

ECEC Values as a Tool for Strengthening the Image of the Child and Families

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We began this special issue with a call to document how embracing early childhood education and care (ECEC) values can support navigating an uncertain future. This call leaned into the belief that, when facing global challenges, we must anchor our pedagogy, curriculum, and ideology in values that help us remain rooted in what we know young children need and deserve. The first issue explored values of play, children's agency, and social justice as central tenets in the field of ECEC. Though these values appear again in some of the articles included in this second issue, we see a focus this time on how our commitment to ECEC values strengthens the image of the child and their families. The common thread we find in these articles is a valuing of children's and families' dignity, worthiness, and rights.

As the only United Nations member that has refused to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we recognize that children and their families in the US are routinely denied their dignity. Young children are powerless and often subject to shifting ideologies that determine when they go to school, how and what they are taught, and who is responsible for their early years' education. Recent cuts to child care funding in [Colorado](#), [Michigan](#), [Indiana](#), and [Pennsylvania](#), and attempts to [freeze federal child care funding nationwide](#), demonstrate the precariousness that young children and their families face in securing high-quality early childhood education.

Without a commitment to viewing children as worthy of rights and dignity, they are often subjected to deficit views that relegate them to subhumans who are in need of training and education before they can be treated as people. This image of the child then leads to pedagogical and curricular decisions that do not treat children as fully human, capable, and inherently worthy. And often, families of young children and their teachers are negatively impacted by this demanding image of the child. Low-income families who need government assistance for child care rarely have the option to choose play- or nature-based programs and are instead offered spots only in centers that meet strict academic preparation requirements. Because their children are seen as deficient, the government offers only early education aimed at remediation. Children from higher-income families can pay for programs that see them for their potential and offer early learning experiences that promote optimal whole-child development. And early childhood teachers are often relegated to the bottom of the education workforce, earning poverty wages, and often have the least amount of agency compared to elementary and secondary school teachers.

This is not a coincidence. It is evidence of a system that devalues children, penalizes families of young children, and demeans the early childhood profession. However, all children are, first and foremost, human beings and must be treated as such. In a world where

language is becoming increasingly inhumane and children, as a minority without protection, are increasingly being pushed to the margins of society, the rights and dignity of all children must be upheld. Every child exists in the here and now. Every child is a human being with the right to be themselves and to be treated with dignity. Children have the right to childhood and to be children, or as Janusz Korczak emphasized almost 100 years ago: “Children are just as valuable humans as we are” (1929, p. 7). Taken seriously, one needs to wonder about the children’s right to be a (non-responsible, immature, ir-rational, in-sensitive) child – and not to be an adult. And why are such rights constantly ignored in ECEC settings?

If we emphasize the image of the child as a capable, strong, and agentic actor, the early childhood education they receive aligns with these beliefs. In the Reggio Emilia preschools, in northern Italy, the image of the child as strong, capable, and naturally curious is a vital component of their educational philosophy (Malaguzzi, 1994). As a result, children in Reggio preschools engage in thoughtful project-based learning in environments designed as the third teacher and in communities that strengthen relationships with families and educators. Similarly, in Anji, China, their approach to true play, centered on the values of love, joy, risk, engagement, and reflection, projects an image of the child as worthy of time and space to play and explore (Jones, 2023). Thus, if we are to ensure that all children receive a high-quality early childhood education grounded in what we know about child development, we must ensure that the image of the child is worthy of such an approach.

In this special issue, we include four articles that demonstrate how a commitment to valuing the dignity of young children, their families, and their teachers can support the early

childhood profession as we navigate global challenges and an uncertain future. Two articles focus on children’s dignity in relation to their experience mediated by race and culture. In her article *Moving Towards the Light: Navigating Global Challenges Through Early Childhood Education and Care Values*, Kirton explores how Black families in New York navigate anti-Blackness in early childhood spaces. Her interviews with parents and children and observations in their early learning classrooms documented how the parents strengthened collaboration to support their child when dealing with racist discrimination. One parent worked with their child’s teacher to improve the teacher’s image of her child from loud and rambunctious to engaging and interested. By prioritizing joy, peace, love, and security as essential for their children to thrive, these parents navigated an environment that routinely devalues and stigmatizes their young Black children.

Thomas et al. provide a fascinating look into how a community of practice, guided by a commitment to valuing everyone’s dignity, created spaces where trust and play were used as pedagogical and methodological tools. In *Trust, Play, and Place: How Early Childhood Education Values Shaped Collaborative Research in the U.S. Southwest*, the authors document the collaborative efforts of home child care providers, university researchers, and community partners to explore culturally sustaining practices in infant and toddler settings. Their collective inquiry was guided by shared meals, democratic decision-making, honoring rituals, learning through play, and engagement with the natural environment. This approach led to a successful collaboration that reinforced each person’s dignity and importance within the ecology of early childhood education and care.

Marcias in *Cultural Identity Agency- An Allyship for Recentering Culture & Identity with Children* offers a framework for cultural identity, agency, and allyship that affirms children's dignity and right to maintain their culture and positions teachers as allies to ensure that each child is respected. One way to counter the negative impacts of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), Marcias argues, is to emphasize what he calls cultural identity agency, the ability to maintain and sustain one's cultural identity, home language, and community knowledge. ECEC that centers culture, identity, and justice-oriented learning design is able to resist assimilation and colonizing practices and instead empower children. What is needed, Marcias powerfully emphasizes, is an allyship, one that values children and their right to childhood by sustaining children's cultural identities.

Hughes et al. offer another framework that centers children's dignity through the lens of compassion in their article *The Compassionate Framework: Positioning compassion at the heart of Early Childhood Education and Care*. The Compassionate Framework, which consists of the EPIK Reflective Tool for assessing professional practice and the EPIK Observation Tool for enhancing approaches for children, is an approach that aims to improve the awareness and practice of compassion in ECEC. By reflecting on and implementing the four interconnected components of Emotional Awareness, Perspective Taking, Inclusive Practice, and Kindness (EPIK), so the authors argue convincingly, ECEC enriches and supports the development of all children, while at the same time ensuring that the children's dignity is valued.

Now more than ever, we must resist the forces that seek to commodify childhood and strip early childhood education and care to a factory model of academic preparation. Across the eight articles in these two special issues, we sought to provide you with examples of how commitment to ECEC values can help us resist harmful policies, practices, and ideologies. When we see children as capable, trustworthy, and curious, and we center their agency, dignity, and rights, we prepare ourselves to face whatever the future offers, as uncertain as it may be.

References

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