



Research Snapshot No. 28

Supporting the inclusion of young children in childcare settings through professional development: perceptions of educators and managers

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What do you need to know?

Inclusion in early childhood involves more than a child being physically present in an early childhood education and care setting. Dionne and colleagues describe inclusion as both a process and an outcome: welcoming diversity, creating a sense of belonging, supporting participation and relationships, and enabling each child to learn and develop with appropriate support.

Educators have a central role in inclusion because inclusive practice happens throughout the day. It is reflected in what educators notice, how they plan, the learning opportunities they create during play and routines, and how they adapt activities, interactions and environments for children with different strengths and needs.

This requires both universal practices that support the whole group and more individualised or specialised support when needed. Rather than separating children into those with and without disability, an inclusive approach recognises that all children have individual developmental profiles and may require different levels or types of support.

Professional development is one strategy for strengthening educators' capability to provide inclusive environments. The background research discussed by the authors suggests that professional learning is more likely to influence practice when it goes beyond theoretical content.

Useful elements may include:

- clear practice objectives;
- demonstrations and practical examples;

- opportunities to apply new knowledge;
- observation of practice;
- feedback and reflection; and
- coaching within the educator's everyday work environment.

In this study, coaching was understood as a collaborative relationship between an educator and a professional with relevant knowledge and experience. The process included identifying needs, developing an action plan, observing practice directly or through video, reflecting together and providing feedback.

This differs from a one-off workshop because learning is revisited while educators are attempting to use it in everyday practice. The context of the study is important. It was conducted in subsidised, non-profit early childhood centres in Quebec, Canada. These centres provide education and care for children from birth to five years. Centres may receive financial assistance to support the inclusion of children with significant and persistent limitations, but individual centres retain substantial responsibility for how inclusion is implemented.

The present study did not set out to determine whether the professional-development program was effective. Instead, it explored what educators and managers perceived had changed after participating in a sustained professional-development process focused on assessment-informed and embedded inclusive practice.

What is this research about?

The study explored the following research question:

What changes in educational practices do childcare educators and managers perceive following one year of professional development?

The researchers specifically sought participants' perspectives on:

- the learning and skills they believed they had developed;
- the professional development and coaching they received; and
- their experience using the French version of the Assessment, Evaluation and Programming System, Third Edition, known as AEPS-3 or ÉIS-3.

The study formed part of a larger seven-year action-research partnership involving 19 organisations in Quebec. The broader project aims to develop, implement and evaluate a model that supports children's holistic development in inclusive childcare settings.

Examining the perspectives of both educators and managers was important because inclusive practice does not depend only on an individual educator's knowledge. It may also be influenced by leadership, organisational expectations, staffing, time, resources and the extent to which inclusion is understood as a shared responsibility.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used a qualitative study design to examine participants' perceptions at the end of the professional-development year.

Setting and participants

Eight subsidised, non-profit early childhood centres from three regions of Quebec participated. One centre was in an urban area and seven were located in small or medium-sized towns. Selection also considered variation in socioeconomic and multicultural contexts.

To participate, a centre had to:

- be recognised within Quebec's public early childhood-centre network;
- be available for both educator and manager coaching; and
- have a participating group that included a child with significant and persistent limitations who qualified for ministry financial support.

Sixteen educators and eight managers participated in the broader project. Fourteen educators and six managers completed the end-of-year interviews analysed in this paper. All participating educators were women and met Quebec's training requirements. Their experience ranged from fewer than five years to more than 25 years. Managers had between two and 24 years of experience.

Each of the 16 participating educator groups included a child aged three to five years with identified developmental needs. Across the groups, children had autism, global developmental delay, language or cognitive difficulties, combined language and sensory difficulties, or motor difficulties.

The children provided the context for the professional development, but they were not research participants whose outcomes were measured in this study.

The professional-development process

Professional development took place over 10 months, from September to June. It combined short online training with repeated, individualised coaching.

Two online modules, totalling three hours, introduced:

- the French AEPS-3/ÉIS-3, a curriculum-based system that connects assessment, goal setting, intervention and progress monitoring across developmental areas; and
- Activity-Based Intervention, which embeds learning opportunities within children's ordinary activities and routines.

Educators received an average of six individual coaching sessions, each lasting approximately two hours.

Coaching included:

- revisiting knowledge introduced through the online training;
- discussing educators' roles and current practices;
- using video of routines or free play to examine what educators noticed and the strategies they used;
- considering children's developmental profiles and appropriate learning opportunities;
- reflecting on how the same everyday activity could be adjusted for children with different strengths and needs; and
- reviewing an action plan, the educator's objectives and how these would be implemented.

Managers received a parallel coaching process focused on leadership and supporting educators. These sessions explored managers' concerns, reflected on their leadership practices, identified strategies and organisational conditions that could support inclusion, and reviewed progress against an action plan.

Coaching was provided by two professionals with backgrounds in education and psychology and experience in educational settings.

Data collection and analysis

In June 2023, the coaching professionals conducted individual semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 75 minutes.

The interviews explored:

- participants' learning;
- skills they believed they had developed;
- their experience of the AEPS-3/ÉIS-3;
- facilitators and barriers to using the approach;
- their experience of professional support;
- advice they would give future users;
- personal characteristics that helped them participate; and
- what they expected to carry into their future inclusive practice.

The interviewers took notes and checked their understanding of participants' responses during the discussion. Field notes had also been recorded following coaching meetings.

The principal investigator conducted a thematic content analysis of the interview material and field notes. The coaches reviewed the thematic summaries to check that they represented participants' ideas. The researchers also presented the analysis of managers' accounts to the managers to validate their understanding.

What did the researchers find?

The findings describe what educators and managers reported after participating in the program. They should not be interpreted as independent evidence that educator practice or child outcomes changed.

Educators connected observation more closely with planning

Educators reported becoming more precise in observing children's skills and more confident in identifying developmental sequences. They described using clearer observation targets and breaking development into smaller steps so they could identify an achievable next challenge for each child.

Educators said that individual and group developmental profiles helped them decide what opportunities to offer, make proactive adjustments and use the same activity differently for children with different strengths and needs.

They also described paying more attention to learning opportunities within everyday routines, activities and free play, rather than relying only on separate or specifically planned learning activities.

Educators described a broader understanding of difference and inclusion

Several educators described moving away from seeing one particular child as “the child who is different”. Instead, they described every child as having a distinct developmental profile across different areas.

Educators reported:

- greater awareness of their own educational choices and influence;
- a stronger vocabulary for discussing child development;
- increased confidence in explaining their educational decisions; and
- a greater sense of competence and professionalism.

The researchers interpreted these accounts as indicating that the professional-development process supported educators to think about individualising educational opportunities for all children, with or without an identified disability.

The assessment system was useful but time intensive

Educators reported that the AEPS-3/ÉIS-3 helped them:

- organise their observations;
- monitor children’s development;
- prepare developmental profiles;
- identify realistic next learning opportunities; and
- connect assessment information with planning.

Managers valued the detail of the developmental information and believed the assessment framework supported a shared language between educators and professionals from other disciplines.

However, educators and managers also identified challenges. Some of the terminology and assessment criteria were unfamiliar or difficult to interpret. Learning and completing the assessment required considerable time.

Managers emphasised that educators needed support and protected time so that using the assessment system did not add to their workload without adequate resourcing.

Educators particularly valued coaching and reflective discussion

All educators described the professional development positively. Although they found the online training useful, they regarded the discussions with coaches as the most significant component.

They valued:

- regular contact with the coach;
- support tailored to their own needs;
- opportunities to discuss real situations;
- reflection on their existing practice;
- feedback about their strengths; and
- assistance to identify possible improvements.

Educators associated coaching with increased confidence and a stronger sense of competence.

Video feedback initially felt intimidating for some educators. However, participants described it as particularly useful for recognising things they were already doing well and identifying opportunities to adjust their practice. Their comments highlighted the importance of trust, respect and psychological safety within the coaching relationship.

The study did not compare coaching with training alone, so it cannot establish that coaching was more effective. It demonstrates that these participants perceived the coaching conversations as especially valuable.

Managers saw leadership and shared responsibility as essential

Managers described inclusion as a whole-service responsibility requiring organisational commitment, appropriate policies, communication and practical support.

They identified several conditions that could enable or constrain inclusive practice, including:

- staffing;
- child-to-educator ratios;
- access to additional educators;
- protected time;
- resources; and
- a shared understanding of inclusion across the service.

Managers described their leadership role as involving:

- clearly communicating what was expected and why;
- modelling commitment to inclusion;
- supporting and motivating educators;
- monitoring progress;
- helping staff solve problems;
- working with external partners; and
- developing a shared organisational vision.

Managers also valued receiving coaching themselves. They said coaching reduced their sense of isolation, helped them reflect on their leadership and modelled a collaborative approach they could use when supporting educators.

One manager described this shift as learning to work “with” educators rather than “for” them.

Managers perceived that repeated coaching helped educators maintain motivation, develop confidence and share knowledge with colleagues. However, the study did not independently examine whether learning spread to other educators or became embedded across each centre.

How can you use this research?

The following are practice implications informed by participants’ experiences. They are not tested conclusions about the effectiveness of the program.

Treat professional learning as an implementation process

A workshop can introduce knowledge, but educators in this study placed particular value on what happened afterwards: applying ideas, examining their practice, receiving feedback and revisiting an action plan over time.

For ECI practitioners and organisations supporting ECEC services, this suggests that professional learning should address how knowledge will be transferred into everyday practice.

Useful questions include:

- What specific practice is the educator trying to implement?
- Where will it fit within existing play, routines and group experiences?
- What will the educator observe to understand whether it is useful?
- What support or resources will be required?
- When will there be an opportunity to reflect, receive feedback and refine the approach?

Connect observation with meaningful action

Participants valued assessment information when it helped them understand children's strengths, current development and achievable next learning opportunities. Assessment should not become an administrative endpoint.

ECI practitioners can work alongside educators to strengthen the connection between observation and action by:

- observing children within natural contexts;
- making sense of what is observed together;
- identifying meaningful and achievable priorities;
- selecting strategies that fit the ECEC environment; and
- embedding opportunities into the child's ordinary day.

The aim should be to strengthen educators' capability and decision-making, rather than create ongoing dependence on an external practitioner.

Embed inclusion within everyday ECEC practice

The professional-development model focused on routines, free play and ordinary group activities. This is consistent with understanding inclusion as participation and belonging throughout the day, rather than as a separate program delivered to an individual child.

Educators and ECI practitioners can consider how the same activity might provide:

- different ways to participate;
- different levels of challenge;
- environmental or interactional supports;
- additional opportunities for practice; and
- individualised support when required.

A strong whole-group foundation and individualised adjustments can coexist.

Make coaching collaborative, reflective and strengths based

Participants valued coaching that responded to their own goals and helped them recognise what they were already doing well.

Coaching is therefore more than providing advice or recommendations. It can involve:

- jointly identifying a focus for practice;
- shared observation;
- reflective questions;
- feedback linked to an agreed objective;
- collaborative action planning; and
- follow-up to review what occurred.

Video may support reflection when there is informed consent, a clear purpose, appropriate privacy and data protections, and an established climate of trust and psychological safety.

Include managers and organisational conditions

The findings suggest that educator capability cannot be considered solely an individual educator responsibility. Managers identified vision, policy, staffing, protected time, communication and follow-through as relevant to implementation.

Professional-development providers and ECI practitioners should consider involving ECEC managers and educational leaders from the beginning. An educator may understand a practice but remain unable to implement it when workforce instability, time, ratios, competing requirements or organisational expectations work against it.

Build shared responsibility across disciplines and settings

Managers believed that a common developmental framework supported communication between educators and specialist professionals.

For multidisciplinary ECI teams, this points towards the value of:

- shared language;
- jointly understood priorities;
- collaborative planning;
- clearly defined roles; and
- recommendations that can be integrated into the child's everyday ECEC experience.

External expertise should add to the capability of the setting while preserving educators' central role in children's daily learning and participation. Inclusion remains a shared responsibility across educators, leaders, families, ECI practitioners and broader systems.

Plan for workload and sustainability

The assessment system was experienced as useful but demanding. Any similar approach requires realistic planning for:

- protected educator time;
- staged learning;
- access to coaching;
- managerial support;
- workforce capacity; and
- alignment with existing curriculum, planning and documentation requirements.

The model involved approximately 12 hours of individual coaching for each educator, in addition to online training, assessment, practice, video and action-planning activities. Services considering a comparable model should be explicit about the resources required rather than describing it as a brief training package.

How does this research align with the Framework?

This study was conducted in Canada and was not designed around Australia's National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention. However, several elements are consistent with the Framework's principles and guidance for collaboration between early childhood educators and ECI practitioners.

Ecologically-based and Everyday Settings

The professional-development approach focused on children's participation and learning within their usual childcare environment. Educators were supported to use routines, free play and ordinary group activities as opportunities for learning rather than relying primarily on separate intervention activities.

This is consistent with the Framework's emphasis on supporting children in the everyday settings where they learn, play and develop.

Participation

The article describes inclusion as extending beyond physical placement to participation, belonging, relationships, friendships, development and learning.

The professional-development model encouraged educators to adjust everyday activities and create achievable learning opportunities for children with different developmental profiles. However, children's participation and belonging were not directly measured in the study.

Strengths-based

Coaching helped educators recognise their existing capabilities and identify children's current skills and achievable next steps. Participants valued feedback that acknowledged what they were already doing well while supporting further development.

This is consistent with building on the strengths, capabilities and resources of children and the adults who support them.

Diversity-affirming

Educators described moving away from viewing one child as "different" and towards recognising developmental variability across all children.

This broadly aligns with diversity-affirming practice and the view that difference should be welcomed rather than treated primarily as a deficit. The study did not, however, closely examine cultural, linguistic, identity or intersectional dimensions of diversity.

Evidence-informed and Outcomes-focused

The program connected curriculum-based assessment with goal selection, intervention planning and progress monitoring. Educators were encouraged to use information about children's development to identify achievable next learning opportunities.

This reflects evidence-informed and outcomes-focused decision-making. However, the study itself did not measure implementation fidelity, observed changes in practice or outcomes for children and families.

Community-focused and Capability Building

The model aimed to increase the capability of educators and managers within the childcare setting, rather than positioning inclusion as the responsibility of an external specialist.

Managers also described the potential for educators to share learning with colleagues. This suggests a possible pathway towards broader organisational capability, although the study did not demonstrate that whole-setting change occurred.

Collaborative Practice

The findings support collaboration between educators, managers, coaches and other professionals. Managers believed that a common assessment framework helped establish a shared language with professionals from different disciplines.

This aligns with the Framework's expectation that early childhood educators, ECI practitioners, families and other services work together with clear and complementary roles.

Where to from here?

This study provides a useful account of how educators and managers experienced a sustained professional-development process in real childcare settings.

Its strengths include:

- professional development delivered over 10 months;
- application within participants' everyday work;
- attention to both educators and managers;
- repeated coaching rather than training alone; and
- direct accounts from professionals working in groups that included children with identified developmental needs.

The authors also acknowledged several limitations.

The sample was small and limited to eight subsidised early childhood centres in Quebec. Participants volunteered and may already have been relatively interested in or supportive of inclusion.

The coaches conducted the interviews. Because participants were evaluating the support directly with the people who had provided it, they may have felt pressure to respond positively. The established relationships may also have supported more open discussion, but the possibility of socially desirable responses remains important.

The authors recommend evaluating the approach across a wider range of childcare settings and countries.

Several additional methodological cautions matter when interpreting the findings:

- The study examined participants' perceptions at the end of the program.
- There were no baseline interviews, independent observations or comparison group.
- Interview responses appear to have been documented through interviewer notes rather than audio-recorded verbatim transcripts.
- The principal investigator conducted the thematic analysis. The paper reports review by coaches and validation with managers, but provides limited detail about independent coding, researcher reflexivity or how alternative interpretations were considered.
- The program combined an assessment system, online learning, coaching, video feedback, reflection and action planning. The study cannot determine which components were necessary or how much support was sufficient.

Most importantly, the study did not measure:

- actual changes in educator behaviour or practice;
- whether educators implemented the practices accurately or consistently;
- implementation fidelity;
- children's participation, belonging, relationships, learning or development;
- family experiences or outcomes;
- whether learning spread to other educators; or
- whether perceived changes were sustained after coaching ended.

The findings should therefore be understood as evidence of perceived relevance, acceptability and practice change.

Future research should combine educator and manager perspectives with independent observation of practice.

It should examine:

- implementation fidelity;
- the contribution of different program components;
- the amount and duration of coaching required;
- whether changes are sustained after coaching finishes;
- whether learning extends beyond directly coached educators;
- the organisational conditions needed to maintain change;
- the cost and feasibility of implementation; and
- outcomes relating to children's participation, belonging, relationships, learning and development.

Future studies should also include the perspectives of children and families.

The Canadian context must be considered when translating the findings. Quebec's childcare system, funding arrangements, professional roles and workforce conditions differ from those operating in Australia. Australian research is needed to investigate whether a comparable

professional-development and coaching model is feasible, effective and sustainable within local ECEC and ECI systems.

About the researchers

The research team was based in the Department of Psychoeducation at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières in Quebec, Canada.

All six authors were affiliated with the university's UNESCO Chair in Early Childhood and Inclusive Early Intervention. Several authors were also affiliated with a Quebec research team investigating the factors that support quality inclusion in early childhood.

This institutional context is directly connected with the study's focus on inclusive early childhood environments, educator capability, professional development and implementation. The article was published in *Frontiers in Education* on 19 March 2025. It is publicly available under a Creative Commons Attribution licence.

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This Research Snapshot was prepared by Talia Pulis, PRECI Board Director, CEO of Emble Allied Health and Certified Practising Speech Pathologist.

In the spirit of reconciliation PRECI acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.