Understanding Early Childhood Education Quality Through Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Lenses

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Abstract

This systematic literature review synthesizes 29 studies published between 2016 and 2025 to examine the multidimensional factors shaping the quality of early childhood education (ECE) across global contexts. Findings show that ECE quality is influenced by six interrelated dimensions: inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, and culture, which interact through broader political, economic, social, and cultural structures. Strong governance and sustainable financing enhance equitable access, while inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies support children's holistic development and socio-emotional well-being. The review also identifies fragmentation across studies, limited cross-country comparative work, and persistent policy-practice gaps that hinder the effective implementation of high-quality ECE. The study proposes an integrated model demonstrating how structural and contextual factors collectively shape early learning experiences. These insights provide a foundation for strengthening policy alignment, professional development, and culturally grounded practices to improve ECE quality worldwide.

Keywords: inclusive education; early funding; child well-being; ECE governance; cultural pedagogy

Abstrak

Kajian literatur sistematis ini menganalisis 29 studi yang dipublikasikan antara tahun 2016–2025 untuk menelaah faktor-faktor multidimensional yang membentuk kualitas pendidikan anak usia dini (PAUD) di berbagai konteks global. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kualitas PAUD dipengaruhi oleh enam dimensi yang saling berkaitan inklusi, ekuitas, pendanaan, kesejahteraan, tata kelola, dan budaya yang berinteraksi dalam struktur politik, ekonomi, sosial, dan budaya. Tata kelola yang kuat dan pendanaan berkelanjutan memperkuat akses yang adil, sementara pedagogi inklusif dan responsif budaya mendukung perkembangan holistik dan kesejahteraan sosio-emosional anak. Kajian ini juga mengidentifikasi fragmentasi riset, minimnya studi perbandingan lintas negara, serta kesenjangan kebijakan–praktik yang menghambat implementasi PAUD berkualitas. Studi ini menawarkan model terintegrasi yang menunjukkan bagaimana faktor struktural dan kontekstual secara kolektif membentuk pengalaman belajar anak usia dini. Temuan ini memberikan dasar bagi penguatan kebijakan, pengembangan profesional, dan praktik berbasis budaya di tingkat global.

Kata kunci: pendidikan inklusif, pendanaan paud, kesejahteraan anak, tata kelola paud, pedagogi budaya

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A. **Introduction**

Early childhood education (ECE) constitutes a critical period for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Experiences from birth through approximately age eight shape not only school readiness but also long-term health, well-being, and social participation. Evidence from diverse contexts shows that early learning environments, caregiving quality, and access to supportive services are strongly associated with developmental trajectories and later life outcomes (Hossain et al., 2021; Kuhn et al., 2021; Slemming et al., 2022; Sudfeld et al., 2021; Workie et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2020). At the same time, social determinants such as income, housing, and community resources exert a powerful influence on children's opportunities and health across the life course (Moore et al., 2024; Tomori, 2025; Williams-Breault, 2020; Zhan & Fan, 2022). These findings underscore that the quality of ECE is not merely a pedagogical issue but is embedded in broader political, economic, social, and cultural structures.

However, substantial disparities in ECE quality persist within and across countries. In many settings, children from low-income families, rural areas, or marginalised communities face barriers to accessing high-quality services, which can reinforce cycles of disadvantage ((Atashbahar et al., 2021; I. M. Azzahra et al., 2022; Bobáková et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2024). Even where investments in preschool education have increased, such as the reported 7.29% rise in preschool funding in China in 2022 (Tang et al., 2024), regional differences in resource allocation and system capacity remain evident. In lower-middle-income countries, policy frameworks for early childhood development (ECD) are often fragmented and under-resourced, as illustrated by persistent gaps in implementing integrated ECD policies in Kenya (Abboah-Offei et al., 2022). These patterns suggest that improving ECE quality requires a comprehensive understanding of how multiple systemic forces intersect to shape children's early experiences.

Against this backdrop, six interrelated dimensions emerge as central to understanding the quality of early childhood education: inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, and culture. Early childhood inclusion emphasises the right of children with and without disabilities to learn together in shared educational settings, grounded in principles of equity and human rights. Inclusive ECE is characterised by enriched learning experiences that foster engagement and joint participation among children with diverse abilities (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020), supported by policy guidelines that promote access to high-quality, inclusive early learning, particularly for children with disabilities (Steed et al., 2022). The effectiveness of inclusion depends heavily on educators' preparedness, attitudes, and self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices (Kim et al., 2024; McKee et al., 2023; Singogo & Muzata, 2023), as well as on addressing logistical and systemic constraints such as resource limitations and support for low-income families (Long et al., 2022; Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2021).

The dimension of equity is closely linked to social justice and human rights in ECE. Systemic inequities rooted in socioeconomic status, access to resources, and structural discrimination can prevent children from marginalised communities from fully participating in and benefiting from ECEC services (Atashbahar et al., 2021; Bobáková et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2024; Souto-Manning & Epley, 2024). Approaches such as proportional universalism argue that universal services must be complemented by targeted support for disadvantaged groups to reduce health and educational inequities effectively (Barboza et al., 2022; OECD, 2023). Within ECE settings, equitable outcomes are supported by culturally responsive pedagogy, community-engaged interventions, professional development focused on equity, and strong family engagement (Costa et al., 2022; Drake-Croft et al., 2025; Harvey et al., 2023; Harvey & Wennerstrom, 2021; Sun & Saleh, 2024).

Funding constitutes another foundational dimension shaping ECE quality. While increased investment raises expectations for improved access and quality, the coexistence of multiple funding streams at federal, state, and local levels can complicate governance and hinder effective service delivery (Zuckerman et al., 2020). Sustainable and efficient financing requires robust fiscal management, including needs assessments, cost–benefit analyses, and strategic budgeting (Omotunde et al., 2025). Comparative evidence from initiatives such as Chile Crece Contigo and Canadian early childhood policies shows how well-structured public investments in the early years can yield substantial benefits (Lima, 2025). At a macro level, early childhood investments are strongly associated with positive returns in education and health, reinforcing the framing of ECE funding as an investment in human capital (Karaman et al., 2023), even though regions with limited fiscal capacity continue to struggle to provide adequate services (N. Azzahra & Safira, 2022).

The concept of early childhood well-being integrates multiple dimensions, including health, nutrition, safety, and caregiver interaction, that collectively contribute to optimal development. Studies have shown that malnutrition and poor access to nutritional resources can significantly impair early development, particularly in rural and disadvantaged settings (Hossain et al., 2021; Workie et al., 2020). Conversely, well-nourished children who receive adequate cognitive stimulation and responsive caregiving demonstrate enhanced developmental outcomes and resilience (Slemming et al., 2022; Sudfeld et al., 2021). The Nurturing Care Framework highlights the importance of stable, responsive caregiving environments that integrate health, nutrition, and early learning (Bhojani et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2020). Socioeconomic factors such as parental education, income, and employment conditions influence the quality of home learning environments (Bliznashka et al., 2023; Kuhn et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2020). Holistic interventions that engage families and provide resources for nurturing environments can mitigate socio-economic disadvantages and promote better cognitive and behavioural outcomes (Costa et al., 2022; Grantham-McGregor et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; Scheidecker et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2025).

Governance and culture further contextualise these dimensions within broader systems of policy and meaning. Early childhood governance concerns the policies, institutional arrangements, and coordination mechanisms that shape ECEC systems. Efforts in China to strengthen the transition from preschool to primary education reflect a strategic orientation towards nurturing well-rounded talents for national development (Ma, 2024). At the global level, frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals spotlight the importance of ensuring access to quality ECD services (Jeong et al., 2021; Topothai et al., 2024). Yet in many contexts, governance remains fragmented and under-resourced, as evidenced by gaps in Kenya's integrated ECD policies (Abboah-Offei et al., 2022). Research from Ireland shows that sustained investment in structural and process quality, alongside inclusive practices, can transform outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children (Nazir et al., 2023; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2024; Rad et al., 2022).

Early childhood culture, meanwhile, encompasses how educational settings transmit, negotiate, and sustain cultural values and identities. Studies from Indonesia and other contexts show that integrating local cultural elements into ECE, such as indigenous customs, regional languages, traditional games, and storytelling, supports both cognitive and socio-emotional development and strengthens children's sense of identity and belonging (Abdullah et al., 2025; Afriliani et al., 2023; Nuriani, 2025; Utama et al., 2024). Curricular frameworks that foreground national and religious values, such as Emirati values and Islamic studies in the United Arab Emirates, foster cultural integrity among young learners (Alhosani, 2022). In multicultural environments, early exposure to diverse cultural perspectives enhances empathy and adaptability, highlighting the importance of culturally

sustaining pedagogy (Abbas & Rizvi, 2020; Aprilia et al., 2025; Daniju-Jegede & Fowowe, 2024; Lisnawati, 2023; Trimuliana et al., 2025).

Despite this extensive and growing literature, research on the quality of early childhood education remains fragmented. Many studies focus on a single dimension—such as inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, or culture or examine only one level of influence, whether structural, institutional, or classroom-based. Consequently, there is limited synthesis that systematically integrates these dimensions and examines how political, economic, social, and cultural factors intersect to shape ECE quality across contexts. Much of the evidence is also scattered across disciplinary boundaries and geographical settings, which makes it difficult for policymakers and practitioners to gain a holistic understanding of how different levers can be aligned to improve early childhood education.

Given these gaps, there is a need for an integrative approach that brings together diverse strands of research to illuminate the multidimensional nature of quality in early childhood education. This systematic literature review (SLR) is designed to address that need by: Synthesising the literature on six key themes inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, and culture in relation to early childhood education; Analysing how political, economic, social, and cultural factors, as reflected in these themes, influence the quality of early childhood education; and Providing a conceptual mapping that can inform policy development and educational practice aimed at building more equitable, inclusive, and contextually responsive ECE systems.

In line with these aims, the review is guided by the following research questions: RQ1. How do political, economic, social, and cultural factors influence the quality of early childhood education?. RQ2. What themes emerge from existing research regarding inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, and culture in early childhood education?. RQ3. What gaps remain in the literature concerning the multidimensional understanding of early childhood education quality?

Beyond addressing these research questions, this review makes a distinct scientific contribution by proposing an integrated conceptual model that reconceptualises early childhood education quality as a dynamic, multi-level system rather than a collection of isolated dimensions. While previous reviews have tended to examine inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, or culture separately, this study systematically integrates these dimensions within a political, economic, social, and cultural framework to illuminate how they interact across structural, institutional, and classroom levels. By positioning ECE quality as a relational and context-sensitive construct, the proposed model advances existing review literature and provides a conceptual foundation for future comparative, theory-driven, and systems-oriented research on early childhood education quality across diverse global contexts.

B. Literature Review
1. Early Childhood Inclusion

Early childhood inclusion is grounded in the principle that all children, regardless of disability status, background, or developmental needs, should learn together in shared educational environments. Inclusion is conceptualised not merely as physical placement but as the creation of enriched learning experiences that foster engagement, interaction, and development for all children. Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020) emphasise that inclusive early childhood education supports joint participation among children with diverse needs, thereby promoting both social integration and holistic development. Policy guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education further reinforce the importance of expanding access to

high-quality inclusive programs, particularly to strengthen developmental outcomes for children with disabilities (Steed et al., 2022).

Teacher beliefs, preparedness, and attitudes are central to the success of inclusive practices. Singogo and Muzata (2023) found that educators with strong knowledge of inclusive principles exhibit greater self-efficacy and are more committed to supporting learners with special needs. Similarly, Kim et al. (2024) argue that positive teacher perceptions foster welcoming classroom environments that encourage active participation from all children. Preservice education, therefore, plays a critical role in equipping future educators with the pedagogical competencies and inclusive mindsets necessary to accommodate diverse learners (McKee et al., 2023).

Despite clear benefits, numerous challenges hinder the realisation of fully inclusive early learning environments. Barriers such as limited teacher training, logistical constraints, and societal attitudes that inadequately support inclusion persist across many contexts (Long et al., 2022). Additionally, Zhang and Li (2021) highlight systemic issues such as insufficient resource allocation and a lack of coordinated support systems for children with special needs, particularly in low-income families. As Mathwasa and Sibanda (2021) note, ensuring that inclusive early childhood education becomes reality requires not only pedagogical commitment but also structural supports embedded within broader social and policy systems. Taken together, these studies suggest a persistent tension between inclusive policy aspirations and the practical capacity of education systems to implement inclusive practices across different socioeconomic contexts.

2. Early Childhood Equity

Early childhood equity is a foundational dimension of educational justice, ensuring that all children, irrespective of socioeconomic background, have equal access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Literature consistently shows that systemic inequities can prevent marginalised groups from fully engaging in early learning opportunities (Bobáková et al., 2022; Souto-Manning & Epley, 2024). Structural determinants such as income, parental occupation, neighbourhood resources, and social capital directly shape children's developmental pathways (Atashbahar et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2024).

Proportional universalism is frequently discussed as an approach for addressing inequities by combining universal services with targeted support for disadvantaged populations (Barboza et al., 2022; OECD, 2023). Within early childhood classrooms, equitable practices include culturally responsive teaching, community-engaged educational interventions, and teacher professional development centred on equity (Drake-Croft et al., 2025; Harvey et al., 2023; Harvey & Wennerstrom, 2021; Sun & Saleh, 2024). These practices promote environments where children's diverse cultural identities are recognised, affirmed, and integrated into the learning process (Souto-Manning & Epley, 2024).

Family engagement is another critical mechanism for achieving equity. Active parental involvement supports culturally relevant curricular design and strengthens home–school connections, ultimately contributing to more equitable educational outcomes (Costa et al., 2022; Harvey et al., 2023). Beyond education, early equity influences long-term health and social outcomes. Studies demonstrate that early childhood development is closely tied to social determinants such as housing, income, and access to community resources (Moore et al., 2024; Williams-Breault, 2020). Effective interventions must therefore adopt holistic approaches addressing both educational and social barriers (Drake-Croft et al., 2025; OECD, 2023; Tomori, 2025; Zhan & Fan, 2022). Taken together, these studies reveal a tension between equity as a normative policy commitment and equity as a

consistently achieved outcome, particularly in contexts where governance capacity and cross-sector coordination remain uneven.

3. Early Childhood Funding

Funding is a critical structural determinant of the quality of early childhood education. Recent data from China indicate a 7.29% increase in preschool investment in 2022, totalling 101.98 billion yuan, although regional disparities remain significant (Tang et al., 2024). Such uneven distribution underscores broader systemic challenges that influence equitable access to ECE services. Compounding these disparities are fragmented funding streams at the federal and state levels, which complicate coordination and service delivery (Zuckerman et al., 2020).

Financial sustainability is essential for long-term program viability. Omotunde et al. (2025) highlight the importance of fiscal efficiency through needs assessments, strategic budgeting, and cost-benefit analyses to ensure that limited resources are allocated effectively. Comparative studies offer valuable insights: initiatives such as Chile Crece Contigo and Canadian early childhood policies illustrate how robust public investment in early childhood services yields positive developmental and social outcomes (Lima, 2025).

Early childhood funding also carries substantial economic implications. Evidence cited by the World Bank links investment in early childhood to long-term societal returns, reinforcing the understanding that spending in this sector constitutes a significant investment in human capital (Karaman et al., 2023). Nonetheless, disparities persist, particularly in low-capacity regions where fiscal resources are insufficient to provide adequate services (N. Azzahra & Safira, 2022). These trends suggest that comprehensive and equitable funding strategies remain central to improving global ECE quality. These contrasting findings suggest that increased funding, while necessary, is not sufficient on its own to ensure equitable ECE quality without parallel improvements in governance coherence and implementation capacity.

4. Early Childhood Well-being

Early childhood well-being encompasses the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of development. Adequate nutrition, health care, and responsive caregiving are central to fostering optimal early development. Studies have demonstrated that malnutrition significantly impairs developmental outcomes, especially in rural areas with limited access to health and nutritional resources (Hossain et al., 2021; Workie et al., 2020). In contrast, children who receive adequate nutrition and cognitive stimulation are more resilient and demonstrate improved developmental outcomes (Slemming et al., 2022; Sudfeld et al., 2021).

The Nurturing Care Framework emphasises the role of stable environments that integrate health, safety, nutrition, and early learning opportunities (Bhojani et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2020). Socioeconomic conditions such as parental education, income, and employment patterns further shape children's home learning environments (Bliznashka et al., 2023; Kuhn et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2020). Interventions that directly engage families and promote nurturing environments have been shown to mitigate socioeconomic disadvantages and strengthen children's cognitive and behavioural outcomes (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2023).

Recent evidence underscores the value of integrated, culturally sensitive programs that combine early learning, health, and nutrition to produce sustained developmental benefits (Jeong et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020). Such approaches align with global commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals, which reinforce the importance of expanding access to high-quality ECE and care (Turner et al., 2025). Given the complex interplay of sociodemographic and cultural factors, ongoing research and

context-specific interventions are necessary to address the diverse well-being needs of young children (Costa et al., 2022; Scheidecker et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness and sustainability of well-being-focused interventions vary markedly across contexts, particularly where structural poverty and limited service integration constrain long-term impact.

5. Early Childhood Governance

Governance structures shape the coherence, quality, and accessibility of ECEC systems. In China, efforts to strengthen the transition from preschool to primary school reflect government strategies to develop well-rounded human capital for long-term national development (Ma, 2024). Globally, ECD has gained prominence through international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, notably Target 4.2, which calls for universal access to quality early childhood opportunities (Jeong et al., 2021).

Despite these normative commitments, governance challenges persist, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Kenya, for instance, continues to face gaps in implementing its Integrated ECD Policy Framework (Abboah-Offei et al., 2022). Fragmented governance structures, inadequate funding, and limited coordination hinder the operationalisation of comprehensive ECD systems.

High-quality governance frameworks promote both structural quality (e.g., standards, regulations, financing) and process quality (e.g., pedagogical practices, inclusion, child–teacher interactions). Research in Ireland demonstrates that sustained investment in both dimensions enhances developmental outcomes and supports inclusive education, particularly for disadvantaged children (Nazir et al., 2023; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2024; Rad et al., 2022). Taken together, these studies highlight the centrality of governance in ensuring equity, quality, and sustainability across ECEC systems. Taken together, these studies point to a recurring gap between governance frameworks articulated at the policy level and their translation into coherent and effective early childhood systems in practice.

6. Early Childhood Culture

Culture plays a vital role in shaping children's identities, values, and developmental trajectories. Integrating local cultural knowledge, practices, and languages into early childhood education enriches children's learning experiences and reinforces community identity. In North Lombok, for example, the decline of indigenous customs due to globalisation has increased calls for culturally grounded early childhood approaches that preserve cultural heritage while supporting cognitive and emotional development (Afriliani et al., 2023; Nuriani, 2025). Similarly, embedding Acehnese cultural themes into instructional practices promotes both language development and cultural identity formation (Abdullah et al., 2025).

Curriculum development in various countries reflects cultural priorities. In the United Arab Emirates, early childhood education emphasises Emirati traditions and Islamic studies to instil cultural integrity among young learners (Alhosani, 2022). Incorporating traditional games and storytelling fosters the transmission of local philosophical values and strengthens a sense of community belonging (Utama et al., 2024).

Multicultural studies further reveal that exposure to diverse cultural perspectives enhances children's empathy, adaptability, and collaborative competencies (Daniju-Jegede & Fowowe, 2024; Lisnawati, 2023). A culturally sustaining pedagogical approach equips educators to recognise and incorporate children's cultural backgrounds into daily instruction, fostering inclusive learning environments (Abbas & Rizvi, 2020; Aprilia et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings show that culturally embedded ECE enhances identity formation and prepares children for active participation in pluralistic societies (Trimuliana et al., 2025). At the same time, tensions emerge in standardised or centralised curriculum

systems, where local cultural knowledge may be marginalised despite growing recognition of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

C. Method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, which offers a transparent and replicable process for identifying, screening, and synthesising research evidence. The review focused on understanding early childhood education (ECE) quality through six significant thematic dimensions: inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, and culture as reflected in peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2016 and 2025. The Scopus database was selected as the primary source for its extensive indexing of high-quality international journals across the education and social sciences. A structured search strategy was developed using keyword combinations such as "early childhood education," "ECEC," "quality," "inclusion," "equity," "funding," "well-being," "governance," and "culture," with Boolean operators integrated to refine the search. Only English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus Q1–Q4 categories were included to ensure the academic rigor and relevance of the selected studies.

The search process initially identified 433 records, which were exported for duplicate removal. A total of 147 duplicates were excluded, leaving 286 articles for title and abstract screening. Of these, 202 records were excluded because they did not meet the thematic or methodological criteria of this review. The remaining 84 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, resulting in 55 exclusions due to scope mismatch, insufficient quality, or inadequate relevance to early childhood education quality. Ultimately, 29 articles met all inclusion criteria and were retained for full synthesis. The review included studies that explicitly addressed early childhood education for children aged 0–8 years and examined one or more of the six thematic dimensions. Exclusion criteria comprised non-journal publications, studies outside the 2015–2025 timeframe, and research not connected to the political, economic, social, or cultural determinants of ECE quality.

A narrative quality appraisal was used to evaluate each article's methodological clarity, conceptual contribution, and relevance to the review's thematic focus. The selected studies were systematically extracted using a structured data matrix that captured authorship, publication year, geographical context, journal ranking, thematic category, methodological approach, and key findings. A thematic synthesis method was used to analyse the extracted data, enabling the identification of recurring patterns within and across the six dimensions. A cross-lens analysis was then conducted to examine how political, economic, social, and cultural factors intersect and shape the quality of early childhood education across different contexts.

The flow of study selection is illustrated in the PRISMA 2020 diagram, which visually summarises the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion processes. Following academic conventions, the PRISMA figure is inserted immediately after the paragraph describing the screening process:
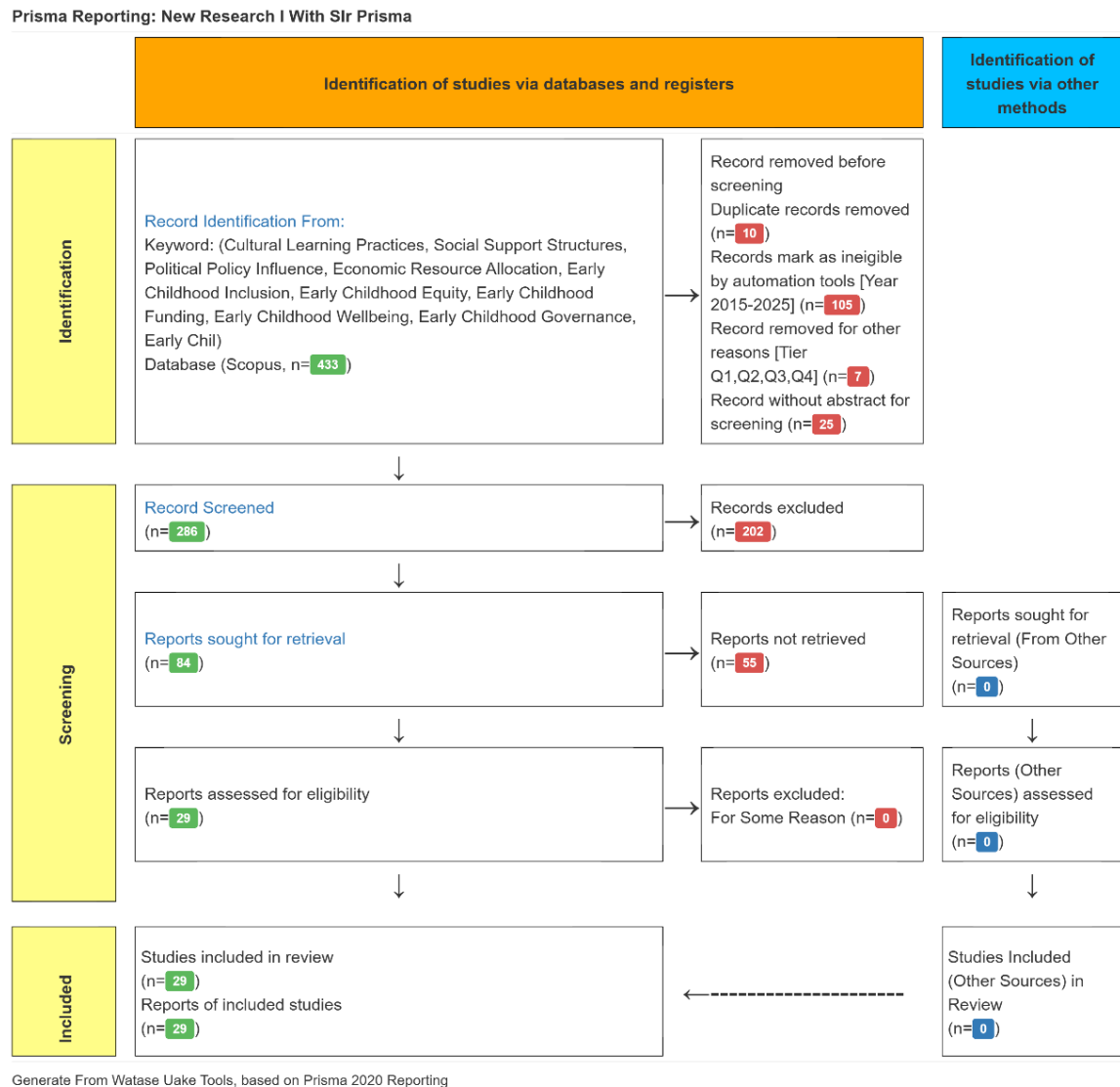
Prisma Reporting: New Research I With SIr Prisma

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies (n = 29)

D. Results and Discussion
1. Descriptive Characteristics of the Included Studies

A total of **29 studies** published between **2016 and 2025** were included in this systematic review. The publication distribution shows a gradual increase in scholarly attention to the quality of early childhood education (ECE) over the last decade, especially after 2019, reflecting growing global awareness of children's well-being, governance reforms, cultural issues, and equity. Most studies (n = 17) were published in **Q1 journals**, followed by Q2 (n = 8) and Q3 (n = 4), indicating strong representation from high-impact scholarly outlets.

Geographically, the studies cover a wide variety of contexts, including Nordic countries (Alexiadou et al., 2022), China (Xia et al., 2022; Yang & Li, 2019), Israel (Moshel, 2022), Pakistan (Chan & Li, 2020; Zaidi et al., 2018), Australia (Baker et al., 2025; Sisson et al., 2020), Europe and Central Asia (Ponguta et al., 2019), United States (Condon, 2019; Sarche et al., 2016), and others.

Methodologically, the majority of studies are **review-based analyses**, policy analyses, and qualitative case studies focusing on governance, culture, equity, or inclusion. This aligns with the nature of ECE quality research, which often emphasizes policy frameworks, curriculum analyses, and sociocultural dynamics rather than experimental designs. Table 1 provides a complete summary of the included studies, their journal ranks, and thematic categorization.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Included Studies (n = 29)

No	Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Rank	Theme
1	Baker, Lisa M.; Raban; Oades	2025	What does well-being mean in ECE pedagogy & practice	Educational Research for Policy and Practice	Q2	Well-being
2	Stavholm, Emelie	2025	Social sustainability in ECE through play & inclusion	Oxford Review of Education	Q1	Inclusion
3	Raviv & Shwartz-Asher	2024	Organizational culture & burnout in educators	European Early Childhood Education Research Journal	Q2	Well-being / Culture
4	Alexiadou et al.	2022	ECEC policy change: governance in Nordic contexts	Compare	Q1	Governance
5	Brogaard-Clausen et al.	2022	Well-being & democratic living in curricula	Early Years	Q3	Well-being
6	Macniven et al.	2022	Family SES, well-being & physical activity	Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport	Q1	Well-being / Equity
7	Moshel, Smadar	2022	Governance deficits in Israeli ECEC	Children and Youth Services Review	Q1	Governance
8	Xia, Jing; Wang; Zhang	2022	School culture & teacher job satisfaction	Asia Pacific Education Review	Q2	Culture
9	Arace et al.	2021	Emotional competence & socio-emotional well-being	IJERPH	Q1	Well-being
10	Birbili & Hedges	2021	Curriculum as culture in Greece & NZ	International Journal of Early Years Education	Q2	Culture

11	Folayan et al.	2020	Governance, well-being & child oral health	BMC Oral Health	Q1	Governance/ Well-being
12	Sisson et al.	2020	Culturally responsive pedagogies	Journal of Research in Childhood Education	Q2	Culture
13	Chan & Li	2020	Parental expectations & acculturation	Children and Youth Services Review	Q1	Culture / Social
14	Barco & Carrasco	2020	Equity policies in Chile ECE	Early Years	Q3	Equity
15	Paananen et al.	2020	Epistemic governance in ECEC policy	European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology	Q1	Governance
16	Lambrev et al.	2020	Reforms for inclusion in Bulgaria	Education Inquiry	Q1	Inclusion
17	McIsaac et al.	2020	Collaborative governance for ECE	European Early Childhood Education Research Journal	Q2	Governance
18	Yang & Li	2019	Changing culture & curriculum in China	The Curriculum Journal	Q1	Culture
19	Condon, E.	2019	Home visiting funding policies	Policy, Politics & Nursing Practice	Q2	Funding
20	Fenech & Skattebol	2019	Inclusion of low-income families	International Journal of Inclusive Education	Q1	Inclusion / Equity
21	Ponguta et al.	2019	Decentralized governance & equity	Early Years	Q3	Governance / Equity
22	Nuttall et al.	2018	Cultural tools in teachers' curriculum decisions	Professional Development in Education	Q1	Culture
23	Blanchard et al.	2018	Equity, diversity & antibias education	Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education	Q2	Equity / Inclusion
24	Zaidi et al.	2018	Multisector governance for nutrition & ECD	BMJ Global Health	Q1	Governance / Well-being

25	McLeod et al.	2018	Long-term socioeconomic outcomes of ECE	NZ Journal of Educational Studies	Q3	Equity
26	Zimet & Gilat	2017	Cultural context & ECE perceptions	Journal of Research in Childhood Education	Q2	Culture
27	Hu et al.	2016	Teachers' views on quality inclusion	International Journal of Inclusive Education	Q1	Inclusion
28	Sarche et al.	2016	Risk & resilience in Native American ECE	Infant Mental Health Journal	Q2	Culture / Well-being
29	Robinson, Rachel	2016	Hybridity theory in ECE governance	Social Sciences	Q2	Governance

2. Thematic Findings Across Six Dimensions of ECE Quality

(RQ2: "What themes emerge from existing research regarding inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, and culture in early childhood education?")

a. Inclusion

Studies on inclusion emphasize the importance of ensuring that children with diverse needs participate meaningfully in early learning environments. Keywords highlight that inclusion is rooted in principles of equity and human rights (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020), while successful implementation requires teachers' knowledge, self-efficacy, and positive attitudes (Kim et al., 2024; Singogo & Muzata, 2023). From the included studies, Hu et al. (2017) show that teachers in China perceive inclusion as both essential and feasible, though often constrained by limited training and resources. Lambrev et al. (2020) reveal a persistent policy practice gap in Bulgaria, where inclusive reforms are introduced but not adequately supported. Fenech and Skattebol (2021) similarly argue that low-income families remain underserved despite policy rhetoric on inclusion. Overall, inclusion research points to the need for systemic support, professional development, and responsive pedagogies to ensure equitable participation.

b. Equity

Equity appears as a strong theme, reflecting attention to socioeconomic disparities, marginalization, and the need for culturally responsive practices. Equity-focused literature emphasizes how structural factors such as income, social status, and policy frameworks shape children's access to quality ECE (Barco & Carrasco, 2020; McLeod et al., 2018). Blanchard et al. (2018) demonstrate that antibias education and self-reflection enhance preservice teachers' capacity to support equity. Ponguta et al. (2019) highlight inequities associated with decentralized governance models, while studies such as Macniven et al. (2022) link family well-being and socioeconomic status to children's physical development. These findings align with prior evidence that equity in ECE requires policy attention, family engagement, and culturally grounded pedagogical practices (Costa et al., 2022; Harvey et al., 2023).

c. Funding

Funding studies underscore the political and economic commitment required to strengthen ECE systems. Condon (2019) calls for paradigm shifts in how states design home-visiting and early intervention funding, arguing that fragmented financing undermines program effectiveness. Broader evidence shows increasing investment in ECE globally, such as the 7.29% increase in China's preschool funding (Tang et al., 2024). However, disparities persist: regions with lower fiscal capacity struggle to maintain quality services (N. Azzahra & Safira, 2022). Funding is therefore closely tied to national priorities, inter-sectoral collaboration, and long-term policy vision, reinforcing arguments that early childhood investment yields high societal returns (Karaman et al., 2023).

d. Well-being

Well-being is one of the most frequently explored dimensions. Baker et al. (2025), Brogaard-Clausen et al. (2023), Arace et al. (2021), and Macniven et al. (2022) consistently emphasize that the well-being of children and educators shapes the quality of ECE. Studies also highlight that socio-emotional development, family functioning, and teacher emotional competence are central to children's holistic growth (Arace et al., 2021). Research outside the table reinforces that malnutrition, poverty, and limited parental support directly influence developmental outcomes (Hossain et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2020). The Nurturing Care Framework further stresses integrated support, nutrition, responsive caregiving, and safe environments as essential (Lu et al., 2020).

e. Governance

Governance emerges as a significant structural determinant of ECE quality. Alexiadou et al. (2024) compare Nordic governance reforms and find that policy coherence and long-term planning positively influence ECEC goals. Moshel (2022) identifies historical governance weaknesses in Israel, while Paananen et al. (2020) highlight policy debates in Finland that shape entitlement to ECEC. Multi-sector governance is also critical. Zaidi et al. (2018) show how nutrition and child development agendas in Pakistan require cross-ministerial coordination. Ponguta et al. (2019) indicate that decentralized governance models risk increasing inequities if accountability is weak. These findings echo broader evidence that achieving SDG 4.2 requires strong, well-coordinated governance systems (Jeong et al., 2021).

f. Culture

Culture is deeply embedded in early childhood learning, shaping pedagogy, curriculum, and children's identities. The reviewed studies demonstrate that culture is not a peripheral consideration but a core element of quality. Sisson et al. (2020) illustrate how culturally responsive pedagogies enhance engagement. Yang and Li (2019) show how curriculum innovation in China reflects broader shifts in cultural expectations. Research in multicultural contexts (Chan & Li, 2020; Nuttall et al., 2019; Zimet & Gilat, 2017) reveals that cultural norms shape parental expectations, teacher decision-making, and children's daily experiences. This aligns with wider scholarship emphasizing that culturally sustaining pedagogy fosters identity formation and social cohesion (Aprilia et al., 2025; Lisnawati, 2023).

3. Cross-Lens Analysis of Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Factors

(RQ1: "How do political, economic, social, and cultural factors influence ECE quality?")

a. Political Factors

Political priorities determine entitlement, access, governance structures, and curricular standards. Policy debates in Finland (Paananen et al., 2020), governance transitions in Nordic countries (Alexiadou et al., 2024), and collaborative governance efforts in Nova Scotia (McIsaac et al., 2020) show that political will is essential for equitable ECE expansion. Weak governance leads to service gaps, as seen in Israel (Moshel, 2022).

b. Economic Factors

Funding levels, resource allocation, and national income directly influence ECE quality. Disparities highlighted by Condon (2019), Ponguta et al. (2019), and McLeod et al. (2018) show that fiscal inequity translates into unequal access. Broader evidence confirms that early investment yields high societal returns, but only if sustained and well-distributed.

c. Social Factors

Family background, SES, inclusion, and equity conditions shape children's opportunities. Studies such as Macniven et al. (2022) and Fenech & Skattebol (2021) demonstrate how socioeconomic status predicts developmental trajectories. Anti-bias education (Blanchard et al., 2018) and culturally responsive practices (Sisson et al., 2020) mediate social disparities.

d. Cultural Factors

Cultural expectations influence not only parental aspirations (Chan & Li, 2020) but also curriculum content (Nuttall et al., 2019), governance models (Robinson, 2016), and teacher decision-making. Culture is thus both a contextual determinant and a pedagogical opportunity. Together, these four lenses show that ECE quality is not a single-dimensional concept but an interconnected system shaped by structural, interpersonal, and cultural dynamics.

4. Integrated Interpretation and Emerging Conceptual Model

Synthesizing the six themes through the four analytical lenses reveals an integrated model of ECE quality: a. Governance shapes the political conditions that regulate access, standards, and accountability; b. Funding determines economic capacity to sustain quality programs and equitable distribution; c. Inclusion, equity, and well-being represent social conditions for participation and development; and d. Culture mediates local meaning-making, shaping pedagogy, identity, and community engagement.

These elements interact dynamically: strong governance improves funding allocation; adequate funding enables inclusive practices; inclusive practices enhance well-being; culturally grounded curriculum strengthens identity and belonging. ECE quality, therefore, emerges from the synergy of structural supports, equitable resource distribution, socio-emotional environments, and culturally sustaining pedagogies.

5. Gaps and Implications for Future Research

(RQ3: "What gaps remain in the literature concerning multidimensional understanding of ECE quality?")

Across the 29 reviewed studies, three significant gaps emerge: a. *Fragmentation of topics*, each dimension (funding, inclusion, culture, governance, and well-being) is often examined in isolation. Few studies integrate all four lenses simultaneously; b. *Limited cross-country comparative work*, only a handful (Alexiadou et al., 2024; Ponguta et al., 2019) directly compare governance or equity across national contexts; and c. *Insufficient linkage between policy and classroom practice*, studies report persistent policy–practice gaps (Lambrev et al., 2020; Moshel, 2022), indicating a need for implementation-focused research. Together, these gaps show that future research must adopt integrative, multi-level frameworks that connect political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions to operational definitions of ECE quality.

E. Conclusion

This systematic review of 29 studies published between 2016 and 2025 demonstrates that early childhood education (ECE) quality is shaped by an interdependent constellation of political, economic, social, and cultural factors operating across six key dimensions: inclusion, equity, funding, well-being, governance, and culture. The findings reveal that strong governance structures, equitable and sustainable funding, inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies, and comprehensive well-being supports collectively determine children's developmental opportunities and the effectiveness of ECE systems. Based on this synthesis, ECE quality should be reconceptualised not as a set of isolated programmatic components, but as a dynamic, multi-level system in which structural conditions and pedagogical practices are mutually constitutive. However, persistent gaps, such as a fragmented research focus, limited cross-national comparative evidence, and ongoing policy practice disjunctions, indicate the need for more integrative, multi-level analyses that link structural policy environments to everyday classroom realities. Future global research should therefore move beyond single-dimension evaluations and adopt comparative, systems-oriented designs capable of examining how interactions among governance, funding, culture, and well-being shape ECE quality across diverse contexts. Overall, advancing ECE quality globally requires coordinated policy commitments, strengthened professional capacity, and culturally grounded practices that ensure all children benefit from equitable, developmentally enriching early learning environments.

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