



**Culturally and
Linguistically Responsive**
Early Childhood Pedagogies



The Australian
Culturally and Linguistically
Responsive Early Childhood
Pedagogies Framework

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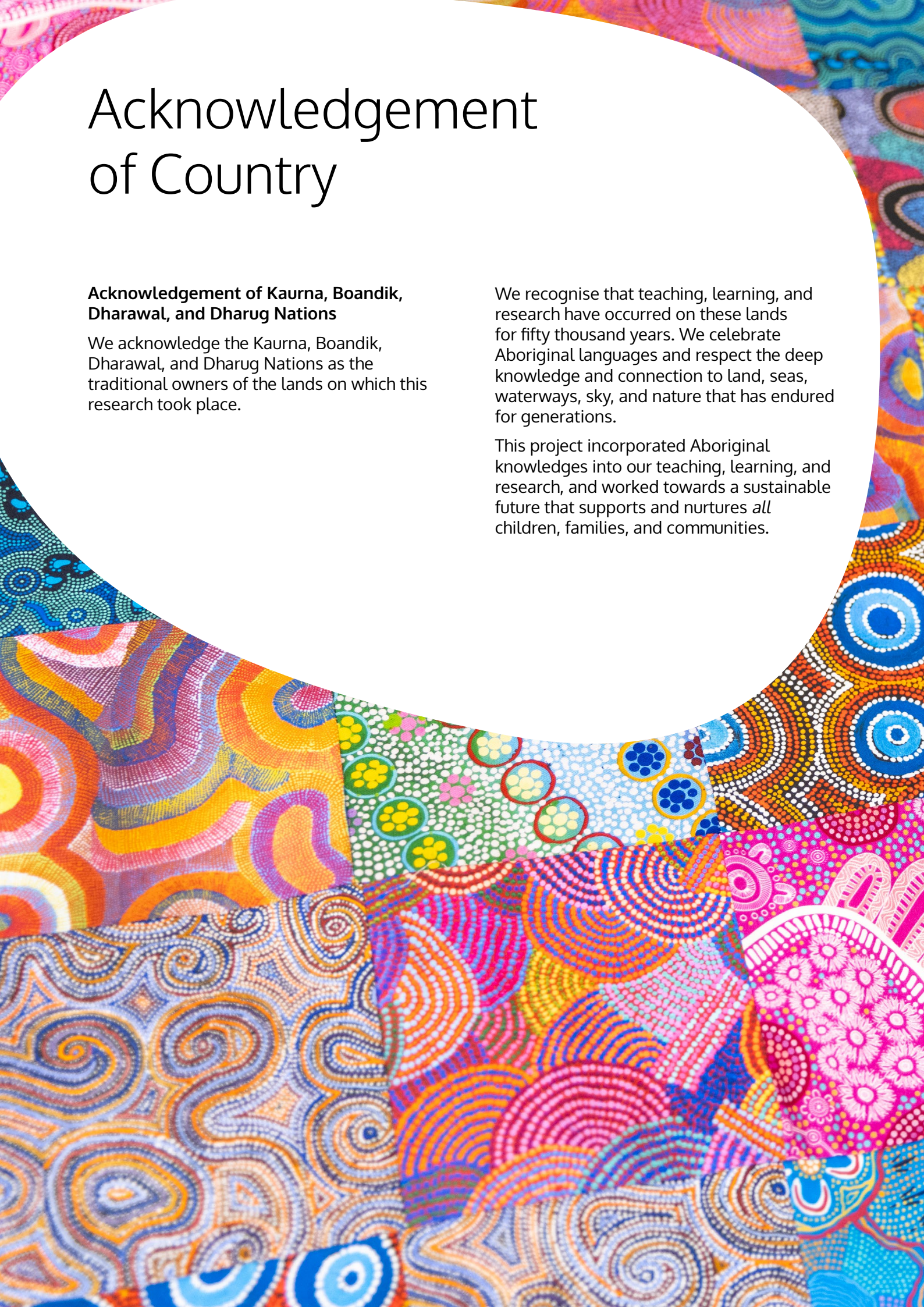
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Acknowledgement of Kurna, Boandik, Dharawal, and Dharug Nations

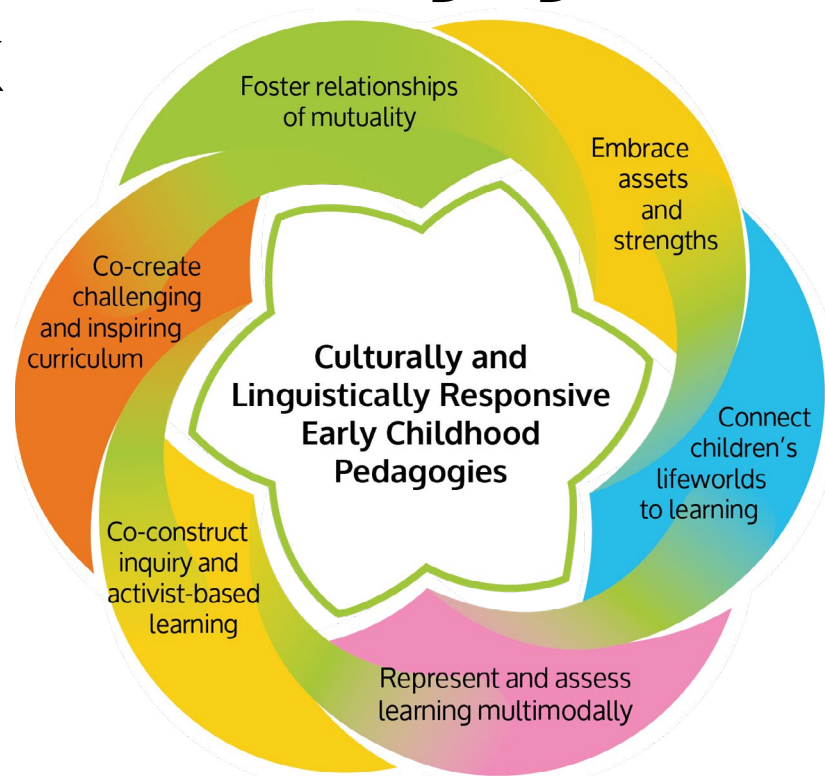
We acknowledge the Kurna, Boandik, Dharawal, and Dharug Nations as the traditional owners of the lands on which this research took place.

We recognise that teaching, learning, and research have occurred on these lands for fifty thousand years. We celebrate Aboriginal languages and respect the deep knowledge and connection to land, seas, waterways, sky, and nature that has endured for generations.

This project incorporated Aboriginal knowledges into our teaching, learning, and research, and worked towards a sustainable future that supports and nurtures *all* children, families, and communities.



The Australian Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Early Childhood Pedagogies Framework



Introduction

The Australian Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Early Childhood Pedagogies Framework is designed to support early childhood education (ECE) professionals to embed culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies (CLRP) in everyday practice.¹ The framework consists of guiding principles, illustrations of practice, and key enablers for sustaining culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies within sites and across organisations. The framework has been developed from the research and experiences of ECE professionals, site and organisational

leaders, and local Elders who participated in or engaged with the *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Early Childhood Pedagogies* research project (2023-2025).

This framework complements the work of Rigney and Hattam (2016-2019) which focussed on culturally responsive pedagogy in the primary and secondary years of schooling. The framework and its underlying principles are intended to ensure a smooth transition for all children from early childhood settings into schools.

¹In this document, the term 'ECE professionals' is used to refer to all professional staff working with young children in early childhood and lower primary educational settings, such as teachers, educators, site leaders, and organisational leaders. This includes four-year qualified teachers, diploma and certificate-level qualified educators, and site leaders. When reference to a specific subgroup is required, the appropriate identifier (e.g., teacher, educator, site leader) will be used.

Guiding principles

The Australian Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Early Childhood Pedagogies Framework is underpinned by six guiding principles:

1. Foster relationships of mutuality
2. Embrace assets and strengths
3. Connect children's lifeworlds to learning
4. Represent and assess learning multimodally
5. Co-construct inquiry and activist-based learning
6. Co-create challenging and inspiring curriculum

The principles for culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies are grounded in the lived experiences of ECE professionals working in super-diverse early childhood and early years schooling settings. Through the *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Early Childhood Pedagogies* project these professionals reflected on and analysed their current practices and, drawing on new theoretical resources and insights, introduced culturally and linguistically responsive innovations within their pedagogies and site practices.

Field tested and evidence-based, these principles provide a practical framework for planning and implementing culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies. They guide ECE professionals in shaping everyday learning experiences and environments.

1. Foster relationships of mutuality

Relationships between teachers, ECE professionals, leaders, children, families, community, and the environment form the foundation for all other principles of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies. Mutual relationships are built on respect, reciprocity, and deep listening (Staples & Woodrow, 2019). When ECE professionals actively listen and are responsive to children and families, trust grows and shared responsibility emerges. This sense of co-agency empowers everyone involved to contribute in meaningful ways to learning.

Mutuality is not only about connection; it is the condition for co-construction. Co-construction requires ongoing, relational processes where knowledge is created together rather than 'delivered' from one party to another (Sisson et al., 2025). When relationships are reciprocal, ECE professionals, families, and communities become collaborators in shaping pedagogies that reflect their cultural and linguistic identities. These relationships extend beyond human connections to include the natural world, fostering respect and care for Country. Strong, mutual relationships create the conditions for transformative pedagogies by enabling dialogue, shared agency, and authentic participation in decision-making.

2. Embrace assets and strengths

A strength-based approach to education honours the rich tapestry of knowledges and experiences that children bring into the learning environment. Within this perspective children are viewed as active participants in the co-construction of knowledge. This approach aligns with the concepts of funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), which recognise that children's cultural and linguistic resources are powerful assets for learning that can be built on, rather than deficits that need to be 'fixed'.

Understanding, valuing, and engaging with the assets that children bring to the learning environment offers opportunities to build on and strengthen their cultural repertoires and linguistic capabilities. ECE professionals play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive spaces where children's languages, routines, rituals, and ways of being are meaningfully woven into the curriculum, materials, and everyday interactions. These intentional practices foster a sense of belonging, engagement, and connection.

Central to this approach is a commitment to building strong, reciprocal partnerships with families and communities. When children's and families' cultural knowledge and community languages are valued as learning assets, children's identities as learners are celebrated and evolved, and their educational experiences are deepened.

3. Connect children's lifeworlds to learning

Children's lifeworlds (Roche, 1987) include their everyday experiences, interactions, languages, and the rich family and community practices that shape their social contexts. When ECE professionals weave children's lifeworlds into the curriculum and into everyday practices, they foster children's sense of belonging, agency, and identity.

When learning opportunities are intentionally designed to reflect and extend children's lived experiences, they provide a vital bridge between children's funds of knowledge and identity and the broader aims of the educational context and curriculum. Pedagogical practices that are grounded in relationships, language, and culture can contribute to deepening children's and ECE professionals' understandings of community, place, and the interconnected nature of their worlds.

When ECE professionals are committed to a curriculum that emerges from children's lifeworlds, they co-construct with children an assemblage of pedagogical practices (Sisson, 2024). This commitment deepens engagement and educational relevance in children's local and global contexts. The evolving nature of lifeworlds creates opportunities for ECE professionals' and children's horizons to be expanded and enriched through these encounters.

4. Represent and assess learning multimodally

Multimodality is the use of multiple modes or channels of communication – including auditory, visual, gestural, linguistic, spatial, digital, and embodied – to convey meaning (Kress, 2009; Tan et al., 2020). In practice, children communicate in a range of ways, contributing their ideas to the community life of the centre/school through multiple channels.

When children exercise agency in their community by acting, talking, drawing, and making, they negotiate with others and co-construct meaning. Children's learning is enhanced when their knowledges and understandings are made visible in multiple ways. When assessment practices are guided by this principle, ECE professionals offer a variety of ways for children to lead and share their learning within the interactional context of their learning community. ECE professionals' documentation of children's learning plays a dual role in capturing children's thinking and making it available for reflection to guide further learning. Valuing children's multiple languages and ways of knowing affords multimodal opportunities for communication and supports children's sense of belonging and confidence.

Children's multimodal capacities for communication are expanded when they see ECE professionals, Elders, and community members using and valuing multiple modes of communication, including movement, music, story, making, and using diverse languages. When ECE professionals take up these multiple ways of representing learning in their assessment practices, they capture rich meaning making, deeper understanding and reciprocal exchange.

5. Co-construct inquiry and activist-based learning

Co-constructed inquiry and activist-based learning emerges from the dynamic interplay of individuals' knowledges, experiences, relationships, values, and skills. It draws on the personal, cultural, and social resources people use to shape their identities. It requires children and communities to actively engage in and lead learning experiences that address real world issues (Zipin, 2017). Key here is the capacity for learning to become a catalyst for inclusive and transformative change for social justice.

Co-constructed inquiry and collective learning experiences can spark critical thinking and inspire meaningful changes, both small and large. Inquiry and activist-based learning offer possibilities and opportunities to engage with local and global issues that matter to children – for example racism, discrimination, and environmental sustainability – to promote intercultural understanding, to raise awareness around gender and the local and global environment, and to expand children's linguistic repertoires.

The co-construction of inquiry and activist-based learning comes to life when ECE professionals and the broader community create spaces where learning is led by children and communities. These experiences begin by acknowledging and promoting the existing knowledge and capabilities of children and their communities, and they deepen when rooted in topics that resonate personally and locally. This evolution can foster being, belonging, and becoming (cf. Australian Government, 2022), and challenge and transform perspectives. Inquiry is premised on the understanding that knowledge is not fixed, and what is considered valuable knowledge can shift. ECE professionals connect local issues to global themes, making learning more purposeful, and fostering agency and relevance, not only for learners, but also for ECE professionals, families, and communities.

6. Co-create challenging and inspiring curriculum

A challenging and inspiring curriculum positions children as curious, capable, and agentic co-constructors of knowledge. It emerges from children's inquiries and perspectives and offers rigorous intellectually rich experiences that promote deep thinking, problem solving, and critical reflection aligned with the strengths and challenges that children bring. Such curriculum is dynamic, responsive to children's lived experiences, and provides rich opportunities for children to thrive as active learners. We are mindful that this requires high support.

When the curriculum is challenging and inspiring it fosters higher-order thinking and rejects deficit views of children that narrow learning and limit engagement. When seen as agentic, children are recognised as capable of co-constructing learning through their choices, questions, and active explorations and engagement. In this way, children develop strong identities as capable learners who understand their contribution to community. Inspiring curriculum supports children's meaningful engagement, connection, and love of learning. Curriculum and pedagogy go hand in hand. ECE professionals' pedagogies can enliven curriculum by connecting children's lifeworlds to societal and community constructions of knowledge.

ECE professionals create challenging and inspiring curricula by engaging in a process of listening, and analysing and engaging with the rich knowledges and experiences embedded within each learning community. They attentively listen to children's questions, concerns, and ideas, and observe their explorations. Integral to creating a challenging learning environment is ECE professionals' ability to analyse and interpret children's strengths and emerging capabilities and connecting these to concepts and processes for learning. The curriculum is therefore designed around children's inquiries and perspectives, providing diverse opportunities for children to investigate, reflect, and share their understandings. When teachers curate opportunities for collaborative learning and social interaction, they enhance the process of knowledge creation.



Illustrations of practice

The following illustrations of practice drawn from the research data demonstrate how ECE professionals can enact the guiding principles of the Framework in their practice. ECE teams are encouraged to explore these examples collaboratively and reflect on their own practice. Through discussion and critical reflection, we hope that new, contextually relevant approaches will emerge, strengthening culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies and deepening engagement with children, families, and communities.





Foster relationships of mutuality

ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Prioritise relational time, slowing down interactions so children, families, and staff can genuinely attend to one another without rushing or agenda-setting.
- Engage in back-and-forth relational exchanges, responding not only to what children say but to their gestures, emotions, rhythms, and relational cues.
- Share responsibility for the learning community, inviting children and families to help shape norms, expectations, and ways of being together.
- Model vulnerability and openness, showing children and families that ECE professionals are learners too and that knowledge can flow both ways.
- Build relational continuity across the day, ensuring transitions, routines, and groupings support sustained connections between children, staff, and peers.
- Create structures that support co-agency, such as shared agreements, collaborative problem-solving, and child-family-educator decision making opportunities.
- Intentionally nurture peer relationships, supporting children to listen to, care for, and negotiate with each other in ways that uphold mutual respect.

This is evident for children, families and community, when, for example:

- Children engage confidently with ECE professionals and peers, showing comfort, trust, and openness in conversations, play, and collaborative learning.
- Children actively participate in shared decision making, offering ideas, negotiating routines, and contributing to group agreements or problem solving.
- Children demonstrate relational responsibility, supporting peers, resolving conflicts with empathy, and acknowledging others' perspectives.
- Children show connection to the natural world, taking part in caring actions, noticing changes in the environment, and expressing respect for Country.
- Children return to trusted relationships throughout the day, seeking comfort, sharing excitement, or inviting ECE professionals and peers into their play.
- Children co-construct and lead learning experiences, taking shared responsibility for organising materials, shaping inquiries, negotiating changes, resolving conflicts, and contributing to the flow of the learning day.
- Families and community members feel confident voicing ideas, questions, or alternative viewpoints, indicating that power is shared and relationships are grounded in trust.



ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Use relational documentation, capturing not only what children do but how they connect with people, places, materials, and the natural world.
- Foster reciprocal relationships with Country, engaging children in caring actions that highlight interdependence with the natural world (e.g., tending plants, sharing responsibility for place, practicing environmental stewardship).
- Engage families in relational dialogue, not just information exchange, using conversations as opportunities to express concerns, negotiate change, and deepen shared understanding and relational trust.
- Reflect on relational power dynamics, asking who feels comfortable contributing, who withdraws, and how staff can shift practices to create more equitable relational participation and shared experiences.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

- Families contribute knowledge, stories, cultural practices, and expertise, recognising that their perspectives meaningfully shape learning experiences.
- Families and community members participate in decision making, contributing to discussions about routines, curriculum directions, or shared expectations in ways that reflect genuine co-agency.
- Families and community members experience a sense of belonging within the learning environment, seeing themselves represented, respected, and valued in everyday practice.
- Community relationships are ongoing rather than event-based, with local Elders and community knowledge holders participating regularly in site life.
- Connections to Country and place are visible, supported by guidance from community Elders, and practices reflect mutual care for the natural world.



Embrace assets and strengths

ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Speak about children as being competent and capable.
- Draw on children's knowledge, skills, and understandings to inform curriculum and pedagogy.
- Take the time to learn about each child's assets and strengths by engaging in curious, respectful dialogue with children and families.
- Critically reflect on family engagement practices to identify who is represented, whose interests are served, and whose are overlooked.
- Make children's strengths visible in planning, documentation, and learning environments.
- Critically reflect on who is involved in the planning and setting up of learning experiences to ensure the assets of all children and staff are valued.
- Integrate children's cultural and linguistic knowledges into planning and documentation to ensure their identities are honoured.
- Invite children to lead or co-create learning experiences based on their interests and capabilities.
- Learn about and embrace the languages of children's home and community, not as an add-on, but as integral to learning.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

- Children confidently use their home and community language in the setting in multimodal ways (e.g., role play, storytelling, book making, word walls) and across a variety of interactions (e.g., play experiences and small and large group learning experiences).
- Children share their expertise by:
 - * Bringing in collections and meaningful artefacts
 - * Sharing practical skills (e.g., cooking, fire making, gardening)
 - * Introducing elements of popular culture (e.g., music, games, digital media)
 - * Sharing family and cultural stories and constructing family trees
 - * Sharing stories in home and community language and contributing cultural narratives to the learning environment
 - * Sharing skills and traditions (e.g., calligraphy, gardening, knitting, bread making, sewing, music, dance)
- Families contribute ideas for learning experiences and resources that reflect their cultural and linguistic heritage.
- Elders and cultural leaders share knowledge, histories, and practices that affirm children's identities.

Connect children's lifeworlds to learning

ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Conduct language mapping with children and families to reveal languages and family/community relationships.
- Use authentic materials and artefacts connected with children's life experiences as provocations for storytelling, inquiry, and writing.
- Redesign enrolment protocols, pre-school processes, and parent information sessions to enable reciprocal exchanges of funds of knowledge.
- Co-construct rituals with children by inviting their contributions to the redesign of daily practices (e.g., mealtimes, rest times, playtimes, excursion planning, and learning experiences and places, organising materials, choosing if learning happens inside or outside)
- Integrate and strengthen connections between children's lived experiences and learning by engaging community members and incorporating community knowledge and practices into curriculum planning (e.g., through gardening, cooking, cultural celebrations).
- Use children's everyday experiences and interests as starting points for inquiry-based learning.
- Set up learning experiences in places and contexts that are meaningful and relevant to children, and help children make sense of how their worlds are interconnected.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

- Children identify similarities and differences in their learning community (e.g., where they play, shop, travel, and the languages they speak).
- Children's attendance improves and transitions between settings are smoother.
- Children confidently show their knowledge and experiences from home and community contexts.
- Children show pride in sharing their expertise and experiences (e.g., cultural practices, hobbies, family traditions).
- Children have meaningful ways to represent their ideas.
- Children develop greater curiosity about and appreciation for diverse perspectives and cultural practices.
- Children co-design ways to welcome new children to the centre, such as creating information packs, contributing to social stories to explain routines, and helping to organise welcome events in culturally and linguistically responsive ways.
- Families and community members feel welcomed and acknowledged through ECE professionals' genuine interest in their life worlds.
- Families actively contribute to curriculum planning by sharing cultural knowledge, languages, and practices.
- Families participate in centre activities (e.g., story telling, cooking, gardening, cultural celebrations, walking on Country)
- Families report stronger relationships with ECE professionals and a sense of partnership in their child's learning journey.
- Community members and Elders share expertise, histories, and traditions that enrich learning experiences.

Represent and assess learning multimodally

ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Use digital technologies to enable bilingual and multilingual audio story telling and documentation.
- Provide visual artefacts such as photos, drawings, maps, diagrams, puppets, and objects, as prompts for speaking, listening, reading, and writing.
- Invite children to choose how they represent their learning, offering options such as drawing, construction, dramatic play, digital media, movement, music, or oral story telling.
- Include multimodal representations of home life, such as songs, scripts and writing systems (e.g., Chinese characters, Arabic script), and incorporate them into displays, documentation, and learning experiences.
- Expand classroom libraries to include visual texts, wordless books, multilingual books, texts in a range of scripts, and audio-supported texts.
- Invite families to share resources, such as texts and artefacts relevant to home languages and lifeworlds.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

- Children recognise and talk about the similarities and differences in the languages they and their peers speak, and how they use those languages in different contexts.
- Children use a range of visual strategies such as drawing, mapping, diagramming, storyboarding, and photographing, to represent and share their ideas, experiences, and understandings.
- Children confidently choose from and collaborate across a range of modes (e.g., music, drama, construction, digital tools, puppetry, movement) to express their ideas and demonstrate their learning.
- Children revisit their multimodal documentation to reflect on and extend their learning, showing awareness of themselves as learners.
- Children see their world reflected in the materials, resources, and texts in their educational settings.
- Families share multimodal examples of their children engaging with storytelling in home languages in community settings (e.g., a grandparent recording a story, songs passed down through family).



ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Communicate multimodally by using gestures, movement, music, objects, visual supports, and multiple languages during interactions.
- Integrate materials for making and designing (e.g., clay, collage, construction materials, digital drawing tools) to support children in expressing complex ideas in diverse ways.
- Support children to document their own learning using multiple modes - photos, films, voice recordings, drawings, or annotations to create artefacts they can revisit and discuss.
- Use multimodal assessment practices, such as learning stories, annotated photographs, concept maps, and audio/video reflections, to capture and interpret children's meaning making.
- Incorporate embodied learning experiences, including movement, dance, sensory engagement, and place-based exploration, as legitimate and valuable modes of communication and assessment.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

- Families and community members contribute multimodal resources (e.g., texts in home/community languages, cultural artefacts, music, visual symbols, scripts) to enrich learning experiences.
- Families and community members see their languages, writing systems, artefacts, and cultural practices represented authentically in children's learning spaces and documentation.
- Community members use diverse modes of communication (e.g., song, performance, craft, storytelling) to share knowledge with children, expanding children's multimodal repertoires.



Co-construct inquiry and activist-based learning

ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Act as co-learners alongside children, families, and community members, recognising that knowledge is shared, relational, and evolving.
- Expand their own understanding of language, culture, identity, and place through collaborative exploration.
- Take a stance of 'not knowing' to make space for children and families to lead learning and contribute their expertise where appropriate.
- Demonstrate intellectual humility by openly wondering, questioning, and exploring alongside children.
- Listen closely to children's conversations, questions, and concerns and support children to identify inquiry topics that matter to them.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

- Children propose ideas for exploring issues and topics that matter to them including suggesting places to visit or people to consult.
- Children collaborate with peers to investigate questions, test ideas, and represent their thinking in a variety of ways (e.g., dramatic play).
- Children feel confident that they can take action to help advocate or enact change.
- Children freely explore, experiment, and collaborate in a range of environments.
- Children use spaces intuitively for inquiry, dialogue, and action.

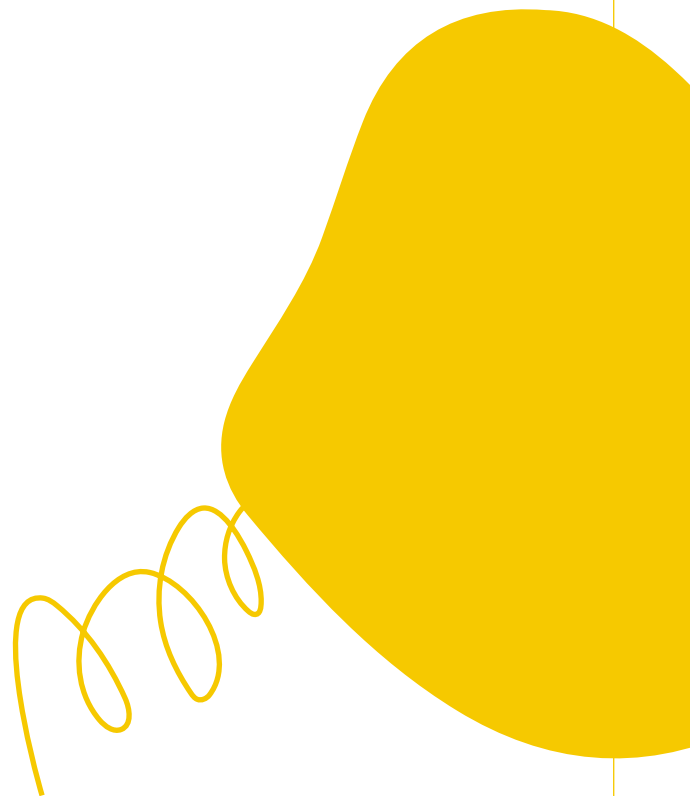


ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Engage with families and community members to understand local issues that can become meaningful catalysts for collective inquiry.
- Share decision making about planning what to learn, how to learn, which materials to use, and where the learning will take place, inviting children to help establish goals, roles, and responsibilities.
- Facilitate democratic dialogue, ensuring all voices have opportunities to contribute. Encourage children to negotiate, reason, hypothesise, and challenge assumptions within the learning community.
- Support children to identify ways they can take action based on their inquiry findings.
- Scaffold children in creating public representations of their inquiry (e.g., exhibitions, videos, performances, community messages).
- Revisit documentation with children and families to reflect on how ideas have changed, deepened, or expanded.
- Design flexible and open-ended learning environments that invite exploration, experimentation, and collaboration.
- Use indoor and outdoor spaces, including community sites, as places of inquiry, dialogue, and action.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

- Families and community Elders contribute knowledge, stories, and perspectives that deepen children's investigations, especially on place-based or culturally significant topics.
- Family and community members participate in inquiries by offering expertise, identifying local issues, or supporting children's activist projects.
- Families recognise their children's growing awareness of fairness, care for place, and social responsibility as inquiries evolve.



Co-create a challenging and inspiring curriculum

ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Provide a high-challenge, high support learning environment by using age-appropriate, complex texts supported through scaffolding (e.g., visuals, glossaries, chunking), explicitly teaching academic language (such as vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse patterns), and promoting collaborative, talk-rich learning.
- Incorporate multimodal supports alongside rigorous content, use a 'gradual release of responsibility' model and connect new learning to students' prior knowledge and home languages.
- Listen deeply to children's questions, ideas, and concerns, using these as starting points for intellectually rich learning experiences.
- Analyse children's strengths, emerging capabilities, and ways of knowing to design curriculum that stretches thinking and builds on what children can do already.
- Hold high expectations, recognising children as capable, curious, and agentic, shaping curriculum around their inquiries, strengths and aspirations.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

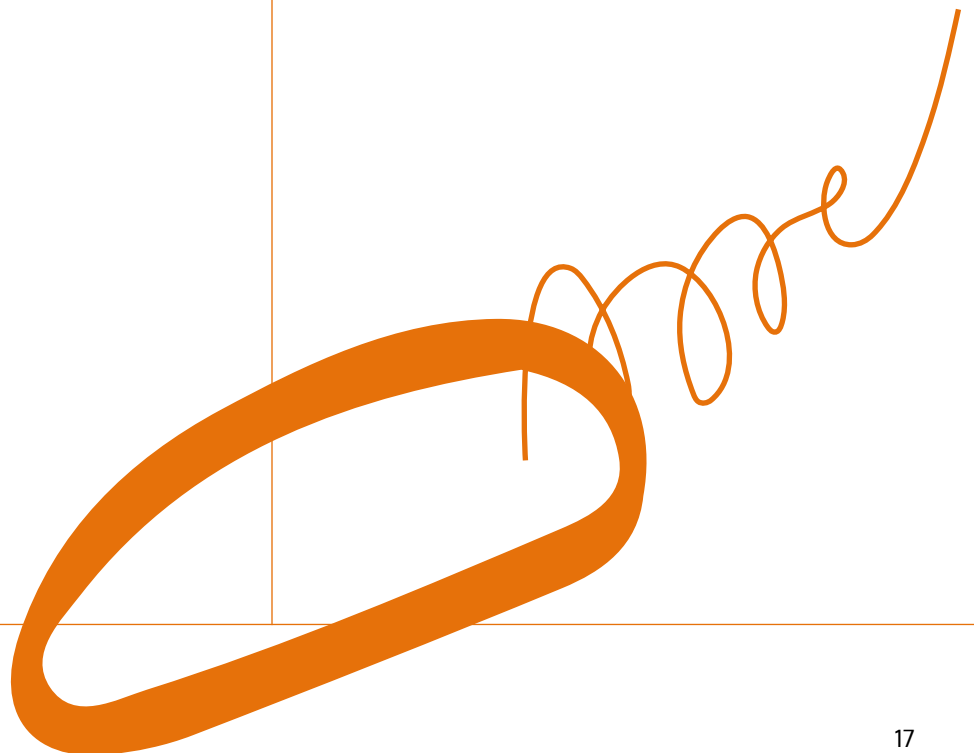
- Children demonstrate curiosity and intellectual engagement, offering their own theories, questions, and ideas as they inquire deeply into topics that matter to them.
- Children engage with literacy in purposeful and meaningful ways, using documents, artefacts, maps, photos, and other texts connected to their experiences and learning.
- Children articulate the purpose of their learning, showing understanding of how their inquiries connect to real-world ideas, community knowledge, and broader learning concepts.
- Children revisit and build upon previous learning, making connections over time and demonstrating increasingly sophisticated thinking, problem solving, and reflection.
- Children collaborate as co-constructors of knowledge, listening to and building on the ideas of multiple perspectives within a learning community to extend shared inquiries.

ECE professionals promote this practice for all children when they, for example:

- Identify and act on the possibilities in children's proposals for deepening engagement with curriculum content.
- Connect children's inquiries to important curriculum ideas, ensuring learning is both relevant to children's lives and aligned with broader learning goals.
- Introduce new materials, tools, and perspectives that challenge children to stretch their thinking and consider multiple viewpoints.
- Return to prior learning to make connections and extend thinking over time.

This is evident for children, families, and community when, for example:

- Family and community members actively participate in the learning process, responding to invitations to contribute expertise, cultural knowledge, stories, or skills that strengthen children's investigations.
- Families and community members recognise children's agency and capability, noticing how children take ownership of their learning and bring meaningful questions and ideas into home and community settings.
- Families and community contributions deepen children's learning, offering perspectives, resources, and lived experiences that enrich inquiries and broaden children's understanding of the world.
- Meaningful partnerships emerge, with families and community members freely sharing their knowledge, visiting the site, joining excursions, and engaging in ongoing documentation and dialogue about children's learning.





Key enablers for sustaining culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies

In order to sustain CLRP over the long term, it is essential to extend and evolve repertoires of pedagogical practice across settings, sites and systems. The key enablers presented here address our research question: **What practices and policies serve as barriers to the inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families?**

Contexts are dynamic and evolve over time through interactions with multiple actors, competing priorities, and a changing world. To ensure ongoing relevance to particular contexts, attention to the following key enablers is critical:

1. Engaging professional learning through theoretically-informed critical inquiry

For professional learning to sustain and extend pedagogical change and evolve culturally and linguistically responsive practices, atmospheres of openness, collegiality, and criticality are required. Critically, collegial atmospheres are enabled through the curation of discourse, relationships, time, space, and materials in forming professional learning communities (PLCs).

Attention to democratic participation within PLCs (Lyndon, 2024) requires commitment to long term collaboration and conscious decisions that position ECE professionals as knowledge holders and knowledge creators rather than recipients of pre-determined professional learning content. Democratic positioning can be achieved through prioritising time for participants' dialogue, co-construction of group protocols to explore multiple perspectives, and acknowledgement of ECE professionals' intellectual capacity to construct knowledge that is grounded in theory and contextually situated.

Critical participatory action research (McTaggart et al., 2017) mobilises ECE professionals' existing funds of knowledge and provides shared focus within PLCs for intellectual rigour and joint problem solving.

2. Community engaged policy development

In the Australian context, the characteristics, priorities, and interests of families and communities are typically diverse, often complex, and sometimes competing. Importantly, these characteristics can change over time and may do so quite quickly.

Engaging families and communities in authentic consultative processes and establishing community-based decision-making forums, such as community learning circles, are important for ensuring responsiveness to these changing dynamics, and for maintaining connectedness to local communities. Such facilitative strategies recognise families as key stakeholders in policy formation and decision making, and can be mobilised in a variety of ways that go beyond surveys and questionnaires. For example, they may involve long or short-term engagements, can be issue-focused or exploratory, and be community or site led.

When families and communities are engaged meaningfully in consultation and decision-making, site-based policies are enhanced and more likely to reflect the community that they impact. This also contributes to building trust between families and education sites.

3. Raising critical consciousness

Raising critical consciousness requires nurturing the ability to question and reflect (Freire, 1973). This involves reflecting on the everyday moments and critical incidents that shape people's thinking and action in education contexts. Through dialogue, critical inquiry, and real-world engagement, ECE professionals have the language and tools to recognise systems of inequality and envision more just and manageable alternatives. This can deepen understanding but also foster empathy, agency, and a commitment to collective change.

In sustaining educational practice, raising critical consciousness is a powerful catalyst for meaningful learning and social empowerment (Hattam et al., 2009; Zipin, 2009). Empowering ECE professionals to move beyond passive acceptance and become active, reflective participants in transforming their pedagogical practices and relationships with their communities is central to culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies.

When ECE professionals engage with diverse educational theories and multiple epistemologies, they deepen their understanding of the complexities shaping their practice and children's learning. Theory provides a critical lens that disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions; without it, pedagogical decisions risk being unexamined, inconsistent, or disconnected from the cultural and linguistic realities of children, families, and communities.

4. Co-constructing leadership for sustainability

Previous research has shown that leadership is critical to the sustainability, growth, and change of pedagogy and practice (Sisson et al., 2025; Sisson et al., 2024). Co-constructed leadership moves away from hierarchical top-down models of leadership and instead is created through the interplay of listening, agency, and dialogue in collaborative practices developed in context with ECE professionals, families and communities. Grounded in democratic values and participatory decision-making, co-constructed leadership allows opportunities for leaders to emerge rather than being imposed. For these opportunities to be realised, positional leaders play a vital role in reconceptualising structures and practices where children, ECE professionals, families, and communities can lead.

When ECE professionals in a site or system experience democratic participation through co-constructed leadership, they become attuned to what it takes to construct democratic participation through pedagogical change. The sustainability and evolution of any pedagogical change is made possible through the collective support, shared responsibility, and ongoing nurturing provided by co-constructed leadership.



5. Theory-enriched decision making

Theory plays a crucial role in sustainable pedagogical change. Theoretical concepts serve as a catalyst for reflective dialogue, professional and pedagogical insight, and collaborative growth. They provide multiple 'lenses' through which ECE professionals can frame and critically reflect on their everyday practice.

By applying theoretical frameworks, ECE professionals gain insight into perspectives and approaches which inform their pedagogical decision making. Theoretical concepts must be chosen judiciously to meet ECE professionals' situated challenges and dilemmas. The introduction of such concepts ensures a shared language between all members of the PLC. The use of theoretical concepts gives ECE professionals the confidence to take up actions. When theoretical concepts are purposefully chosen, they have the potential to support ECE professionals to both make sense of and respond to pedagogical challenges, opening new horizons for capacity building. Theoretical concepts should be deliberately engaged to not only address situated professional challenges in early childhood education, but to expand pedagogical possibilities in advance of practice, inform decision-making in the moment, and support responsive adaptation within context.

The weaving of theory with practice strengthens ECE professionals' confidence, enabling them to identify, reflect on, and articulate their evolving perspectives and practice. This process equips ECE professionals to consider and enact reimagined actions.

6. Transformative multimodal evidence of outcomes

Systems that privilege standards-based assessment as the primary way of accounting for children's learning create barriers for culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies. Current standards-based assessments that narrowly focus on Western constructs of learning underestimate the strengths of culturally and linguistically diverse perspectives for all.

Research and the multimodal realities of modern communication highlight how learning is complex, multi-faceted, and able to be represented in a myriad of ways. Reimagining and transforming what counts as evidence of learning is essential, as the complexity of learning, the diversity of learners, and the contextual realities of educational settings can be overlooked. Expanding our understanding through the inclusion of multimodal evidence allows for greater inclusion, responsiveness, and equity and it can empower children, ECE professionals, and communities.

Systemic policy change that provides opportunities for agency and flexibility in decision making at the local level about what counts as evidence of learning can transform education in powerful ways. Policy that prioritises contextual knowledge provides opportunities for rich and meaningful demonstration of learning.



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