Rhonda Livingstone, National Education Leader of the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority, debunks the myths around educational leadership and looks at ways to support educators in their leadership role.

It has long been recognised that early childhood leadership is an indicator of quality. The National Quality Framework acknowledges that the role of an educational leader in an early childhood service is very important in supporting educators to develop and implement the curriculum and in doing so, promote quality outcomes for children and families using the service.

Many myths about the educational leader role have emerged in recent times. For example, there are myths that suggest the educational leader has to do all the programming in all areas of the service, or take responsibility for supervision of staff. These are very narrow, prescriptive ways of viewing this important role and there are many more possibilities and opportunities that the role presents.

In the absence of a mandated role description or prescriptive qualification standards, some approved providers and educators have expressed uncertainty about the role and what it might look like in a service.

It is therefore timely to revisit the requirements of the National Quality Standard (NQS) and related legislative standards for the educational leader.

The requirements

Under Quality Area 7 – Leadership and Management of the National Quality Standard, Standard 7.1 requires that effective leadership promotes a positive organisational culture and builds a professional learning community.

In particular, element 7.1.4 requires that provision is made to ensure a suitably qualified and experienced educator or coordinator leads the development of the curriculum and ensures the establishment of clear goals and expectations for teaching and learning.

Underpinning these requirements, Section 118 of the Education and Care Services National Regulations requires that the approved provider must designate, in writing, a suitably qualified and experienced educator, coordinator or other individual as educational leader at the service to lead the development and implementation of educational programs in the service.

It is important to note that neither the NQS nor the regulatory standards are prescriptive about the qualifications, experience, skill or role description for the person chosen to be the educational leader. This recognises that every service is different and every team of educators is different. The flexibility built into these provisions allows approved providers to choose the best person in the service to take on this role.

So what might the role look like in your service?

I have spoken with educational leaders from many areas of Australia working in different service types and settings. Their stories are amazing and it is so inspiring to hear the variety of strategies used to enthuse, motivate and guide educators.

The educational leader may be the most qualified person in the service; however, to be an effective educational leader, a broader range of skills and attributes that includes leadership skills is required.

There may be other team members who are more experienced, have built respectful relationships or have more time to take on this role. As the focus is on outcomes, it is important to be able to demonstrate how a leader is undertaking the role effectively.

Approved providers can use their professional judgement to determine who is suitably qualified, experienced, skilled and best able to take on that role. The same applies to authorised officers who will use their professional judgment to determine how effectively the educational leader is leading curriculum development and ensuring clear goals and expectations are established for teaching and learning.

Qualities of an educational leader

Sandra Cheesman in the Early Childhood Australia NQS PLP e-Newsletter No. 33 2012, identifies that ideally the educational leader has qualifications in early childhood education and identifies the following qualities that should be given consideration when choosing an educational leader:

- Leadership skills
- Flexibility
- Creativity
- Empathy
- Communication skills
- Commitment to children and families
- Understanding of the role of the educational leader
- Attention to detail
- Adaptability
- Ability to work collaboratively
- Visionary thinking
- Passion for early childhood education
- Strong interpersonal skills
- Ability to motivate and inspire others
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- Knowledge of the NQS and related legislative standards
- Commitment to professional development
- Ability to make decisions
- Advantageous qualifications or experience
“The educational leader may not necessarily be the most qualified or working full-time. In fact, an educational leader can be a leader for more than one service. As the focus is on outcomes, it is important to be able to demonstrate how a leader is undertaking the role effectively.”
Rhonda Livingstone, National Education Leader of ACECQA.

Challenges and opportunities
I recently spoke with Dr Louise Thomas, National Director, Early Childhood at the Australian Catholic University. Louise has been engaged in research around the educational leader role and has been exploring current expectations of leadership and the tension between being a leader and doing leadership in early childhood education.

In her research, Louise identified that educators are more familiar with the expectations of managerial leadership (for example, taking on roles such as director or coordinator) and less familiar with the expectations of educational leadership. This can be a source of uncertainty and sometimes tension, holding together expected practices of the role, and the sometimes competing practices of building and maintaining the relationships that are so important for success in this role.

Holding together certainty and uncertainty of these expectations is the ethical work that educators embrace, and sometimes struggle with, in their continual endeavours to do the best for children, families and colleagues.

While the educational role may pose some challenges, it also provides a range of opportunities, including the following examples drawn from this Department of Education and Early Childhood Development factsheet (www.education.vic.gov.au/.../factsheeteducationalleaderaccessible.docx):

• providing educational leadership to educators, teachers and administrative staff
• coaching and mentoring educators to support children's learning in the five learning and development outcomes (identity, community, wellbeing, learning and communication)
• supporting high quality teaching and learning for children in a service
• representing the organisation in networks and committees that focus on children's learning
• developing and reviewing policy, course curricula and teaching/learning materials drawing on a deep understanding of educational theory and practice
• collaborating and working with parents and families as partners in children's learning.

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“Bringing educators on the journey and working collaboratively to establish clear goals and expectations for teaching and learning will build ownership and maximise the likelihood of success”, Rhonda Livingstone, National Education Leader of ACECQA.

Where to start
So where should an educational leader start and what support is available to assist educational leaders to be effective in the two key roles of:

- leading the development of the curriculum
- ensuring the establishment of clear goals and expectations for teaching and learning?

Bringing educators on the journey and working collaboratively to establish clear goals and expectations for teaching and learning will build ownership and maximise the likelihood of success. Other important roles that educational leaders can take include supporting and assisting educators to:

- find, use and share resources
- understand and implement policies and procedures
- engage in critical reflection (for example engaging in an action research project to enhance practices in the service)
- link the service philosophy with practice, think about the theories that underpin practice and think about the learning outcomes, principles and practices in the learning frameworks
- document children’s programs, learning and development in a way that meets the standards and is manageable, meaningful and relevant for the children, families, setting and community
- think about what they would like the authorised officer to observe, discuss and sight to demonstrate the service is meeting the standards.

From the data available from the service assessment and ratings to date, we see that educators are having most difficulty with the elements in Quality Area 1 – Educational Program and Practice – that relate to critical reflection and the cycle of planning, implementing and evaluating. As a start, the reflective questions in the Early Years Learning Framework and the Framework for School Age Care as well as the Guide to the National Quality Standard are useful for educational leaders to use to engage educators in discussion and reflection about programs and practices.

There are a number of resources available to assist educational leaders. For example, if you want to know how the authorised officer will assess that the educational leader is effectively leading the development of the curriculum and ensuring the establishment of clear goals and expectations for teaching and learning, the Guide to the National Quality Standard offers some suggestions. However, it is important to remember it is not a checklist, but rather paints a picture of what you might expect to see at the Meeting National Quality Standard level. The Early Childhood Australia Professional Learning Program and the Inclusion and Professional Support online library also include useful and accessible resources on this topic.