

Inclusionary Practices

Building Educator Capacity for Inclusive Practice Across Maine's Early Childhood System

Performance period 04/2024–12/2025

Professional development focused on inclusive practice is a critical component of early childhood system building, particularly as Maine continues to strengthen its mixed-delivery system¹ and expand access to learning environments that support all children. Educators across settings—including public schools, Head Start programs, and community-based early childhood programs—are called upon to serve children with diverse learning needs, cultural backgrounds, and developmental profiles. Effective inclusion requires more than awareness of special education processes; it depends on shared understanding of inclusive principles, reflective practice, and shared responsibility for implementing practical strategies that support participation, belonging, and learning for all children.

To support this work, a set of **inclusion-focused professional learning opportunities** was developed and offered through Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R). Designed and implemented by the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN), in collaboration with the Maine Department of Education (DOE) and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Child and Family Services, the initiative provided multiple learning pathways at no cost to early childhood educators. The offerings were intentionally structured to vary in intensity and time commitment, allowing educators to engage at different entry points while building toward a shared foundation of inclusive practice across Maine's early childhood system.

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 participation records, educator feedback, interviews with initiative leads, and implementation documentation, the report examines the Inclusive Education Professional Growth Opportunities with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including educator-reported changes in understanding of inclusive practice and early examples of application in classroom and program settings.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including dialogue across roles and settings within Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system.
- **System building**, including contributions to shared understanding of inclusion, professional norms, and early relational connections across the field.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation, identified barriers to engagement, and lessons learned from implementation.

Data sources for this report include recruitment materials; interviews with state and MRTQ PDN lead staff (Andie Faurot, Jordan Detwiler-Michelson, Lorie Moses, Lee Lingelbach, Shilo Johnson, Jennifer Maeverde); implementation report; monthly reports; interviews/communications with participants (based on those responding to MRTQ PDN about willingness to participate); excerpts from Book Club end-of-series feedback, observation of Book Club.

¹Maine defines mixed delivery early care and education (ECE) as the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families

To support inclusion in Maine’s early learning programs, four professional development opportunities were designed and offered through the Preschool Development Grant, made available at no cost to early educators. The initiative was offered by the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) in collaboration with the Maine Department of Education (DOE) and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Child and Family Services.

The offerings varied in time demand and were designed to work together incrementally to build knowledge and skills. The Inclusion Book Club was based on virtual group discussions of *Inclusion Includes Us*². Three sections of the six-week series were offered to accommodate different schedules.

The micro-credential is offered by the University of Maine System and includes training modules developed by the Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies (CCIDS) at the University of Maine. The Inclusion Credential is competency-based and requires prerequisites for education; cohort participation was encouraged.

MRTQ PDN assembled a technical assistance team composed of individuals with experience and backgrounds in special education and inclusion to facilitate training sessions and provide support to cohorts.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FEATURES

Four professional learning pathways designed to support inclusive practice at varying levels of intensity and time commitment:

- **Inclusion Book Club**
- **On-demand inclusion training modules**
- **Inclusion micro-credential** (on-demand modules with an in-person application session)
- **Maine Inclusion Credential** (competency-based credential requiring 72 hours of training, demonstration of competencies, and an observation/interview)

Credential content areas aligned with evidence-based inclusive practice, including:

- Access, participation, and supports
- Child development and learning
- Curriculum, assessment, instruction, and learning environments
- Building relationships with children and families
- Professionalism

What was the impact of the inclusive education professional learning opportunities?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported professional learning initiatives is essential to assessing whether investments are supporting meaningful change in educator understanding and practice. For inclusion-focused professional learning, impact is reflected not only in participation levels

²Huber, Mike (2023). *Inclusion Includes Us: Building bridges and removing barriers in early childhood classrooms*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.

but also in early indicators of learning, confidence, and application within classroom and program settings.

The structure and implementation of the inclusive education professional learning opportunities reflect several **intended outcomes**, including:

- **Educators engaged across all available professional learning pathways**, taking advantage of multiple formats offered to accommodate differing roles, time availability, and levels of commitment.
- **Increased educator understanding of inclusive practice**, broadly defined to include access, participation, and belonging for children with diverse learning needs, cultural backgrounds, and developmental profiles.
- **Improved educator confidence and readiness** to reflect on and apply inclusive strategies within classroom and program settings.

The sections that follow examine educator engagement across the four pathways and evidence of early outcomes, drawing on participation data, self-reported outcomes, and qualitative feedback from participants.

Because participation and outcome data were most robust for the Inclusion Book Club during the performance period, the impact analysis focuses primarily on this pathway, while findings related to the other professional development options are addressed in sections on engagement, access, system building, and sustainability.

Educator Engagement Across Professional Learning Pathways

The different professional learning pathways were intended to accommodate varying bandwidth levels and teacher interests. During the performance period, participation varied across pathways, with the Inclusion Book Club generating the highest level of engagement. **Table 1** summarizes participation by pathway.

Participation by Pathway

Four options	Number participating
Inclusion Book Club	42 in 3 cohorts
On-demand training modules	30 participated in Level 1 23 participated in Level 2
Inclusion micro-credential	30 achieved prerequisites, but none earned the credential
Maine Inclusion Credential	5 participated; one earned a credential

Participation patterns indicate that the Inclusion Book Club attracted the highest level of engagement. Participation in the credential pathways was more limited during the performance period. MRTQ PDN leaders described using lessons learned from the rollout and implementation of the credential options to inform adjustments to future professional development offerings (discussed further below).

Educators and administrators who participated in the Inclusion Book Club were motivated by a range of personal and professional experiences. One center director noted that she was “looking for different things to try,” while another described her own experiences as the mother of a child with a disability. An elementary principal described long-standing frustration with the practice of removing children with special needs from classrooms, limiting access to peer learning, and reinforcing stigma. Other participants reported seeking information and language to help them engage supervisors in conversations about the importance of inclusive practice.

What was the impact of the Inclusion Book Club?

Changes in Educator Knowledge and Confidence

Participants reported increased knowledge and confidence in inclusive practice as a result of participating in the Inclusion Book Club. In a follow-up survey conducted by MRTQ PDN, **100% of respondents reported an increase in knowledge about inclusion, and 95% reported increased confidence in creating an inclusive culture** based on the book study content (survey respondents: N = 20; response rate = 67%). Initiative leads also noted that interest in the Book Club spread through word of mouth, and subsequent cohorts continued to fill.

Shifts in Understanding of Inclusive Practice

Book Club focus group participants emphasized the insights they gained, both from the readings and especially from the peer discussions.

Participants first described broad shifts in perspective related to adult mindset and the role of inclusive practice in supporting all children:

“It gave me a lot of insight into managing diverse personalities and challenging behaviors. Inclusionary practice makes everyone feel important.”

“We’re in a different time, and the way we need to think about children is different.”

Several participants noted that the Book Club expanded their understanding of inclusion beyond disability-focused definitions to encompass culture, religion, and the full range of children’s identities and experiences:

“My eyes were opened . . . I learned that inclusion isn’t just for children with disabilities but those from various cultures and with different religious backgrounds. Inclusion affects the whole spectrum.”

“Book talks get you thinking. What all our specialists’ teachers are doing with individuals is good for the whole classroom to experience.”

Participants also reflected on increased awareness of family context and the importance of remaining open and responsive to families’ experiences and perspectives:

“Being open to the idea that every family is different. I should be open to learning and growing with my kids.”

In addition, educators described gaining new understanding related to children’s emotional regulation and the importance of identifying underlying causes of behavior and responding proactively:

“One thing that stayed with me was the information on dysregulation. We, as the child’s village (parents, family, teachers, service providers, etc.), need to help figure out what is causing the dysregulation, and try to teach the child strategies to help them self-regulate. We need to figure out the triggers so we can pre-teach and help prevent them.”

Finally, participants described a shift toward viewing inclusion as a universal approach that should be intentionally modeled and embedded across classrooms and programs, rather than applied only in response to individual needs:

“I believe one takeaway that I have from the book study was intentional modeling for my staff how to create a more universal approach to inclusion. Often, in our setting, we have focused on ways to include our learners, but we haven’t focused on making that holistic and natural.”

Participants were eager to discuss the need to emphasize that inclusivity goes well beyond children with special needs, relating examples of children affected by traumatic events and experiencing emotional and mental crises. They also emphasized the importance of cultural inclusion in early childhood education, highlighting the benefits of bridging cultural gaps between children and staff. Book Club participants felt supported and encouraged to pursue additional training, including the Maine Inclusion Credential.

Early Application of Inclusive Practices

Several participants described applying what they had learned to **strengthen relationships with families and increase cultural responsiveness at the program level**. One center director reported adding questions to the child enrollment process to learn more about families’ cultural backgrounds; she noted that families in her program include African, Brazilian, Asian, Latino, and French communities. A teacher in an out-of-school program described creating a list of her students’ positive qualities.

A center director described **having open conversations with families** about children who may need extra help. She explained that families quickly pick up a child who is different, and they can help their own children learn to include all children.

The school principal shared that **parents have been supportive of more inclusive classrooms**, noting significant improvements in their children’s classroom experiences, higher-quality instruction, and overall happiness. He also described the challenge of convincing teachers and special educators of the value of inclusion. **Participation in peer discussions**, such as those held during the Book Club,

provides an avenue for collaborative sharing of experiences, which he believes is essential for changing perspectives.

A pre-K teacher was introduced to Polyvagal Theory during the Book Club, was motivated to attend two Regulated Classroom trainings, and has been **using the techniques in her classroom**. A teacher of infants and toddlers was reinforced to individualize her strategies based on what she learns from parents about children's strengths. A preschool coordinator described how she has worked to **identify her own biases through reflection** and worked with her staff to do the same.

How did the inclusive education professional learning opportunities support collaboration and shared understanding across the early childhood system?

Communication and collaboration within PDG-R initiatives are reflected in opportunities for shared learning, dialogue across roles and settings, and informal connections that support common understanding over time. Within the inclusive education professional learning opportunities, evidence related to communication and collaboration was most apparent in formats that emphasized facilitated discussion and peer interaction.

Participants emphasized the value of **interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds and roles**, noting that **sharing stories and experiences was a highlight** of the learning experience. Several participants remarked on the importance of the **mix of directors, principals, and teachers across age groups, noting** that the Inclusion Book Club was a **model of inclusiveness among adults**. One participant noted, "We don't have enough opportunities to do things as a group," underscoring the role of discussion-based professional learning in supporting communication across roles.

Participants described **peer discussions**, such as those held during the Book Club, as providing **an avenue for the collaborative sharing of experiences, which they viewed as essential for changing perspectives on** inclusive practice. Participants also reported feeling **supported and encouraged to pursue additional training**, including the Maine Inclusion Credential, and more comfortable engaging in conversations about inclusion within their programs or schools.

How has the inclusive education initiative contributed to system building? What is its role in a mixed-delivery system, and will it continue?

In addition to influencing educator learning and practice, PDG-supported inclusion education 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 inclusion-focused professional learning offered through multiple pathways, system-building contributions are most often reflected in **the development of shared language, clarified understanding of inclusive practice, and relational connections across roles and settings**, rather than in formal coordination structures or policy changes.

The MRTQ PDN team emphasized the importance of inclusion education as a component of system building, particularly for child care providers. They noted that educators often **misconceive inclusion**

as **synonymous with special education**, rather than as a broader framework for supporting access, participation, and belonging for all children.

Participants and initiative leads described inclusion education as a topic that **brings together professionals from various fields**, making it especially relevant within Maine’s mixed-delivery early childhood system. In this context, inclusion education supported shared understanding across roles and settings by emphasizing universal approaches to practice. As one participant noted, **universal design can reach all children**, including those whose needs may not have been previously identified.

Together, these perspectives suggest that inclusion-focused professional learning contributed to early system-building conditions by clarifying the purpose of inclusion education and reinforcing its relevance across child care, Head Start, and public-school settings. While this work did not establish formal coordination structures, it supported shared language and understanding that can inform future alignment across the early childhood system.

Sustainability and Continuation

All-inclusive education offerings are planned to move forward beyond the performance period, though in some cases in a modified form and under specific conditions.

Steps are underway to **continue the inclusion offerings in a modified form**. The facilitators of the Inclusion Book Club are interested in continuing with additional cohorts, although funding would need to be located for textbooks. The **micro-credential is still being offered** with current take-up from school districts. MRTQ PDN intends to **continue offering the Inclusion Credential** with the goal of increasing participation from school staff as more districts move toward the **FAPE³ transition**. The credential is also included in the teacher apprenticeship program.

In what ways did design and implementation affect participation and access across the inclusive education pathways?

In examining PDG-supported professional learning initiatives, supports and access are considered in relation to how design and implementation features shape participation. Because the inclusion education initiative offered professional learning **through multiple formats with differing levels of intensity, participation varied across pathways during the performance period**. Examining supports and access, therefore, provides important context for understanding engagement patterns and why educator-level impact was more evident in some formats than others. This section focuses on design features that **supported participation** and on **barriers that limited access and completion**, drawing on participation data, implementation observations, and reflections from MRTQ PDN leaders.

Design Features That Supported Access to the Inclusion Book Club

Participants appreciated the **facilitation, peer interactions, and pace**. The design of the Inclusion Book Club hit the right notes for participants. The opportunity for **interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds and roles** was very appealing. **Sharing stories and experiences** was a highlight. As one

³Free Appropriate Public Education

remarked, “We don’t have enough opportunities to do things as a group,” noting that in-person trainings are rare post-COVID. While asynchronous training modules can be convenient, participants miss the person-to-person interaction. Several remarked on the value of the **mix of directors, principals, and teachers across different age levels, observing that the Book Club was a model of adult inclusiveness.**

Facilitators received high marks for their input and the **pace of learning. Focusing on one chapter of the book at a time** allowed time to process and reflect. **Options for different time blocks** accommodated the needs of varied role groups. In an observation of one of the sessions, the evaluators saw a lively discussion. Facilitators started with **clear ground rules** and invited participation with open-ended questions; they intentionally linked the discussion to the book chapters and shared personal experiences, which set the stage for a notably high level of engagement. The participants seemed very comfortable sharing their experiences and feelings about what they read.

The text that served as the basis for the Book Club provided **a solid foundation for the discussions,** with each chapter serving as background for **application in early learning settings.** The major chapters focused on:

- Definitions: physical, informational, attitudinal, and cultural barriers
- Rethinking diversity: strengths, needs, and preferences
- Self-reflection on one’s culture and abilities; managing stress
- The variety of experts in early childhood, including family and community
- Application in the classroom: proactive, global, and individual strategies

Barriers to Participation in Credential-Based Professional Learning Pathways

Recruitment efforts fell short, and the **demands of earning the credential within the allotted time seemed daunting.** MRTQ PDN faced recruitment challenges due to limited registration time. Further, the registration information for the Inclusion Credential **did not include details on the availability of stipends** that accompany the training. While MRTQ PDN leaders anticipated 10-15 applicants for the Maine Inclusion Credential, they speculated that the **short timeline did not allow participants to fully commit** to both the training and the credential process, such as preparing a portfolio.

MRTQ PDN leaders described **lessons learned from the rollout and are applying them** to other professional development offerings.

Apart from allowing **sufficient lead time,** the MRTQ PDN staff also recognizes the need to employ **multiple entry points and levels of professional development to meet diverse needs.** Recruitment success depends on a variety of methods, including **state agency promotions, newsletter announcements, and facilitated connections** made by the MRTQ PDN ECE Program Quality Specialists. Above all, they stress the importance of coordination across **methods, messages, and staff.**

To promote greater understanding of the steps and time required to complete the Maine Inclusion Credential, MRTQ PDN is working to **break the credential-earning process into more easily recognized phases.** For a different credential (family child care), MRTQ PDN is developing a “start to finish” framework that schedules the required training over a two-year period, with built-in time to

develop the portfolios used to verify competencies. The lesson learned is about conceptualizing the learning process over time, building and documenting knowledge and skills incrementally. They cited **the Leading Early Learning series as a good example to emulate**. To support peer learning with the micro-credential, consider adding a community of practice to foster skill development and knowledge application.

Lessons Learned

- **Low-barrier formats generated the strongest participation.** The Inclusion Book Club—virtual, discussion-based, no prerequisites—attracted the highest engagement across all four pathways. Credential-based options drew significantly fewer participants, suggesting that the level of commitment and clarity of expectations influenced uptake more than topic relevance.
- **Recruitment for credential pathways requires sufficient lead time and transparent information about requirements.** Registration timelines were too compressed, and initial communications did not include details about prerequisites, time commitment, or the credential-earning process. MRTQ PDN is now developing phased frameworks that break credential processes into recognizable steps.
- **Cross-role participation enriched the learning experience.** The mix of directors, principals, and teachers of different age groups within the same cohort was consistently described as a strength. Participants valued learning from peers in different settings and roles, thereby supporting the broader application of inclusive practices.
- **Educators' understanding of inclusion expanded beyond disability when given structured opportunities for reflection.** Participants entered with inclusion largely framed as special education; through facilitated discussion, many described a shift toward viewing inclusion as encompassing the full range of children's identities, experiences, and family contexts.

Summary

The inclusion education initiative offered four professional learning pathways of varying intensity to support educators across Maine's mixed-delivery system. Across pathways, 71 educators participated during the performance period, with the Inclusion Book Club generating the strongest engagement. Credential-based pathways drew more limited participation. MRTQ PDN leaders are committed to continuing inclusion credential pathways and are applying lessons from this experience to future professional development strategies.