

(Re)framing Early Childhood Education: A Critical Reflection Through Macrocosmic and Inclusive Lenses

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Abstract

This conceptual study explores the implications of multiculturalism on the practice and pedagogy of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Adopting an inclusion lens, it seeks to understand ways in which different ideas about ECEC have been developed and codified. In a global context, with competing and evolving values and imperatives, it can be difficult to establish and maintain consistent principles on the care and education of young children. In Australia, a multicultural country, with large numbers of recent immigrants entering the early childhood workforce, these differing views of the child can present challenges with parents, colleagues and the children themselves. This article unpacks some of the contemporary perspectives in Australia, focusing on intercultural collaborations. We share case studies from our own work in teacher education to show how differing perspectives can be shared and celebrated. We introduce multidisciplinary, multi-contextual perspectives on the future of ECEC and aim to bring curiosity and openness to diverse insights on what ECEC is and can be.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Inclusion, Responsive Pedagogy, Initial Teacher Education

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Introduction: Early Childhood Education in a Globalised World

We live in an era of globalisation - a period marked by unprecedented human mobility, cross-cultural exchange, and the emergence of increasingly diverse communities. Within this context, early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings have become microcosms of multicultural societies, reflecting the complex interplay of migration, global interconnectedness, and evolving social dynamics (Faas & Wasmuth, 2019). Australia, like many other nations, is experiencing profound and complex demographic shifts, with its population now characterised by rich, vibrant and dynamic cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and social plurality (ABS, 2025). This diversity is vividly visible in early learning environments, influencing the experiences of children, families, and educators. Such demographic shifts challenge traditional assumptions about the image of the child, families, childhood, care, play, and pedagogy (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013). Catering to these dynamics requires inclusive, reflexive, and socially just approaches to early childhood education that encompass societal and global phenomena. This paper adopts a broader macrocosmic inclusive lens to explore and reflect on the complexities of multiculturalism as experienced within ECEC in Australia and globally. Drawing on local and international perspectives, we explore how global movements and cultural diversity influence and reshape conceptions of childhood, the image of the child, responsive early childhood education practice and initial teacher education. ECEC graduates ought to be well-informed about global perspectives. Our primary aim in this article is to critically analyse and reflect on global dynamics at play, and to inform the readers about how early learning contexts can be influenced by these paradigm shifts. These reflections consider potential impacts on initial teacher education programs, ongoing professional development, teaching pedagogy, and engagement with interconnected stakeholders and systems.

Diversity in early childhood settings extends beyond cultural and linguistic indicators. It also encompasses historical and political perspectives, family structures and values, socio-economic status, disability, gender identity, belief systems, and many more perspectives. In diverse global contexts, ECEC is grounded in culturally responsive epistemologies, languages, and natural environments. For example, some Scandinavian models emphasise outdoor, risky, play-based learning that aligns with national values and perspectives on democracy and human rights and that positions the image of the child as capable and competent (Garvis, et al., 2025), while Indigenous communities in Australia focus on learning through yarning, connection to land, Country, and kinship (Cantley, 2024; Dockett & Macdonald, 2017). In contrast, early childhood education in many Asian countries is more instruction-based, with differing cultural perspectives on play as a vehicle for learning (Bautista, 2023). We also know that access to early learning opportunities is neither universal nor equitable (OECD, 2025).

Globalisation has fundamentally reshaped ECEC, transcending economic and political influences to profoundly alter sociocultural dimensions of pedagogy, family engagement, linguistic practices, and constructions of childhood (Arslan, 2025; Branco, 2009). This globalised reality positions young children as emergent global citizens, developing within contexts of linguistic multiplicity, cultural hybridity, and fluid identities (Williams & Samuelsson, 2022). Culturally sustaining pedagogies have transitioned from aspirational to

imperative - essential for fostering authentic belonging and meaningful engagement and equity (Flint, et al., 2021). This paradigm shift demands that educators leverage socio-cultural knowledge while engaging with children and families. Research demonstrates that multicultural and responsive teaching and learning approaches foster children's cultural identities and sense of belonging. Effectively navigating diversity and individual differences requires the adoption of culturally responsive, child- and family-centred approaches (Gide et al., 2022), underpinned by a decolonial lens that challenges dominant narratives and promotes equity in early learning contexts (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

The contemporary ECEC workforce in Australia and other OECD nations reflects these complexities and globalised context, with many ECEC educators bringing multicultural experiences and perspectives to their practice just as are children and families. This diversity may often exist in tension with dominant cultural and institutional frameworks, highlighting the need for professional learning that fosters intercultural competence, awareness, critical reflection and responsive practices. It is a current imperative that ECEC educators develop teaching pedagogies that authentically incorporate cultural narratives, multilingual resources, responsive practices and place-based knowledge - moving beyond superficial celebrations of diversity and difference toward transformative inclusion. In the next section we explore the specific example of Australia as a multicultural ECEC context.

Multicultural Australia

Australia represents global complexity and history. Indigenous Australians trace their heritage back at least 60,000 years. White settlement, sometimes referred to as invasion, commenced in 1788 with the British exportation of convicts. Many further waves of immigration followed, reflecting the political, economic and social disruptions on the world stage (Museums Victoria). The government policy of multiculturalism, rather than assimilation, means that many Australians have multiple identities and move between these identities in daily life (Multiculturalism, Home Affairs).

Within this context of multiculturalism, the ECEC workforce is increasingly a place where migrants find work. The relatively low level of entry to the profession (Certificate III) makes ECEC employment accessible to people who have experienced disrupted education, and for whom English is an additional language. In addition, completing bachelor-level teaching qualifications in ECEC provides potential immigrants with a fast track to permanent residency, and so appeals to many people seeking a new life in Australia.

How educators, parents, and society at large, view children, influences every aspect of their care and education. A challenge of a multicultural workforce in ECEC includes the prevalence of differing images of the child, formed as a result of generations of practice, economic imperatives, environment, and levels and types of education. Differing cultures and traditions view children in differing ways – as inherently naughty and needing correction; as vulnerable and needing protection; as capable and competent and requiring agency; as empty vessels to fill with knowledge, or as fully formed humans with opinions, ideas and preferences. The range of ways in which the image of the child is constructed is almost infinite, impacted by adults' values, beliefs, personal reflections, and social systems. The

greater the cultural diversity of the population, the more reasonable it is to expect differing, and sometimes conflicting, images of the child. At Victoria University in the West of Melbourne, there are approximately 8000 ECEC students. Of these, in 2024, 65% were international students; 67% spoke English as an additional language; 51 different countries were represented in the courses; and 63% of these students were over the age of 25. Consequently, many different images of the child are present in university classrooms, and in early learning centres.

Amid the growing cultural diversity of early childhood professionals in Australia, other pressures are impacting the sector, to the point of prompting a sense of crisis (Dumas, 2024; Productivity Commission, 2024). There are falling rates of people entering the profession and increasing rates of students dropping out of ECEC courses (Productivity Commission, 2024). In 2016 only 48% of students who commenced an early childhood degree completed it within six years (Productivity Commission, 2024). Retention within the Early Childhood profession is also problematic, with high rates of educators and teachers leaving the sector within five years of graduation (Thorpe et al., 2020). The turnover of early childhood educators is somewhere between 30% and 40% each year (Bull, et al., 2024; Jackson, 2021). New people entering the workforce are ECEC recent graduates, and consequently, the workforce is shifting more and more to being populated by recent arrivals to Australia.

General social inequity is reflected in the provision of ECEC. The Deserts and Oases report (Hurley et al., 2022) mapped ECEC services across Australia. It found that in some parts of Australia (often rural and remote areas) there were three children competing for each available spot; in other parts, and particularly in more affluent suburbs, there were 1.2 places per child. Wealthier suburbs have more early learning centres; poorer suburbs have fewer. The Victorian State government has tried to address this inequality by providing universal free kindergarten for three- and four-year-old children. However, the flow-on effect is the need for more teachers in a sector already under stress.

Such stresses are added to by the commodification of ECEC. In Victoria, Australia, in 2020, 49% of providers were private and for-profit and a further 33% were private but not for profit. State or local government provided only 15% and about 3% were provided by Catholic or independent schools (Victorian Skills Commissioner, 2020). However, statistics can be confusing as independent schools may or may not be seen as private. Whereas part-time kindergarten and occasional care were often run by state or local governments, long day care (full-day care) was dominated by private providers. Consequently, ECEC for the youngest citizens in Australia has become something that can be bought, 'invested in', and in which inequity is evident. Although these statistics are Victorian, and not national, it is reasonable to expect them to be duplicated across the country.

Preparing ECEC Graduates for a Culturally Diverse and Responsive ECEC Career

It is imperative that programs equip graduates to understand and critically reflect on both local and global issues of diversity, inclusion and equity. Thus, programs must critically and authentically reflect the cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and ability-based diversities present in early childhood settings. Graduates must be prepared not only to recognise these diversities, but also to responsively engage with the unique identities, lived experiences, and

learning needs of all children and their families, irrespective of their individual differences. To achieve this, graduates need to be equipped to work collaboratively with children, families, educators and other professionals. Most importantly, they need to be aware of changing societal and global phenomena. This includes having a deep understanding of both individual and collective contexts that shape children's development and learning. Collective and collaborative approaches is essential; embedded within initial teacher education and continuing into professional practice.

Adopting a multidisciplinary model can strengthen cultural responsiveness in initial teacher education. When students from different disciplines (e.g., education, social work, health and psychology) work together during initial teacher education and practicum placements, they gain first-hand experience in team-based professional collaboration. Such experiences not only enhance their capacity to provide responsive education and care but also prepare them to engage holistically with families and communities (Bronstein, et. al., 2012).

An inclusive and socio-cultural pedagogical approach helps prepare ECEC graduates to navigate complex systems and to foster responsive, ethical, and contextually-aware practices that promote equity and inclusion. Graduates should be able to demonstrate the ability to engage in culturally responsive and trauma-aware practices and apply critical reflection to understanding of how broader social, cultural, and contextual factors shape ECEC practices and impact children's learning and development. They also should be able to co-construct knowledge and curriculum in partnership with children and their families and be informed about socially just and contextually responsive learning environments that reflect broader cultural and societal influences. These are not easy things to ask. They require the graduate to step outside their own cultural constructions of the image of the child, and their own prevailing ideas and beliefs, and to instead work in partnership with parents who may have very different views. Furthermore, they must do this in the context of what they have learned to be best practice in ECEC through their degree.

Tensions evident for new graduates highlight the fact that inclusive pedagogy can include diverse and sometimes contradictory practices, particularly in Australian culture, where individuals from various backgrounds live together in one country. According to MacDonald (2018), policies that are intended to promote inclusivity can sometimes contribute to division when they fail to consider the cultural context in which they are implemented. For instance, the concept of "risky play" in ECEC can be beneficial for developing independence, curiosity and problem-solving skills (Little & Stapleton, 2023). However, this approach may be perceived as hazardous by cultures that prioritise safety and protection over exploration and independence.

This disconnection in perceiving cultural difference highlights a critical challenge in ECEC: who holds the power to decide which practices are negotiable and which are non-negotiable? It is essential to learn from Indigenous communities, where community-led decision making is a major key to promoting inclusivity. By shifting the power dynamics and hearing the marginalised voices, early childhood teachers and educators can develop policies that genuinely respect and value diverse opinions. This must happen in alignment with the principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). Where cultural differences create tensions in the ways in which children are educated, disciplined

and cared for, The United Nations Convention offers insight into the values that must underpin ECEC.

Authenticity is crucial when practicing inclusion in early childhood settings. It is not enough for teachers to talk about inclusion; they must represent it in their daily actions and decisions. This means creating environments where children are seen, heard, and valued for who they are now, and who they are becoming, and moving beyond superficial celebrations of diversity. Our ambition for the cultural responsiveness of ECEC graduates should be to the highest possible level. By embracing differences in everyday moments, educators model empathy, compassion, and open-mindedness, helping children develop vital life skills and values that foster social harmony and understanding. When educators commit to this deeper level of inclusivity, they create spaces where every child feels a sense of belonging and respect. This not only enriches the educational experience for all children but also lays the foundation for a more inclusive and empathetic society.

These ambitions might seem obvious; however, individuals can be resistant to change or new ideas. In a Swedish study, Abraham and Margrain (2022) described how many ECEC student teachers were sceptical about the relevance of internationalisation generally to their own teacher education, unless it explicitly connected to their practical work or to the cultural groups they were likely to encounter. In a further project involving qualitative analysis of online educational discussions between student teachers from seven countries (Margrain et al., 2017), differing intercultural positions were identified that ranged from simple and self-focused, to deeper reciprocity. These studies illustrate that initial teacher education plays an important role in fostering deeper critical reflection and can help minimise too-simple interpretations of interculturality. In the following sections we share several case studies to show differing ways in which the authors have engaged with intercultural awareness in initial teacher education, alongside use of broad literature sources reflecting differing cultural positions and perspectives.

Malaysia Short-Stay ITE Case Study

The Victoria University early childhood program's study tour to Malaysia provides pre-service teachers with a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in a different cultural context. Spending three weeks in Malaysia, with 15 days of placement in local early childhood settings, allows students of ECEC to observe and practice the Malaysian way of teaching. The inclusion of cultural activities enables them to experience the culture more holistically.

VU pre-service teachers have been surprised – and some shocked - by differences between Australian and Malaysian practices. The structured and regimented nature of Malaysian ECEC, with its emphasis on formal education, discipline and minimal outdoor play, can be confronting for those accustomed to more play-based and child-centred approaches (Dockett & MacDonald, 2017). Initially Some students judged and criticised the Malaysian practice, viewing it as restrictive and unresponsive to children's needs.

However, as pre-service teachers learn about the history, background, and socio-political context of Malaysia, they begin to understand the rationale behind the practice. They start to appreciate cultural values and beliefs that underpin the Malaysian approach and make connections between these and the educational practices they observe. This new

understanding enables them to shift from what Keddie (2012) describes as a criticising lens, to a more reflective lens, analysing the practices with greater depth.

As pre-service teachers engage with the Malaysian culture and educational practices, they come to realise that the true meaning of inclusion is not just about policies, but about human experiences. They learn to appreciate diversity of practices and perspectives and recognise that there is no one "right" way to educate young children. By embracing differences, they begin to see inclusion in accordance with Martin (2008) who considers it to be about accepting and valuing diversity, rather than trying to change or assimilate others (Martin, 2008). They learn to approach educational practices with a more open and curious mindset, seeking to understand the cultural and historical contexts that shape the practice. By doing so, they develop a deeper appreciation for the diversity of human experiences, and a greater commitment to inclusive practices that value and celebrate difference.

Sweden-Australia Semester Abroad Case Study in ITE

Between 2019 and 2022 academic leaders at Karlstad University (KAU) and Victoria University (VU) dreamed of and developed documentation to support a whole-of-semester exchange within their ECEC initial teacher education degrees. This was innovative given that the programmes have either none or few electives, and a large number of learning outcomes that must be met for teacher accreditation purposes. While the Swedish students travelling to Australia were fluent in English and could slot into existing courses, creativity in course design was needed for those coming to Sweden who could not speak Swedish. The semester content of 30 European higher education points (48 Australian credit points) has included theoretical courses, ECEC observations and practicum.

Across the period 2022-2024 there were a total of 28 ECEC exchanges between Victoria University in Australia (VU) and Karlstad University (KAU) in Sweden. These were constructed as nine staff exchanges and 17 student exchanges. Further exchanges are continuing in 2025, 2026, and beyond. Many, but not all, of the exchanges have been funded by Erasmus+ exchange funding, and others have been funded by student loans, self-funding or staff research.

Twelve of the exchange participants completed Erasmus+ evaluations, reported in Jacobsson, et. al. (in press). Analysis of these evaluations identified that perceived outcomes of the staff exchange included: opportunities for spin-off contributions such as: course development and research collaboration; increasing student and staff mobility; enhancing organisational, management and leadership skills; improved social, linguistic and cultural competences; increased job satisfaction; learning; network development; cooperation and knowledge-sharing. Other positively identified outcomes include: enhanced employment and career opportunities; and professional skill acquisition. The student evaluations indicated perceived outcomes as including; development of skills in engagement; interaction with differing social groups; deepening appreciation for different cultures; improved creative expression; independence; ICT skills; team cooperation; idea development; organisational skills; and analytical skills.

A promotional video about exchange, made by Victoria University (2023) highlights that exchange experiences are much broader than those perhaps initially expected. ‘... our system is a little different from their system and that helps them to think critically about their own system and about how early childhood is around the world.’ In an autobiographical reflection of her experience, student Morton-Pederson (2025) describes coping with challenge as the most important outcome for her as an exchange student: ‘Many times, I questioned my abilities during this journey abroad, but I can now safely say I lean into challenges like never before. Such experiences build resilience and nourish the adventurous spirit. (p. 13).

ECEC Teacher Professional Identity Development in ITE

How we see ourselves as ECEC professionals is directly related to our image of the child. Australian society carries considerable privilege in accepted notions of education, and in early years curriculum documents. ECEC practice is influenced by a range of practices, including: Reggio Emilia; Waldorf/Steiner; Montessori; outdoor and environmental learning; a focus of First Nations’ understandings of place and time; and an intention of responsiveness to the child, family and community. ECEC can also be seen as an educated profession that draws in practice, pedagogy and philosophy to be successful, placing the child at the heart of all action. Australian early childhood teachers may experience challenges in navigating this mix of philosophies and theories, but there is a shared understanding that this is what we aspire to. As we have tried to reinforce in this article, not all cultures position children and families in this way. Nor do they necessarily view early childhood education as a profession.

As early childhood teacher educators, the authors of this article see their role as understanding and communicating cultural differences and supporting student teachers to develop the intellectual tools they need to critically reflect on their own ideas and practices, and on practices they observe. Teaching a culturally and linguistically diverse cohort, we aim to be mindful of changes to the demographics of ECEC teachers and educators, to note the cultural diversity of our own staff, and are committed to graduating ECEC teachers who are listening to their communities and seeking culturally inclusive practices. When teaching our future ECEC teachers, and when engaging in cultural exchanges, our aims are twofold:

1. To provide the richest learning context for our students
2. To provide opportunities for our students to move from cultural awareness to cultural responsiveness.

In particular, we seek to engender genuine curiosity rather than judgement: why do some people think of children one way, while others hold a different view? What can we learn from opinions and values that initially appear to be diametrically opposed to our own? Ultimately, this is not only a question of what we want early childhood education to look like in Australia, but also a bigger question, of how we want Australian society generally to be enacted.

One of the questions we continuously ask is how we facilitate our students finding their way along a pathway to cultural responsiveness when engaging with young children and their families. The difference between being culturally aware and culturally responsive is

important. While cultural awareness is important, in a multicultural society, and dealing with young children and families, cultural responsiveness is of greater value.

Cultural awareness can be seen in the following behaviours (McLaren, 2025):

- Notices that not everyone is the same
- Observes differences in cultural practices
- May have questions but may hesitate to ask them
- Seeks advice; worries about ‘getting it wrong’
- Tries not to be judgmental

In contrast, *cultural responsiveness* has the following indicators:

- Is curious about the cultures of others
- Seeks to make connection
- Asks questions to build better understanding
- Seeks advice; interactions come from connection
- Curious, not judgmental

Three authentic examples can assist in untangling the layers of professional identity and experience that feed into ECEC in an Australian context.

1. An ECEC teacher from a southeast Asian country whose parents did not speak to them for over two years because they changed their studies at university in Australia from biomedicine to early childhood education, which was culturally considered to be a profession of lower status.
2. An ECEC teacher from India who said they did the ECEC course primarily just to get permanent residency in Australia, but now see that this is the most noble profession of all
3. An ECEC teacher from Indonesia who continually fights the desire to sit children down and teach them letters and numbers because in Indonesia survival literally depends on education, and education is highly competitive.

This mix of values, beliefs and uncertainties experienced within the professional is not a comfortable place – and it requires understanding, curiosity and open heartedness from all of us to create ECEC experiences that foreground the child, the family and the community as well as professionals

Discussion and Reflection

Initial teacher education plays a significant role in shaping ECEC practices that are responsive to the demands of the time, and that acknowledge the multiplexity of voices that share an interest in the education and care of young children. Important within that multiplexity are the voices of the children themselves; their developing communication of own identity, and their confidence in their place in the world. Also important are the trajectories of ECEC professionals who navigate their own journeys of cultural awareness and reflection. There is no ‘one way’ to do ECEC, although there are practices, pedagogies and philosophies that will sit most comfortably with us. There are also some practices that will conflict with deeply held values. In order to create space for conversation about these

practices, it is necessary to understand why they have emerged – what image of the child, what cultural or religious beliefs have prompted these practices? Respect for differing views, especially those that we as ECEC professionals find troublesome, will open space to hear alternatives and build knowledge from shared understandings. Development of critical self-awareness and critical reflection of values and purpose is continuous. The initial teacher education case studies which we shared in this article provided some opportunities for student teachers to develop intercultural awareness but were, of course, not the only ways. We are sure that readers have their own examples to reflect on. Regardless of the program or the activity, we urge a reminder that careful consideration of what is presented as ‘best practice’ can be examined from various lenses including: the UN *Rights of the Child*, insights from research, and cultural norms – but at the heart of it all must sit wellbeing for children and the ECEC profession.

Implications for policy, practice and research initiatives are both challenging and exciting. We must accept that ‘best practice’ in ECEC and initial teacher education is context based and does not look the same everywhere. As global migration continues to shift cultural viewpoints and perspectives, it is imperative that everyone who engages with young children and families continues to listen, be responsive, aim for inclusion, and keep the child, and the rights of the child, central to conversations. The goal of ECEC initial teacher education is to prepare teachers to be able to work confidently in these areas and so doing to meet the learning needs of all children irrespective of their individual differences.

One of the purposes of this journal is to bring a range of voices to the fore – not only those we agree with, but also those that challenge us. When we see or read about practices that are different from our own it prompts us to reflect on what we value and why. It is only by having conversations, exercising curiosity and critiquing our own thinking that we can ensure the best ECEC experiences for our children and the best professional development for ECEC teachers. This is when best practice is enacted.

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