



Evaluation of The Hive's Early Childhood Educators' Network 2026



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“The ECEN model is contributing to an improvement in the quality of ECEC services in the postcode 2770. ”



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Executive Summary

Children from disadvantaged families are at greater risk of poor education and health outcomes, compared to children who do not experience disadvantage, potentially limiting their future life chances. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services play a critical role in supporting young children in their foundational years as they learn, develop, and prepare to engage with formal schooling. It is well documented that barriers to child and family engagement with ECEC settings often cluster in high poverty contexts. These include: the cost of accessing ECEC; challenges with service supply in the areas where children live; families needing support to collect the necessary documentation and complete the administrative tasks associated with enrolment; and a higher than average proportion of children with developmental vulnerabilities creating additional challenges for ECEC staff (ARTD report 2021, Skattebol et al. 2023). This report evaluates the contribution of The Hive Mount Druitt's Early Childhood Educators' Network (ECEN) in supporting early childhood educators (ECEs) to be equipped to support the complex needs of children entering their service, provide high quality early childhood education and support children's transition to school in the 2770 postcode.

Overall evaluation

The ECEN model is contributing to an improvement in the quality of ECEC services in postcode 2770. The ECEN operates in alignment with peer reviewed evidence of what is known to be emerging best practice in professional learning models for early educators working in high poverty contexts. In the focus groups educators spoke strongly about the complexities and challenges of everyday practice in early childhood settings within the 2770 area due to socio-economic and associated factors. The ECEN professional learning model is deeply embedded in and responsive to this high poverty context. Ways of working in this context were described as "not the norm" (Focus Group 2), requiring educators to develop additional skills. The network supports them to do this in a way that is both innovative and aligned with emerging best practice in the academic literature. The distinct nature of working in this context suggests that government might consider increased resourcing for ECEC services in these communities to achieve desired outcomes. The ECEN model could be adapted to other high poverty contexts and regional areas. Table 1 provides an overview of the evaluation criteria, the evidence gathered to evaluate each of the criteria and the findings.

Strong evidence of best practice

There is strong evidence that the ECEN network introduces current theory and disciplinary knowledge to the members of the network. Educators try out new practices in their services based on this knowledge. Educators collaborate in their services to do this. Educators have opportunities to access coaching in the network related activities. Particularly, participation in the ECEN network enables services to be better equipped to support children with special educational needs. The network supports relationships between services to be built, where educators can seek advice from others. Participation in the network acts as participation in a community of practice, where members learn from each other, and seek advice from each other. The confidence and wellbeing of members is supported by the network. The ECEN supports reflective practice for educators. The network responds to educators' identified needs, particularly regarding working in a high-poverty contexts. The ECEN provides opportunity and resources to access different kinds of professional learning.



“The network supports relationships between services to be built.”

Mixed evidence

Educators did not provide examples of incorporation of child and family knowledges, into service practices, except for practices to support Aboriginal families. However, Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) data indicates that services already have strong practices of collaborative partnerships with children and families.

Quality improvement

Publicly available data from ACECQA demonstrates a mean quality improvement of 1.8% for participating services in the period of the evaluation. Services in the network meeting or exceeding National Quality Standards rose from 77% to 90%. The greatest improvement was for 'Educational Program and Practice'. Of the new services established in the time period which have been assessed, all met the standards of the National Quality Standards.

School readiness

In Australia, school readiness is measured nationally by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). Publicly available data from the (AEDC) demonstrates that the proportion of children starting school that are developmentally 'on track' fell in NSW, Blacktown, and postcode 2770 over the time period 2018 to 2024. The number of children with one developmental vulnerability increased in these geographies overall and increased faster in 2770. The number of children with two or more developmental vulnerabilities also increased in these geographies, but less so in 2770. On the positive side, the percentage of children starting school who had attended a pre-school program increased more in the postcode 2770 area than in Blacktown, or NSW as a whole.

Summary of evaluation plan and findings

	Evaluation criteria	Evidence gathered	Finding
1	Is current theory and disciplinary knowledge introduced to the network?	- Focus groups - Mentimeter Q1 - Desktop review of topics and gatherings	Strong evidence
2	Do educators try things out in their centres?	- Focus groups - Mentimeter Q2	Strong evidence
3	Do educators collaborate in their centres?	Focus groups	Strong evidence
4	Do educators access coaching or mentoring?	Focus groups	Strong evidence
5	Do educators incorporate child and family knowledge in their practices?	- Focus groups - Mentimeter Q3	Good evidence
6	Do educators participate in a community pf practice?	- Desktop review of attendance and gatherings - Focus groups	Strong evidence
7	Does the ECEN support educator confidence?	Focus groups	Strong evidence
8	Does the ECEN support educator wellbeing?	Focus groups	Strong evidence
9	Relationships between services (ECEN and other services) are built	- Social network analysis - desktop review of change in reach of ECEN into 2770	Strong evidence
10	Does the ECEN support reflective practice?	Focus groups	Strong evidence
11	Do educators feel like the ECEN responds to what they need?	- Focus groups - Mentimeter Q4	Strong evidence
12	Is it easy to access different kinds of professional learning?	- Desktop review of gatherings and topics - Focus groups	Strong evidence
13	Are centres better equipped to support children with special educational needs?	- Desktop review of gatherings and topics - Focus groups - Mentimeter Q5	Strong evidence
14	Has quality improved in postcode 2770?	Desktop review of public data - ACECQA	Good evidence
15	Has school readiness improved in postcode 2770?	Desktop review of public data - AEDC	Mixed evidence

Background and introduction

Policy at both the federal and state levels has pushed to improve access to ECEC for all children and has put in place the funding mechanisms to do this. A national vision to drive reform of the ECEC sector is being developed to provide long-term direction to achieve a quality, accessible, affordable and equitable early childhood education and care system (Department of Education, 2025a). Policy objectives are to simplify access to ECEC services (Bray et al., 2021) for vulnerable and disadvantaged families, including those living with poverty and those who are caring for children with additional needs (Bray et al., 2021). Recent policy changes have reflected this with a focus on improving professional development (Department of Education, 2025b) and addressing inequalities, particularly in disadvantaged communities. These changes include streamlining professional development requirements, increasing access to subsidized care, and developing resources to support inclusive practices (Department of Education, 2025c).

In addition to subsidising professional development and workforce mentoring, the policies emphasize the promotion of cultural diversity and support for children with additional needs. For instance, the 2024 report Foundational Supports and Inclusion in ECEC outlines several key strategies to enhance inclusion. These include embedding an inclusive culture within early childhood services, clarifying policy responsibilities and ensuring funding transparency, strengthening workforce capacity, particularly in remote and underserved areas, and promoting integrated, community-led service models to improve developmental outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage (CPD, 2024).

Australia's Early Years Strategy (2024-2034) emphasizes stronger connections between ECEC, families, schools, and communities by empowering families and improving coordination across services (DSS, 2024). Integrated service hubs serve as accessible entry points for families facing adversity, while efforts to align curricula and pedagogical practices support smooth transitions from ECEC to primary school. Take up of screening services for child health and development in the early years can be facilitated by working with ECEC services to provide a place-based, integrated approach to families in disadvantaged areas. This Check Ups Before School approach results in an opportunity for children and families to benefit from the early identification of child support needs, referral to health and other support services, and collaborative care (Grace et al., 2025).

At the same time, governance and funding reforms are being pursued to address inequities, as public investment in ECEC remains lower than public investment in school settings and is heavily reliant on private providers. Policy initiatives aim to improve funding equity, regulate private provision, and enhance workforce conditions through measures such as the Worker Retention Payment Grant Program. Broad governance improvements also focus on better integration across government departments and data systems to strengthen quality monitoring and equity (OECD, 2025).

There is an established monitoring system to ensure the quality of ECEC services consisting of a National Quality Framework (NQF) which makes for the provision of ECEC quality assessments based on ACECQA criteria (Phillips & Boyd 2023). There is some understanding of what improves quality ratings in ECEC services. Implementation of the Quality Improvement Plan (Davis et al., 2023) incorporates leadership and governance support, educators involved in learning and quality improvement projects in centres, working in teams, and engagement with families. Quality improvement in early childhood education requires skilled educators with a strong understanding of pedagogy, play-based learning, and ongoing professional development within communities of practice. Sustained improvement is supported through access to appropriate resources and the allocation of time for critical reflection and collaboration. Educational leadership plays a critical role in driving quality improvement, alongside the active involvement of individual educators in quality improvement strategies and collaborative teamwork approaches (Harrison et al 2019).

Providers with experience in delivering ECEC in areas of high poverty identify five important factors as critical to the provision of high-quality services. These include services being approachable and acceptable, which supports the development of trusting relationships with families and enhances engagement and retention. Affordability and accessibility are critical structural factors that influence equitable participation and inform quality improvement planning at the service level, particularly in reducing barriers to access. Appropriateness refers to the alignment of pedagogical practices, service design, and support strategies with the lived realities of children and families. Collectively, these factors support equitable outcomes and sustained quality improvement in ECEC settings in contexts of disadvantage (Skattebol et al., 2023).

The educator is central to improving quality and access to ECEC services for families in high poverty contexts. The ability to work collaboratively with other stakeholders, build skills in pedagogy, develop and implement quality improvements, work with families to build trusting relationships and navigate administrative barriers and payment plans are key to the delivery of good quality ECEC services.

The Hive is the backbone organisation of a place based collective impact initiative, Together in 2770, operating in Mt Druitt, in Western Sydney. The purpose of the initiative is to collaborate with families, communities, government and service systems to ensure that all children in the 2770 postcode start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy & participate in quality community life. The Hive increases access to developmental checks for babies and young children through Check Ups Before School; provides children's books to families; links families to health and early education services; seeks to improve the quality of early education and care services; and prepares children and families to start school. A major initiative of The Hive is the Early Childhood Educators' Network (ECEN), which offers professional development and relationship building opportunities for early educators in the Mt Druitt area.

There are several defining features of The Hive's ECEC capacity building initiatives. These include

- a focus on the high poverty contexts;
- capacity building through transdisciplinary work;
- a place-based approach;
- the length of time that professional learning has been supported.

The Hive has engaged Western Sydney University to evaluate the ECEN in the period from 2020 to 2025.



Evaluation design and methods

Foundational to this evaluation is the development of a set of evaluation criteria. We did this by firstly reviewing the theory of change and program logic developed by the Hive (see Appendix A).

We then undertook a scoping review of the peer reviewed academic literature, to understand what factors are important to successful professional development models for ECEC educators working in high poverty contexts. The scoping review sought literature on capacity building for ECEC professionals from several disciplines and included searches for initiatives that are place-based and/or delivered in-situ over a period of time, rather than one off interventions. A more detailed account of the method of the scoping review can be found in Appendix B, together with a summary table of identified literature in Appendix F.

This scoping review resulted in a set of 12 factors that support good outcomes (Appendix C). These factors resulted in 12 evaluation criteria:

1. Is current theory and disciplinary knowledge introduced to the network?
2. Do educators try things out in their centres?
3. Do educators collaborate in their centres?
4. Do educators access coaching or mentoring?
5. Do educators incorporate child and family knowledge in their practices?
6. Do educators participate in a community of practice?
7. Does the ECEN support educator confidence?
8. Does the ECEN support educator wellbeing?
9. Are relationships between services (ECEC and other services) built?
10. Does the ECEN support reflective practice?
11. Do educators feel like the ECEN responds to what they need?
12. Is it easy to access different kinds of professional learning?

Discussions with The Hive and a review of the theory of change and program logic identified that these criteria are also important:

1. Are centres better equipped to support children with special educational needs?
2. Has quality improved?
3. Has school readiness improved?



Evaluation plan

Our evaluation gathered evidence to assess the network against the evaluation criteria. We gathered evidence through focus groups, a mentimeter survey in the focus groups to compare data with 2019 data, social network analysis, a desktop review of gathering data provided by the Hive, and a desktop review of publicly available ACECQA data and AEDC data.

Ethics approval was obtained from Western Sydney University Human Ethics Committee for the collection and analysis of data for the focus groups, mentimeter survey and social network analysis. Approval number H16869.

Desktop review of attendance, gatherings and topics method

The Hive provided information about the trainings and gatherings ('gatherings') that they had organised for the ECEN in the period 2021 to 2025, and attendance by staff from local ECEC centres, schools and other services at these gatherings. These data have been summarised for the evaluation.

Focus group method

We conducted 5 focus groups with a total of 12 participants. Two were online and three were face-to-face held in postcode 2770. The focus groups were held between 28th October and 3rd December 2025. Network members were invited to participate in an email sent from the researchers to The Hive and forwarded to ECEN members. An invitation to participate in the research was also extended by the researchers in person at the November 2025 ECEN meeting (E5, Appendix H). Participants provided written consent for their participation. Two researchers were present for four focus groups, and one for one focus group. No-one from The Hive was present in the focus groups.

Mentimeter survey method

In 2019 an evaluation of the Collaboration for Learning program, an initiative of the ECEN, was conducted (Woodrow et al., 2022). In the 2019 evaluation participants were surveyed, and five of these survey questions were selected in the evaluation design phase and incorporated into the current evaluation. Thus, responses at two time points, December 2019 and November 2025, could be compared. We utilised Mentimeter in the focus groups to provide some structure to the conversation, and collected quantitative data in response to the following five questions:

1. My experiences in the ECEN have allowed me to apply new knowledge in my work.
2. Through my experiences in the ECEN I feel I have been able to shape my professional learning to my own needs and interests.
3. Through my experiences in the ECEN I have built new knowledge with peers.
4. My experiences in the ECEN have allowed me to change the way I connect with families.
5. My experiences in the ECEN have allowed me to change the way I connect with children.

Participants chose their response from a six-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6), and an additional 'not applicable' option. No-one from The Hive was present in the focus groups when this survey data were collected.

Social network analysis method

Lin defines social capital as “resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposeful action” 2001 (p.29). Central to the purpose of The Hive ECEN is to create a network between educators in different ECEC centres and organisations, such that these professionals can learn from each other and seek advice from each other about professional ways of working. Whilst The Hive operates as a network hub connecting people and providing learning and advice, The Hive also seeks to build capacity in the direct relationships between ECEC services and other organisations in the network. Social capital enables goal achievement and access to resources (Lin, 2001). Historically, women have reduced access to social capital, as do disadvantaged groups, and women’s networks are often unacknowledged (O’Neill and Gidengil, 2006). Given that ECEN members are predominantly women, this suggests that paying attention to this social capital network is both important and innovative.

Traditionally, social networks are measured by asking people about their advice networks (who they approach for advice) and trust networks (who they trust). We chose to focus on one of these for simplicity of data collection and analysis. We selected advice because our goal was to understand whether the professional learning supported by The Hive resulted in practitioners sharing knowledge between themselves. In addition, given the specialist advisory organisations who are members of the ECEN, advice is a key function of the network. We excluded The Hive from the network map because we were evaluating the network that was built between members that was not directly dependent on The Hive as the conduit for the flow of advice and information.

Network members were invited to participate by email, sent from the researchers to the Hive and forwarded to ECEN members, and by the researchers in person at the ECEN gathering in November 2025 (E5, Appendix H). Respondents completed a Qualtrics survey. Participants provided consent for their participation at the beginning of the survey. They were asked the following questions:

1. In the last six months, have you asked any of your colleagues in the ECEN network or ECEC services in postcode 2770, for advice?
2. When you asked a colleague for advice, which service did they work in? You may give more than one answer.
3. In the last six months, have any of your colleagues in the ECEN network or ECEC services in postcode 2770, asked you for advice?
4. When a colleague asked you for advice, which service did they work in? You may give more than one answer.
5. In which service do you work?

Respondents were provided with a drop-down list of organisations to choose from when identifying services. This list included an ‘other’ box with a free text field. The data was collected in Qualtrics, entered into a matrix in Excel, then imported to UCINET (Borgatti et al., 2002). UCINET converts the data to a network map (see Appendix E) using Netdraw.



ACECQA data method

Information on service performance was drawn from the ACECQA website as of 27th January 2026 (<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/national-registers/services>), including overall ratings and outcomes for the seven Quality Areas within the National Quality Standard (NQS).

The quality areas (QAs) are:

- Quality Area 1 – Educational program and practice
- Quality Area 2 – Children’s health and safety
- Quality Area 3 – Physical environment
- Quality Area 4 - Staffing arrangements
- Quality Area 5 - Relationships with children
- Quality Area 6 - Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- Quality Area 7 - Governance and leadership

While services are expected to be reassessed on a three-year cycle, delays in scheduling mean that assessments are currently occurring less frequently. The time between assessments can be between two and six years. Therefore, a cut-off date had to be determined for the pre-rating and post-rating comparison. Given the period of the evaluation is between 2020 and 2025, and the assessment process and recording of the result in the ACECQA database can take some months, the following guidelines were applied: (1) an assessment date of 2021 or prior was used for the pre evaluation period rating, and (2) the most recent assessment date from 2022 or later was taken for the post evaluation rating. One exception is a service that had ratings dated 2017, 2022 and 2024. The dates 2022 and 2024 have been used to best demonstrate the change in rating in the evaluation period.

Services are assessed against each Quality Area and given an overall assessment rating. These are Excellent, Exceeding NQS, Meeting NQS, Working Towards NQS, or Significant Improvement Required.

AEDC data method

Strengthening early childhood education is widely recognised as a pathway to children’s school readiness, long-term educational attainment, and sustained family engagement in learning. Early developmental experiences lay the foundation for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical outcomes, making the early years a key focus for policy and research. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides a nationally standardised measure of children’s developmental status at the time of school entry. The AEDC is completed by teachers for children in their first year of full-time schooling and has been collected every three years since 2009, enabling the monitoring of developmental trends over time. The AEDC assesses children’s development across five key developmental domains (physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive communication skills and general knowledge) (Howells et al., 2024). These domains reflect critical areas of early development that are predictive of later educational outcomes. As such, AEDC data are widely used to inform early childhood policy, guide service planning, and identify areas where targeted interventions may support improved developmental outcomes for children and families.

The three indicators developed by the AEDC to describe children’s development are:

- DV1: The percentage of children who are developmentally vulnerable in that they score in the lowest 10% in one or more AEDC domain(s).
- DV2: The percentage of children who are developmentally vulnerable in that they score in the lowest 10% in two or more AEDC domains.
- On track (OT5): The percentage of children who score above the lowest 25% in each AEDC domain.

The AEDC also reports on the percentage of children who attended a pre-school program. Preschool attendance data enable examination of patterns of participation across populations and regions, and support analysis of the relationships between early childhood education participation and developmental outcomes at school entry.

This evaluation has taken source data from the AEDC website. We used the Blacktown Community time series tables, accessible at <https://www.aedc.gov.au/community-data-explorer/?id=21>. The AEDC data is organised by suburb. We have calculated the data from the 2770 postcode area by aggregating data from the suburbs Bidwill, Blackett, Dharruk, Emerton, Hebersham, Lethbridge Park, Minchinbury, Mount Druitt, Shalvey, Tregear, Whalan, and Willmot.



Findings

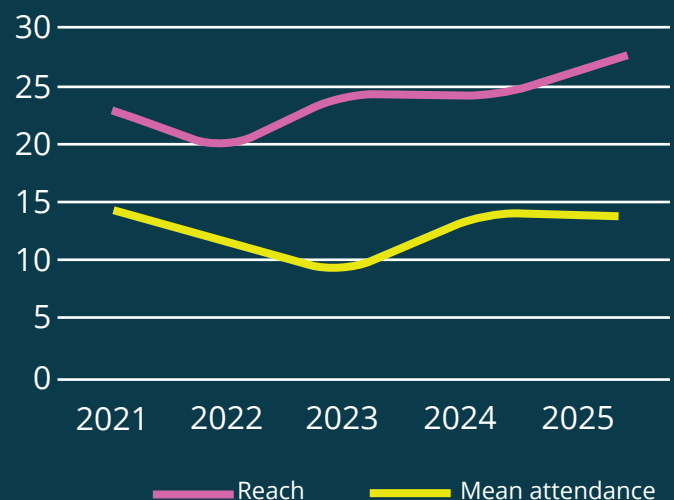
Desktop review of ECEN gatherings and attendance

The ECEN held 5 gatherings each year from 2021 to 2025. We have summarised the attendance data provided by The Hive. The overall trend is that the ECEN is reaching more services through gatherings as time goes on, after a dip in 2022. The mean attendance at gatherings was highest in 2021, dropped in 2022 and 2023, and has been increasing since then.

Figure 1 shows the reach of the network and mean attendance at gatherings. The reach is the number of services attending at least one gathering in any one year. The mean attendance is the mean number of services that attended each gathering in that year. Note that more than one person from a service sometimes attended, so the actual number of people at the gathering is higher than these numbers.

The topics and attendance data can be found in Appendix H.

Figure 1: Number of services attending events



Focus group findings

Bringing current theory and disciplinary knowledge into the network

The Hive was regarded by members in focus groups as having a significant impact on introducing current theory and disciplinary knowledge to the network. The face-to-face gatherings held 4 to 5 times a year each had one or more speakers who presented on topics selected to address the specific needs of services. These topics included trauma-informed practice, transition-to-school strategies, and reframing children's behaviour, all aimed at building educators' theoretical knowledge and practical capacities. Participants explained that these sessions helped fill knowledge gaps for educators, particularly with respect to working in postcode 2770. They also praised the relevancy and continuity of the training.

“It's just keeping up to date, otherwise [we] become old and stale and, you know, same thing we were doing 10 years ago, ... working in childcare, it's like there's something new every year or something changing. ... we need to be up to date with that so we can then feed the information to members or community members.” (Focus group 4)

The participants were articulate about the theoretical concepts they had encountered in the network. In the focus groups, participants referenced what they had learned. This knowledge included their learnings about: brain development (Nathan Wallis, May 2024, September 2022); critical reflection (Anthony Semann, November 2024); the Circle of Security (June 2025); and the HOPE approach (TeEACH, Western Sydney University, November 2022, November 2023).

Educators try things out in their services

Educators described applying the knowledge gained from the ECEN in their services. For example, some introduced new strategies such as using sensory boxes to help calm children, others introduced story bags. One participant reflected that The Hive upskilled staff to implement its family-linking model. From their participation in the network, members reported feeling well-prepared to make initial referrals when they observed family or child need, for example, where children might need developmental support.

Examples were provided where the things that educators tried out in their centres were then replicated by families at home:

“ sometimes a basic activity that an educator provides, a parent will come in and go, ‘Oh, I could do that at home’. Yep. And then they take that, and they’ll do it with their own children at home. ” (Focus group 3)

One service put up in their centre a display on how to create positive environments for children with autism, based on what they had learned through the ECEN. The families who attended this centre were exposed to this display, providing an opportunity for the staff members to pass on their new knowledge to families.

Educators collaborate in their services

Educators shared the knowledge of the ECEN network within their centres. Members gave examples of services where the person who attends the network varies and has to report back to the centre on what they learnt. One member explained how her service uses a communication app to share what educators learn from the network.

“ Whenever anyone attends a training or any information that we want to share with everyone, we put it there ... and then people will start ... talking about [for example] play-based learning. ... sometimes, it can also be part of the next staff meeting. If we’ve identified [for example that we are] struggling with group time ... whenever we make decisions, we need to make sure that it’s evidence-based We’ve read, like, what the literature says about, you know, all these things, and so we make use of that [app]. ” (Focus group 3)

Educators access coaching or mentoring

Coaching and mentoring are embedded in and supported by the ECEN professional development model in a number of ways. The Hive facilitator of the ECEN is an early childhood educator who builds individual trusted relationships with ECEs and provides coaching support as needed. Within ECEC services, coaching was often carried out by directors and managers, who supported educators with their specific needs and challenges. The network also played a significant role in modelling effective communication with children and parents, shifting deficit mindsets and helping educators deliver best practices. Members reported in focus groups that:

- The network gatherings sometimes operate as a group coaching session, where the speakers respond to questions from the floor about scenarios that people are facing.
- Those that attend network gatherings return to their services and pass the knowledge on to others through coaching conversations and practices.
- The network connects services with practitioners, including allied health practitioners and ECEC support organisations. These practitioners visit ECEC services to role model interactions with children and coach educators.
- Coaching of educators by practitioners in support organisations is improved because these practitioners have developed a better understanding of the context in which educators work. This strengthens their ability to provide coaching.
- Members can access advice that they describe as coaching from The Hive when they face particular challenges. One example was a member who was appointed to an educational leader role; another, a member who set up a new ECEC service.

Here, a member explains how coaching occurred in their service by visiting practitioners:

“the OT, the speech [pathologist, ... the Hive has] built a capacity for the educators to actually share those strategies. ... [The Hive] funds it, and then the OT and the speech [pathologist] come into the centre, and then they play with the children. But the educators can glean from their practice through that and then as they play with the children. So, we identify children who have those needs, and then what they do is they focus on those children. So, we are standing back doing our own thing, but then we glean from their practices, ” and then we reflect.” (Focus group 3)

Here, a member explains how what she has learned in the network informs her coaching of family day care educators.

“we’ve got a very big diverse range of educators and their abilities ... English as second language and stuff. So, what I’ll do is, I’ll go back, have a look, and see what information I’ve got and dissect it. And then, when we go out on our visit ... it’s more of a verbal exchange with the educators. And we find that that works a lot better. ... stuff like that brain development, we run an early literacy program through all the educator services. So that stuff is really important to back up why it’s important to read and write sing, talk, and rhyme to under fives. ” (Focus group 3)

One educator described her capacity to break down what she has learned, provide this learning to the educators in different ways, and tailor it to the specific environments in which educators are working:

“sometimes like the information that we get here, when we are translating it, you can see it’s too overwhelming for them. Yeah. So, then you go, oh, OK, I’ve got to think of how I am going to break that down and still give them... what... I think they need? ” (Focus group 3)

Educators incorporate child and family knowledge in their practices

Participants highlighted the importance of incorporating information from children and families into program planning. They gave examples of getting to know about families through informal conversations and “random stories” (Focus group 2) from other network members, asking the family about themselves on enrolment, and listening to what children told them. An example was provided where a child was enrolled in two services, who were able to share strategies for supporting the child and the family, increasing their understanding of the family.

The child and family funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) that were identified as important by members were the knowledge and experience of living with poverty and disadvantage, and Aboriginal knowledges. It was clear that members strongly believed that educators needed to work in a way that was informed by these knowledges.

Regarding bringing Aboriginal knowledge into services, the network is a place to share the understanding that many Aboriginal families want educators to bring Aboriginal knowledges into their practices, and that learning how to do this requires listening to Aboriginal families. One member explained:

“I’m thinking of one of our educators in particular, and she was saying the grandparents of this particular little one said ‘it doesn’t matter what you do, as long as you’re doing something’. ... [And] if you’re doing something and it isn’t appropriate, and then you go and ask for help ... [from] the community ... the educators now are drawing on that information from grandparents, from families.” (Focus group 3)

Participation in the network connected educators to other services and specialist Aboriginal services to support their work with Aboriginal knowledges and families.

However, members most often discussed their understanding of living with poverty and disadvantage in a way that positioned educators and practitioners as experts, passing on to families what they needed to know and practices appropriate to children and families in the 2770 context. Other family cultural funds of knowledge were not discussed.

Educators participate in a community of practice

At the core of the ECEN professional development model is the creation of a community of practice.

“we are very isolated, I suppose. So, this has been an absolute blessing for us. Just being able to collaborate with other like-minded people, you know, and I’ve built some good relationships.” (Focus group 3)

The network has many features of a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). Members meet regularly, there is a focus on learning and improving practice, they share tips and resources, and there are different levels of participation possible, both core and peripheral. Members are learning from each other what it is to be an early childhood professional in a high poverty context, where participation in the community acts as a form of apprenticeship for people who are new to the 2770 postcode. A sense of shared identity was apparent in the focus groups, a shared identity built around the uniqueness of working in early childhood in 2770. The face-to-face gatherings are supported by resources and knowledge from these gatherings being accessible online.

Connections through the network enabled educators to engage in a community of practice in diverse ways, such as creating a WhatsApp group to share resources, training materials, and learnings in an accessible format. Some participants described how they were able to talk to others while sitting at their tables at gatherings, although one focus group member expressed that they would like more opportunities at gatherings to talk to other people at their table.

The Hive, at its core, supports the community of practice. The convenor of the community of practice, Jean Villacorta, is of central importance to the community. Jean's knowledge, acknowledged identity as "one of us" (Focus group 1) (i.e., from the 2770 area and knows it well), personality and communication style are important factors. The importance of this convenor is described by one member in this way "It's like calling your mum" (Focus group 3). Jean organises meetings, establishes connections, and distributes information and resource kits. The topics of these resource kits include, for example, birth certificate applications and working with First Nations families.

The advice network social network map in Section 4.5 provides a summary of the density and reach of this community of practice.

The ECEN supports educator confidence

The ECEN supports educator confidence by building educators' knowledge and understanding of effective ways to support children. This increased knowledge strengthens educators' confidence in their practice and reinforces their role as a safe and trusted person for children. Educators' confidence is further strengthened through network gatherings, where hearing others discuss shared challenges helps them recognise that these experiences are not experienced in isolation. This shared understanding fosters collaboration, reassurance, and confidence in working together to address common concerns.

One participant gave the following example of building the confidence of family daycare educators. They explained that some family daycare providers, for example, South Asian educators, are sometimes viewed as nannies or babysitters. Bringing learning and theory to them as a result of the network builds their confidence to be proud of their work as educators.

“... they're educating the children, but then it can be looked at they're just a nanny. And it's that, like, the definition of what they're doing, like, what they're doing is amazing here. But how it's seen back home is very different. So, it's also building their capacity. So they understand that what they're doing... is important. It's important work, and they have to educate the families that may have a bias thinking on.” (Focus group 3)

Providing staff with opportunities to attend professional learning gatherings aligned with their expressed interests was also identified as contributing to increased educator confidence. Engagement in relevant topics supports the development of knowledge and skills, reinforces a sense of professional value, and enhances educators' confidence in applying new learning within their practice.

The ECEN supports educator wellbeing

Participants consistently described the ECEN as a supportive space that contributed positively to educators' wellbeing. A key feature of this support was the provision of a safe environment in which educators facing similar challenges could openly share experiences and collectively move towards problem-solving. Hearing others articulate shared concerns helped educators feel less isolated and reassured them that they were "not alone" (Focus group 2) in navigating the complexities of their work.

Educators described the network as a "positive", "guided calm space" (Focus group 1) that allowed them to slow down, reflect, and critically question existing practices without fear of judgement. One educator suggested that the training creates a supportive space for engaging with constructive challenges, thereby contributing to staff wellbeing. She reflected on discussions about progressive mealtimes during the training, describing it as "a place of safe challenge" (Focus group 1). She noted that the ECEN provides relief from being "in defence mode", explaining that the gatherings "bring people down" from a heightened sense of being under threat and enabled participants to "question" existing practices in a constructive way. (Focus group 1)

Wellbeing support was also fostered through social aspects of the network. Opportunities for informal connections, such as shared meals, annual social gatherings, Trivia nights, and small gestures like gift baskets, were repeatedly identified as contributing to feelings of being valued. The food provided was appreciated. In the words of one participant: “oh yeah, yes, the doughnuts [laughter]” (Focus group 3). These activities promoted wellbeing opportunities for educators, strengthened interpersonal relationships, and fostered a sense of belonging. One educator reflected on the depth of relationships that had developed over time:

“there’s friendships as well. ... there’s the banter now, ... Like, you know, it’s that you’re coming and you see your aunties, you know? Oh, yeah, or your cousins. It’s that’s the sort of feeling ” (Focus group 3)

Practical and emotional support from the network facilitator further enhanced educators’ wellbeing. Participants valued centre visits and the provision of treats, which reinforced the sense that ECEN was attentive to the everyday pressures experienced in early childhood settings in 2770. For those in leadership roles, the ECEN played an important role in alleviating the professional burden. One director emphasised that the network helped them reflect on the best ways to support educators, children, and families, and described the experience as follows:

“...having that support, because you do feel that the weight is on your shoulders, ” because when you’re looking after the staff, you’re looking after the families and the children. (Focus group 3).

Building relationships between ECEC and other services

In terms of collaboration, participants valued the opportunities provided by Hive to connect with other services, visit centres, share ideas, and learn from one another. Participants valued the relationships they built with each other, between ECEC centres, pre-schools, agencies and inclusion and Aboriginal services. This enabled services with specialised expertise, including inclusion support and Aboriginal knowledge, to engage with centres more easily. Through these partnerships, services strengthened their visibility and connections within the broader community. One preschool director described the importance of relationships:

“If I didn’t have those relationships, I’m cold calling and people wouldn’t be open to arranging visits between centres to see how other people do things, and solve problems, and take school uniforms for role play to support school transition. ” (Focus group 4)

Established partnerships with The Hive enabled services to access funding and resources to support families. This included assistance with healthcare access and diagnostic processes, such as occupational therapy and speech pathology services, and support in navigating government requirements, such as obtaining birth certificates, and accessing funded programs like the NDIS, along with other family supports. An Aboriginal community leader reflected on the vital role of The Hive in accessing this support:

“We definitely use The Hive for supporting NDIS paperwork completion, birth certificates, all of those kind of hurdles that, because our families are illiterate. Some of our families can’t write their first name, which shows the extreme need when you’re asked to fill out a government form. ” (Focus group 4)

The ECEN network provided opportunities for educators to share practice-based knowledge and feedback with government agencies. For example, network members were able to inform the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) about relevant services identified through ECEN connections. The network also facilitated opportunities for educators to provide feedback to the Department of Education regarding the transition to school program. Additionally, the network facilitated information sharing among educators, ensuring consistent and coordinated support for children enrolled across multiple services.

The ECEN supports reflective practice

The ECEN actively supports reflective practice by providing educators with structured opportunities to pause, think, and critically reflect on their work. Face-to-face meetings offer opportunities for educators to slow down and engage in deeper reflection away from daily operational demands. Reflective practice is further prompted through exposure to theory, opportunities to explain practice to others, and collaborative problem-solving discussions. For example, sessions delivered by HOPE encouraged educators to reframe and reflect on the underlying causes of children's behaviours, rather than responding reactively. Similarly, a session on slow pedagogy invited educators to reflect on their teaching approaches and professional practices.

Reflection is also extended back into services, as educators who attend ECEN sessions share learning during staff meetings, prompting broader reflective dialogue within teams.

“Reflection occurs when you see or hear about things other people are doing, and you reflect on how that might be adapted to be implemented in your service. Those reflections really actually lead to positive outcomes” (Focus group 3)

The Hive's consistent engagement with educators to determine professional learning and networking needs creates ongoing opportunities for reflection. This process encourages educators to evaluate their practice, identify gaps in knowledge, and consider how their professional learning needs align with the needs of children, families, and communities.

The ECEN responds to what educators identify that they need

Participants reflected on the range of support provided by the ECEN in response to their unique needs. They consistently valued their participation in the network, highlighting its role in facilitating access to relevant professional learning, promoting the sharing of information and resources between centres, and strengthening professional relationships. One educator described the complexities and challenges of everyday practice in early childhood settings within the 2770 area:

“... to be honest, I came to this preschool room and I was like, seriously?! My first day was like, what?! Because it's not the norm. The number of children who have a disability but aren't diagnosed, [those] who [have] trauma... Or we can't have that toy out, it's a weapon, you know? ... These children have no social skills. They have no support at home. You can't just run a parent meeting because the parents won't attend because they feel like you're criticising their parenting. It's not seen as me helping; it's seen as a criticism. Like there are just so many things that being able to talk with everybody in the network or connect with certain people. Because others don't get it.” [Focus group 2]

The high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage within the 2770 area were central to educators' discussions. Another educator reflected on how these contextual challenges directly impact families and early childhood centres' day-to-day practice:

“I think there are lots of little things like that happen here that people do judge. Our families do have a lot of pride. They’re proud of everything they’ve got. And I think a lot of our families, they are caught in a poverty cycle. So, their parenting skills flow down from the parents that they had and so on. We’re finding a lot at the moment through the domestic violence and things like that where it’s just, it’s flowing. They had that as a child, AVOs on everybody.” [Focus group 2]

One preschool director provided an example of how the ECEN responds to the centres’ unique needs through targeted support programs:

“... my teachers do have a certain level of education and knowledge around behaviour management, trauma-informed practice, all of those things. But ultimately, we didn’t sign up to be counsellors, we didn’t sign up to be OTs, we didn’t sign up to be social workers. If we wanted to do that, we would have done that. But we have to, on a daily basis, sit in all of those roles. So I think that’s where the network helps us fill those gaps.” [Focus group 4]

Educators consistently reported that the ECEN is responsive to their needs. Learning goals are discussed collaboratively within services, and educators are supported to attend ECEN sessions that align with identified interests and priorities. Participants indicated that the relevance of session topics informed decisions about staff attendance, ensuring professional learning was purposeful and directly applicable to practice. This responsiveness contributed to educators’ sense that the ECEN was tailored to the needs of services and staff in 2770.

Accessing different kinds of professional learning

Educators reported that professional learning opportunities are easy to access through the ECEN. The network offers a broad range of topics that respond to diverse interests and service needs. In addition to face-to-face sessions, educators are provided with supplementary readings and resources following gatherings, enabling ongoing learning and deeper engagement with content. Opportunities to access online professional learning further enhanced accessibility and flexibility. Network membership also supported access to external professional learning initiatives; for example, a specialist service’s Expo for early childhood services and the wider community was promoted through the ECEN, increasing awareness and participation across services.

Educators identified several factors that facilitate access to the ECEN and support attendance at network gatherings. Predictability and consistency were highlighted as key enablers, with gathering dates communicated well in advance, allowing services to plan staffing accordingly. Members explained that in contrast to other professional learning opportunities that are often costly, the ECEN provides free access to high-quality professional development, reducing financial barriers and making participation more feasible.

The flexibility of the network was also noted as important, particularly for services unable to release all staff on the same day; the option to send individual staff members to sessions at The Hive supported more equitable access. Additionally, the regularity of gatherings and the network’s ongoing commitment to professional learning were seen as critical to sustained engagement. Practical considerations, including the provision of food, appropriate timing, and resources to support backfilling, further enhanced educators’ capacity to attend.

Equipping centres to support children with special educational needs

Educators across all focus groups reported that participation in the ECEN has strengthened their capacity to support children with special educational needs. Learning in this area was consistently identified as a key benefit of network involvement. Professional learning sessions, for example on the HOPE framework (November 2022 and 2023), supported educators to develop a deeper understanding of behaviour and responsive strategies. Practical resources, such as sensory boxes introduced through the network, were described as providing educators with a reliable and accessible “go-to” tool to support individual children’s self-regulation, contributing to calmer learning environments (Focus group 3). In addition, access to specialist input, including occupational therapy visits, further enhanced educators’ confidence and ability to implement inclusive practices.

As a result, one educator described how their graduation celebration was intentionally redesigned to better meet the needs of children with high learning support needs within the centre:

“Instead of having formal celebration, it was just a display of everything that they were doing, like the crafts, and all of the things that they were doing throughout the year. And I think that was, you know, the families were so happy with that, that even our children with high learning support needs, that they were not forced to be on the stage to sing, but they were part of that, and they were showing, even they were not, like, the non-verbal children can just use pointing. And the families felt so included ... we see over the years that families, when you have celebrations like that, when children are going to sing, that they will not be there. Because they know that their children would just be running around. My child will be the one different, not looking or doing something else, but in a celebration like that, where, you know, everyone’s really included.” [Focus group 3]

Participants reported that the proportion of children with additional needs within their services was significantly higher than in other contexts. One preschool reported an increase from two children with identified needs to approximately 80 per cent of enrolments in a three year period. Another large ECEC service reported that 85 per cent of enrolled children have a diagnosed disability.

One educator reflected on how they respond to the needs of children with additional needs through the implementation of appropriate activities:

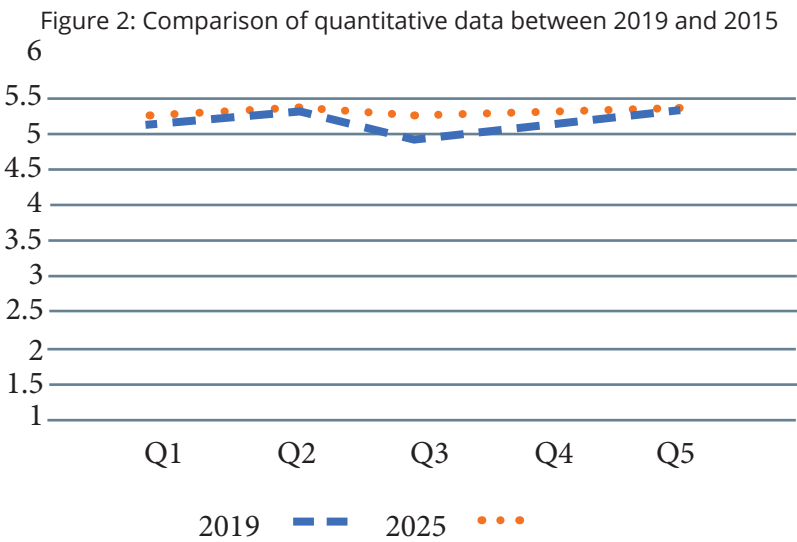
“we do have a lot of children with additional needs. One [idea that] I’m looking at right now [is] about sensory-friendly classroom ideas. So, because we do support a lot of children with additional needs, and understanding what they’re going through, we might be overstimulating for them. How do we set up the learning environment so that it is, you know, we’re able to make modifications and not just say, oh, yeah, well, this is the classroom. ... being careful to really think about and reflecting on, okay, there’s too much noise, there’s too much lights...also the physical activity, because it says here, you know, what the brain looks like, if the children are sitting for 20 minutes a day. But what the brain looks like after 20 minutes of walking. So, you know, if the child’s brain, how it looks like so dull, but when, so then because of that, we’ve reflected as a team, how do we increase physical activities for the children? So right now, what we’ve been doing is that we’ve increased the number of hours that the children are playing outdoors, and that has really made a big difference to, especially the children who need [a high level of physical activity]” [Focus group 3]

Another example shared was the successful support of a non-verbal child with autism who, over time, began to develop spoken language. This outcome was achieved through ongoing professional reflection, collaborative discussion around the child's needs, the implementation of targeted support strategies, and the facilitation of connections with relevant health services. Importantly, this process also contributed to alleviating feelings of shame and fear experienced by parents, fostering greater confidence and trust in the support provided.

One participant, who works across multiple ECEC services both within and outside the 2770 area, emphasised the significant impact of the network on practice and service capacity. They observed noticeable and positive changes within the 2770 services, noting that “I see changes in the 2770 services” (Focus group 1). These changes were described as improvements in educators’ confidence, consistency of inclusive practices, and responsiveness to children with additional needs, highlighting the value of the network in supporting sustained practice development across services.

Mentimeter survey

This data demonstrates that the ECEN continues to enable members to apply new knowledge (Q1); shape professional learning to their own needs and interests (Q2); build new knowledge with peers (Q3); connect with families (Q4); and connect with children (Q5).



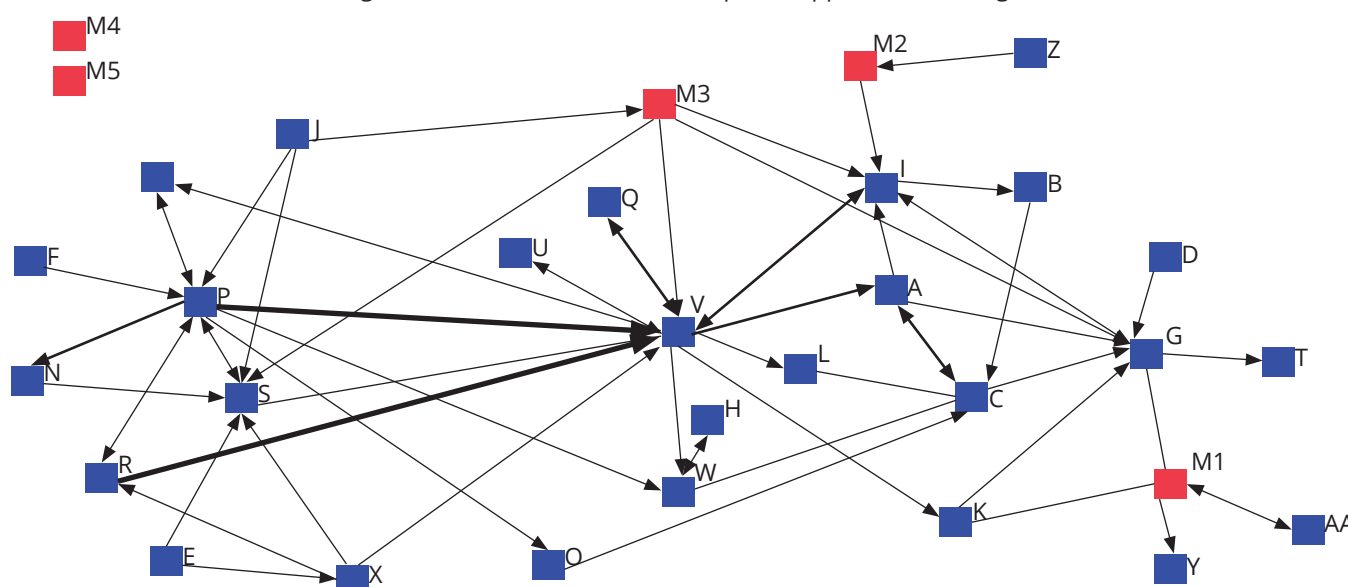
The results of the five key questions showed little difference between 2019 and 2025 (Figure 2). There were slight improvements in the weighted average strength of agreement for all questions across this six -year period. Note that the 2019 data was collected immediately before the onset of the COVID pandemic. More detailed results are provided in Appendix G.



Social network analysis

The findings from the social network analysis are that the ECEN advice network has strong interconnections across the respondents' organisations and is resilient. Educators seek advice from other services in the network. The giving and seeking of advice is often reciprocal. The advice seeking is direct between organisations, indicating that the ECEN has supported educators to build relationships between centres rather than be restricted to only seeking advice from The Hive.

Figure 3: ECEN Advice network map (see Appendix E for larger version)



There were 23 responses to the advice network survey. Of these, 19 provided usable data. Of the remaining four, one had no data at all, one was from The Hive Linker and was therefore excluded, and two said they had asked for or been asked for advice but gave no further information.

The 19 responses gave us a total of 76 connections and connected 27 named centres plus three unidentified centres (M1, M2, M3) which could be duplicates or could be additional centres. In the analysis, they have been treated as additional centres. The centres are shown as red and blue boxes, the 32 nodes.

There is a total of 66 ties between nodes. Represented by the lines between centres, the arrow indicates the direction of the flow of advice. Of these ties, 21% ($n=14$) are symmetrical ties. A symmetric tie indicates that advice has been given in both directions in the relationships between the two nodes. This demonstrates that there is reciprocity and mutual support in the network, where services both receive and give advice. The 76 connections resulted in 66 ties (lines) between nodes (centres) in Figure 3. There are fewer ties than connections because some ties are formed by more than one connection reported. The line is thicker where it represents multiple connections.

The diagram shows that 30 services were connected out of approximately 40 services in the ECEN. That is, 68% of services were connected from 19 survey responses. This indicates a high network density with strong interconnections. Furthermore, the network map has one single component, rather than being comprised of a number of components, or separate networks, that are not connected to each other. This is an indicator of strong interconnections across the network.

There are two isolates (unidentified centres M4 and M5), from the two respondents who indicated they had neither approached nor been approached by others for advice. These respondents might be connected to the network through

their employment in one of the network nodes, but since they did not disclose their employer, we cannot know.

The ties in the network include those to and from ECEC services that operate over multiple sites, specialist advisory services, school-based preschools, family day care, single -site services, and Aboriginal organisations. This network consisting of a single component indicates that advice is flowing between all types of organisations described. In order to protect anonymity, no further analysis has been conducted by type of service.

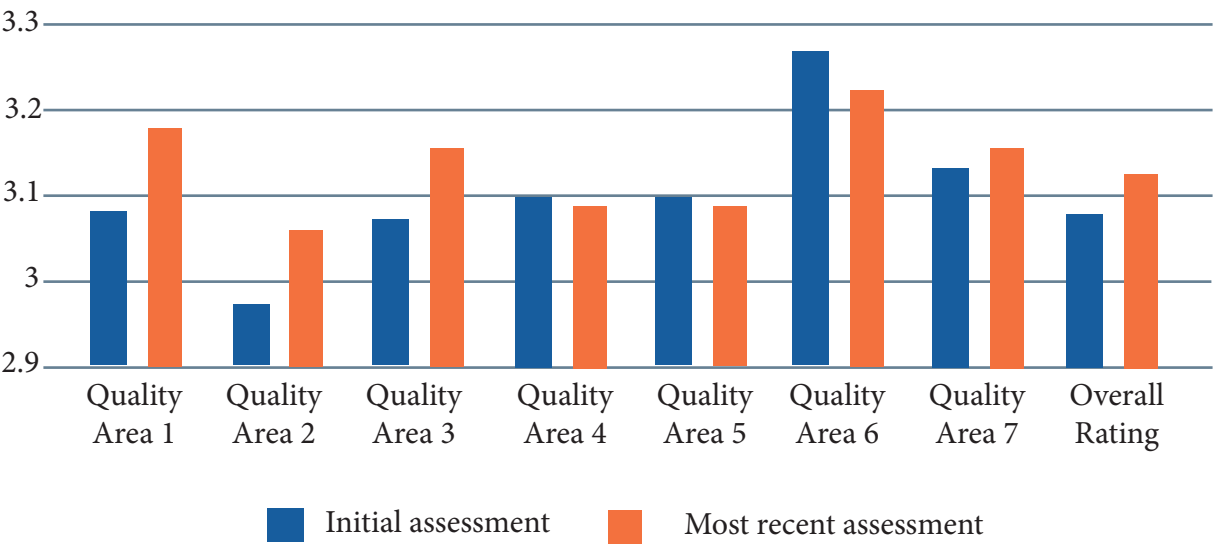
There are five nodes that have high centrality (S, V, P, I, G) who both seek and receive advice from multiple other services, and they connect different parts of the network together. Having five such nodes supports the resilience of the network.

The network map provides evidence of a community of practice, where the network is well connected, with some services central to the flow of advice and others more peripheral.

Quality improvements - ACECQA data

The analysis found that the percentage of services in the network meeting or exceeding National Quality Standards rose from 77% to 90%. The highest performing area at both time points was collaborative partnerships with children and families. The area of greatest improvement was educational program and practice, now the second highest performing area. The lowest performing area in 2021 was children’s health and safety. This is still the lowest performing area, but demonstrated the second highest improvement, and now has a mean score over 3, meeting expectations.

Figure 4: Mean rating of the ECEN services (A rating of 2 denotes ‘Working Towards NQS’, 3 denotes ‘Meeting NQS’ and 4 denotes ‘Exceeding NQS’.)



This data demonstrates an improvement in the overall rating of the ECEN centres of 1.8% (Figure 4). In 2021 7 (23%) services were rated as Working Towards NQS, 14 (47%) as Meeting NQS, with 9 (30%) achieving Exceeding NQS. At the beginning of 2026, 3 (10%) services were rated as Working Towards NQS, 23 (69%) as Meeting NQS, with 7 (21%) achieving Exceeding NQS. All new services that were rated received Meeting NQS.

Greatest improvement was evident in QA1 – Educational program and practice (3.8%); QA2 – Children’s health and safety (3.2%); and QA3 – Physical environment (2.8%). QA7 – Governance and leadership improved 0.6%. There was a small reduction in QA5 – Relationships with children (-0.3%) and QA4 – Staffing arrangements (-0.3%). Although ratings fell for QA6 – Collaborative partnerships with children and families (-1.7%), this remains the highest rated quality area.

There are 43 services subject to ACECQA assessment in the ECEN network situated in 2770. Of these, 27 have a pre-rating and a post-rating for comparison. One service had the name changed, and another was bought by new management. These have also been included in the analysis. Six have not been assessed since 2021 so have not been included.

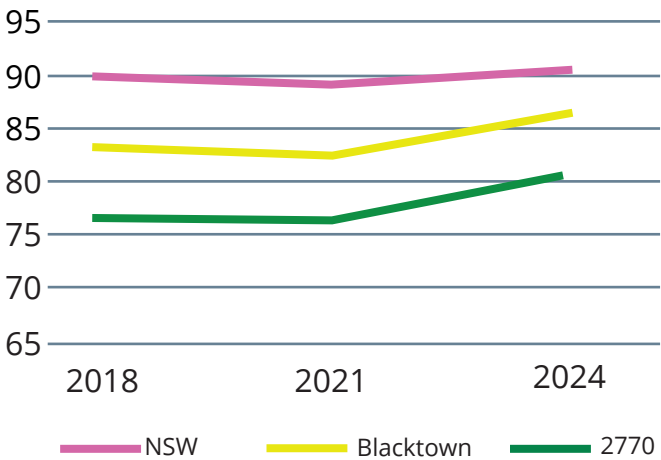
Seven new services were established in the evaluation period. Four of these have been rated by ACECQA and three have not. There is also one service that closed in the period. Given that the mission of The Hive is to increase quality in the services that engage with them in postcode 2770, and that The Hive supports new services establishing themselves in 2770, the service that closed and the four services that have opened in the period with ratings have been included in the analysis, as this data provides evidence of a change in quality of services in the network during the period. This leaves 34 services where the ratings have been included in the analysis. Of these, 30 have ratings in 2021 or before, and 33 have current ratings.

Category	n	Included in analysis?
Pre and post rating for comparison	27	Yes
Change of name or management	2	Yes
New service established in period - has a rating	4	Yes
New service established in period - no rating	3	No
Not assessed since 2021	6	No
Service closed in period	1	Yes
Total	43	

School readiness improvements - AEDC data

The percentage of children starting school who had attended a pre-school program has increased more in the postcode 2770 area than in Blacktown, or NSW as a whole (Figure 5). The developmental data from the AEDC paints a more complex picture. The percentages of children who are developmentally vulnerable in postcode 2770 continue to be higher than the percentages in Blacktown, and NSW as a whole. Whilst the rate of increase in the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in one or more domain from 2018 to 2024 is greater in 2770 than in Blacktown and NSW, the rate of increase in the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains is smaller in postcode 2770. This is an indicator of success in 2770.

Figure 5: Percentage of children who attended a pre-school program



The most recent AEDC was collected in 2024. The data demonstrates that nearly half of Australian children are not meeting key developmental milestones (SNAICC - National Voice for our Children, 2025). Research shows that vulnerability in children has increased across all five domains, with emotional maturity showing the largest deterioration. This is due to a variety of reasons, including persistent socio-economic inequities, access and affordability barriers to ECE (Hinz et al., 2025), multiple early life risk factors, pandemic disruptions to development, and cultural and linguistic barriers (Atalell et al., 2025).

In 2021, in the postcode 2770 geographical area, approximately one-third of children (33.9%) were considered developmentally vulnerable in at least one domain (Figure 6), while 10.0% were vulnerable in two or more (Figure 7). By 2024, these figures had worsened, with 37.8% vulnerable in one or more domains and 20.6% in two or more. At the same time, the proportion of children who were developmentally “on track” in all five domains declined from 43.7% in 2021 to 39.2% in 2024 (Figure 8). In the same time period, the percentage of children starting school who had attended a pre-school program rose from 76.4% to 80.2% (Figure 5).

Whilst the developmental data does not demonstrate improvements over the time period of the evaluation, this is not surprising given the wider context. The COVID pandemic had a major impact on the lives of children, who had reduced opportunities for playing outdoors, social interaction, pre-school attendance. Families faced extraordinary stressors in this time. The following figures illustrate trends over the time period 2018 to 2024, where the peak of the COVID pandemic was 2020, just before the 2021 data point. The figures compare NSW, the Blacktown LGA, and postcode 2770.

Figure 6: Percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in one or more AEDC domains

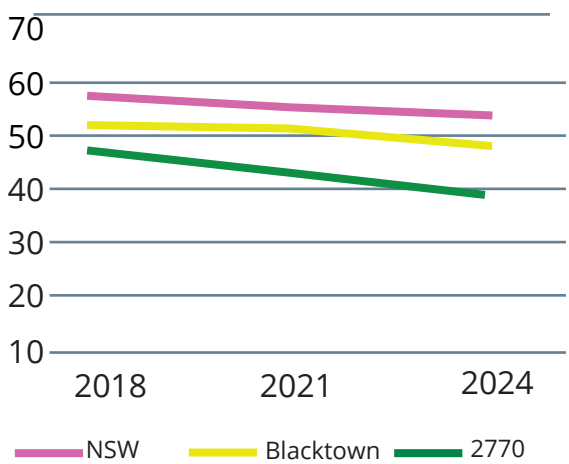


It is possible that the number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable have increased in 2770 due to the work done by The Hive and the ECEN to increase the access of children and families to healthcare and diagnosis. A further consideration is that the impact of the COVID pandemic was greater in lower socio-economic areas, which may have had an impact on children’s development during and after the peak pandemic period. Accordingly, it is noteworthy that in 2770 the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains increased more between 2018 and 2021, during the peak of the pandemic, than in the years 2021 to 2024. This may reflect the work of the ECEN since the peak of the pandemic.

Figure 7: Percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in two or more AEDC domains



Figure 8: Percentage of children developmentally “on track” in all five AEDC domains



Conclusion



In conclusion, we found that The Hive's Early Childhood Educators' Network is contributing to an improvement in the quality of ECEC services in the postcode 2770. We have also reviewed evidence that ECEC attendance rates have increased in 2770 over the period of the evaluation.

We have reviewed the evidence base in the academic literature for best practice in professional development of ECEC educators in high poverty contexts. From this review we developed twelve criteria that underpin the evaluation (see Table 1). Discussions with The Hive and a review of the theory of change and program logic identified three further evaluation criteria.

We found strong evidence that as a result of the Hive's ECEN:

- current theory and disciplinary knowledge are introduced into ECEC services
- educators try things out in their centres
- educators collaborate in their centres
- educators access coaching or mentoring
- educators participate in a community of practice
- the ECEN supports educator confidence
- the ECEN supports educator wellbeing
- relationships between services (ECEC and other services) are built
- the ECEN supports reflective practice
- educators feel like the ECEN responds to what they need
- educators can access different kinds of professional learning
- centres are better equipped to support children with special educational needs.

We found good evidence that educators incorporate child and family knowledge in their practices. Our review of ACECQA data provides good evidence that the quality of ECEC service provision has improved in 2770 in the evaluation period. Our review of AEDC data found mixed evidence of an improvement in children's readiness for school in postcode 2770 in the evaluation period.

Overall, we find that the Hive's ECEN is an exemplary model of ECEC educator professional development in high poverty contexts. The network creates and sustains a community of practice of educators and other early childhood professionals who learn with and from each other to improve ECEC quality in the local area.

“The Hive’s ECEN is an exemplary model of ECEC educator professional development in high poverty contexts.”



Appendices

Appendix A - The Hive ECEN Program Logic

Families and Children program logic template

Early Childhood Educators Network

Objective/s:

To enable the early childhood education and care system throughout 2770 to be high quality and accessible and for early childhood educators to feel connected, supported and equipped to deliver their services.

Needs statement: In 2015, out of 33 ECECs, 19 of these ECECs were not meeting the National Quality Standards for early education and care. Many educators were also leaving the sector due to burn out and lack of support. With a high population of vulnerable children in 2770, the need or quality ECEC is significantly more important.

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Medium-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
-Facilitator – a person who can visit services for regular check-ins and build relationships with early learning leaders and other staff members. Lead the network gatherings. Support early learning services through regular coaching and mentoring. -Funding to be able to provide high quality professional development training and well-being support to early childhood educators.	- Provide bi-monthly quality training from reputable trainers and additional professional development trainings that are tailored to the early learning service. - Create a relational and collaborative approach through the early childhood network. -Practitioner research and evaluation -Coaching and Mentoring 1:1 for educators and bespoke training for individual centre-based services	-This will provide opportunities for early childhood educators to increase knowledge of current practice as well as enhance skills to provide high quality education and care. -A safe space for EC educators to share their experiences with one another, gain new strategies and insights that can be implemented within their early learning services. -Coaching and Mentoring: providing service specific support to build the capacity of early childhood educators to learn to partner with families and communities so that they can gain	-Early childhood educators are connected to support and feel less isolated in their roles -Educators become part of a community that provide support through the challenges of frontline work. -Increased collaboration and relationship building within the early childhood space to better support children and families within 2770 community. -Educators gain new ideas for improving the quality of their service	-Educational leaders gain skills to lead a positive organisational culture and learning community. -The educators are more equipped in supporting and advocating for the families in their early learning services. -Educators feel more equipped to accept enrollments of children with additional needs	- All early childhood services in 2770 meet or exceed the National Quality Standards. -Early childhood educators will be sustained in their work to support children and families because they are valued, appreciated, and supported in their roles. -Children will achieve increased developmental outcomes and be school-ready because of the positive interactions from high-quality education from early childhood services.

- Physical space in a place-based location to deliver training to educators - Funding for incentives for ECECs to attend training		knowledge to be able to represent their needs and improve inclusion, learning and wellbeing of children. -Regular meetings to provide wellbeing support for educators to boost their confidence.			
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Theory of change statement¹
High quality education and care plays a significant role in supporting children in disadvantaged communities to start school developmentally on track. In order to achieve this high quality care, educators need accessible and affordable opportunities for learning, connecting with other educators and feeling sustained and equipped in their roles.

¹This theory of change assumes that the program activities are informed by evidence about how to support the target group/s and achieve the desired program outcomes.

Appendix B - Detailed scoping review method

We conducted a search for education and health related literature on professional learning and capacity building with a specific focus on the early years in high poverty contexts. The search aimed to retrieve peer-reviewed literature published in English language between December 2014 and December 2024.

A number of individual searches contributed to this scoping review. We searched peer-reviewed literature in the following three databases: ProQuest Education; Scopus; and A+ Education via Informit. These databases were selected because they include research on early childhood education and care and allied professions. The first two databases cover international academic sources on education and social work, and the third has a focus on Australian literature. Together they meet the review's focus on Australian ECEC, but also capture any significant knowledge on professional learning across disciplines from the international context.

A number of searches in ProQuest were undertaken, using combinations of our subject terms. These subject terms were: "early childhood", "professional development", "professional learning" "poverty" "low socioeconomic" "economic disadvantage" "low income groups" "community of practice" "capacity building" and NOT ("literacy" "parents & parenting" "families & family life" "reading comprehension" "kindergarten" "schools" "educational technology" "primary education" "science education" "elementary schools" "reading instruction" "distance learning" "higher education" "digital technology" "grade 1"). A total of 494 references were identified in ProQuest, and added to an Endnote library.

Similarly, in Scopus we searched in article title, abstract, and keywords using the keywords: "professional" "learning" "development" "capacity" "early childhood education" "poverty" "capacity building". This gave us nine papers from Scopus, which were added to the Endnote library.

We identified 81 papers in Informit. Here we searched for “professional development” “early childhood education” “preschool” and limited the search to peer reviewed journal articles with full text available. We also searched by adding “disadvantage*” and “poverty” which identified no results. This resulted in 584 papers across the three databases. Removing duplicates left 523. Removing documents published before December 2014 left 486.

We conducted a Google scholar search for “best practice models of professional learning in disadvantaged contexts”. Examination of the first two pages resulted in four papers published after 2014 being identified. These were added to the Endnote library. Then, the library database at Western Sydney University was searched for ‘best practice models of professional learning in disadvantaged contexts early childhood education and care’. This resulted in two items, neither of which addressed early childhood. A further 11 papers were found during these searches that were not a direct result of the searches but connected to papers that were identified and judged to be potentially relevant.

By this point, there were 501 papers identified. The abstracts of these papers were reviewed to identify which papers were relevant to the objectives of the scoping review, where we asked – is this paper about practice models of professional learning in disadvantaged contexts? At this stage, pre-service teacher programs and home visiting models were excluded.

After abstract review, there were 40 papers remaining. A full text review of these remaining articles resulted in rejection of a further number as not including findings from high poverty contexts, leaving 18 papers to be included in the detailed review (see Appendix D).

These 18 papers were analysed as follows. A detailed full text review was conducted. The analysis consisted of the compilation of an Excel spreadsheet. Columns were populated for the professional learning model, which professionals were involved, the research outcomes, what factors facilitated the outcomes, any barriers to outcomes identified, the study participants’ experience, and the research design (see Appendix F).

The findings of the scoping review consist of 12 factors identified from the analysis. These factors support good outcomes of professional learning models for early childhood educators in high -poverty contexts. These factors are explained in Appendix C.

Appendix C - Scoping review findings: What factors supported good outcomes?

1. Theory and disciplinary knowledge

Effective professional learning included an element of new theory or disciplinary knowledge. For example, one study found that educators appreciated having a ‘science of learning’ to inform and justify their educational practices (Aylward & Neilsen-Hewett, 2021). One model of learning was embedded in a Reggio Emilia approach (Zinsser et al., 2019). Examples of the benefits of discipline-specific knowledge were literacy approaches and literacy leadership (Cheyney-Collante & Cheyney, 2018; Jaskolski & Moyle, 2023; Maher & Bellen, 2015; Wajskop, 2017). Engaging in action research also required specific skills, such as research methods for observation (Johnson et al., 2017). Some of the professional learning models encouraged educators to acquire qualifications that built and validated their knowledge (Maher & Bellen, 2015; Zinsser et al., 2019), in one study, 6 out of 10 educators were studying to upgrade their qualification (Nolan & Molla, 2019).

2. In classroom work

Effective learning models included extensive in-classroom experience, usually at the ECEC service where the educator worked (eg Aylward & Neilsen-Hewett, 2021; Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019; Zinsser et al., 2019). In one study, parents of children in the centre were those engaged in professional learning in their children’s ECEC service to develop parents into educators with a base level of qualification (Zinsser et al., 2019). Guided practice by facilitators or coaches supported embedding of practice in the centres (Aylward & Neilsen-Hewett, 2021). In-classroom work was supported by model lesson resources (Brenneman et al., 2019), curriculum support (Harding et al., 2019), and connecting practical work to coursework (Rooks-Ellis, 2017). Educators valued the opportunity to visit other classrooms (Harding et al., 2019).

3. Building the team in the service

Many of the professional learning models had a collaborative, team-based approach, with groups of participants from the same ECEC service (e.g. Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019; Wajskop, 2017; Zinsser et al., 2019). Sometimes there were multiple participants from one room in a service (Eadie et al., 2019). One study involved a collaborative approach in room teams, with regular room meetings (Colmer et al., 2014). This demonstrated the interdependence of educators in a room or service.

4. Coaching, modelling and mentoring

Reflective practice was often structured as a reflective cycle with a coach. Coaches were also utilised for lesson planning support and evaluation of student lesson plans (Brenneman et al., 2019). In a number of models, the coach and educator meet to reflect and plan improvements, on which the educator then acted (Aylward & Neilsen-Hewett, 2021; Brenneman et al., 2019).

Involving a coach created opportunities for feedback loops, where educators are observed by coaches in their classroom and given feedback (Aylward & Neilsen-Hewett, 2021; Conners-burrow et al., 2017). In one example, educators acted as peer coaches (Johnson et al., 2017). In this way, coaches could provide individual coaching for teaching strategies.

Mentoring was also a common component of learning models. Mentors who could model pedagogy were valuable (Cheyney-Collante & Cheyney, 2018). In one model, mentors also acted as advocates, where advocacy meant leaders in the ECEC service advocating for educators and children and pitching in to help in a team (Cheyney-Collante & Cheyney, 2018). One beneficial outcome of mentoring and coaching was to make visible moments of good pedagogy. In one model, where the service was going through transformational change, a component of the model was mentoring for the new manager (Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019).

5. Working with child and family knowledges

In some instances, making children's cultural knowledge central was foundational to success. This includes bilingual implementation with children (Maher & Bellen, 2015; Zinsser et al., 2019), respect for Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing (Maher & Bellen, 2015), and telling stories to children about other children living in high-poverty contexts (Wajskop, 2017). A strength-based approach to parents as existing educators of their children was a strong basis for family engagement and learning (Zinsser et al., 2019).

6. Participation in communities of practice

The opportunity to participate in communities of practice and communities of interest supported a number of outcomes for educators. Discussions in a learning community resulted in co-construction of new practice, learning about different pedagogies, and finding out about professional development opportunities (Clark, 2019). Connecting with other educators and services supported educator wellbeing (Harding et al., 2019). Communities of practice were sometimes focused on particular disciplinary expertise, such as working with children with special educational needs (Corral-Granados, 2024).

7. Recognising educator strengths

A strengths-based approach to educators, where strengths are recognised and built on, supported educator agency and learning. Where educators were encouraged to identify their own learning needs, they were self-driven to keep up to date (Nolan & Molla, 2019). In one study, the positive attitudes of special educational needs specialists and the substitute teacher supported a community of practice and mutual support, even in the face of a lack of support from mainstream teachers (Corral-Granados, 2024).

8. Building relationships

Building trusting relationships between participants and facilitators, whilst expensive, was important (Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019). Educator relationships of trust and professional respect with colleagues were also critical (Nolan & Molla, 2019). Regular contact with facilitators supports relationships between educators and academic facilitators (Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019). In one study, the academic moved from initiator to coach to mentor to friend and equal (Maher & Bellen, 2015). This study was with remote Aboriginal communities, where relationships between the academics and the elders and within the community were also important.

The professionals involved in the learning models were usually educators and academic facilitators. Coaches and mentors, perhaps with particular discipline expertise, were sometimes involved (Aylward & Neilsen-Hewett, 2021; Brenneman et al., 2019). There were examples of other professionals being involved in the programs, such as special educational needs experts (Corral-Granados, 2024; Rooks-Ellis, 2017) and speech pathologists as facilitators (Eadie et al., 2019). Some programs were embedded in a network of supportive organisations, such as local government (Jensen & Brandi, 2018), ECEC services, TAFE and/or higher education (Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019), private funders (Zinsser et al., 2019), the Aboriginal community (Maher & Bellen, 2015) and schools (Corral-Granados, 2024).

9. Reflective practice

Reflective practice was at the core of most of the professional learning models. This reflective practice was often embedded in an action research cycle of learning, action and reflection (e.g., Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019; Jensen & Brandi, 2018; Wajskop, 2017). This allowed for an interplay between theory and practice (via action and reflection). Reflection on practice took the form of purposeful dialogue with colleagues.

10. Flexible, needs-driven approach

Some programs were intentional about their flexible approach, driven by educator needs. One began with the collection of data from educators so that the program could be designed to meet the specific learning needs of the educators (Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019). Progressive flexibility in the design as the program unfolded was also employed to meet the needs of the service and educators (Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019), as was identifying and funding professional learning that was specific to educator need (Nolan & Molla, 2019).

11. Access to resources

Educators valued learning where they had access to resources for classroom activities. Because centres had limited resources, programs that included the provision of toolkits were helpful (Connors-burrow et al., 2017), as were curriculum ideas that were designed to use easily accessible materials (Brenneman et al., 2019). One study provided examples of how educators in a high-poverty context were inspired to find second-hand materials such as furniture to repurpose in their centre (Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019).

12. Access to a range of professional development modalities

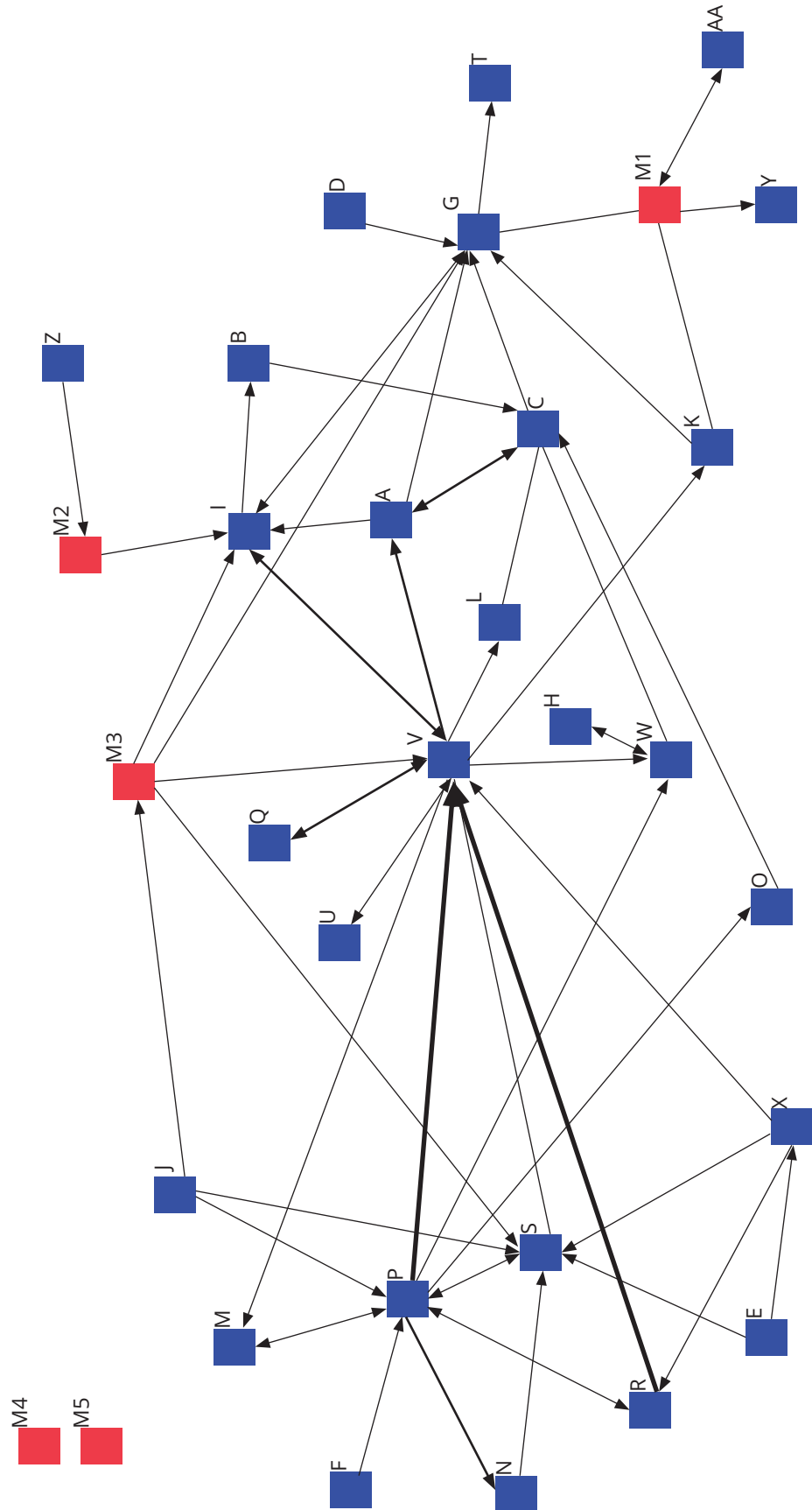
Strategies to make professional development more accessible were useful. Having a range of professional development types and modes available led to better outcomes (Harding et al., 2019). In one case a higher dosage of instructional workshop time was found to be beneficial (Jaskolski & Moyle, 2023). Where the structure of the intervention was feasible, all educators completed the coaching (Johnson et al., 2017). In some cases, online distance education for some of the delivery was successful (Rooks-Ellis, 2017). Financial support in the form of tuition stipends (Rooks-Ellis, 2017), or where professional development time was paid for by the centre (Jensen & Brandi, 2018), was helpful. Sometimes tuition and other costs were funded through a combination of public and private funds (Jensen & Brandi, 2018).

One model, where parents were supported to gain a qualification in ECEC, had classes taught at the service rather than in a higher education setting, where participants were more comfortable and felt they belonged (Zinsser et al., 2019). Higher education program advisers came to the ECEC setting to support enrolment and administration. This resulted in reduced transportation costs and time commitment for participants.

Appendix D - Scoping review papers

1. Aylward, E., & Neilsen-Hewett, C. (2021). Application of an Evidence-Based Early Intervention Model for Children With ASD in Mainstream Early Childhood Education and Care Settings via a Targeted Professional Development Program. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 45(2), 135-149. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2021.11>
2. Brenneman, K., Lange, A., & Nayfeld, I. (2019). Integrating STEM into Preschool Education; Designing a Professional Development Model in Diverse Settings. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47(1), 15-28. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-018-0912-z>
3. Cheyney-Collante, K., & Cheyney, M. (2018). Early Childhood Leadership: A Photovoice Exploration. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(9), 2151-2180. <http://ezproxy.uws.edu.au/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/early-childhood-leadership-photovoice-exploration/docview/2116801708/se-2?accountid=36155>
4. Clark, M. (2019). Edges and Boundaries: Finding Community and Innovation as an Early Childhood Educator. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47(2), 153-162. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-018-0904-z>
5. Colmer, K., Waniganayake, M., & Field, L. (2014). Leading professional learning in early childhood centres : Who are the educational leaders? *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*; v.39 n.4 online annex p.103-113; December 2014, 39(4), 103-113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911403900414>
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7. Corral-Granados, A. (2024). Challenges in continuing professional development on inclusion in early years in Spain. *Journal of Educational Change*, 25(1), 19-41. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-022-09473-3>
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9. Foulkes, T., & and St John Robb, V. (2019). Transforming practice in long day care: an action research project. *International Journal of Training Research*, 17(1), 80-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2019.1602141>
10. Harding, J. F., Connors, M. C., Krauss, A. F., Aikens, N., Malone, L., & Tarullo, L. (2019). Head Start Teachers' Professional Development, Well-being, Attitudes, and Practices: Understanding Changes Over Time and Predictive Associations. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 63(3-4), 324-337. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12327>
11. Jaskolski, J. E., & Moyle, M. J. (2023). Professional Development in Phonological Awareness for Early Childhood Educators in Low-Income, Urban Classrooms: A Pilot Study Examining Dosage Effects. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 73(3), 440-468. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s11881-023-00289-1>
12. Jensen, B., & and Brandi, U. (2018). Enabling professionals to change practices aimed at tackling social inequality through professional development: results from a case study. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(1), 50-65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2016.1262550>
13. Johnson, S. R., Finlon, K. J., Kobak, R., & Izard, C. E. (2017). Promoting Student-Teacher Interactions: Exploring a Peer Coaching Model for Teachers in a Preschool Setting. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45(4), 461-470. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-016-0790-1>
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17. Wajskop, G. (2017). "Literate Playing" – An Oral Language Empowerment Strategy for Underprivileged Children. *Language and Literacy*, 19(2), 33. <http://ezproxy.uws.edu.au/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/literate-playing-oral-language-empowerment/docview/1917373593/se-2?accountid=36155>
18. Zinsser, K. M., Main, C., Torres, L., & Connor, K. (2019). Patching the Pathway and Widening the Pipeline: Models for Developing a Diverse Early Childhood Workforce in Chicago. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 63(3-4), 459-471. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12310>

Appendix E - ECEN Advice network map



Note: The red and blue boxes are early childhood services. Blue boxes are named centres, red boxes are unnamed centres, and so may also be one of the blue boxes.

Appendix F - Summary of scoping review papers

Authors	Setting	Professional learning model	Delivered by	Outcomes	Facilitators of and barriers outcomes	Participant's experiences	Research design
Aylward & Neilson-Hewett 2021	Three centres, 2 with SEIFA 1 (relatively greater disadvantage) and one with SEIFA 10 (advantage). 3-5 year olds; 5 ASD children in each centres, quality of all is all Exceeding Expectations	Professional development program for educators of children with ASD in mainstream settings, using the manualised Early Start Denver Model (ESDM). Educators were trained in one of two programs, one for degree qualified educators and a paraprofessional version for those without a degree qualification. This program comprised a 3 day workshop by a certified EDSM therapist and trainer, with 3 five hour booster coaching follow ups over the year. Also mentoring through weekly 2 hour sessions of guided practice on the job, and self-evaluation checklists. ASD children also had EDSM therapist assessments and learning plans developed.	Educators. Certified EDSM therapist and trainer, EC peer mentor who was a certified EDSM therapist.	Increased capacity, confidence and team-work of educators led to positive child outcomes.	Facilitators: Reflective practice. Having a 'science of learning'. The guided practice supported embedding of practice in the centres. Barriers: Additional load on educators of data collection about children.	ECEC directors concluded quickly that EDSM principles were best practice for all children in ECEC, not just those with ASD. Increased confidence, reduction of stress/fear and burnout. Educators developed a specialist skill set, evidenced by the fidelity monitoring.	Interpretive phenomenological (interviews, fidelity evaluation weekly self-monitoring with coaching and mentoring; post-test question-aire.
Brennem and et al., 2019	'under-resourced communities' with 'low SES homes'	Aim to improve STEM experiences in preschool. 1) workshops for large group content delivery then small group hands on development of teaching strategies (four @1 day across the year) 2) reflective coaching cycles 3) teachers and coaches in small group learning communities (1 hr every 6-8 weeks, teachers present and get feedback / debrief). 10 features of the model: ongoing educator driven design; coaches; builds content knowledge; attends to attitudes and beliefs; large + small group and 1-1; connected to classroom practice; reflection and feedback; CoP; sustained and long term; individualised.	Researchers (academics in STEM education); teachers, district level coaches.	This paper describes the model and how the design is driven by research grounded knowledge, rather than being an empirical study. The intended outcome is improved STEM experiences in pre-schools	Facilitators: Classroom activities designed to use easily accessible materials; model lesson resources. Reflective cycle: lesson planning support and evaluation from coaches; coach, researcher and teacher meet to reflect; improvements planned and acted on. Barriers: N/a	N/A	N/A
Cheyney-Collante & Cheyney, 2018	Minimum 25% children on subsidy; reputation for accepting children with special needs, and English as a Second Language. High quality centre.	Not a professional learning model per se, but an investigation into what contributes to a high quality environment in poverty contexts.	EC educators and administrators, researchers.	One contributor to a high quality environment was a culture of professional support.	Facilitators: Mentoring, modelling pedagogy, making visible moments of good pedagogy, building on agency, interdependence and advocacy, literacy leadership. Believing in educator strengths. Advocacy means advocating for educators and children, pitching in to help in a team. Barriers: Low status of educators and low pay. Resource scarcity.	Experiences expressed as poems. It is hard work and hard to feel valued. Feeling valued makes a big difference. Teamwork, incentives, mentoring.	Photovoice, interviews, participant observation, co-creation of analysis and photo installation.

Authors	Setting	Professional learning model	Delivered by	Outcomes	Facilitators of and barriers to outcomes	Participant's experiences	Research design
Clark, 2019	nine ECEC settings including Head of Start; lack of ECEC in the area	Network of nine teachers from a range of setting including Head Start; series of workshops of writing and discussion; 2 hours a month, one year, two inquiry cycles, the first inwards reflection to get to know each other, the second outward reflection on classrooms and communities. Teachers shared resources by email or social media - 'edge community of practice'	educators, participant researcher	Educators gained new and innovative perspectives on teaching young children	Facilitators: Building relationships across services, exposure to different pedagogical approaches, participation in a community of practice over an extended time period (1 year) Barriers: None identified	A network of support, sharing resources, engaging in inquiry, sharing external PD opportunities.	Inquiry cycles. Data were written reflection, workshop outputs like written activities, audio recordings; case study interviews and written questionnaires.
Brennem and et al., 2019	'under-resourced communities' with 'low SES homes'	Aim to improve STEM experiences in preschool. 1) workshops for large group content delivery then small group hands on development of teaching strategies (four @1 day across the year) 2) reflective coaching cycles 3) teachers and coaches in small group learning communities (1 hr every 6-8 weeks, teachers present and get feedback / debrief). 10 features of the model: ongoing educator driven design; coaches; builds content knowledge; attends to attitudes and beliefs; large + small group and 1-1; connected to classroom practice; reflection and feedback; CoP; sustained and long term; individualised.	Researchers (academics in STEM education); teachers, district level coaches.	This paper describes the model and how the design is driven by research grounded knowledge, rather than being an empirical study. The intended outcome is improved STEM experiences in pre-schools	Facilitators: Classroom activities designed to use easily accessible materials; model lesson resources. Reflective cycle: lesson planning support and evaluation from coaches; coach, researcher and teacher meet to reflect; improvements planned and acted on. Barriers: N/a	N/A	N/A
Colmer et al., 2014	Two centres - A 'diverse' with 15% CALD, B 'lower socioeconomic' with 80% CALD	One (of three) themes in this paper was collaborative professional development, at the time of the implementation of the EYLF. In centre B - Collaborative learning - whole group at same workshop with external presenters, followed by ongoing small group work in the centre. Room leaders work together as a collaborative group, then when they are confident in their knowledge they hold meetings with their room staff for EYLF learning. So, cross centre dialogue at room leader level.	Room leaders	Distributed leadership and collaborative professional development support educational reform, in this instance, implementation of the EYLF	Facilitators: Regular room meetings; collaborative approaches in room teams Barriers: Time for program development, opportunities for feedback. 'filtering' of PD through room leaders might be more instructional and hinder exploration.	Educators at Centre B felt like they had less time, less feedback, and experienced a tendency towards authoritarian leadership.	Case study, including interviews with director and educators.

Authors	Setting	Professional learning model	Delivered by	Outcomes	Facilitators of and barriers to outcomes	Participant's experiences	Research design
Corral-Granados, 2024	Andalusia is a low socioeconomic area of Europe	An investigation into challenges to professional development relating to inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Mainstream school, 3-11 yrs. Study was on 3-5 year old group in nursery classroom. 24 in class, including 2 SEN.	Class teacher, substitute teacher, SEN specialist teachers, parents, allied health SEN professionals, including NGO worker paid for by parent.	Sought the outcome of integration of SEN children in mainstream classrooms. Not successful, as mainstream educators did not work together with SEN educators.	Facilitators: CoPs of SEN specialists, attitudes of SEN specialist and substitute teacher. Authors argue written documentation on a child's needs would help. Barriers: Long serving teachers who refuse responsibility for integration. SEN specialists do good work, but integration is not happening. Lack of power of SEN specialists / substitute teacher.	Collaborative practice and learning between SEN specialists, resistance from mainstream educators	Case study - participant observation notes, document review, interview data, artefacts such as teachers reports (on SEN student plans), photos
Eadie et al., 2019	Seven LGAs. low SEIFA area and high AEDC developmental vulnerability. 2 rural, 2 regional and 3 metropolitan. 25% of families spoke more than one language.	Children under 3, centre-based long day care. 38 services in the 7 LGAs. The program, 'Every Toddler Talking', was manualised, 'Learning Language and Loving IT'. Led by a speech pathologist and EC educator trained by the program accreditors, 14 weeks, 8 2hr professional learning modules and 6 individual video coaching sessions.	ECEC educators, also with a speech pathologist as a facilitator.	Significant improvements in instructional quality. More than one educator in a room participating in the professional learning was associated with higher instructional quality. No differences were detected in children's vocabulary knowledge	Facilitators: Discipline-specific knowledge and individual coaching of teaching strategies. More than one educator in a room participating in the program. Prior educator qualifications made no difference. Barriers: Short time between pre and post - authors suggest that a longer time period of sustained ongoing support for educators would improve outcomes.	N/A	Pre and post test cluster controlled model. Observations (using 'CLASS Pre-K' and 'CLASS Toddler') pre and post the 14 week program, of learning cohort and comparison services. Parents also completed pre and post communication inventories for their child.
Foulkes & St John Robb, 2019	Economically and socially disadvantaged area, high developmental vulnerability	long term engagement between TAFE SA and the EC service; one year of fortnightly 2 hour workshops; the TAFE facilitators were in an action research project with a University; mentoring of (new) manager. The new manager of the centre also had mentoring sessions.	EC staff and manager; TAFE teachers (the facilitators, who were also being supported by University researchers in an action research process)	Boosting educator confidence in service delivery reflecting current research and national standards, supported by creation of learning environments with increased stimulation and child focus. Greater emphasis on relationship skills has enabled service provider staff to build more positive	Facilitators: Collection of data at the start of the program so that the program could be designed to meet the specific learning needs of the educators. Progressive flexibility in the design as the program unfolded, to meet the needs of the service / educators. Building trusting relationships between participants and facilitators - expensive but important. Regular contact with facilitators, cycle of learning, action,	Eager and excited to show the changes they had made. Inspired. Hard to come to unpaid out of work hour workshops.	Action research - pre survey; mind maps; VIA survey of character strength; photographs of learning environments; review of behaviour management policies; mid term evaluation survey; reflection sheets at start of each workshop; oral questions at final workshop. Also observation and discussion of changes initiated by educators at the

Authors	Setting	Professional learning model	Delivered by	Outcomes	Facilitators of and barriers to outcomes	Participant's experiences	Research design
				behaviour guidance and resulting in a significant increase in job satisfaction and staff stability	reflection. Barriers: Superficial adaptation of existing professional learning would not have been suitable. Unpaid workshops had reduced attendance.		service.
Harding et al., 2019	Head Start educators - Head Start primarily serves low-income 3-4 year olds	Investigation of professional development (PD) rather than a specific model. Asks about PD supports, eg mentoring, visiting other classrooms, workshops (internal or external), paid planning time, professional learning community, incentives, curriculum training, help implementing curriculum	Educators, mentors, external training organisations, supervisors.	More types of PD support, and visiting other classrooms and centres, increases job satisfaction; more curriculum support increases maths activities; more mentoring supports lead to better developmentally appropriate attitudes. No association between PD and depression.	Facilitators: Range of PD; curriculum support; mentoring; visiting other classrooms and centres. Barriers: none identified	Data are teacher reported	Analysis of FACES data - nationally representative study, six cohorts between 1997 and 2014. Data asks about what PD support educators have available, and teacher outcomes eg wellbeing, attitudes, teaching practices.
Jaskolski & Moyle, 2023	12 urban preschools, 9 of them Head Start, in eight low income neighbourhoods.	Monthly group workshops (43.5 hours / year for 3 years) and weekly individual literacy coaching sessions. The study gave a sub group an extra 15 hours of PD in phonological awareness, and the comparison group had 15 hours extra in other EC topics.	EC educators, academics, literacy coaches	Higher dosage of phonological awareness abilities learning resulted in higher educator skills, higher instructional quality and higher children's code focussed early literacy skills.	Facilitators: Higher dosage of PD given. Barriers: none identified	N/A	Quasi-experimental. Pre and post test scores on ECE's phonological awareness abilities, teaching quality of code focussed emergent literacy skills, and children's code-focused early literacy skills.
Jensen & Brandi, 2018	'Socially disadvantaged children in particular'	VIDA professional development program. Day care leader and one educator from ECEC centres, 2 year PD program, 17 one day workshops, and one two day workshop for only the leaders. Reflections on actions in educational settings also done. Educators share the knowledge with their colleagues at work, experiments, ie actions in ECEC settings over the period of a month, then all educators in that setting reflect on the experiment. Municipalities offered financial support of hours and workload resources.	EC educators, EC leaders, local government, university.	Practices that can address social inequality in ECEC are enhanced through professional development that makes sense for participants, is organised in communities of practices (CoP) and communities of innovation (CoI), and is facilitated and integrated in entire ECEC systems.	Facilitators: Interplay between theory and practice (via action and reflection). Co-construction of new practice; CoPs and CoIs. Financial support. Barriers: Diffusion of theory and expertise into centres from only two participants varied, and depended on their capabilities, and resources available.	One group wrote a book about their learning and practice.	Intervention group and control group. Interviews with day care leaders (baseline) and focus groups (endline); pre and post observation at one centre per municipality;

Authors	Setting	Professional learning model	Delivered by	Outcomes	Facilitators of and barriers to outcomes	Participant's experiences	Research design
Johnson et al., 2017	Head start pre school settings	Colleague Observation and Coaching (COACH) - two 1.5 hour after school (paid) workshop and peer coaching over 7 weeks. Participants both gave and received coaching, in three sets of 2 week periods, in three different pairings. Three school wide meetings, one at the end of each 2 week period. Incorporated peer observation, discussion and reflection. 12 participants in 2 schools received the intervention.	Educators as participants and peer coaches, academic ran initial workshop	Preliminary support that the peer coaching program is perceived as acceptable and feasible by the participating preschool teachers and that it may strengthen student-teacher interactions.	Facilitators: Peer coaching. The structure of the intervention is feasible - all educators completed the coaching. Also this model had a large group of participants in the same ECEC centre. Barriers: Discomfort observing and providing feedback - perhaps the rotational model did not help this.	Found the program and coaching useful.	Treatment control design. Pre and post classroom observation (CLASS PreK), and feedback surveys from those that received peer coaching.
Maier & Bellen, 2015	very remote Aboriginal communities	Six university academics each linked to a preschool (with school attached) in a remote community, spending time in these communities. 'Two way learning', but really focussed on how to improve school readiness and literacy, dressed up in the non-indigenous academic learning how to help with this, and incidental educator learning outcomes. Collaborative blog discussions built a community of learners. One educator gained a qualification.	Community Elders, academics, educators.	Literacy improved - children developed books and became fascinated by books	Facilitators: Aboriginal Elders steering the project; respect for Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, doing. Making children's cultural knowledge central. The relationship between academic and educator. Bilingual implementation. Academic moved from initiator, to coach, to mentor, then friend and equal. Barriers: Prior experiences of remote Aboriginal communities with the imposition of policy and practices. Power imbalances of whose knowledge is valued, re: the goals of the project, language, agency and cultural practices.	Educator was motivated to engage children in literacy and school transition work, and gained a new qualification	Case study of one site.
Nolan & Molla, 2019	data from an ECEC centre 'relatively greater disadvantage' in SIEFA indexes	Although a wider study, the study explored educators' opportunities for professional growth, and there were some findings about the professional learning model at the centre.	Ten educators from an ECEC centre in Melbourne	Not an intervention with outcomes	Facilitators: 6 out of 10 studying to upgrade qualification; encouraged to identify own learning needs, this was then paid for by the centre; reflection on practice and purposeful dialogue with colleagues; self-driven to keep up to date; relationships of trust and professional respect with colleagues; Barriers: Gap identified was that participants had stopped seeing the poverty experienced by families, and this was not taken into account in their teaching.	Data are teacher reported.	Interviews

Authors	Setting	Professional learning model	Delivered by	Outcomes	Facilitators of and barriers outcomes	Participant's experiences	Research design
Rooks-Ellis, 2017	Rural Maine - extreme poverty, high unemployment and high rates of disability	2.5 year program for existing ECEC educators for certification in EC special education and a masters in Special Education / Early intervention. Mentor network, distance education, tuition stipends (linked to service agreements), coursework and practica, onsite and online feedback, supervision and coaching, self rating against checklists, joint action plans.	Special Ed academics. EC educators, EI professionals, families, workplace coaches/supervisors, mentors, instructional technology university staff.	45 students were recruited, supported, and retained to completion across 2 cohorts, became ECEC certified, gained a masters degree, and then worked in a related job	Facilitators: distance ed, feedback loops, connecting practical to coursework, mentor, tuition stipends Barriers: poor internet connections	High levels of satisfaction with the program	demographics, employer evaluations, test scores, online portfolios, annual focus groups, 'Student rating of Knowledge and Skills', qualifications gained, annual survey of graduates telephone satisfaction survey of exited students,
Wajskop, 2017	EC service with 4 centres in low income neighbourhood in a big city in Brazil	ECEC educators across 4 sites of a service participated in learning research tools to observe children and reflect on their play and learning, participation in a learning community, chose interventions (books) that reflected poor children's experience to build literacy	researchers, educators	Enriching children's oral skills through book reading and providing props for play can increase literacy. Action research impacts teaching practices	Facilitators: Reflecting poor children's experiences in learning and resources. Action research, research methods for observation, discussions in a learning community Barriers: 'there is still much to do' - the complexity of the task	Valued learning about research practices; became aware of children's voice and needs, and the right to play for children living in a poverty context; reflected in a learning community.	collaborative action research between teachers and researchers; video observation of children and reflection; observing the impact on children's play and oral language development.
Zinsler et al., 2019	High cultural diversity. One of the three programs (Pathways for Parents, P4P) explicitly noted the program provides EC services to under-resourced communities in poverty. Educators were low paid, poor, often older women of colour (eg Latina non legal US residents), coming from the target communities.	Overall, these three 'Grow Your Own' models were founded in: higher education - community partnerships; a cohort model; providing financial and logistical assistance. The third model, in high poverty context, targeted entry level EC educators, ie, parents of children in the program who can act as teacher's aides. Parent participants worked directly in classrooms, took college level courses, to acquire useful qualifications for employment,	'A web of partnerships'. Advisory group of advocates and higher ed faculty. Family engagement team. Partnerships with state agencies and private funders.	In P4P, 13 of the initial 16 finished the program and gained a qualification, and are studying further.	Facilitators: In P4P, Reggio Emilia approach, strength based approach to parents as already child educators, classes taught at the service not in an HE setting, where participants were more comfortable and felt they belonged. This reduced transportation costs and time for participants. HE program advisers came to the ECEC setting to support enrolment and admin. Some tuition paid and other costs covered from public and private funds. Extensive in-classroom experience. Barriers: Commuting, childcare, financial cost, sense of belonging in HE, disparate qualification requirements. When children transition to kindergarten, the convenience of the location diminishes.	Not reported	Case studies. Completion rates.

Appendix G - Mentimeter results

Questions	2019 % (n) Strongly Agree	2025 % (n) Strongly Agree	2019 % (n) Agree	2025 % (n) Agree
Q1 My experiences in the ECEN have allowed me to apply new knowledge in my work (Q2 2019)	60% (n=9)	75% (n=9)	40% (n=6)	25% (n=3)
Q2 Through my experiences in the ECEN I have built new knowledge with my peers (Q6 2019)	80% (n=12)	83% (n=10)	20% (n=3)	17% (n=2)
Q3 My experiences in the ECEN have allowed me to change the way I connect with families (Q10 2019)	47% (n=7)	75% (n=9)	53% (n=8)	25% (n=3)
Q4 Through my experiences in the ECEN I feel I have been able to shape my professional learning to my own needs and interests (Q4 2019)	73% (n=11)	83% (n=10)	20% (n=3) (plus 7% (n=1) tend to agree)	17% (n=2)
Q5 My experiences in the ECEN allowed me to change the way I connect with children (Q11 2019)	80% (n=12)	82% (n=9)	20% (n=2)	18% (n=2)

Note - there was one 'not applicable' response to 5 in the 2025 data. We subtracted this from the total number of respondents. No respondents disagreed with the statements.

Appendix H - Gathering and attendance data

ECEN gathering	Year	Number of attending centres
E1 March Assessment	2021	16
E2 May Wellbeing	2021	16
E3 Jul Trauma	2021	13
E4 Sep School Transition	2021	13
E5 Nov Cultural safety	2021	13
Total number of services in 2021 who attended at least one gathering		22
E1 Feb Banquet	2022	16
E2 May Early Childhood intervention pathways	2022	14
E3 July Allied health support for children	2022	11
E4 Sept Brain development and impact of trauma	2022	9
E5 Nov Healthy outcomes from positive experiences (HOPE) training	2022	9
Total number of services in 2022 who attended at least one gathering		20

ECEN gathering	Year	Number of attending centres
E1 March Available support pathways for children with additional need	2023	10
E2 June Trauma-informed practice approach workshop - working together for children	2023	7
E3 Jul/Aug EYLF updates and reflection conversation - high quality transitions to schools	2023	11
E4 Sept Cultural capacity training	2023	12
E5 Nov Unpacking the HOPE'ful Approach	2023	6
Total number of services in 2023 who attended at least one gathering		24
E1 Mar Understand your brain - the first 1000 days, engage your brain 2-7 years - building resilience and maximising learning	2024	14
E2 Jun Emotional coaching	2024	12
E3 Jul Connecting to the joy of children's learning through purposeful observation	2024	12
E4 Sept The power of critical reflection as a transformative tool in early childhood education	2024	16
Total number of services in 2024 who attended at least one gathering		24
E1 Mar ACECQA Assessment and rating processes	2025	15
E2 May transition to school	2025	17
E3 Jun Circle of Security classroom	2025	11
E4 Sept An introduction to reframing and responding to children's behaviour	2025	9
E5 November Trivia Night	2025	13
Total number of services in 2025 who attended at least one gathering		27

- All figures based on data provided by The Hive

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