

# BUILDING AND SUSTAINING A CULTURE OF LEARNING



**Nicole Pilsworth, Jane Page and Collette Tayler, from the University of Melbourne explain the Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study which is proving to have positive impacts on educator practice, educational leadership and learning outcomes for children.**

It is well recognised that a central determinant of quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the knowledge, skills and capacities of its educators (Sheridan, Pope Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009; Chu, 2012; OECD, 2005). In addition, increasing the capacity of staff has been shown to have the most direct impact on improving children's learning and development outcomes (Hattie, 2003). The critical role of educators in optimising young children's learning, and the importance of building staff capacity, is acknowledged in the National Quality Framework, most notably Quality Area 7 of the National Quality Standard (NQS) where the Educational Leader is seen as the key agent to enact these imperatives. The Educational Leader is defined as the professional who 'leads the development of the curriculum and ensures the establishment of clear goals and expectations for teaching and learning' (ACECQA, 2011, p. 172). The Educational Leader is critical to providing support to educators as they enhance young children's learning outcomes through their educational programs and pedagogical practices.

The NQS further defines effective leadership as 'a relationship between people' (ACECQA, 2011, p.171) and speaks to the importance of leaders having the capacity to empower colleagues. In this way the NQS recognises that effective leadership builds a positive organisational culture and professional learning community where every educator

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shares experiences and expertise, and learns from colleagues. Enhancing the knowledge, skills and capacities of educators to offer quality learning experiences for young children and their families is fundamental. The concept of lifelong learning is an important construct to support this ongoing evolution and organisational success (Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd, 2012). Research emphasises the role of positional leaders in motivating and supporting staff in ongoing learning.

The designated Educational Leader is a vital part of any effective early childhood organisation (Hadley, Waniganayake & Shepherd, 2015). When an organisation nominates an Educational Leader and commits to ongoing professional learning and development for staff it not only adds value to the organisation but also plays a critical role in attracting and retaining good quality staff. ECEC settings are increasingly complex and dynamic organisations that must continually evolve and adapt to the changing policy landscape. The Educational Leader can help set into place cohesive, effective early childhood programs and pedagogical practices.

A small-scale research study in metropolitan Melbourne is investigating the role of the Educational Leader in supporting the implementation of evidence-based strategies, and establishing what strategies and techniques Educational Leaders apply to improve the quality of pedagogy in their ECEC settings. The Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study (VAELS) is a three-year research project funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training. The study is conducted by researchers from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) at the University of Melbourne in partnership with Moonee Valley City Council, Hume City Council and Mission Australia. As part of the VAEL study the team designed a professional learning program that provides sustainable effects on educators' practice as well as outcomes for children's learning and development. The Educational Leader



plays a key role in this ongoing professional learning and works collaboratively with the leadership team to mentor and coach educators in reflecting on their practice, setting goals that focus on the frequency and intentionality of the educator-child interactions within their programs.

An element of the capacity building is based on embedding evidence based teaching strategies from 3a (Abecedarian Approach Australia) that place high priority on language and cognition into the educational program and practice to optimise children's learning and development outcomes. There is growing evidence that participating in single in-service training sessions has minimal sustained effect on increasing the quality of teaching practice (Sheridan et al, 2009; Brown & Inglis, 2013). Therefore the approach to professional learning in the VAEL study is focused on collaborative, sustained engagement based on the needs of individuals and the service as a whole to build a shared language around teaching and learning, for educators and the children and families. In the first year of implementation – the Treatment Year – Educational Leaders and Educators are offered professional learning and interactive coaching from MGSE. In the second year – the Sustainability Year – the Educational Leader continues to work with colleagues to improve the quality of their teaching and learning, with reduced support from MGSE.

As the program was established the development of clear guidelines outlining the expectations of the process as well as the responsibilities associated with each role assisted in clarifying the purpose and structure. This gave an opportunity for educators as well as those in leadership positions to ask questions and make suggestions as to how the program may work best with individual educators. In addition, shared professional learning sessions with all educators supported the development of a professional learning community across the centres. Importantly the Educational Leader is supported by a coach from MGSE who provides one-on-one sessions that reinforce knowledge of the evidence-based strategies, attend to change management and identify and evaluate the 3a implementation practices and targets. The Educational Leader also maintains evidence records related to ongoing development, including the specific details for supporting individual educators.

Research has identified mentoring and coaching as effective models for strengthening educator knowledge and to rethink practice, and these are strategies that Educational Leaders can incorporate into their practice to support continuous improvement (Twig, Pendergast, Fluckiger, Garvis, Johnson & Robertson, 2013). However, it is important to consider the readiness and commitment of each educator to change. Coaching and

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mentoring are strategies that can utilise individual educators' strengths as a way of reflecting on and improving practice, rather than 'fixing' people. The aim of the mentoring and coaching is to build relationships based on trust rather than simply managing performance. Both formal and informal interactions within the service can strengthen relationships within teams and encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility for team members. Focusing on mentoring and coaching as strategies to engage educators provides a structure to elements of these relationships, a way to monitor the progress, and to show the impact of their interactions with young children. This emphasis on collaborative partnerships developed through the program will influence how successful the process will be, with greater potential for sustained changes in practice (Barber, Cohrssen & Church, 2014).

The ultimate goal of introducing such a program is to embed reflective practice and the concept of continuous improvement among the team of educators for the purpose of building greater personal and professional capacity. Such a program can lead to increased job satisfaction as well as more positive outcomes for children and families.

Professional learning programs, such as the program outlined in the VAEL study aims to involve educators in ways that stimulate not only their knowledge and practice, but also their motivation and engagement.

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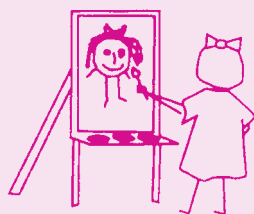
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