

# LINC-ing the Gap between Aspirations and Realities of CPD in the Early Years Sector

The influence of learning on educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion

## Introduction

The Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme was introduced as part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2016 to support children's inclusion and meaningful participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC). LINC would support educators to develop the knowledge and skills required to lead inclusive practice and pedagogy in early years settings. On completion, learners are awarded a level 6 certificate which qualifies them as a room leader who can take on the leadership role of inclusion coordinator (INCO) in their setting.

This article, based on a doctoral research study, considers the influence of engaging with the LINC programme on educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion. It uses a hermeneutic lens acknowledging the world of those working in the early years sector.

Heidegger (1929) wrote that a phenomenon can only be truly understood through *Dasein* ('being' or 'existence'). He presented *Dasein* as related to individuals and their different situations. His work underpins the methodology for this study, which emphasises the social dimensions of *Dasein*: how one perceives oneself in society, and how this self-perception affects the phenomenon. Heidegger also considered the importance of moods and the potential of our emotions to influence life experiences. This application of understanding *Dasein* is particularly relevant to the study of educators' experiences in the context of their professions (Skehill, 2022).

Heidegger's philosophy aligns with Guskey's (2002) levels of evaluation in thinking about CPD in education and the



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The paper is drawn from a PhD study on Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) and how engagement in this continuing professional development (CPD) programme influences early years educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion. It considers the contextual reality of the sector and addresses challenges to inclusive practice. It looks at Guskey's (2002) evaluation of CPD in education and how learning from such programmes can be adapted and considered in relation to child voice and participation in settings and schools.

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factors that influence participants' reactions to and learning from a programme. Owing to the fragmented nature of ECEC qualifications and course content (DCEDIY, 2021; Nutbrown, 2021), CPD has the potential to develop professional practice and provide a mark of learner achievement. Indeed, participation in CPD is the most consistent indicator of quality in child development and learning (OECD, 2019). It is also linked to staff retention by enhancing professional identity and improving career satisfaction. But such learning experiences must be incentivised and linked to pay and conditions.

Mooney-Simmie and Murphy (2021) consider the professional role of educators in Ireland from a feminist perspective, with competing entities of power and education underpinning policy. They highlight challenges for the predominantly female workforce engaging in CPD: lack of time, accessibility, and no wage increase for participation. While LINC offers the flexibility of blended learning and the professional title of INCO on completion, Mooney-Simmie and Murphy criticise such CPD as benefiting providers rather than learners, perpetuating the potential for exploitation in a childcare business model.

## Making a difference

There are renewed government commitments to improving quality in ECEC through formal and informal CPD initiatives, which are included alongside aspirations for developing the terms and conditions of the educator role (DCEDIY, 2021). In considering engagement with LINC in this context, Guskey (2002) advises that one must plan backward – 'starting where you want to end and then working back' (p.50). Can LINC achieve the learning outcome of empowering INCOs to enhance the inclusion of all children?

Braun and Clarke (2022) ask the important 'so what?' question in qualitative research: What can one take from this study that might make a difference to practice and policy? First and foremost is the recognition that there are different understandings and perceptions of inclusion that depend on educators' perspectives and experiences (Gadamer, 2004). Through their stories as educators, and in the broader societal context as parents, learners, colleagues, and carers, they reveal how their personal stories from these different biographical lenses (Brookfield, 2017) influenced their engagement with and interpretation of the learning from LINC.

The findings from this study show features of an inclusive culture where the pedagogical approach is underpinned by respectful regard for the rights of each child. Respectful relationships are built through a nurturing pedagogy in an inclusive environment. This child-centred approach is evident in the various interpretations of inclusion, which are not necessarily led by professional knowledge but rather a kindness that underpins pedagogy. The LINC

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programme renewed participants' empathy, creating a shift in perspective: they realised the importance of their role in facilitating participation in the group. Inclusive environments and considered resources and routines all indicated the positive impact of learning from LINC during field visits.

As well as influencing how participants engaged with children in a more nurturing way, LINC also helped them work collaboratively with parents. One educator said LINC 'made me more aware' of communicating effectively and empathically with parents on supporting children's belonging in the setting. After the programme, participants articulated a renewed awareness of the need for relational pedagogy to guide their work with families as well as children. There was an evident shift towards reflective practice in the conversations and considerations of new ideas in the module content.

The findings show how inclusion is facilitated by seeking out and developing positive relationships with important people in the child's life. Effective communication, and the confidence to initiate it, are presented as key responsibilities of the educator in supporting participation. While there were positive examples of collaboration with early years specialists and early intervention teams, there was minimal evidence of collaboration with local primary schools to support transitions from one setting to another, despite the emphasis on this in the LINC programme content.

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### Leadership on inclusion

Findings indicate that the professional identity of leaders in early years settings directly influences the development of an inclusive culture. Personal recognition of the importance of their role is overshadowed by frustration at having to assert their professional worth. Engagement with LINC illustrated leaders' capacity to lead and implement change, and consequently the challenges of doing so, to promote the inclusion of all children.

A leadership role in any organisation means taking responsibility for guiding the team and setting standards of practice. Leaders in early years settings need to have the qualifications, knowledge base, and skills to take on this role (Skehill, 2021). LINC graduates qualify with the title of inclusion coordinator (INCO) but not necessarily with the 'organisational support and change' (Guskey, 2002, p.50) to make this work in settings. While the potential for positive change and development is evidenced through participants' stories, the practicality of leading inclusion is dependent on one's role in the setting and on one's engagement with the CPD.

Respondents from the AIM review (DCYA, 2019) indicated similar challenges in how the learning from LINC could contribute to an inclusive culture. On a practical level, assuming one has acquired new knowledge about inclusive

practice, there is the challenge of finding time and space in the daily routine to share this learning with the team. This is further complicated when the INCO is not in a leadership position and lacks supporting resources. Participants also worried about how the additional duties of INCO could be incorporated with existing responsibilities as an educator.

The contextual reality of precarious funding, staff shortages, inconsistent quality, inspection processes, and lack of value in the sector (Urban, 2022) is balancing against educators' enthusiasm for new learning, feeling valued by children and families, and knowing the difference one might make in their lives. Amidst change with the new workforce plan for the sector (DCEDIY, 2021), the findings support previous research (Oke et al., 2019) showing the impact of this reality on educators and the children they work with.

## A sector led from within

In view of Guskey's (2002) criteria for effective CPD experiences, this study concurs with the initial review of the AIM (DCYA, 2019), which illustrates how LINC has influenced practice in settings. In response to challenges identified, the programme might be extended to include all educators to bridge any gap in qualifications and knowledge, adapting the format as appropriate and relevant to staff needs. Blanchard et al. (2018) argue for purposeful CPD as relevant to the professional role of adults working with children, with consideration of qualification and knowledge to support understanding of differing perspectives of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the setting.

While this is the rationale for the additional CPD element of LINC, extending access to all educators rather than limiting it to the INCO would facilitate 'cascading of learning' to the team in line with the responsibilities of the role. There might be consideration of shared learning across initial teacher education in modules pertaining to inclusion, children's rights, playful pedagogies, supporting transitions, and leading learning. As well as the value of modular content, a collegial regard between early years educators and primary teachers would lay a foundation for collaboration and alignment to support the inclusion of all.

There is no doubt of the quality of learning in the LINC programme, and its worth is more than a sticking plaster on a damaged sector. We need a sector led from within, where confident, skilful, knowledgeable educators can take on leadership roles to support children's meaningful participation. Ironically, the solution lies in embracing inclusion of the early years sector within the education continuum, to establish and affirm the professional role of educators.

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