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I graduated as an EC teacher in 1979 and have been the director, nominated supervisor and educational leader at Coolamon Preschool for 37 years. My title has changed over the years and I have seen several changes to regulations and more recently the introduction of the National Quality Framework. While my role has changed over those years, I have essentially been a teacher of young children, manager of a community-based preschool reporting to a parent management committee and mentor to other staff for all that time. Although the NQF, for the first time named the position of educational leader, in reality I have always assumed that role as the only teacher in a preschool with only two to three staff at any one time.

Coolamon is 40 kilometres from Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, with a growing population of around two thousand people. The main employment is from agriculture (canola, wheat and sheep), Charles Sturt University and a growing tourism industry. It is a really mixed community and we have children attending the centre who travel sometimes up to 60 kilometres for a round trip for their preschool experience. Some of these children travel home from preschool on the local school buses. The preschool is a 25-place, single-unit centre and currently employs a qualified EC teacher, a Diploma of Education and Care educator and a Certificate III job-share educator along with a part-time administration officer. The Certificate III position varies from year to year according to the number of children identified as needing additional learning support and the preschool's budget. So essentially we have two staff that are permanently employed and a casual third educator each year according to our enrolments. In all, we have up to about 50 children each week. They are predominantly four year olds attending two to three days per week, but we also have a number of three year olds. The town has a central school (Kinder to year 12) and a Catholic primary school.

I have seen many changes in funding and regulatory requirements over the years, but probably the most significant has been the introduction of the NQF. Prior to the NQF, I was the only qualified person at the preschool, so I carried the full responsibility for the education program. The new requirement that all staff would hold at least a Certificate III was met with mixed feelings. At first, staff were resistant to gaining qualifications as they had many years of experience and felt they were not being recognised for what they had done so well for so long. So these staff sought to have some of their experience formally recognised (through Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL). In hindsight, I think it would have been more beneficial for all concerned to do the study and really learn about observations, planning and scaffolding children's learning.

The announcement of the role of educational leader was not a big change for me; it was something I had always done—it was embedded in my everyday practice of being the teacher. I guess the naming of the role made me think more about talking with the other staff and being more explicit in mentoring them. As time went on and they felt more comfortable with their new qualifications, they became more empowered and took on greater responsibilities, particularly for the things they enjoyed sharing.

In my role as the educational leader, I tend to be the one who raises issues for discussion and I find relevant journals and articles for everyone to read. We support the ongoing professional learning of staff and we encourage staff to attend any workshops that they are interested in. We hold staff meetings about twice each term but with such a small team it is often better to just have a daily catch-up after the children have gone home for the day. The good thing about a small team is that you do a lot of the small stuff in a fairly informal way. We put our energies into making meetings about some of

the big things that need all of our attention. We made a significant change to the way we documented children's learning about six months ago so we have met several times over that period to give a concentrated effort to thinking that through. We are fortunate that within our small staff team, we have always worked well together and have respect for each other's strengths and opinions.

We found the expectations of the NQS and our first assessment and rating visit quite stressful. In hindsight, it was more about the unknown and we were happy to receive an overall meeting rating, with two 'exceeding' ratings in Educational Program and Practice and Staffing Arrangements. The process has given us things to focus on for the coming years. As we came to terms with the NQS, I found it really useful to be a part of our regional directors group. While I have always had good connections with teachers in other EC settings, in 2011 a group of nine preschools from this region (Adelong, Gundagai, Junee, Temora, Aria Park, Ganmain, Leeton and Ardlethan—a region of about 200 kilometres) decided to formalise the network and meet once a month.

We were inspired by a similar group that had been operating for some time around Albury, so after talking with them we formed our own regional network group. We pooled some funds and employed a consultant to help us with policies and procedures. This was so valuable, as doing all of the policies on your own is really time consuming. In a small centre you have to do the same amount of policy development as larger centres but you have far fewer people to call on to help out. It made sense to get together and share our ideas. Then our consultant would go away and write up our thinking.

We have visited each other's centres and meet at our centre each term—usually in June, which is central for most of us. This has been a really important support for us to connect, tease out issues and problems and get advice from each other. We have become really close friends and colleagues. There is no defined leader of the group, but people just naturally take the lead on issues that are important for them. This network has been so important for us all. Working in small, stand-alone centres can be very isolating and you can go for long periods without really knowing what others are doing. Our centres are all very different, but we share a lot of issues that are common to rural EC settings.

I am about to retire from my position at the preschool and so I think about what advice I would give to the new teacher who takes over from me in the role of educational leader. I think the most important thing is to respect staff and listen to them. If you are coming into an established staff team, be mindful that the existing team have a lot of knowledge and experience to offer. They know the community so well and it is important in a small community to be sensitive to that community. It is also important to talk through your decisions and explain why you are doing things a particular way—people need to understand why you are doing the things you do—even if they seem like common sense to you. In a rural town it is also essential to get out into the community and build relationships. Getting to know the schools and library staff is essential but I have gained a lot from links with the aged care facility, the local council, the other EC settings (because children often attend more than one service), early intervention and community health staff. In a small community you can also have really good relationships with the police and the fire brigade and local businesses. These are the connections that really enrich the program. In a small town it is all about relationships.