

National professional practice network for educators and teachers

National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy

Focus Area 3-3

July 2024



The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia's national education evidence body, working to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people.

About this report

This report has been produced as Action FA3.3 under the Leadership and capability theme of the National Workforce Strategy, Shaping Our Future. It was developed by AERO in consultation with ECEC stakeholders.

The Australian Education Senior Officials Committee has agreed to the release of this report for government and sector consideration.

The publication of this report does not indicate government acceptance of any recommendations. For any queries regarding this report, please email ECECWorkforceStrategy@education.gov.au

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Acknowledgement of Country

AERO acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, waterways, skies, islands and sea Country across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to First Nations cultures and Elders past and present. We endeavour to continually value and learn from First Nations knowledges and educational practices.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full term
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AERO	Australian Education Research Organisation
AEU	Australian Education Union
APNA	Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association
ARACY	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
CCS	Child Care Subsidy
DET	Department of Education and Training
ECA	Early Childhood Australia
ECE	Early childhood education
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
FA	Focus Area
HALT SA	Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers of South Australia
LDC	Long day care
LGA	Local government area
NQS	National Quality Standard
NWC	National Workforce Census
NWS	National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy
OSHC	Outside school hours care
SNAICC	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
SRC	Social Research Centre

Executive summary

The desirability of a national professional practice network for educators and teachers depends on it having a clear purpose and effective design. National collaboration is needed to design an approach that adds value to the sector.

This report addresses the following action from the Shaping Our Future: Implementation and Evaluation Plan for the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (NWS):

FA3-3: Consider the appropriateness of a national professional practice network, following a review of existing networks that are available at jurisdictional and local levels.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), in partnership with Deakin University, undertook research and analysis to support implementation of this action, including: analysis of existing networks in children's education and care services¹; a review of international literature; consultation with policymakers and peak bodies; and research into the perspectives and experiences of teachers, educators and leaders.

Recommendations

Key recommendations and associated research findings are summarised in this section. Given the limited evidence on the effectiveness of existing networks, all recommendations signal promising design elements of a national network rather than proven strategies. They also require strategic integration with other related NWS actions to ensure that reform is cohesive and efficient, and that actions are mutually reinforcing.

The 10-year period of the NWS provides an opportunity to prioritise those actions most urgently required to secure the foundations for others. AERO's analysis suggests that a national professional practice network could be an appropriate long-term strategy towards the NWS's goal of a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce. However, there needs to be consensus on its nature and purpose. AERO recommends that implementation begins with Recommendation 1. Without resolving Recommendation 1, or if Recommendation 1 cannot be implemented, AERO does not recommend proceeding with the remaining recommendations.

¹ This report uses the term 'children's education and care' to refer to both ECEC (including settings such as preschool, long day care and family day care) and outside school hours care.

Recommendation 1: Clarify a distinct purpose for the national network to inform its design

Recommendation 1.1: Establish the main purpose of the network as collaborative problem-solving and practice improvement

Professional practice networks are most effective when members can share ideas about practice and solve problems together. An orientation towards collaborative action can ensure that sharing is purposeful and not simply passive or burdensome.

Recommendation 1.2: Consider a secondary purpose for the network as generating insights to inform policy and advocacy

Professional networks can provide a forum for members to discuss issues and share insights and ideas that could help to shape policy and connect it to practice. This requires transparency in how information that is shared through the network will be used.

Recommendation 1.3: Engage Indigenous early childhood communities in knowledge sharing, in ways that protect their knowledge, histories and ways of teaching and learning

National network design could support Indigenous early childhood communities, who are willing and seeking to connect, to connect with other Indigenous early childhood communities across the country and share effective, culturally responsive practice.

Recommendation 2: Include all types of children's education and care professionals in the network, with subgroups to meet specific interests and needs

Recommendation 2.1: Invite all teachers and educators to be part of the network, and possibly other professionals

A national network that includes all teachers and educators has potential to improve connections between types of education and care services and across jurisdictions. It could also involve other professionals (e.g. allied health and early intervention) to promote collaborative practice.

Recommendation 2.2: Create purpose-driven interest groups within the network to address shared experiences, goals and needs

Interest groups within a broad national network would enable teachers and educators to connect with others with similar contexts, aspirations or challenges. Existing groups and localised networks could also be incorporated within the national network.

Recommendation 2.3: Support Indigenous early childhood communities, who are willing and seeking to connect, to share culturally responsive practices with other Indigenous services

There is interest among some Indigenous early childhood communities in sharing effective, culturally responsive practice with other Indigenous services, to develop and increase networks and to share practices.

Recommendation 3: Ensure the network has expert moderation to foster professional trust

Recommendation 3.1: Employ network facilitators with expertise in current practice and group moderation, to lead in partnership with teachers and educators

Quality facilitation is a key determinant of the effectiveness of networks. Facilitators need to be collaborative leaders, with current expertise in practice, as well as skills in moderating diverse groups.

Recommendation 3.2: Facilitate cultural responsiveness and anti-racism learning across the network, and ensure Indigenous participants have self-determination and autonomy over knowledge sharing outside their communities

Culturally responsive and anti-racist learning across the network would help to ensure that Indigenous perspectives are valued. To counter against the cultural load placed upon Indigenous communities, there must be self-determination and autonomy over how, when and in what ways Indigenous educators would like to share their professional practices outside of their community.

Recommendation 3.3: Moderate information provided through the network so it becomes a trusted source of authoritative advice

A national network could curate and share information about practice from across organisations, making it easier for teachers and educators to find what they need. This requires balancing openness to members' ideas with consistent and evidence-based advice.

Recommendation 4: Establish governance and funding arrangements for the network that promote shared ownership and trust

Recommendation 4.1: Host the network in a trusted, independent organisation in collaboration with governments and the sector

A national network will be most effective if it is seen as responsive to teachers and educators and independent from government or private interests. The network host must work in partnership with governments and peak children's education and care sector organisations.

Recommendation 4.2: Provide funding for whole-of-network operations as well as targeted support for innovative projects

Adequate funding for network operations is essential to the network's success. Funding could also be distributed through the network to support collaborative projects designed by network interest groups or localised networks to tackle shared challenges or create innovation in practice.

Recommendation 5: Offer flexible options for network participation to respond to diverse contexts and employment arrangements

Recommendation 5.1: Use online delivery to promote inclusion alongside opportunities for purposeful face-to-face interaction

Online delivery is likely to be a significant part of any national network, to ensure that participation is accessible across Australia. There is also value in face-to-face activities (potentially for interest groups and localised networks) and a need to consider inequalities in digital access.

Recommendation 5.2: Respect teachers' and educators' time by making network activities flexible, short, purposeful and practical

Time for professional learning is scarce and varies across services and employment arrangements. Resolving these issues is crucial to improving access to the opportunities a network can provide. Network activities must be designed to fit within time constraints, alongside efforts to increase paid time for professional learning across the sector.



About this study

This report draws on the following research and analysis:

- a review of Australian and international research literature on professional networks undertaken by AERO and augmented by Deakin University
- interviews, focus groups and a national survey of teachers, educators and leaders undertaken by Deakin University. This included dedicated ‘Yarning Up’ conducted by an Indigenous researcher with Indigenous teachers, educators and leaders, with data gathered and analysed using Indigenous methodologies
- stakeholder consultations undertaken by AERO (see [Appendix A: Overview of consultations and review of existing approaches](#))
- synthesis of findings and development of recommendations by AERO aimed at providing clear proposals for policymakers and sector leaders to consider in the next stage of implementing the NWS actions.

[Appendix B: Research methods](#) provides details of the research methods used. Participation included:

- survey responses from 454 participants (223 partially completed), covering a range of service types, roles and qualification levels, and representing all states and territories (with about one-third each coming from New South Wales and Victoria)
- interviews and focus groups with 33 participants, who were predominantly degree qualified and working as teachers or educational leaders across a range of ECEC service types. The remaining participants included diverse roles such as preschool field officer (PSFO)², university employee, consultant, practice coach, leader of a peak organisation, recruiter, and child and family practitioner.

Significant pressures on the sector – such as staff shortages and concurrent consultations – made participant recruitment challenging. The efforts participants made to contribute attests to their strong desire for enhanced support. Their input provided vivid insights into the experiences of teachers, educators and leaders, and has shaped the report and its recommendations. There would be value in further consultation as proposals for reform and pathways to implementation are further developed. Given how much has been asked of the sector during consultations across NWS actions, support for their continued engagement would be appropriate.

The authors thank the educators, teachers and leaders who participated in the research; the representatives of jurisdictions, peak bodies and providers who participated in consultations; and Dr Katey De Gioia, Dr Melanie Thomas, Dr Kelly Johnston and Anna Razak who assisted in the preparation of this report.

² Preschool field officers provide short-term guidance and coaching to ECEC educators and teachers in Victoria to improve the inclusion of children with additional needs. The positions are Victorian Government-funded.

Introduction

The National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (NWS) sets out a suite of interconnected focus areas (FAs) and actions to build the education and care workforce. This report addresses the following NWS action:

FA3-3: Investigate options for a national professional practice network for educators and teachers.

To achieve this action, the NWS Implementation and Evaluation Plan commits to:

FA3-3: Consider the appropriateness of a national professional practice network, following a review of existing networks that are available at jurisdictional and local levels.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) was tasked with reviewing existing networks and analysing their relative effectiveness, alongside a domestic and international literature review of professional practice networks.

The idea of a professional practice network reflects the longstanding recognition that all education and care professionals benefit from collegial learning and support. It aligns well with the other NWS action that AERO investigated (FA1-3 Enhance mentoring and induction support for new teachers) and opportunities for intersection between the 2 actions are outlined in this report. Both actions could be components of a connected strategy to enhance collegial professional learning across the education and care sector and enable teachers and educators to learn from one another.

While the benefits of collegial learning and support are clear, there is less clarity about exactly what a national professional practice network could involve. This contrasted with AERO's research into mentoring and induction for new teachers, which revealed a clear, shared vision as well as work still to be done in mapping how the vision might be achieved. For a professional practice network, considerable work remains to be done in designing the vision itself.

The complexity of the education and care sector makes the design of a national network even more challenging. Based on the 2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census (NWC), a national network could cover over 220,000 educators and teachers, including:

- close to 200,000 early childhood education and care (ECEC) and outside school hours care (OSHC) professionals in 'contact' roles (working directly with children) across all services approved for Child Care Subsidy (CCS) (Social Research Centre [SRC], 2022, p. 5)
- a total of 22,447 additional teachers and educators in standalone preschools in the 6 jurisdictions for which data was available (SRC, 2022, p. 58).

Within this workforce, there is significant diversity in qualifications, employment arrangements, ECEC service types, ownership and governance. Particular challenges exist for teachers and educators in OSHC, whose work involves age groups and contexts that differ significantly from early childhood services. The workforce also includes considerable socio-demographic diversity, including teachers and educators from different cultural, educational and socio-economic backgrounds (Gide et al., 2022; Jackson, 2018).

The possibilities for a national network presented in this report provide a range of options for navigating this complexity. The report also addresses the practicalities of implementing a national network in a complex, dynamic sector. It aims to help policymakers and sector leaders to appraise whether a national network could be designed and delivered in a way that adds value for teachers and educators, alongside the many other professional networks already active in the sector.

Defining ‘professional practice network’

A ‘professional practice network’ can be defined as a group of professionals who engage in reflective, collaborative learning about practice outside their everyday workplace over a period of time (rather than at one-off events), with the aim of improving outcomes for teachers, educators, families and children. Professional networks may also be referred to as ‘communities of practice’, ‘communities of learning’, ‘local learning communities’, ‘professional learning networks’, ‘professional learning communities’, ‘teacher and educator networks’ and ‘professional communities of teachers and educators’ (Howe & Jacobs, 2013; Pavia et al., 2003; Premier & Parr, 2019; Thornton & Cherrington, 2019; Thornton & Wansbrough, 2012).

Formal professional practice networks in the Australian children’s education and care sector can vary widely in membership and facilitation. They may be delivered by:

- **governments** – for teachers and educators involved in implementing a key area of policy or practice improvement (at either state/territory, regional or local level)
- **ECEC service providers** – for their employees (usually across multiple sites)
- **peak bodies, unions or professional associations** – for their members
- **professional learning providers** (including universities and private providers) – for teachers and educators participating in a specific program.

Teachers and educators may also build informal networks outside their own ECEC service through connections made at workshops, conferences or events, or online through interest groups on social media (Waniganayake et al., 2008). The lines between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ networks may be indistinct, as facilitated networks may evolve into informal networks over time and vice versa.

Defining ‘national’

For the purposes of this report, ‘national’ is taken simply to mean covering all jurisdictions. No assumptions are made about ‘national’ coverage of all teachers and educators within each jurisdiction, or delivery by a specific ‘national’ body. This flexibility allows for consideration of the different possibilities outlined in this report.

Defining ‘appropriateness’

The ‘appropriateness’ of a national network – and of the various options for what it could involve – has been considered according to 3 dimensions:

- Do the options reflect the best available research?
- Do the options support the achievement of policy goals?
- Do the options reflect the priorities of teachers, educators and leaders?

Do the options reflect the best available research?

The benefits of networks for professional practice have been well established in research for some time, and continue to be supported. Collegial discussions provide opportunities to consider alternative perspectives and ways of working (Waite & Gatrell, 2004), reducing the possibility of self-deception (Fisher, 2003) that can occur when critical reflection is conducted alone (Brockbank & McGill, 1998). As Nuttall (2013) and Brookfield and Preskill (2009) point out, working collaboratively, rather than individually, harnesses a group’s collective thinking, experience and creativity to address the problems of practice. The research of Trust et al. (2016) demonstrates the influence of professional networks on the modification of teaching practices and teacher growth in affective, social, cognitive and identity aspects.

Networks may also increase teachers’ and educators’ resilience and wellbeing. Vijayadevar et al. (2019) found that loneliness, professional isolation and lack of management support were key reasons why the early childhood teachers in their research valued participating in a network. As a result of their participation, these teachers demonstrated more confidence in their abilities, engaged in collaborative peer learning and were better able to listen to each other’s concerns. Similarly, Serrano et al. (2017) reported that early childhood teachers involved in a professional network benefited from increasing their professional teaching development, sharing ideas and, perhaps most importantly, receiving emotional support.

While supporting the benefits of professional networks in general, the available research does not provide a conclusive steer on the most appropriate model for the Australian education and care sector. Most literature on networks focuses on communities of practice within primary schools, and there is an identified need for further research into the nature and outcomes of professional networks in children’s education and care (Thornton & Cherrington, 2019; Watson & Wildy, 2014). Professional networks are also often researched within the context of other initiatives, such as induction and mentoring (Howe & Jacobs, 2013), making it harder to isolate the benefits of professional networks alone.

Analysis of existing education and care networks in Australia yields some insight into potential models, but evaluative information about their effectiveness is scarce. Results of available evaluations are also difficult to interpret due to the diversity of outcomes that programs aim to achieve. Further evaluation of existing models may be desirable once the desired purpose of a national network is clarified, as explored in this report.

Do the options support the achievement of policy goals?

The idea for a national network emerged from findings in NWS consultations that some education and care professionals feel isolated, as outlined in this rationale:

Educators, teachers and service leaders, particularly those in regional and remote areas, can feel isolated and would benefit from access to a professional practice network to enhance their practice (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2019, p. 7).

The NWS Implementation and Evaluation Plan positions the proposal for a network in Focus Area 3 – Leadership and Capability, along with access to core professional development and micro-credentials in areas of need. The anticipated benefits of this suite of actions are:

- increased quality of practice for teachers and educators
- increased quality of leadership and management.

The findings in this report suggest that a national professional practice network has potential to support these objectives, and may also offer benefits for other NWS goals, including professional recognition (FA1), wellbeing (FA4) and retention (included in FA2).

Do the options reflect the priorities of teachers, educators and leaders?

It is clear from the research that teachers and educators value the opportunity to connect with one another through professional networks. There was nevertheless some hesitation among practitioners consulted for this report about whether a national professional practice network was necessary or desirable. The following quote typifies comments from a number of participants that there are sufficient networks operating already, and the sector has limited capacity to absorb more:

There are many of these already operating. Attendance is extremely poor due to an exhausted workforce.

While only 6% of survey respondents explicitly stated that a national network would not be useful, more than 36% of respondents were unsure.

To address concerns about adding another network to an already crowded sector, another participant suggested building on existing networks as a priority:

Sometimes adding more isn't the outcome, rather tuning into what is already available and working.

These comments reinforce the need for a clear value-add for any new national network, and careful integration with existing programs and related reforms. These considerations have informed the recommendations in this report.

Recommendations

The desirability of a national professional practice network depends on whether it can be designed in a way that adds value for teachers and educators, with a clear purpose, flexible membership and delivery options and responsive leadership.

There was modest support for the proposed national professional practice network in the research and consultation undertaken for this report, indicating that further design work is necessary before the proposal is seen as having clear value for the sector. This contrasted with AERO's first NWS report, [National Early Career Teacher Mentoring and Induction Support](#), which found resounding enthusiasm for the proposal but concerns about the challenges in implementing it. For the professional practice network, concerns related more to its design and purpose than its implementation.

The recommendations in this report, therefore, aim to clarify what purposes a national professional practice network may serve, and what it could look like, so more informed decisions can be made about its desirability.

AERO's primary recommendation is to clarify a distinct purpose (Recommendation 1) before proceeding further. Agreement on purpose is necessary for fruitful engagement with the considerations of membership, moderation, governance, funding and flexibility presented in Recommendations 2 to 5.

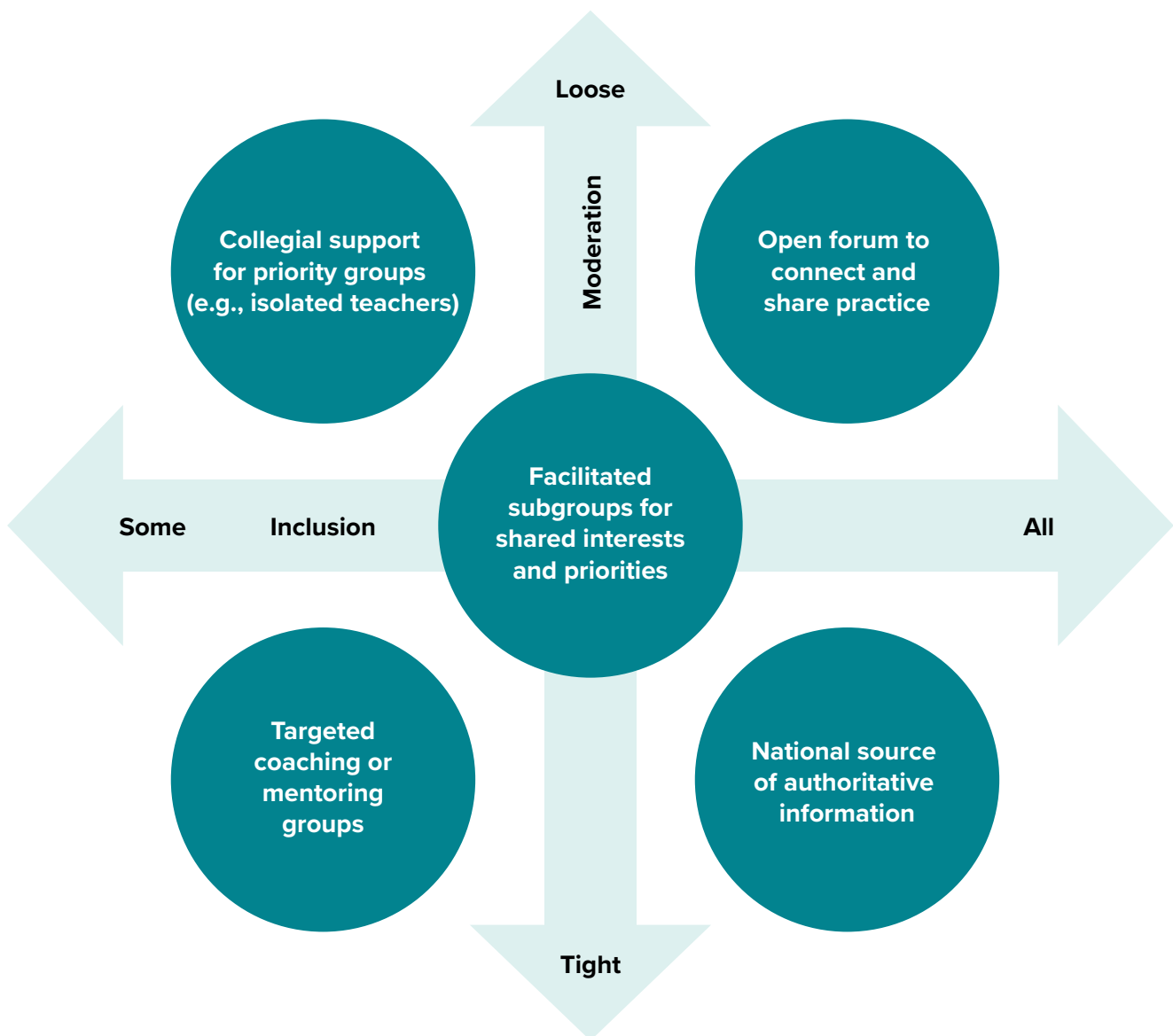
The recommendations are not intended to provide a fixed 'recipe' for network design, as there is not yet sufficient evidence to conclusively recommend a specific approach. The possibilities in this report are proposed as promising rather than proven. Given the range of possible options, it may be best for a national professional practice network to have a flexible design that can evolve to offer its members different benefits and experiences over time.

[Figure 1](#) provides a framework for considering different options for the network, based on the 2 main dimensions for decision-making that emerged in this study:

- **who is included in the network** – whether all children's education and care professionals are included (i.e., teachers, educators and others) or whether it targets specific groups
- **the level of moderation** – whether interactions and information in the network are 'loose' and open-ended or more tightly focused and managed.

Potential network designs may be positioned along these dimensions, as shown in [Figure 1](#), depending on the network's desired purpose. Each potential design offers both strengths and risks in supporting improvements to education and care practice. These are noted throughout the report as each component of design is considered.

Whichever design is chosen, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the network's impact on practice will be necessary to justify investment of resources and time. Monitoring and evaluation would also help to guide adaptations to the network, to ease back on functions that are not working well and augment those that are flourishing. The views of network members (as well as teachers and educators who choose not to participate) will be key to informing efforts to sustain its ongoing value.

Figure 1: Framework for considering potential functions of a national network

The recommendations in this report must also be considered in the context of other NWS actions to create a cohesive approach to reform. Figure 1 shows the significant potential for intersection between a national professional practice network and other NWS actions. Some possible network designs may overlap with mentoring and induction for new teachers (FA1-3), support for teachers' and educators' wellbeing (FA4-1) or the adoption of unified language (FA1-5). Leveraging these intersections can help create a cohesive architecture for workforce development and collegial learning.

The network could also support other NWS actions by establishing a ready-made forum for governments at all levels (or other sector leaders) to elicit ground-up solutions to challenges in education and care practice. Positioning the network as an engine for solution generation could add to its value for informing policy innovation and activating the capability of teachers and educators as partners in strengthening the sector. In this way, the network has the potential to extend the collaborative vision of the NWS into lasting collaborative effort to enhance the sector and profession.

Networks, communities of practice and taskforces

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) distinguishes between different types of professional groups (Goodhue & Seriamlu, 2021):

- **Networks** are sets of relationships, interactions and connections. A network may be the basis for developing a community of practice.
- **Communities of practice** go beyond 'networking' to develop a learning partnership and shared identity around a common agenda or area.
- **Teams or taskforces** are formed around a specific task or function. They are defined by the achievement of the task, not the learning that occurs.

The recommendations in this report extend the role of a national professional network beyond building connections, towards developing communities of practice to share learning and improve practice. ARACY's list of the functions of a community of practice (Table 1) is therefore instructive in considering what a national network could offer its members (Goodhue & Seriamlu, 2021).

Table 1: Functions of a community of practice (ARACY)

Functions	Example
Filters information	What information is worth paying more attention to?
Convenes people	Brings together different groups of people from potentially diverse geographical regions
Amplifies information	What new, little known or little understood information needs to be discussed/given a platform?
Creates resources	What resources would be useful to develop?
Builds values	Promotes and sustains values of individuals and organisations
Problem solves	How can we ...?
Requests information	Where can I find an example of ...?
Experience sharing	Has anyone had a similar experience?
Reusing assets and creating templates	I have materials from a similar session that can be used as a starting point
Enhances collaboration	Can we combine or work together? Can I visit your practice?
Discuss developments	What do you think of ...?
Maps knowledge and identifies gaps	Who knows what and what are we missing?

Source: Goodhue & Seriamlu (2021, p. 8).

Recommendation 1: Clarify a distinct purpose for the national network to inform its design

The proposal to establish a national professional practice network generated some confusion among participants in the research for this report. This was in contrast to mentoring and induction, which were readily understood and supported. The following comment exemplifies views expressed in the survey and interviews:

I am not really clear on what a national network is or would look like, compared to more local and/or state networks.

Confusion also arose from the perception that many networks are already active in the education and care sector, which led to doubts about the value of something new.

The following recommendations suggest ways to clarify what a national network could add to the sector, additional to what is offered through existing channels.

Recommendation 1.1: Establish the main purpose of the network as collaborative problem-solving and practice improvement

The most compelling benefit that a professional practice network could offer is to accelerate the spread of high-quality practice across the sector. Comments from participants in this study indicated strong appetite for sharing successes:

It would be good to see what other states are doing and learn together – why be limited. Get the best in the country to teach the rest!

I am definitely in favour of having a national practice network for teachers to be able to see other great practice that does exist in Australia.

I think that the classroom experience, and being able to see the great practice in front of you speaks volumes so having a national professional practice network that can enable this to happen would be really wonderful and inspiring.

Teachers' and educators' enthusiasm to learn from one another is a powerful force for practice improvement, as well as collegial connections and support. At the same time, current patterns of engagement in social media give grounds for caution in adopting a 'show-and-tell' approach. There is increasing recognition of the negative effects of social media platforms, which include psychosocial costs (such as feelings of anxiety or self-dissatisfaction) and lost time (either from consuming or creating content) (Boroon et al., 2021). These risks must be managed in the design of any network for sharing professional practice.

A more action-oriented, interactive model may help to mitigate some of the risks associated with consuming or creating practice exemplars. Some participants suggested that the network could be a forum for collaborative problem-solving:

A place to share ideas and provide examples of how to face challenges.

It's building those relationships and finding out how other people tackle challenges or celebrate the great things that are going on and ... [knowing] what different places look like and services look like.

This suggests the potential for a question-and-answer format for the network, where members can pose challenges and receive advice from their peers.

These action-oriented functions are consistent with the features of effective professional practice networks identified in research. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) make a case for 'collaborative professionalism', which includes collective inquiry and joint work (that is, solving problems or taking action together), not just treating networks as a smorgasbord of information and ideas. Adopting this approach would have implications for the network design, as discussed later in this report.

Recommendation 1.2: Consider a secondary purpose for the network as generating insights to inform policy and advocacy

A national professional practice network could become a valuable forum for sharing insights from across Australia's diverse children's education and care sector to inform policy and advocacy. Some participants suggested that the network could provide a space for discussing the issues facing the sector and developing shared aspirations:

It provides a space for all teachers to unite as one and discuss as a whole what they need, where the support is required, they can have a national voice.

Bring more attention and focus to some of the issues facing our industry.

Come together in celebration and we share aspirations.

Others pointed to specific benefits for increasing professional recognition:

Lift the profile of [early childhood teachers] as teachers not workers, to increase workforce participation.

Adds worth to the role – recognised as a professional.

There may be potential for the network to help make the day-to-day issues and aspirations of the education and care sector more visible to policymakers and sector leaders, improving the responsiveness of the policy process and reducing the burden of engaging in consultations across multiple reforms. Any such role for a national network would need to be considered carefully alongside the role of unions and other professional organisations representing the sector. It would also require careful management of privacy issues, to ensure that network members are aware of how the information that they share may be accessed and used.

Policy and regulatory differences between states and territories also factor into consideration of the kinds of issues and information that the network may address. Some participants identified these as a barrier to the efficacy of a national network – both in terms of explicit jurisdictional differences in regulation and initial teacher education, and perceived differences in expectations:

Each state has different laws and regulations as well as different approaches to early childhood degrees (e.g. 0–5 [years] vs 0–8 vs 0–12) so it might be difficult to run this at a national level.

There seems to be so much discrepancy between the states and what constitutes high quality.

For one participant, these differences would make sharing across jurisdictions even more interesting – but inter-jurisdictional interactions in the network may require careful moderation to ensure that policy comparisons are engaged in constructively with a focus on collegial support.

Practice example: Australian Education Union networks

The Australian Education Union (AEU) offers a range of networks for members. Its main Professional Network includes regular bulletins, professional learning and discussion of issues affecting the sector. AEU also offers dedicated networks for new teachers; women; same-sex attracted, intersex, or gender-diverse members and their allies; and health and safety representatives.

These examples demonstrate the potential for networks to amplify and connect the voices of teachers and educators on policy issues, when they are facilitated by organisations with a commitment to synthesising and sharing these insights.

Recommendation 1.3: Engage Indigenous early childhood communities in knowledge sharing in ways that protect their knowledge, histories and ways of teaching and learning

Many Indigenous early childhood teachers, educators and leaders were enthusiastic about the value of sharing professional practice and engaging in collaborative problem-solving with other Indigenous early childhood communities (see [Yarning Up: Showcasing great practice in Indigenous communities](#)). Many Yarning Up participants welcomed the opportunity to share ways to educate and culturally nurture children, families and community.

For those who are willing and seeking to connect, sharing with other Indigenous early childhood communities can help safeguard against increasing the cultural load of educating non-Indigenous professionals within a network. Indeed, the Yarning Up findings signal the need for care in ensuring that Indigenous knowledge and histories are protected as well as shared. Indigenous ownership of knowledge and the mechanisms by which it is shared is an important factor to consider in a culturally safe and culturally responsive professional practice network design.

Yarning Up: Showcasing great practice in Indigenous communities

Some Indigenous early childhood teachers and educators recognise the potential benefits of a national professional practice network, often to showcase the work they are already doing to educate and culturally nurture their children, families and community.

Evidence

The potential of a national professional practice network is noted in the following quotations:

Yeah, I think it's always great to hear about what's going on in different areas, and how we can share information, and learn from each other.

I love networking with people. I can be a bit like sit in my own little space, but then once I get out. That's something I do have to push myself to do, I must admit. But I'm much better at it now than what I used to be. I'd love to join in with SNAICC [Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care] meetings, which I don't do, and I don't know why. I read the minutes, I still get the emails and read the information and stuff. But a lot of it's time, I think. But also, I'd love to become more involved in SNAICC, for example, and really keep up, because the stuff that I read is very relevant to us ...

... Definitely like to know about the views, like if it's the childcare or is it community services, what they do, how they do. It could be like when you hear the different people's idea or their knowledge you get some ideas, or you get a better way. You're not doing the wrong way, but that can be the better way when you heard about from someone else.

Yarning Up: Showcasing great practice in Indigenous communities

If you can learn our [Aboriginal] way and the westernised way, you're always going to come out stronger and smarter. So don't be reluctant to engage in further learning ...

Literature notes

There is little academic evidence that speaks to professional practice networking on a national scale in Indigenous early childhood educational contexts. This is because in Indigenous communities there is important recognition of 'our ways' of teaching and learning, which must be centred first in our Indigenous services, where cultural knowledges and protocols must always be guided by Elders and senior community leaders before, potentially, being shared. In one relevant study, Browne et al. (2022) highlight the complexities experienced within Indigenous early childhood educational spaces alongside sharing, transitioning, entrusting and protecting Indigenous knowledges and histories in the Australian and New Zealand context.

Of interest, some Indigenous participants in this project sought strongly to highlight their desire for networking professionally with early childhood peers across the nation. Ways to balance protection and sharing with others professionally, alongside central cultural needs and protocols of a community, are key aspects for considering the potential of a national professional practice network. This warrants further attention in research.



Recommendation 2: Include all types of children's education and care professionals in the network, with subgroups to meet specific interests and needs

A key question emerging in this study was whether a national professional practice network would be simply too big to add value to the sector. Many participants were sceptical about what such a large network could achieve:

If it was too distant and 'big picture' it would have little to [no] impact. ECEC educators need practical, 'day-to-day' support & PL [professional learning] – relevance?

I guess I think it's hard enough to do locally, let alone nationally ... Just creates more challenges when looking do to this on a larger scale.

I wonder whether that the actual scope of it is too big, it's too much variation, maybe, I'm not sure, I just sometimes think that bigger is not always better.

The following recommendations respond to these concerns by proposing a 'proportionate universalism' approach to network membership. This is where all early childhood professionals are invited to participate but receive differentiated support from the network depending on their interests and needs.

Recommendation 2.1: Invite all teachers and educators to be part of the network, and possibly other professionals

A national professional practice network is an opportunity to create a shared sense of professional identity and build the collaboration between diverse early childhood professionals (for example, across education and allied health) that can lift outcomes for children and families. A sense of belonging to a diverse professional community emerged in some comments:

I think that it is important for educators to understand that they are a part of something bigger than themselves and any opportunity to break down an invisible wall between services and regions is important.

There is always value in ongoing professional learning and networking. We do not operate in isolation, we are a part of a professional community as well as local, state and national communities.

Participants strongly supported the network being open to practitioners in all service types, including centre-based preschool and long day care, OSHC and family day care services. One participant suggested that other professionals be included in the network, beyond teachers and educators:

We want something that is inclusive, it can't just be for teachers ... I think we would want to include our colleagues who work in playgroup, and I think we would want to involve some colleagues who are working in different types of spaces so that it's a profession organisation.

This reflects the broad understanding of professional communities promoted in the National Quality Framework, where teachers and educators see themselves as part of collaborative partnerships to support children and their families.

At the national level, involving professionals beyond the children's education and care sector itself in a professional practice network adds a level of complexity in terms of governance arrangements and funding. Australia does not currently have a single national body overseeing all services for children and families, so an interprofessional network would require some level of collaborative governance to function effectively. As professionals outside approved early childhood services are beyond the scope of the NWS, these issues are not addressed in this report – but all recommendations could also be applied to a network that includes a diverse range of professionals supporting children's learning and development.

Practice example: Early Years Networks, Western Australia

Local networks or communities of practice involving diverse professionals are a well-established component of place-based early childhood initiatives. Operating in Western Australia since 2003, local Early Years Networks enable professionals from education, health, local government associations and the community services sector to learn together and collaborate to address the issues and opportunities for young children and families in their community.

The 'Connecting Early Years Networks' initiative exists to connect leaders across sectors, build capacity in local Early Years Networks, establish sound governance and the develop local, evidence-based strategic plans. This model offers a potentially instructive example of how place-based and national collaboration could be connected.

Where strong, local interprofessional networks already exist, they could be linked into and supported by a national professional practice network. The Yarning Up findings described in the following text box indicate that local professional networks are already a strength of many Indigenous early childhood communities, including collaboration between professionals responsible for early learning and child and family wellbeing. The high value they place on local networks led some Indigenous early childhood professionals to question whether a national network was necessary.

These Indigenous-led local networks warrant recognition in the design of funding and delivery models at a national level. A proposal for interest groups within the wider network to receive funding for collaborative projects (see [Recommendation 2.2](#)) could provide a way to support local Indigenous early childhood networks to strengthen their work in their community. This model would also enable leadership of such networks to remain with local community leaders and Elders.

Yarning Up: Nurture the strong professional networks in communities

Many Indigenous early childhood professionals felt they already had a strong professional community network that was supported broadly within and among the community, inclusive of allied health organisations and local government. They did not feel the need for a national professional practice network. This is because shared models of professional partnerships between professional practices – health, welfare services and education – already take place in many local Indigenous early childhood educational settings. Many Indigenous early childhood communities believe these models benefit children, families and their local communities.

Evidence

In the quotes that follow, the value of more localised, integrated connections are evident:

Just dropping in and saying hello, letting them know if there's any professional development, or meetings, or things like that, going on that they might like to pop into. Even on the day, giving them a call saying, 'This is on this afternoon, would you like to come? I'm happy to pick you up if you don't want to walk in by yourself,' just that friendly face when they walk into a different room.

Let them know that you have some knowledge, and experience, in that area, so if they've got any questions or anything, they're more than welcome to give you a call, and often they'll know where you live. It is a small town, so just letting them know that we're always available and they're welcome.

... Wanted to do something for the community in NAIDOC week, and I was like, 'Well, we can do something with you.' So, I thought this is my community. Literally my local community that I grew up in. And I said I'd suss out what we can do. And then we met up and just planned ...

Literature notes

Health, wellbeing and education components are intertwined as part of Indigenous ways of being and knowing and cannot be separated. Being in community recognises that you are already well and in good health. Indigenous participants in this project report that early childhood educational networking includes localised Indigenous health and wellbeing services that are in keeping with community expectations, experiences and protocols. These are viewed as effective and strong localised partnerships.

Research that speaks of connections between Indigenous community networks and health and wellbeing can be found in the areas of health and social work (Cuesta-Briand et al., 2016). However, less is known about the relationality between health, wellbeing and early childhood education in Indigenous communities and the ways in which networking is shaped and enacted between these components. Further research is warranted in this area to understand the efficacy of localised Indigenous professional practice networks and the potential benefits that may be found through this connected approach to wider early childhood services.

Recommendation 2.2: Create purpose-driven interest groups within the network to address shared interests, goals and needs

A single national professional practice network could contain interest groups for early childhood professionals with common interests or challenges. The diversity of the Australian children's education and care sector means that some level of differentiation within the network is likely to be necessary to maximise its relevance to its members:

One-size-fits-all approaches rarely meet the individual needs of services or specific contexts.

Because it needs to be local, contextually relevant and personal.

Suggestions for differentiation included a national network with state branches, or different approaches for remote and metropolitan teachers. Others used the term 'like-minded', reflecting a desire to connect with others who share similar philosophies or contexts:

An overarching network with smaller networks with like-minded people.

Like-minded people who you can vent with and share ideas and practice.

Drawing on the action-oriented approach to networks outlined, interest groups may be most effective if framed around shared goals for collective action. Network interest group members may be more likely to engage and provide support to one another if they have a question to explore or a challenge to address that results in tangible outcomes for themselves, their service or their community. A shared commitment to action can also generate the collective accountability that strong professional practice networks provide (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016), where members motivate each other to contribute to visible change.

The specific needs of professionally isolated teachers also emerged in some comments, reflecting the focus on isolated professionals in the NWS itself. The following comments demonstrate the many ways in which 'professional isolation' can be defined for teachers: geographic isolation, working in a standalone service, or being the only degree-qualified teacher in a long day care service:

It's that networking: I just think it's so important for people and those that are quite isolated that may be in a small remote service or you know are the only early childhood teacher at their service, I think that that's really important.

I would really appreciate the support of this kind of network – at times it feels kind of lonely being an ECT [early childhood teacher] in a LDC [long day care] setting.

Networking with other ECE [early childhood education] practitioners, sharing ideas, sometimes sharing the problems will be useful especially for ECE practitioners who work in standalone services.

These groups of isolated teachers could be prioritised within the national network and could receive additional support to engage with the specific issues and challenges that professional isolation may present. Alternatively, they could be supported to join other action-oriented interest groups on issues of interest, recognising that isolated teachers may have more in common with non-isolated professionals with similar interests or issues than they do with one another.

Another priority group for supporting in the professional practice network could be teachers and educators working in services rated as Working Towards the National Quality Standard (NQS) in the assessment and rating process. In this case, it seems less likely that a dedicated group would deliver benefits; it may in fact reinforce lower-quality practice and stigmatise its members. A preferable strategy may be to invite teachers and educators from services rated as Working Towards the NQS to choose interest groups with others aiming to improve quality in similar areas, and then prioritising those groups for receiving targeted funding. Connecting teachers and educators with higher-performing colleagues could help inject new ideas into services and disrupt 'echo chambers' that inhibit improvement.

Membership of interest groups could be flexible over time, as goals are achieved and members develop new interests. The quality improvement planning cycle that all education and care services follow may provide a natural rhythm for cycles of collaborative inquiry within interest groups, as well as a potential organising framework for shared interests (e.g., groups may form around a particular standard or quality area). However the groups are designed, membership must be voluntary and flexible, to ensure that all members have agency and are ready to contribute and learn.

Practice example: Early Years Learning Networks, Victoria

The Victorian Department of Education delivers more than 60 Early Years Learning Networks for early childhood teachers in services with a funded kindergarten (preschool) program. The place-based networks meet each term and are facilitated by local departmental staff in partnership with external facilitators. Network discussions emerge from issues and problems of practice identified by network members, who report the benefits of being able to connect and collaborate with other early childhood professionals.

Recommendation 2.3: Support Indigenous early childhood communities, who are willing and seeking to connect, to share culturally responsive practices with other Indigenous services

There is interest among some Indigenous early childhood communities in sharing effective, culturally responsive practice with other Indigenous services, to develop and increase networks and to share practices.

Yarning Up: Sharing cultural knowledges within and between communities

A potential value for a national professional practice network could be if Indigenous early childhood communities, who are willing and seeking to connect, could learn and understand what was happening in other Indigenous early childhood communities around Australia.

Evidence

The data excerpts that follow highlight some of these affordances:

... I'd want to be networking with services that were similar to ours, as in maybe size, values, that kind of thing. There's been a number of workshops online, workshops and things that we've been doing as part of the – for out-of-scope services – and most of them are Aboriginal services. So, I haven't done all of them, I just haven't had the time, but it's been really good, you can watch the recording of them, but if you're on there live, you actually go into the breakout rooms and you get to talk to people.

... We had to do a risk assessment of an excursion and worked through it together. And then we got chatting, and it was like, 'Oh well, if you went out in the bush where you are, what would your risk be?' And we talked about it, and this woman said, 'Yeah, we wouldn't be going in the water, crocodiles.' We don't have to worry about that down here. So, that was really, really great to talk to somebody who's very different from us, still a smaller service, just the different challenges.

... And just seeing other people's challenges, like challenges that we think we've had here with our yard – one of the centres there, oh my God it was so outback. I can't think of where it was, but they talked about what they had to do to just get this small service built, just hardly any homes there, it was just incredible. And the number of people that came to this little town and built houses, I can't think of where it was, but it was just amazing. And it's like 'Wow, that's a challenge.' Just incredible what they go through, what their facilities look like, and how hard they work to get these places up and running, and how important they are for the community.

Yarning Up: Sharing cultural knowledges within and between communities

... Protocols: I think childrearing practices for sure. Education: so, I love education our way. Academic education where everyone sits in a classroom and we all learn the same, not a fan. Personalised learning plans, the way that I believe I can use culture as a teaching tool that other people wouldn't. So, give examples about throwing a boomerang, they go, 'It comes back,' but then how many steps? So, I want you to be able to take 20 steps, that's counting. So how we can academically learn through our own knowledges, I would just – that's what inspires me for teaching ...

Literature notes

Research could not be located pertaining to an actual current professional practice networking arrangement in Indigenous early childhood educational services. However, 'yarning up' (communicating with one another in Indigenous communities) is a well-known and valued way of understanding and sharing cultural knowledges within our communities (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Yarning up is generally undertaken within an Indigenous community by members together as part of kinship connections. Generally, it is also important to Indigenous people to connect with other Indigenous communities. However, not all Indigenous people will seek to connect with other First Nations communities and, in some cases, it may be inappropriate and against cultural protocols to do so. It is important that, should a national professional practice network be established, cultural protocols are responsively followed by authorities under the explicit and direct recommendations of each participating Indigenous community when determining how and when people will network and the ways in which this happens.



Recommendation 3: Ensure the network has expert moderation to foster professional trust

A national professional practice network must be trusted if it is to be effective. The importance of trust in professional networks cannot be underestimated, as '[t]rust is seen as a valuable and necessary precursor to collaboration' (Vijayadevar et al., 2019, p. 89). This includes trust that the information received is truthful, and that any insights shared will be treated respectfully and without evaluation (Puig & Recchia, 2008). Again, social media provides cautionary examples of how misinformation and conflict can proliferate if trust is not actively sustained.

The larger the network, the harder it is to create a trusting environment:

Smaller networks allow for deeper connections and building of trust to share and contribute. A larger network may still be good. But smaller networks I believe build better connections.

A particular risk is that groups become dominated by majority (or otherwise powerful) voices, undermining trust in the network as a safe and inclusive space:

Because national allows for stronger voices to override the weaker voices and sometimes it's the weaker voices that have more valuable information to share.

This risk is especially relevant to the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, given the dominance of westernised perspectives among those that hold power over practice in the Australian education and care community (see [recommendation 3.2](#)). Leadership of the national network would need to ensure there was not one dominant voice and that different perspectives had time and space to be heard.

Further, facilitation must be culturally safe, responsive and anti-racist. This means providing training and facilitation network-wide, and ensuring that Indigenous early childhood communities have autonomy of knowledge sharing, such that they do not assume the cultural load of teaching culturally responsive practice network-wide.

The following recommendations propose strategies for building trust in the interactions occurring within the network as well as the information that is exchanged.

Recommendation 3.1: Employ network facilitators with expertise in current practice and group moderation, to lead in partnership with teachers and educators

Dedicated facilitators could help to build trust in the national network if they are equipped with current knowledge about practice and strategies to maintain an inclusive, respectful culture in moderated groups. Research supports the need for effective leadership in professional networks, either by individuals or a steering committee (Briscoe et al., 2015). The subgroup model proposed in Recommendation 2 would lend itself well to leadership of groups by a team of expert facilitators.

Participants expressed a clear preference for leadership roles in a national network to be filled by professionals with recent practice experience:

Experienced practitioners (current). I am noting that many of the programs being delivered are being done so by people who no longer work in service and therefore do not have tangible, current examples of practice.

Largely teachers working in the field NOT the experts who are often isolated from the realities and high paced change that we deal with.

An ECT [early childhood teacher] that has just stopped working in long day care – who has on the floor experience.

Educational leaders as they still work directly with educators and children and understand the challenges.

Service leaders and preschool field officers with relevant expertise were also identified as potential leaders for professional practice networks or groups.

Facilitators would also need well-developed skills in moderating networks (either face-to-face or online), sensitivity to the power dynamics that can inhibit inclusion and understanding of strategies to address them. In their analysis of the role of facilitators in networks, Hadar and Brody (2021) found that establishing protocols for collaborative conversations was an important part of the role, alongside basic management tasks such as connecting members and keeping the group on track. Facilitators need the skills to ‘read the room’, and the flexibility to adapt as new issues emerge.

This blend of leadership with collegial collaboration is captured in the concept of facilitators being ‘first among peers’ (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016, p. 16). The goal is for a non-hierarchical model where facilitators support the group to achieve collectively-developed goals, stepping back as the group gains greater momentum. Facilitators may also bring in other experts or partners to elevate learning or support moderation, or connect multiple interest groups to support one another.

In many ways, the network facilitator role strongly resembles the mentoring role for new teachers explored in the AERO NWS report on Focus Area 1-3. Several participants made this connection by envisaging the network as a group mentoring model:

Your mentoring program could run out of that [network] too.

A regular guided community of practice where educators could be grouped with one mentor and, you know, whether that would be like bimonthly or something like that where they can come together just for an hour and a half but also having the opportunity to touch base with the mentor one on one 2 or 3 times throughout the year. I think that would be beneficial as well.

Maybe 6 people with one mentor ... I think that's a nice amount, if you have 15 or 12, it takes away from what you're actually trying to do when people don't get the chance to talk and it's already hard enough online for some people, so I think it would have to be kind of some boundaries around how many people to the group, how often to meet, what it would look like ... is there an opportunity to meet face-to-face in regions.

Others saw the network as an extension of the mentoring model for new early childhood teachers, connecting mentors with designated mentee groups, or enabling mentoring to be situated in a broader professional community:

If everyone's assigned a place and a group or something like [someone] might be assigned for regional Victoria or new graduates, so then they can just devote themselves to those teachers within those areas.

The ECTs [early childhood teachers] could reach out to their mentor and that community of practice to get more strategies, you know, so that they can actually have some follow-up because implementation is the biggest part.

Having a network that can enable genuine connections between mentors and mentees, or create a genuine authentic, reciprocal, you know, relationship between different teachers, that will definitely be a value-added thing.

While the one-to-one relationship is an important characteristic of mentoring for new teachers (Connors, 2019; Smith & Lynch, 2014), these suggestions show how professional relationships could expand from individuals to groups over time. They also point to valuable opportunities to connect multiple NWS actions and create a dynamic architecture for ongoing collegial support throughout education and care careers.

Several educators commented on the need for the network to provide a safe space to share information freely, with one even suggesting anonymous participation:

I feel that as professionals there is so much we can learn from each other if we are vulnerable and open – so often we operate in [a] silo.

Having the ability to discuss safely, anonymously in peer group discussions ...

Facilitators would require a well-developed toolkit for supporting participants to navigate difficult conversations successfully, including strategies for using critical reflection to explore different perspectives on effective practice respectfully.

Recommendation 3.2: Facilitate cultural responsiveness and anti-racism learning across the network, and ensure Indigenous participants have self-determination and autonomy over knowledge sharing outside their communities

Cultural sensitivity is an essential characteristic in facilitators that may require dedicated training and support. The Yarning Up findings in the following text box signal the distress and disengagement that can occur when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators are exposed to culturally unsafe practices or groups. Culturally responsive facilitation would help to ensure that Indigenous perspectives are valued in all groups within the network, not just the groups with Indigenous membership or focus. This also requires facilitators to be skilled listeners, not experts imposing their own ideas.

Some Indigenous participants highlighted their interest in networking with outside organisations to learn about practices and knowledges in wide-ranging services. Self-determination and autonomy over how, when and in what ways Indigenous educators would like to share their professional practices outside of their community are crucial. It is imperative in these instances that cultural load is not increased upon Indigenous services so that educators and teachers are not made responsible to teach others about their practices in a networking arrangement. For non-Indigenous educators in the wider sector engaging in cultural awareness training and anti-racism practices, it is important to counter against potential cultural load upon Indigenous communities in a networking partnership.

Yarning Up: The importance of Indigenous leadership for cultural safety

Some Indigenous early childhood teachers and educators do not see a national practice network or consultants, who operate professional networking businesses, as a benefit to their service, and children or families in their communities. Indigenous early childhood educators reported feeling disrespected regarding Indigenous cultural matters and community protocols. Trusting how professionals will network with Indigenous communities and protect what matters to them as part of networking was viewed as very important to many Indigenous participants. This impacted their viewpoints on the worthiness of establishing a national professional practice network, believing that it is not a valid enterprise or partnership as their perspectives would not be valued or respected.

Evidence

The following data excerpts question the value of a national professional practice network.

... Yeah, what it's going to look like, how they're going, what [Aboriginal] voices are they going to have in there. How are they going to find those voices? You know, how is that going to be decided? Yeah, a lot of questions come to mind.

Yarning Up: The importance of Indigenous leadership for cultural safety

... what's going to happen with the information? How's it going to benefit the Aboriginal community?

I feel like [the consultants] take away much of what is already there and change it ... they should really listen to us.

This is what I'm cautious of ... I don't want a professional consultant to come up and think their ideas would work in our kind of ways, if that makes sense? I just don't think it's going to work.

They [professional network consultants] say 'we are here. This is what we'd like to do in your centre', but we are the ones working here, not you. At the very least ... they need to listen first. And then they are adamant it's going to work ... and I end up arguing with them. 'No, your idea is not going to work. You're not engaging with our families and children and it's not going to work.' They don't want to hear it. They say, 'I know better than you' and I say, 'No, you don't'.

Literature notes

Aunty Dr Karen Martin (2017) argues that while there is attention on compulsory schooling for Indigenous children, early childhood education of Indigenous children is devalued and under-researched. Aunty Dr Karen Martin calls for the Indigenous early childhood workforce to be consulted about what they would like to see children learn, enjoy and know as part of cultural knowledges and understandings alongside the early childhood curriculum.

Furthermore, we suggest that professional consultants networking with Indigenous early childhood educators and teachers are part of this conversation and shift their practices to enable Indigenous services to take the lead on what will work best in their services and communities. Consultancy services in early childhood education at a broad organisational level are dominated by (westernised) governing agendas, techniques and procedural arrangements that are then regularly pressed upon early childhood educators' practices and programs (Browne, 2017). Such arrangements, we argue, hinder Indigenous perspectives and expectations being equitably elevated, valued and led by the Indigenous communities they serve.

Recommendation 3.3: Moderate information provided through the network so it becomes a trusted source of authoritative advice

The national network could be established as an authoritative, accessible source of information and advice for all teachers and educators on issues that would benefit from greater national clarity and consistency. Some participants noted the need to keep up-to-date with the rapidly changing early childhood context:

More knowledge about what is happening in the sector and staying up-to-date.

We can then all keep up-to-date with any relevant information about the industry.

Other comments expressed frustration at the proliferation of information available to the sector, and saw the network as a potential ‘one-stop shop’:

Just to have the one source that you can go to, because it is a minefield ... navigating and trying to find stuff is just an absolute nightmare but to have one place to go to and then branches off from that ... I really think the networking groups can only benefit.

One place to help everyone would make it the same so it doesn't get confusing.

Another participant added that ‘benchmarking expectations’ could be part of the provision of consistent information, suggesting that the network could help to foster consistent understandings of quality practice.

In the absence of a single source of authoritative advice, many early childhood professionals are turning to social media to ‘crowdsource’ information. This creates a risk of misinformation, even when provided with good intentions:

People are searching for answers and seem to be trying to find them on platforms such as Facebook. I think a professional practice network is a better approach.

Looking at Facebook, there are a lot of ECTs [early childhood teachers] out there looking for guidance. The issue is asking for advice on Facebook is dangerous. Could be anyone typing anything as advice. The advice they're looking for would be much better off coming from vetted parties.

There is a fine line between creating an inclusive platform in which many voices are heard, and risking the spread of myths or misunderstandings that may inhibit effective practice. Facilitators could support network members to distinguish between information and ideas that originate from authoritative sources (such as government policy or high-quality research), and information generated from practitioner insights. While there are benefits in sharing both kinds of information – including to address any myths that may be circulating – critical reflection on the credibility of new ideas is an essential part of collegial professional learning.

The role of the network in compiling and disseminating authoritative information could intersect with the provision of induction materials for new early childhood teachers discussed in AERO's NWS report on mentoring and induction for new teachers. The network itself could host a curated, up-to-date platform of core documents, links and resources; or it could connect teachers and educators with a platform hosted elsewhere. Over time, the network could also possibly collect, appraise and disseminate practice resources recommended by its members (subject to intellectual property constraints).

Practice example: Raising Children Network

The Raising Children Network is an Australian Government-funded website to support parents and carers raising children across Australia. It offers 'easy to find and easy to digest' information on a range of parenting issues. This includes resources specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, as well as culturally and linguistically diverse, blended, rainbow and same-sex families.

The network brings together contributions from a range of experts and partner organisations to ensure it provides current, authoritative information. While it does not include opportunities for parents to interact, a short online survey and feedback buttons on all resources enable some user input to be captured.



Recommendation 4: Establish governance and funding arrangements for the network that promote shared ownership and trust

A national professional practice network would require a host organisation with the credibility and capability to ensure its effective facilitation and delivery. It would also need a governance structure that reflects the diversity of service types and ownership arrangements among Australian children's education and care services, as well as a funding model that fairly balances costs and benefits across multiple sector stakeholders.

The following recommendations explore hosting options most likely to deliver a sustainable network that promotes trust and engagement across the profession.

Recommendation 4.1: Host the network in a trusted, independent organisation in collaboration with governments and the sector

A national network would be most successful in securing engagement and trust if it is positioned as operating wholly in the interests of the children's education and care profession. While some participants were comfortable with the network being hosted in an existing national practice-oriented organisation (such as ACECQA or Early Childhood Australia [ECA]), others felt that a new national body was needed:

It needs to be set up by people that are in the sector as well, so that they understand the sector as well ... you've got to have people in the sector advising because they understand the sector and that's why in an ideal world an actual association or whatever set up, brand new.

There were mixed views about the suitability of a government agency as a host. While a government body was the next preference overall, after a sector-led organisation, some participants engaged in government-led networks saw them as focused on policy rather than practitioner dialogue:

There are a few within my LGA [local government area] – one run by the department, one run by council and one run by teachers. The department meetings often feel like a burden – they're often at challenging times to attend, and there are many 'reports' ... There are often long (and boring) PowerPoints, and little opportunities to connect with other services.

Department staff are required to toe the party line. If these networks were led by outside consultants, perhaps some brave conversions could take place. As it is, these networks are run by people who are focused on government policy objectives rather than quality pedagogy.

The desire for the network host to be 'neutral to government' rather than driven by policy is consistent with the potential for the network to activate capability for collegial learning within the children's education and care sector.

Concerns also emerged about delivery of the network through a private organisation (either for-profit or not-for-profit), as these organisations have other accountabilities and interests that may affect their perceived impartiality:

It's got to be moving beyond a money-making association because I think that kind of is what happens you know, places become money-making associations and then it's trying to get more people on board but not providing anything.

I don't like private, I don't like not-for-profit, it has to be a body that is not biased ... it needs to be non-biased because they [educators and teachers] need to trust that source.

One participant expressed doubts about the suitability of a tendering process to find a suitable host, noting that growth in professional learning procurements had created a 'very small pool in which people who can write good tenders win', with limited demonstrable impact on outcomes.

The most promising suggestions envisaged a collaborative delivery model in which governments work in partnership with sector-led organisations:

If a national professional practice network is set up by government in genuine partnership with practitioners and organisations, so that they have key organisations that they're partnering with to develop and present this network that has built into it an expectation that they will be genuine partnership with independent practitioners ... I would hate to see something that it's just one organisation, and they take on it.

The sector needs to take responsibility as we know what the overall benefits are to our sector. However, being supported by state and federal government to establish and maintain these networks will support success.

This aligns with the 'sector stewardship' approach to the NWS overall, and the commitment to collective accountability for addressing workforce challenges. A collaborative delivery model could also enable collective effort and information sharing between the diverse parts of the sector to be built into the network design. If peak organisations and governments work collaboratively to overcome barriers to information sharing, such as commercial sensitivity and competition, then it augurs well for the practitioners they employ to do the same.

The recent Productivity Commission report recommended the establishment of a national ECEC Commission tasked with coordinating policy across jurisdictions and advising governments on policy issues (Productivity Commission, 2023). Depending on whether the recommendation is accepted, such a body may be an appropriate host for a national professional practice network, in collaboration with sector organisations. The suitability of the Commission for this role would depend on its functions and design, and whether it has a strong connection to teachers' and educators' everyday work.

Practice example: Be You

Be You is a sector-led, Australian Government-funded national mental health in education initiative that provides tools and resources designed for educators working with children from birth to 18 years of age. Early childhood services can register as 'Learning Communities' to receive support from a Be You consultant and access to sessions, events and networking opportunities focused on a whole learning community approach to promoting mental health. Be You is delivered by Beyond Blue in collaboration with Early Childhood Australia and Headspace.

Recommendation 4.2: Provide funding for whole-of-network operations as well as targeted support for innovative projects

A national professional practice network would require dedicated funding to operate effectively. Costs could include employment of facilitators, hosting of an online platform, travel to enable face-to-face connections if desired, and development or curation of resources to fulfil its information-sharing role. Participants recognised that funding is essential for the network's sustainability:

I think the key problem is for this [network] organisation to have money to have funding.

There are some problems in who it would be and where does the money come from, if you fund it poorly, it will fall over.

There have been various attempts to have national networks over the past years, such as the various state workforce consortiums and national funding to groups to provide training. However, once funding stopped, these resources were unsustainable.

There is a strong case for government investment in the network, given the 'public good' arising from improved professional practice across the sector. Costs could be distributed across preschool and childcare funding streams, to ensure that the fragmentation of funding arrangements in the sector does not translate to inequities in access to the network among early childhood professionals.

Many existing networks charge membership fees, reflecting the 'private good' that individual teachers and educators also derive from improving their practice. One university-based participant suggested a tiered fee structure for the national network, with students given free entry to foster their growing professional identity:

Having a membership fee, which there would need to be, that is stepped at different levels for different levels of income and giving students free access to that so that they're kind of inculcated to a professional association that is focused on them.

An individual membership fee is not recommended, as it is likely to skew participation towards those already committed to improving their practice and inhibit participation from teachers and educators who may benefit most. An alternative public–private partnership funding model could involve employer contributions proportional to the number of employees, which could be offset by in-kind commitments to share resources or lead network interest group activities.

Additional network funding could be made available to support the achievement of specific actions, projects or goals. One participant stressed the importance of funding being available to everyone and tied to clearly defined expectations:

[The network should be] multimodal with funding attached, so ‘here’s a bucket of money and this is what we want you to achieve and we’re not going to pick just one provider to kind of source or outsource ... we want everyone to have that equal opportunity to participate’.

The action-oriented network interest groups proposed in [Recommendation 2](#) could be ideal sites for distributing targeted funding to support sector-led innovation and collaborative professional learning. This could include funding for travel to meet face-to-face and attend relevant conferences, which some participants saw as valuable components of a national professional practice network’s activities. Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) affirm that flexible funding can help create conditions for effective collaboration.

Practice example: [Early Childhood Community Innovation Grants](#)

Funding can be effectively distributed through collaborations across multiple levels of government and the sector.

Early Childhood Community Innovation Grants provided funding to councils for the delivery of evidence-informed and community-led programs that responded to needs identified through the Australian Early Development Census. Funded by the South Australian Department of Education and led by the Local Government Association, this example of collaborative funding illustrates how targeted network support could stimulate innovation.

Recommendation 5: Offer flexible options for network participation to respond to diverse contexts and employment arrangements

The practical aspects of network participation are complicated by the wide diversity in teachers' and educators' contexts (including different service types, ownership models and geographic locations) and employment arrangements (including their roles and industrial entitlements). For a national professional practice network to include all teachers and educators – and potentially other early childhood professionals – it needs to ensure that network activities are delivered in ways that are accessible for all.

The need for flexibility in delivery emerged most strongly in this study in relation to the timing of network activities as well as the balance between online and face-to-face delivery. The following recommendations address these priority areas. There are many other dimensions of diversity that also raise practical issues for network delivery, including:

- ensuring activities are accessible for teachers and educators with disability
- offering content that engages teachers and educators at all qualification levels
- considering different operating hours and service delivery models, especially for teachers and educators in OSHC services whose working hours differ from ECEC.

In such a diverse sector, it is inevitable that a universally available network will end up with many permutations in its delivery models, creating potential for fragmentation. It is a matter for consideration whether the benefits of establishing a single network that spans this wide diversity adds value beyond the sum of its many different parts.

Recommendation 5.1: Use online delivery to promote inclusion alongside opportunities for purposeful face-to-face interaction

Participation in professional network activities can be delivered in a number of different ways. In a study of professional learning networks for teachers, Trust et al. (2016, p. 17) found that these networks were 'multifaceted systems, that often incorporate multiple communities, networks of practice and sites that support both on and off-line learning'. While much of their research related to virtual communities and networks, they also found there were 'beneficial effects of combined on- and off-line professional learning experiences for teachers' (Trust et al., 2016, p. 28).

Participants in this study expressed a general expectation that a national network would involve some kind of online delivery, but that opportunities for face-to-face participation would also be desirable to include. There were different views about the frequency of face-to-face meetings, from every month to once every 2 years:

Regular time for Zoom drop-in session ... face-to-face once a month, then online more regularly.

Using your online forums, and you know, maybe every 2 years the opportunity where people can come together would be amazing.

While online options were seen as a way of engaging geographically isolated teachers and educators, their need for face-to-face contact was noted too:

Flexibility for location, so for educators who are out in regional and rural areas, so obviously there would be some kind of maybe Zoom component for those communities of practice.

I think that there's merit in looking at a combination of online and face-to-face for the more regional ... online relationships still benefit from face-to-face connection as well.

The Yarning Up findings in this section caution against assuming that online options are adequate for engaging professionals in regional and remote communities, as access to internet connections and digital devices may be limited. There is a clear case for flexible delivery options to meet the needs of network participants – with the interest groups proposed in [Recommendation 2.2](#) offering a site for tailored solutions. Facilitators could help interest groups to agree on channels of communication and use them well.

The Yarning Up findings also point to the limitations of large online meetings, through platforms such as Zoom, for generating the kinds of professional conversations that will ensure that the networks have value. If network activities do occur online, this must be conducted in a way that enables two-way dialogue and a free flow of ideas, not only delivery of presentations. Synchronous instant messaging or collaboration tools, such as digital whiteboards, may be more effective than large videoconferences for sharing and discussing ideas.

Practice example: [NurseTalk](#)

NurseTalk is a national professional practice network hosted by the Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association (APNA), an organisation for nurses in working outside a hospital setting. NurseTalk offers a range of online and face-to-face options, including 'live' professional learning sites, where nurses can discuss material synchronously, and 'replay' sites for asynchronous viewing.

NurseTalk replaces APNA's Local-Nurse Networks, which were local networks for APNA members to meet face-to-face. When engagement in local networks declined due to COVID-19, NurseTalk emerged as an innovative response.

Practice example: Te Whāriki o te Ara Oranga

Te Whāriki o te Ara Oranga (Whāriki) is a network dedicated to driving change in mental health and addiction services in Aotearoa/New Zealand and accelerating improvements in mental health and wellbeing equity for Māori people. It was established in response to the call in the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction for a ‘system focused on wellbeing that makes the most of existing talent and builds capability and relationships across the sector and communities.’ It welcomes ‘innovators, influencers and leaders,’ including people with lived experience, to share tools and solutions.

The network is grounded in Treaty (Te-Tiriti), sector owned, and staffed by a team who pull together examples of excellence, connect members with each other and the knowledge they bring, scan for new ideas and host learning events for the sector.

Yarning Up: Ensure equity of access and address digital inequalities

Equity of access for all rural and remote communities was raised as a potential drawback for a national network to operate consistently and effectively; for example, in the consistent provision of broadband networks and overcrowding within online platforms; and in terms of worktime and when you may be expected to network with others (e.g., time zones).

Evidence

The excerpts that follow highlight the difficulties that would arise around accessing a national network:

I don't know whether they're thinking about a Zoom with 400 people on it, and if that's the case, that's absolutely useless, as far as I'm concerned, you might as well get sent a PowerPoint presentation and read it yourself.

... Yeah, there would be the normal time differences, or you know how they are behind the time for 2 hours? Well okay, that's probably the biggest challenge when you're talking the different time zone or something. What suits for them, what suits for us.

... well, we'd have to find the time and our programs run at certain times. I don't know how it would work.

There is no internet in the Islands.

Yarning Up: Ensure equity of access and address digital inequalities

Literature notes

The importance of digital literacy and access to the digital world is well documented in early childhood education, frequently focusing upon children's access to, learning from and the quality time recommended for children engaging with digital resources (Martin et al., 2020; Nolan et al., 2021). However, less is known about the engagement of and equity of access to digital resources in Indigenous early childhood educational services by early childhood educators. Furthermore, more research is needed to understand the digital needs of Indigenous early childhood educational services alongside access to the internet, particularly in rural and remote settings. This is vital, should a national professional practice network be recommended as part of the NWS, as Indigenous educators will be hindered by a lack of access to digital resources and reliable internet services. In addition, these factors need to be understood in the context of the provision of Indigenous early childhood services and the ways in which time can be found by educators to engage in quality networking opportunities that are of benefit to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Recommendation 5.2: Respect teachers' and educators' time by making network activities flexible, short, purposeful and practical

The design of a national professional practice network must take into account the limited time that teachers and educators have to network and engage in professional learning. The time pressures facing the sector were evident in comments raising concern at 'yet another thing to do'; or that there is 'not enough time to attend all the meetings now, don't add more'.

Lack of time can undermine the effectiveness of a network, even when it is well designed and supported. The following comment shows this risk for a group of national networks convened through the Be You initiative delivered by ECA:

ECA already runs online professional practice/community of practice/connected communities. The ones in the Be You initiative are national and inclusive of all service types – they are called Be You Connected Communities. Despite them being free, facilitated by a consultant, member driven, attendance really varies. At the end of the day, educators and leaders just don't have the time for this: services are in survival mode. We get plenty of feedback from people who do attend that they are extremely valuable, but we have hundreds of people register as members but then never attend. It's economically unsustainable to continue to do this and my experience with any kind of network group is once the driver/really motivated person running them leaves, they fall apart.

Investment in a national professional practice network may be wasted if there is no time in members' busy working lives to benefit. While the issue of finding time for professional learning is broader than this NWS action alone – and is covered extensively in AERO's report on enhanced mentoring and induction support for new teachers (FA1-3) – some ideas emerged to help address this challenge specifically for network participation.

A streamlined, flexible design for the network would help teachers and educators participate in whatever time for professional learning they have available. One participant suggested that the network is available for use on a 'needs basis':

Means it would be nationally available for all to use at any time. For constant use in times needed.

Another expressed a preference for 'short, sharp' information with immediate practical relevance, to maximise benefits gained from a short burst of engagement:

Having things short and sharp as well, you can't give pages and pages and pages and it has to be tools that you can then take back on the floor because there's nothing worse than when you go to something and it's like that's a great in-depth look into all that theory but how am I practically now going to use this on the floor ... that's going to improve my practice.

An advantage of a network over other sources of professional learning is that engagement could be 'bite-sized', such as regular check-ins or asynchronous chat, for teachers and educators to access even during short periods away from working directly with children.

For more substantial engagements, such as meetings or coaching sessions, time needs to be funded for teachers and educators to attend, and attendance supported and encouraged by service leaders. Briscoe et al. (2015) note that networks need to offer incentives to motivate services' participation, given the many competing demands services and their staff must meet, with insufficient time to do so. The proposal to make additional funding available for network interest groups to pursue action-oriented projects could cover time release when more substantial investments of time are needed to achieve group goals.

The scarcity of time reinforces the need for the network to have a clear purpose, and clear value-add for service leaders, without whose support teachers and educators cannot participate. In the crowded children's education and care reform space, participants justifiably expected anything new to be well-integrated with existing requirements and priorities:

There's no reason for an organisation to support a teacher in doing this – for example, giving them time off the floor or paying for them to access it – unless it's going to help them with their assessment and rating or it's going to help them with something. You need to have some kind of buy-in as to why people would do this.

How can it be coalescing with the standards, how can it be coalescing with AITSL [Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership] and all of those sorts of things rather than putting another layer of stuff that goes on the top of what people are already doing.

Briscoe et al. (2015) also found that networks are more successful in intentionally operationalising their goals when those goals are aligned with government priorities. This does not mean that government policy priorities necessarily drive the activities of the network. Indeed, research participants emphasised that network activity should be teacher- and educator-driven. Rather, network activities should be designed in a way that complements existing demands on professionals' time and attention.

Conclusion

This report addresses a powerful force for resilience and practice improvement in the children's education and care sector: the connections between teachers and educators in professional networks. The value of professional networks is widely recognised, and is reflected in the many formal and informal networks that exist throughout the sector already.

The question to be addressed in this report is whether a national professional practice network would add meaningful value to the lives of teachers and educators, especially those who are currently unable to access those that already exist. By drawing on research and consultations, it is possible to envisage a design for a national network that connects teachers and educators across Australia and builds collaboration. The recommendations in this report set out the key components of this design.

On the other hand, it is equally possible to see networks as most effective at a more grassroots level. The current array of networks that exist in jurisdictions, organisations, providers or communities have the advantage of greater agility to respond to their members' needs, compared to a national network spanning wider diversity. Even if a national network were to be established, the evidence indicates that substructures would be needed to keep members focused and engaged.

The purpose and goals for a professional practice network at the national level must be resolved before the design elements AERO has proposed can be pursued. Clarity of purpose will crystallise the vision of what a national professional practice network should look like, and galvanise the array of constituents who all have a role to play in this collaborative endeavour.

The voices of teachers, educators and leaders have been invaluable in shaping recommendations and exploring the possibilities for action, as have the contributions of academics, policymakers and other sector leaders. Their willingness to give thoughtful consideration to a broad proposal that is not yet defined exemplifies the sector's openness to possibility.

This same openness to new ideas places a responsibility on policymakers to carefully consider which initiatives to pursue and when, to avoid overwhelming the sector at a time of significant challenge. The hesitation around a national network suggests that this may not be a priority action for implementation from the NWS, but a longer-term possibility that requires further scoping and development to become compelling.

Appendix A: Overview of consultations and review of existing approaches

AERO was tasked with reviewing existing professional practice networks available at jurisdictional and local levels. To document existing approaches, AERO conducted a desktop review followed by consultations with stakeholders across a range of organisations, including governments, peak bodies, providers and teacher registration regulatory authorities. AERO issued invitations to participate in the consultations via the NWS Workforce Working Group and the ACECQA Stakeholder Reference Group. Using purposeful sampling and snowballing recruitment, AERO used existing relationships with organisation representatives to spread the word and recruit more participants. A full list of participating organisations is provided in the Consultation Participants section of this appendix.

AERO conducted consultation meetings with one or more participants in an open-ended interview format. The interviews explored existing approaches used in their organisation and the appropriateness of a national professional practice network. Participants were invited to provide documentation related to existing approaches to be included in AERO's review.

Information gathered during the consultations was used in 2 ways:

- Documentation of approaches and programs was analysed as part of AERO's review of existing approaches and their relative effectiveness.
- Perspectives on effectiveness of existing approaches and opportunities for a professional practice network shared by participants were used to triangulate findings from the research and test the appropriateness of the recommendations.

AERO analysed relative effectiveness by reviewing each approach against key features for success identified in the best available research and appraising its alignment with policy goals and the priorities of educators, teachers and service leaders. These findings were synthesised with findings from the review of domestic and international literature and original research to formulate the report's recommendations.

Approaches were included if they met this report's definition of a professional practice network and were available to some, if not all, educators, teachers and leaders in children's education and care, and were currently or recently available.

The review yielded 17 approaches (see [Table A1](#)) led by community organisations, state and territory governments, large providers, professional associations and peak bodies. Of these, none were freely available to all teachers, educators and leaders nationwide. Membership requirements varied, including by state/territory, qualifications, certification and role. Where indicated, membership attracted fees. Several approaches comprised multiple networks across geographic regions or interest groups, the largest hosting more than 60 in-person networks statewide.

[Table A1](#) lists the approaches included in the review.

Table A1: Existing professional practice networks

Agency	Professional practice networks
ACT Government	Communities of Practice are in place for early childhood teachers in preschools attached to Directorate of Education schools, underpinned by a Community of Practice Plan, which provides guidance about purpose, goal setting and process.
Australian Education Union	The New Educator and Student Network provides new graduates and pre-service teachers across Australia with access to advice, support and professional learning. AEU membership is required. Membership is free for students.
Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership	The Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher Network includes online opportunities to connect, collaborate and share expertise. There is also a network bulletin and a free summit. Membership is available to teachers with 'Highly Accomplished' or 'Lead' certification status if they are employed in a school or early childhood setting with a certifying authority.
Beyond Blue, in collaboration with Early Childhood Australia and Headspace	Be You is an Australian Government-funded national mental health in education initiative that provides tools and resources designed for educators working with children from birth to 18 years of age. Early childhood services can register as 'Learning Communities' to receive support from a Be You consultant and access to sessions, events and networking opportunities focused on a whole learning community approach to promoting mental health.
Community Early Learning Australia	<i>No longer operating.</i> The Early Education Leaders Peer Network (funded 2020–2021) provided a community of practice for leaders to connect with peers to exchange ideas and extend thinking.
The Front Project	The Connection Hub is the Front Project's online community of practice. It is a forum for early childhood professionals to connect, share, learn and deepen their positive impact. The Connection Hub also provides access to professional learning webinars and events and a resource library. After a free trial, there is a cost for participation.
Gowrie New South Wales	The Education Hub provides a series of workshops and online communities intended to provide sustained opportunities for people to come together to address topics identified as priorities for their teams with children and families. The hub also offers teachers and educators 'Inquiry Visits' to a Gowrie service, bookended by an introductory online session on the fundamentals of practice in Gowrie settings, and a post-visit online reflection session. The hub is free to Gowrie staff and accessible to external participants for a fee.

Agency	Professional practice networks
Murdoch Children's Research Institute	The National Child and Family Hubs Network is a national, multidisciplinary group dedicated to strengthening Child and Family Hubs across Australia. The network offers a forum for service providers, community-based organisations, advocates, researchers and policymakers to share insights and evidence and scale up effective practice.
Australian Professional Teachers Association	The Australian Professional Teachers Association is a federation of state and territory professional teaching associations that provides opportunities for teachers to network and connect with others, to share ideas and to build support networks.
Northern Territory	Professional Learning Networks are available to all teachers and educators in Northern Territory government, independent and private schools and ECEC settings. Groups are available in urban areas in person, and online for remote participants. Session topics are determined in response to participant feedback.
Preschool Directors Association of South Australia	The Preschool Directors Association of South Australia is dedicated to advocating and advancing early childhood education in South Australia, and supporting public preschool leaders with the guidance, education and opportunities they need to perform at their best. They provide networking and professional development opportunities for over 100 members.
Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers of South Australia (HALT SA) network	<p>HALT SA provides connections between certified teachers to work together and share collective expertise. The network focuses on engaging and collaborating with other certified teachers for career development, while improving teacher quality to improve outcomes for children.</p> <p>The HALT SA network e-news is distributed to members quarterly, and events are advertised directly to certified teachers each year.</p>
Victorian Government	Communities of Practice are available free to early childhood teachers in their second year to fifth year of practice. A Community of Practice runs for 18 months and provides 4 facilitated sessions of 2 hours each. The Communities of Practice are funded by the Victorian Government Department of Education and Training as part of the End-to-End Career Supports Program, and are facilitated by Semann & Slattery.
	The Beginning Teacher Conference Series is for early childhood teachers in their first 6 months to 12 months of teaching. Advice and guidance are provided by accomplished teachers in relation to daily teaching practices.

Agency	Professional practice networks
Victorian Government	<p>Early Learning Leadership Forums provide those in service and organisational leadership roles in the early childhood sector across Victoria the opportunity to hear up-to-date information, collaborate and network. The biannual, place-based meetings are convened by the Victorian Department of Education.</p>
	<p>Early Years Learning Networks bring together early childhood teachers from services delivering a funded preschool program once per term to connect, collaborate and share professional insights and best practice. More than 60 local networks are established across Victoria. The networks are co-facilitated by a local Department of Education Kindergarten Improvement Advisor and an external facilitator.</p>
	<p>An alumni network supports ongoing connection between teachers after they complete the End-to-End Career Supports Program, which is part of the Best Start, Best Life initiative.</p>
Victorian Inclusion Agency	<p>Networks and virtual networks are available for early childhood educators and teachers to connect between Melbourne and regional Victoria. The networks include ECEC, OSHC and occasional care.</p>
Western Australian Government	<p>Early Years Networks have existed in Western Australia since 2003 and operate in locations statewide to connect a range of professionals who work with children in the early years and their families. Professionals can find their local network using the Early Years Network Directory, which provides contact details for the local network lead.</p> <p>The Connecting Early Years Networks initiative aims to build capacity and sustainability of Early Years Networks, enhance the establishment of sound network governance and local evidence-based strategic action plans, encourage community sector partnerships and facilitate information sharing. It brings together government and non-government providers of early years and parent support services from education, health, local government associations and the community services sector.</p>

Consultation participants

Facilitated discussions and workshops

AERO facilitated discussions at meetings of the NWS Workforce Working Group, comprising jurisdiction representatives, and the ACECQA Stakeholder Reference Group comprising peak bodies and large providers. AERO also facilitated a consultation workshop, testing research findings and draft recommendations, at the 2023 National Workforce Forum.

At each discussion/workshop, participants were invited to contact AERO via email to provide further information or participate in a consultation interview.

Open-ended interviews

AERO conducted open-ended interviews with:

- Australasian Teacher Regulatory Authorities (including the New South Wales Education Standards Authority, Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory, Queensland College of Teachers, Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia and the Victorian Institute of Teaching)
- Catholic Education Canberra and Goulburn
- Early Learning and Care Council of Australia and the University of Wollongong
- Gowrie Victoria
- Gowrie New South Wales
- Haywood Consulting Group
- Independent Schools Australia and the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia
- Lady Gowrie Tasmania
- Semann & Slattery and FKA Children's Services
- TAFE Queensland
- The Front Project
- Jurisdictions:
 - ACT Directorate of Education and the ACT Teacher Quality Institute
 - New South Wales Department of Education
 - Northern Territory Department of Education
 - Queensland Department of Education
 - Tasmanian Department of Education, Children and Young People
 - Victorian Department of Education
 - Western Australian Department of Communities and Department of Education.

Appendix B: Research methods

This appendix provides an overview of the methods that guided the field research the Deakin University early childhood research team undertook on AERO's behalf.

The Deakin University early childhood research team worked in partnership with AERO over a 7-month period from January to August 2023 to gather insights from early childhood teachers, educators and leaders throughout Australia about the effectiveness of existing approaches and opportunities related to AERO's 2 actions in the NWS Implementation and Evaluation Plan:

- FA1-3: Enhance mentoring and induction support for new teachers
- FA3-3: Investigate options for a national professional practice network for educators and teachers.

Led by Professor Andrea Nolan, the team comprised Jenni Beahan (Project Manager), Dr Deb Moore, Carole Lanting, Kim Kinnear (Indigenous Researcher) and Jessica Ciuciu.

The mixed methods study gathered qualitative and quantitative data via a national survey, focus groups and individual interviews conducted via the Zoom videoconferencing software. To ensure the research methods were respectful of all participants, the design incorporated 2 cohorts with distinct methodological approaches. Cohort 1 included early childhood educators, teachers and leaders, and Cohort 2 included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, teachers and leaders.

Participants

Of the 216,619 ECEC staff reported in the 2021 ECEC NWS (SRC, 2022), most of the workforce was employed in New South Wales (33%), Victoria (23%) and Queensland (22%), so efforts were concentrated within these states at the beginning of the project. However, participants from all states and territories were sought to be included in some way (i.e., through Zoom calls, fieldwork and/or survey) to gauge whether experiences were similar or whether location and circumstance could be seen as mediating factors in experiences of mentoring, induction and professional practice networks.

Ethics

This research was approved by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HAE-23-015; 2023-074). National, state and territory requirements for approval to conduct research involving early childhood educators, teachers and leaders differed in each jurisdiction, and extensive efforts were made to ensure recruitment and data collection complied with each jurisdiction's policies. Finally, all participants were provided with a plain language statement and consent form to enable informed consent to participate.

Methodological approaches

Case study methodological approach (Cohort 1)

This study applied a mixed methods case study approach. The case study method has become increasingly widespread in contemporary educational research (Lichtman, 2006; Yin, 2018). It was selected for this project for its ability to provide an 'in-depth understanding of a situation and meaning for those involved' (Merriam, 1998, p. 18). A case study is bound within a 'case' or 'phenomenon', usually within a specified timeframe and location, using detailed data collection involving multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). For this case study, the 'case' or 'phenomenon' under study was the induction, mentoring and professional practice networking experiences of Australian early childhood teachers and educators. The case was bound by time (7 months) and location (across all Australian states and territories) and used multiple in-depth sources of both quantitative (a national survey) and qualitative (a national survey, focus group and individual interviews) methods for data collection.

Indigenous methodological approach (Cohort 2)

An integral aspect of this research project was to call for and listen to the voices of, and research alongside, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood teachers, educators and service leaders in Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous early childhood services. However, to conduct western-initiated research that is ethically sound and culturally responsive alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators, there are Indigenous principles and 6 core Indigenous values that must be abided by to be deemed authentic Indigenous research and findings (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018; SNAICC, 2019). As such, we have earnestly attempted to follow the protocols and advice provided by Elders and Indigenous community leaders so that we could authentically research alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood teachers, educators and service leaders to start to understand their early childhood workforce experiences.

We aimed to abide by the principles and protocols of Indigenous methodologies, in particular in the use of 'yarning up' as 'a research methodology that is based on relationships' (Barlo et al., 2021, p. 40). This holistic Indigenous methodological approach requires explicit relationship building and ongoing maintenance of respectful relationships with 'data' and knowledges, which takes time. In Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) work, they claim the basis of an Indigenous research paradigm is framed by respect for Indigenous cultural integrity, relevance to Indigenous perspectives and experiences, reciprocal relationships, and responsibility through participation. This approach is dynamic and fluid, informed by place and premised on trust.

With the view to enable the voices and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood teachers and educators to be authentically heard, a respectful, culturally sensitive research strategy was co-designed alongside our Indigenous Deakin Team member, Kim Kinnear. Kim is a proud descendant of Adnyamathanha and Nukunu Community and Country with connections to Maralinga Tjarutja Peoples and a current PhD candidate and Lecturer at Deakin University. Further to our research design, Kim and our Deakin Research Team developed an Indigenous Data Sovereignty Plan to guide our research to be ethically responsible and aware of Indigenous peoples' self-determination, their Indigenous research rights and multiple ways of knowing and being. Indigenous Elders and communities expressed their gratitude for the creation of the Deakin Indigenous Data Sovereignty Plan, again, showing our desire to work authentically alongside Indigenous peoples.

Data collection

National survey

To maximise the number of early childhood teachers, educators and service leaders' voices across Australia, a national survey was designed and activated using the Qualtrics survey platform. The plain language statement and consent form appeared on the landing page of the survey and made it clear to participants that by completing and submitting the survey, they were giving consent to have the data incorporated into the research data corpus.

The survey collected demographic information that did not identify the respondent but provided information to map against the required participant criteria. This assisted with identifying gaps in the corpus of data to be followed up. The survey had 3 sections, addressing induction, mentoring and professional networks. It collected responses relating to:

- what has been experienced and how effective this has been
- what would have been helpful when transitioning into the profession, and during the early stages of a career
- the characteristics that are deemed important – for example, those considered 'not negotiable'
- the barriers and enablers to effective induction, mentoring and engagement in professional networks.

The survey included a mixture of open-ended, short answer questions, and drop-down menu selections. It was designed to be user-friendly and time efficient, recognising the early childhood workforce is time-poor. The survey was piloted by 6 early childhood professionals (nominated by the research team), and was subsequently adapted for clarity and brevity and to include a specific group (EY Management) based on their feedback. Responses from pilot survey participants were included in the data.

Focus groups and interviews on Zoom calls (Cohort 1)

Due to the short timeframe of the project, Zoom meetings were privileged for the focus groups and individual interviews. Once participants responded to the expression of interest to participate, they were provided with a plain language statement and consent form to consider. Participants had a choice of times and dates that were convenient to them. At the beginning of the focus group or interview, the plain language statement was explained and verbal consent was requested to confirm they were still willing to participate, even though a written consent form had already been sent to the Project Manager. At this point, if a potential participant no longer wanted to participate, they could disconnect from the Zoom meeting.

Focus groups and/or individual Yarning Up interview (Cohort 2)

For the Indigenous participants, there were 2 main methods used for data collection to align with relational Indigenous methodologies as much as possible. These were:

1. Face-to-face focus group and individual Yarning Up interviews
2. Zoom call focus group and/or individual Yarning Up interviews.

‘Yarning up’ can be seen to be a culturally safe and respectful method of creating, gathering and collating stories of experiences (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Wilson, 2008). This method entails being ‘in community’ with early childhood teachers and educators. ‘Yarning up’ involved researchers (in particular, Kim Kinnear and one other non-Indigenous researcher) visiting sites where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander teachers and/or educators were working, and then talking with the teachers and educators at a time and place that was convenient for them. It was important that Indigenous teachers and educators determined the best way to share information and uphold their voices about their early childhood mentoring, induction and networking experiences in connection with the Elders, community members and the service. This acknowledges the complexity and ongoing changes that many of the identified services experience and is a respectful way to engage in person where possible, and otherwise via Zoom.

Participants were recruited via purposive sampling and snowballing. Initially, recruitment for Cohort 2 participants was introduced through Kim Kinnear’s already established relationships using purposeful sampling, followed by snowballing recruitment strategies. Palinkas et al. (2015, p. 1) argue that:

Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest.

Purposeful sampling allowed for the specific invitation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood teachers and educators, as it was their perspectives, knowledges and experiences of mentoring, induction and networking we sought to hear. These groups were contacted by Kim Kinnear, using her own professional networks, National Indigenous Knowledges Education Research Innovation Institute lecturers and through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations and government agencies.

Snowballing as a recruitment strategy is said to occur when ‘members of a particular population refer you to other members of that population ... via word of mouth’ (Nolan, et al., 2013, p. 128). For Indigenous communities, this is an important consideration in passing on information to other potential research participants if:

- the researchers are deemed to be trustworthy or not
- the research is worthy of participation
- it is culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate.

This practice is confirmed in a study by Guillemin et al. (2016, p. 3), where Indigenous participants spoke of ‘checking them out’ first before giving or denying consent to participate.

Appendix C: Overview of the Australian Children's Education and Care Workforce

This appendix provides key statistics most relevant to this report. Additional data about Australian children's education and care services can be found in the cited sources.

The NWS concerns all 17,319 ECEC services in Australia approved by ACECQA:

- 8,855 long day care services
- 3,062 standalone preschools
- 448 family day care services
- 4,954 outside school hours care (OSHC) services (ACECQA, 2023b, p. 7).

The NWS (p. 11) provides an overview of the diversity within the sector, including:

- **Provider size** – Around one-third of providers (34%) are large (more than 25 services), with a similar proportion operating a single service (36%).
- **Ownership** – For-profit provision is common in long day care (68%), family day care (60%) and OSHC (48%), but rare for standalone preschools (1%).

The ECEC National Workforce Census (NWC) (SRC, 2022) provides further details of the workforce in ECEC services approved for Child Care Subsidy (CCS). Dedicated preschools were invited to participate in the 2021 ECEC NWC, but participation was not mandatory and Western Australia and South Australia did not participate. Nevertheless, the NWC provides a valuable overview of the majority of the ECEC workforce to help contextualise this report. Table C1 shows key statistics for qualification levels, experience and age groups.

Table C1: Key statistics for contact staff* (teachers and educators) in CCS-approved services

Workforce profile	Long day care	Family day care	OSHC
Total number of teachers	15,749	438	2,483
ECEC-related qualification levels (percentage of all teachers and educators)			
Degree	12.4%	3.4%	11.7%
Diploma/advanced diploma	47.5%	48.3%	22.3%
Certificate III or IV	32.2%	45.4%	18.3%
No ECEC qualification	8%	2.6%	46.3%
Years of experience (percentage of all teachers and educators)			
10 or more years' experience	29.1%	37.7%	15%
Under one year's experience	11.4%	5.1%	17.6%

Workforce profile	Long day care	Family day care	OSHC
Younger and older age groups (percentage of all teachers and educators)			
Aged 15 to 24 years	19.1%	2.8%	42.1%
Aged 50 years and over	16.4%	36.1%	14.3%

Note: *Contact staff refers to teachers and educators working directly with children.

Source: SRC (2022)

While excluded from the NWC dataset, standalone preschools are known to have a higher proportion of degree-qualified teachers, often working alone or supported by a certificate III or diploma-qualified co-educator. Standalone preschools also have an older workforce. In all jurisdictions with available data, around one-third (or more) of staff in standalone preschools were aged 50 years and over in 2021, with fewer than 10% of staff aged 15 to 24 years (SRC, 2022).

Indigenous educators constitute 3.0% of educators in both long day care and OSHC, and 1.0% of family day care educators. Over 1 in 5 (21.6%) long day care services have at least one Indigenous staff member, compared to 12.1% of family day care services and 7.3% of OSHC. This increases markedly with service remoteness, with one-third (33%) of outer regional CCS-approved services having an Indigenous educator, compared to over half (54.6%) of remote or very remote services. In the Northern Territory, 37.1% of preschool staff identified as Indigenous (SRC, 2022).



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