



LINCing research with practice: Exploring the quantitative influence of the LINC Programme on inclusivity practices within Early Learning and Care Settings

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Background

The Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme was introduced in 2016 to address the need for inclusive education in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings. This Specific Purpose Level 6 Programme is designed for Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) working in ELC settings. From 2016–2020, the programme was delivered via a blended learning approach, combining face-to-face classes with online content and tutor support. It transitioned to fully online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A main aim of the programme is for participants to reflect on their practice using the LINC competency framework, which includes:

Inclusive culture: Welcoming and valuing children through environments, policies, and partnerships.

Inclusive practice: Supporting transitions and building staff expertise via training.

Inclusive pedagogy: Tailoring learning experiences to children's needs with playful strategies and effective documentation.

Graduates of the LINC programme are then empowered to take on the role of INclusion COordinator, becoming leaders of inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy within their ELC settings. This role equips them to champion inclusion, ensuring all children can access and thrive in inclusive ELC environments. By 2020, 3,461 students had graduated, contributing to enhanced inclusivity across ELC settings nationally.

Current Study

The aim of the current research was to assess the extent in which the LINC Programme influenced ECTs' competencies in creating inclusive ELC settings. To get a more holistic perspective on the effectiveness of the programme, ECTs along with the ECTs' employers were approached to share their views on both the LINC Programme and its influence on inclusivity practices within their ELC settings.

Therefore, the main research questions were:

How satisfied were ECTs and their employers with the LINC Programme?

How well did the LINC Programme prepare ECTs to champion inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy?

Methodology

The research adopted a survey-based quantitative approach, where both ECTs and their employers were asked to participate, as part of a multi-method research design, framed using Guskey's (2002) five levels of CPD evaluation (as imaged).



Data were collected across four academic years, and across multiple ELC settings in Ireland. 1,767 participants volunteered to take part in the study overall. See the table below for a breakdown of participation, based on role and year.

	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20
ECT	391	228	241	146
Employer	195	238	220	108

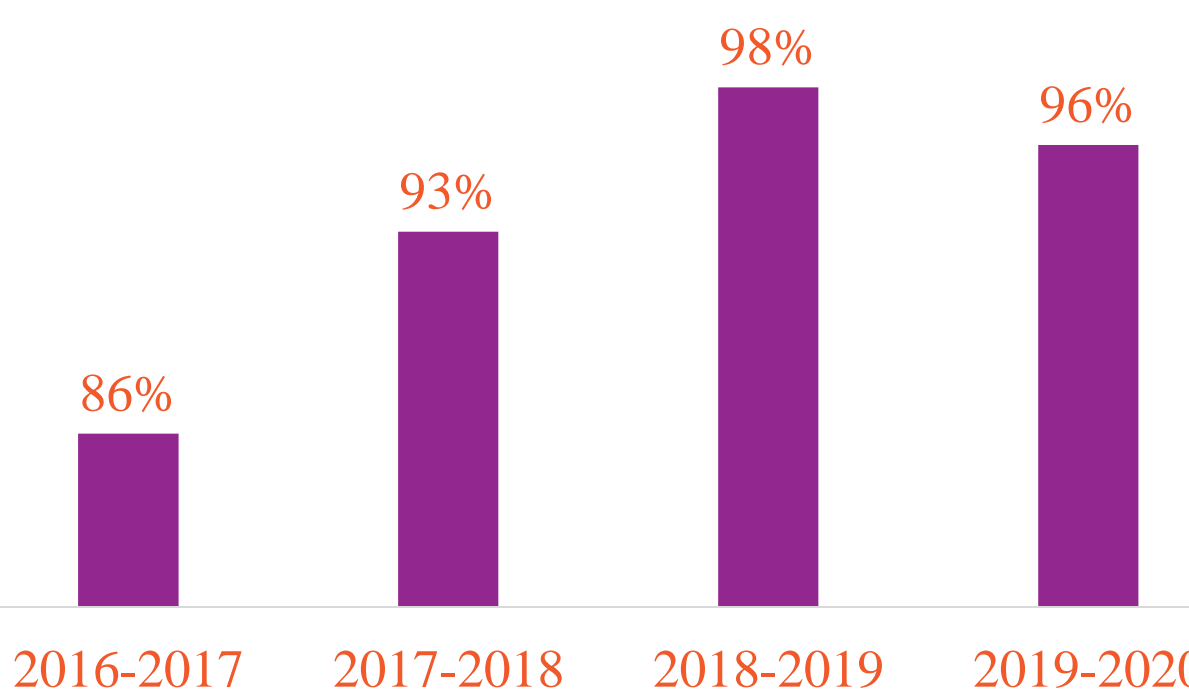
All participants were asked how satisfied they were with the LINC Programme overall, to which they could respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'very dissatisfied' to 'very satisfied'.

ECTs were asked how well prepared they felt to lead inclusion within their ELC setting upon completing the LINC Programme. The 3 responses to this question were 'neutral', 'well', 'very well'. The same question was asked of employers about how well prepared they felt the LINC graduate was to lead inclusion in their setting.

Results

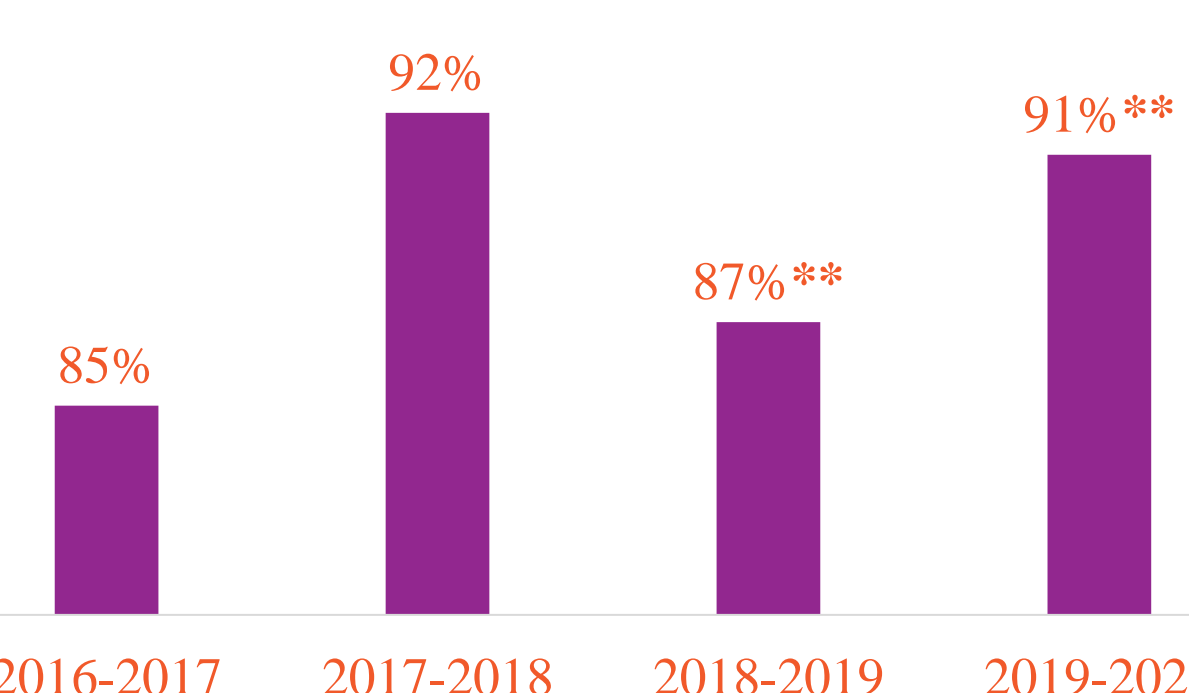
Findings across the four academic years show high satisfaction with the LINC Programme from both ECTs and their employers.

% of ECTs who were Satisfied/Very Satisfied with the LINC Programme



*It is important to interpret this year's findings in reference to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

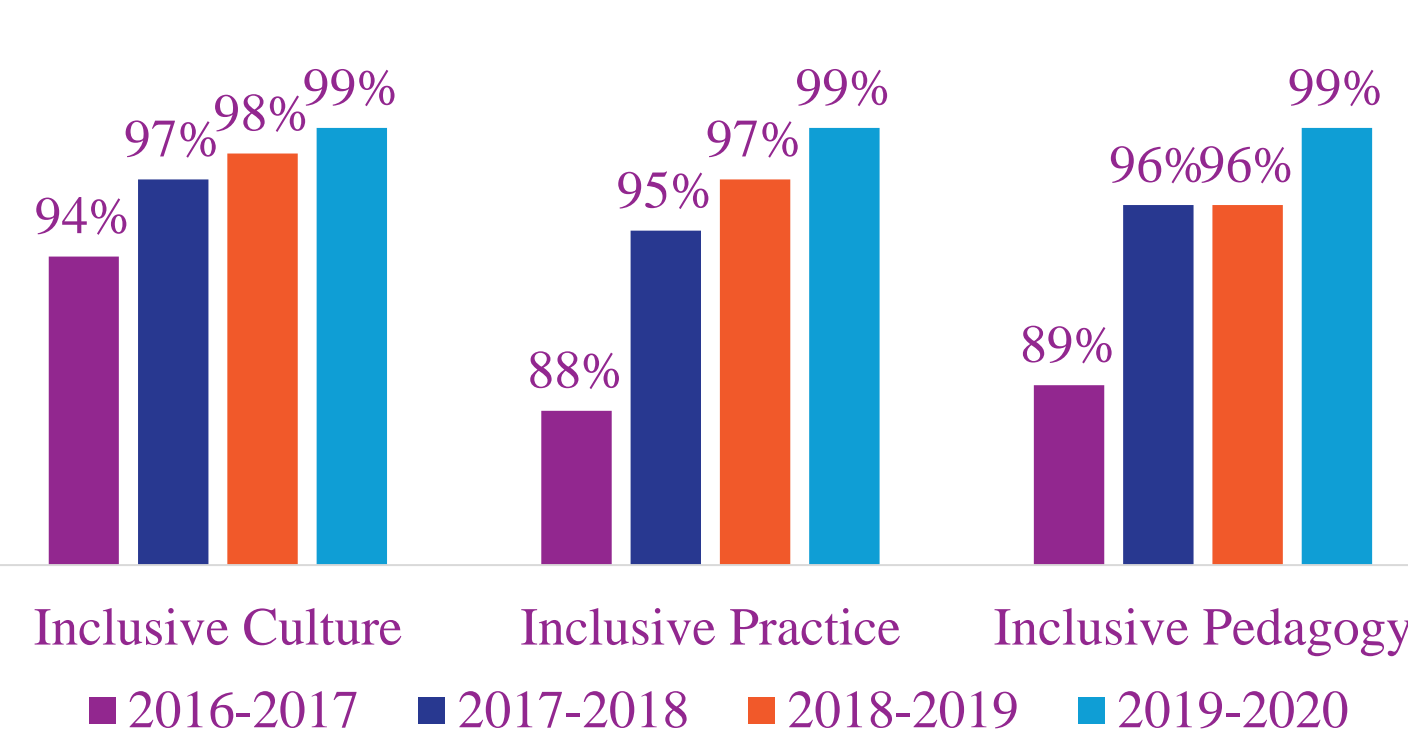
% of ECTs' employers who were Satisfied/Very Satisfied with the LINC Programme



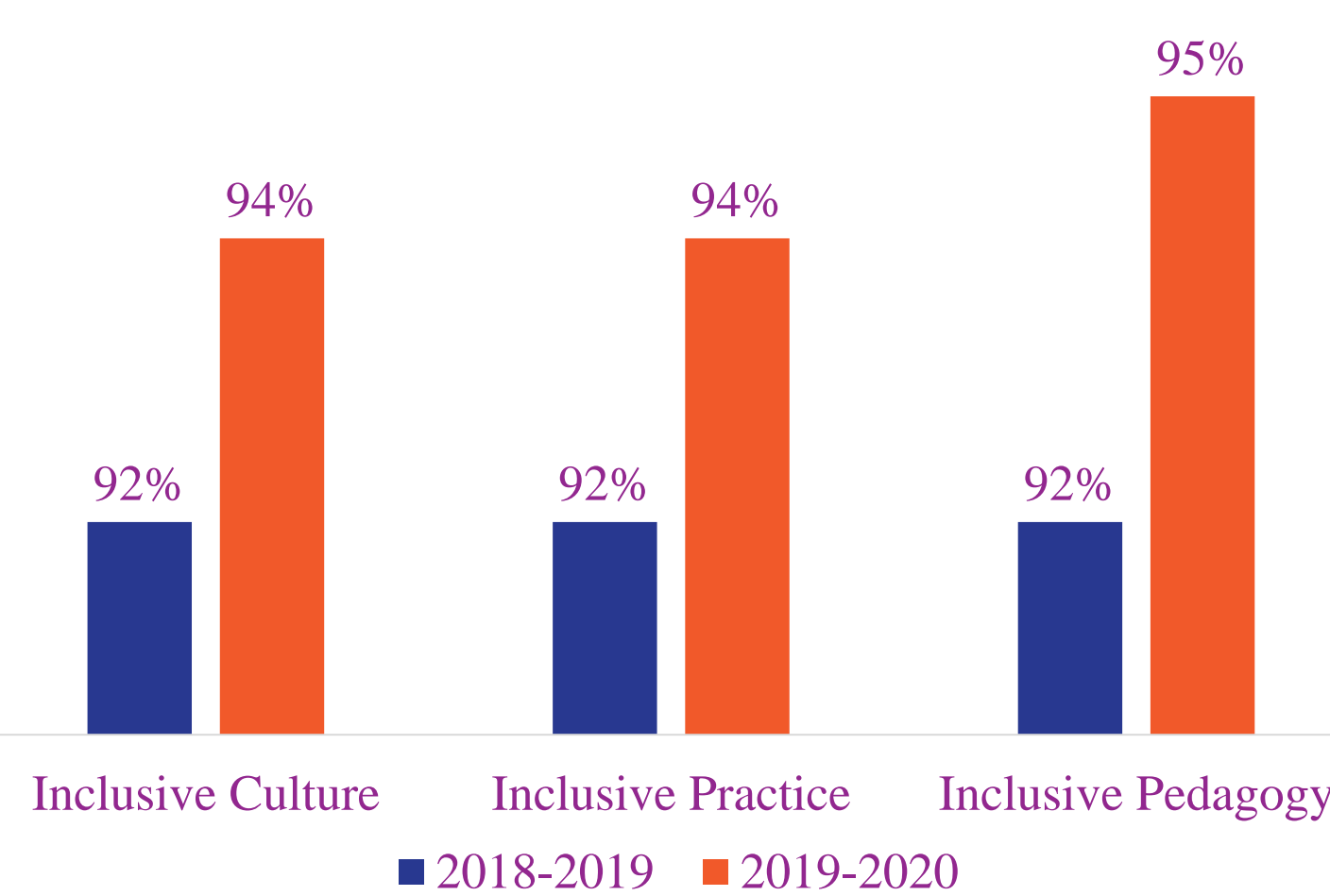
**Several discrepancies were noted between the ratings provided and employers' additional comments which suggested that employers' satisfaction for these years may be slightly underestimated.

Both ECTs' level of preparedness to lead inclusion, and their employers' perception of their preparedness, rose consistently across the four academic years the competencies were measured. Employers also indicated that the LINC Programme benefitted their ELC setting very well.

% of ECTs who felt Well/Very Well prepared to lead in inclusion



% of ECTs' employers who felt their ECT was Well/Very Well prepared to lead in inclusion



% of ECT employers who believed the LINC Programme benefitted their settings Well/Very Well



Discussion

The findings show that ECTs and their employers were highly satisfied with the outcomes of the LINC Programme. ECTs gained a better understanding on, and preparedness for, implementing inclusive culture, practice, and pedagogy within the ELC setting. Employers were equally satisfied the programme, as they noted consistent improvement in preparedness within their setting for fostering inclusive practices.

A key strength of the study was the multi-method evaluation, which gained insights from both ECTs and their employers for a more holistic understanding of the programme's influence in practice. This evaluative approach to consistently improve the programme based on action research principles highlights the programme's commitment of linking research to practice.

Limitations of the research include reliance on self-reported data, variability in settings' resources, and the data that were collected during the pandemic, which needs to be interpreted in context.

A recommendation for future research would be to consider multi-method approaches when evaluating CPD programmes. Guskey's five levels of CPD evaluation, specifically, provides a strong framework for ensuring various stakeholders benefit from the outcomes of the programme, and that the child's voice is considered when measuring the benefits of a programme on the ELC setting.

Conclusion

Overall, the LINC Programme successfully enhanced educators' abilities to foster inclusion, positively impacting ELC settings and children's experiences. This can be credited to the programme's focus on the research-to-practice approach, which is core to the programme to ensure continued professional development during and after ECTs enrolment on the programme. The findings therefore underscore the LINC Programme's role in advancing inclusive education, advocating for continued investment and further research to measure long-term impacts on children and families.

Acknowledgements and References

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Reference: Guskey, T.R. (2002), 'Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development', *Educational Leadership*, 59(6), 45-51

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