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Sharing professional learning via peer mentoring

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This research summary provides an overview of a study on peer mentoring for professional learning conducted by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) in partnership with the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF). The full findings are presented in our report Peer Mentoring for Sharing Skills and Knowledge from Professional Learning.

The research study

Professional learning is a key driver for improving the use of evidence-based practices in education. However, participating in high-quality external professional learning requires a significant investment of time and resources, which can be challenging for under-resourced or minimally staffed schools and early education and care (ECEC) services.

A peer mentoring approach to professional learning is one way to resolve this challenge. It involves a small number of staff completing external professional learning and sharing what they learnt with colleagues who did not attend. This approach is common practice in many workplaces (Cramer et al., 2022; Nexø et al., 2024; Siraj et al., 2018; Suhrheinrich, 2015; Vogt et al., 2015).

Although often used, there is a lack of research demonstrating that the peer mentoring approach is effective. Indeed, while a peer mentoring approach may seem less expensive and time-intensive than sending all staff to external training, it may also be less effective in improving teaching practice and children's learning.

This study aimed to address this gap. It investigated the feasibility and impact of a peer mentoring approach, compared to an approach where all or most teachers and educators receive external professional learning.

We conducted the study as a small-scale two-arm cluster randomised trial in ECEC services with educators and teachers working in preschool rooms (i.e., the year before school).

In total, 37 preschool educators, teachers and educational leaders and 152 children from 10 ECEC services in Western Sydney, Australia, were involved. ECEC services were randomly assigned to one of 2 professional learning delivery approaches:

1. The intervention group – referred to as the '**peer mentoring approach**' – involved an educational leader plus one preschool educator or teacher attending external professional learning ('peer mentors'). Peer mentors were tasked with sharing what they learnt with 2 'nominated mentees' who also worked in the preschool room (though they could also share with any other colleagues).

2. The comparison group – referred to as the '**direct participation approach**' – involved an educational leader and most or all other teachers and educators working in the preschool room ('direct participants') attending external professional learning. Direct participants could share what they learnt with colleagues but weren't required to do so.

The external professional learning program was ALNF's Early Language and Literacy Program (EL&L) and training in ALNF's Early Language and Literacy Development Index (ELLDI) formative assessment tool. This program provides participants with the skills and knowledge to use evidence-based oral language and early literacy practices. A recent evaluation found the EL&L program improved child oral language and early literacy outcomes when extensively adopted within a service (Cloney et al., 2022).

Key findings

- **All educators and teachers, regardless of professional learning approach, demonstrated learning in terms of knowledge and use of evidence-based practices.** Children's oral language and early literacy development outcomes were also similar regardless of professional learning approach (Figure 1a and Figure 1b).

- **Several factors affected the success of peer mentoring.** These factors included managing staffing constraints, allocating time for peer mentoring, having collegially supportive environments, managing the cognitive load placed on peer mentors and selecting appropriate staff for skill and knowledge sharing. Where any of these factors weren't present, they were seen as barriers, especially by the peer mentors tasked with sharing their skills and knowledge (Table 1).

- **The upfront cost and time investment for peer mentoring were lower but the overall time investment was similar to the direct participation approach.** The time needed for peer mentoring was distributed over an extended timeframe, while the time needed for direct participation was an intense, initial block. Therefore, a peer mentoring approach may be a suitable alternative when educational settings can't make an upfront cost or time commitment to train all or most staff (Figure 1c).

Overall, our findings suggest that while peer mentoring requires a high level of planning and support, **peer mentoring is a feasible and promising way to disseminate professional learning so more educators and teachers, and ultimately children, can benefit.**

**Figure 1a:** Use of evidence-based practices
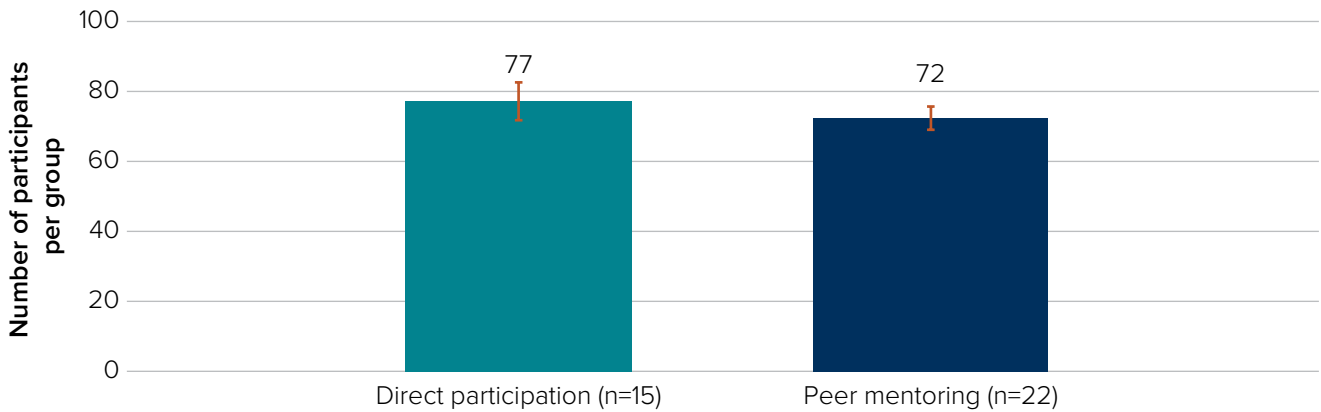
Note: The use of evidence-based oral language and early literacy practices was measured using a self-report rubric. It identifies and measures the use of evidence-based strategies that contribute to quality oral language and early literacy educator practices – particularly those relevant to children aged 3 to 5 years. The scores for each item are added together to give a total score with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 99 with a higher score representing greater use of evidence-based practices.

Figure 1b: Children scoring level 4 or above on the ELLDI
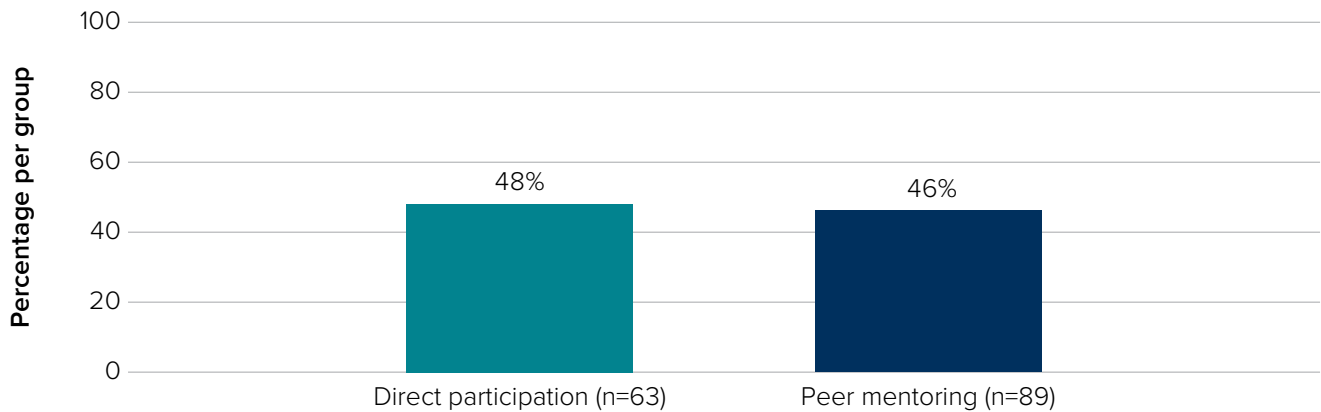
Note: Children's oral language and early literacy were measured using the Early Language and Literacy Developmental Index (ELLDI). A child in ELLDI Level 4 speaks in increasingly complex sentences with an expanding vocabulary, demonstrates inferential comprehension, and is aware of speech sounds in words (for example, the speech sound in the initial position of the word). ELLDI Level 4 contains the skills that are developed in readiness for formal literacy instruction, such as syllabification and speech sound awareness (Phonological Awareness).

Figure 1c: Time in training and mentoring activities
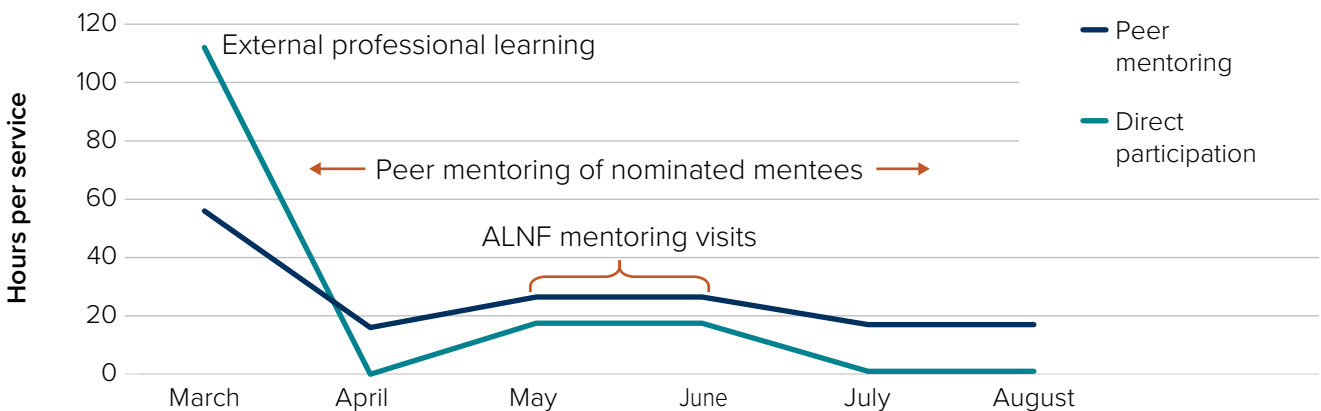
Note: The time in training and mentoring activities does not include time spent implementing the practices they learnt. Thus, while the direct participation approach may not engage in any training or mentoring activities in the second, fifth or sixth month, it is assumed they would be spending time putting into practice what they learnt throughout the delivery period.

Table 1: Enablers of and barriers to a peer mentoring approach to professional learning

Enablers and barriers	Study findings
Time and staffing commitment	Some peer mentors found it challenging to find time in addition to their workloads to share their skills and knowledge with mentees. They indicated that having time set aside for peer mentoring would have been helpful.
Collegially supportive environments	Collaboration was perceived by participants as important for facilitating practice change. This included exchanging experiences in applying new knowledge, brainstorming ways to adapt it to their specific contexts, and supporting each other to share skills and knowledge with mentees. Some peer mentors, however, reported that collaboration was challenging given the responsibility of both learning something new and then passing these teachings on to colleagues, as well as the fact that there weren't many others who also undertook the external training to discuss and consolidate their own learning.
Selecting appropriate staff	Staff with experience in mentoring were more confident and better able to engage in it than those who were new to peer mentoring. Some leaders also considered peer mentoring as part of their role, and so felt better equipped. Peer mentors who had administrative roles or roles that involved minimal time working side-by-side with colleagues had limited opportunity to share skills and knowledge with mentees.

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