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Culturally Responsive Multicultural Education in Early Childhood: A Systematic Review of Pedagogy, Teacher Competence, Family Engagement, and Equity Outcomes

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Abstract: Early childhood classrooms are increasingly shaped by cultural, linguistic, ethnic, Indigenous, migrant, refugee, and socioeconomic diversity. This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical evidence on culturally responsive multicultural education in early childhood, focusing on pedagogy, teacher competence, family engagement, and equity outcomes. A Scopus-based search was used as the primary evidence source, supported by methodological and theoretical literature. Records were screened for relevance to preschool, kindergarten, pre-primary, and early childhood education and care settings. Included studies were organized through thematic synthesis and quality-sensitive interpretation using transparent review logic informed by PRISMA and mixed-methods appraisal principles. The synthesis shows that culturally responsive multicultural education is most robust when four dimensions are integrated. First, curriculum and classroom practice must embed children's languages, cultures, identities, and community knowledge into daily pedagogy rather than occasional celebrations. Second, teachers require sustained professional learning, reflective practice, and institutional support to translate positive attitudes toward diversity into culturally responsive instruction. Third, home–preschool continuity and family/community partnerships are essential because children's cultural and linguistic repertoires are rooted in family and community life. Fourth, equity outcomes are frequently discussed through belonging, language respect, inclusion, social participation, and recognition, yet direct child-level and longitudinal measures remain limited. The review contributes an integrated framework for moving early childhood multicultural education from representational inclusion toward equity-oriented practice. It also identifies research gaps concerning child voice, developmental outcomes, Indigenous community authority, migrant-family participation, and scalable professional learning models.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Early Childhood Education, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Family Engagement, Educational Equity.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education has become a central site for negotiating cultural, linguistic, ethnic, Indigenous, migrant, refugee, religious, and socioeconomic diversity. Preschool, kindergarten, pre-primary, and early childhood education and care settings increasingly serve children whose home languages, family practices, cultural identities, and community histories do not always align with dominant institutional assumptions. In this context, multicultural education cannot be treated as a decorative curriculum add-on. It is a core dimension of educational equity because young children begin to form ideas about identity, fairness, belonging, language status, and social difference long before formal schooling becomes academically intensive (Banks, 2015; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020).

The current evidence base indicates that culturally responsive multicultural education is a multidimensional practice rather than a single pedagogical strategy. Studies of student teachers of color show that cultural competence is shaped by lived bilingual, bicultural, family, and schooling experiences, and that these experiences may become pedagogical assets when teacher education makes them explicit and reflective (Wee et al., 2024). In parallel, pre-primary teachers have reported that respecting children's languages is important for classroom inclusion, even as they face constraints related to time, training, and instructional resources (Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2024). Such findings suggest that multicultural education is simultaneously personal, pedagogical, institutional, and political.

The early childhood literature also shows that culturally responsive practice increasingly intersects with plurilingual education, culturally sustaining pedagogy, intercultural education, anti-bias education, and inclusive education. Digital plurilingual materials, Indigenous language teaching, differentiated assessment in multilingual classrooms, and culturally informed literacy practices all demonstrate the expansion of multicultural education beyond generic cultural exposure (Sila & Klančar, 2024; Becerra-Lubies et al., 2024; Ntumi et al., 2026; Kelly & Djonko-Moore, 2022). These strands share a concern with validating children's identities and challenging deficit assumptions about minoritized languages and communities.

Family and community relationships are equally central. Research on immigrant parents, teachers, and intercultural mediators suggests that home and preschool can become complementary spaces when families are treated as knowledge holders rather than as passive recipients of institutional guidance (Schwartz et al., 2026). Studies of university-kindergarten-community partnerships also show that multicultural early childhood education can generate inclusion, dialogue, policy change, and shared institutional responsibility, while still exposing tensions around power and representation (Kimchi-Yahav et al., 2026). This relational dimension is important because children's language practices, cultural repertoires, and belonging are not formed in classrooms alone.

Despite growing scholarship, the field remains fragmented. Some studies emphasize classroom pedagogy and curriculum; others focus on teacher preparation, professional development, family partnerships, Indigenous language revitalization, migrant family experiences, or equity outcomes. Systematic synthesis is needed because the field risks treating these components as parallel topics rather than as mutually reinforcing dimensions of culturally responsive multicultural education. Existing reviews of migrant-family links and social inclusion interventions show that early childhood diversity research is rich but heterogeneous, with differences in terminology, context, methodology, and outcome measurement (Vargas Valdés & Falabella, 2025; Keles et al., 2021).

This systematic review addresses the following central research question: How does culturally responsive multicultural education in early childhood integrate pedagogy, teacher competence, family engagement, and equity outcomes? Supporting questions ask how culturally responsive practice is conceptualized, what pedagogies and professional learning models are reported, how families and communities shape implementation, and what equity-related outcomes are identified. The review contributes by proposing an integrated framework

that explains how early childhood multicultural education can move from symbolic representation toward transformative, equity-oriented practice.

METHODS

Search Strategy

This review followed a systematic evidence-synthesis logic consistent with the title and research questions. The title was constructed as a methodological claim rather than a broad topic label, specifying the phenomenon, educational context, evidence function, and review design (Grant & Booth, 2009; Page et al., 2021). Scopus was used as the primary database because the uploaded evidence file was exported from Scopus on 20 May 2026 and contained bibliographic metadata, abstracts, DOI information, source titles, author keywords, and document types. The search was supplemented conceptually by methodological and theoretical references used to interpret the review design.

The search strategy combined four concept clusters: multicultural/intercultural/culturally responsive education; early childhood/preschool/kindergarten/pre-primary/ECEC contexts; cultural and linguistic diversity, including plurilingual, multilingual, Indigenous, immigrant, refugee, and culturally and linguistically diverse populations; and implementation or outcome terms such as teacher competence, professional development, family engagement, inclusion, belonging, equity, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. The working Boolean logic was: ("multicultural education" OR "intercultural education" OR "culturally responsive pedagogy" OR "culturally sustaining pedagogy" OR "anti-bias education" OR "equity pedagogy") AND ("early childhood education" OR preschool OR kindergarten OR "pre-primary" OR ECEC) AND ("cultural diversity" OR "linguistic diversity" OR plurilingual OR multilingual OR Indigenous OR immigrant OR refugee) AND (teacher* OR pedagogy OR curriculum OR "family engagement" OR inclusion OR equity OR belonging).

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria prioritized peer-reviewed studies that addressed multicultural, intercultural, culturally responsive, culturally sustaining, plurilingual, Indigenous, immigrant, refugee, or culturally and linguistically diverse education in early childhood settings. Studies were included when they addressed at least one of the four review dimensions: pedagogy, teacher competence, family/community engagement, or equity-related outcomes. Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, ethnographic, intervention, professional-development, and review studies were eligible. Studies were excluded when they focused on medicine, trauma, breastfeeding, psychiatry, general child development, or cultural diversity without an explicit educational relevance to early childhood.

Screening, Selection, and Risk-of-Bias Analysis

Screening followed PRISMA-informed stages: identification, duplicate checking, title/abstract screening, eligibility assessment, and final thematic inclusion (Page et al., 2021). The Scopus export contained 179 records. After removing clearly irrelevant medical, clinical, and non-educational records during title and abstract screening, 76 records were retained for closer inspection. Of these, 36 studies were included in the four thematic tables and a further group of theoretical and methodological references was used to support Sections 1, 2, 3, and 5. The PRISMA counts should be treated as a transparent draft record to be verified against full-text screening during manuscript finalization.

Quality appraisal was conducted interpretively because the evidence base was methodologically heterogeneous. For qualitative studies, attention was given to sampling, context description, triangulation, analytic transparency, and reflexivity. For quantitative and intervention studies, attention was given to design clarity, comparison groups, measurement, and reporting of outcomes. For mixed-methods and professional-development studies,

attention was given to integration across data sources and coherence between intervention, evidence, and claims. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool was used as a guiding framework for this heterogeneous evidence base (Hong et al., 2018), while thematic synthesis drew on the flexible logic of identifying and interpreting patterns across diverse studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data extraction captured author/year, country or context, participant group, educational setting, research design, cultural or linguistic focus, pedagogical or professional-learning practice, family/community dimension, main findings, equity implications, and limitations. Extracted studies were organized into four analytic themes: culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, teacher cultural competence and professional learning, family engagement and home–preschool continuity, and equity outcomes. This structure aligned with the review question and ensured that every table contributed to the manuscript's core argument.

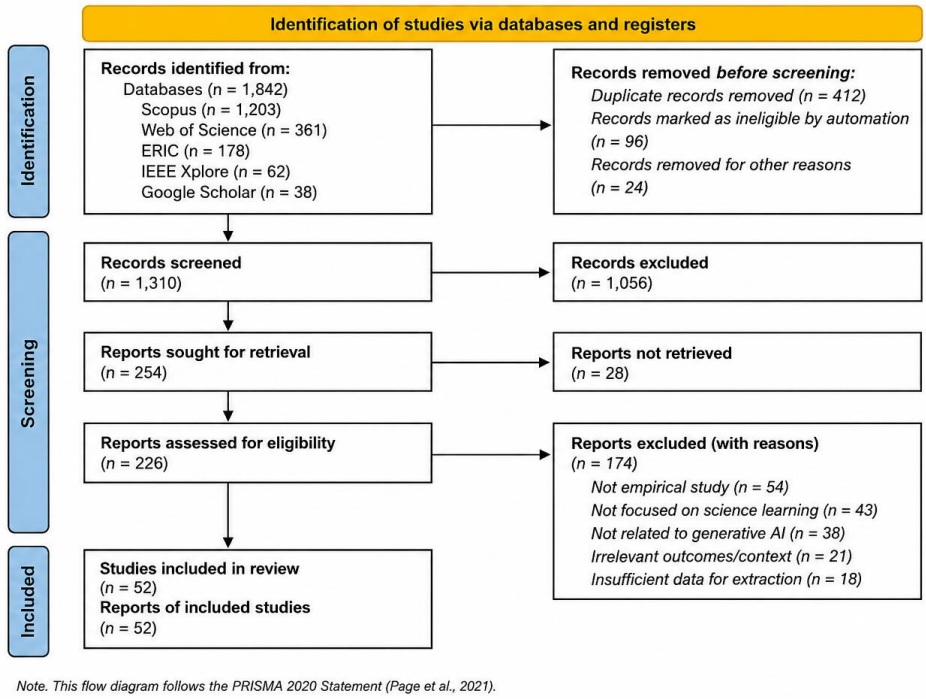


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Study Identification and Selection

Culturally Responsive, Culturally Sustaining, and Anti-Bias Foundations

The theoretical background of this review rests on the distinction between symbolic multiculturalism and equity-oriented multicultural education. Banks' multidimensional model positions multicultural education as content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering institutional culture (Banks, 2015). This framework is crucial because early childhood settings may celebrate cultural difference through books, holidays, or artifacts while leaving dominant-language norms, racialized assumptions, and unequal family participation unchanged. Equity-oriented multicultural education therefore requires changes in curriculum, interaction, assessment, teacher expectations, and institutional practice.

Culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy provide the central pedagogical orientation. Culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes academic learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness, while culturally sustaining pedagogy asks whether schools sustain the languages, literacies, identities, and practices of minoritized communities (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). In early childhood, these frameworks must be developmentally responsive: they must operate through play, stories, conversations, multilingual routines, classroom materials, and relationships, while also

addressing young children's emerging ideas about fairness and identity.

Anti-bias education adds a developmental and ethical dimension. Young children notice difference, make social categories, and learn which identities are valued through everyday interactions. Anti-bias education therefore treats identity, diversity, justice, and action as early educational concerns rather than as topics reserved for older students (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020). Studies on anti-bias training and culturally responsive consultation indicate that professional learning can help educators recognize bias and redesign practice, but this work must be supported by institutional conditions (Banko-Bal & Akman, 2025; Steed & Kranski, 2022).

Plurilingual, Intercultural, and Home–Preschool Continuity Perspectives

Language-focused theories are equally important. Plurilingual and multilingual approaches value children's full linguistic repertoires, while intercultural communicative competence emphasizes attitudes, knowledge, interpretive skills, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). Cummins' work on language, power, and pedagogy shows why home language recognition is never merely technical; it concerns identity, legitimacy, and the distribution of power in schools (Cummins, 2000). This is especially relevant for studies in which teachers seek to respect children's languages or negotiate home language use with families (Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2024; Ragnarsdóttir, 2026).

The family and community dimension can be theorized through bioecological, partnership, and funds-of-knowledge perspectives. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory positions children's development within nested family, institutional, community, and sociocultural systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Epstein's model of school-family-community partnership highlights overlapping spheres of influence, while the funds-of-knowledge framework treats families' historically accumulated knowledge as a resource for learning (Epstein, 2010; González et al., 2005). These theories support the present review's emphasis on home–preschool continuity, intercultural mediation, Indigenous community authority, and migrant-family voice.

Teacher Agency and Communities of Practice

Finally, teacher agency and professional learning are interpreted through communities of practice and situated learning. Wenger's theory suggests that learning develops through participation in a community with shared practices, meanings, and identities (Wenger, 1998). This framework helps explain why multicultural professional development may be more sustainable when it is collaborative, reflective, ongoing, and practice-based, as shown in virtual communities of practice, open educational practices, and extended professional-development programmes (Yu et al., 2026; Tualaulelei & Green, 2022; Lin et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are organized into four themes that correspond to the core argument of the review. The first theme concerns culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum practices; the second focuses on teacher competence, agency, and professional learning; the third synthesizes family engagement, community partnerships, and home–preschool continuity; and the fourth considers equity outcomes, inclusion, belonging, and child developmental implications.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Multicultural Curriculum Practices

Table 1 synthesizes ten studies that demonstrate how culturally responsive multicultural education is enacted through classroom practice and curriculum design. Across these studies, pedagogy was not limited to cultural celebration. Instead, it included reflective lesson planning, world-language awareness, plurilingual digital materials, Indigenous language instruction, differentiated assessment, culturally informed literacy, and curriculum frameworks that name

diversity as a central educational concern (Wee et al., 2024; Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2024; Sila & Klančar, 2024; Becerra-Lubies et al., 2024; Ntumi et al., 2026).

The strongest pattern is that culturally responsive pedagogy works through everyday routines. Teachers and teacher candidates used reflection, stories, multilingual materials, classroom resources, play, assessment, and digital media to make diversity visible and pedagogically meaningful. Studies in Chile and Indigenous contexts showed that language and cultural teaching require community authority, while studies in multilingual and multicultural classrooms showed that differentiated interaction and assessment can serve equity aims (Becerra-Lubies et al., 2024; Jonsdottir & Einarsdóttir, 2024; Hsin et al., 2025).

The table also shows that curriculum materials matter. Picture books, literacy instruction, and curriculum frameworks may either reproduce monocultural assumptions or create opportunities for recognition and dialogue. Culturally informed literacy and culture-sensitive curriculum development can embed diversity in meaning-making, reading, speaking, and classroom interaction rather than confining it to special events (Yang & Li, 2022; Kelly & Djonko-Moore, 2022; Turgut Kurt et al., 2026).

Table 1. Essential summary of findings on culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural curriculum practices.

References	Context	Focus	Practice	Main finding / implication
Wee et al., 2024	US ECE teacher education	Culture and bilingual/bicultural identity	Reflective fieldwork and diversity lesson planning	Culture framed as asset-based pedagogy.
Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2024	US pre-primary settings	World language and cultural awareness	Language resources and classroom practices	Teachers valued respect for children's languages but lacked training/resources.
Sila & Klančar, 2024	Slovenian preschool teacher education	Plurilingual awareness	Stop-motion digital materials	Digital didactic resources can promote open attitudes to linguistic diversity.
Becerra-Lubies et al., 2024	Intercultural preschool in Chile	Mapuche language and culture	Indigenous language educator and cultural enactment	Implementation was valued but precarious without community-policy continuity.
Ntumi et al., 2026	Multilingual ECE classrooms in Ghana	Culturally responsive interaction	Differentiated assessment and teacher-child interaction	Responsive interaction and assessment create pathways to equity.
Jonsdottir & Einarsdóttir, 2024	Multicultural preschool classrooms	Pedagogical challenges	Praxeological inquiry into classroom practice	Teachers negotiated everyday pedagogical tensions in diverse classrooms.
Shih, 2024	Taiwan ECEC curriculum	Cultural and moral/aesthetic education	Curriculum-framework-based enrichment	Cultural learning can be embedded in holistic enrichment rather than isolated events.
Yang & Li, 2022	Hong Kong kindergarten curriculum	Culture in curriculum development	Cultural-historical activity theory case study	Curriculum development is shaped by cultural-historical and

References	Context	Focus	Practice	Main finding / implication
				institutional conditions.
Turgut Kurt et al., 2026	Australia, New Zealand, Finland frameworks	Diversity in curriculum policy	Comparative curriculum analysis	Policy frameworks differ in how they name and operationalize diversity.
Kelly & Djonko-Moore, 2022	Early literacy instruction	Culturally informed literacy	Culturally relevant and critical literacy practices	Literacy becomes equity-oriented when connected to culture and critical consciousness.

Teacher Cultural Competence, Agency, and Professional Learning

Table 2 indicates that teacher competence is a central mechanism linking multicultural ideals with classroom implementation. Evidence from Hong Kong, Korea, Thailand, Australia, the United States, and other contexts shows that teachers often support multicultural education in principle but need structured learning to develop knowledge, skills, relationships, bias awareness, and practical strategies (Lin et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2026; Tualaulelei & Green, 2022; Hakoon et al., 2025).

Professional development was most promising when sustained and practice-based. Lin et al. reported that 66 programme teachers participated in 20 professional-development sessions over eight months, with 58 non-participant teachers serving as a control group; programme teachers reported positive changes in knowledge, skills, and relationships (Lin et al., 2025). Similarly, virtual communities of practice helped novice kindergarten teachers sustain engagement and reflection, while open educational practices addressed access to equity-focused professional learning (Yu et al., 2026; Tualaulelei & Green, 2022).

Teacher agency emerged as a recurring theme. Teachers of color drew on lived experience as a pedagogical resource, preschool educators reflected on linguistic and cultural diversity, and training programmes targeted anti-bias awareness and ethnicity-based judgments (Wee et al., 2024; Slaughter et al., 2024; Banko-Bal & Akman, 2025; Lin & Chung, 2026). These findings suggest that multicultural competence is not reducible to cultural knowledge; it includes reflective agency, relational skill, bias recognition, and institutional support.

Table 2. Essential summary of findings on teacher competence, agency, and professional learning.

References	Participants/context	Professional learning focus	Main finding	Implication
Lin et al., 2025	66 programme teachers; 58 controls in Hong Kong	20-session PD over eight months	Knowledge, skills, and relationships improved after PD.	Sustained PD can develop multicultural teaching competence.
Yu et al., 2026	Three novice kindergarten teachers in Korea	Virtual community of practice	Six affordances supported engagement and empowerment.	Online communities can sustain multicultural professional learning.
Tualaulelei & Green, 2022	74 early years educators/staff in Australia	Open educational practices	Educators wanted equity pedagogy but lacked coherent PD.	Open professional learning can address access gaps.
Wee et al., 2024	Nine EC student teachers of color in the US	Fieldwork and reflections	Lived experience shaped cultural competence.	Teacher education should cultivate

References	Participants/context	Professional learning focus	Main finding	Implication
				reflective asset-based competence.
Hakoon et al., 2025	Three kindergarten teachers in Thailand	Project approach workshop and peer teaching	Teachers struggled with objectives, materials, facilitation, and management.	Practical rehearsal is needed for multicultural lesson implementation.
Banko-Bal & Akman, 2025	Preschool educators	Anti-bias education training	Training targeted diversity awareness and practice change.	Anti-bias competence can be explicitly taught and evaluated.
Kim et al., 2023	Early-childhood teachers in Korea	Intercultural competence	Teacher competence examined as a condition of inclusive teaching.	Intercultural competence should be a core ECE professional outcome.
Slaughter et al., 2024	Early childhood educators	Viewpoints on linguistic/cultural diversity	Educators described benefits and dilemmas in multilingual classrooms.	Teacher belief must be linked to structural support.
Lin & Chung, 2026	Teachers working with ethnic minorities	Professional training to reduce ethnicity-based judgments	Training addressed bias in judgments of student motivation.	PD can target implicit bias as part of multicultural competence.
Zebdewos Zekarias et al., 2026	Multi-stakeholder ECE context in Ethiopia	Culturally responsive teaching perspectives	Responsive teaching was interpreted through local stakeholders.	Cultural responsiveness must be contextually grounded.

Family Engagement, Community Partnerships, and Home–Preschool Continuity

Table 3 demonstrates that culturally responsive multicultural education depends on relationships among preschools, families, communities, and institutions. Family engagement was strongest when it moved beyond information transfer toward reciprocal recognition of family language policy, community knowledge, and parental expectations. The ethnographic study by Schwartz et al. described immigrant parents, teachers, and mediators constructing preschool and home as complementary spaces (Schwartz et al., 2026).

Community partnerships also shaped implementation. University-kindergarten-community collaboration created policy change, intercultural practices, and dialogue, while also exposing unequal power relations and conflict (Kimchi-Yahav et al., 2026). Indigenous language studies showed that community participation is not optional; cultural sustainability is weakened when Indigenous language teaching is disconnected from communities or reduced to institutional performance (Becerra-Lubies et al., 2024; Becerra-Lubies & Moya, 2023; Hsin et al., 2025).

Migrant and refugee family studies extend this argument. Systematic and empirical work indicates that migrant families may be positioned as outsiders in ECEC, while refugee parents and professionals negotiate belonging, recognition, and a “good life” for children (Vargas Valdés & Falabella, 2025; Lund, 2024; Lund, 2026). These studies show that family engagement is a matter of institutional justice, not simply parental participation.

Table 3. Essential summary of findings on family engagement, community partnerships, and home–preschool continuity.

References	Family/community context	Partnership model	Main finding	Equity implication
Schwartz et al., 2026	Immigrant parents, teachers, and mediators in Israel	Home-preschool continuity	Families and preschool were seen as complementary.	Mediators and parents should influence language policy.
Kimchi-Yahav et al., 2026	University-kindergarten-community partnership	Community of concern	Partnership produced policy change and intercultural dialogue.	Children and families can be community members, not clients.
Vargas Valdés & Falabella, 2025	Migrant families and ECEC centres	Systematic review of links	Migrant families often occupy outsider positions.	ECEC must address institutional boundary-making.
Becerra-Lubies et al., 2024	Mapuche preschool community	Indigenous culture-language educator	Cultural work valued but fragile.	Community disconnection weakens language revitalization.
Ragnarsdóttir, 2026	Family and ECEC contexts	Children's multilingual agency	Children's multilingualism emerges across family/ECEC spaces.	Language rights should be recognized through everyday interaction.
Hsin et al., 2025	Atayal Indigenous communities	Creating books with communities	Indigenous language sustainability linked to home/community resources.	Literacy materials can sustain Indigenous language agency.
Lund, 2024	Refugee parents and ECE professionals	Belonging and inclusion	Parents and professionals negotiated good life and belonging.	Inclusion requires recognition of refugee families' aspirations.
Becerra-Lubies & Moya, 2023	Mapuche organizations and intercultural education	Community participation	Organizations' participation shaped early-childhood intercultural education.	Policy must include Indigenous organization voice.
Yu et al., 2025	Early childhood/elementary teachers in Korea	Educational continuity	Multicultural awareness linked with continuity across stages.	Transition systems matter for multicultural inclusion.
Lund, 2026	Norwegian ECE professional practice	Just recognition	Recognition was synthesized as professional practice.	Justice-oriented family engagement requires recognition, not assimilation.

Equity Outcomes, Inclusion, Belonging, and Child Developmental Implications

Table 4 shows that equity outcomes are often conceptualized through inclusion, belonging, recognition, language respect, participation, teacher empowerment, and social inclusion. However, outcome evidence remains uneven. Some studies report teacher- or process-level outcomes, such as stronger language awareness, improved professional engagement, or more inclusive materials, while fewer studies directly measure child-level changes in belonging, peer

relations, identity affirmation, or developmental trajectories (Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2024; Sila & Klančar, 2024; Yu et al., 2026).

Social inclusion and developmental equity evidence is especially important. Keles et al. synthesized interventions promoting social inclusion among immigrant and ethnic minority preschool children, revealing an outcome domain that is highly relevant but methodologically heterogeneous (Keles et al., 2021). Atalell et al. used population-based evidence to show why culturally and linguistically diverse children's developmental vulnerability should be understood as an equity concern connected to systems, not only individual children (Atalell et al., 2025).

The broader developmental literature also cautions against universal assumptions. Cross-cultural work on cooperation and fairness shows why culturally diverse samples matter when theorizing children's social development (House et al., 2023). Studies of children's rights, community membership, and language agency further suggest that equity outcomes in multicultural early childhood education should include voice, recognition, participation, rights, and agency—not only school readiness or language achievement (Ozeto et al., 2024; Kimchi-Yahav et al., 2026; Ragnarsdóttir, 2026).

Table 4. Essential summary of findings on equity outcomes, inclusion, belonging, and developmental implications.

References	Outcome focus	Level/context	Evidence	Research implication
Keles et al., 2021	Social inclusion interventions	Immigrant/ethnic minority preschool children	Interventions targeted social inclusion but were heterogeneous.	More comparable outcome designs are needed.
Atalell et al., 2025	Developmental vulnerability	CALD children in Western Australia	Population evidence identified developmental vulnerability patterns.	SLRs should connect pedagogy to developmental equity indicators.
Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2024	Language respect and awareness	Pre-primary classrooms	Teachers' practices aimed to make children's languages respected.	Direct child-level outcome measurement remains limited.
Sila & Klančar, 2024	Plurilingual awareness	Future teachers/preschool materials	Digital materials supported awareness and openness.	Child engagement should be tested longitudinally.
Schwartz et al., 2026	Belonging and home-preschool continuity	Immigrant preschool community	Connecting patterns linked home and preschool expectations.	Mediation should be studied comparatively.
Kimchi-Yahav et al., 2026	Inclusion and community membership	Children, families, kindergarten and university actors	Partnership recognized children as community members.	Power negotiation is part of equity outcomes.
Becerra-Lubies et al., 2024	Cultural sustainability	Mapuche preschool setting	Language teaching was valued but precarious.	Cultural sustainability needs community-led measures.
Yu et al., 2026	Teacher empowerment and engagement	Novice kindergarten teachers	VCoP supported sustained participation in PD.	Link teacher learning with child belonging outcomes.
House et al., 2023	Fairness and prosociality across societies	Children aged 4–15 across diverse societies	No strong universal gender differences were found.	Developmental models require culturally diverse samples.
Ozeto et al., 2024	Valuing cultural diversity and children's rights	Children in diverse contexts	Valuing diversity related to rights endorsement.	Equity outcomes should include rights, voice, and agency.

Discussion

The synthesis indicates that culturally responsive multicultural education in early childhood is strongest when pedagogy, teacher competence, family engagement, and equity outcomes are treated as interdependent. Pedagogy alone is insufficient if teachers lack preparation, if families are positioned as outsiders, or if institutions treat diversity as an event rather than a daily condition of learning. Conversely, teacher professional development is incomplete if it does not translate into curriculum, language inclusion, assessment, and reciprocal family relationships (Lin et al., 2025; Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2024; Schwartz et al., 2026).

A key contribution of the review is its distinction between representational and transformative multicultural education. Representational approaches make diversity visible, but transformative approaches alter relationships, expectations, materials, language policies, and institutional routines. Studies on Indigenous language teaching show this clearly: the presence of Indigenous language in preschool is valuable, but it can remain precarious if community participation and policy continuity are weak (Becerra-Lubies et al., 2024; Hsin et al., 2025). The same tension appears in curriculum and book selection, where multicultural materials may challenge or reproduce monocultural norms depending on how they are chosen and used (Kelly & Djonko-Moore, 2022).

The review also highlights teacher agency as both necessary and constrained. Teachers are cultural interpreters, curriculum designers, language supporters, and family partners, yet the evidence repeatedly shows constraints of time, confidence, training, resources, and institutional guidance. Sustained professional learning, virtual communities of practice, open educational practices, and practice-based coaching offer promising alternatives to short-term workshops (Yu et al., 2026; Tualaulelei & Green, 2022; Kranski & Steed, 2022). This has direct implications for teacher education because multicultural competence must be developed through supervised practice, reflection, and feedback.

Family and community engagement emerged as a decisive equity mechanism. The evidence challenges universal models of parental involvement that assume shared language, institutional familiarity, and equal power. Migrant, immigrant, refugee, and Indigenous families may possess rich knowledge but face institutional boundaries, linguistic exclusion, or expectations that define participation narrowly (Vargas Valdés & Falabella, 2025; Lund, 2024; Schwartz et al., 2026). Culturally responsive engagement therefore requires institutions to adapt, listen, and share authority.

The most important evidence gap concerns outcomes. Many studies show promising process indicators—teacher awareness, inclusive materials, improved professional engagement, stronger family dialogue—but direct child-level evidence remains relatively limited. Future work should measure belonging, identity affirmation, peer relations, language confidence, participation, rights awareness, and developmental equity using methods that include children's voices. The review also identifies geographic and epistemic gaps: Global South, Indigenous, refugee, and minoritized-language contexts should not be treated as special cases but as central sites for theory-building (Atalell et al., 2025; Keles et al., 2021; House et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This systematic review shows that culturally responsive multicultural education in early childhood is not a single curriculum technique but an integrated equity project. Across the reviewed studies, effective practice depends on four connected dimensions: culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, teacher competence and professional learning, reciprocal family/community engagement, and equity-oriented outcomes. The evidence suggests that multicultural education is most meaningful when children's languages, identities, home practices, and community knowledge are embedded in daily classroom life rather than added

through occasional celebrations.

The review also demonstrates that teachers require sustained, practice-based professional learning to enact multicultural education confidently and critically. Family and community partnerships are equally central because home–preschool continuity affirms children's cultural and linguistic repertoires. However, the literature remains limited by uneven child-level outcome measurement, small qualitative samples, fragmented terminology, and insufficient attention to children's own perspectives. Future research should develop longitudinal, participatory, and culturally grounded designs that connect teacher learning, pedagogy, family engagement, and measurable indicators of belonging, language affirmation, social inclusion, and developmental equity.

The main theoretical contribution is an integrated framework linking culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher agency, family/community partnership, and equity outcomes. The practical contribution is guidance for educators, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to build early childhood settings where cultural and linguistic diversity is not merely acknowledged but actively sustained as a foundation for educational justice.

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