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Mapping the Divides; Bridging the Gaps: A Bibliometric–Systematic Review and an Integrative Framework for Multicultural Early Childhood Education



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Abstract

The growing global diversification of early childhood education (ECE) settings necessitates pedagogical approaches that are both responsive to and affirming of diverse learners' needs. However, the expansion of the related literature risks fragmentation, obscuring structural divides, including persistent policy–practice gaps and global knowledge inequities. To date, bibliometric methods have not been applied to systematically diagnose these issues or propose a resolution framework. This study addresses this gap in the literature via a bibliometric–systematic review conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. A total of 203 documents (1991–2025) from the Scopus database were analysed using performance analysis and science mapping to delineate the field's intellectual, conceptual, and social dimensions. The research findings indicate that multicultural ECE research is based on three core pillars—developmental psychology, pedagogical practice, and educational policy—but is constrained by a persistent disconnect between policy- and practice-oriented research. The study also provides quantitative evidence of a pronounced core–periphery structure in knowledge production, with North American and European institutions forming the central research core, and identifies strategic gaps in research on educational technology and culturally responsive assessment. With these findings, this study's principal contribution is the development of the integrative framework for multicultural ECE research (IFMER).

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The model reconceptualises technology and assessment not as deficits but as strategic bridging mechanisms that link policy and practice, integrate developmental theory into pedagogy, and promote more equitable global research collaboration. The IFMER provides a strategic roadmap for advancing a more coherent, equitable, and impactful research agenda.

Keywords: multicultural education, early childhood education, bibliometric analysis, science mapping, equity, Scopus

Introduction

The demographic composition of early childhood education (ECE) settings has diversified over recent decades (Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Miller, 2016). This global transformation, marked by an expanded range of students' racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, has emphasised the need for pedagogical approaches that are responsive to and affirming of all children. The urgency of this need is underscored by recent population-level evidence demonstrating that children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds face a greater risk of developmental vulnerability, particularly in the domains of communication and language skills (Atalell et al., 2025). This reality transforms multicultural education from a pedagogical ideal into a critical tool for promoting developmental equity.

In response, multicultural education has evolved from a narrow focus on race and ethnicity to a comprehensive pedagogical philosophy. As Banks (2004) describes in an early contribution, this approach includes a range of practices, such as content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, and the creation of an inclusive school culture. More recently, the field has advanced toward “culturally sustaining pedagogy,” an orientation that supports not only tolerance and responsiveness but also the maintenance and continuation of the linguistic and cultural heritages of all children (Paris & Alim, 2014). However, translating this advanced theoretical orientation into effective classroom practice remains a significant challenge, as educators often perceive their preparedness as stemming more from experiential, on-the-ground knowledge rather than from formal professional training, and face systemic constraints such as a lack of time and resources (Veliz et al., 2025).

Multicultural education provides an essential starting point for broadening the curricula, teacher dispositions, and school cultures (Banks, 1993, 1995). Within ECE, this initial move has expanded representation and prompted curricular audits. However, as critics have noted, multiculturalism too often devolves into surface-level celebrations of difference—festivals, food, and flags—without redistributing epistemic authority or transforming assessment and pedagogy (Boutte, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2019). This tension is particularly acute in early-year settings where identity, language, and family knowledge interface daily with play-based curricula. This review takes this tendency toward superficial celebration seriously while also interrogating its limits, asking what comes after representational inclusion in ECE.

The critical turn has reframed culture from a topic to be added into curricula to a resource that organises learning. Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, and its classroom portraits in *The Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings, 2009), shifted the conversation from content inclusion to using students' cultural referents to foster academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Gay's (2018) synthesis of culturally responsive teaching operationalises this stance through planning, interactional routines, and assessment. In ECE, this turn reorients teacher–child interactions, family partnerships, and play-based curricula toward children's everyday repertoires from the earliest years (Souto-Manning, 2013). Funds of Knowledge approaches (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992)

further situate families as co-producers of knowledge, inviting pedagogies that distribute expertise across home and school. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) advances this evolution by insisting that schools should not only recognise but actively sustain and extend the linguistic and cultural life-ways of communities (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). In practice, this translates into tangible classroom strategies such as leveraging children's multilingual names as gateways to biliteracy (Durán & Bernstein, 2024) or using story circles to honour diverse narrative structures and cultivate children's cultural and linguistic dexterity (Flynn, 2024). Crucially, such strategies differ from surface-level activities, as they are not cultural additions but pedagogical tools that reorganise learning around the children's existing cultural and linguistic assets. In multilingual ECE, this stance aligns with longstanding evidence on the developmental and sociopolitical value of the mother tongue (Cummins, 2000, 2001) and demands assessment practices that can "hear" diverse competencies early in life.

Paradoxically, despite this conceptual momentum, our science mapping indicates that policy-oriented and classroom-practice outlets in ECE exhibit limited dialogue (see below in the Results section), raising the possibility of a structural communication gap that may slow the translation of CSP-aligned visions into day-to-day pedagogy. This review therefore maps the field's intellectual, conceptual, and social structures and proposes an integrative framework to bridge these structural and conceptual divides.

While this increase in scholarly interest is evident, it can conceal structural challenges. When academic fields proliferate without regular synthesis, their accumulated knowledge risks becoming fragmented (Öztürk et al., 2024). In such domains, systematic and bibliometric reviews play a role that extends beyond summarisation. These reviews serve as instruments that outline the intellectual structure of a field, identify its foundational elements, and expose its weaknesses (Hulland, 2024). In the case of multicultural ECE, this growth has obscured theoretical fragmentation, a gap between policy and practice, and geographical inequities in knowledge production. These problems emerge in areas such as the development of effective home-school partnerships with culturally diverse families (Castro et al., 2011; Norheim et al., 2024), where migrant parents frequently navigate "cultural continuity dilemmas", as their ingrained child-rearing habitus clashes with the norms of the host society (Akifeva et al., 2024), and the practical implementation of responsive pedagogies. Recent studies highlight persistent challenges, including a lack of continuity in multicultural education across early childhood and elementary stages (Yu et al., 2025) and educators' difficulties in differentiating the learning environment and, most notably, assessment practices to meet diverse needs (Demirci-Ünal & Öztürk, 2025). Concurrently, research underscores the powerful role of home literacy practices, such as translanguaging, in building "literate cultural capital" that can bridge home and school environments (Le et al., 2025). However, these family-based assets are not always leveraged effectively within educational systems. Resolving this gap demands not only new classroom strategies but also a reconsideration of teacher education, moving toward models that incorporate principles of social justice and critical consciousness (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2019).

Examining the structural problems in multicultural ECE requires a method that can generate an objective and reproducible outline of the field's structure. Although traditional narrative reviews offer valuable perspectives, they often face obstacles in handling large numbers of publications and in identifying the intellectual, theoretical, and social structures of a field (Hoang, 2025; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Bibliometric analysis, a quantitative method, provides instruments to address this difficulty by allowing an examination of publication patterns, influential works, thematic clusters, and collaboration networks (Donthu et al., 2021; Klarin, 2024). To date, the application of bibliometric evidence to address these issues of fragmentation and inequity and to advance a framework for resolving them appears to be a notable gap in the existing literature. In response to calls for review articles to extend beyond synthesis and formulate conceptual contributions (Marzi et al., 2025), the present study addresses that gap. A broad operational

definition of “multicultural education” was adopted for this review, one that includes research on the intersections of culture, language, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status within ECE settings, as well as pedagogical approaches—such as intercultural education and culturally responsive practices—that promote equity and inclusion. The study offers two contributions. First, it presents a detailed analysis of the multicultural ECE field. Second, this analysis leads to the formulation of an integrative framework for multicultural ECE research (IFMER). The framework functions both as a tool to examine the current state of the field and as a directive for a more connected and equitable research program.

To address these objectives, the study examined the following research questions (RQs).

- RQ1: How has the structure of multicultural ECE research developed, as indicated by publication patterns and citation impacts?
- RQ2: What are the main knowledge domains and research themes within multicultural ECE, and how have these themes changed over time?
- RQ3: What patterns of international collaboration and scholarly networking emerge from the bibliometric analysis, and what do they indicate about the distribution of knowledge production?

Theoretical Foundations

A dual theoretical framework forms the basis of this bibliometric review. This framework combines the principles of science mapping with conceptual frameworks from the field of multicultural ECE. The first element supplies the methodological rationale for the analytical approach, whereas the second provides the interpretive perspectives needed to examine and explain the resulting knowledge structures. This combined approach ensures that the analysis remains both methodologically sound and theoretically grounded (Hoang, 2025).

Foundations of Bibliometric Science Mapping

The intellectual heritage of science mapping originates in the work of scholars such as Price (1963), who conceptualised scientific literature as an interconnected network of scientific papers. Although this concept remains central, bibliometric research requires advanced frameworks to examine the multidimensional nature of research fields (Donthu et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study applies the analytical framework that Zupic and Čater (2015) suggested, which supplies a structure for assessing a field according to the following three interrelated dimensions.

- (1) The intellectual structure: This dimension reveals the foundational knowledge base of a field by examining the citation relationships between documents. Analysis of this dimension, which relies on co-citation methods, delineates how often two documents are cited together by other publications, thereby identifying influential works and theoretical clusters (Rodriguez-Prieto et al., 2019; Small, 1973).
- (2) The conceptual structure: This dimension outlines the themes and concepts that define a field’s research agenda. Analysis of this dimension, using keyword co-occurrence networks, represents the relationships between research topics according to their simultaneous appearance in publications, which permits the recognition of central themes, trends, and conceptual gaps (Klarin, 2024).
- (3) The social structure: This dimension assesses collaborative patterns among researchers, institutions, and countries. Analysis of this dimension, which uses co-authorship networks, identifies key research communities, collaborative hubs, and the flow of knowledge across geographical and institutional boundaries (Fagan et al., 2018; Glänzel & Schubert, 2005).

An examination of these three dimensions yields a multidimensional overview of the multicultural ECE research domain.

Interpretive Frameworks from Multicultural ECE

Although bibliometric methods indicate patterns and structures, theories from the field of multicultural ECE supply the basis for interpreting the implications of these findings. The frameworks outlined below are applied in the discussion section to examine and interpret the bibliometric patterns.

Banks (2004) presents an early contribution with a framework that includes five dimensions of multicultural education (content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture). This framework is applied to interpret the thematic clusters that arise from the analysis of the conceptual structure, which aids in determining whether research in the field emphasises curriculum, pedagogy, or systemic equity concerns. Applying these dimensions demands an intersectional perspective that acknowledges how the interaction of multiple factors—such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, and language—influences a child's experience. This perspective is used to assess how research themes address these overlapping identities, rather than viewing diversity as a uniform category.

Vandenbroeck's (2007) examination of diversity and equity in European ECE offers a perspective on identity construction and the role of policy in influencing pedagogical approaches. This framework retains relevance for interpreting the findings on the intellectual and social structures, given the contributions of European institutions to the field. The framework also supports an assessment of the relationships between policy- and practice-oriented research clusters. Young et al. (2024) introduced a tripartite framework of reinvestment, reorientation, and reshaping, which provides a model for understanding field development. This framework is adopted to explain the evolutionary trends observed in the analysis. For example, patterns of publication growth correspond to expansion. At the same time, changes in the dominant keywords and research clusters reflect reorientation, and an emphasis on pedagogical practices and equity indicates efforts to reshape the field. This framework permits the association of observed bibliometric patterns with the social and intellectual movements that influence the field.

Methodology

This study employed a bibliometric–systematic review design to delineate the intellectual, conceptual, and social structures of multicultural education research in early childhood settings. The methodological protocol adhered to the PRISMA guidelines, ensuring a transparent and reproducible research process (Moher et al., 2009). The approach integrated performance analysis with science mapping techniques to generate a multidimensional assessment of the field's structure and development (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Data Collection and Screening

Data Source Selection

Scopus served as the primary data source for this review, a choice justified by its alignment with the study's objectives. Scopus supplies broad coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the fields of social science and education, indexing a greater range of international journals than other databases and thus permitting the representation of a global perspective on the topic (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). In addition, the data export functionalities of Scopus are compatible with bibliometric analysis software, such as VOSviewer and Bibliometrix, allowing for an accurate data processing workflow

(Donthu et al., 2021). Although no single database encompasses all the relevant material, Scopus provides a robust foundation for examining global research trends within the field.

Search Strategy

An expanded search string emerged from an iterative process that incorporated preliminary searches and expert consultation. This approach allowed for the inclusion of the field's central concepts and related themes, such as culturally responsive pedagogy, equity, and social justice, all of which were represented in the discourse (Klarin, 2024). The final search query occurred on 28 February 2025, with application to the title, abstract, and keyword fields for greater sensitivity. The search string appeared as follows:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“multicultural educat” OR “intercultural educat*” OR “cultural diversity” OR “multiculturalism”) AND (“early childhood educat*” OR “preschool educat*” OR “kindergarten” OR “nursery school” OR “ECE”))*

The search proceeded without temporal or document-type limitations during the initial retrieval stage, an omission that allowed the representation of the research domain's historical development.

Inclusion Criteria and Screening Process

The screening process followed a multistage protocol, as depicted in the PRISMA flow diagram (see Figure 1). Inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined in advance to maintain the relevance and quality of the final sample.

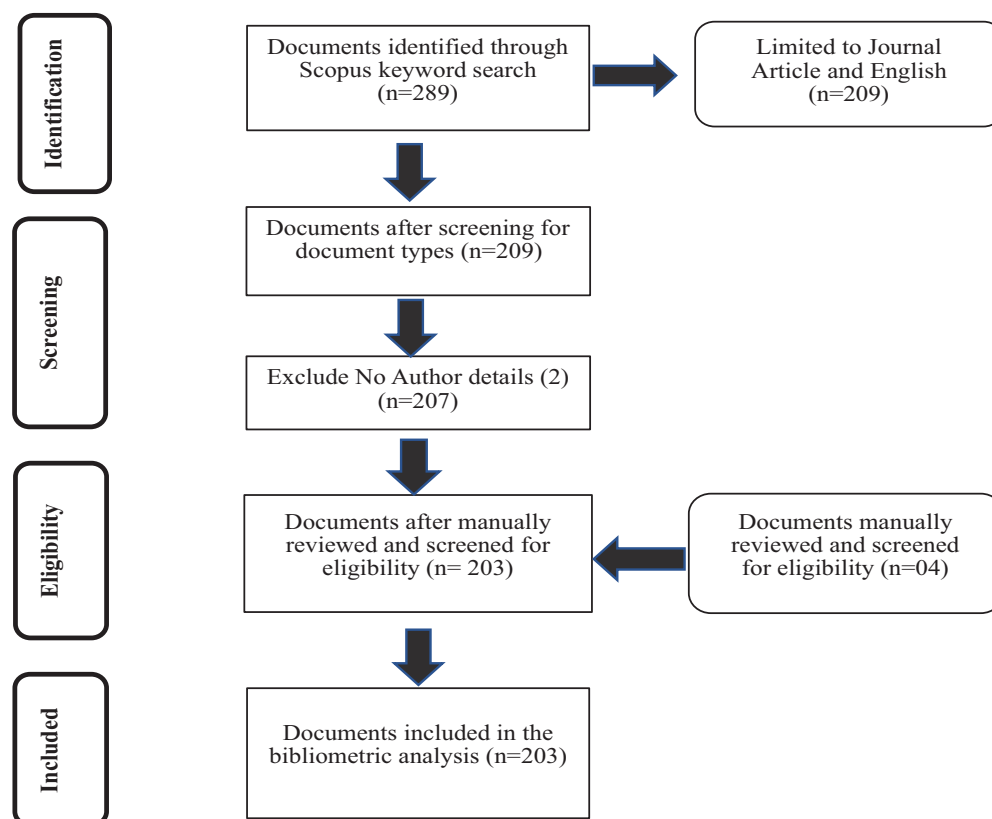


Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram Detailing the Steps used to Identify and Screen Articles for Inclusion (Moher et al., 2009).

Inclusion criteria: (1) The document's primary focus centred on multicultural education or related conceptual frameworks (e.g., intercultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, social justice). (2) The study context related to early childhood settings (i.e., children aged from birth to 8 years), a category that encompassed research on preservice and in-service ECE teacher training. (3) The document consisted of a journal article or review.

Exclusion criteria: (1) Studies that examined kindergarten–Grade 12 or higher education without a direct ECE component; (2) documents in which multicultural concepts received only peripheral mention; (3) editorials, commentaries, book reviews, and other non-peer-reviewed publications; (4) documents not published in English. Title and abstract screening were conducted independently by two researchers. An initial inter-rater reliability check on a subset of 100 articles yielded agreement (Cohen's kappa = 0.91). Discrepancies underwent resolution through discussion until consensus emerged. The full texts of the remaining articles then received assessment for eligibility against the same criteria. That process produced a final sample of 203 documents for analysis.

Data Analysis and Visualisation

Specialised software supported our data analysis and visualisation. Performance analysis and temporal were conducted occurred with the Bibliometrix R package (v. 4.1.0) (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Network construction and visualisation for co-authorship, co-citation, and co-occurrence analyses used with VOSviewer (v. 1.6.18) (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Data Cleaning and Normalisation

A data cleaning and normalisation phase preceded the analysis. That phase entailed the creation of a thesaurus file, which merged keyword variations (e.g., “preschool education” and “preschool”), reconciled different spellings (e.g., American and British English), and standardised author names and institutional affiliations to avoid fragmentation in the network analyses. Those steps ensured the accuracy and validity of the resulting knowledge structures (Hoang, 2025).

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework addressed the three research questions.

- *Performance analysis (RQ1)*: Bibliometric indicators were calculated to examine the development and impact of the field's structure. Document and author impact underwent an evaluation based on citation metrics (e.g., total citations, normalised citations, h-index), an approach that yielded a broader assessment than simple rankings (Hoang, 2025).
- *Science mapping (RQ2 and RQ3)*: Three complementary science mapping analyses were conducted, in accordance with the recommendations of Zupic and Čater (2015). A journal co-citation analysis identified the foundational elements of the field. That technique delineated the cognitive connections between disciplines and theoretical communities on the basis of the frequency with which journals underwent co-citation (Small, 1973). In these networks, an edge represents the connection between two nodes (e.g., two co-cited journals). The strength of this edge, often represented as the lines' thickness, indicates the frequency or intensity of the relationship, such as the number of co-citations. To allow for more accurate comparisons between these connections, VOSviewer applies a normalisation method known as association strength. This method corrects for the total number of citations or occurrences of each item, providing

a relative measure of connection strength that is less biased by highly frequent items. This study also reported the average normalised link strength (ANLS)—the mean association strength across a set of connections—which offers a standardised metric for comparing the intensity of dialogue between different intellectual clusters. In addition, a keyword co-occurrence analysis examined the dominant themes and their interrelations. This method represents the thematic structure of a field and thereby permits the recognition of themes, trends, and conceptual gaps (Klarin, 2024). Co-authorship networks at the country and institutional levels revealed the geographic and organisational centres of knowledge production (Glänzel & Schubert, 2005). For all network visualisations in VOSviewer, the association strength method supports normalisation. A minimum cluster size of five items maintained thematic coherence. The resolution parameter underwent optimisation through iterative testing, which produced a thematically meaningful and stable cluster solution instead of relying on the default setting. Parameters and decisions received documentation to allow full reproducibility of the analysis.

Results

Development of the Intellectual Structure (RQ1)

An analysis of the 203 documents published between 1991 and 2025 indicated a field marked by consistent growth and greater scholarly impact. Performance indicators offered an overview of the field's development (Table 1).

Table 1 *Bibliometric Performance Indicators (1991–2025)*

Description	Results	Description	Results
Main information		Document contents	
Timespan	1991:2/2025	Keywords plus	317
Sources (journals, books)	130	Authors' keywords	579
Documents	203	Authors	
Annual growth rate, %	2.06	Authors	456
Document average age	8.98	Single-authored docs	68
Average citations per document	10.55	Author collaborations	
References	8923	Co-authors per document	2.41
		International co-authorships, %	10.84
Document types			
Article	194	Review	8

Sources: R-Biblioshiny.

The dataset shows an annual growth rate of 2.06%, reflecting continued scholarly attention. An average of 10.55 citations per document suggests a notable scholarly impact in the field, a figure that exceeds the mean citation rate for general ECE research. The high proportion of original research articles (95.5%) compared with review articles suggested that the field relies on new empirical and theoretical investigations. Collaboration patterns appeared to be moderate, with an average of 2.41 co-authors per document and an international co-authorship rate of 10.84%, indicating opportunities for greater global networking.

Developmental Phases and Citation Trajectory

A temporal analysis of publication and citation trends indicated three developmental phases from 1991 to 2025 (Figure 2).

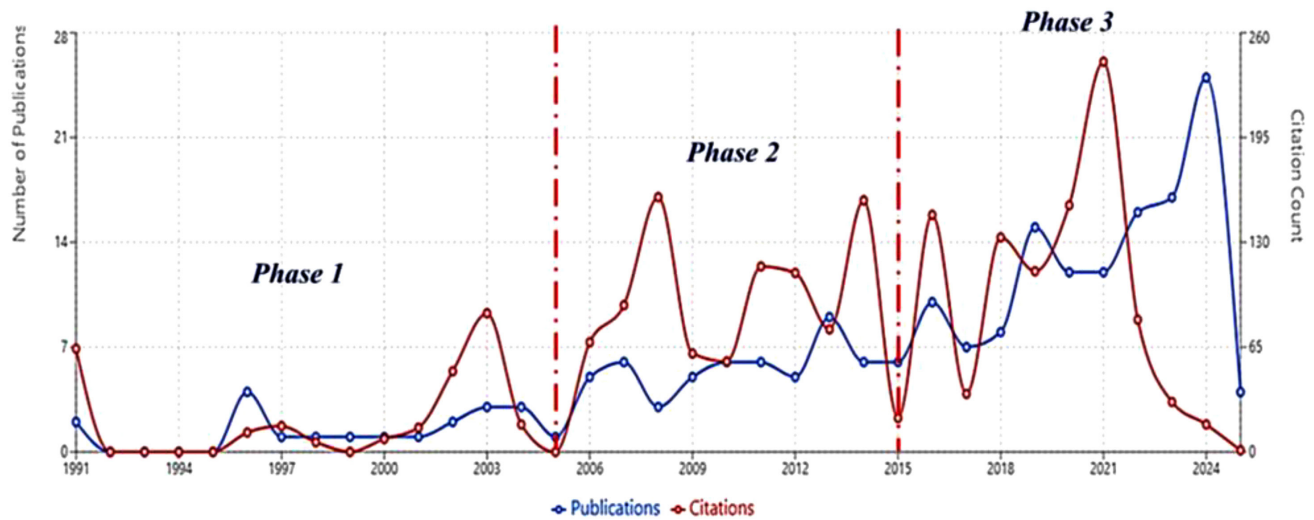


Figure 2 Temporal Evolution of Publications and Citations (1991–2025).

- Phase 1 (1991–2005): The analysis indicated a foundational period distinguished by limited publication output and an emphasis on developing the essential theoretical foundations. The average citation impact stood at moderate levels (5.63 citations per document), which corresponded to the early development of the field.
- Phase 2 (2006–2015): Commencing around 2006, in conjunction with a marked upsurge in research output as depicted in Figure 1, the phase involved a substantial rise in empirical investigations and a doubling of the citation impact. A gradual transition toward empirical approaches emerged, accompanied by greater adoption of mixed-method designs.
- Phase 3 (2016–2025): The latest phase exhibited consolidation within the field, featuring consistent growth and an emphasis on applied and evaluative investigations. Citation impact persisted at elevated levels, although the newest publications remained in the preliminary stages of accruing citations.

Two prominent citation peaks appeared in the data, one between 2007 and 2008 and another between 2018 and 2019. These peaks corresponded to the release of influential studies, including those of Vandebroek (2007), which assessed European pedagogical methods, and Bennett et al. (2018), which evaluated culturally responsive literacy strategies, indicating that such studies stimulated further inquiries.

Analysis of Influential Publications

An analysis of publications was conducted based on citation impact to identify influential works. A justified threshold was applied instead of arbitrary rankings. Table 2 lists all documents from the dataset that received 20 or more global citations, furnishing a precise overview of their research contributions. The analysis also encompassed the local to global citation ratio. This normalised metric distinguishes between an article's specialised influence within the field (local citations from the 203 documents in

Table 2 *Most Influential Publications in Multicultural ECE Research (Global Citations $\geq$ 20)*

Document	DOI	Year	Local citations	Global citations	Local to global citation ratio (%)
Bennett et al., 2018	10.1007/s10643-017-0839-9	2018	4	47	8.51
Jipson, 1991	10.1207/s15566935eed0202_4	1991	2	57	3.51
Khalfaoui et al., 2021	10.1007/s10643-020-01054-4	2021	2	52	3.85
Vandenbroek, 2007	10.1080/13502930601046604	2007	2	44	4.55
Schoorman, 2011	10.1080/00094056.2011.10523210	2011	2	21	9.52
Lappalainen, 2006	10.1080/14681360500487777	2006	1	39	2.56
Aragona-Young and Sawyer, 2018	10.1080/13540602.2018.1435527	2018	1	33	3.03
Chan and Ritchie, 2016	10.1177/1463949116660954	2016	1	32	3.13
Adam and Barratt-Pugh, 2020	10.1007/s13384-019-00375-7	2020	1	28	3.57

the dataset) and its broader influence (global citations from the entire Scopus database), which afforded a refined perspective on influence beyond raw counts (Hoang, 2025).

The analysis revealed diverse patterns of influence. Foundational theoretical works, such as Jipson (1991), maintained high global citation counts over decades, indicating their continued relevance as reference points. In contrast, more recent works like Khalfaoui et al. (2021) accumulated citations rapidly, suggesting their direct connection to ongoing discussions. The article by Bennett et al. (2018) showed both high global citations and a high local to global citation ratio (8.51%), which indicated influence both within and outside the ECE research community. Such patterns point to the paper's function in connecting knowledge across areas.

An examination of influential publications suggested a progression in the multicultural ECE field, moving from critiques of universalist pedagogy to assessments of policy and context, and ultimately to a focus on evidence-based frameworks for practitioners. This shift can be traced to works such as Jipson (1991), which questioned the cultural neutrality of “developmentally appropriate practice.” The paper examined how dominant pedagogical models often overlooked diverse cultural values and ways of knowing, thereby directing attention toward cultural context. Ethnographic studies, such as Lappalainen (2006), refined this perspective by showing how “liberal multiculturalism” could reinforce nationalistic and exclusionary practices in preschool settings. These early works outlined the basis for multicultural education by stressing the need to identify and reconsider assumptions in mainstream pedagogy.

The discourse advanced to address systemic issues. Vandenbroeck (2007) represented a key development, moving “beyond anti-bias education” by offering a European perspective on the adoption of American models. The work connected pedagogical approaches to national policies and societal shifts, encouraging consideration of power dynamics in a globalised context. A focus on systemic tensions also appeared in the work of Chan and Ritchie (2016), who, through their assessment of “partnership with parents,” identified a “cycle of misunderstanding” between educators and families from nondominant cultures. These studies moved the discussion from questioning the need for multiculturalism to investigating points of failure in its systemic application.

Recent influential works indicated a turn toward integrating theory with evidence-based practice. For instance, Bennett et al. (2018) illustrated this shift by translating research into five frameworks for

culturally responsive teaching in literacy, connecting theory to classroom application. This practical emphasis also appeared in systematic reviews on specific outcomes, such as the work by Khalfaoui et al. (2021) investigating the creation of a “positive classroom climate.” The rapid citation accumulation of such studies points to a field that has directed attention toward confirming and organising knowledge into tools and strategies that educators can apply to support equitable learning environments. In sum, an examination of these influential works indicates a field that has advanced from critiques of universal developmental theories (Jipson, 1991) and analyses of socio-political contexts (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Vandenbroeck, 2007) to a focus on organising knowledge into evidence-based frameworks for practice (Bennett et al., 2018; Khalfaoui et al., 2021).

Dominant Knowledge Domains and Research Themes (RQ2)

Co-citation and co-occurrence analyses were conducted to examine the intellectual and conceptual structure of the field.

The Intellectual Structure: Journal Co-citation

The co-citation network of journals (Figure 3) reveals three distinct intellectual communities that form the pillars of multicultural ECE research.

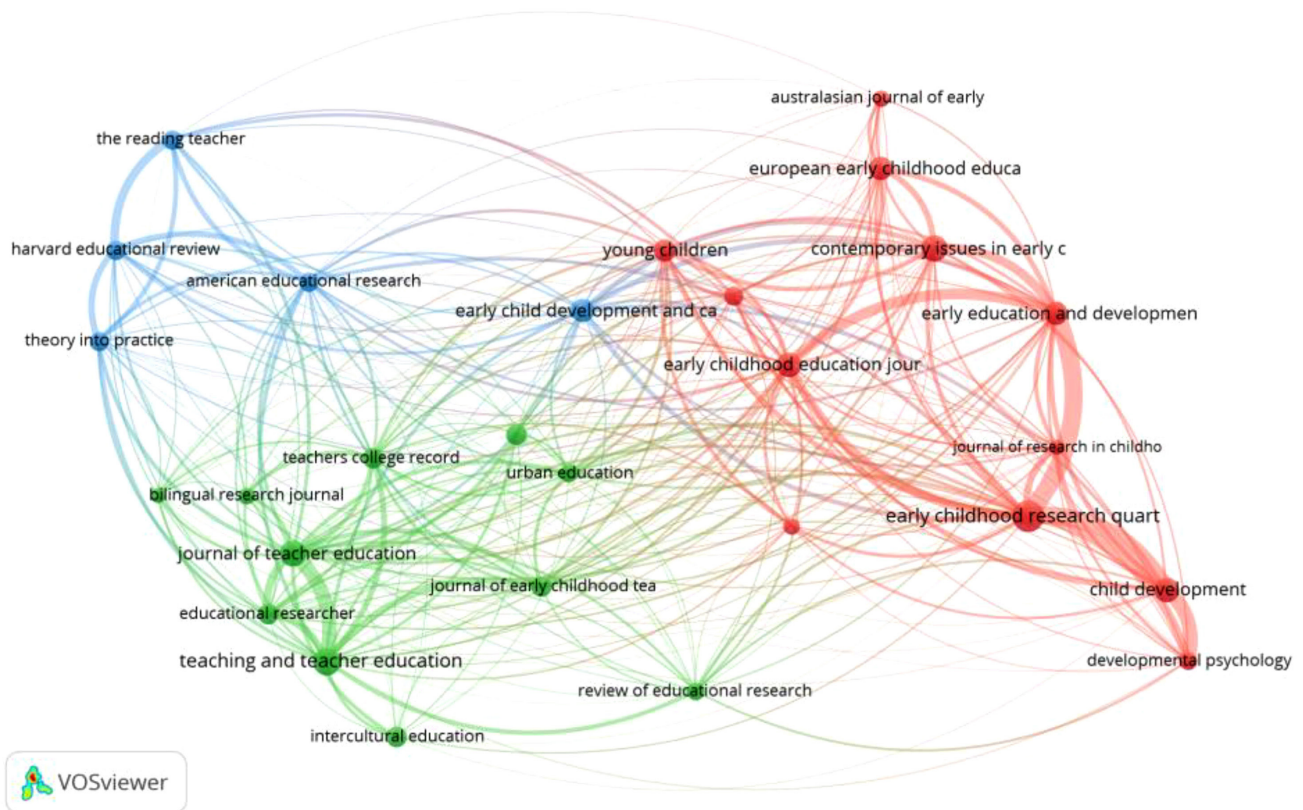


Figure 3 Co-citation Network of Journals with at Least 20 Citations.

The three clusters that define the field of education were interrelated and supported the understanding of child development and education. The developmental psychology cluster (red, 27 links, total link strength: 743, 74 citations), which included journals such as *Child Development* and *Early Education and Development*, offered the theoretical framework that addressed children’s identity formation and

cognitive development across diverse contexts. The pedagogical practice cluster (green, 27 links, total link strength: 579, 55 citations), which centred on journals like *Teaching and Teacher Education* and *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, stressed teacher preparation, instructional strategies, and the integration of multicultural education within the classroom. The educational policy and equity cluster (blue, 27 links, total link strength: 385, 28 citations), which featured journals such as *Harvard Educational Review* and *Theory into Practice*, examined systemic issues, social justice, and educational equity, as the cluster assessed the implications of educational policies. These clusters formed a framework that influenced both research and educational practice.

While these clusters form the field's foundation, the network analysis also measures the relationships between them. The network analysis measured the relationships between these communities. A co-citation link existed between the psychology (red) and pedagogy (green) clusters, which suggested knowledge transfer from developmental theory to classroom practice. In contrast, the link between the policy (blue) cluster and the pedagogy (green) cluster appeared weaker, providing evidence of a divide between academic communities focused on policy and those focused on pedagogy. Such a divide could limit the application of systemic reforms in classroom settings.

The Conceptual Structure: Keyword Analysis

The keyword co-occurrence network (Figure 4) and strategic diagram (Figure 5) offered information about the thematic structure and maturity of the field. The network depicted in Figure 4, based on author-supplied keywords, indicated the intellectual structure of multicultural ECE research.

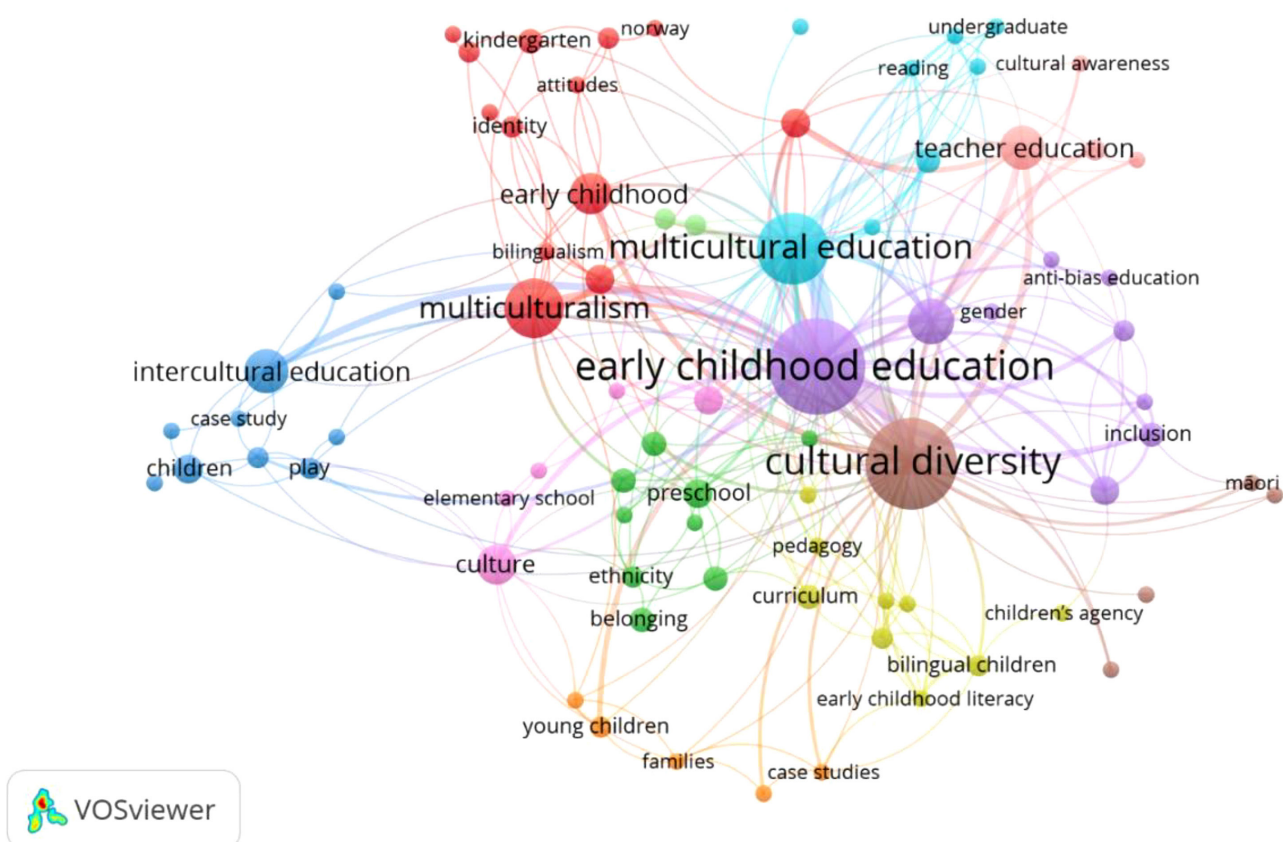


Figure 4 Co-occurrence of Author-supplied Keywords (At Least Two Occurrences).

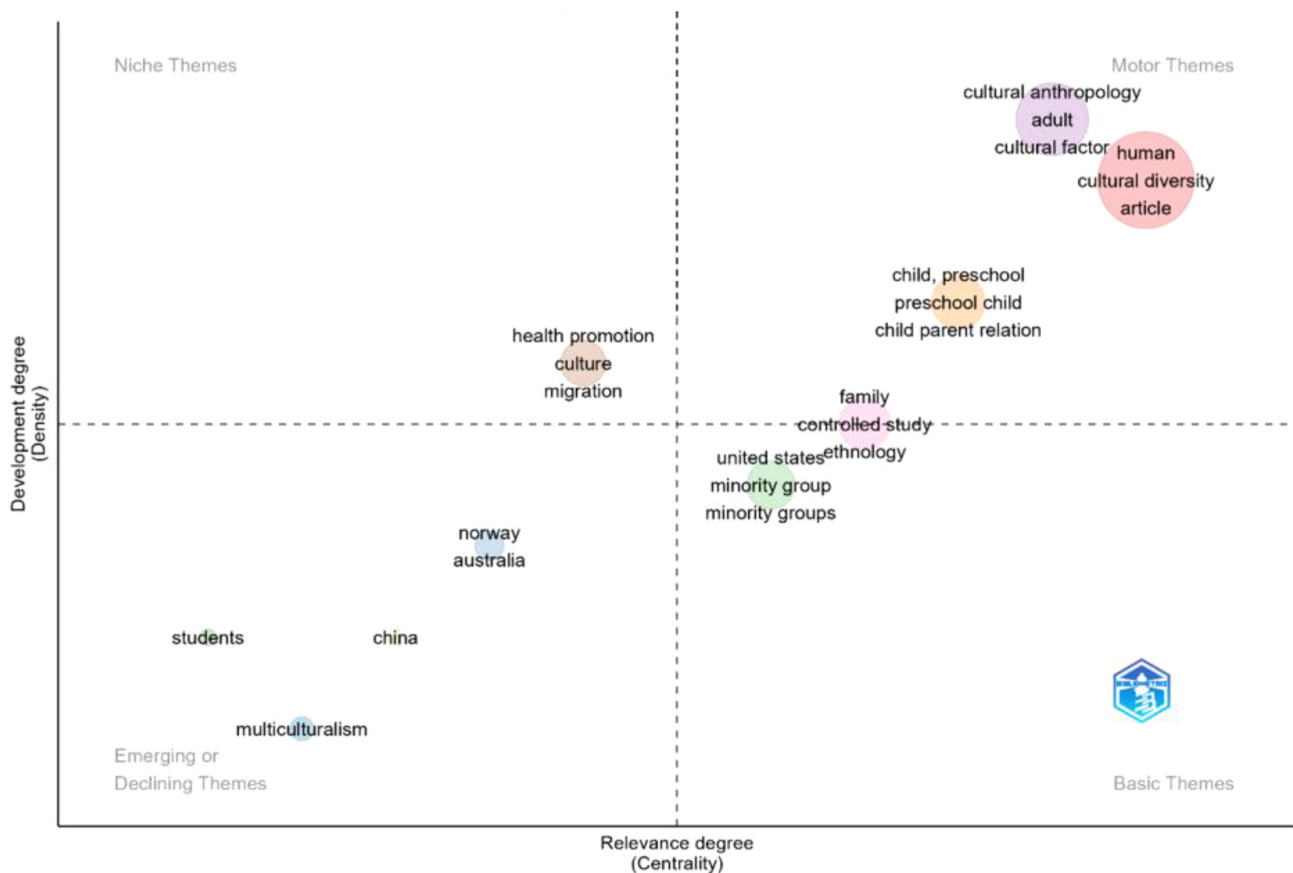


Figure 5 *Strategic Diagram of Research Themes.*

The core theoretical foundations cluster (red) addressed the terms “early childhood education” (46 occurrences, total link strength: 92) and “cultural diversity” (42 occurrences, link strength: 67). This positioning corresponded to the emphasis on cultural responsiveness in ECE, as described by Bennett et al. (2018). The co-occurrence of these terms with “multicultural education” (27 occurrences, link strength: 57) suggested theoretical integration, which aligned with conceptual advancements noted by Khalfaoui et al. (2021).

The pedagogical practice cluster (blue) centred on “teacher education” (11 occurrences, link strength: 26) and “professional development” (5 occurrences, link strength: 16). The cluster showed theoretical cohesion, with an integration index of 0.68, which supported the assertion by Vandebroek (2007) about teachers’ preparation in multicultural education. Recent reviews pointed to a shift toward practical teaching strategies, as shown by the mention of “culturally responsive teaching” (5 occurrences, link strength: 12).

The social justice and equity cluster (green) encompassed “social justice” (5 occurrences, link strength: 13) and “equity” (4 occurrences, link strength: 11). The centrality of this cluster (0.62) aligned with the call by Adam and Barratt-Pugh (2020) for attention to systemic equity in ECE. Co-occurrence patterns indicated an integration of equity frameworks with pedagogical practices, although connections to assessment methodologies remained limited.

The linguistic and cultural identity cluster (yellow) indicated a focus on language development and cultural identity. Terms such as “bilingual education” (3 occurrences, link strength: 4) and “linguistic diversity” (3 occurrences, link strength: 7) suggested scholarly interest in multilingual learning environments.

The strategic diagram (Figure 5) identified “cultural diversity” and associated concepts as motor themes, which were well-developed and central to the field’s advancement. By contrast, the analysis showed two strategic gaps: keywords linked to “educational technology” and “cross-cultural assessment” were either absent or held peripheral positions, which indicated that these areas warrant attention but have received limited research. The temporal evolution map (Figure 6) also shows a conceptual maturation, as the research focus shifted from broad terms such as “culture” in the early period to more specific, action-oriented concepts like “intercultural education” and “multiculturalism” in the later phase.

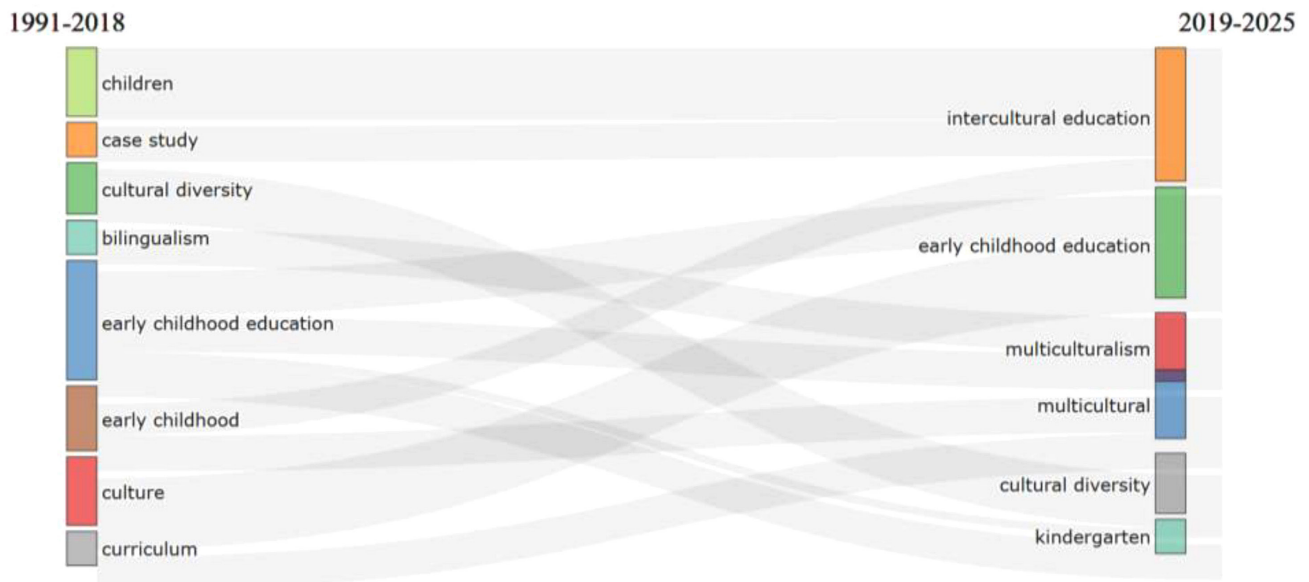


Figure 6 *Temporal Evolution of Research Topics.*

Patterns of International Collaboration (RQ3)

Geographical Distribution and Collaboration

The international collaboration network (Figure 7) showed a core–periphery structure. A core group of countries from North America and Europe, led by the United States (accounting for 35.9% of publications), dominated the research output. These countries maintained extensive connections. By contrast, most nations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America occupied peripheral positions, with limited collaborative links and lower publication counts. Such patterns indicated an imbalance in global knowledge production.



Figure 7 *International Countries' Collaboration Network.*

Institutional Collaboration

At the institutional level (Figure 8), the collaborative network appeared to be fragmented. The majority of research occurred within institutional silos, with few strong partnerships between different

universities, even those located in the same country. Although some regional clusters were present, the overall patterns suggested isolated research efforts rather than coordinated interorganisational knowledge production. This lack of coordination could limit the scale and impact of research initiatives in the field. The apparent separation between institutions may stem from the competitive nature of academic funding. Alternatively, it could be an artifact of challenges in normalising keywords across institutional names; this second possibility warrants further investigation to understand the true barriers to interorganisational research.



Figure 8 *International Institutions' Collaboration Network.*

Discussion

This study offers more than a description of the multicultural ECE research field. By visualising the intellectual, conceptual, and social structures, the findings serve as a diagnostic tool, identifying a research area marked by established theoretical foundations as well as by structural divides. This discussion synthesises the findings to identify three key challenges: (1) a disconnect between policy and practice, (2) a core–periphery structure in global knowledge production, and (3) strategic gaps that present opportunities for integration. This diagnosis leads to a proposal for an integrative framework designed to direct future research toward greater coherence and equity.

The Three Pillars and the Policy–Practice Divide

The journal co-citation analysis (Figure 3) reveals that multicultural ECE research is based on three intellectual areas: Developmental psychology, pedagogical practice, and educational policy. This analysis, based on published academic literature, maps the structure of scholarly communication rather than the direct state of policy or classroom practice. The results show a compartmentalised field of study, with an uneven distribution of scholarly dialogue across its core domains. The most frequent communication occurs between developmental psychology and pedagogical research, which has the highest volume of connections (133 edges). In contrast, the scholarly conversation between policy and pedagogical research is more complex. While this connection has the highest average normalised link strength when interactions occur ($ANLS = 0.0153$), the number of these interactions is the lowest observed (39 edges). This pattern suggests that the scholarly discourse connecting policy to pedagogy is not broad-based but is concentrated within a few specialised channels. Furthermore, the dialogue between policy and foundational psychology research appears to be the least developed, with a low interaction volume and average strength (40 edges, $ANLS = 0.0099$). These results illustrate a body of literature where the integration of policy, psychology, and pedagogy is limited, pointing to a substantial gap in scholarship connecting these related areas of inquiry.

Co-citation links between the psychology and pedagogy clusters indicated an exchange of knowledge, where developmental theories inform the design of pedagogical strategies and classroom interventions. Such connections help ensure that practice draws from an understanding of child development. The network analysis, however, shows a weaker connection between the educational policy cluster and the pedagogical practice cluster. This pattern suggests a disconnect within the scholarly discourse

that mirrors the policy–practice gap long discussed in educational research. Co-citation flow between these two clusters seems restricted, a condition indicating that they operate in somewhat isolated areas of discourse. Policy research, which appears in journals such as *Harvard Educational Review*, might not effectively reach or integrate with studies on classroom implementation, and the reverse may also apply. This structural gap in the literature may reflect or even reinforce the challenges of applying systemic reforms to classroom changes, a concern that aligns with those expressed by Vandenberg (2007) regarding the challenges of implementing equity-focused pedagogical approaches in various systemic contexts.

The Core–Periphery Structure of Global Knowledge Production

An analysis of the field’s social structure (Figure 7) reveals a distinct core–periphery model of knowledge production. A geographically concentrated core of institutions in North America and Europe accounts for the vast majority of research output (approximately 85% of publications in this dataset) and forms the most densely connected segment of the collaboration network. In contrast, a broad periphery of researchers from the Global South (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) contributes less in terms of volume and has far fewer collaborative links.

This disparity represents more than a numerical difference; it may reflect a system of accumulating “scientific capital” (Bourdieu, 1975). Scholars and institutions within the core benefit from greater access to funding, well-established publication venues, and denser collaborative networks, which, in turn, can lead to higher visibility and citation rates, reinforcing their dominant position. The implication of this core–periphery dynamic is a significant risk of epistemological bias. Theoretical frameworks and “best practices” developed and validated primarily in Western contexts may be disseminated globally without adequate critical adaptation, potentially marginalising indigenous knowledge and locally relevant pedagogical traditions. This quantitative evidence of a core–periphery structure substantiates earlier critiques of the Western-centric nature of the field (De Gioia, 2013) by illustrating the underlying social structure that may perpetuate it. This global pattern is further reflected in the institutional fragmentation (Figure 8), where the lack of strong interinstitutional collaboration suggests that research often remains isolated within individual institutions, even in the core countries. Addressing this structural imbalance calls for a conscious shift toward research models that actively counter this core–periphery dynamic and promote genuine global partnership.

Reframing Strategic Gaps as Unifying Bridges

Analysis of the field’s structure reveals not only divisions but also strategic opportunities for promoting integration. The conceptual structure analysis (Figure 5) indicates that research on educational technology and cross-cultural assessment is under-represented and marginal relative to the field’s core themes. These areas, rather than being simple shortcomings, represent powerful strategies for addressing the identified disconnects.

Cross-cultural assessments, distinct from translated versions of existing tests, encompass approaches designed to capture diverse expressions of knowledge and competence, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity in educational evaluation. Such approaches include dynamic assessment and portfolio-based evaluation that emphasise processes over products. Additionally, observation tools calibrated to recognise culturally specific communication styles and social competencies are integral to this framework. For instance, the development of culturally sensitive assessment tools could establish a data-driven feedback system, which is currently lacking between policy and practice. These tools would facilitate the systematic evaluation of how multicultural policies influence developmental and learning outcomes for diverse children, which is important for understanding the impact of such

policies. By generating empirical evidence, such assessments can help confirm the effectiveness of multicultural policies at the individual level, thereby bridging the gap between policy and practice.

Similarly, educational technology offers platforms for enhancing international research collaboration, such as virtual conferencing and data-sharing networks. However, without an intentional focus on fairness, such technology risks widening digital disparities or perpetuating cultural biases embedded in its algorithms and content. Accordingly, the objective is to develop culturally sustaining technology platforms designed to support and extend the linguistic and cultural heritages of all children, which is important for ensuring inclusivity and diversity in educational technology.

Toward an Integrative Framework for Multicultural ECE Research

Building on our diagnosis of the field's structural divides and strategic gaps, we propose an IFMER (see Figure 9). This framework is not merely a summary of existing research themes but is a conceptual model intended to guide future inquiry toward greater coherence and impact. As scholars have noted, a key contribution of a literature review is to move beyond mapping the existing concepts and propose novel conceptualisations that can advance the field (Marzi et al., 2025).

The use of educational technology and culturally responsive assessment as mechanisms for equity requires careful examination, as their effectiveness depends entirely on how they are designed and applied. For educational technology to promote equity, it must be guided by culturally sustaining principles that extend beyond ensuring access. This involves creating platforms and content that reflect the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of children; otherwise, the technology risks reinforcing the dominant ideologies. Similarly, culturally responsive assessment serves its purpose only when applied formatively to support holistic development, rather than as a refined method for ranking students. To be fair, this approach must also be supported by relevant policy, professional development, and active family and community participation. Consequently, the IFMER does not present a technical solution. Instead, it calls for a sustained research and development agenda to ensure that these mechanisms are designed and evaluated with ethical and responsible oversight.

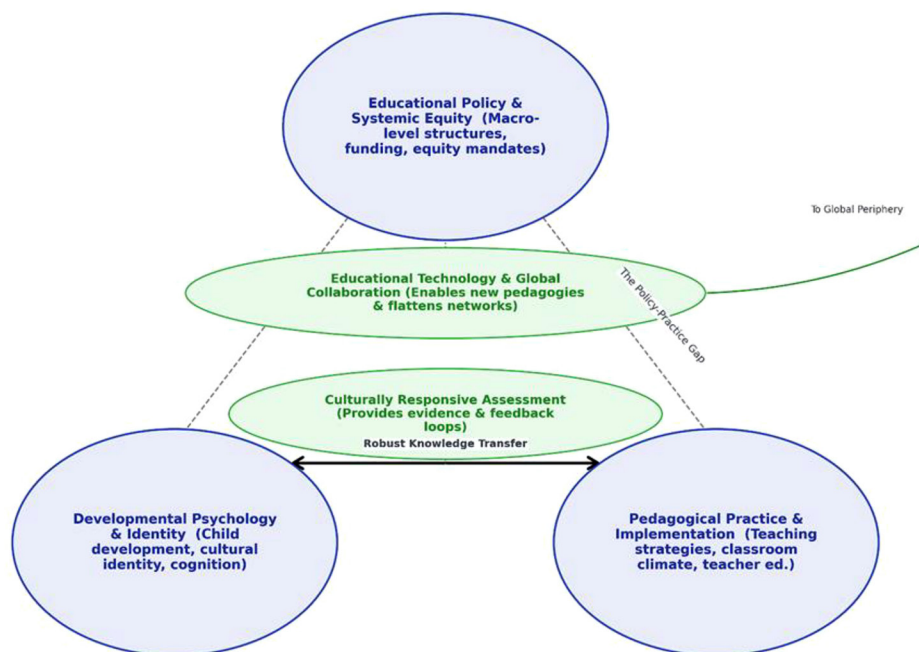


Figure 9 *An Integrative Framework for Multicultural ECE Research.*

The framework depicts the three core pillars of the field and underscores the critical disconnect between policy and practice. More importantly, it strategically positions educational technology and culturally responsive assessment as two central bridging mechanisms. We posit that focused research and development in these areas can serve to achieve the following.

- (1) Connect policy with practice: By providing tools for assessment, technology can help measure the real-world impact of policies, facilitating an evidence-based dialogue between policymakers and practitioners.
- (2) Integrate theory and pedagogy: Technology can act as a vehicle for translating psychological theories of identity and learning into innovative, culturally responsive pedagogical tools and platforms.
- (3) Foster global collaboration: Digital platforms can dismantle geographical barriers, linking the research core and periphery, and enabling the co-creation of more globally relevant knowledge.

The proposed framework provides a dynamic and critical understanding of the field. By visualising the system's points of friction (disconnects) and mechanisms for change (bridges), it moves beyond a simple thematic map. The model serves as a guide for researchers, funders, and policymakers to prioritise efforts that not only fill thematic gaps but also enhance the structural integrity and equity of the field.

To illustrate the framework's practical application, consider a new national policy aimed at supporting dual-language learners (the policy and systemic equity pillar). A research project designed within this integrative framework would not be limited to observing classroom implementation (the pedagogical practice pillar). Instead, it would strategically use culturally responsive assessment as a bridge to track the children's holistic development, measuring not only language acquisition but also their sense of belonging and cultural identity (connecting to the developmental psychology pillar). Simultaneously, the project could use educational technology as the second bridge to connect practitioners with the policy research team, creating a real-time feedback loop. This integrated model helps ensure that the policy's impact is measured meaningfully at the child level and that practice informs policy in a continuous, evidence-based cycle.

Our maps converge on three structurally significant challenges: (1) a scholarly communication gap between policy and classroom communities, evidenced by the weak connective structure and low ANLS between these domains; (2) a pronounced core-periphery pattern in collaboration that tracks indexation regimes and scientific capital, and (3) two strategic peripheries—educational technology and culturally responsive assessment—that are positioned well to operate as bridges. Framing these as bridges rather than deficits yields a programmatic agenda for the next decade of ECE research.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken not only to survey the field of multicultural education in early childhood settings but also to diagnose its structural dynamics and propose a path toward a more integrated and equitable future. Through a bibliometric-systematic review, this study provided quantitative evidence for challenges that have long been discussed anecdotally: A disconnect between educational policy and pedagogical practice, and a pronounced core-periphery structure that concentrates knowledge production within Western institutions. The research findings suggest that although the field is rich in theoretical and practical inquiry, its potential may be constrained by these foundational divides.

A primary contribution of this paper is the proposed IFMER, a conceptual model derived directly from the bibliometric findings. By reframing under-researched areas, such as culturally responsive

assessment and educational technology, not as weaknesses but as strategic bridges, the framework offers a clear and actionable agenda for researchers. The framework posits that by focusing on these unifying mechanisms, the research community can begin to close the policy–practice gap, promote more equitable global collaboration, and better integrate the field’s core intellectual pillars. This approach could shift the conversation from identifying problems to actively constructing solutions.

Advancing multicultural education for all young children calls for more than the proliferation of isolated studies; it requires a conscious, collective effort to build connections, challenge structural inequities, and synthesise diverse forms of knowledge. The proposed integrative framework is therefore offered as a guide for this critical work. By making the field’s structural challenges visible and proposing a concrete path forward, this research is intended to empower scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to collaborate more effectively in the shared pursuit of creating truly equitable and enriching educational experiences for every child. The IFMER operationalises this agenda by positioning assessment and technology as mechanisms that align CSP-informed visions with classroom realities, while expanding South–North knowledge co-production. Coupling decolonised bibliometric protocols with longitudinal, classroom-proximal studies can convert structural diagnoses into measurable child-level gains and more equitable research ecologies.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

The study’s findings and the proposed integrative framework carry significant implications for various stakeholders. However, these contributions must be considered in light of the study’s methodological limitations, which, in turn, illuminate critical directions for future inquiry.

Implications for Research and Theory

The primary implication for researchers is the need to move beyond siloed inquiry toward more integrative and structurally aware research designs. Our framework highlights three specific avenues for advancing the field.

- **Prioritising “bridging” research:** Future studies should intentionally focus on the strategic gaps of culturally responsive assessment and educational technology. Research is needed to develop and validate assessment tools that are both psychometrically sound and culturally equitable. Similarly, studies should explore how technology can be leveraged not just as an instructional tool but as a platform for fostering cross-cultural dialogue and global research collaboration, directly challenging the core–periphery structure identified in this study.
- **Fostering cross-pillar dialogue:** Our findings provide a strong call for studies that intentionally bridge the policy–practice divide. Such an effort could involve mixed-methods research that tracks the implementation journey of policies into the classroom or collaborative projects co-authored by policy analysts, teacher educators, and classroom practitioners.
- **Advancing methodological sophistication:** The field would benefit from more longitudinal research designs that track children’s development within multicultural settings over time, moving beyond the cross-sectional studies that currently dominate the literature. This would provide richer data on the long-term impacts of different pedagogical and policy approaches.
- **Advancing intersectional analysis:** The field must move beyond analyses that treat categories of diversity in isolation. Future research should employ an intersectional framework to investigate how the combined and overlapping identities of children (e.g.,

a recently immigrated girl from a low-income family versus an affluent, third-generation boy from the same ethnic background) shape their developmental trajectories and educational experiences. This will provide a more nuanced understanding essential for creating truly equitable pedagogies.

Implications for Policy and Practice

For policymakers and practitioners, our findings offer an evidence-based rationale for systemic adjustments.

- For policymakers: The diagnosed policy–practice gap underscores that the mere creation of multicultural policies is insufficient. Effective policy must include precise mechanisms for implementation support, professional development, and, crucially, evaluation. Funding should be directed toward developing and validating the culturally responsive assessment tools necessary to create this essential feedback loop.
- For practitioners and teacher educators: Teacher education programmes must adopt a more holistic approach, ensuring that both pre-service and in-service teachers are equipped not only with pedagogical strategies (the “practice” pillar) but also with a deep understanding of child development in diverse contexts (the “psychology” pillar) and the policy landscape they operate within (the “policy” pillar). Training should explicitly address the use of technology for inclusive purposes and the implementation of equitable assessment practices.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study’s rigour is bound by certain methodological limitations, which simultaneously point toward important avenues for future research. By acknowledging the limitations below, we hope to pave the way for future research that is more comprehensive, equitable, and impactful.

- Database and language bias: The reliance on the Scopus database and English-language publications is a key limitation that also reflects the epistemological inequities identified in this analysis. This Anglophone, Scopus-based design inevitably under-represents scholarship from the humanities and social sciences, which are better indexed in other databases (e.g., Web of Science). Furthermore, it almost certainly excludes scholarly conversations occurring in other languages, thereby reinforcing the Western-centric bias that the findings reveal. Consequently, these limitations highlight an urgent need for future meta-research to adopt ‘decolonising’ bibliometric methodologies. Such an approach would require moving beyond single-database designs to incorporate multilingual corpora and merge data from multiple indexes (e.g., Scopus, WoS, SciELO, CNKI). This process should be supported by bilingual thesauri for rigorous author and keyword normalisation. To produce a more just cartography of ECE knowledge, these improved macro-level maps should be complemented by micro-qualitative studies in under-indexed locales. This combined methodology would ensure a more complete and equitable representation of the global body of scholarship.
- Citation as an imperfect proxy: While citation counts are a standard metric, they are not a direct measure of research quality or influence. Citation counts can be influenced by numerous factors, including publication age, journal prestige, and self-citation, and they tend to reward established scholars and institutions through a “Matthew effect” of accumulated advantage.

Author Contributions

Nhat Huu Ho: Supervision, writing – original draft, review and editing; Tam Thanh Nguyen: writing – review and editing, supervision; Viet-Nhi Tran: data curation, methodology, writing – review and editing

Declarations

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Ethical statements

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Informed consent

Not applicable.

Data availability

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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