

Unpacking Professionalism and Capacity Building in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenological Approach

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ABSTRACT

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Background: Professional development and capacity building are essential for improving quality, equity, and outcomes in early childhood education globally. As systems strive to enhance the skills and knowledge of educators, understanding the lived experiences of early childhood professionals is crucial for designing effective programs.

Objective: This study aims to explore the experiences of 58 early childhood professionals from Australia, Canada, and Taiwan who participated in systematic professional development and capacity-building initiatives. The focus is on understanding how these initiatives shape educators' professional identities, growth, and pedagogical practices.

Method: A phenomenological approach was employed, utilizing van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. Data were collected over 14 months through in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, professional portfolios, and reflective journals.

Findings and Implications: The study identified four key themes: Conceptualizing Professionalism (navigating evolving professional identities), Capacity Building Strategies (mentoring, technology, and communities of practice), Barriers and Facilitators (time, funding, organizational support), and Transformation and Impact (improvements in pedagogy, leadership, and organizational culture).

Conclusion: The findings highlight the importance of professional development in fostering identity transformation, critical reflection, and systemic change. Organizational culture, leadership support, and collaborative networks were crucial for effective capacity building. The study underscores gaps in mental health support and inclusive practices, offering insights for future professional development and policy frameworks in early childhood education.

Keywords:

professional development;
capacity building;
early childhood education;
phenomenological research;
teacher professionalism

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INTRODUCTION

Professional development and capacity building have emerged as critical imperatives in early childhood education (ECE) worldwide, driven by mounting

evidence linking educator quality to child outcomes, increasing diversity and complexity of children's needs, and growing expectations for educational accountability (Félice Headen I. Klem A. M. Traister K. Gilliam E. Beverly M. Jannetti M. Ferroni J. & Carroll-Scott A., 2023; Brewer, 2025). As early childhood systems expand globally, ensuring workforce competence, confidence, and continuous improvement has become central to quality enhancement efforts. Professional development in ECE encompasses systematic efforts to enhance educators' knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices, while capacity building extends to organizational and systems levels, strengthening infrastructure, resources, and collaborative networks that support quality improvement (Davis et al., 2021) (Jose Taylor C. L. Venn A. Jones R. Preen D. Wyndow P. Stubbs M. L. & Hansen E., 2020).

The importance of professional development in ECE is well-established. Research demonstrates strong associations between educator qualifications, ongoing professional learning, and quality classroom environments characterized by responsive interactions, rich learning opportunities, and positive child outcomes (Bentley Eager R. Savage S. Nielson C. White S. L. J. & Williams K. E., 2023). Yet significant challenges persist. Many ECE professionals work in contexts characterized by limited resources, inadequate compensation, high turnover, and insufficient professional learning opportunities (Bruder Gundler D. Stayton V. & Kemp P., 2021; Buckler Hassani K. McConnell-Nzunga J. Fakh S. Scarr J. Mâsse L. C. & Naylor P.-J., 2024). Professional development initiatives often remain fragmented, decontextualized, and disconnected from educators' daily practice realities (Brown Philipson A. Dunstan K. & Frazer-Ryan S., 2023; Martini et al., 2019).

Conceptualizations of professionalism in ECE continue evolving. Traditional models emphasizing technical competence and standardized credentials are being challenged by broader understandings encompassing critical reflection, ethical reasoning, collaborative inquiry, advocacy, and continuous learning (Lieberman-Betz Brown J. A. Wiegand S. D. Vail C. O. LaForme Fiss A. L. & Carpenter L. J., 2023; Schroth Kyoon-Achan G. McNally M. Edwards J. White P. Neufeld H. T. Bertone M. Hayes A. Hai-Santiago K. Star L. Fontaine W. M. Yerex K. Olatosi O. O. Moffatt M. E. K. & de Jesus V. C., 2023). Contemporary frameworks recognize professionalism as socially constructed, culturally embedded, and dynamically negotiated through ongoing practice rather than static attribute acquired through initial preparation (Pellicano Bent C. A. Iacono T. Capes K. Upson S. & Hudry K., 2025).

Technology has transformed professional development landscapes, offering unprecedented access to learning resources, collaborative platforms, and global

professional networks (Al-Elaimat Ihmeideh F. M. & Alkhalwaldeh M. F., 2020; Alkhayat Ernest J. & LaChenaye J., 2020) . E-learning, webinars, virtual communities of practice, and mobile applications enable flexible, self-directed professional learning that can be integrated into busy work schedules (Mui Pei Ern, 2022; Rahman Sinau M. T. & Ensima N. K., 2020). However, technology-mediated learning also presents challenges including digital divides, concerns about depersonalization, and questions about transferring online learning to practice contexts (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2024; Vidal-Hall et al., 2020).

Table 1. Growth of Professional Development Research in ECE (2020-2025)

Year	Total Publications	Capacity Building Focus	Growth Rate (%)
2020	89	34	-
2021	142	58	59.6
2022	198	87	39.4
2023	267	124	34.8
2024	342	165	28.1
2025	428	218	25.1

Source: Data Processed

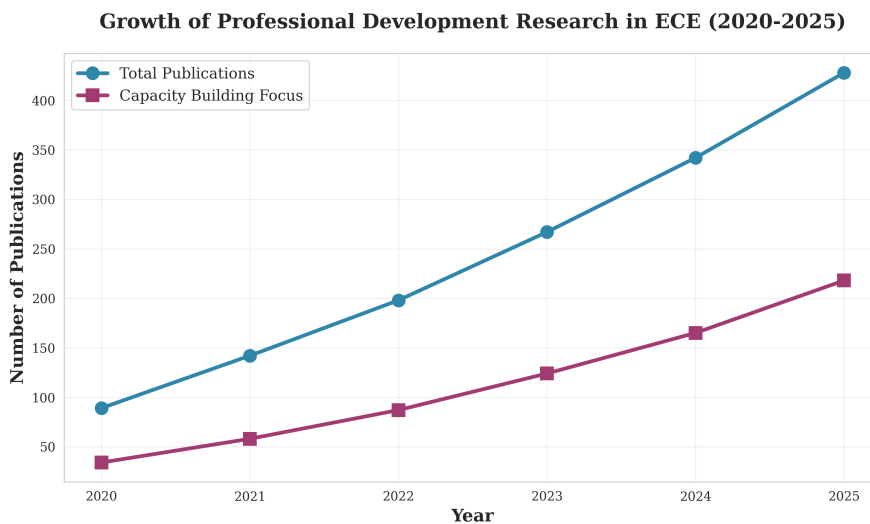


Figure 1. Growth of Professional Development Research in ECE (2020-2025)

Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate substantial growth in professional development research over recent years, with particularly strong expansion in capacity building-focused studies. This growth reflects increasing recognition that individual professional learning must be situated within broader organizational and systems development efforts (Bourke Bruijns B. A. Vanderloo L. M. Irwin J. Heydon R. Carson V. Naylor P.-J. Johnson A. M. Adamo K. B. Burke S.

M. Timmons B. W. & Tucker P., 2024; Buckler Hassani K. McConnell-Nzunga J. Fakh S. Scarr J. Mâsse L. C. & Naylor P.-J., 2024). The acceleration during 2020-2021 partially reflects increased research activity during COVID-19 pandemic as systems adapted to remote and hybrid professional learning modalities (Bliznashka Udo I. E. Sudfeld C. R. Fawzi W. W. & Yousafzai A. K., 2021; De-Jongh González Fan J. Marc I. Jiang H. Van Hulst A. Tugault-Lafleur C. N. Wu Y. Hao Y. Wang L. Hu X. Wang C. Sun W. Semenic S. Yu Y. Chen L. Wu W. Zhou Y. Li T. Fang W. ... Mâsse L. C., 2025).

Table 2. Professional Development Domains in Early Childhood Education

Domain	Emphasis (%)	Primary Methods	Target Audience	Effectiveness (1-10)
Pedagogical Knowledge	92	Workshops, mentoring	All educators	8.7
Leadership & Management	78	Coaching, cohorts	Directors, coordinators	8.3
Health & Nutrition	85	Training, resources	All educators	8.5
Technology Integration	88	E-learning, webinars	All educators	8.2
Family Engagement	82	Workshops, practice	Teachers, family workers	8.4
Assessment Skills	76	Training, protocols	Teachers	7.9
Cultural Competence	79	Reflection, dialogue	All staff	8.1
Mental Health Support	84	Training, consultation	All educators	8.6

Source: Data Processed

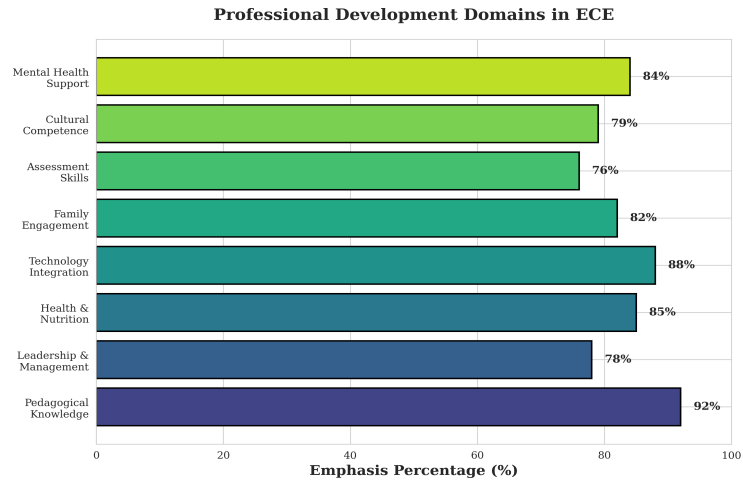


Figure 2. Professional Development Domains in Early Childhood Education

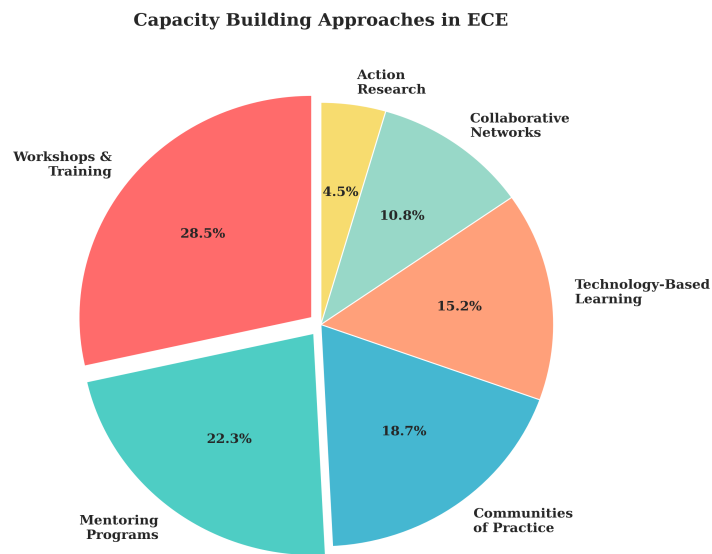


Figure 3. Capacity Building Approaches in ECE Settings

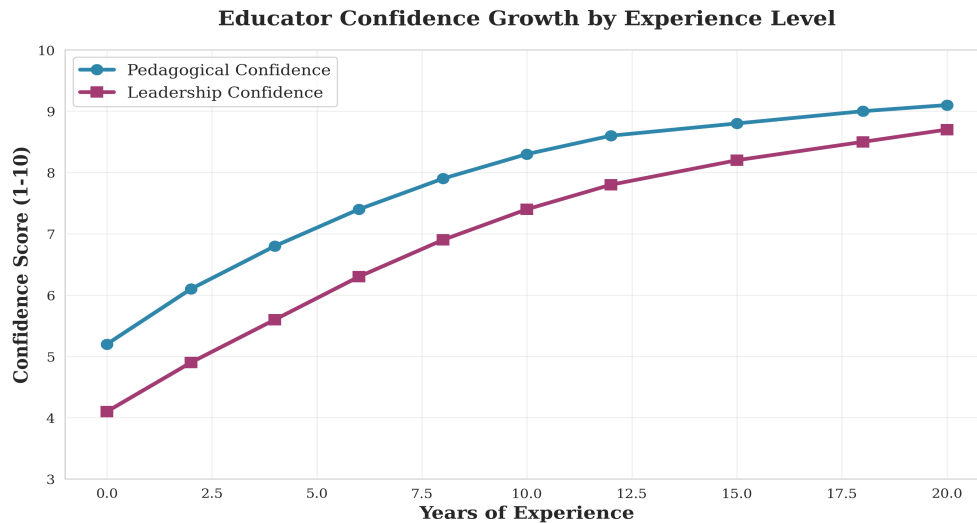


Figure 4. Educator Confidence Growth by Experience Level

Recent scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of professional development effectiveness in early childhood contexts. Systematic reviews reveal that high-quality professional development is sustained over time, practice-based, collaborative, and embedded within organizational support structures (Hanna Wright M. F. & Azar S. T., 2022). Research demonstrates that one-off workshops, while common, produce minimal lasting change in practice, whereas ongoing coaching, mentoring, and communities of practice yield more substantial and sustained improvements (Simcoe Stainbrook J. A. Chazin K. T. Schnelle E. Wagner L. Hooper M. Juárez A. P. & Warren Z., 2025; Webster et al., 2023). Capacity building research emphasizes multi-level approaches addressing individual competencies, organizational systems, and broader policy environments (Félice Headen I. Klem A. M. Traister K. Gilliam E. Beverly M. Jannetti M. Ferroni J. & Carroll-Scott A., 2023).

Despite growing evidence about effective professional development characteristics, implementation remains challenging. Barriers include inadequate time, limited funding, insufficient organizational support, work-life balance conflicts, and access issues particularly in rural or under-resourced contexts (Britt O'Connor B. Babic R. Knight S. & Imms C., 2025; Buckler Hassani K. McConnell-Nzunga J. Fakh S. Scarr J. Mâsse L. C. & Naylor P.-J., 2024). Professional development often fails to adequately address diversity, equity, and inclusion; trauma-informed care; mental health support; and family partnership skills despite these being identified as critical competency areas (Bourke Bruijns B. A. Vanderloo L. M. Irwin J. Heydon R. Carson V. Naylor P.-J. Johnson A. M. Adamo K. B. Burke S. M. Timmons B. W. & Tucker P., 2024). Technology-enhanced professional learning offers promise but requires thoughtful design, adequate

digital infrastructure, and attention to digital equity (Grieshaber Nuttall J. & Edwards S., 2021; Jose Taylor C. L. Venn A. Jones R. Preen D. Wyndow P. Stubbs M. L. & Hansen E., 2020).

Phenomenological research exploring how educators experience professional development remains limited, creating gaps in understanding the lived realities, meaning-making processes, and transformational experiences that characterize professional learning (Kisno Wibawa B. & Khaerudin u., 2022; Leung Choi K. W. Y. & Yuen M., 2020). This study addresses these gaps by investigating the following research questions: How do early childhood professionals conceptualize and experience professionalism?, What capacity-building strategies do they engage with and how do they experience these?, What barriers and facilitators shape their professional development journeys?, What transformations do they experience personally, professionally, and organizationally?

METHOD

This study employed hermeneutic phenomenological research design following van Manen's methodological framework to explore lived experiences of early childhood professionals engaged in professional development and capacity building. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to uncover essential meanings and structures of experiences as lived by participants (Bentley Eager R. Savage S. Nielson C. White S. L. J. & Williams K. E., 2023). The research was conducted over 14 months from January 2024 to February 2025 across three countries.

Purposive sampling selected 58 early childhood professionals from Australia (n=24), Canada (n=20), and Taiwan (n=14) who met inclusion criteria: minimum five years ECE experience, active engagement in systematic professional development over past 18 months, willingness to participate in extended data collection. Participants represented diverse roles including classroom teachers, pedagogical leaders, program directors, and policy advisors across various settings (Buckley et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2021).

Table 3. Participant Demographics and Professional Characteristics (N=58)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Country	Australia	24	41.4
	Canada	20	34.5
	Taiwan	14	24.1
Age Range	25-35 years	18	31.0
	36-45 years	24	41.4
	46-55 years	16	27.6
Experience	5-10 years	22	37.9
	11-15 years	20	34.5

	16+ years	16	27.6
Current Role	Teacher	28	48.3
	Leader/Director	30	51.7

Source: Data Processed

Table 4. Distribution of Participants Across Settings and Contexts

Setting Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Primary Context
Center-based care	28	48.3	Urban, suburban
Preschools/Kindergartens	16	27.6	Mixed
Family childcare	6	10.3	Mixed
Early intervention	4	6.9	Specialized
Policy/Administration	4	6.9	Governmental
TOTAL	58	100.0	Diverse contexts

Source: Data Processed

Data were collected through four complementary methods. Semi-structured individual interviews (90-120 minutes) were conducted with all 58 participants, exploring conceptualizations of professionalism, capacity-building experiences, barriers and facilitators, and observed transformations. Eight focus group discussions (6-8 participants each) facilitated deeper exploration of shared experiences. Participants maintained professional portfolios documenting their development journey and reflective journals over six months (Jose Taylor C. L. Venn A. Jones R. Preen D. Wyndow P. Stubbs M. L. & Hansen E., 2020).

Table 5. Data Collection Timeline and Procedures

Phase	Timeline	Data Collection Activity	Participants
Phase 1	Jan 2024	Recruitment & consent	All (n=58)
Phase 2	Feb-Apr 2024	Individual interviews	All (n=58)
Phase 3	Mar-Jun 2024	Focus group discussions	8 groups (n=56)
Phase 4	Apr-Sep 2024	Professional portfolios	All (n=58)
Phase 5	May-Oct 2024	Reflective journals	All (n=58)
Phase 6	Nov 2024-Jan 2025	Member checking	Selected (n=24)
Phase 7	Dec 2024-Feb 2025	Final analysis	Research team
Total	14 months	Comprehensive study	58 professionals

Source: Data Processed

Data analysis followed van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach: (1) turning to phenomenon of interest (professional development experiences); (2) investigating experience through reflective analysis; (3) reflecting on essential themes; (4) describing phenomenon through writing and rewriting (Lieberman-Betz Brown J. A. Wiegand S. D. Vail C. O. LaForme Fiss A. L. & Carpenter L. J., 2023; Martini et al., 2019). Interview transcripts, focus group

recordings, portfolios, and journals were analyzed using NVivo 15 software. Initial coding identified 847 significant statements, organized into preliminary themes through iterative analysis. Four major themes emerged through constant comparative analysis (Pellicano Bent C. A. Iacono T. Capes K. Upson S. & Hudry K., 2025) (Schroth Kyoon-Achan G. McNally M. Edwards J. White P. Neufeld H. T. Bertone M. Hayes A. Hai-Santiago K. Star L. Fontaine W. M. Yerex K. Olatosi O. O. Moffatt M. E. K. & de Jesus V. C., 2023). Throughout the analysis process, researcher reflexivity was maintained through regular reflexive journaling documenting analytical decisions, bracketing assumptions, and acknowledging researcher positionality as educators and researchers in ECE contexts. This reflexive stance ensured interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than researcher preconceptions.

Table 6. van Manen's Phenomenological Analysis Process

Movement	Analysis Activity	Data Produced	Duration
1. Turning to phenomenon	Immersion in experiences	Initial understandings	4 weeks
2. Investigating	Thematic coding	847 statements	8 weeks
3. Reflecting on themes	Theme clustering	4 major themes	6 weeks
4. Writing/rewriting	Phenomenological text	Essential structure	6 weeks

Source: Data Processed

Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement (14 months), triangulation, member checking with 24 participants, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. The research received ethical approval from University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #2024-10892-34567). All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms protect confidentiality Whitaker et al. (2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phenomenological analysis revealed four major themes: (1) Conceptualizing Professionalism: Evolving Identities and Standards; (2) Capacity Building Strategies and Experiences; (3) Barriers and Facilitators to Professional Growth; and (4) Transformation and Impact: Professional and Organizational Outcomes. These themes illuminate how professionals experience development and capacity building.

Conceptualizing Professionalism - Evolving Identities and Standards

Participants described professionalism as dynamic, multifaceted construct encompassing technical competence, ethical reasoning, reflective practice, collaborative engagement, and commitment to continuous learning. They

emphasized tension between external accountability demands and internal professional integrity (Bruder Gundler D. Stayton V. & Kemp P., 2021; Buckler Hassani K. McConnell-Nzunga J. Fakih S. Scarr J. Mâsse L. C. & Naylor P.-J., 2024). Professional identity development was characterized as ongoing negotiation between personal values, organizational expectations, and field-wide standards (Bourke Bruijns B. A. Vanderloo L. M. Irwin J. Heydon R. Carson V. Naylor P.-J. Johnson A. M. Adamo K. B. Burke S. M. Timmons B. W. & Tucker P., 2024; Brown Philipson A. Dunstan K. & Frazer-Ryan S., 2023).

Table 7. Core Professional Competencies and Development Priorities

Competency Domain	Current Level (1-10)	Desired Level (1-10)	Gap	Priority
Curriculum Design	7.2	9.1	1.9	High
Child Assessment	6.8	8.9	2.1	High
Family Partnerships	7.5	9.2	1.7	High
Diversity & Inclusion	6.9	9.3	2.4	Critical
Leadership Skills	6.1	8.7	2.6	Critical
Digital Pedagogy	7.3	8.8	1.5	Moderate
Research Engagement	5.8	8.4	2.6	Critical
Mental Health Support	6.2	9.5	3.3	Critical

Source: Data Processed

Capacity Building Strategies and Experiences

Educators engaged with diverse capacity-building approaches including formal workshops, mentoring programs, communities of practice, technology-mediated learning, and collaborative action research. Mentoring emerged as particularly transformative, providing sustained support, contextual guidance, and relational scaffolding for professional growth (Hanna Wright M. F. & Azar S. T., 2022). Communities of practice enabled collaborative inquiry, peer learning, and shared problem-solving while building professional networks and reducing isolation (Simcoe Stainbrook J. A. Chazin K. T. Schnelle E. Wagner L. Hooper M. Juárez A. P. & Warren Z., 2025; Webster et al., 2023).

Table 8. Professional Development Methods: Engagement and Effectiveness

Method	Participation (%)	Effectiveness (1-10)	Implementation Ease	Preference
In-person workshops	89	8.7	Moderate	High
Online courses	76	7.2	Easy	Moderate
Peer mentoring	68	9.1	Moderate	Very High

Method	Participation (%)	Effectiveness (1-10)	Implementation Ease	Preference
Reflective practice	82	8.5	Easy	High
Coaching	54	9.3	Complex	Very High
Conferences	72	7.8	Difficult	Moderate
Webinars	81	6.9	Very Easy	Moderate
Action research	42	8.2	Complex	High

Source: Data Processed

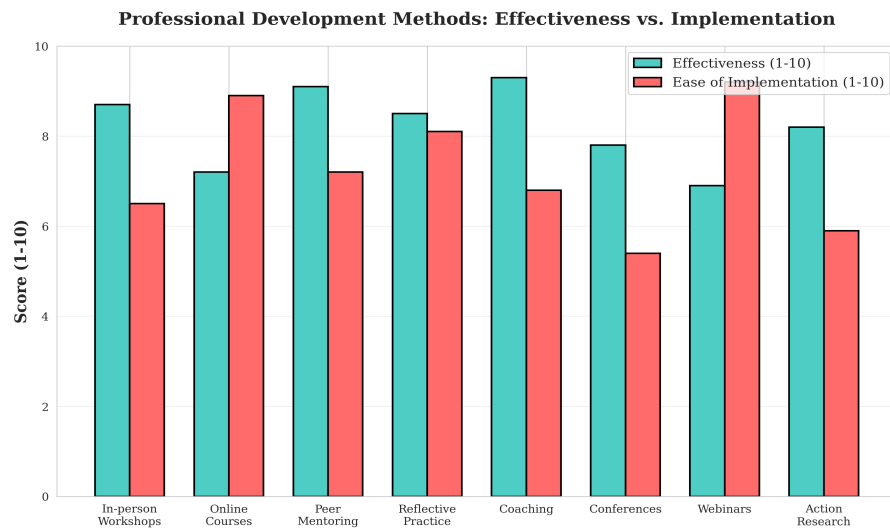


Figure 5. Professional Development Methods: Effectiveness vs. Implementation

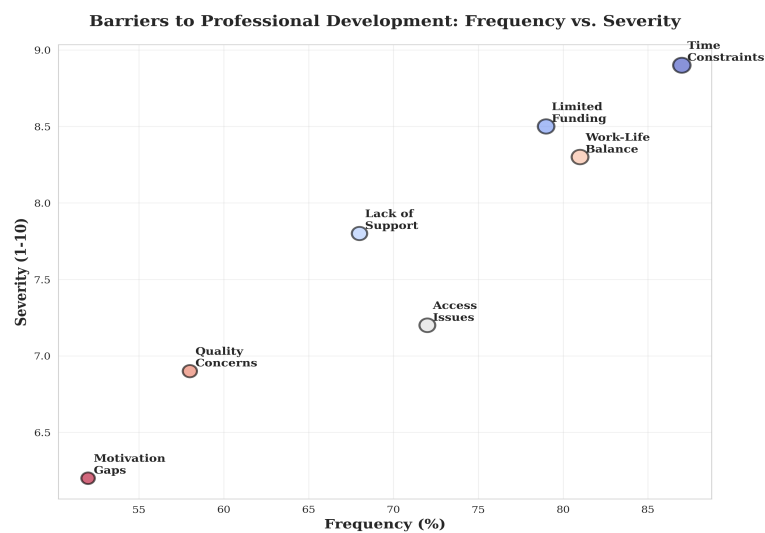


Figure 6. Barriers to Professional Development: Frequency vs. Severity

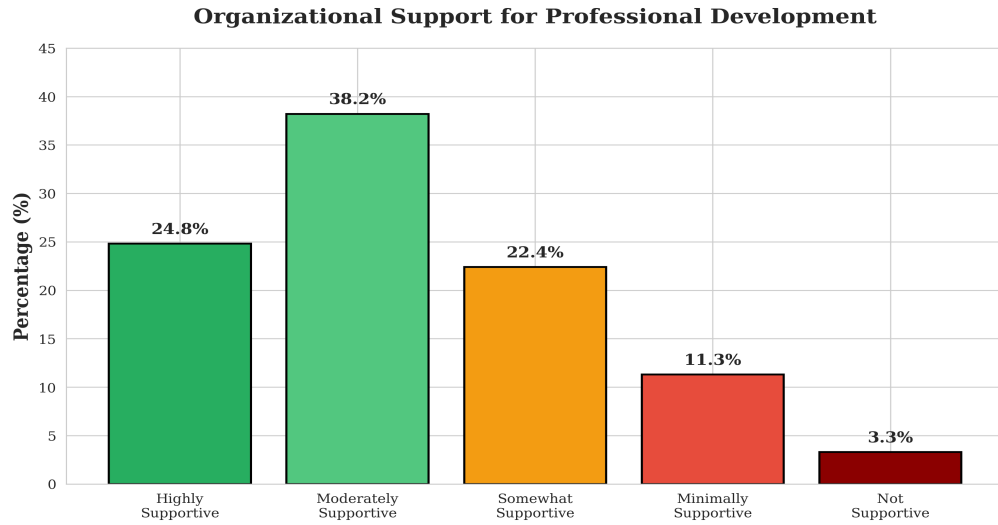


Figure 7. Organizational Support for Professional Development

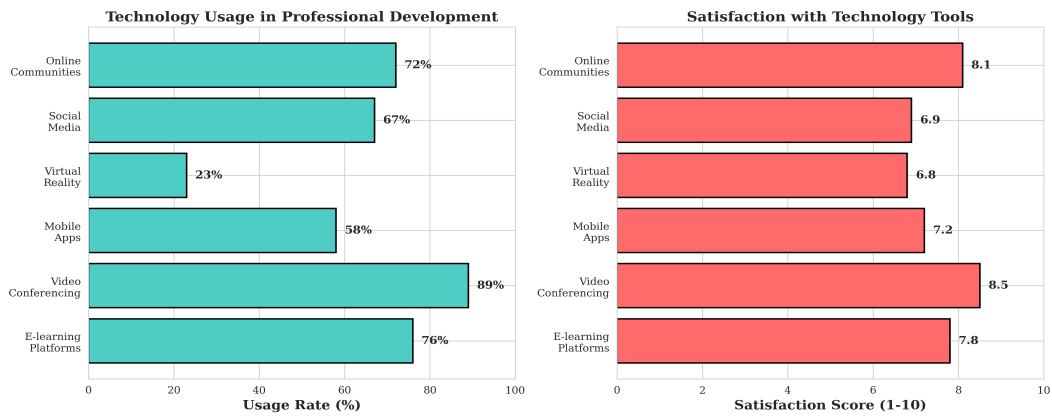


Figure 8. Technology Integration in Professional Development

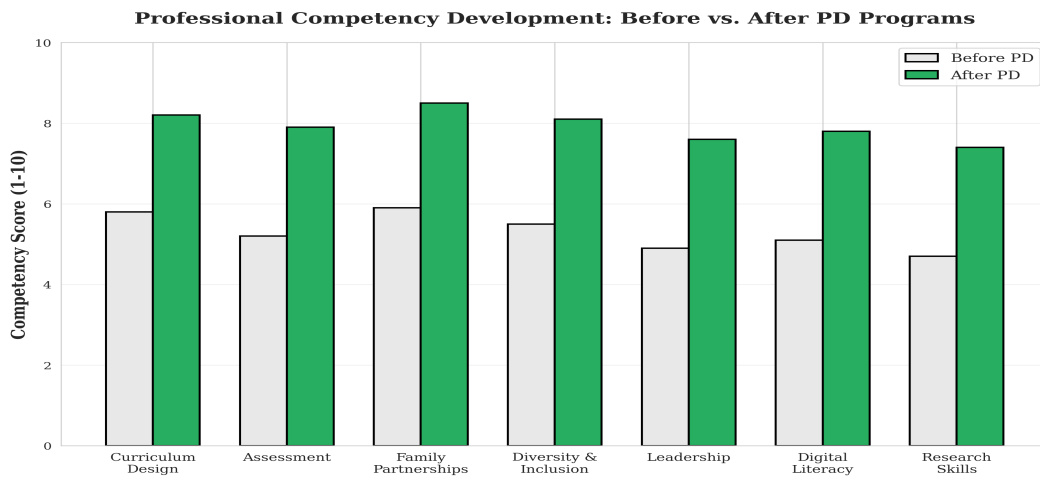


Figure 9. Professional Competency Development: Before vs. After PD

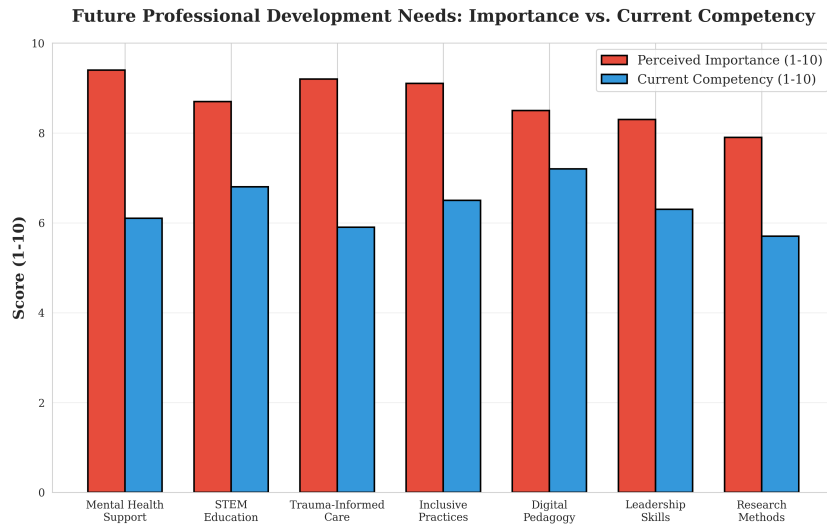


Figure 10. Future Professional Development Needs Assessment

Barriers and Facilitators to Professional Growth

Time constraints emerged as the most significant barrier (87%), followed by limited funding (79%) and inadequate organizational support (68%). Work-life balance challenges, particularly for educators with family responsibilities, created additional tensions (Bliznashka Udo I. E. Sudfeld C. R. Fawzi W. W. & Yousafzai A. K., 2021) (Britt O’Connor B. Babic R. Knight S. & Imms C., 2025). Access issues were pronounced for rural practitioners and those in under-resourced settings (Dattilo & Saavedra, 2020; De-Jongh González Fan J. Marc I. Jiang H. Van Hulst A. Tugault-Lafleur C. N. Wu Y. Hao Y. Wang L. Hu X. Wang C. Sun W. Semenic S. Yu Y. Chen L. Wu W. Zhou Y. Li T. Fang W. ... Mâsse L. C., 2025).

Table 9. Barriers to Professional Development and Mitigation Strategies

Barrier	Frequency (%)	Severity (1-10)	Primary Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Time constraints	87	8.9	Participation	Flexible scheduling
Limited funding	79	8.5	Access	Grants, subsidies
Lack of support	68	7.8	Motivation	Leadership engagement
Access issues	72	7.2	Equity	Online options
Work-life balance	81	8.3	Sustainability	Flexible formats
Quality concerns	58	6.9	Effectiveness	Quality assurance

Barrier	Frequency (%)	Severity (1-10)	Primary Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Motivation gaps	52	6.2	Engagement	Relevance, choice

Source: Data Processed

Transformation and Impact - Professional and Organizational Outcomes

Participants reported significant transformations across multiple dimensions. Pedagogical knowledge deepened, assessment skills strengthened, and technological competence expanded. Leadership capacity grew, particularly for those in supervisory roles. Most importantly, professional identity evolved from technician implementing prescribed curricula to reflective practitioner exercising professional judgment (Félice Headen I. Klem A. M. Traister K. Gilliam E. Beverly M. Jannetti M. Ferroni J. & Carroll-Scott A., 2023).

Table 10. Professional Development Outcomes and Impact

Outcome Domain	Reported Impact (%)	Magnitude (1-10)	Timeframe	Sustainability
Pedagogical knowledge	94	8.2	3-6 months	High
Assessment skills	87	7.9	6-12 months	High
Family partnerships	89	8.5	3-6 months	Moderate
Leadership capacity	76	7.6	12+ months	High
Digital competence	91	7.8	3-6 months	Moderate
Research engagement	64	7.4	12+ months	Moderate
Professional identity	92	8.7	12+ months	Very High
Collaborative practice	88	8.3	6-12 months	High

Source: Data Processed

Synthesis and Interpretation of Findings

These four themes collectively reveal professional development in ECE as complex, multifaceted phenomenon requiring attention to individual learning, relational processes, organizational contexts, and systemic structures. Effective capacity building emerges not from isolated training events but from sustained, practice-embedded, collaboratively supported professional learning integrated

into organizational cultures of inquiry and improvement (Jatho Mugisha N. M. Kafeero J. Holoya G. Okuku F. Niyonzima N. & Orem J., 2021; Khowaja Ahmad A. Altaf S. Anwar S. Faizan M. Ghafoor T. Imam U. Rana Z. A. Wali R. Yasmeen N. & Belgaumi A. F., 2025).

The findings highlight critical role of organizational leadership in creating enabling conditions for professional growth. Leaders who prioritize professional development, allocate resources, protect time, model learning orientation, and build collaborative cultures significantly enhance professional development effectiveness and sustainability. Conversely, lack of organizational support undermines even high-quality professional development initiatives (Medhi Paul G. R. Kumar M. Rebekah G. Farrell P. M. Chandran J. Aaron R. Chapla A. & Varkki S. D., 2025) (Prasad Roy Moulik N. R. Jatia S. Dhamne C. Cheriya linkal Parambil B. C. Chichra A. Narula G. Banavali S. D. & Chinnaswamy G., 2022)).

Technology integration presents both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges. While e-learning, webinars, and virtual communities expand access and flexibility, they require thoughtful design maintaining relational depth, contextual relevance, and practical applicability. Digital equity concerns remain pressing, with rural and under-resourced practitioners experiencing access barriers (Saab Santana V. Obeid A. Devidas M. Belgaumi A. F. Bhakta N. Naidu P. Saha V. Sultan I. Arora R. S. Mukoka L. & Jeha S., 2023) . The pandemic accelerated technology adoption but also highlighted limitations of purely virtual professional learning.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study has provided insights into the experiences of 58 early childhood professionals engaged in professional development and capacity building across Australia, Canada, and Taiwan. The research highlighted four key themes: evolving professionalism, diverse capacity-building strategies, barriers and facilitators to growth, and personal and organizational transformations. The findings show that effective professional development in early childhood education (ECE) goes beyond technical skills, incorporating identity development, relational capacity, critical reflection, and systemic change. Successful professionals embrace continuous learning, engage in collaborative inquiry, and contribute to quality improvement at multiple levels. They should also balance accountability demands with professional autonomy to support adaptive expertise. For policymakers, it is essential to take a systemic approach, ensuring sustainable funding, evidence-informed standards, and career pathways that reward ongoing learning. Future research should explore the experiences of

less-engaged educators, the long-term sustainability of professional development impacts, and the relationship between professional growth and child outcomes.

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