



Professional Learning Supporting Multilingual Children's Social and Emotional Development in Diverse Australian Early Childhood Education and Care Settings

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Abstract

This research examined the conditions under which codesigned approaches to educator professional learning in multilingual, birth to five settings were accessible and supportive of children's social and emotional development across diverse types of Australian early childhood services. The research sites, in the suburbs of a capital city, comprised a long day childcare center, two short term informal community creches for birth to 5-year-old children of migrants and refugees attending English classes, and a family hub short term informal community creche for children of Afghan refugees. Professional learning mentors visited the participating sites eight times for 2 h every 2 weeks for 16 Weeks in 2021, demonstrating resources and strategies to assist young children to identify their own and others' emotions and engage with social settings. Over 20 weeks, 97 participants provided data, commencing before and extending after the professional learning program. Participants included professional learning mentors, staff and volunteers, parents, and children via observation. Using Reggio Emilia principles, the research identified that professional learning, flexibly delivered over time, enabled educators and volunteers to build their social and emotional development knowledge, and to try resources and strategies with children in their care. Recruiting educators who shared children's home or community languages, in addition to professional learning, supported multilingual children to engage with emotional literacy resources, while still developing spoken English. The research affirmed that educators, volunteers, parents, and children benefitted from a sustained focus on children's social and emotional development in the early childhood education and care settings.

Keywords Professional learning · Social and emotional development · Early childhood education and care · Migrant and refugee families · Multilingual children

This article reports on the *Wellbeing in Early Childhood Project*, a research study that assessed the effects of professional learning for educators and volunteers, enabling them to employ resources and strategies intended to foster multilingual, birth to 5-year-old children's social and emotional development (SED). Young children's SED impacts their transition into compulsory schooling from the age of five (Hirst et al., 2011). Australian children's development at five years of age is assessed using the *Australian Early Development Census*' (AEDC, 2022) five domains: physical

health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication. Every 3 years, upon children's primary school commencement, teachers collect data about children across these five domains.

According to 2021 AEDC data, children who attended early childhood (EC) services were less likely to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains (20.3%) compared to those who did not (40.7%) (AEDC, 2022). In the Australian research locations, the percentage of "vulnerable" children in the AEDC social competence domain was 13.9% in 2021, compared to a national 2021 score of 9.6% (AEDC, 2022). Children's social competence includes being able to interact in age appropriate ways with peers and adults in social settings, which are key skills for school engagement. AEDC 2021 data in the emotional maturity domain identified 11.3% of children as "vulnerable" in the current study's research sites in the suburbs of a capital city, compared to a

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national score of 8.6% (AEDC, 2022). Emotional literacy in children is defined as the ability to identify, understand, and communicate their own and others' feelings (Clarke et al., 2021). The local AEDC data confirmed the importance of professional learning to foster educators' skills in supporting preschool children's SED in EC settings.

The 2021 *Report on Government Services: Early Childhood Education and Care* (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022) identified that 45.5% of South Australian birth to 5-year-old children attended formal childcare regulated by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) quality standards. In formal care settings, the employment of EC qualified staff, ranging from those with early childhood university degrees to diplomas and certificates, is mandated (*Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* (Cth), ss. 125–135). Informal creche childcare is unregulated and includes paid or unpaid childminding services such as community creches for birth to 5-year-old children, which can be variously provided by paid qualified educators, through to volunteer community members, friends, and family without formal qualifications. Approximately 30% of Australian children aged 0–4 access informal care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021), so informal community creches and family centers also present opportunities to support children's SED.

The diversity of formal and informal EC services presents challenges for developing modes of professional learning which can be adapted to these different contexts. A key objective of the *Wellbeing in Early Childhood Project* was to develop professional learning approaches that would foster sustainable carer and educator skills to support young children's SED in diverse children's services and thus provide positive outcomes for children and their families. The professional learning model needed to work across various types of EC services accessed by families, spanning regulated long day childcare centers and unregulated short term community creches. The SED strategies and resources used needed to be inclusive of children from migrant and refugee families with multiple home and community languages.

Australia's EC and schooling systems are regulated, administered, and enacted in English. The English language structuring of EC settings provides challenges for the significant proportion of Australia's birth to five-year-old children who are in the early years of acquiring spoken language, and acquire their first or home language as one of more than 300 languages other than English spoken in Australian homes (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). Many of these children's families have migrated from nations with multiple official languages. Parents often speak one or two home languages other than English plus one or more community languages, for example a language aligned with their religion. In the current study's research locations, 39.9% of children entering their first year of primary school were

learning English as an additional language (AEDC, 2022). Nationally, the 2015 AEDC identified that 94.1% of children who had a home language other than English, were not yet proficient in English, and were developmentally vulnerable on at least one AEDC domain. Nearly one in five (19.1%) children who had a home language other than English, and were proficient in English, were also vulnerable on at least one AEDC domain. These data reflect elevated development risks for multilingual birth to five year old children in Australia. Therefore, the current study investigated how professional learning resources and strategies for educators and volunteers might enable them to foster the SED of multilingual, birth to five children in diverse EC settings.

The following sections begin with a review of research into approaches to professional learning for educators and volunteers to foster multilingual, birth to five-year-old children's SED in EC settings. The review is followed by a [methodology](#) section, detailing the theoretical approach and research design of this study, followed by details of the research sites, data collection and analysis, findings and discussion, and conclusions.

Research Review

In this section, we review research which attends to the social and emotional development of multilingual children in EC settings and professional learning approaches that can support educators and carers to facilitate children's SED and wellbeing.

Multilingual Children in Early Childhood Services

Bligh and Drury (2015) drew attention to the social and emotional challenges for multilingual children negotiating monolingual English preschool settings, identifying a "silent period" when multilingual children encounter such monolingual English settings in which educators and carers do not speak or recognize their home languages. Farndale et al. (2016) study of multilingual children in preschool settings noted that being unable to speak English yet increased children's anxieties about separating from their parents and engagement with English speaking volunteers and educators. Kang et al. (2014) and Ren and Wyver (2014) made connections between socioemotional wellbeing and language identity among immigrant children. Chung et al. (2019) found that promoting children's home language with their immigrant parents could be beneficial for multilingual learners' socioemotional adjustment.

Research on multilingual children attending EC services points to the need to support children's communication development, in home and English languages, to facilitate their adjustment to educational settings and expression of

emotions. Translanguaging research, which considers children's full linguistic repertoires in learning settings (Garcia & Wei, 2014), endorses the efficacy of multilingual approaches supporting children learning to socialize, share, regulate, and express their emotions. Bilingual educators in preschool settings who share children's languages have been found to scaffold children's development of emotional resilience in relationships beyond their family homes (Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021). Reed and Lee (2020) note the utility of physical, sense stimulating resources in engaging young children and encouraging oral expression. Professional learning in these and other practices is critical to ensuring educators meet quality standards for care provision. Arguably, such professional learning is equally as critical to ensuring informal EC providers can build capacity to approach the formal standards for quality care provision.

Professional Learning in Early Childhood Services

Early childhood services vary widely in the structure of care and education offered and their regulatory obligations. Consequently, professional learning activities need to be able to adapt to services' diverse workforce qualification profiles, hours and days of service provision, and the categories of care provided. Although ACECQA regulated childcare is the predominant form of care and education provision for birth to 5 year-old-children in Australia (ABS, 2018), children attending unregulated or informal EC services, such as community creches, also benefit from quality care.

McInnes et al. (2017) researched professional learning approaches to integrating a preschool curriculum within long day care centers. A multimodal approach included educator teams attending lectures and discussion workshops, visiting mentors engaging with site staff, regional professional learning hubs, social media learning groups, and educator inquiry projects. These varied learning modes enabled site leaders and educators to engage in professional learning over 12 months in ways that suited their contexts and learning needs. Using multiple learning options, engaging with site specific needs and providing research and practice resources over an extended period supported sustained professional learning (McInnes et al., 2017).

Rigney et al. (2020) also involved EC staff in inquiry projects for professional learning. Staff from six EC sites devised action research projects exploring strategies that engaged with a Funds of Knowledge perspective (Moll & González, 1994), Culturally Responsive Pedagogies (Rigney et al., 2020), and Reggio Emilia principles (Rinaldi, 2006, 2013). The researchers concluded that this approach enhanced educators' redesign of their teaching practices, boosted children's wellbeing, and strengthened collegial relationships and learning outcomes (Rigney et al., 2020).

A sitewide focus on desired educator practices over time has been found to support sustained changes in pedagogy. Clarke et al. (2021) identified EC teaching practices which supported toddlers' emotional literacy, including acknowledging and naming children's feelings to expand their vocabulary of emotions, matching facial and body language with feelings words, talking about emotions, and using resources such as songs and books to name emotions. Researchers observed educators using these emotional literacy teaching strategies and provided written feedback to the site leader to facilitate reflective group discussions. Clarke et al. (2021) identified educators' increasing use of feelings words during the data collection period, finding that the intentional focus on emotional literacy pedagogical practices over time embedded sustained change in educator practices in long day childcare. Yamauchi et al. (2022) assessed teaching practices emerging from preschool educators' formal and informal professional learning at the Hawaiian Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) to identify educators' adherence to CREDE standards emphasizing assisted performance, joint activity, and verbal interactions with children from diverse cultures. They found that permanently employed staff routinely used the selected teaching practices, while also applying informal professional learning. Further, they found administrators supported the CREDE standards as they inducted new staff to learn and implement consistent SED practices incorporating vocabulary about feelings in English.

In Australia, McInnes et al. (2016) examined approaches to fostering children's SED in school settings. Developing teachers' understanding of chronic stress and trauma, building children's emotional literacy, and enabling students to build positive relationships at school were found to support the wellbeing of primary school children. In 2019, an evaluation of a primary school's four year, holistic adoption of the *Wellbeing Classroom Approach* evidenced year-on-year improved attendance, reduced bullying incidents, increased parent engagement and staff satisfaction, as well as improvements in student numeracy and literacy standardized test scores (McInnes et al., 2020). The *Wellbeing Classroom Approach* used a range of resources including Kimochis (2011) (a social emotional learning program using colorful soft toys), interoception (Price & Hooven, 2018), mindfulness (Creswell, 2017), and mentoring strategies codesigned with school staff and students. The participatory codesign approach (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008) supports the process of adapting professional learning within diverse education sites to local requirements.

Fukking (2022) and Bradford (2012) emphasized that connection and consistency between home and care settings supports children's emotional wellbeing in EC. Bradford (2012) argued that understanding children's home settings and family relationships is critical for interpreting children's

communications and being emotionally available, for enabling focused lesson planning, and for children's development and learning.

These studies converge on the importance of clearly identified EC planning and practices to foster young children's SED, which informed the current study. Successful programs included the following essential elements: (a) adaptable for diverse EC contexts; (b) informed by continuing professional learning models featuring both informal and formal learning modes; and (c) attuned to children's home contexts, cultures, and languages. The current research aimed to examine whether codesigned approaches to educator professional learning in multilingual, birth to 5-year-old children's SED are supportive of child wellbeing across diverse types of early childhood services and are accessible for educators.

Theoretical Considerations

To provide a strong foundation, the current research study relied on the following theoretical considerations. Professional learning providers, educators and carers, children, and their families were theorized as agentic and competent participants using five Reggio Emilia principles, including positioning children as "competent" (Rinaldi, 2013, p. 43) emotional beings, who are learning to theorize and find meaning in life, individually and with others (Rinaldi, 2013). Furthermore, educators and volunteers were regarded as competent adults who brought skills and knowledge to their work with children, with rights and duties to engage in professional learning, reflection and planning time as part of their daily activity (Rinaldi, 2006, 2013). Education settings were thus theorized as learning communities where children, staff, and families are both teachers and learners in shared educational projects (Rinaldi, 2006). This approach recognizes that quality physical environments are important to support teachers' and children's education experiences (Malaguzzi, cited in Rinaldi, 2013). The current study's theoretical framework required a consultative and constructive approach to professional learning, one which fostered the engagement of educators and children.

Methodology

Following the Reggio Emilia principles and the essential elements of professional learning, as identified in our review of related research, the research approach for the *Early Childhood Wellbeing Project* was participatory codesign with site leadership and staff (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008), which was intended to accommodate diverse EC delivery structures. The participating EC service providers' leadership collaborated as partners with the researchers and the mentors in planning the professional learning workshops

and provided various financial and in-kind support for site access, staff, and volunteer release time. The three mentors were staff of a provider of SED professional learning in primary schools partnering in the research. A predominantly qualitative approach was used to identify the perspectives and experiences of professional learning for mentors, EC staff, children, and families.

Research Procedure

Research data were collected over 20 weeks in 2021, with data collection commencing two weeks before and extending 2 weeks after the 16 week professional learning intervention. The intervention involved three professional learning mentors. Two site mentors worked closely with staff and children, making eight fortnightly, two hour visits to their sites, demonstrating social and emotional learning resources and strategies using Kimochis (2011) (see Appendix 1). One site mentor visited the long day care center and two community creches. The other visited the Family Hub creche. The third mentor led a half day training workshop for educators and volunteers during the term break on trauma informed practice with children. Each of the four authors was assigned a site to visit alongside, and independently of, mentors, collecting data and observing mentors' professional learning sessions.

The intention of the 16 week program was to enable ongoing professional learning for educators and volunteers regarding children's SED. The extended schedule provided opportunities to practice strategies and observe effects on children between professional learning visits, as well as time for EC staff, children, and families to develop trust relationships with mentors and researchers.

Research Limitations

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection was mostly conducted in English, relying on multilingual educators to communicate with parents and children with limited English, except for translated surveys for Afghan participants at the Family Hub. The collective case study research design limits the generalizability of the research and the replicability of the results.

Ethical Considerations

The *Early Childhood Wellbeing Project* research partnership involved the authors as education researchers with a local university partnered with a government funded network providing formal and informal childcare, plus two community sector organizations. One organization specializes in providing professional learning mentors supporting SED in education settings, and the other

facilitates various family support services for children and families, including the Family Hub. Leaders of the three partnering organizations sat on the research project's steering committee. Their staff and volunteers participated in the research and managed the recruitment of parent and child participants attending childcare.

The research commenced following approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Australia. All adult participants provided informed consent. Participating parents consented to child observations by participating educators and researchers, who documented and planned activities to foster children's SED. All sites, mentors, educators, volunteers, children, and their families are given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Data Sources and Procedures

Professional learning mentors, site administrators, educators and volunteers, parents, and attending children all provided data. Mentors kept a reflective journal of their site visits and attended a focus group with researchers at the conclusion of the intervention. The reflective journals and focus groups with mentors detailed their experiences across the sites. Participating educators were interviewed before and after the intervention regarding their knowledge and practice fostering children's SED. Educators were also invited to document child observations and to plan for children's SED using indicators selected from relevant national curriculum and *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF)* (Department of Education and Training, 2009). Educators recruited parents to complete before and after intervention surveys about their child's SED and EC experiences. Table 1 lists the participant numbers and data collected at each site.

Data Analysis

Case study data analysis (Ylikoski & Zahle, 2019) was used to capture the variations across the four research sites. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis (Belotto, 2018). Educators' child observations and action plans were assessed against 5 of 13 possible evidence indicators specified for the *EYLF* Outcome 3.1, "children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing" (Department of Education and Training, 2009, p. 34). The indicators were chosen by researchers as observable behaviors within the EC settings. Parent surveys from each site were analyzed using descriptive statistics alongside qualitative themes identified from parent comments.

Research Site Contexts and Descriptions

To provide context across each of the diverse EC settings, the following descriptions were compiled by researchers using publicly available information about the sites' education and care settings and data collected from participating educators, volunteers, and families via interviews and surveys.

Metro Long Day Childcare Center

The Metro Long Day Childcare Center is the only one of the four participating sites subject to nationally regulated accreditation standards, and is licensed to provide care for up to 110 children. Open Monday to Friday from 6.30 a.m. to 6.30 p.m., the purpose designed building has spaces catering to infants (up to two years old), toddlers (2–3 years old), and preschoolers (3–5 years old), with all spaces opening onto an internal courtyard with outdoor garden and play equipment. Staff turnover was relatively low, and the staff were well qualified. All staff were members of diverse language communities. Of the 12 participating educators, 7 held ECE diplomas, 2 held ECE certificates, 2 possessed a Bachelor of ECE, and 1 had a Master of Teaching (ECE) degree. Of the

Table 1 Participant and data collection summary

Site/participants	Metro Long Day Childcare Center	Galeford Community Creche	Esseldon Community Creche	Peppermint Hill Family Hub Creche	Data collected
Staff	12 educators	4 educators	4 educators	3 volunteers	Pre & post interviews & child observations
Parents	9	4	13	9	Pre & post surveys
Children	2	8	10	11	Educators' observations of children
Site mentors	1	1	1	1	Reflective site mentoring journals & focus groups
Service administrators				5	Focus groups
Total participants	24	17	28	29	97 (3 mentors across 4 sites)

total, seven educators had worked at the site for more than seven years, two for four to six years and two for less than three years, with four working part time and eight working full time. Initial interviews involved four baby room educators, two from the toddler room, and five from the preschool room. The center's Curriculum Coordinator also participated. We conducted second interviews with eight of the staff. Of the parents of the four to five year old children, nine answered the initial survey. The second parent survey was not conducted due to educator time limitations. Metro Long Day Childcare Center educators did not contribute child observation and planning data for this research, as these activities already formed part of routine site practice to which limited time was allocated across the week.

Galeford Community Creche

Galeford Community Creche opens for 4.5 hour morning sessions, three days a week, in the grounds of a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college. The space comprises a small lounge, an office, a kitchen area, and a large indoor communal room opening onto a paved and roofed outdoor area, extending into a garden and sandpit. Up to 30 children aged seven months to 5 years, attend in the shared space while their parents attend English classes. The children come from varying cultural communities originating in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The five temporary creche staff shared the home languages of some attending children. Of the four participating staff, two had ECE certificates, one had an ECE diploma, and the site leader had a bachelor's degree in an applied health science.

The site leader participated in both the initial and concluding educator interviews, while another three educators also provided a concluding interview. Of the parents using this creche, four completed surveys before and after the visits. There were 12 child observations made of 8 children, comprising 6 observations involving a single child and 3 observations of each of 2 children. Prior to the mentor visits, there were four observations, and eight after the mentor visits. Of these, two were second observations of children, and another two were third observations of the same two children.

Esseldon Community Creche

Esseldon Community Creche employs 17 temporary hourly hire staff and operates for 4.5 h Monday to Friday mornings in the grounds of a TAFE college. It comprises two offices, with separate rooms for babies, toddlers, and preschool children. The preschool room extends to a small concrete outdoor space with some plastic play equipment, but no garden. Up to 143 children, aged from 4 months to 4 years and six months, attend while their parents join TAFE classes.

Children's languages are drawn from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The creche staff shared some of the children's home languages.

We conducted initial interviews with four educators, with three also participating in a second interview. The fourth educator was no longer available for the second interview. Of the educators, two had an ECE certificate. Of these, one was a team leader with 14 years' experience at the site and the other, with ten years of experience at the site, worked in the toddler room. The third educator, who worked in the baby room, had an ECE diploma and a Bachelor of Human Development. She had been at the site for three years. The fourth educator, who worked in the preschool room, did not have relevant formal qualifications. Of the parents, 13 provided commencing surveys and 5 provided concluding surveys, while 10 children were subjects of 18 child observations comprising 10 initial observations and 8 observations after mentor visits concluded.

Peppermint Hill Family Hub Creche

Peppermint Hill Family Hub Creche is located alongside a primary school and a formal EC center. The Family Hub site comprises a large central area, furnished at the edges with play spaces and seating configurations, shared by a range of community organizations delivering family support services. Staff share an open plan office adjacent to the central space. On the three other sides are a series of rooms configured for meetings and creche services. Outdoor play spaces include a small, paved courtyard area, sandpit, and plastic climbing infrastructure for very young children. These were not accessible during the research period.

Each Thursday morning during school terms, two hour creche sessions provided care for up to 16 preschool aged children of Afghan women attending a cultural support group run by the Australian Refugee Association. Sessions were supervised by three volunteers in a room stocked with toys and books. A researcher attended and observed the Family Hub creche during fortnightly mentor visits.

Initial interviews were conducted with three creche volunteers. Prior to migrating to Australia, one creche volunteer had qualified and worked as a primary school educator. Another had worked as a qualified healthcare professional until retirement and had since volunteered in schools and children's support services. The third volunteer brought experience from caring for her own children and grandchildren and volunteering in family services connected to her religious community. Scheduling problems disrupted opportunities for concluding interviews with creche volunteers. Instead, a focus group involving the Family Hub Manager and administrative staff reflected on the intervention and opportunities for service improvement.

Parent information sheets, consent forms, and surveys were translated into Farsi and Dari. Initial surveys were completed by 11 parents, who also consented for their children to be observed. Due to disruptions arising from regime change in Afghanistan in 2021, parents did not complete second surveys. However, six child observations, without the planning component, were documented by the researcher and site mentor, as creche volunteers were fully engaged in supervising the children.

Site Summary Overview

Resources varied widely across the four locations. The Metro Long Day Childcare site was the best resourced, with more qualified staff in continuing employment with ongoing access to professional learning opportunities, curriculum planning time, and purpose designed physical spaces for children. The least regulated sites located community creche services in available spaces, with temporary staff or volunteers, fewer play spaces and sparse resources. These staff did not have paid structured opportunities for professional learning or planning for children. Some staff, at all but the least resourced Peppermint Hill site, were able to speak some home languages shared by the children.

Findings and Discussion

The current research analyzed the outcomes of a codesigned professional learning program to foster multilingual, birth to five year old children's SED, as delivered to EC staff and volunteers across a 16 week period in four diverse EC settings. Four key themes emerged from the analysis. First, flexible alignment with site conditions and children's needs is imperative when implementing SED learning strategies. Second, the engagement of multilingual children can be enhanced by using physical resources such as Kimochis to enable their development of a vocabulary of emotions. A third theme highlighted the professional learning benefits of focusing on children's SED over time. A fourth theme identified parents' preferences for communication about their children's SED. Data supporting these themes are presented below.

Theme 1: Flexibility When Implementing SED Strategies in Professional Learning Mentoring

The data highlighted the importance of flexibility when implementing the professional learning program, in particular adapting SED learning activities to EC contexts. Mentors' reflective journals and focus group data emphasized the importance of adapting workshops and training to children's needs. Despite the varying types of EC services, all children

need to feel secure and supported as they transition from their parents' care.

There was no consistency across the different sites in terms of structures, staff knowledge, and mindset ... but what was consistent were the needs of the children ... navigating attachment from mum into the care of workers, consistency of needing to be entertained and played with, consistency of needing a person to help them through these processes. (Jeremy, Workshop Mentor)

The mentors who were visiting sites noted that child initiated engagement in SED activities presents different challenges in EC settings than in primary school classrooms, where children of similar age and development can share an activity. Across all participating sites, the mentors needed to adapt activities to the less structured, mixed age, and play based environments of EC settings.

I had started thinking I could write a lesson program for each site and run these consistently across sites, but that wasn't the case. I had to adapt to the staff and children I was working with at each site, because the knowledge base, children, families and backgrounds were all different. (Jenny, Site Mentor, Esseldon Creche, Galeford Creche and Metro Childcare Center)

Lesson plans were mapped for each week, but mostly didn't occur. I moved to working individually or in small groups with kids—using Kimochis and talking through feelings and playing games. There were language barriers. Some had great English, but others struggled to communicate in English. (Greg, Site Mentor, Peppermint Hill Creche)

Codesigning professional learning activities with site leadership and staff is consistent with the Reggio Emilia principle that children and educators are both competent partners in activity development (Rinaldi, 2006). This collaboration extended to all aspects of the activities offered to children, as well as organizational matters. For example, mentors' professional learning visits were timed to ensure that activities did not clash with routines that would otherwise demand educator attention.

Theme 2: Engaging Multilingual Children Using Physical Resources

Educator and volunteer interviews and parent survey data indicated that children from birth to five years with home languages other than English can benefit from a SED program. The benefit type depended on the child's age and ability to express themselves in English. However, most toddlers, and older children who were not proficient in

English, could directly engage with English language stories involving the plush Kimochis characters.

I think those bigger soft toys, they can be good like a comforter [for babies], but not because they are representing certain emotions, just as a sensory thing that is making them feel good when they hold it. (Leika, Metro Childcare Centre Educator)

Most toddlers and preschool children who were acquiring English as an additional language were still able to connect with the tactile and visual pleasure of the plush toys while observing the facial expressions of emotions.

There's a boy who's very fascinated with the octopus so when he comes here, he just stands in a place and ... picks the book and shows that octopus. And after that his mood ... changes because he holds the octopus. [Hugtopus Kimochi], (Amy, Galeford Creche Educator)

There was a child having a tricky day, crying and crying. A child picked up Bug [Kimochi] and brought Bug to the crying child in an effort to help ... the girl said she offered Bug "because I am kind, and he is friendly." We have been talking about kindness and friendliness and Bug, so they remembered. (Jenny, Site Mentor, Esseldon Creche, Galeford Creche and Metro Childcare Center)

English vocabulary activities focused on expressing feelings supported children's learning of new English language words to communicate their feelings.

The introduction of an English word for a face meaning and body language meaning was a really important part for the younger children. For children with diverse languages, craft activities and drawing pictures were used to replace discussion—doing practical activity rather than talking. (Jenny, Site Mentor, Esseldon Creche, Galeford Creche and Metro Childcare Center)

Using physical toys supported children's SED across age ranges by enabling them to express and connect with feelings and emotions.

We have placed a few of the different emotions all around the room ... it is at their eye level ... emotional vocabulary has obviously increased. Because that's what we wanted at the end ... children to start talking more about emotions. (Sunny, Educator, Metro Childcare Center)

You can see their face brighten up straight away when they see those cute little toys. (Belle, Esseldon Educator)

The visual and tactile elements of physical SED resources supported active engagement by children across the age range, and with varying knowledge of English. This aligns with Reed and Lee's (2020) finding that physical, sense stimulating resources promote engagement and oral literacy learning in the early years.

Theme 3: Benefits of Professional Learning for Children's SED Over Time

The data indicated that professional learning visits over an extended time are likely to build educators' and volunteers' capacity to implement an SED program. Although educators and volunteers had a range of strategies to calm distressed children and support their wellbeing, professional learning visits over 16 weeks and training in using resources such as Kimochis extended educators' knowledge of SED. They reported feeling more prepared to help children from various language backgrounds identify their feelings, learn words to name their feelings, and develop skills in understanding their own and others' feelings.

I have learned through my training how to use the Kimochis to safely explore the toddlers' emotions. (Belle, Esseldon Creche Educator)

More specifically, some educators identified a significant shift in their practice from responding to distress with distraction, to helping the child express their emotions.

I used to like trying to calm them down and distract them from what caused them to be upset or angry or whatever, but now I realize that, even if I get them to forget about it for a couple of hours here, they are going to go back to it if the reason behind that still exists at home. I started to realize that we should investigate about it, rather than trying to hide it ... sometimes the child doesn't respond, but I started to realize that they listen. (Daisy, Galeford Creche Educator)

Likewise, educators reported increased understanding of children's social and emotional expressions arising from focusing on SED over time.

I do notice more things now. I recognize some behavior where children need some support. (Merry, Metro Childcare Center Educator)

Child observation and planning data provided insights into individual children's SED, prompting educators to assess and plan for their SED learning. Observation based planning was routine practice at Metro Long Day Childcare Center, but new to the informal EC settings. At Peppermint Hill Creche the researcher concluded mentor sessions with shared conversations documenting the site mentor's and carers' observations of participating children and planning ideas

using the child observation template (modelled in Table 2). At Galeford and Esseldon Creches, analysis showed the educators’ documented child observations became more focused on children’s SED over time, and educators’ planning for children’s SED showed increasing understanding of the process. Table 2 provides an example of three observations and plans relating to Julie, a child at Galeford Creche.

Site based professional learning over 16 weeks allowed educators, volunteers, and children to develop relationships with mentors and to practice SED activities between mentor visits. The mentor visits helped educators and volunteer carers to learn ways to help children communicate their feelings using Kimochis.

The first time I showed staff the curriculum, there was a feeling, “Oh no, this will be too much for us.” Incrementally over time, a great trusting relationship was built. (Jenny, Site Mentor, Esseldon Creche, Galeford Creche and Metro Childcare Center)

Site visits were timed for the convenience of staff. Educators and volunteers who did not wish to participate in the research were still exposed to the professional learning opportunities, so they could absorb the training without contributing to the data.

More opportunities to watch me play and solve problems with children is important to using Kimochis ... Things grew quicker with playful relationship building time. The amount of time was good at two hours a fort-

night ... despite the frustration and challenge, being present where the children are was really successful. [The professional learning process needed] a body [another person] in the room building relationships to support staff to support the children. Caring for educators is important to caring for the child. (Jenny, Site Mentor, Esseldon Creche, Galeford Creche and Metro Childcare Centre)

Although some educators and volunteers expressed initial hesitancy about their own capacity to participate in the SED program, over time they embraced the benefits of an SED focus for them and the children in their care. Drawing upon Reggio Emilia principles (Rinaldi, 2006), professional learning is a right and duty for those working with young children, yet the research revealed that temporary creche educators and volunteers had no employer-funded access to ongoing professional learning. Creche educators appreciated and valued the professional learning offered, finding time to gather observations, reflect, and plan as part of their daily activity.

Theme 4: Educators’ Communication of SED Strategies to Parents

Across all sites, parents expressed interest in learning more about fostering their children’s SED. Survey data indicated that parents welcomed all forms of communication; however, multilingual parents said they preferred to

Table 2 Child observations and planning example

Child	Julie (age: 4½ years at observation 1; 5 years at observation 3)						
EYLF outcome	3.1 Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing						
Selected indicators	1. Demonstrates trust and confidence 2. Increasingly co-operates and works collaboratively with others 3. Makes choices, accepts challenges, takes considered risks, manages change, and copes with frustrations and the unexpected 4. Shows an increasing capacity to understand, self-regulate, and manage their emotions in ways that reflect the feelings and needs of others 5. Experiences and shares personal successes in learning and initiates opportunities for new learning in their home or community languages or Standard Australian English. NY (Not Yet Evident) E (Emerging) Y (Yes Evident)						
Observation no.	Observation text	Selected EYLF 3.1 indicators			Planning notes		
		1	2	3	4	5	
1 Pre-mentoring	Julie wanted a toy being used by another child. After her request for the toy was rejected, she picked a flower and exchanged this for the toy.	NY	E	E	NY	E	Encourage sharing
2 Post-mentoring	Julie was concerned about a crying child and offered him a “feeling happy” Kimochis pillow with a big smile	Y	Y	E	E	Y	Play “happy hide and seek”—children hide and when found join hands to form a happy child chain
3 Post-mentoring	Julie was the last child to be collected after her two friends left. She cried and said her mum was always late. Julie picked up the “left out” feeling from the Kimochis.	Y	Y	Y	E	Y	Play “hide and seek” until Mum arrives.

receive information about their children's SED in person from a staff member who was familiar with their child and could speak one of their home or community languages.

Parent surveys indicated that, without shared language at childcare, children sometimes struggled to adjust and calm themselves.

I like how they take care of my child and they have some who can speak my language [Swahili]. (Peppermint Hill Creche Parent)

Participating parents at the Peppermint Hill Creche emphasized their need for respite from child rearing duties for them to make social connections and access public information, while also appreciating how carers acknowledged their child's emotions.

My daughter is one year and three months old and whenever she cries the workers always bring her to me ... When I take her to a different childcare, they don't bring her to me, they try to keep her busy. But when I bring her here, they quickly bring her to me, they don't try to keep her busy. (Peppermint Hill Creche Parent A)

Likewise, parents noted that their children's self-regulation improved after the mentor visits, providing evidence of educators' implementation of SED strategies. Parents felt their children would likely be better able to cope with going to school.

My child was not happy to stay in creche before, but now she is happy to play there. I think the creche staff interaction with children has improved. (Peppermint Hill Creche Parent B)

My son has better experience in group and [is] ready for kindergarten. (Peppermint Hill Creche Parent C)

This theme highlighted that parents wanted to be able to discuss their children's experiences with educators and to know more about the resources their children were using to understand their own and others' emotions.

The employment of staff who shared some families' home or community languages enabled children's participation in the learning program of the site, which was central to the creation of a learning community (Rinaldi, 2006). Parents, already generally happy with their children's experiences of care, noticed positive changes in their children's enjoyment and abilities to calm themselves, and expressed interest in learning more about strategies to support their child's SED at home. Parents preferred to learn by speaking with educators and volunteers who shared their community language and were familiar with their children.

Conclusion

The current research project identified circumstances under which staff from diverse types of EC services were successfully engaged in professional learning, fostering young, multilingual children's SED, increasing their knowledge of children's SED, and utilizing SED physical resources such as Kimochis. The data indicated that the themes contributing to the project's success included: 1] flexibility when implementing SED strategies in professional learning mentoring; 2] engaging multilingual children using physical resources; 3] benefits of professional learning for children's SED over time and 4] educators' communication of SED strategies to parents.

The Reggio Emilia notion of children as competent learners emphasizes the importance of educators attending to and talking with young children about their emotions, a key language through which children communicate in their world (Rinaldi, 2006, 2013). In these sites, educators and volunteers were already responsive to children's emotions; however, through the professional learning they found new ways to extend children's emotional literacies, developing additional strategies to foster children's awareness of their own and others' emotions. The sustained focus on SED, supported by educators' observations of children, provided a strong basis for educators to incorporate SED into their planning for children's learning.

Educators and volunteers welcomed sustained professional learning opportunities, trusted mentors, and valued time to practice the strategies learned, including documenting children's SED and planning activities. The extended engagement strategy for professional learning onsite aligned with McInnes et al.'s (2017) research evidencing its efficacy in embedding sustained shifts in practice. Codesign engagement with staff validated findings from McInnes et al. (2017) and Rigney et al. (2020) regarding the benefits of supporting active staff involvement in their professional learning. The professional learning demonstrated the value of staff learning strategies to foster children's SED across diverse environments. The findings of this project also highlight the need for all EC services to have the capacity via professional learning to meaningfully support children's emotional wellbeing, regardless of the different regulatory requirements. Furthermore, the quality of the learning environment matters (Malaguzzi, cited in Rinaldi, 2013), irrespective of such requirements. As short term EC services, the creche settings often serviced by volunteers and educators were not consistently purpose designed to acceptable national standards, but they filled the community's need for childcare while parents attended various classes. Additionally, the current research findings were congruent with studies

by Clarke et al. (2021) and Yamauchi et al. (2022) that intentional focus on emotional literacy, SED, and ongoing professional learning enables sustained EC practices fostering the SED of birth to five year old children, particularly with children whose home language does not align with the language predominantly used in their EC settings.

In conclusion, this Australian study adds to professional learning literature by using codesign to support adaptive, ongoing professional learning strategies across diverse formal and informal EC settings to boost multilingual children's SED.

Appendix 1



Kimochis kits are a social and emotional learning resource for children from birth to eight years (see <https://www.kimochis.com>). The kits comprise an educator curriculum, a selection of plush toys associated with emotional characteristics, a “mixed bag of feelings,” and stories in which the toys recount common childhood experiences. The “mixed bag of feelings” pillows with facial expressions and matching words can be selected and tucked into pockets on the plush toys. Kimochis help children identify their own and others' emotions.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest No authors financially benefited from the research outside their usual employment remuneration

Ethical Approval The research protocol 202855 was approved by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee

Informed Consent All participants provided informed consent.

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