

Challenging Behaviors Text Study

Strengthening Relationship-Based Approaches to Challenging Behavior

Performance period 1/2025–11/2025

Professional learning focused on challenging behavior is a critical component of early childhood system building, particularly in supporting educators to create inclusive, responsive, and emotionally supportive learning environments. Challenging behavior remains one of the most frequently cited concerns among early childhood educators and is a leading contributor to suspension and expulsion in early learning settings. Effective professional learning in this area must move beyond one-time workshops to support sustained reflection, shared language, and practical application grounded in relationship-based and trauma-informed practice.

The **Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior text study** was developed by the Maine Department of Education (DOE) in response to sustained requests from the field for professional learning that supports educators in understanding, preventing, and responding to challenging behaviors in developmentally appropriate ways. Designed as a facilitated, discussion-based book study using *Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior* (NAEYC, 2024), the initiative emphasized peer learning, guided reflection, and application to real classroom contexts. The format supported educators in developing an understanding of behavior as communication and strengthening their reflective practice.

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** conducted in fall 2025 as part of Maine’s Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) program. Drawing on exit tickets, follow-up outreach, interviews with state leads, and implementation documentation, the report examines the Challenging Behavior Text Study with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including changes in educator understanding and early application of relationship-based and trauma-informed approaches to behavior.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including shared learning across roles and some settings within Maine’s mixed-delivery system.
- **System building**, including contributions to shared language, professional norms, and informal connections across early childhood settings.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation and engagement, as well as barriers identified by participants.

Data sources for this report include registration and participation records; educator exit tickets collected during each session across four cohorts; follow-up outreach (survey) to participants after the conclusion of the text study; and interviews and group conversations with state initiative leads regarding design, implementation, and perceived impact.

The text study was designed as a facilitated, discussion-based professional learning experience that emphasized reflection, peer exchange, and application to practice rather than lecture-style delivery. Initiative leads described the intent as offering learning “in a different way”—one that allowed educators to engage with real classroom situations, test ideas between sessions, and learn from colleagues across roles and settings.

Implementation occurred across four cohorts offered in early winter, spring, and fall 2025, with participation from educators across public schools, Head Start programs, and community-based early child care settings. The cohorts included classroom teachers, special education staff, educational technicians, early childhood educators, program directors, and administrators.

Sessions were scheduled to align with the end of the school day and to minimize conflicts with other professional learning opportunities. In response to demand and participant feedback, the implementation team made adjustments over time, including offering simultaneous sessions and later reducing cohort size to strengthen interaction and discussion. These adaptations reinforced the initiative’s emphasis on quality of engagement over scale and informed refinements to the delivery model.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR TEXT STUDY FEATURES

Approximately **64 educators** participated during the grant period.

Four facilitated discussion-based cohorts offered statewide using *Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior* (NAEYC).

Combination of **assigned readings, small-group breakout discussions, and whole-group synthesis.**

Emphasis on **guided reflection, peer learning, and application to real classroom contexts.**

Participation from **public schools (47), Head Start (4) and community-based early childhood programs (14).**

Virtual sessions scheduled from 3:30–4:30 p.m.

Brief exit tickets collected at each session to **inform continuous improvement.**

Cohort sizes adjusted over time to support interaction and peer learning.

No cost to participants; books and materials provided through PDG funding.

What was the impact of the text study on educators’ understanding of challenging behavior?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported professional learning initiatives is essential to assessing whether investments are achieving intended outcomes and supporting meaningful change in educator practice. This section examines the impact of the Challenging Behavior Text Study, focusing on evidence of changes in educators’ understanding, reflective practice, and early application of relationship-based and trauma-informed approaches to behavior.

Initiative leads identified several **intended outcomes** for the text study, focused primarily on educator learning and early changes in practice:

- **Reframing children’s behavior** as communication, rather than defiance or “bad behavior.”
- Increased use of trauma-informed, relationship-based approaches to guidance and behavior support.
- **Strengthened adult reflection and self-regulation** in response to challenging behavior.
- **Development of peer networks** that support sharing strategies across roles and early childhood settings.
- **Long-term contribution to reductions** in suspension and expulsion, through strengthened preventive classroom practices.

While reductions in exclusionary discipline were described as a **long-term aspiration**, the initiative's immediate focus was to build educators' understanding, support reflective practice, and strengthen preventive approaches to behavior.

Shifts in Educator Understanding

Data from session exit tickets, follow-up outreach, and interviews indicate that the Challenging Behavior Text Study contributed to **shifts in educators’ understanding of challenging behavior and their role in responding to it**. According to **initiative leads**, the primary impact of the text study was not the introduction of new techniques, but a reframing of how educators interpret behavior and reflect on their own responses in classroom situations.

Across cohorts, educators frequently described a shift away from viewing challenging behavior as something to manage or control, toward understanding it **as meaningful communication that reflects children’s needs, experiences, and developmental stages**. Many reflections highlighted increased awareness of adult tone, assumptions, and self-regulation, underscoring the adult’s role in shaping children’s behavioral experiences.

“We have to calm ourselves first before we can help kids calm down.”
(Text study participant)

“Behaviors are not always what they appear. Understanding the ‘why’ behind behavior changes how we respond.” (Text study participant)

Together, these reflections and others indicate **meaningful conceptual learning and the development of a shared language** around behavior that emphasizes connection, prevention, and reflective practice rather than reactive responses.

Early Changes in Educator Practice

In addition to conceptual shifts, educators identified **concrete ways they intended to apply ideas from the text** study in their daily work. Across **260 coded statements** about intended practice, educators most frequently described plans to:

- Increase use of visual supports (27%)
- Apply preventive and supportive guidance strategies (24%)

- Strengthen relationships with children and families (20%)
- Improve transitions and routines (14%)
- Adjust the classroom environment (13%)

A smaller but meaningful subset of participants described **changes already underway during the study**. These early applications included printing and using visual supports, slowing adult responses to challenging behavior, sharing materials with colleagues, and applying guidance frameworks more intentionally in classroom settings.

“I have already made copies of the five-step reflective cycle¹ and shared them with my coworkers.” (Text study participant)

Reflective Cycle Used by Educators

Educators described using a structured reflective process to guide their responses to challenging behavior. While specific tools varied by setting, the process typically involved:

1. Pausing to observe behavior without immediate reaction.
2. Reflecting on underlying needs, triggers, and developmental factors.
3. Adjusting the adult response, with attention to tone and self-regulation.
4. Applying preventive and relationship-based strategies (e.g., visual supports, routines, connection).
5. Reviewing and refining responses based on children’s cues and outcomes.

This process supports intentional, reflective responses to behavior rather than reactive or punitive approaches.

Follow-up outreach conducted shortly after the conclusion of the text study provided additional evidence of **early application beyond the sessions themselves**. Educators reported continued use of strategies introduced during the study and described observing improvements in classroom climate and children’s responses. Since data collection occurred shortly after participation, findings reflect early indicators of learning and practice change, rather than sustained implementation or child-level outcomes.

Several educators also described **sharing materials or strategies with colleagues or administrators**. While sharing does not, in itself, indicate learning, it is a powerful indicator of the value participants assign to the practices and to the relevance and usefulness of book study resources. Sharing also provided additional educators with access to evidence-based resources on a **high-interest, practice-relevant topic**.

A small number of respondents described **early observations of changes in children’s behavior** when applying these strategies. These observations were reported by **six of seven respondents** who participated in follow-up outreach and were described as emerging rather than sustained changes.

¹The ‘5-step reflective cycle’ referenced here comes from Claire D. Vallotton et al.’s guidance framework for interpreting and responding to young children’s behavior, reprinted in *Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior* (Wahman & Lee, 2024)

“By increasing positive relationships for students struggling with behavior and implementing consistent positive interventions, we have seen a decrease in negative behavior.” (Text study participant)

“Children have started to independently use the skills taught.”
(Text study participant)

Activities That Were Most Influential in Changing Practice

Participants consistently identified the **text study's discussion-based design** as central to their learning. **Small-group breakout discussions** were the most frequently cited element supporting engagement, allowing educators to share experiences, ask questions, and explore how ideas applied across different roles and settings.

Educators also responded positively to the **overall structure and flow of the sessions**, including beginning and ending together as a whole group, **predictable routines**, and **clear facilitation**. The combination of **assigned reading, peer discussion, and intentional application between sessions** supported deeper reflection than traditional workshop formats.

Over time, **adjustments to cohort size** further strengthened the experience. Initiative leads reported **that smaller cohorts—typically 15-20 participants**—supported more balanced participation and richer discussion, reinforcing the importance of **quality interaction over scale** in discussion-based professional learning.

How did the text study support collaboration and a shared understanding across the early childhood system?

In addition to supporting individual educator learning, the text study operated within Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system, where shared understanding and communication across roles and settings are essential. The following section describes how the initiative supported collaboration and shared understanding among public school staff, Head Start, and community-based early childhood programs. The text study supported a **common language around behavior and guidance** and reinforced **shared responsibility** for supporting young children and families.

Initiative leads described the initiative as helping **to reframe conversations about behavior away from children's deficits and toward adults' responsibility** for creating supportive environments. As one initiative lead noted, “the behaviors aren't necessarily challenging for the children, they're challenging for the adults.” This reframing closely aligns with the themes that educators emphasized in exit-ticket reflections and discussions.

Initiative leads also reported that some educators reached out for additional guidance after participating, suggesting that the initiative strengthened **ongoing relationships and expanded access to support beyond the sessions**.

How has the text study contributed to system building, and will it continue to do so?

In addition to influencing educator learning and practice, PDG-supported initiatives are examined for their contributions to broader system conditions, including **shared understanding, alignment, and access to guidance** across Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system. For discussion-based professional learning initiatives, system-building contributions are most often reflected in **relational and informational connections** rather than formal structures or policy changes.

Initiative leads described the text study as contributing to early system-building efforts **by strengthening relationships across sectors, reinforcing a shared language around behavior and positive supports, and increasing access to state-level guidance and resources**. These contributions reflect strengthened connections and shared understanding, rather than formal system structures or policy changes, and represent an effective way to engage a broader set of educators in this work by sharing evidence-based resources.

Looking ahead, initiative leads expressed a **clear intention to continue offering discussion-based professional learning opportunities focused on challenging behavior**, though on a reduced scale and with reduced capacity if PDG funding is not sustained. They emphasized that while staffing levels and frequency may change, the relationships built through the work and the shared understanding fostered among educators are durable outcomes that are likely to continue influencing practice.

Several implementation lessons also emerged. **Smaller cohorts** supported stronger engagement, and **predictable session structures** helped educators feel comfortable participating. While challenges such as book availability, scheduling across sectors, and occasional technology issues arose, many were addressed through adjustments to pacing, cohort size, and confirmation processes.

In what ways did the design of the text study support participation and access?

Supports and access for the Challenging Behavior Text Study were primarily shaped by design choices intended to reduce barriers to participation and support consistent engagement. **Virtual delivery and end-of-school-day scheduling** supported access for many educators, though these choices aligned more closely with public school schedules than with those of community-based early childhood programs. The table below shows the breakdown of participants in public schools, Head Start, and community early childhood programs by Maine's five state regions, based on registration data.

Table 1. Regional Representation of Book Study Participants (N=65)

Maine Region	Public School Participants	Head Start Participants	Community EC Programs	Total
Southern Maine	28	2	10	40
Midcoast	9	1	1	11
Central / Western Maine	6	0	1	7
Downeast	3	0	1	4
Northern / Aroostook	1	1	1	3
CDS (Statewide)	—	—	—	1

Eighteen of the 65 participants (28%) were from community-based early childhood programs (14) or Head Start (4), indicating cross-sector participation within a cohort composition weighted toward public-school educators, with particularly low participation from Maine's Head Start programs. A range of factors could influence participation across settings—including staffing patterns, daily schedules, the availability of coverage or substitutes, and how information about the opportunity reached different sectors. These conditions vary widely across early childhood programs and may have affected participation in ways not fully visible in the available data, including the limited Head Start participation. Notably, participation patterns in the final cohort differed from earlier groups, with three of the six participants coming from community-based programs and three from the public school. The reasons for this shift are not clear from available information. Session timing remained consistent across cohorts.

The facilitated, discussion-based format encouraged participation without requiring prior expertise or specialized materials. Initiative leads and participants identified **cohort size, predictable session routines, and clear facilitation** as particularly important for supporting engagement. While some logistical challenges emerged—including book availability, scheduling across sectors, and occasional technology issues—these were addressed through adjustments to pacing, cohort size, and confirmation processes, except for scheduling across sectors.

Lessons Learned

- **Discussion-based formats are central to participant learning.** Participants identified small-group breakout discussions as the most influential element of the text study, and initiative leads reported that smaller cohorts of 15–20 produced more balanced participation and richer exchange than larger groups.
- **Reframing behavior as communication shifts educators' orientation.** Across cohorts, the most frequently reported change was in educators' interpretation of children's behavior. Early evidence suggests this reframing influenced both immediate responses and longer-term planning.
- **Structured professional learning can reach across the mixed-delivery system when scheduling and format reduce participation barriers.** Virtual delivery and end-of-day scheduling supported broad access, though participation during the performance period was weighted toward public school educators, with lower representation from Head Start and community-based programs.
- **Informal sharing is a meaningful indicator of perceived value.** Participants described sharing materials, strategies, and frameworks with colleagues and administrators beyond the sessions. While sharing does not constitute evidence of learning transfer, it suggests that educators found the content relevant and applicable.

Summary

Across four cohorts, the Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior text study engaged 65 educators from public schools, community-based programs, and Head Start in a structured, discussion-based learning series. Educators identified 260 intended practice changes, most frequently describing plans to increase use of visual supports, apply preventive guidance strategies, and strengthen relationships with children and families. While child-level outcomes were not measured, the text study strengthened relationships across sectors, built shared language around behavior as communication, and expanded access to evidence-based resources.