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Action research for enhancing preschool educators' competence in attending to individual children's learning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how preschool educators can develop competence in attending to individual children's learning through participation in an action research (AR) project. Attending to children's learning processes is central in preschool education, grounded in the need to plan teaching to ensure high-quality education for all children. However, research indicates that many preschool educators experience tension between educational and care missions, leading to ambivalence and uncertainty, which may challenge their ability to plan and implement teaching. Therefore, this study investigates whether AR can strengthen educators' pedagogical efforts to attend to individual learning processes. The AR project involved two preschool teams, who identified areas for pedagogical development within their own practice. The analysis explored how participation in AR was associated with changes in educators´ knowledge, confidence, and professional practice. Findings show that AR promoted shifts in educators' understanding, strengthened their confidence, and supported developments in practice that contribute to improved conditions for children's learning. Consequently, results indicate that AR can serve as a powerful tool for pedagogical improvement as well as for enhancing educators' belief in their capacity to make meaningful contributions to children's learning.

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Action research; attending to children's learning; preschool educators' competence; strengthen confidence; transformation; transformed practice

Introduction

Attending to individual children's learning processes is a central aspect of preschool education, requiring educators[1] to actively observe, interpret, and support each child's unique way of learning and developing (Bates 2019; Melasalmi, Hurme, and Ruokonen 2022; Rothuizen 2022; Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2018). This pedagogical responsibility is not only grounded in the need to plan teaching based on the children currently participating in the educational setting, but also in the broader perspective of ensuring equitable quality in early childhood education (OECD 2025; Persson 2015). Researchers point out that children's learning benefits from a holistic perspective, where teaching is designed to address diverse needs and combines a strong pedagogical foundation with methods adapted to children's current situations (Bates 2019; Melasalmi, Hurme, and Ruokonen 2022; Rothuizen 2022; Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2018). This underscores

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the importance of providing educators with opportunities to develop a pedagogical foundation rooted in ethical commitment and a practice that is responsive to children's emerging needs.

In recent years, the task of attending to individual learning processes has become increasingly complex, as demands for equity and systematic follow-up have been strengthened in Swedish preschool policy documents (Swedish Government 2010; Swedish National Agency for Education 2018). These developments highlight a growing emphasis on assessment and measurability, aimed at guaranteeing that all children receive a high-quality preschool education and are provided the necessary conditions for a successful transition to school. However, previous research (Ehrström 2023; Insulander and Svärdemo Åberg 2014; Johansson 2016) indicates that many preschool educators experience ambivalence and uncertainty regarding how to identify and analyse children's learning, particularly when it comes to interpreting individual learning processes. This uncertainty may challenge their ability to plan and implement teaching that supports each child's learning based on their unique conditions.

Moreover, several studies have highlighted how tensions between the educational and care missions in preschool has led to pedagogical dilemmas. Educators often find themselves navigating between ethical and pedagogical considerations when attending to individual children's learning (Melasalmi, Hurme, and Ruokonen 2022; Noddings 2012; Rothuizen 2022). These tensions underscore the need for developmental initiatives that can support educators in managing such challenges.

Against this background, the present study investigates how action research, or AR (Beaulieu 2013; Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014; Salo and Rönnerman 2014) can serve as a method of aiding preschool educators in their pedagogical efforts to attend to individual children's learning processes. Of particular interest is whether participation in an AR initiative can support preschool educators in changing their beliefs, which may influence their teaching and thereby improve the conditions for individual children's learning. Although some studies (Aras 2021, 2024; Bergmark 2022; Olin and Pörn 2023) have examined the role of AR in enhancing pedagogical competence in early childhood education, research focusing on preschool educators' perceptions of how such initiatives specifically contribute to their ability to attend to each child's learning process is scarce.

Aims and research questions

The study aims to explore how an AR initiative can support preschool educators in developing their understanding and competence in attending to individual children's learning. It also explores how educators express the significance of their participation in such initiatives regarding their ability to observe, respond to, and create improved conditions for children's learning, thereby contributing to greater educational equity. The research is guided by the following questions: How can AR contribute to preschool educators' competence in attending to individual children's learning processes? In what ways can AR contribute to preschool educators' perception of themselves as empowered to create improved conditions for individual children's learning?

The Swedish context

Swedish preschool education is rooted in a social-pedagogical tradition (Bennett 2005), integrating care, learning, and development. Preschool is available to children aged 1–6 years, with recommended group sizes of 6–12 children for ages 1–3 and 9–15 for ages 4–6. Despite groups often exceeding these benchmarks, staff density is relatively high by international standards.

Review of the literature

Transformative professional development (PD) for preschool educators

Many studies (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner 2017; Desimone 2009; Desimone and Stuckey 2014; Hill and Papay 2022) have explored how teachers and preschool educators can develop professionally through various initiatives. However, the findings differ regarding what is considered essential for professional development (PD) to lead to meaningful and equitable teaching practices. Hill and Papay (2022) argue that PD should be designed to support changes in practice as well as to deepen subject knowledge. Their study highlights the lack of evaluations of PD for equitable classrooms and emphasises the importance of grounding initiatives in the challenges teachers encounter in their daily work. They also advocate the use of practice-supporting tools to facilitate implementation and sustainability.

While Hill and Papay (2022) emphasise the need for PD to be grounded in teachers' everyday challenges and be supported by practical tools, other scholars have focused on essential features that promote effectiveness and sustainability across contexts. For example, Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) highlight key characteristics of effective PD: content focus, active learning, collaboration, the use of models, expert support, reflection, and long-term engagement. These key characteristics are essential for PD to result in meaningful changes in teaching and improved outcomes for children. Desimone and Stuckey (2014) also add that whether a development initiative becomes sustainable depends on whether educators understand both the pedagogical content and the theory of change underpinning the initiative. Without this dual understanding, long-term transformation is unlikely.

Using action research for developing preschool educators' competence

Action research (AR) (Beaulieu 2013; Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014; Salo and Rönnerman 2014) is increasingly recognised as a valuable approach to PD in early childhood education and care (ECEC). It fosters both individual growth and collective learning by encouraging educators to critically reflect on their practice, engage in dialogue with colleagues and researchers, and deepen their understanding of teaching and learning.

A recurring theme in research concerns changes that occur in teachers over time. Several studies (e.g. Bergmark 2023; Olin and Pörn 2023; Parkhouse et al. 2021) demonstrate that educators involved in AR often change their professional identity, from seeing themselves as knowledge transmitters to becoming reflective practitioners and active agents of change. For example, Parkhouse et al. (2021) explored how teachers working in

early childhood settings engaged with an AR project aimed at promoting more equitable and culturally responsive education. They found that through structured reflection and experimentation, teachers developed a deeper understanding of the contextual and structural factors influencing their practice. This awareness enabled them to implement significant changes and re-evaluate their roles within the educational system. Similarly, Olin and Pörn (2023) examined how collaboration between teachers and researchers in two AR projects contributed to professional transformation. Their findings emphasise the importance of dialogue, collegial learning, and joint reflection in supporting teachers' development. Participants reported that they moved from initial uncertainty about their professional capacity to a more confident approach; one where they viewed themselves as capable of contributing to knowledge production. The study underscores the significance of building trust in one's own abilities and the value of collaborative exploration in promoting sustainable professional learning. Bergmark (2023) further contributes to this discussion by analysing what teachers learn, in terms of both content and process. The study highlights that teacher learning is not only about acquiring new knowledge but also involves a broader professional transformation, including changes in how educators think, act, and relate to others. Importantly, the study emphasises the need for engagement among principals, teachers, and researchers to ensure that AR initiatives lead to meaningful and lasting change.

The integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experience is another recurring theme in research (Aras 2021; Stavholm et al. 2021; Bergmark and Westman 2022). Stavholm et al. (2021) investigated how a preschool team participating in focus group interviews appropriated the concept of metacommunication. Findings illustrate how participants' understanding of the concept evolved through a combination of theoretical reading and practical reflection, supported by video recordings of their own practice. This interplay between theory and practice enabled educators to express and deepen their pedagogical thinking in relation to everyday situations.

Other studies (e.g. Bergmark 2022; Stavholm, Lagerlöf, and Wallerstedt 2022) emphasise how AR can contribute to a redefinition of the teaching role in preschool. Bergmark (2022) examined teachers' motivations and expectations when participating in AR and found that these developed over time and influenced both their engagement and the perceived outcomes of the project. Stavholm, Lagerlöf, and Wallerstedt (2022) focused specifically on how a developmental initiative, based on focus group interviews, influenced preschool teachers' reasoning about their role in children's play. Findings revealed a shift in educators' perceptions – from perceiving their presence in play as possibly limiting to seeing it as crucial for teaching to take place. This re-evaluation contributed to a transformed professional self-understanding.

Finally, Bergmark (2020) emphasises how a caring and responsive relationship between researchers and teachers can promote mutual understanding and shared responsibility. AR, in this context, becomes a collaborative exploration through which power is distributed and professional learning is grounded in trust and reciprocity. Collectively, these studies indicate that AR can strengthen preschool educators' professional identity, pedagogical insight, and capacity to foster equitable and responsive learning environments.

Theoretical framework

This study explores how educators can develop their competence through participation in an AR project. Since the study focuses on educators' participation in AR as a development initiative, I use Desimone's theory of change (Desimone 2009) to analyse whether and how the project contributed to changes in teachers' competence. The framework (see Figure 1) can accommodate multiple theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, and can, therefore, be employed to examine teachers' learning from different perspectives. However, its application within early childhood education research remains relatively unexplored.

According to Desimone (2009), two components are essential for studying teachers' PD. The first component aims to identify the core features that characterise effective PD. The second seeks to establish a theory that is useful for demonstrating how PD influences both educators and children.

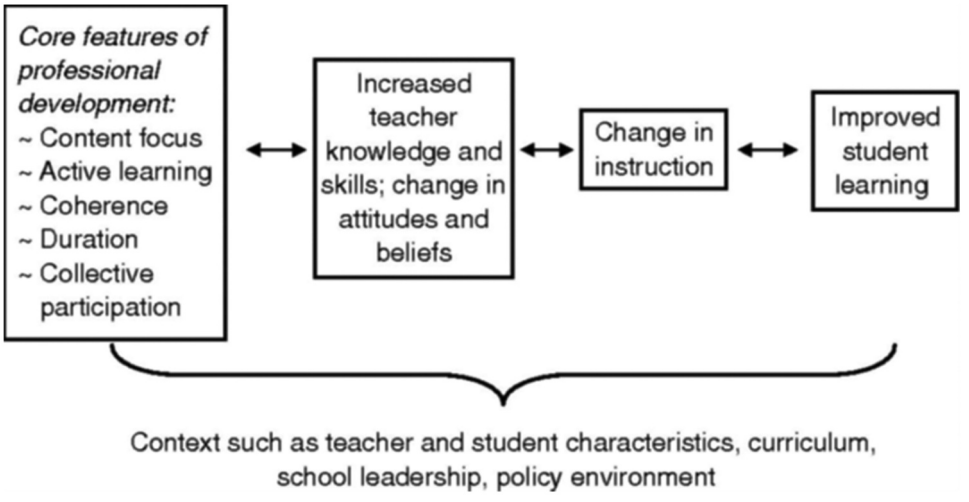

Figure 1. Desimone´s (2009) proposed conceptual framework for studying the impact of professional development.

Desimone conceptualises her framework for examining the impact of PD across four interrelated domains: teachers' PD experiences, their knowledge and skills, their instructional practices, and student achievement. These areas, in turn, consist of distinct elements.

This study focuses on educators' evolving knowledge, skills, and beliefs rather than on children's learning progress. Accordingly, changes in children's learning outcomes have not been analysed through Desimone's model. Instead, the analysis focuses on how educators perceive their efforts to create conditions that support children's developing understanding.

The results of the study are presented according to the elements 'increased teacher knowledge and skills' and 'change in attitudes and beliefs'. To illustrate how these changes may occur as a result of participating in an AR project, the educators' views are also analysed in relation to Desimone's core features of PD. These features (Desimone 2009; Desimone and Stuckey 2014) serve as guiding principles for evaluating the impact

of the PD initiative and are central to understanding how such a development initiative can promote meaningful change in educational practice. In addition, AR also works very well based on these core features.

A presentation of the core features follows: Content focus refers to activities designed around specific subject matter, with the aim of fostering learning through engagement with that content. In this study, the AR did not have a specific subject focus; therefore, this criterion has been broadened to address the study's focus area, namely attention to learning. Active learning concerns how teachers acquire knowledge by being actively involved and participatory, in contrast to passively receiving information; for example, through feedback or discussions. Within the AR format, learning is active, meaning that participants themselves drive their own learning and development. Coherence pertains to the extent to which PD aligns with educators' knowledge and beliefs, and the preschool's guidelines, objectives, and planned activities. Duration underscores the importance of sustaining PD efforts over time to enable intellectual and pedagogical transformation (Desimone 2009; Desimone and Stuckey 2014). However, these findings primarily concern schools, whereas Kirsten and Lindvall (2024) found evidence of positive effects even from shorter development initiatives in preschool settings. Collective participation emphasises the value of teachers from the same institution engaging in PD together, thereby creating a learning community through interaction and dialogue.

Desimone's five core features are often used as guidelines for evaluating the impact of development initiatives, but they have been criticised for having emerged from review studies that do not demonstrate causal relationships in the developmental initiatives that were studied (Sims et al. 2025). Instead, Sims et al. propose the IMTP model (Insights, Motivation, Techniques, Practice integration). However, the IMTP model does not cover all of Desimone's factors, lacking a focus on content and coherence.

Content focus and coherence are two of the core features in Desimone's framework that have been subject to criticism (Lindvall 2017). While content focus often improves teachers' subject knowledge and instructional practices, it rarely leads to better student outcomes (Kennedy 2016). Moreover, coherence has not been perceived uniformly but has been interpreted in various ways in research. In this regard, Lindvall and Ryve (2019) identify three distinct ways of conceptualising coherence in relation to PD, which shape how teachers are positioned within such initiatives. When coherence is defined as alignment with external goals, teachers are positioned mainly as implementers of predetermined standards. When it refers to internal programme consistency, they act as participants following structured activities designed by others. Finally, when coherence is created through shared goal-setting, teachers take on a collaborative role, contributing to the formulation of objectives. However, Desimone's framework remains relevant and continues to be used in several recent studies (Shin and Kim 2021; Swai, Liu, and Wu 2024). In using the five core features for evaluating the PD initiative, the study may offer insights into content focus and coherence in AR initiatives, thereby contributing to ongoing discussions on PD efforts for educators, particularly in the preschool context.

Method

This study adopts an AR design that aims to promote change through collaborative inquiry and reflective practice. The design facilitates close collaboration between

a researcher and participating preschool educators, intending to support educators in developing a deeper understanding of how to attend to individual children's learning processes. AR is carried out as a process, often visualised as a 'spiral' (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014) symbolising how the development process begins with a question posed by the participants, followed by action and observation. These actions become the basis for participants' reflections and give rise to new suggestions that need to be tested in practice. The theme of the AR was established by the participating researcher, and the participants chose to take part based on their interests. Within this theme, participants identified their specific areas of focus, and their work was conducted in accordance with the iterative process represented by the 'spiral'.

Participants

Information about the study was shared within a distance-based preschool teacher education programme, which resulted in contact being established with a preschool principal. This contact enabled the implementation of the AR project within the principal's preschool unit, where the principal invited two preschool teams to participate. The project, for which no compensation was provided, involved five female preschool educators from two separate work teams. One team consisted of a preschool teacher and a childcare worker, while the other included a preschool teacher and two childcare workers, one of whom had additional training. Collectively, their professional experience ranged from 4 to 46 years.

Although both teams operated within the same school district, they had not previously collaborated or engaged in joint reflective practices. Moreover, the educators had not systematically used strategies aimed at attending to individual children's learning. The principal and assistant principal were present during the reflection sessions. While they remained largely passive and only contributed occasionally, they expressed interest in the project and attended the sessions to support the educators' PD. Despite initial uncertainty about engaging in open dialogue regarding pedagogical methods and areas for development, all participants described the opportunity to take part in the project as exciting and motivating.

Procedure

The AR project involved the two preschool teams identifying areas for pedagogical development within their own practice. Based on these identified areas, the educators implemented targeted actions aimed at improving situations or addressing dilemmas they perceived as problematic within their educational practice. One team wished to develop its reading environment, while the other team aimed to enhance children's participation during circle time activities. Participants, along with the principal, assistant principal, and the researcher, met in reflection sessions six times over a 6-month period, from August 2024 to January 2025. The reflection meetings were conducted alternately at the preschools where the two preschool teams were based. Each reflection session lasted 2 h and was audio-recorded, resulting in a total of 12 h of recorded material. These recordings were transcribed verbatim and served as data for analysis.

Throughout the project, participants engaged with scholarly texts and articles related to the theme of 'attending to and following each child's learning process', which were selected by the researcher. These readings were discussed in relation to the educators' selected areas of development and used to interpret their pedagogical challenges through theoretical perspectives. The content of the reflection sessions was framed by the preschool curriculum, research on didactics and teaching methods, educational and ethical perspectives on preschool education, and concepts from 'the caring relation in teaching' (Noddings 2012) as an approach to attending to individual children.

The reflection sessions were carried out as follows: first, a discussion was initiated based on the text the participants had read in preparation for the session. The participants highlighted what they found to be particularly interesting or difficult to understand in the text. The researcher acted as a facilitator, encouraging the educators to share their thoughts and providing clarifications. The focus then shifted to the participants' chosen projects, and the two teams shared their development processes. Both teams documented their work through photos and video recordings, which were used as material for collective reflection.

Each session concluded with the educators deciding on the next steps and identifying the support they needed from other participants in the project for their ongoing development work. The educators then returned to their practice to test and refine their approaches. This process enabled both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Jepson Wigg and Ehrlin 2018). Finally, during the last session, the researcher asked the participants questions to encourage them to reflect on their developmental journey.

The 6-month study enabled trust-building and contextual understanding, supported by ongoing dialogue and critical reflection. The AR design, grounded in relationality and reflexivity, ensured continuous reassessment of actions and fostered ethically grounded research. Since the development areas focused on improving teaching practices, the children participating in preschool were naturally involved in the project and could appear in photos and video recordings. The research data only consist of the participants' notes and audio recordings from reflection meetings, but due to the fact that the educators' reflections were based on photos and video recordings, it was still important to ensure any ethical obligations surrounding the project were followed. Therefore, ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2024-01435-01) and written informed consent was collected from all participants and the guardians of the involved children. Overall, the study adhered to the ethical guidelines provided by the Swedish Research Council (2025).

Analysis

This analysis was conducted deductively and guided by Desimone's (2009) theoretical framework on teacher change. A directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) was applied to examine how preschool educators expressed changes in their PD through participation in an AR project. To identify the unit of analysis for the study – that is, the parts of the transcripts where preschool teachers talk about their work/their competence in attending to individual children's learning and about their participation in the AR – I have used Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework based on the elements: 'change in attitudes and beliefs', 'change in instruction', and 'educators' perceptions of improved conditions for children's learning', as well as the core features of PD: 'content focus', 'active learning', 'coherence', 'duration', and 'collective participation' (see Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of meaning units based on Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework.

Educators talk about their understanding and competence in attending to individual children's learning	**Meaning unit**
Changes in attitudes and beliefs	- How have you changed your understanding of paying attention to individual children? [. . .] - With . . . awareness, I think we can say 'a lot'. That we think, one step extra. That you give it . . . one more thought.
Changes in instruction	- How come you decided to start asking the kids um . . . ? [. . .] - Well because we thought, there's a reason why we're not succeeding in there. - If the kids don't . . . enjoy themselves, that is, aren't uhh interested in being there. Then we wanted to know what they think.
Perceptions of improved conditions for children's learning	- And then the result, you can see that it's . . . so much better! So, you see the difference . . . when you capture the children's thoughts . . . ehh . . . and you compare it to what *we*, what *we* just think.
Educators talk about their participation in the action research initiative	**Meaning unit**
Core features of professional development – Content focus	- How can this be significant when talking about paying attention to each child in their learning processes? Why are these didactic questions important? - Because you can think about individual children, what these children need, how to do it, and why.
Core features of professional development – Active learning	- [. . .] so otherwise, you don't know anything if you don't try, so to speak. It's kind of a learning experience for us too, to try and see 'does this work or does it not work' and then try something new . . . until you find something that actually works.
Core features of professional development – Coherence	- But I was thinking about what you said, this thing about right and wrong, ehh, I might think something is right but maybe (xxx) doesn't think so. So, we must have a discussion about that . . . and it's not certain that any of us is actually right. - And it's really not about us being right or wrong, but rather that we need to know we're doing what's best for the child.
Core features of professional development – Duration	[. . .] six months, does that feel like a good amount of time. . . to carry out a project like this? - Yes, I think so. But sometimes we felt, as you said, that four weeks went by really fast. We don't have enough time, if you . . . want to make a major change or have a goal you're working towards . . .
Core features of professional development – Collective participation	[one team to the other] . . . we listen to you, and can share with you, because we come from the outside and can listen in a different way . . . and you give us something, if you see other possibilities for us instead. - Yes, it's easy to get stuck.

These analytical elements were used to explore how educators developed an understanding of the purpose and strategies for attending and following each child's learning process, thereby contributing to creating improved conditions for children's learning. The results from the analysis are presented as four themes. Each theme is presented in greater detail within the categories associated with it, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of the themes and categories related to the elements 'increased teacher knowledge and skills' and 'change in attitudes and beliefs' (Desimone 2009).

Themes	Categories
Shifts in preschool educators' understanding	Educators' changed view of the child
	Educators' changed views of their professional responsibility
Preschool educators' transformed practices and strategies	Transformed practices and strategies through professional responsibility
	Transformed strategies based on children's influence
	Strategies transformed through children's interests
Preschool educators' perceptions of improved conditions for children's learning	Professional responsibility and deliberate strategies for learning
	Improved conditions for learning based on children's influence
	Improved conditions for learning based on children's interests and needs
Developing competence in attending to individual children's learning processes through participating in an AR project	Content focus
	Active learning
	Coherence
	Duration
	Collective participation

Findings

The AR initiative contributed to shifts in educators' understanding, strengthened their confidence, and led to changes in practices and strategies aimed at improving conditions for children's learning.

Shifts in preschool educators' understanding

When participants discussed attending to each child's learning, a shift in their understanding emerged over the course of the project, both in relation to their views of children and their professional responsibilities.

Educators' changed view of the child

During the project, educators in both teams developed greater trust in children's abilities and perspectives. Rather than relying primarily on their own assumptions, they increasingly involved children in decisions about activities and the learning environment.

This shift was evident during circle time. Initially, educators used seating cards they had created for the children. As their trust in children's capabilities increased, the children were invited to create their own cards, which was perceived to promote their willingness to participate. The educators also broadened their understanding of participation. Whereas they had initially emphasised the importance of active participation, they came to recognise that children could engage in shared activities in different ways and on their own terms: '*everyone* participate *in their own way, based on their individual conditions*.'

A similar change was evident in the reading environment. Rather than directing children's choices, the educators came to recognise the value of allowing children to select books from the mobile library based on their own interests:

> They borrowed books, and it was completely spontaneous. We did not direct them. It was entirely their initiative.

Overall, the findings indicate a shift from an educator-centred approach towards greater confidence in children's competence, with children's perspectives increasingly informing pedagogical decision-making and planning.

Educators' changed views of their professional responsibility

During the project, educators developed a greater awareness of their professional responsibility. Initially, their work was characterised by uncertainty regarding how to develop educational practice. When a colleague was absent, the team tended to postpone decisions and planning, indicating a limited sense of agency:

> . . .because you had been away quite a lot, we said that we would wait until you came back so that we could discuss together how we should proceed.

The educators also described limited time and uncertainty about how to address children's individual needs in practice. Gradually, however, they began to experiment with new ways of working and to adapt the educational environment based on children's needs. This change was particularly evident in the second team's work with the reading environment. Rather than simply noting that children avoided the room, they explored the reasons through conversations with the children and used these insights to improve the environment. Toward the end of the project, the educators described increased professional awareness and more reflective planning:

> Our awareness increased considerably. We thought several steps ahead and reflected more on different aspects of our practice than we had before.

Overall, educators moved from uncertainty and dependence on others' direction towards a more reflective approach, actively analysing challenges and developing practice in response to children's needs.

Preschool educators' transformed practices and strategies

During the development initiative, the educators developed a deeper understanding that recognising and attending to each child's learning process was a central aspect of teaching. This understanding led to changes in their pedagogical practices and strategies.

Transformed practices and strategies through professional responsibility

One example was the redesign of reading activities to ensure that all children had regular opportunities to participate in reading and shared reading experiences:

> We needed to make some adjustments and integrated the reading initiative into this work. Now, every child has opportunities for reading and shared reading experiences from Monday to Friday. We sit in groups based on age.

The educators organised reading sessions in smaller groups and introduced visual symbols to indicate which children would participate in specific reading activities. These changes reflected a more systematic approach to ensuring that each child received opportunities for participation and learning.

Transformed strategies based on children's influence

In their efforts to develop the reading environment, the first team realised that their previous initiatives had not achieved the desired results. Rather than continuing to rely on their own assumptions, they began to explore how the children themselves experienced the environment.

> We thought there had must be a reason why we´re not succeeding in there. . . We wanted to know what they were thinking. Why? And, as I said, the didactic questions: *Where*, *Why*, and *When* would you like to listen to or read books?

This shift illustrated how children's perspectives and experiences increasingly became a basis for pedagogical decision-making. Instead of viewing children primarily as participants in adult-designed activities, the educators involved them in developing the reading environment and educational content.

Strategies transformed through children's interests

The second team similarly described how they developed a greater understanding of the importance of building on children's interests and perspectives. They began asking children what they wanted to discuss during circle time and used the responses as a starting point for planning. At the same time, they broadened their understanding of participation, recognising that children could be engaged in shared activities in different ways. Another strategy involved allowing children to create personalised seating cards based on their interests.

> Researcher: Why do you think the cards made such a big difference?
>
> Participant: Well, this is something they got to do themselves. . . [. . .] So they have something of their own; it´s personal.

The educators explained that each child designed an individual seating card that was later used during circle time. This strategy created opportunities for participation, while incorporating children's interests into the organisation of everyday activities.

Overall, the educators reported that the development initiative transformed their teaching practice. Children's interests, needs, and perspectives increasingly guided teaching, resulting in a more responsive and child-centred pedagogy.

Preschool educators' perceptions of improved conditions for children's learning

Both teams described how the AR project improved conditions for children's learning through strengthened professional responsibility and greater attention to children's participation and engagement.

Professional responsibility and deliberate strategies for learning

Initially, the educators described their efforts to create conditions for supporting each child's learning, while acknowledging the challenge of meeting all children's needs. A lack of time was identified as a main reason behind this dilemma.

> Researcher: What could be a dilemma for you, for example?

> Educator: Simply not having enough time.

This contrasts with their perceptions after the project was completed, when they instead emphasised professional responsibility and the importance of deliberate strategies for attending to each child´s learning.

Improved conditions for learning based on children's influence

They described how listening to children and incorporating their perspectives resulted in more meaningful learning opportunities.

> You could really see the difference when you capture the children's thoughts and compare them with what we think. The children's perspectives and our perspectives. You achieve so much more when you listen to the children.

The first team particularly noted a change in children's engagement with reading. When children were involved in shaping the reading environment, their interest increased considerably. By the end of the project, children spontaneously chose to spend time in the reading area. They became absorbed in books and engaged in reading, in contrast to the initial phase when the environment was primarily a space where children wanted to run around.

Improved conditions for learning based on children's interests and needs

Participating in the project encouraged educators in the first team to develop their teaching practices, both in terms of planning intentional content and considering how to make it appealing to each child. Rather than offering the same content to all children, they increasingly connected learning experiences to children's interests and everyday lives, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> You can offer a child who have only participated once: 'Which book do you like?'. . . You can capture the interest of a child whose father drives a truck and who is really interested in listening to a book about that . . ..

Similarly, educators in the second team reported listening more closely to children and designing activities based on their interests. For example, they began asking: 'What would you like us to talk about during circle time today?' and adopting activities to support children ´s engagement and participation. Educators also found that allowing children to select books from the mobile library increased participation in circle time. As one educator noted:

> During that circle time, he sat still. He, the boy who usually chose to walk away. And he chose the spider book.

These approaches enabled the educators to attend more closely to each child's learning process in relation to books and reading.

Overall, the AR project contributed to a shift in educators' focus from what was not working to what children needed for learning to be successful. This increased educators' confidence and sense of empowerment, strengthening their ability to create improved conditions for children's learning. These changes were made possible through the AR project in various ways:

Developing competence in attending to individual children's learning processes through participating in an AR project

Content focus

The participants expressed an understanding that the texts they were expected to read before each session could be related to and contribute to the shared discussions and reflections. Reading texts helped them see connections between their own actions and research, as illustrated in the following extract:

> Researcher: How, then, might this be meaningful when talking about noticing each child's learning process? Why do these didactic questions become important?
>
> Participant: Because you start thinking about individual children, what they need, how to act, and why. What is the purpose of this? Why should we do it this way? And it's important to find . . . the right answer . . . for each child.

After reading a text on didactics, participants requested texts focusing on the content of education to shift their attention toward documenting children's learning *about* something. The texts supported their practical work, as various theoretical concepts presented in the texts helped them think. For example, discussing and using Noddings' (Noddings 2012) concept of caring for and responding to each child became a strategy for developing their reading environment.

> Participant: Because we *paid attention* and *listened* . . . and *had a dialogue* with them, and then *thought critically*: 'What should we do?' So that . . . this room wouldn't feel scary or . . . so we could engage more children in there.

Shortcomings in personal responsibility for reading the texts became evident. Uncertainty about what to read, forgetting texts at home, or finding them difficult to understand hindered their use as a basis for discussion. However, participants highlighted the joint discussions as valuable for engaging with didactic issues and reflecting on individual children's needs and what actions are therefore required. They also stressed the importance of a knowledgeable, well-informed discussion facilitator, noting that such conversations were essential for maintaining focus and directing attention, as shown in this excerpt:

> Researcher: Do you feel that you've received any support from me [. . .]?
>
> Participant: Yes.
>
> Participant: Especially in staying on topic.
>
> Participant: Yes, to help structure things. But you've also pointed things out to us, I feel. Or brought us back sometimes. Umm, when we maybe drifted off topic, but . . . 'have you thought about this', you'd say.

Active learning

Between the reflection sessions, educators practiced and experimented with suggestions raised during those meetings. They noted that without testing these suggestions, they would not know what actually works, as illustrated by the following quote:

> Otherwise, you don't really learn anything if you're not allowed to try. It's a learning experience for us as well, to try things out and see, 'Does this work, or does it not?'

Coherence

Participants emphasised the importance of aligning the development initiative with their everyday practice and existing goals. They valued shared documents and tools for building common understanding, as well as time for joint reflection to strengthen collective insights into children's learning processes.

During all project sessions, the principal and assistant principal were present, although they did not actively participate in the development work or discussions. Their presence reflected an interest in the project´s focus and a desire to better understand the organisational conditions needed for educators to attend to each child's learning process. As one leader explained, she wanted to understand:

> what is required of me as a leader to provide support so that the educators have the opportunity to attend to each child's learning process.

This reflects a leadership perspective concerned with creating conditions for educators to engage with and respond to children's ongoing learning processes.

Duration

Participants met once a month, which they considered beneficial for reading the assigned texts and for practicing their planned actions. They emphasised the importance of repeating their actions multiple times. When one session was rescheduled to take place only two weeks after the previous one, participants found it difficult to make time to read and work with the provided matrices.

> . . .two weeks, I felt, went by quickly. So, I thought a month was good, because then you have time to do . . . a few things. Since we have a lot of other things going on as well.

Furthermore, participants emphasised the importance of mutual trust during the reflection sessions, which was something that developed over the course of the project. They noted that when they felt safe, the discussions became more constructive.

Collective participation

At the first session, participants expressed doubting their own knowledge and feeling uncertain within the group, as the two teams had not previously worked together. Although they were excited about the project, they also described feeling stressed about giving and receiving feedback.

> Participant: . . . and I really appreciate the meeting structure, that everyone gets a chance to speak and that you wait for your turn or are invited to contribute . . . I think that's really good. Because even if I don't have much to add at that moment, I still get to share the little I've noticed or taken in. I like that.

Over time, participants felt comfortable asking the other team about challenges and areas for development. Conclusions and suggestions exchanged during reflection sessions revealed strategies applicable to their own practice.

> Participant: Wow, what a privilege we have, getting to do this. I mean, this is something everyone should get to do . . . because somewhere, you say something, or you notice something, and then we start finding the solutions ourselves too. Umm, it really gets the thinking going . . .

Gaining insight into others' perspectives broadened their approach to dilemmas, and when suggestions were perceived as helpful, educators were more willing to implement them repeatedly.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how AR can contribute to preschool educators' development of competence in attending to individual children's learning processes. In this section, the results of the study are discussed in relation to previous research on PD and Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework.

Preschool educators' strengthened competencies

Drawing on Desimone's (2009) core features, the analysis highlights how preschool educators express that the development initiative has contributed to strengthening their competencies. Findings underscore the importance of integrating theoretical input with practical reflection, as highlighted by Stavholm et al. (2021) and Bergmark and Westman (2022). Participants engaging with research literature and reflecting on their own practice contribute to the development of new perspectives and broader pedagogical thinking. Concepts from Noddings (2012), such as listening, dialogue, critical thinking, and reflective response and connections between disciplines and life itself, were cited as valuable tools for planning teaching based on children's needs. Listening to children to support learning aligns with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, affirming their right to participate in matters that affect them. The significance of content focus – interpreted in this study through a broader didactic orientation – contributed to educators' conceptualisation, supporting their thinking, personal understanding, and professional practice. This is an important finding adding to the discussion on the relevance of content focus in PD.

Collaboration and mutual support emerged as key factors in the professional transformation process. Participants valued structured reflection sessions and the opportunity to contribute their own practical knowledge, which aligns with Bergmark's (2020) emphasis on trust and reciprocity in professional learning. The study also confirms the significance of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Jepson Wigg and Ehrlin 2018) in reshaping educators' beliefs, which in turn influence instructional practice (Desimone 2009).

An important result was that leadership support was identified as crucial, encompassing the importance of principals listening to educators' needs and providing both affirmation and challenge, contributing to their professional growth. This is consistent with Lindvall and Ryve's (2019) findings on how teachers are positioned in relation to PD. In this study, coherence is fostered through shared goal-setting between educators and principals, with teachers assuming a collaborative, negotiating role, strengthening their sense of empowerment. The study also demonstrates that educators' motivation evolved during the project, particularly as they observed tangible improvements in how they created conditions for individual children's learning and saw the effects of their efforts on children's learning. This aligns with results from Bergmark's (2022) study, which showed that teachers' motivation changed during their participation in an AR initiative, subsequently influencing both their engagement and the perceived outcomes of the project. Furthermore, the current study's

participants reported increased attentiveness to children's voices and greater confidence in setting boundaries, supported by a clearer understanding of pedagogical goals. This differs from research suggesting that a content focus in PD rarely leads to improved student outcomes (Kennedy 2016), when 'content focus' solely pertains to learning subject matter knowledge. Instead, this study underscores the importance of adopting a broader didactic focus when implementing development initiatives. These findings were also supported by Parkhouse et al. (2021), whose study shows that participants developed a deeper understanding and increased awareness of structural and contextual factors through their participation in an AR initiative.

Ultimately, the AR initiative led to a shift in focus from solving immediate problems to identifying what children need to feel safe and engaged. This is important from the holistic perspective adopted in Swedish preschools, in which teaching is designed to meet children's diverse needs and integrates a strong pedagogical foundation with methods adapted to children's current situations (Bates 2019; Melasalmi, Hurme, and Ruokonen 2022; Rothuizen 2022; Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2018). This study demonstrates how AR can promote these dimensions, contributing to preschool educators' PD and improved conditions for individual children's learning.

Preschool teachers feeling empowered and having confidence in their competence

Drawing on Desimone's (2009) core features of effective PD, the analysis also reveals that the AR initiative contributed to preschool educators perceiving themselves as empowered to create improved conditions for children's learning by enhancing understanding of pedagogical strategies and purposes.

One of the central findings of this study is the shift in preschool educators' self-perception from uncertainty in their professional role to a strengthened sense of competence and confidence. Initially, the participants expressed hesitation and doubted their ability to attend individual children's learning processes. However, through their engagement in the AR initiative, they experienced a transformation in how they viewed their pedagogical responsibilities, a finding that has also been reported in previous research (Olin and Pörn 2023; Stavholm, Lagerlöf, and Wallerstedt 2022). Structured reflection, collegial dialogue, and theoretical input enabled educators to articulate and critically examine their practices, which is consistent with Bergmark's (2023) findings. The opportunity to contribute their own practical knowledge while simultaneously receiving support from peers and researchers, promoted a sense of mutual respect and recognition. This collaborative environment allowed educators to develop trust in their own abilities, aligning with previous research emphasising the importance of professional confidence for sustainable development (Bergmark 2020; Olin and Pörn 2023). By offering educators the opportunity to take on a collaborative role and contribute to formulating goals, they were able to participate in creating coherence in education. Thus, this study underscores the importance of coherence in PD initiatives, which has previously been criticised as a hallmark of effective PD, and demonstrates how AR can serve as a powerful tool not only for pedagogical improvement but also for enhancing educators' belief in their capacity to make meaningful contributions to children's learning.

Implications

This study suggests that participation in AR can support preschool educators in developing the competence needed to attend to individual children's learning processes. Through content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation (Desimone 2009), educators transformed their perspectives and pedagogical practices, thereby enhancing learning opportunities. The findings highlight the importance of a shared understanding within the teaching team and a common focus on each child's learning in creating supportive conditions for all children's development and learning, which may contribute to greater educational equity.

Limitations

A limitation of this study concerns the principals' presence during the reflection sessions, which may have influenced educators' participation and contributions, despite the principals largely maintaining a passive role. In addition, staff shortages occasionally hindered participation in the early stages of the study; this challenge was mitigated by appointing replacement educators. Furthermore, although the theoretical input was considered beneficial and enhanced participants' learning, they found it difficult to consistently utilise the matrix tools introduced as part of the initiative. This may be due to the short duration of the project, as effective use of such tools requires time for reflection and integration (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner 2017; Hill and Papay 2022). This could be explored in future research.

Note

1. In Sweden, preschool teachers with a bachelor's degree and childminders cooperate in work teams. The concept of 'preschool educators' includes both professional categories.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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