

The Dialog Framework: Actualizing Research in Support of Early Childhood Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Connecting research to practice is a critical component of scholarship, yet research often remains confined to academia, rather than reaching the professionals, families, and policymakers who can use it. Translating research into meaningful practice can be especially challenging in early childhood inclusion, where studies are typically conducted in real-world setting with young children with delays or disabilities and their families. As an open-access journal, The Dialog serves as a bridge between research and practice by making evidence more accessible and actionable. This article is intended for professionals, faculty instructors in preparation programs, advocates, and caregivers, and others seeking to connect research to their work on inclusion with children and families. It highlights how articles published in The Dialog connects with three foundational pillars of inclusion (preparation, practice, and policy) and emphasizes Research to Practice (RTP) products authors create to accompany their manuscripts to support immediate use by professionals.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion; Early Childhood; Research-to-practice

Late on a Sunday night, a first-year early childhood teacher searches online for strategies to support a student with autism in her inclusive classroom of twenty children. While she finds numerous studies proving that inclusion works, none offer practical steps for her Monday morning lessons. At the same time, a university faculty member struggles to find research materials that translate cleanly into training higher education students to adapt lesson plans for children with developmental delays. This persistent gap between theoretical research and actionable, day-to-day practices represents a well-documented challenge across the early childhood field (Siller et al., 2021). Advancing high-quality inclusion requires equipping on-the-ground professionals with accessible, evidence-based tools.

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THE DIALOG FRAMEWORK FOR ACTUALIZING RESEARCH

Extensive evidence confirms that high-quality inclusive settings benefit young children with and without disabilities. Inclusive environments improve developmental outcomes, increase peer empathy, encourage positive attitudes toward diversity, and foster a sense of belonging. Beyond promoting positive developmental outcomes for children, inclusion benefits peers and other individuals that support them, by increasing empathy, encouraging positive attitudes towards diversity, and fostering a social environment guided by acceptance and belonging. Importantly, these outcomes are tied to the use of research-based supports, such as embedded learning, curricular adaptations, and other quality practices, delivered by trained professionals who have accepted the philosophy of inclusion and importance of creating a welcoming environment for all children (Barton, Smith & Lochetta, 2025; Kart & Kart, 2021).

Although decades of research have established what works and identified the practices described above, much of this evidence base was generated in contexts that differ from the realities practitioners encounter today. Shifts in educational systems, service delivery models, family priorities, and workforce demands mean that even well-established practices like embedded learning and curricular adaptation must be continually reexamined and re-translated for contemporary early childhood settings. This divide between longstanding evidence and current practice underscores the need for more outlets that illustrate how evidence-based strategies can be implemented effectively, and for materials that help the professionals delivering these supports stay current with the field.

Reflecting the benefits of inclusion, federal policy mandates teams to prioritize the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). Joint guidance from the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education (2015) similarly underscores that all early childhood programs must guarantee high-quality inclusion across learning environments. Together, these highlight the ongoing importance of equipping professionals with accessible, actionable materials to guide inclusive practices. Despite clear legislative and developmental motivations, special education professionals

consistently face a shortage of actionable materials that connect these systemic expectations with daily classroom implementation (Siller et al., 2021). Peer-reviewed research rarely reaches the field in formats that practitioners can apply immediately.

The Dialog: A Journal for Inclusive Early Childhood Professionals was created to target this specific resource deficiency. The journal deliberately translates rigorous scientific studies into accessible, application-oriented articles. By publishing evidence-informed approaches, innovative field strategies, and community voices, the journal advances workforce competencies to improve real-world implementation.

Purpose of this Article

Accordingly, this article provides a comprehensive guide and conceptual framework that explicitly connects *The Dialog* to three foundational pillars of early childhood inclusion – preparation, practice, and policy. By defining each pillar, this paper outlines how published manuscripts translate empirical research into actionable strategies, guide higher education coursework, align with national professional standards, and reshape local and state-level guidelines to support young children with delays or disabilities and their families.

Connecting *The Dialog* to The Pillars of Early Childhood Inclusion

To guide prospective authors in connecting their work to inclusive supports for young children with delays/disabilities and their families, we share a framework that clarifies the role of *The Dialog* in translating knowledge into action. This framework positions published manuscripts as contributing to three foundational pillars: preparation, practice, and policy, each informed by lived experiences, research evidence, and systems-level considerations.

These specific pillars represent the functional requirements needed to sustain high-quality early childhood inclusion. Personnel preparation builds a skilled workforce, direct practice translates that knowledge into daily interventions, and policy provides the structural infrastructure necessary to fund and institutionalize both components. Ad-

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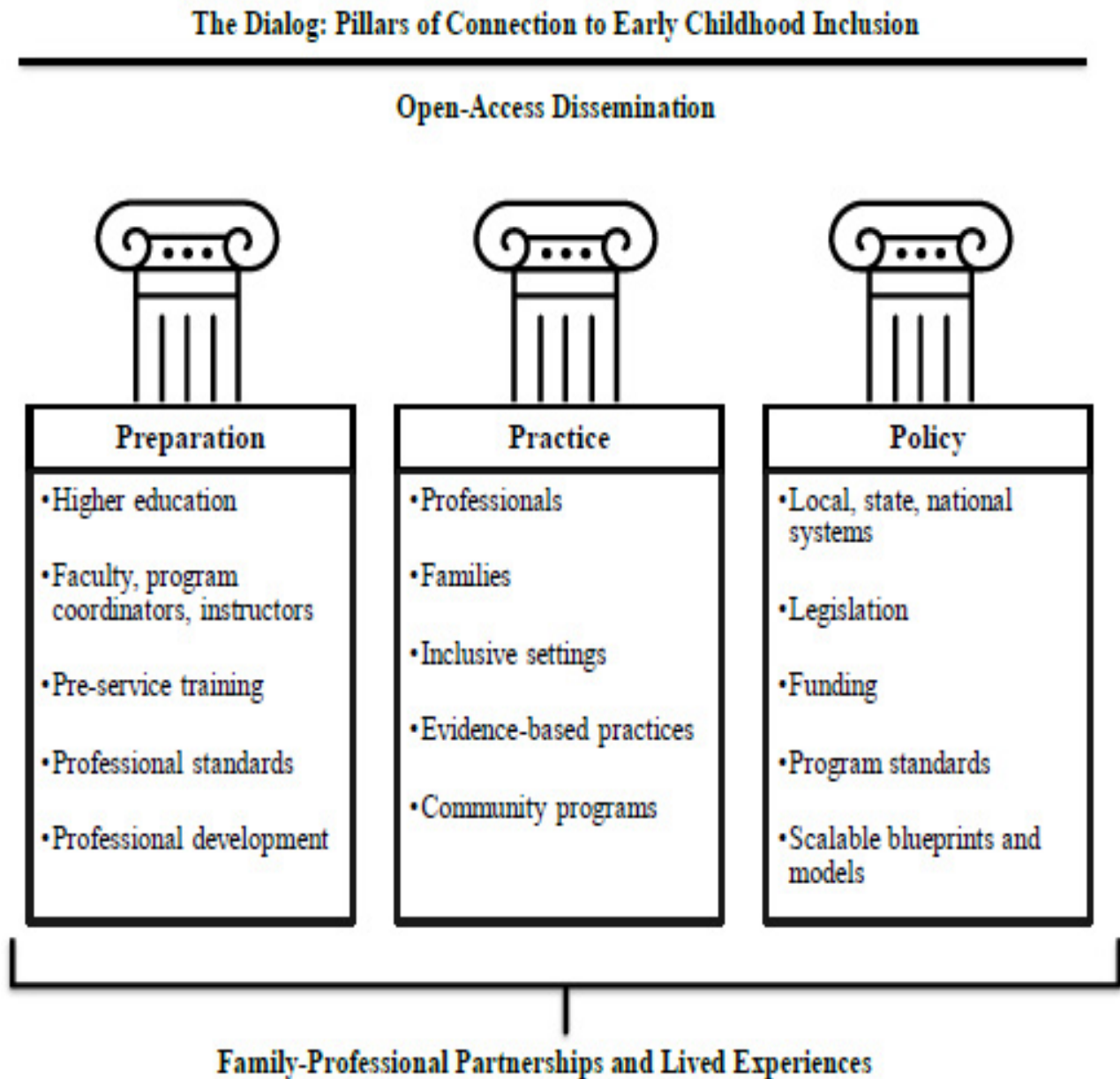
addressing these three areas together accounts for the multi-level nature of translational science and ensures systemic change rather than isolated success.

Accordingly, preparation refers to the education and training of early childhood professionals, both before they enter the field and throughout their careers. Practice refers to the direct service that providers and professionals deliver to children and

families across settings, including home, school, and community. Policy refers to the guidance, systems, and structures that shape inclusive environments, ensuring young children who benefit from additional supports can learn and grow alongside their peers, family members, and communities. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Dialog: Pillars of Connection to Early Childhood Inclusion



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Pillar 1: Using the Dialog to Strengthen Personnel Preparation

Personnel preparation serves an important role in guiding faculty in shaping knowledge, skills and competence of inclusive early childhood professionals who support children and their families. Preparation is multifaceted and usually includes a range of learning experiences, including university and college-based programs providing pre-service education to professionals before assuming roles, and ongoing training and development designed to strengthen and inform throughout a professional's career (Early Childhood Personnel Center, n.d.).

Using The Dialog in Higher Education

The articles published in *The Dialog* serve as valuable resources for faculty, instructors, and students in higher academia and personnel preparation programs. Students training to be early childhood professionals, such as early intervention providers and early childhood special education teachers, need concrete examples, case studies, and detailed descriptions of how to put evidence-based practices into action. Faculty members and instructors can direct students to The Dialog articles online, integrating both foundational and current research into early childhood and early intervention coursework. For example, in a course teaching developmental assessment, an instructor could assign an article detailing naturalistic observation tools. Students could then use that article's case study to complete a field-based learning assignment, practicing how to document a child's authentic behaviors in an inclusive classroom setting.

Academic programs must align their course content with evidence-based standards set by national early childhood organizations. For programs preparing professionals to support children with delays or disabilities, curriculum alignment should draw directly from the standards and practices established by the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). For professionals working in infant and toddler inclusive settings, these frameworks are complemented by the ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators. Faculty can explicitly connect

coursework to these combined benchmarks through core competencies in child development, family partnerships, collaboration, and inclusive instructional planning. Authors of *The Dialog* submissions should clearly articulate how program coordinators and instructors can use their manuscripts to meet these cross-disciplinary professional standards.

Additionally, undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in early childhood, early intervention, early childhood special education, inclusive, and blended training programs play a critical role in advancing the field through the contribution of new ideas, engaging in research, and translating research into practical actions. *The Dialog* encourages faculty members and instructors to collaborate with students as co-authors, researchers, and presenters, elevating their voices and contributions. Their involvement helps bridge the gap between preparation and practice while fostering the next generation of inclusive professional leaders who can help others provide welcoming, accepting environments.

Using The Dialog in Professional Development

Higher education programs are not the only pathway for preparing early childhood professionals to use inclusive practices; professional development (PD) training and materials play an equally vital role. At its core, PD provides currently employed professionals with learning experiences that advance their careers and build competencies their formal training may not have addressed. Organizations (e.g., DEC, NAEYC, ZERO-TO-THREE) and state-level programs develop these resources to support professionals already working in early childhood settings. We encourage PD professionals to embed articles published in The Dialog within their training materials and resources, strengthening the connection between research and practice.

When writing for *The Dialog*, your manuscript should provide explicit examples of how content, such as key terms, voices from the field, and practical suggestions, can be weaved into course assignments and field activities. This targeted framing enriches training materials and resources, strengthening the connection between research and practice.

Pillar 2: Using The Dialog to Strengthen Practices

While preparing a highly qualified workforce sets a critical foundation, the ultimate success of inclusion depends on how effectively that training translates into daily routines. Moving from personnel preparation to active clinical or classroom execution requires a clear bridge connecting academic knowledge to public implementation. Within this translational process, the dissemination, communication, and implementation of research findings serve as critical components of translational science (Leppin et al., 2019). Effectively sharing evidence with the public is a core responsibility of researchers and must be intentionally integrated into the research and publication process (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011).

Our audience extends directly beyond academic researchers to include practitioners, program leaders, policymakers, advocates, and families who seek evidence-based information to guide their daily work and decision-making. Recognizing these diverse needs, the journal intentionally incorporates Research-to-Practice (R2P) products to support direct engagement with and application of published data. Please see the first article in this special issue for more information on these unique publications (Mickelson & Meyer, 2026).

Learning from Diverse Experiences and Voices

The impact of early childhood research is maximized when the lived experiences of children, families, and practitioners are explicitly acknowledged and integrated throughout the research cycle. *The Dialog* prioritizes elevating these diverse community perspectives. Readers can use published articles to better understand how empirical findings connect to current real-world dilemmas facing the field. These insights give critical context to the research, helping practitioners determine how findings apply directly to the unique populations they serve and the specific settings in which they practice. This grounding allows professionals to make informed, meaningful decisions that are genuinely responsive to their localized environments.

Bridging Research and Practices

To further bridge the gap between theory and execution, the journal encourages authors to tie

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their findings directly to national benchmarks developed by leading organizations, including the DEC, NAEYC, and ZERO TO THREE. Articulating these explicit connections helps clarify the practical, ground-level implications of empirical findings for the broader field.

Recognizing that distinct stakeholders consume information differently, *The Dialog* will move beyond traditional scholarly manuscripts by offering multi-modal R2P products. Readers will be able to access collaborative dissemination materials such as R2P briefs, blogs, instructional videos, and infographics. Rather than acting as mere condensed versions of original papers, these open-access assets will be explicitly designed to translate complex academic content into practical formats that are easy to understand, implement, and share across diverse communities. Through these efforts, the journal facilitates ongoing dialogue and encourages the active application of research findings within programs, organizations, and communities. See Table 1 for resources for connecting *The Dialog* to Personnel Preparation and Ongoing Professional Development.

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Table 1

Resources to Connect The Dialog to Personnel Preparation and Ongoing Professional Development

Resource	Link to Resource
Division for Early Childhood Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education Standards	https://www.dec-sped.org/ei-ecse-standards
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Standards	https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/professional-standards-competencies
Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices	https://www.dec-sped.org/dec-recommended-practices
Early Childhood Personnel Center Cross-Disciplinary Competencies	https://ecpcta.org/cross-disciplinary-competencies/
Zero to Three	https://www.zerotothree.org/learn-professional-development/zero-to-three-critical-competencies-for-infant-toddler-educators/

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Pillar 3: Using The Dialog to Inform Policy

Translational science emphasizes that research achieves its maximum impact when it directly informs policy and systemic decision-making (Trivette & Dunst, 2013). Because *The Dialog* is a fully open-access, peer-reviewed journal, it removes the traditional financial barriers that historically blocked local leaders, educators, and community members from accessing rigorous data. This accessibility establishes *The Dialog* into an active tool that early childhood inclusive professionals can strategically use to shape classroom instruction, elevate teacher preparation, and inform institutional and state guidelines. To maximize this impact, prospective authors and readers must consider a dual lens: how to actively use the journal's existing insights to inform policy changes, and how to intentionally frame their own ground-level work to serve as a scalable policy blueprint for others.

Informing Local and Regional Program Policy

For program administrators and local leaders, *The Dialog* provides a mechanism to move beyond compliance and actively advocate for systemic policy updates within their districts or networks. Rather than approaching local school boards or funding agencies with purely anecdotal requests, professionals can leverage open-access articles as authoritative, external validation for necessary policy revisions. For example, when collaborating with institutional decision-makers to rewrite district discipline policies or student placement guidelines, leaders can share peer-reviewed articles from the journal that demonstrate the systemic value of inclusive, supportive frameworks.

Furthermore, administrators can use published empirical data to restructure district budget priorities, justifying the allocation of local funds toward continuous co-teaching resources and classroom paraeducator allocations rather than isolated, short-term professional development events. This evidence base can also be used to systematically reform district-wide inclusion models, replacing outdated self-contained placement frameworks with structural guidelines that actively implement embedded, naturalistic learning opportunities across every neighborhood campus. Using published data provides a strong, evidence-based foundation for strengthening local rules and enriching pro-

gram-wide standards.

From an author's standpoint, when considering writing for *The Dialog* based on your own programmatic successes, your manuscript should explicitly document how local policy shifts allowed those successes to happen. Prospective authors should reflect on how their ground-level data and lessons learned can be packaged so that other administrators can use them to influence their own local boards. By detailing distinct administrative realities, authors prove to decision-makers that inclusive practices are scalable solutions rather than isolated successes.

Shaping Workforce Standards and Higher Education Policy

Faculty members, professional development trainers, and researchers can use the journal to support, operationalize, and reform education policies across multiple systemic tiers. At the national level, *The Dialog* helps ground abstract professional guidelines, such as the DEC Recommended Practices, the NAEYC standards, and the ZERO TO THREE core workforce frameworks, by providing empirical data that demonstrates how these benchmarks operate in real-world environments. At the state level, these peer-reviewed findings can be strategically leveraged when partnering with state certification boards or regional teacher licensing agencies to justify shifting field experience requirements toward structured, hands-on inclusive training models. Finally, at the local and institutional levels, university faculty and technical assistance providers can use published articles to guide internal curriculum committees, reforming campus-wide course structures to align directly with modern workforce readiness standards. Rather than viewing high-level policy as an unyielding mandate, instructors can use the journal to show policymakers at every level how inclusive benchmarks function in day-to-day practice.

Strengthening Policy-Focused Family Partnerships

Effective early childhood systems rely on collaborative relationships between professionals and families to inform and improve educational policies. Practitioners and administrators can use *The Dialog* as a practical resource to strengthen their communication with families, empowering caregivers to participate as essential partners in pro-

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-gram governance and policy initiations. When working to update family engagement guidelines or program-wide transition policies, professionals can pull evidence-based frameworks directly from the journal to share with parents. Sharing these peer-reviewed, open-access frameworks provides a transparent and supportive foundation, helping professionals and families co-construct a shared language to present to school boards or advisory councils.

Conversely, when writing for *The Dialog*, prospective authors should explicitly highlight how they integrated family voices to shift local or institutional policies. Authors should reflect on how their collaborative projects can be packaged to help other educational leaders build stronger, policy-driven partnerships with the families they serve. For example, a manuscript might document how a program successfully redesigned its intake policies or routine communication standards based on direct family feedback and journal research. Ultimately, submissions to *The Dialog* offer an opportunity to connect these ground-level partnership successes to broader educational frameworks, providing readers with adaptable strategies that can help shape family collaboration guidelines and inclusive school models.

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Conclusion

Ultimately, we hope this framework becomes a tool authors return to again and again, using it to ensure every manuscript submitted to *The Dialog* reaches the professionals, students, and families working to make sure all children are welcomed and given every chance to grow in inclusive settings. By bridging the historical divide between empirical research and field reality, we can transform passive knowledge into dynamic, systemic advocacy across preparation programs, classrooms, and policy spaces. True inclusion is not an abstract ideal, but a lived reality that requires continuous coordination across research, classroom practice, and structural policy.

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