



Waves of Wisdom

Early Childhood Research Conference

1 May 2026

Early Years Research Lab,
Southern Cross University, Gold Coast Campus

scu.edu.au/education/events/wow-conference



Waves of Wisdom (WOW)

The wisdom of the early childhood profession is often misinterpreted and misunderstood. As we ride the swell of policy debate and expansion, how can we keep from being dumped in these tidal patterns that work to marginalise and undermine the ways early childhood education is articulated and practised?

Our conference employs the concept of wisdom to honour the knowledge within childhoods and the early childhood profession, that is wise, unique and tethered to care, kinships and relational ways of being and knowing. The Waves of Wisdom Early Childhood Conference 2025 (WOW) is an opportunity to come together and (re)awaken our collective wisdom and reaffirm our sense of community, agency, creativity, and commitment to co-creating a more equitable, just, caring, and welcoming world for the next generation of children, families, and the early childhood sector.

Papers presented at the conference will also be considered for inclusion in a special edition of the New Zealand International Research in Early Childhood Education Journal.

We hope you enjoy the conference program filled with possibilities for early childhood research and scholarship that will guide the sector toward a more just future.

The WOW Conference Organising Committee

Southern Cross University

Professor Wendy Boyd

Dr Fazlin Mohd Nazir

Dr Shaila Banu

Dr Chris Speldewinde



Conference program

Registration, keynote and plenary sessions are held on, C105 Building C.

Friday 1 May



Friday 1 May

Conference day

8.30 – 9.00am	Registrations	
9.00 – 9.30am	Welcome to Country: Uncle John Graham Opening address: Professor Amy Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, Executive Dean, Faculty of Education Research in early childhood education: Professor Sue Walker Lead of the Early Years Research Lab	Building C516
9.30 – 10.15am	Keynote address 1: Cris Townley <i>Provocations in early childhood education and care: Gender diverse children and queer parents?</i>	Building C516
10.15 – 10.45am	Morning tea	
Plenary Session 1		
10.45 – 11.45am	Creative provocations in early childhood settings: Exploring LGBT families and gender diversity through doll play. Please note- Participants interested in this workshop can opt in to be part of a research focus group. Presenter: Cris Townley	Workshop 1 (GC516)
	Early Childhood Educators' Confidence and Willingness to Teach STEM Presenter: Rayj Xavier	Research 1 (GC416)
	Designing for Dialogue: Reggio-Inspired and Sustainability-Oriented Environments Supporting STEM Inquiry and Science Language in Early Childhood Presenter: Mary Devasahayam	
	Priscilla turns up the volume for: Aesthetic Education Presenter: Monique Fuss	
11.45 – 12.30pm	Lunch	Building C516

12.30 - 1.15pm	Keynote address 2: Distinguished Professor Susan Danby <i>Whose Wellbeing? Young Children's Digital Rights</i>	Building C516
Plenary session 2		
1.20 - 2.20pm	La piazza-like spaces: inhabitation, relationality, and democratic life in Australian early childhood contexts Presenter: Lucia Stacchiotti	Research 2 (GC416)
	Reimagining Physical Literacies in Early Childhood Education Presenter: Trent Davis	
	Strengthening connections between schools and culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families in the early years of school: Listening to CaLD families' voices Presenter: Fazlin Mohd Nazir	
	Can risky play be safe? How educators support play-based learning in outdoor environments in Australia ECEC settings: A systematic literature review Presenter: Nilufar Jahan	Research 3 (GC516)
	The LEAF Framework: A Practice-Based Model for Nature-Connected Early Childhood Education Presenters: Birdwings Forest School	
	Educators' digital self-efficacy for fostering young children's digital play and learning in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres in Western Australia. Presenter: Simjanreet Kaur	



Plenary session 3

2.30 – 3.30pm	Professional Wisdom in the Age of Generative AI: Where Are the Waves Taking Early Childhood Reflective Practice? Presenter: Nicky Thompson	Research 4 (GC516)
	Riding the Swell Together: What Brain Train Teaches Us About Building Wise Educator–Family Partnerships for Children’s Self-Regulation Presenter: Margarita Ghezzi	
	Integrating embodied learning in a digital environment in young children Presenter: Myrto Mavilidi	
	Are We Underusing Music as a Workforce Strategy? Presenter: Melissa Smile	Provocation 1 (GC416)
	Care-full Against the Tide: Micro Acts of Temporal Resistance as Active Hope in ECEC Presenters: Lucia Stacchiotti & Olivera Kamenarac	
	The teacher shortage is fake news! Presenter: Karthika Viknarasa	
	The wisdom of parental involvement. Presenter: Nining Sari	
3.40 – 4.25pm	Keynote address 3: Professor Andrea Nolan <i>The ECEC workforce: Swimming with the tide while negotiating waves of complexity</i>	Building C516
4.30pm	Conference close	

Workshops, research presentations and roundtables

Workshop 1

Creative provocations in early childhood settings: Exploring LGBT families and gender diversity through doll play.

Cris Townley

Uni of Western Sydney

"Are you an early childhood educator? Do you want to know more about how to explore diverse families and gender identity with children? Do you want to know how to embed this in programming, or share your knowledge with others? Do you want to come and play with dolls? Come and participate in a research project which is a partnership between Western Sydney University, Rainbow Families and Parents for Trans Youth Equity. Make a doll family that is an LGBT family and tell us about it. Tell us how you might use dolls to provoke play and conversations with children. We are doing this research to improve practices of LGBT inclusion in early childhood settings, through programming activities for children and educators using dolls to explore diverse families and gender identity.

Research 1

Early Childhood Educators' Confidence and Willingness to Teach STEM

Rajy Xavier

Southern Cross University

Despite widespread acknowledgment of STEM's (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) significance in early childhood education (ECE), a persistent gap exists between educators' positive attitudes toward STEM and their confidence and readiness to teach STEM methods, especially in engineering. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are increasingly seen as interrelated fields essential for 21st-century citizenship. However, engineering remains the least understood, taught, and integrated aspect of STEM in early childhood settings, both globally and in Australia.

This paper presents a systematic literature review examining early childhood educators' confidence and willingness to teach STEM, focusing specifically on engineering. It explores why this gap exists, what keeps it going, and what professional development approaches show promise in addressing it. Drawing on a growing body of research compiled since 2020, the review analyzes key studies in Australian and international ECE contexts. MacDonald et al.'s (2021) landmark survey of 425 Australian early childhood educators revealed that most had positive attitudes toward STEM and felt they had enough math knowledge. However, their confidence in science, technology, and especially engineering was significantly lower.

Internationally, O'Neill et al. (2023) found that only 10% of 198 Irish ECE educators reported any exposure to engineering in their preservice programs, while 43% reported exposure to mathematics. This shows a clear gap in initial teacher education. Wan et al. (2021) attribute lower STEM confidence in ECE to limited training specific to the disciplines and ongoing tension between the care and education roles within the sector. This tension often places STEM content as something for formal schooling instead of early years practice.

Overall, these findings highlight a cycle: inadequate preservice training, confusion of general inquiry skills with STEM-specific abilities, and strong professional identity beliefs that limit confident and consistent integration of engineering in ECE. This review combines the evidence to identify promising directions for professional learning that address both the skills and attitudes involved in this challenge, providing insights for preservice curriculum design and ongoing educator development in Australian early childhood contexts.

Designing for Dialogue: Reggio-Inspired and Sustainability-Oriented Environments Supporting STEM Inquiry and Science Language in Early Childhood

Mary Sunalini Velugu Devasahayam
IKON Institute

There is growing international recognition of the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education in supporting children's scientific literacy, inquiry skills, and engagement with complex environmental challenges (Tytler, 2020; Wan et al., 2021). Increasingly, research emphasises the importance of STEM learning in the early years, where children begin to develop dispositions toward curiosity, problem-solving, and reasoning that shape later learning (Moomaw, 2012). However, research suggests that STEM learning in early childhood settings is often implemented in fragmented or superficial ways, limiting opportunities for sustained inquiry and meaningful scientific dialogue (Campbell & Howitt, 2024).

This proposed study investigates how Reggio-inspired and sustainability-oriented learning environments can support young children's STEM inquiry and the development of science language in early childhood education. Reggio Emilia pedagogy conceptualises the environment as the "third teacher", where thoughtfully designed spaces and open-ended materials provoke investigation, collaboration, and dialogue (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; Rinaldi, 2006). Sustainability-focused experiences such as gardening, recycling, and engagement with natural materials also provide authentic contexts for children to explore scientific concepts and ecological relationships (Davis, 2015; Elliott & Davis, 2020).

This research adopts a qualitative participatory action research approach conducted within an early childhood education and care service serving children aged birth to five years. Through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (McAteer, 2013), educators and the researcher will collaboratively design and refine learning environments that support inquiry and dialogue.

Data will include naturalistic observations of children's STEM inquiry and science language during play, environmental documentation and educator interviews and reflective journals. This study contributes to early childhood STEM scholarship by examining how Reggio-inspired and sustainability-oriented learning environments, together with intentional educator dialogue, can foster children's inquiry, scientific thinking, and science language development in play-based early learning contexts aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework.

Priscilla turns up the volume for: Aesthetic Education

Monique Fuss

Charles Sturt University

Focusing on aesthetic education, this presentation offers insights from a well-known Australian early childhood academic, referred to here as "Priscilla." Drawing on literature that has shaped educational thought since the 1970s, most notably the work of Maxine Greene, this data emphasises the importance of aesthetic education for engaging our sensing bodies in contemporary classrooms. The study employs portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) as both methodology and method, through which a "written image" emerges from qualitative data. Priscilla's data explores aesthetic education from both philosophical and practical standpoints, highlighting classroom practices and corresponding research that value teaching and learning grounded in multi-modal interpretations.

Throughout the session, we seek to challenge binaries, dismantle barriers, and re-centre the understanding that learners and teachers are inherently expressive through the multiplicity of aesthetic languages. Priscilla's story illuminates and invites ways of thinking that are dynamic, open, and responsive.

This presentation asks:

- What is aesthetic education?
- What insights does Priscilla offer for early childhood education today?

While aesthetics is often positioned within arts-based domains and marginalised within standardised, outcome-driven contexts, this research seeks to enliven and centre the embodied dimensions of teaching and learning. In doing so, it calls for a reawakening of priorities that amplify ideas, dreams, and aspirations connected to aesthetic education. Aesthetic education, in this sense, emerges not as a discrete curricular element, but as a generative condition of teaching and learning itself.

This presentation acknowledges that across the world, our priorities and understandings of what truly matters are shifting. In times of change, however, we can find grounding in the knowledge that the wisdom we seek already resides within us, our own becoming. While Priscilla supports an understanding of aesthetics as associated with artistic practice, the data presented extends this view beyond the arts to encompass sensory and perceptual ways of knowing that shape how individuals engage with and make meaning in the world.

Reimagining Physical Literacies in Early Childhood Education

Trent Davis
Griffith University

The increasing presence of digital technologies in early childhood education has reshaped how children learn, play and move. While these technologies offer innovative and engaging learning opportunities, they also introduce tensions between screen-based engagement and embodied, movement-rich experiences. This presentation draws on a systematic literature review of 220 peer-reviewed studies (2014–2024) to examine how digital technologies influence young children's physical literacies. Physical literacies is understood as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to engage in movement.

Three key themes are explored. First, the displacement of movement and embodied play highlights growing concerns regarding sedentary behaviours and reduced opportunities for unstructured physical activity. Second, conceptual ambiguity reveals a lack of shared understanding among educators regarding what constitutes physical literacy and how it can be supported in technology-rich environments. Third, the interconnected nature of physical, cognitive and social-emotional development demonstrates that digital technologies shape children's learning in complex and overlapping ways.

This presentation moves beyond binary debates of "good" or "bad" technology. Instead, it offers a more nuanced perspective that positions digital technologies as both a potential constraint and an opportunity for fostering physical literacies, depending on pedagogical intent. Drawing on examples of movement-based digital practices, the session will highlight how educators can intentionally integrate technologies to support embodied learning, rather than displace it.

This presentation responds to the conference theme of innovative pedagogies and co-constructing wisdom in early childhood spaces by reframing physical literacy as an essential, yet often overlooked, dimension of contemporary early childhood practice. It invites participants to critically reflect on their own use of digital technologies and to consider how "wisdom" in early childhood education may lie in achieving a more intentional and balanced integration of digital and embodied learning experiences.

La piazza-like spaces: inhabitation, relationality, and democratic life in Australian early childhood contexts

Lucia Stacchiotti
Southern Cross University

This research investigates how everyday la piazza-like spaces in an Australian early childhood setting, inspired by the Reggio Emilia Educational Project, are lived and inhabited over time as relational and democratic environments. In a context marked by social acceleration, fragmentation, and growing experiences of disconnection, the study asks: What happens after a space is designed? How is it inhabited, returned to, modified, and experienced in everyday life?

Focusing on two threshold spaces - a large window and a balcony—within a selected Centre, the inquiry explores how belonging, participation, and collective responsibility emerge through micro-gestures, rituals, pauses, and relational encounters. Situated within a post qualitative and relational orientation (St. Pierre, 2018, 2019; Ingold, 2017, 2020), the research approaches space as an active participant in pedagogical life. Through sustained observations, pedagogical documentation, and dialogic engagement with children, educators, families, and scholars, the study attends to how human and more-than-human (Braidotti, 2019) presences co-construct place.

Remaining with the complexity of lived experience, the research explores how micro-gestures and everyday rituals can cultivate democratic ways of being together. By foregrounding inhabitation, correspondence, and response-able dialogues, this study contributes to contemporary conversations in early childhood education and spatial pedagogy, while also extending these discussions through multidisciplinary encounters with architecture, history, design, philosophy, semiotics and other entangled fields, crossing generational, disciplinary and cultural borders or 'going beyond the wall', in the spirits and words of Loris Malaguzzi.

Strengthening connections between schools and culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families in the early years of school: Listening to CaLD families' voices

Fazlin Mohd Nazir
Southern Cross Uni

Family-school partnerships have been pivotal to children's successful educational journeys, particularly in the early years of school. While culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families are well represented in Australian schools, little is known about what aspirations and expectations they have of school. CaLD families' connection to schools becomes more critical as social cohesion is challenged by polarizing views. Listening to the marginalised voices of CaLD families opens a process of transforming schools' engagement with CaLD families.

Framed within an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, a case study approach was used to describe how three schools in metropolitan Perth with high enrolment of CaLD children connected and engaged with their CaLD families and children (Kindergarten to Year One). The researcher gathered CaLD families' voices through 50 parent interviews and four focus groups. Key findings showed that schools who make CaLD families feel welcome develop environments conducive to learning. Additionally, schools connect with CaLD families through a variety of ways and sought information from them about their children. However, the schools did not use this information to embed diverse cultural knowledge and CaLD families recommended ideas for improvement to school and CaLD family connections. Furthermore, the CaLD families described how they had not been asked about what they wanted to happen at school for the children and appreciated their voices being heard.

This study provides insights as to how CaLD families would like to be engaged and to be heard about what they believe is important in their connection with schools. Such data can assist educators and policy makers to create culturally safe spaces and frame CaLD family-school relationships in empowering ways. Acknowledging CaLD families as important contributors to their child's learning brings a step closer to strengthening connection and supporting social cohesion within the school community that supports cohesion, especially during these divided times.

Can risky play be safe? How educators support play-based learning in outdoor environments in Australia ECEC settings: A systematic literature review

Nilufar Jahan
Southern Cross Uni

Outdoor play environments are essential for children's learning and development, offering opportunities for risk-taking, fostering belonging and well-being, and promoting engagement with nature, autonomy, and social connection.

This study conducted a systematic literature review to examine how early childhood educators in Australia perceive and support outdoor play-based learning, with a particular focus on risky play. Drawing on 11 peer-reviewed studies published over the past decade, the review used reflexive thematic analysis to synthesise educator perspectives on the developmental value of outdoor play, strategies for negotiating risk, and the influence of regulatory and cultural constraints.

Informed by Sandseter's six types of risky play, the review highlights how these experiences contribute to children's development. The analysis identifies three interconnected areas: (1) educators' understandings of outdoor play as holistic and purposeful learning, (2) tensions between developmental opportunities and regulatory compliance, and (3) strategies used to scaffold developmentally appropriate risk. Findings indicate that educators view outdoor risky play as a multidimensional developmental practice that supports motor competence, socio-emotional growth, inquiry-based learning, and children's agency. Risk-taking activities and engaging with natural elements were framed as opportunities for problem-solving, resilience, and environmental awareness. Educators described balancing children's autonomy with regulatory and parental expectations, acting as supportive guides who manage and scaffold risk rather than eliminate it. However, institutional risk discourses and parental safety concerns, particularly for children with disabilities, often constrain opportunities for challenge, raising critical questions about inclusion within safety-driven systems.

The review concludes with recommendations to strengthen communication with families, design graded and accessible outdoor environments, enhance educators' professional learning and provide clearer guidance within the EYLF and NQS to support inclusive risky play. Overall, the study contributes to contemporary debates by showing that risky play is negotiated within regulatory pressures, family expectations and ongoing decisions about safety and children's rights.

The LEAF Framework: A Practice-Based Model for Nature-Connected Early Childhood Education

Jennifer McCormark and Narell Neville
Birdwings Forest School

The Birdwings Living, Ecology, Agency and Flow (LEAF) Framework is a practice-based model developed by Birdwings Forest School, a nature-based early childhood setting, to support children's holistic growth through sustained engagement with place, community, and self. Emerging from over seven years of immersive outdoor practice, and created in situ by the Birdwings team, the framework responds to a key tension within early childhood education: how to maintain rich, child-led, nature-connected learning while meeting the planning, documentation, and developmental expectations of formal frameworks such as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

LEAF operates as a complementary structure to the EYLF, translating its principles into lived, relational practice. The framework is grounded in four guiding concepts—Living, Ecology, Agency, and Flow—which anchor eight core practices expressed through everyday experiences in nature. Together, these provide mentors with a clear yet flexible structure for planning, observation, and reflective practice, while preserving the integrity of emergent, play-based learning.

This presentation explores the distinctions between nature pedagogy and more traditional early childhood approaches, positioning the natural environment not simply as a “third teacher,” but as part of a relational, more-than-human community to which children belong. Within this framing, adults act as learning partners as well as mentors, and children are recognised not only as participants, but as active contributors to the pedagogical process.

The development of the LEAF Framework has been informed by the team's participation in the Childhood Nature Project and the creation of the Mud Book, a research inquiry facilitated by Southern Cross University and RMIT from 2019. While the framework remains in development, data is being gathered through practitioner inquiry, including pedagogical documentation, visual journals, learning stories, and reflective cycles with educators and families. This approach positions research as embedded within practice, demonstrating how meaningful data can emerge through sustained, relational engagement over time.

Educators' digital self-efficacy for fostering young children's digital play and learning in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres in Western Australia.

Simranjeet Kaur

Curtin University

This ongoing project addresses the themes of Technological integration for Early Childhood Educators in Early Childhood Education sector. The research study examines the role of digital self efficacy among early childhood educators (EC educators) to foster the digital play for young children (4-5 years old) in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in Western Australia. The EC educators are expected to integrate digital technology to support young children's learning and provide them an opportunity to be digital citizens according to early years curriculum documents. The research highlights variability in the digital self-efficacy of the EC educators. This study explores how educators understand and develop digital self efficacy, and how their beliefs and contextual factors affect their use of digital technology for fostering digital play for young children aged 4-5 years.

Using a constructivist paradigm and interpretivist epistemology, the research draws on semi structured interviews, document analysis and narrative vignettes to investigate educators lived experiences. Bandura's self efficacy theory provides the conceptual lens, focusing on the challenges, barriers and enablers for the early childhood educators. Preliminary findings indicate that digital self efficacy is influenced by the early learning centre contexts, the policies, opportunities for professional learning, and teacher training. The study offers insights for the need of a professional development training for the EC educators, an agency for educators to embed digital play and availability of digital resources to strengthen educators' understanding and confidence to use digital tools for, with and by children to improve their digital self-efficacy.

Professional Wisdom in the Age of Generative AI: Where Are the Waves Taking Early Childhood Reflective Practice?

Nicole Thompson
Southern Cross University

Reflective practice has long been recognised as a cornerstone of professional wisdom in early childhood education. Within the Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, documentation, curriculum planning, and reflective dialogue form part of educators' professional responsibilities under the National Quality Framework and the Early Years Learning Framework. These practices have historically been grounded in relational knowledge, ethical responsibility, and educators' professional judgement.

However, new digital technologies are beginning to reshape this landscape. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools are increasingly being used in professional settings to assist with tasks such as drafting documentation, summarising observations, and generating written reflections. While these tools may offer efficiencies in a sector experiencing ongoing administrative pressures, their use also raises important questions about authorship, professional voice, and the role of technology in pedagogical decision-making.

This presentation introduces an early-stage doctoral research project that investigates how GenAI may intersect with reflective practice in Australian ECEC contexts. Drawing on emerging literature across GenAI, education, and professional practice, the presentation identifies key ethical tensions that arise when GenAI systems participate in processes traditionally grounded in human interpretation and professional judgement.

By reflecting on where the profession has come from and considering where these technological developments may take it next, the session engages directly with the conference theme "Where have we come, where are the waves taking us?". The presentation invites dialogue about how the profession's collective wisdom might guide ethical engagement with GenAI as this new technological wave enters early childhood practice.

Rethinking classroom assessment: Fostering subjective wellbeing by empowering young children's voices

Margarita Ghezzi
Griffith Institute for Educational Research

What does it mean to act wisely when designing and delivering self-regulation (SR) interventions in the early years? This presentation draws on findings from Brain Train (BT), the first Australian adaptation of a teacher-led, two-generation SR program originally developed at the University of Oregon (Neville et al., 2013). Implemented in a low-socioeconomic Queensland kindergarten (2024, n=20 preschoolers and their parents) and two foundation primary schools (2025, n=80 children and their parents), BT was examined through a mixed-methods, pre-post feasibility design, with control groups, incorporating researcher-administered SR tasks and caregiver-reported questionnaires, followed by semi-structured interviews investigated through thematic reflexive analysis.

Three interconnected dimensions emerged as pivotal to feasibility: teachers as interventionists, instructional design, and parental partnerships. Findings affirm that teachers are uniquely positioned to embed SR practices into everyday routines, but only when their wellbeing, readiness to change, and leadership support are genuinely nurtured. Program design must balance structured core components with contextual flexibility; rigid curricula risk undermining adoption, while adaptive models strengthen ecological validity and stakeholder ownership. Parental engagement, though consistently recognised as beneficial, remained underutilised, with participation hindered by structural barriers, mistrust, and accessibility challenges, particularly among families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.

Preliminary quantitative data showed promising positive trends in children's SR and pro-social skills, across all three settings. Critically, BT reframes cultural adaptation and contextual responsiveness not as optional enhancements to effectiveness, but as generative processes - sources of learning, discovery, and relational wisdom in their own right.

This presentation invites conference participants to consider how SR interventions can serve as creative, strength-based spaces for co-constructing wisdom with children, families, and communities, fostering wellbeing for all within and beyond the early years' setting.

Integrating embodied learning in a digital environment in young children

Myrto Mavilidi
Southern Cross University

Educational technologies have revolutionized children's learning experiences. Grounded in embodied cognition and cognitive-motor interference accounts, we tested whether a short digital embodied learning lesson is feasible and whether it improves short-term learning without reducing enjoyment in young children.

Seventy-five children (intervention $n = 37$; control $n = 38$; 6.1 ± 0.7 years; 54% female) visiting a Science museum were individually randomized in a single session to : 1) an embodied learning group, including a 10 min video with animated animals showing movements which children had to imitate (e.g., jumping like a kangaroo), or 2) a sedentary control group, with children looking at the same videos while seated. Children's geography skills (i.e., naming continents and animals living in each) on the content previously taught in the videos were assessed both before and immediately after the learning sessions. Following the learning sessions, child enjoyment was assessed by asking if they liked "this game" and if they would be interested in playing it again in the future. Linear mixed models ran in SPSS, controlling for child ID, were conducted for the learning assessments. The Group x Time interaction for learning scores was not significant (Mean difference = 1.40, 95% CI, -0.28-3.08, $p = .101$). Post-session enjoyment did not differ between groups (intervention: $M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.6$; control: $M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.6$; $F = 2.6$, $p = .109$).

Although learning outcomes in the intervention group did not significantly differ from the sedentary control group, this study shows the potential of integrating technology with movements and learning without impeding their learning outcomes. Future research should focus on looking at the effects of similar programs with longer duration (e.g., 4-6 weeks) applied during their regular routines in early childhood education and care centres.

Are We Underusing Music as a Workforce Strategy?

Melissa Smile

Hey Dee Ho Educational Services

Early childhood education speaks often about quality, outcomes, and pedagogy. We speak less about retention, energy, and what sustains educators over time. In a sector facing workforce fatigue, attrition, and increasing complexity, this provocation asks a direct question: Are we overlooking one of our most powerful cultural tools for keeping educators connected, regulated, and committed to the profession?

Music has always lived within early childhood settings — in songs, rhythms, call-and-response, and shared movement. These practices predate formal curriculum frameworks and sit deeply within cultural memory. Yet increasingly, music is treated as an optional extra, outsourced expertise, or performance-based activity rather than a relational tool embedded in daily practice.

This provocation reframes music, language, and shared cultural practices as workforce strategies. It explores how rhythm, voice, and collective musical experiences build belonging not only for children, but for educators. When educators sing together, move together, and experience joy together, they strengthen psychological safety, co-regulation, and shared identity.

Rather than introducing something new, this session invites practitioners to notice what already exists within their teams — the songs remembered from childhood, the cultural rhythms brought from diverse communities, the humour and shared language that create connection. These are not soft extras. They are protective factors.

Participants will be challenged to reconsider whether music can be repositioned from enrichment to infrastructure — a daily, accessible practice that supports educator wellbeing, strengthens professional culture, and ultimately contributes to retention.

If workforce sustainability is the question, perhaps the answer has been in the room all along.

Care-full Against the Tide: Micro Acts of Temporal Resistance as Active Hope in ECEC

Lucia Stacchiotti &

Olivera Kamenarac

Southern Cross University

This session invites the audience to pause and consider: What if the most radical professional act in early childhood education policy, practice and teacher education today is to slow down and look inwards, deliberately, collectively, and with courage?

In a sector swept by 'care-less' acceleration, surveillance, standardisation, and outcomes-driven governance (Roberts Holmes & Moss, 2021; Moss & Mitchell, 2024), we ask where the wave is taking us and who benefits from its speed. We trouble time itself: from clocked, economised time to multidimensional pedagogical time, time to pause, to listen, to dwell with uncertainty, and to co-construct meaning together (Rinaldi, 2006). We frame Active Hope not as optimism but as practice: a collective readiness of all to act despite uncertainty, sustaining ethical and democratic life in ECE (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). This provocation insists that resisting acceleration is not a refusal for its own sake; it is an affirmative ethics (Braidotti, 2019) that safeguards spaces of dialogue, deep thinking professional judgment, and shared world-making.

We invite participants to consider micro acts of temporal resistance in everyday gestures that interrupt the tempo of compliance and open space for intellectual bravery: lingering with children's questions; staging unrushed encounters; and creating "gift economies of time" with families and communities (Ball, 2016; Manning, 2016; Kimmerer, 2024, Stacchiotti & Kamenarac, forthcoming). Such practices enact a politics of refusal and Active Hope, cultivating alliances of care that resist the narrowing tempo of contemporary education while sustaining democratic presence in the here-and-now and opening toward the not-yet—the yet to come. They ask of us the courage not to stay silent, and to remain publicly answerable for education as an ethical and political act (Rinaldi, 2006), now more than ever, even when it feels inconvenient. (Kamenarac, Moss & Stacchiotti, personal communication, 6 February 2026).

Our closing invitation is pragmatic: arrive with one micro act you have tried (or are willing to try). Together, we will test their potential to re attune time, renew professional judgment, and sustain Active Hope amid proliferating pressures. The wager is simple: micro, situated acts, minor gestures of care, can shift the current, and sometimes even the tide.

The wisdom of parental involvement

Nining Sari

SCEI-HE

Parental involvement is widely acknowledged as a major factor in children's learning success. However, parents participate in different ways. This provocation invites participants to critically reconsider that effective parental engagement only can be shown in a certain way. Inspired by the socioecological theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner, participants will examine how home-school partnerships could be understood, enacted and valued to empower children's learning trajectories and development.

Through the use of image, short scenarios and reflective questioning, participants will be challenged to evaluate their own perspective and consider how the narrow definition about 'active engagement' could possibly marginalize some families and privilege others. For example, what if a parent unable to attend center event? is not showing up equal to not involving? Are broader contextual factors considered? Educational background, work commitment, and language barrier all contribute to how families engage with early childhood centers.

This provocation does not aim to provide definitive strategies. Instead, it seeks to disrupt narrow assumptions and encourage practitioners to reflect critically on their beliefs, biases, and practices. It also promotes a shift from seeing involvement as fixed expectation to understanding it as diverse, contextually shaped and relational process that respects the realities of all families.

The teacher shortage Is fake news!

Karthika Viknarasa

University of Sydney

Australia is frequently told that early childhood education is facing a severe teacher and educator shortage. Governments, media and sector reports regularly highlight workforce gaps and recruitment challenges. For example, national workforce modelling estimates Australia needs around 21,000 additional early childhood educators to meet current demand.

Yet a closer look at the data reveals a more complex story.

Across Australia, more than 70,000 students are currently enrolled in early childhood qualifications, while universities and training providers graduate thousands of new educators each year. Despite this growing pipeline, many graduates report difficulty securing stable employment in early childhood services.

This presentation argues that the "teacher shortage" narrative hides deeper structural issues in the early childhood workforce. Rather than a simple lack of trained educators, the sector faces challenges such as low wages, insecure or part-time employment, poor working conditions, and limited career pathways. High attrition also plays a major role. Surveys suggest over 60% of early childhood educators are considering leaving the sector within three years.

The result is a paradox: thousands of students are training for early childhood careers, yet services struggle to recruit and retain qualified staff.

This session will discuss the myths and realities behind the workforce debate, presenting data on graduate pipelines, workforce retention, and employment conditions. Participants will explore how policy settings, funding models and workforce structures shape employment outcomes, and why solving the "shortage" requires more than simply training more educators.

Understanding the real problem is the first step toward sustainable solutions for the early childhood workforce.



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