with the Educational Leader or Director. When it was pointed out to them that they were reflecting, many of the educators quickly became more confident and were eager to develop these skills further. Educators were encouraged to then write down their reflections from conversations with others and to include questions in their reflections that were sometimes left as a question with no immediate answer... for further individual and/or team reflection.**

To continue our critical reflection journey we are implementing the following strategies:

To **share written examples** of completed reflections that are critical and address key criteria - both from resourced materials as well as examples from colleagues

To continue with **professional conversations** in which we can verbally discuss our reflections and consider multiple ways of looking at emerging issues and topics.

To **share ideas** about the critical issues and topics for reflection and documentation.

To look at ways in which our educators are **best able to reflect** and ways in which they learn and process information as individual adult learners.



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# EXPLORING AND STRENGTHENING THE ROLE BETWEEN CO-ORDINATOR AND EDUCATIONAL LEADER IN FAMILY DAY CARE

## BACKGROUND

**Recognising the link between effective leadership and high quality practice, the National Quality Framework (NQF) requires the appointment of an Educational Leader within all education and care services.**

Facing some uncertainties, due to the lack of a defined role outlined by the National Regulation, National Law and National Quality Framework, we were nominated to attend the Action Research Project. Funded by the Professional Support Coordinator for Queensland, and undertaken in collaboration with Queensland University of Technology and TAFE Queensland (Brisbane), the project involved educators from a range of education and care services, including centre-based long day care, family day care and school age care. Participants met on a monthly basis, as a community of learners, to share knowledge and skills, to listen and critically reflect on the perspectives of others, and to plan, implement and share their research.

This poster details one of these action research projects. The focus of our study was firstly to determine whether our service's current appointment of the Educational Leader role was working and reaching its full potential. Through professional conversations and regular meetings with like-minded colleagues from other services, as well as scheme staff and educators, it was determined that the current practice was not getting effective results. So our research focus shifted and evolved, to look at how we can embed the Educational Leader role to best support educators to provide high quality educational programs whilst undertaking continuous quality improvement.

To be able to offer the support to educators that they required, we first needed to understand each educator's individual learning style. The notion that each person learns and takes in information differently has been identified in Howard Gardener's Multiple Intelligence Theory (1983) and so we first had to look at how we were offering information and support to the educators and whether it was being received effectively.

### ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES:

**Distance** – our educators span from Kallangur to Mountain Creek, Bribie Island and Deception Bay to Woodford.

**Learning Styles** – Identifying each educator's individual learning style to deliver support most effectively.

**Motivation** – getting all educators through the recent legislative and policy changes and ensuring we are all on the same page.

**Personality conflict** – ensuring all parties are treated equally and professionally taking into account ethical practice (e.g. confidentiality).

**Expectations** – Educators' expectations of co-ordinators and co-ordinators' expectations of educators.

**Original appointment of Educational Leader** – Approved Provider asked for volunteer educators to assume the Educational Leader role. Two educators were appointed and each given a group of educators to assist. A subsequent review of this approach indicated this was not working as well as it might. We have now moved forward to having three coordinators act as Educational Leaders, with the two educators offering leadership through focused Facebook pages designed specifically for educators and families/communities individually.

### UNDERPINNING REGULATORY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE REQUIREMENTS:

Education and Care Services National Regulations; **PART 4.4—STAFFING ARRANGEMENTS, Division 1—Educational leader, 118 Educational leader** - The approved provider of an education and care service must designate, in writing, a suitably qualified and experienced educator, co-ordinator or other individual as Educational Leader at the service to lead the development and implementation of educational programs in the service.

NQF - **What we aim to achieve with element 7.1.4** - Effective curriculum development requires ambitious goals and clarity of purpose. It requires attending to the principles, practice and outcomes of the approved learning framework. The role of the educational leader is to work with educators to provide curriculum direction and to ensure children achieve the outcomes of the approved learning framework.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of our study was to clarify the role of Educational Leader and how this fitted within our service. Our overarching research question was:

**How can we embed the role of Educational Leader to support continuous quality improvement and high quality educational programs in our Family Day Care Scheme?**

## RESEARCH METHOD

Action research is often described as practitioner research; research conducted by practitioners to help them in their work (Lewin, 1946). It is also presented as a participatory approach to research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000); an active approach to learning that can support personal and professional development. As McAteer (2013) observes, the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice. We decided to use this research approach to continuously improve teaching and learning for both children and educators within our family day care scheme. Following McNaughton and Hughes (2009) action research cycle, our project involved planning, thinking, action, evaluation, and critical reflection to inform practice change and continuous quality improvement.

We sought to involve all educators in our action research project by firstly asking them to voluntarily participate in the VAK Learning Styles survey produced by Swinburne University of Technology and then engaging them in discussions during regular visits by the co-ordination team.

Key steps included:

➔ **Surveying all educators to gain a better understanding of how each of our individual educators best take in information.** With the results collated from the survey and discussions, we were able to determine the best ways to communicate with our vast range of educators. In doing this we also found that the current method of having small group play sessions, which allowed the current Educational Leaders to meet with and assist each educator with their program and practice, was not working as planned.

➔ **Evaluating the current approach to the role of Educational Leader.** With the appointment of practising educators to the role, we were faced with challenges such as Educational Leaders not being able to consistently get out to visit other educators.

➔ **Looking for different ways of working.** Through staff, scheme and Educational Leader meetings, it was decided to look at an alternative Educational Leader appointment. Still wanting to take advantage of the current Educational Leaders' knowledge and experience, an Educator Facebook page and Families/Communities Facebook page were developed, to be administrated by the current Educational Leaders as a method of peer leadership and sharing ideas and information with educators and families.

➔ **The development of a new role description** which now identifies the Educational Leader role as an aspect of the co-ordination team's responsibilities. Co-ordinators will provide consistent, ongoing support to all educators while carrying out regular visits. The home visit form has been amended to include a specific section for documenting information directly relating to the program and practice of each educator.

## FINDINGS

Through action research we sought to identify the most effective method of embedding the role of Educational Leader in a way that supports continuous quality improvement and high quality educational programs in our service. To begin we explored how well we were supporting educators to provide high quality educational programs and to engage in continuous quality improvement. Key findings included:

- ➔ Our (previous) practice was not working to its full potential and required revising.
- ➔ As part of the action research project, what began as a question of "is our current appointment of Educational Leader working within our service?" changed several times throughout the project to become "How can we embed the role of Educational Leader to support continuous quality improvement and high quality educational programs in our family day care scheme?"
- ➔ Through staff meetings and conversations with educators we discovered that the Educational Leader's mentoring role is already embedded in our service through the role that our coordinators carry out (e.g., offering support in the form of a phone call or email and on regular visits to each educators home).
- ➔ We then looked at ways to enhance the information and support being provided, by recognising and responding to different educator learning styles and preferences. This is an ongoing project.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through participating in the action research project, we were able to identify key areas for improvement but also discovered that we had already begun implementing changes as we worked to continuously improve our practice. Networking with a range of services, although few had the setup of Family Day Care, supported our thinking, reflecting and learning. We found the conversations and discussions involved in the action research project to be extremely useful in prompting us to think differently about our practice and to consider other perspectives.

We found that the best way to ensure our success was to ensure our team of leaders were continuously offering consistent and ongoing support to all educators, regardless of knowledge and experience, and to ensure all members of our leadership team are on the same page.

## MOST SIGNIFICANT LEARNINGS

- Mentoring of educators is an ongoing journey that will never reach an end.
- To support learning and practice change, it is important to identify and implement strategies to support and motivate each educators individual journey.
- The role of Educational Leader will continue to grow and develop as required to support educators.

Next Steps

Continue to find ways to grow our Educational Leader and **mentoring roles** together as a team



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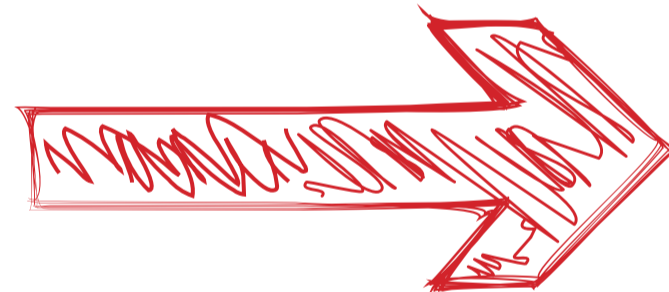
# LEADING EXCELLENT PRACTICE IN ECEC: INVESTING IN THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADER



**OUR QUESTION**  
How can we develop the role of educational leader to best suit the needs of educators, children, families and the centre environment?

**Actions**

- Develop Position Description – What does this role entail?
- Allocate time for senior educators to access the Educational Leader– programming rostered on the same day, open communication.
- What are the educators’ individual learning styles? – questionnaire given to educators.
- Develop a standalone Mentor policy – share with educators for feedback and reflection.
- Continue mentor folder – reissue forms.
- Develop and establish Educational Leader network in our local area.
- Embed a reflective approach to further improve practices and outcomes within the role.



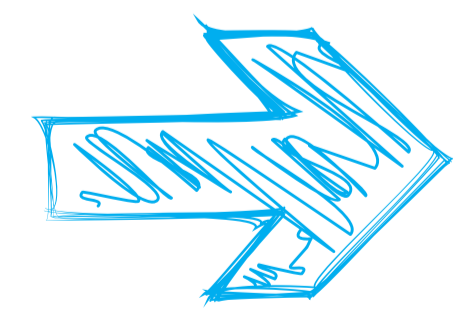
Links to theorists  
Piaget, Vygotsky, Gardner

**Why we chose this topic**

- We felt that the role of Educational Leader was open to interpretation. Therefore we wanted to know what our educators’ thoughts and perceptions of the role were and what they thought it entailed (or how they thought it could work best in our centre).
- As a result of our findings, we wanted to further develop the role of Educational Leader within our environment, to make it work for us and reflect our needs as a service.

**What we’ve learnt**

- We are mentoring each and every day and hadn’t realised how much we are a community of learners until we embarked on this journey.
- Everyone learns in different ways – we need to adapt our mentoring to suit the educators’ individual learning styles.
- Educators now have a better understanding of the Educational Leader role and what mentoring is.
- Mentoring is an integral part of our service and each and every one of our educators is viewed as a mentor and mentee.
- The Educational Leader role is ever evolving.



**Our Ongoing Vision**  
To commit to build upon our learning community, embed practices and support the community to enhance belonging and connectedness within the context of an Educational Leader.

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