

# Communities of practice for early childhood professionals

A literature review synthesising the evidence on what, why and how for Lutheran Education Queensland



*We respectfully acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians across Queensland on which Lutheran Education Queensland communities live, learn and serve.*

*We honour their deep and enduring connection to Country, shaped by tens of thousands of years of culture, spirituality, knowledge and care.*

*We pay our respects to Elders past and present, whose leadership, wisdom and custodianship continue to guide and enrich communities across Queensland.*

*We also recognise the young people who are emerging as future leaders.*

*We acknowledge and value the significant contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to education, to knowledge-sharing, and to the flourishing of communities.*

*As part of LEQ's mission to nurture inspired learning for life, we commit to listening with respect, learning with humility, and working in partnership with First Nations peoples to build a future grounded in truth, inclusion and shared hope.*




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# Executive summary

This document sets out the findings from a literature review of Communities of Practice (CoPs) in early childhood education and care (ECEC), with a focus on the what, the why, and the how. It draws on Australian and international academic research and grey literature, prioritising recent studies and cases in settings similar to those within Lutheran Education Queensland (LEQ), including long day care (LDC), stand-alone kindergarten/preschool, and combined services.

## Key takeaways

<b>What CoPs are</b> 	Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and want to learn to do it better through regular interaction. They are widely used across education and other sectors to support ongoing, practice-embedded professional learning.
<b>Why they matter</b> 	Strong evidence shows that CoPs generate sustained positive effects at both individual and organisational levels. These include improvements in educators' professional knowledge and the consistency and quality of their practices; strengthened confidence, morale and professional identity; and improvements in workforce retention. In ECEC, such shifts contribute to higher service quality and better developmental outcomes for children, because they enhance process quality—children's everyday experiences and interactions.
<b>How they work best</b> 	<p>Effective CoP initiatives typically include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ a clear purpose known and valued by all participants</li><li>✓ meaningful, context-relevant activities that support critical reflection, problem solving and application in practice.</li><li>✓ voluntary participation and choice of focus, which foster genuine engagement and ownership.</li><li>✓ trust and rapport, enabling honest reflection and collaborative learning.</li><li>✓ expert peer facilitation.</li><li>✓ organisational support, including governance, resourcing, operational logistics, and capturing, recognition and sharing of progress and insights.</li></ul>

## Conclusion

**CoPs help educators learn together, grow professionally and improve outcomes for children—through connection, reflection and shared commitment to effective practices and learning.**

The evidence strongly supports LEQ's commitment to co-design, implement and research a CoP professional learning initiative for its educators and educational leaders with an embedded research component as part of its commitment to continuous improvement and inspired learning for life.

The rest of this report presents the supporting detail on CoPs defining features, structure, theoretical foundations, prevalence and use in ECEC, effectiveness, and the factors that help or hinder effectiveness. These findings have directly informed the co-design of a pilot initiative, and then tested and refined with its early childhood professionals, to maximise the pilot's success.

# 1. What is a community of practice and how does it work?

## Defining a community of practice

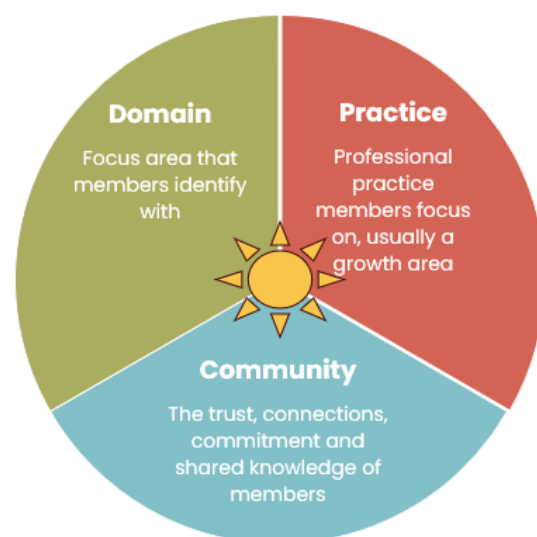
A community of practice is “a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and want to learn to do it better through regular interaction”.<sup>1</sup> CoPs may also be referred to as professional learning networks, communities of learning, professional learning communities, and professional communities of teachers and educators.<sup>2</sup>

CoPs are defined by three essential elements – domain, community and practice – which together create the conditions for social learning through structured critical reflection (see **Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.**).<sup>3</sup> Critical reflection sits at the centre of CoP activity and aligns closely with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), where reflective practice is a central principle and an essential component of high-quality pedagogy and planning.

**Figure 1: The defining elements of a Community of Practice.**

The interaction of domain, community and practice distinguishes CoPs from networks, teams, training groups and taskforces. Compared to these structures, CoPs:

- have a narrower, clearly defined shared focus
- rely on collaboration, not delegation or task allocation
- operate as ongoing learning partnerships rather than time-bound groups; and
- include one or more facilitators who guide inquiry, reflection and shared problem-solving.<sup>4</sup>



**Table 1: Differences between communities of practice and other professional structures<sup>5</sup>**

Structure	Other professional structures	Communities of practice
<b>Team</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver a product, service, or function</li> <li>• Focus on a task with a joint commitment to achieving it</li> <li>• Disband when task is done</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver a capability</li> <li>• Commitment to a learning partnership across multiple tasks or teams</li> <li>• Evolve until domain no longer relevant</li> </ul>
<b>Task force</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking solution to a broad problem</li> <li>• Members come as representatives of specific constituencies</li> <li>• Agreed solution requires negotiation across perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members participate as individual learners even if they represent different organisational units</li> <li>• Mutual engagement not necessarily expected to produce a unique, negotiated position</li> </ul>
<b>Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transmission of a curriculum defined by experts</li> <li>• May or may not be relevant to practice</li> <li>• Timebound learning events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practitioners in the driver's seat</li> <li>• Learning driven by challenges of practice and directly relevant to practice</li> <li>• Ongoing learning loops over time</li> </ul>
<b>Network</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defined by connections among people</li> <li>• Does not require a collective identity or focus</li> <li>• Enables information flows in broad and unpredictable ways</li> <li>• Easy entry and exit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defined by identification with a shared domain</li> <li>• Commitment to collective progress in practice</li> <li>• Information flows more focused and predictable because of shared commitment</li> <li>• Membership significant</li> </ul>

## The size and structure of communities of practice

CoPs vary widely in size and composition, reflecting the diversity of their domains, contexts and intended purposes. In ECEC, research suggests that 5–10 members plus one peer facilitator is optimal for deep, inclusive professional reflection. Smaller CoPs (3–15 members) are suited to instructional or pedagogical areas of focus, while much larger online communities—sometimes labelled CoPs—may include hundreds of participants but are typically organised into smaller subgroups based on location or focus area.<sup>6</sup>

CoPs can be established as part of an organisation, span multiple organisations, or both.<sup>7</sup> For example, Goodstart Early Learning has many communities of practices, each with a different focus and each drawing members from services across Australia (see page 10).

It is also common for multiple CoPs to be established as part of an overarching initiative. For example, the ACT government's communities of practice initiative to support children's transitions from preschool programs to school had 16 CoP sites (or CoP groups) established across schools and ECEC services to enable sharing of knowledge and practices across their different contexts.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Goodstart Early Learning had 69 early learning centres participate in a reconciliation-focused Community of Practice, of which 20 services 'graduated' as alumni and moved into a second phase mentoring other centres on their reconciliation action plans and community connections.<sup>9</sup> Overseas, the United States' early childhood consortium gathered 113 ECEC directors and teachers into 15 centre-based groupings for facilitated discussion, and additionally provided monthly directors meetings (bringing all 15 directors from all centres together) as well as an annual conference for all participants to share and celebrate learning and reflections and bolster identity and connections.<sup>10</sup> CoPs have also been a key enabling element of England's Stronger Practice Hubs (see page 12).

A mix of whole-group and small-group interaction is commonly recommended to balance exposure to diverse ideas with opportunities for deeper relational connection. As Wenger and colleagues note, communities develop a rhythm over time, and part of effective CoP design is identifying the right cadence for each stage of development.<sup>11</sup>

### Core structure: facilitator and members

The internal structure and operations of CoPs remain consistent despite these variations:

- a facilitator (sometimes called a moderator or convenor) is usually a peer with deeper or broader expertise and experiences, who supports reflective dialogue, inquiry and practice improvement.
- members may join the reflections and share their experiences, ideas and questions. Members can vary in engagement, often moving from peripheral participation toward fuller involvement as trust, belonging, shared norms and a repertoire of tools and resources grow.<sup>12</sup>

Colleagues outside the CoP—sometimes called transactional participants—may indirectly benefit from the CoP as new insights and refined practices are shared and applied within services. Organisational support roles (e.g., project managers or professional learning leads) may also sit around the CoP structure, providing logistics, governance and resource support.

## Duration and timing of CoPs

There is no recommended lifespan. In the core CoP literature, duration is treated as contingent: a CoP should continue as long as members gain value from connecting and learning together.<sup>13</sup> Empirical research also makes it hard to estimate an average because duration is often inconsistently reported, or not reported at all.<sup>14</sup> Where duration is reported, it spans from short pilots (such as 6 months) to multi-year initiatives (up to 7 years).

In early childhood education specifically, the peer-reviewed literature tends to describe time-bound initiatives (such as a 7 month project) rather than recommending an ideal lifespan. Descriptions found online and in research papers further suggest many CoPs are designed around a school-year (i.e. monthly during term times for 9 months, or once a term for 18 months).<sup>15</sup> Some CoP guidebooks call out the natural evolution of CoPs, e.g. developing (less than 3 or 6 months), established (3-6 to 9-12 months) and mature (more than 12 months).<sup>16</sup>

## The theoretical foundations of communities of practice

CoPs are grounded in a social theory of learning in which learning occurs through participation in shared activity, collective inquiry and mutual engagement enabled to progress individual and group understanding and goals, enabled by the three defining features – domain, community and practice.<sup>17</sup>

Additional nuance on the ‘how’ of CoPs draw on a rich evidence base for these and related fields:

- **Classic social theory** emphasises modelling and reinforcement as mechanisms for peer-to-peer spread of effective practices.<sup>18</sup>
- **Social Cognitive Theory** highlights the influence of social environments and the importance of both external and internal reinforcement<sup>19</sup>
- **Sociocultural theory** explains how peer-guided mediation and mixed-experience groups support learning within the zone of proximal development.<sup>20</sup>
- **Activity theory** shows how contradictions or tensions in work practices create opportunities for expansive learning and redesign<sup>21</sup> (such as discussing why and how some practices may be adapted for different children or contexts).
- **Distributed cognition** describes how tools, checklists and other “boundary objects” help stabilise shared understanding across teams and organisations.<sup>22</sup>
- **SECI model (tacit <-> explicit knowledge conversion)** illustrates how CoPs accelerate the articulation of tacit know-how into explicit plans, rubrics and tools, strengthening organisational capability (see Figure 2).<sup>23</sup>
- **Double-loop learning** extends reflection beyond improving practice to questioning the assumptions, goals and rules underlying it, generating deeper, sustained change (see Figure 3).<sup>24</sup>

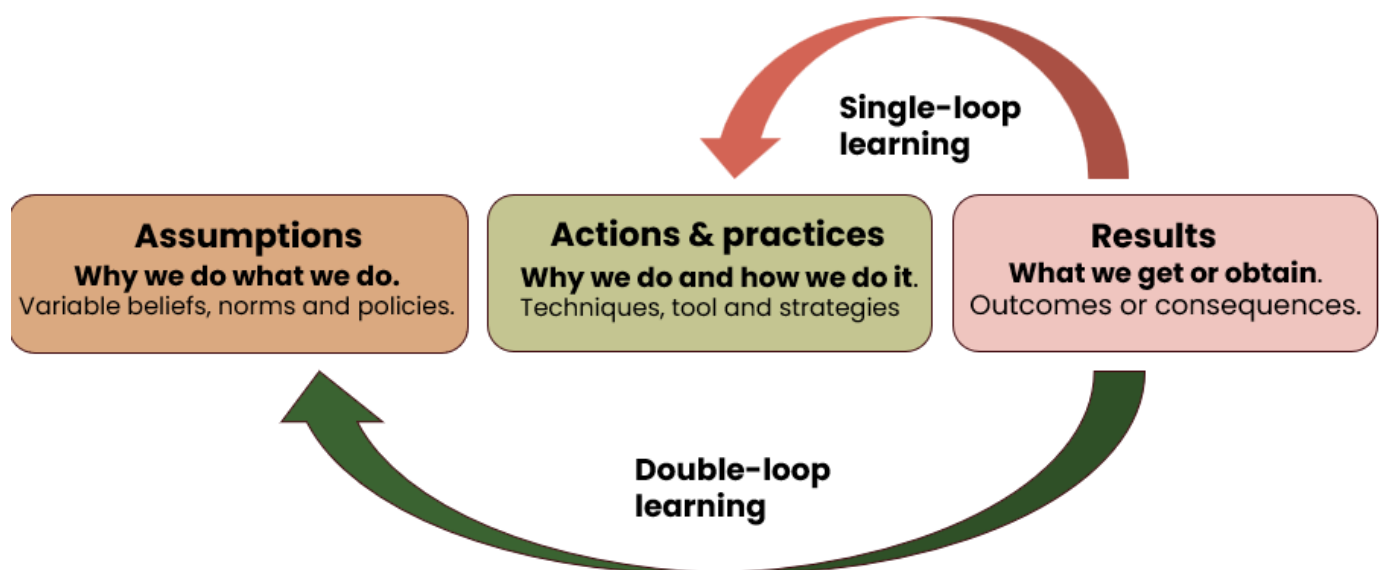
Across these theories, the central concept of thinking together connects them: CoPs create relational conditions—trust, shared purpose, mutual respect—through which deep learning, knowledge sharing and practice transformation can occur.

**Figure 2: The SECI model shows how organisational learn and how CoPs can transform diverse individual actions turn into collective capability<sup>25</sup>**



Linking all these together is the concept of thinking together, which helps explain how tacit knowledge flows in CoPs and emphasises the relational conditions and trust underpinning this social learning at individual and group levels.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 3: Double-loop learning explains how critical reflection in CoPs create lasting change**





## 2. How prevalent are CoPs in ECEC and what do they focus on?

### ECEC CoPs are widespread and vary in focus

While systematic counts of CoP in ECEC are limited and hard to compare, evidence indicates strong, increasing and diversified use of CoPs and CoP-style professional initiatives. In Australia, CoPs have been implemented or recommended by leading organisations such as:

- Early Childhood Australia (ECA)
- ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth)
- Goodstart Early Learning
- The Victorian and ACT Departments of Education, and
- AERO (Australian Education Research Organisation)<sup>27</sup>

Internationally, CoPs and CoP-type entities sit at the heart of large-scale early childhood improvement efforts, including:

- England's Stronger Practice Hubs, supporting approximately 9,700 early years services to exchange evidence-based practice and strengthen professional networks;
- New Zealand's Kāhui Ako cross-setting Professional Learning Communities; and the
- United States' Head Start's MyPeers online communities with thousands of active users.<sup>28</sup>

### Focus areas of CoPs

The topics addressed by CoPs vary widely, reflecting the diverse professional goals of educators and early learning organisations. Common areas of focus include:

- language and literacy development
- social-emotional learning
- mathematics and numeracy
- inclusive practices and supporting diverse learners
- leadership and service quality
- curriculum planning, including integrating learning frameworks and the planning cycle
- assessment of learning and assessment for learning

These focus areas tend to align with organisational priorities, educator-identified needs and policy directions.<sup>29</sup>

### Examples of CoPs in Australian early childhood settings<sup>30</sup>

- **The ACT government** established Communities of Practice for early childhood teachers in preschools attached to Directorate of Education schools, guided by a formal CoP Practice Plan that sets expectations on purpose, goal setting and process.

- **Early Childhood Australia** runs facilitator led COPs on topics such as play-based learning, literacy and language, and diverse learners. These are delivered online for educators at all career stages and open to educators nationwide.
- **The Front Project** runs an online CoP called the Connection Hub, supporting early childhood professionals with resource libraries, webinars and occasional in-person events. Participation is opt-in with a trial period followed by low-cost membership.
- **Goodstart Early Learning** uses CoP initiatives to drive improvements in practice, quality and inclusion at scale across their network. These CoPs bring together educators and leaders from a mix of different services in regular meetings to share resources and reflections around a defined theme. These themes differ widely, from identity and inclusion focussed (such as a First Nations CoP, male educator CoP, Diverse Abilities CoP), to structured improvement (focussing on pedagogy and planning for example) or those which span both (such as their Reconciliation CoP). Meetings are online or in person, depending on members' locations. Meetings focus on sharing practices, problem solving, planning and peer mentoring.
- **Gowrie New South Wales's** Education Hub provides online CoPs for their service staff (for free) and external participants (for a fee) to connect, share, learn and deepen their impact on the issues identified as priorities for their teams. CoPs commence with introductory sessions, optional inquiry visits to support practice reflection, and structured post-visit reflection meetings.
- **The Northern Territory education department** provides opt-in Professional Learning Networks based on a CoP model open to all teachers and educators in schools, preschool and LDC services. Meetings are in-person for those in metro settings and online for professionals joining from regional and remote locations. Topics are determined by participant feedback.
- **The Victorian education department** funds over 60 CoPs opt-in CoPs for Early Childhood Teachers in their second to fifth year of practice across sessional preschools or LDCs. CoPs meet once per term over 18 months to discuss the issues of their choosing, and are facilitated by local staff in partnership with independent experts. Victoria also delivers a 'Beginner Teacher Conference Series' for ECTs in their first 6-12 months in which accomplished teachers provide practical guidance on daily teaching practices. Both initiatives sit within the Victoria's 'End-to-End Career Supports Program for teachers.
- **Western Australia's state and local governments** have an Early Years Network which share many features with CoPs. These bring together professionals from education, health and community services sectors to learn together and collaborate. The Connecting Early Years Initiative aims to build capacity and sustainability of these networks through sound governance and local evidence-based strategic action plans.

### 3. What are the potential benefits and effects?

#### CoPs empower education professionals and support children's learning

A substantial body of research across early childhood, school-based and higher education settings demonstrates that CoPs play a powerful role in supporting, sustaining and elevating professional practice. Educators frequently describe CoPs as enabling them to navigate the complexities and challenges of their work—whether pedagogical, contextual, relational or leadership-related.<sup>31</sup>

CoPs give education professionals structured opportunities to:

- reflect on and refine their thinking and practice
- access colleagues' experience, strategies and insights, including from service contexts different to theirs
- examine alternative approaches and reduce unintentional self-deception that may arise when reflecting alone
- build shared understanding of effective pedagogy
- strengthen their professional identity and sense of belonging.<sup>32</sup>

One participant in a study of professional learning networks captured this experience:

*"The most important thing I learned [from my PLN] is that there is a community of enthusiastic amazing educators that are lifelong learners, always evolving their practice and learning from each other and from me. That was the kind of teacher I wanted to be but I didn't have the best role models of this around me."*

In this initiative, almost all participants reported modifying their teaching practices; one quarter stated that the CoP changed their thinking about teaching, and many described positive impacts on student learning.<sup>33</sup>

#### Professional practice uplift and support in early childhood settings

In early childhood specifically, CoPs have led to improvements in professional knowledge, practices and capability, including:

- starting or deepening the use of the EYLF planning cycle and learning continuums to plan developmentally appropriate learning experiences for children in preschools and LDCs and elevating the pedagogical language and understanding of educators;<sup>34</sup>
- improving educator's dialogic techniques and confidence, including richer educator-child talk and interactions to strengthen children's language and social skills;<sup>35</sup> and expanding prosocial practices such as empathy;<sup>36</sup>
- understanding and introducing or enhancing numeracy development activities;
- deepening collective understanding and reasoning about they 'why' and 'how';<sup>37</sup> and
- strengthening the inclusion of children and their families.<sup>38</sup>

CoPs also support improvements in educator wellbeing, morale and confidence, reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen collegial connections—important factors underpinning workforce retention.<sup>39</sup>

## Higher quality and improved outcomes for children

These positive shifts are directly linked to improvements in service quality, staff retention and wellbeing, and in children's learning and developmental outcomes.<sup>40</sup> This is because CoPs enhance educators' knowledge and everyday interactions with children and peers, thereby raising process quality—the element of early childhood quality most strongly associated with children's developmental outcomes.<sup>41</sup>

**Figure 4: A simplified logic chain for how CoPs improve practices and child outcomes**



### **Example: England's Stronger Practice Hubs – impact of CoPs at scale**

England's Stronger Practice Hubs initiative is a program by the Department of Education to improve the quality of early childhood education and care across the country through the sharing and adoption of good (evidence-based, effective) practices.

Each hub is a partnership, led by an outstanding or good-rated early years service, working with a number of other services in their region. All participating services were also provided with access to an online resource repository. The program was open to the equivalent of Australia's LDCs, FDC and preschool services, fully funded by government, and delivered in partnership with the National Children's Bureau and Education Endowment Foundation.

The recent (2025) program evaluation demonstrated such strong effects the program has been doubled from 18 to 36 hubs, with the new hubs expected to be operational by September 2026.

- All 18 hubs proactively shared information and advice on good practices and reported they wished to continue meeting and collaborating with other services
- 82% of practice leaders felt the initiative improved staff skills or practices.
- 74% of services made changes to their practice, regardless of their socio-economic context
- Educators and leaders reported noticeable improvement in the learning and behaviours of children. The most commonly reported improvements were to language and communication skills, and to children's personal, social and emotional development.

Although it can be hard to ascertain and compare the effectiveness of CoPs given the large variety of focus areas, size, meeting frequency, activities and any connected initiatives,<sup>42</sup> the strength and frequency of their positive effects across studies explain why COPs are increasingly embraced in early learning in Australia and internationally.<sup>43</sup> For example, Participation in professional learning communities [Communities of Practice] is an expectation of New Zealand's revised Indicators of quality for early childhood education because:

"Children's learning is enhanced through leaders and teachers working as a professional learning community', which means teachers and leaders accessing professional learning opportunities that involve engaging and challenging beliefs and practices, inquiring into and evaluating practice and making evidence-based changes, sharing knowledge, expertise, and practice with others."

## The broader value of CoPs

CoPs provide both short- and long-term benefits for individual educators and their organisations. Individuals benefit through collaboration, practical tips, timely support, expanded networks and stronger professional identity. Organisations benefit through improved problem-solving, reduced duplication of effort, diffusion of innovative practices, deeper capability building and strengthened workforce engagement and retention (see in Table 2).

**Table 2: Short and long-term value to organisations and CoP members all sectors, worldwide <sup>44</sup>**

	Short term value	Long-term value
<b>Members</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect and collaborate with colleagues your team or service/centre</li> <li>• Receive 'just in time' help not limited to personal network</li> <li>• Get tips and ideas for one's job</li> <li>• Know what's happening in other teams, departments and organisations</li> <li>• Organise practical and relevant professional development</li> <li>• Find new opportunities for emergent leadership</li> </ul> <p><b>Members of the Victorian Government's CoPs for early-career ECTs reported they benefitted from connecting and collaborating with other new ECTs and from the accomplished teachers that facilitated the meetings.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop new skills and capabilities</li> <li>• Build a stronger sense of professional identity</li> <li>• Gain recognition and reputation by helping people and other organisational units</li> <li>• Gain a collective voice to engage organisational stakeholders around relevant issues</li> <li>• Expand one's professional network</li> </ul>
<b>Organisations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work collectively to solve both local and organisation-wide problems</li> <li>• Avoid repeating mistakes across teams, departments and contexts</li> <li>• Create synergies and economies of scale between organisational units</li> <li>• Benchmark approaches and solutions across contexts</li> <li>• Mentor newcomers to help them get up to speed quickly</li> </ul> <p><b>Goodstart Early Learning uses CoPs to drive continuous improvements in practice and quality across their system, and to support workforce retention, development and inclusion.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build long term capabilities for ongoing success</li> <li>• Involve practice-based partners in strategic conversations around future capabilities</li> <li>• Transform local innovations into widespread yet locally adapted practices</li> <li>• Build a more engaged and committed workforce</li> <li>• Retain employees and promote them internally</li> </ul>

An influential study of CoPs in Australia and New Zealand highlighted that:

*"Effective professional learning must move beyond the battle for individual hearts and minds to embrace the notion of collective zones of proximal development, in order to genuinely serve the interests of young children and their families."*<sup>45</sup>

This reinforces the core principle that collective learning is more powerful and more sustainable than isolated professional development.

## 4. Success factors and design recommendations

The literature confirms a strong evidence base for CoPs as a mechanism for delivering professional learning, supporting educators and leaders to extend and refine their practice, and improving service quality and child outcomes. However, success is not automatic. Even well-designed CoPs can encounter predictable barriers, particularly in ECEC contexts and a context of chronic workforce shortages.

### Common barriers and challenges

The most commonly reported barriers are:



**Difficulties attending meetings.** Time pressures and competing operational demands can prevent educators from participating consistently. Attendance is especially affected when meetings occur outside of normal working hours, leadership support (at centre or approved provider/institutional level) is limited, and backfill or scheduling adjustments are not provided.



**Lack of clarity on purpose and roles.** CoPs falter when facilitators are insufficiently inducted or supported, when communication is unclear, or when the activities (including critical reflections and discussion) feel irrelevant or are not valued by participants.



**Inadequate trust and psychological safety.** Poor connections among participants can occur when meetings are spaced too far apart, when the CoP group is too large, when participation is compulsory, when some voices dominate discussions, when the topic is forced, and when divergent views are discouraged.

Trust takes time and deliberate effort to build and to sustain. It depends on members' willingness to share their experiences and uncertainties, and on the group's ability to respond with respect, honesty and practical support.

These barriers are not signs that CoPs "don't work". Rather, they are predictable risks that can be mitigated through intentional design and thoughtful planning with input educational professionals familiar with a range of service contexts and roles.

### Success factors

Although each study defines and groups barriers and enablers, 10 success factors consistently emerge across the literature. Each of these factors protects against one of more of the most common barriers, and each of these success factors should be intentionally planned, then tested and refined using the lived expertise and contextual knowledge of early childhood professionals – an approach LEQ has already prioritised in its codesign process.

1. **Clear focus, purpose and objectives.** All members should understand and support the CoP's purpose, focus and expectations. This supports effective use of meeting time and also encourages members to apply their new knowledge or practices (and reflect on these) between meetings, ready to share back at the next meeting.<sup>46</sup>

2. **Choice of focus by each CoP.** Choosing is associated with greater buy-in and engagement as the members are more interested in it and/or see greater relevance and potential positive impact. The choice can be within broader parameters set by the supporting organisation running or funding the CoP initiative. For example, the parameter could be education program planning, and sub focus be on aligning with the Kindergarten Learning Framework with the EYLF, or how to use formative assessments to strengthen language and literacy development.<sup>47</sup>
3. **A mix of relevant, high-quality, actionable activities.** Meetings activities should: align with the specific focus area; reflect or be relevant to the roles and service contexts of participants; and include multiple entry points so all members (regardless of their confidence or experience) can participate productively. Activities should facilitate reasoning, reflective and supportive group reflections, and the application or refinement of knowledge and practices between meetings.<sup>48</sup>
4. **Voluntary participation.** CoPs are most effective when members choose to join rather than being compelled, as this voluntary participation fosters intrinsic motivation, engagement and ownership of the CoPs goals and objectives.<sup>49</sup>
5. **Regular, predictable meeting cadence within work hours.** Meeting too infrequently leads to loss of momentum, slower development of trust and shared understanding, and weaker links between reflection and practice change. Meeting too frequently can suppress attendance due to competing demands and operational needs. Monthly or once per term over 4 to 36 months are common.<sup>50</sup>
6. **Expert peer facilitation.** Facilitation is most effective when led by an experienced educator from the same field. Peer facilitators:
  - Bring credibility and practical understanding
  - Model reflective and encouraging dialogue, and
  - Support members to interrogate and refine their practice.

While formal facilitation experience is not required, providing guidance, resources and scaffolds significantly strengthen facilitator confidence and capability and group effectiveness.<sup>51</sup> Outside experts and guest speakers are sometimes used in addition
7. **Effective induction.** Induction should clarify the CoP's purpose and focus (ideally selected by members), the nature of reflective dialogue, and the norms for participation (respect, encouragement, questioning assumptions, social learning towards shared goal to benefit themselves and children). This provides strong alignment and accelerates trust building.<sup>52</sup>
8. **Deliberate trust-building and psychological safety.** Trust and psychological safety are preconditions for honest reflection and inquiry in a group setting, enabling members to share uncertainties, seek feedback and provide their thoughts and experiences. They also contribute to stronger professional identity and organisational belonging. Including relational or rapport building activities in the first meeting, and revisiting them periodically or as warm-up in each meeting prior to the core business, supports building and sustaining this trust and peer connections.<sup>53</sup>
9. **Institutional support and enablers.** This institutional support may include:
  - funding the design, facilitation or logistics, such as time release or backfill;

- providing accessible resources or tools, such as through a moderated online hub;
- helping to resolve any scheduling or operational constraints;
- funding and/or supporting research or evaluations on the CoP initiative and sharing the findings with participants, which models openness to inquiry, reflection and continuous improvement and can lead to initiative enhancements.

Institutional commitment signals value, strengthens engagement and enhances sustainability (longevity) of CoPs.<sup>54</sup>

10. **Built-in reinforcements to support and sustain group and individual learning between sessions.** Effective reinforcements include:

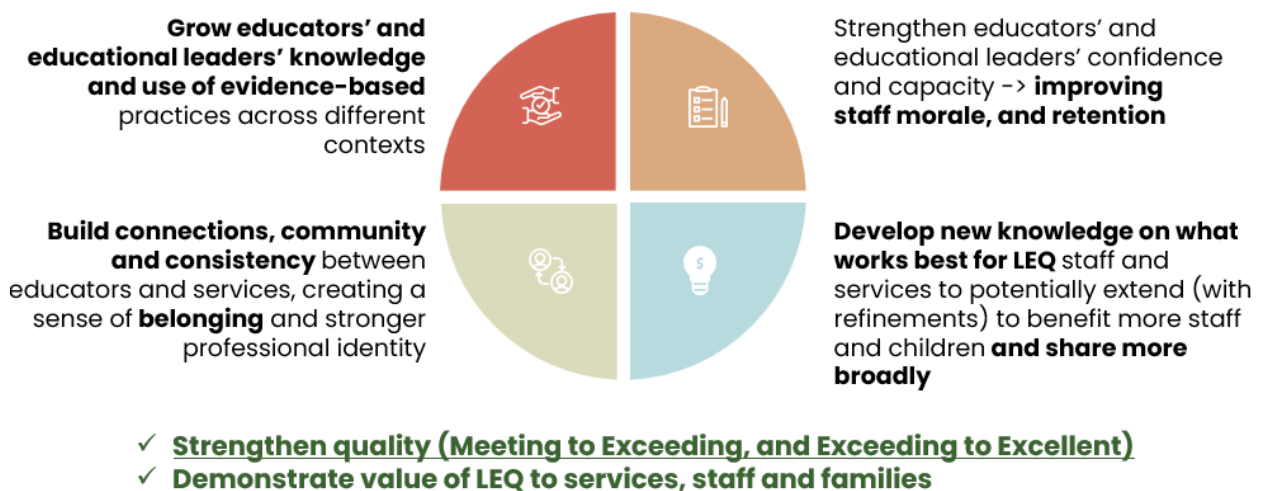
- **Online knowledge hubs or resource repositories.** These allow members to revisit content, catch up on missed sessions and access templates, videos and guides. Moderated discussion forums can support members who prefer written reflection or asynchronous participation.<sup>55</sup>
- **Two or more members participating from each service.** This mitigates the risk of lost learning if one member misses a session and enables colleagues to reflect together (and sense-check) between meetings. Participants in AERO's CoP-style professional learning initiative, along with international CoPs, highlighted this as a critical success factor alongside expert facilitation and relevant, engaging meeting activities.<sup>56</sup>



## 5. Conclusion

This review shows that Communities of Practice are a well-evidenced and effective approach to strengthening educator capability and improving quality in early childhood education and care. Across Australian and international contexts, CoPs consistently support deeper professional knowledge, more reflective and intentional practice, enhanced educator confidence and wellbeing, and, ultimately, better outcomes for children. Their effectiveness lies in their grounding in social learning, their emphasis on collaborative inquiry and critical reflection, and their adaptability to different service contexts.

**Figure 5: Objectives of LEQ's early childhood professionals' CoP professional learning and research initiative**



For Lutheran Education Queensland, investing in educators and educational leaders via a CoP professional learning pilot strongly with organisational priorities, as well as state and national mandates and policy agendas. CoPs offer a structured yet flexible professional learning model through which educators can refine practice, share expertise and build collective capability, supported by expert facilitation and organisational commitment. By embedding CoPs within its broader professional learning strategy, LEQ is investing in a sustainable mechanism for continuous improvement and high quality across its services to better serve children and families.

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