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Title:

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Date:

2025-12-01

Citation:

Baker, L. M., Raban, B. & Oades, L. G. (2025). What does 'wellbeing' mean? A content analysis of early childhood education pedagogy and practice documents in Australia. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 24 (3), pp.391-407. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-025-09396-9>.

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What does ‘wellbeing’ mean? A content analysis of early childhood education pedagogy and practice documents in Australia

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Received: 1 September 2023 / Accepted: 13 May 2025 / Published online: 16 June 2025
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Abstract

Wellbeing is explicitly mentioned in the United Nations Rights of the Child, and governments, humanitarian organisations, scientific and educational research internationally call for a focus on child wellbeing in the early years. Early childhood education policies, pedagogy and practice reflect this call, with curriculum frameworks, regulations and documents around the world having ‘wellbeing’ outcomes and foci. However, the concept of wellbeing is complex, intangible and multifaceted. It is important to understand how the term wellbeing is presented in key policy and pedagogical documents used by early childhood professionals as this discourse informs educational practice. A qualitative summative content analysis of key documents impacting early education practice in Australia was undertaken with the key question of understanding how the term wellbeing is defined, described and used. Results show usage of the term wellbeing is multifold and disparate, and definitions are rare and lacking contemporary perspectives. Questions arise about practice and/or policy implications that result from ‘wellbeing’ positioned as a Learning Outcome in the Australian Early Childhood Learning Framework V2.0. These findings and questions are important for early childhood education professionals and policy makers as they meet increased global imperatives to support child wellbeing in early education contexts. Discourse between education, government bodies and wellbeing science is encouraged to inform and expand current pedagogy, policy and practice in early childhood education in Australia and internationally.

Keywords Child wellbeing · Wellbeing definitions · Early childhood education · Content analysis · Learning Outcome · Pedagogy

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1 Introduction to child wellbeing

‘Wellbeing’ is a complex, intangible and multifaceted construct frequenting conversation and literature, but whose definition is unresolved, contested, inconsistent and changeable (Dodge et al., 2012; Marbina et al., 2015; Pollard & Lee, 2003). The modifier of ‘childhood’ adds complexity via the distinct experience of childhood, and children’s physical, neurological and psychological development (Jones & Sumner, 2009). Rapid change and developmental trajectories and differing social and cultural constructions of childhood also make wellbeing definition and assessment complicated (Marbina et al., 2015). Moreover, the impacts of contextual expectations, opportunities and limits on children’s development and learning, along with children’s relative vulnerability, compounds the difficulty of defining wellbeing (Barblett & Maloney, 2010; Jones & Sumner, 2009; White, 2008).

Despite this complexity, wellbeing definitions, interpretations, indicators, dimensions and measures, some focused specifically on children, can be found in important and influential global reports, policies and frameworks. These include the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Health Promotion Glossary (2021) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) ‘Well-being Framework’ (2020) who describe wellbeing as a positive state influenced by multiple factors and dimensions such as socioeconomics, environmental, materiality and quality of life. Specifically, regarding child wellbeing, UNICEF’s Innocenti report ‘Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries’ provides a multilevel child wellbeing framework illustrating it ecologically, radiating out from child outcomes through activities, relationships, networks, resources, policies and context (Gromada et al., 2020). UNICEF and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ACARY) have collaborated to produce an Australian Children’s Wellbeing Index ‘The Next’ of six interlinked domains—valued, loved, and safe; material basics; healthy; learning; participating and positive sense of identity and culture (Noble et al., 2021). In Australia, the National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy describes a wellbeing continuum for children (from well, coping and struggling to unwell; National Mental Health Commission, 2021). As these examples highlight, definitions in policy and literature tend to be extensional (listing particular characteristics or factors leading to wellbeing) rather than intentional (indicating internal content or a formal definition). However, there is some consensus in that definitions and conceptions of child wellbeing have a shared understanding it is multidimensional, considers objective and subjective quality of life perspectives as well as physical and emotional/mental measures, and pays attention to culture, gender, age and other personal characteristics, including strengths and deficiencies and the child’s own views (Ben-Arieh, 2014; Lippman et al., 2011; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Statham & Chase, 2010).

Even given these various offerings and complexity, we argue it is important to understand how the term wellbeing is described, defined and used in specific contexts as these perceptions and parameters impact not only our view of children, but the way we engage with, make policy for and educate them. This study is particularly interested in child wellbeing conception in early education contexts.

1.1 The context of child wellbeing discourse and descriptions in pedagogy

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1990 (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) sparked a new image and discourse about children as holders of rights and

full participants in society (Casas, 1997) and remains a guiding document for early childhood pedagogy. Explicit in the Convention are children's access to education and protection of their wellbeing (Engdahl, 2019). Global, intergovernmental and humanitarian organisations and policies; neuroscientific, psychological, health and wellbeing sciences have also called for a focus on flourishing for children. An impetus to understand the impact of early education experiences and facilitate the systems and processes by which children experience optimal education and wellbeing followed (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; OECD, 2017; Shonkoff, 2010; UNICEF Office of Research, 2013). In the new millennium, global and cross-disciplinary conversations and understanding of 'what happens early matters' increased. Evidence mounted that quality early education is beneficial for children's learning, development and wellbeing in their early years, and also positively predicts health, wellbeing, educational attainment and employment into adulthood (CDC, 2009; OECD, 2017; Shonkoff, 2010; Shuey & Kankarašm, 2018). Governments around the developed world responded with educational policy, and early education strategies and curricula underwent review in several countries. Explicit 'wellbeing' inclusions were introduced in the United Kingdom, USA, Australia, New Zealand, China, Columbia, Denmark, Portugal (Baker et al., 2017; Brogaard-Clausen et al., 2022; Shuey & Kankarašm, 2018). Most recently the COVID-19 pandemic made apparent the need for coordinated child wellbeing policy and curricula (Dirwan & Thévenon, 2023), further highlighting the importance of understanding 'what does wellbeing mean?' and how the term is positioned and used in education policy and documents.

It is in this context—and those of continued neuroscientific advances, increased understanding of the impact of early childhood experiences and education, and the broadening and complex waves of wellbeing science research (Lomas et al., 2021)—that this study argues an examination of the concept of wellbeing in education discourse is timely and important. Specifically, this paper is interested in the Australian context. Australian is an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UN member, and country who has released its first National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (National Mental Health Commission, 2021), National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018), and most recently 'The Early Years Strategy 2024–2034, outlining the national government's priorities for child centred policy and investment across the next decade (Department of Social Services, 2024). In this policy climate, a focus on child wellbeing and related pedagogical practice is evident.

2 The current study: What does 'wellbeing' mean?

In Australia, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are delivered for children prior to compulsory school age (from birth to 5 years), subsidised by the Australian government. ECEC is guided by the National Quality Framework (NQF) and administered by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) under relevant regulations, laws and frameworks. In a culturally diverse and organisationally complex system, ECEC is offered through a mixed market model including private, for profit, not-for-profit, community-based and government providers. Three primary delivery settings include centre-based long day care (for children aged 0–5 attending on average 30 h per week), sessional preschool (part-time attendance for children aged 3–5 years) or home based care (for children aged 0–5 years, mostly full days; [Understanding ECEC \(thefrontproject.org.au\)](https://www.thefrontproject.org.au)). These programmes are run by teachers and educators with a variety of roles

and education qualifications from trainee, certificate, diploma, bachelor and/or master's degrees, all of whom are mandated to enact ACECQA's approved educational framework/s (Grieshaber & Graham, 2017). Recent government reports that include census data from Australia's broad socio-economic advantaged and disadvantaged population, reporting 48.3% of children aged 0–5 years attending a government subsidised approved child care service and over 337,000 4–5 year old children enrolled in preschool programmes in remote, regional and metro settings across the country (March quarter 2022 report—Department of Education, Australian Government).

Wellbeing is positioned strongly within the Australian ECEC policy and pedagogical documents. A key objective of Australia's National Quality Framework (NQF) is to ensure the 'safety, health and wellbeing of children' (ACECQA, 2023, p. 9) and in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), a specific Learning Outcome for children aged birth to 5 years is 'Children have a strong sense of wellbeing' (AGDE, 2022, p. 44). Additionally, a suite of documents and regulations within the NQF provide ECEC professionals with theories, definitions, pedagogies, principles, practices, outcomes, policies, assessments, ratings, operational requirements, compliance, approvals and the like (ACECQA, 2023). These documents impact, mandate and guide the daily pedagogical practices of ECEC professionals across the nation. How the term 'wellbeing' is defined, described and used within these documents and policies, and what impact this has for ECEC policy and practice, is therefore the key interest of this study, guided by the research question: *How is the concept of wellbeing defined, described and/or used in key documents impacting Australian early childhood education pedagogy and practice?*

3 Methods

3.1 Data acquisition and sample

Data for this study were retrieved from publicly available content, primarily government websites, particularly ACECQA as the authority who resources and guides Australian ECEC services, professionals, management bodies, governments and stakeholders (<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/>). To select a preliminary data set, and for purposes of credibility, aspects questioned of the available documents were [adapted from Cardno (2018)]:

1. Document purpose and location (Is this document accessible, important and relevant to ECEC professional's practice?)
2. Authorship and intended audience (Who wrote this? Who was it written for?)
3. Document context and intended use (What is the document's purpose?)
4. Document text (What are the key elements; are they associated with national legal or regulatory requirements, procedure or guidance for ECEC practice?)
5. Document consequences (Does this document inform or impact ECEC pedagogy or practice and/or have wellbeing implication/content?)

As a result, 21 data sets were initially identified including law, pedagogical guides, curriculum frameworks, assessment tools, policies, standards and information sheets. This sample was then reduced with repeated interrogation of questions 1 and 2 regarding context and intended use, target and consequences. This reduced sample of 9 documents/sets excluded items such as rating scales and literature reviews (state-specific), Educational

Leader resources, educator posters and Transition to School Kit. The final documents were included as they subjectively qualified as both 'everyday' documents (that ECEC professionals would refer to in normal pedagogical practice and where information and assumptions about wellbeing may be present, e.g. the national curriculum framework) and 'high impact/background' documents (those perhaps not referred to inform routine pedagogy, but vital, impactful and available to the ECEC profession, e.g. the National Regulations and Law). Acknowledging the limitation of the subjective selection, the final documents analysed, subjectively listed in order from 'high impact/background' to 'everyday', were:

- UN convention on the rights of the child
- Child Wellbeing and Safety Act
- Education and Care Services National Law Act
- Education and Care services National Regulations
- Guide to the National Quality Framework
- The National Quality Standard
- The EYLF for Australia V2.0
- Educators' Guide to the EYLF for Australia
- ACECQA information sheets

3.2 Data analysis

Qualitative summative content analysis was conducted on the documents to assess the way the term 'wellbeing' is used and conceptualised across the whole data set. Content analysis can be used on all types of texts, qualitatively and quantitatively, and enables reduction of the volume of text, grouping of categories, an understanding of the data sought, and interpretations to be drawn. Although the use of preconceived categories, codes or keywords are generally avoided in conventional content analysis (CA), the qualitative, summative CA method of Hsieh and Shannon (2005) suggests that keywords or codes be derived from the interest of the researchers (with reflexivity paramount) and keyword nomination occurring prior to the data analysis. As this study sought to explore the explicit use of the word 'wellbeing', the word 'wellbeing' was therefore used as the single predetermined key word/code. In summative CA, keywords (rather than codes) are identified and quantified through searching for their occurrences within texts, for the ultimate purpose of understanding their contextual use. Moreover, despite the inherently reductive nature of CA, summative content analysis allows for text to be approached as single words in relation to the chosen content and an interpretation of the contextual meaning reached through an analysis of patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The specific steps taken for this article's analysis are now described.

First, in each of the documents, the explicit presence (or absence) of the word 'wellbeing' was determined as a manifest content analysis (describing what is visible and obvious in the text; Bengtsson, 2016). The *number of occurrences* of the word 'wellbeing' was recorded, with no further quantitative analysis. Explicit uses of the word 'wellbeing' were searched for manually in each document, with the first aim to ascertain if a *definition* of the term was provided (such as in a glossary).

Second, condensation of text around explicit mentions of 'wellbeing' in each document was undertaken, and *categories* formed and applied. Latent content analysis (seeking to find underlying meaning; Bengtsson, 2016) was conducted for interpretation of

how each individual document *described* or *used* the word ‘wellbeing’. Euphemisms or synonyms were not searched for.

Finally, *themes* were derived through latent analysis (where this latent content was found in two or more categories; Bengtsson, 2016) to express the underlying meaning of the usage of the word wellbeing in each document and across the data set.

The creation of and adherence to this specific analytic procedure was important for credibility and dependability of the summative content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The purpose of CA is to organise and elicit meaning from the data collected and draw realistic conclusions in a way that, congruent with a qualitative approach, demonstrates trustworthiness, i.e. is credible, dependable, transferable and confirmable (Bengtsson, 2016; Polit & Beck, 2006). Primary data analysis was conducted by the first author, and threats to trustworthiness, such as coder fatigue in manifest content analysis and subjectivity in regard to latent content analysis, were mitigated with several strategies including allowing sufficient time for analysis, a detailed audit trail, reflective journal and description of methods, and frequent peer debriefings (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

4 Results

Following the steps of the summative CA, many categories were formed from condensation of text around the word ‘wellbeing’. These categories offer an interpretation of how the term is used and described across the whole data set—*basic needs; comfort; connected to play; connectedness; development; dispositions; education; emotional wellbeing; families; family connection; happiness and satisfaction; health and physical wellbeing; health; hygiene; inclusion, learning and wellbeing; learning and development outcomes; learning and wellbeing; learning, development and wellbeing; mental health; outcome; partnership with families; physical needs; protection; resilience; risk and protection; risk assessment; risk; safety, health and wellbeing; safety; security and clarity; sense of wellbeing; social functioning; social relationships; tenderness and affection; wellbeing and comfort; wellbeing, development and learning; wellbeing, motivation and engagement*. Where categories occurred across two or more documents (for example, found in both the National Regulations and the Quality Standard), these were deemed to be themes for how ‘wellbeing’ is being used and described across the data set. The resultant themes present in each document are in the description of each document below:

4.1 UN convention on the rights of the child

The UNCRC is internationally recognised and influential, guiding document in ECEC (Engdahl, 2019). It specifically mentions ‘wellbeing’ (‘well-being’) six times, with no definition provided. ‘Wellbeing’ is used primarily in regard to care, safety and social mechanisms and with condensation of text around phrases of protection and family, for example ‘such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being’ (United Nations, 1989, p. 2). Derived themes present were *family, protection* and *risk* (Table 1).

Table 1 Themes found in Australian ECEC documents expressing underlying meanings of ‘wellbeing’

Document/s	Risk	Protection	Safety	Health	Hygiene	Family	Development	Comfort	Learning	Outcome	Physical	Resilience	Connection
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	■	■				■							
Child Wellbeing and Safety Act		■	■	■		■	■						
Education And Care Services National Law Act	■	■	■	■									
Education and Care services National Regulations	■	■	■	■	■		■		■				
Guide to the National Quality Framework	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				
The National Quality Standard						■	■	■	■	■			
Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework V2.0									■	■	■	■	
Educators’ Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia						■			■	■		■	■
ACECQA information sheets	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■		■	■	■
Frequency of occurrence (percentage of documents expressing this theme)	50	60	50	50	30	60	40	30	60	30	20	30	20

4.2 Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (authorised version no. 038)

The main purpose of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act is to establish, promote and improve child wellbeing outcomes. No explicit definition of wellbeing occurs in the document and the term ‘wellbeing’ is used 224 times, most consistently in conjunction with safety. For example, *Principles for children* mentions the promotion and protection of children’s ‘safety, health, development, education and wellbeing’ (p. 18). Themes appearing were *health, safety, development, families* and *protection* (Table 1).

4.3 Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 (Cth)

Two hundred and ninety-six pages of National Law outline provisions for the adoption of national law, approvals, assessments and ratings, compliance, enforcement, monitoring, records and privacy, finance reporting, regulations, etc. ‘Wellbeing’ is used explicitly 14 times, with no definition. Listed under the objectives and guiding principles of the Law is ‘to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of children’ (*Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010* (Vic), s. 3 (2)(a)Austl.). An interpretation of the contextual meaning of ‘wellbeing’ can be made from patterns where usage of ‘wellbeing’ is

consistently condensed around ‘safety, health and wellbeing’. Themes thus evident are *risk, protection, safety and health* (Table 1).

4.4 Education and Care Services National Regulations (Cth)

The Regulations cover a broad range of areas impacting ECEC services in Australia. These include approvals, assessments, ratings, and operational requirements (including educational programme and practice). ‘Wellbeing’ is explicitly used 35 times across the 218-page accessed version, but without definition. A specific division of Health, safety and wellbeing of children is included (Chapter 4, Division 1, Part 4.2) covering areas of health, hygiene and safe food practices, sleep and rest, and tobacco, drug and alcohol-free environment. Themes found in the document were *risk, health, safety, protection, hygiene, development and learning* (Table 1).

4.5 Guide to the National Quality Framework

A 648-page document, the guide is provided by ACECQA to support ECEC professionals, providers, authorised officers and regulatory staff to understand the NQF. In this document, ‘wellbeing’ is used 215 times and is described in the glossary:

Sound wellbeing results from the satisfaction of basic needs including physical, social-emotional and mental health. Laevers (1994) suggests the need for tenderness and affection; security and clarity; social recognition; to feel competent; physical needs and for meaning in life. Wellbeing includes happiness and satisfaction, effective social functioning and the dispositions of optimism, openness, curiosity and resilience (AGDE, 2022, p. 69)

Questions aside about this glossary term qualifying as a ‘definition’, ‘description’ or simply a list of phenomena, the analysis of ‘wellbeing’ usage patterns derived a long list of categories. Moreover, ‘wellbeing’ was used in conjunction (via the word ‘and’) with 22 additional terms ranging from learning, development, engagement, care and belonging, to safety, comfort, welfare and self-confidence. The largest number of latent themes across the data set were evident, namely *risk, protection, safety, health, hygiene, family, development, comfort and learning* (Table 1).

4.6 National Quality Standard 2018

The National Quality Standard (NQS) comprises seven quality areas against which ECEC services are rated by their regulatory authority (<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard>). ‘Wellbeing’ is explicitly mentioned in three of the seven standards—Quality Area 1 (QA1) with the proposition of wellbeing as a Learning Outcome for children; QA2 in terms of children’s wellbeing and comfort; and QA6 in regard to collaboration with families. The meaning of ‘wellbeing’ is therefore inferred around the themes of *outcome, comfort, learning, development and family* (Table 1).

4.7 Belonging, being and becoming: the early years learning framework for Australia V2.0

The EYLF (V2.0, an update of the original version, released in 2022 and coming fully into effect in 2024) directly uses 'wellbeing' 112 times, including the glossary term (as above, but with the noted additional phase of wellbeing 'including physical, social-emotional and mental health' (AGDE, 2022, p. 69). As Australia's nationally approved learning framework for ECEC, it offers and explains 5 key Learning Outcomes for children, including 'Children have a strong sense of wellbeing' (AGDE, 2022, p. 44). This Learning Outcome is divided into three specific sub-outcomes—'Children become strong in their social, emotional and mental wellbeing'; 'Children become strong in their physical learning and wellbeing' and 'Children are aware of and develop strategies to support their own mental and physical health and personal safety' (AGDE, 2022, p. 45). The document offers many in-text descriptions of what 'wellbeing' provides and is integral to—from physical and mental health, nutrition, sleep and rest, feelings of happiness, satisfaction, successful social functioning, to confidence, optimism, learning, agency and exploratory drive. It also suggests what wellbeing is *correlated with* (resilience, success, achievement, executive function, belonging, becoming and learning), *affected by* (all experiences), *includes* (physical and psychological aspects) and *enables* (growth mindset and positive attitude to learning). In addition, it uses 'wellbeing' in terms of something that educators can *contribute to, monitor, support, assist, observe, attend to, build and promote*. Latent themes resulting around 'wellbeing' were *learning, outcome, physical and resilience* (Table 1). While this study did not have the specific focus of comparing the original EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) with the updated version (AGDE, 2022), it is interesting to note the explicit addition of the term 'mental health' in the document and glossary term, and the significantly increased usage of the term wellbeing (up from 34 times to 112). This resulted in 'mental health' emerging as a category in the EYLF V2, however given the lack of usage or condensation of this term in the text of other examined documents, 'mental health' did not surface as a theme across the whole data set.

4.8 Educators' guide to the early years learning framework for Australia

The Guide has the stated intention of supporting ECEC curriculum decision making (DEEWR, 2010). It includes the wellbeing glossary term (as above) and contains 43 direct mentions of 'wellbeing'. 'Wellbeing' usage is broad across the 150-page document, with many categories derived (learning and wellbeing; outcome; resilience; security and clarity; physical needs; basic needs; happiness and satisfaction; tenderness and affection; competence; social functioning; partnership with families; dispositions; connected to play; connectedness/connection). Themes interpreted (Table 1) from the analysis of patterns were *family, learning, outcome, resilience and connection*. Note that at the time of publication, although the EYLF itself has been updated, the Guide has not. ACECQA have provided a list of resources to support the implementation of the new EYLF V2.0 ([Approved learning frameworks | ACECQA](#)).

4.9 ACECQA information sheets

The ACECQA website has 39 information sheets with the stated intention of offering ECEC professional practical strategies to support quality practice ([Information sheets |](#)

ACECQA). 26 information sheets contain the word ‘wellbeing’. As a data set (rather than a single document) policy, pedagogy and practice areas covered are broad, revealing different categories of wellbeing dependent upon the topic of the information sheet. For example, *Inappropriate Discipline* sheet revealed categories of safety, health and risk, while *Toileting and Nappy Changing* sheet evidenced the hygiene category. No specific information sheet on wellbeing was available, despite this being a key outcome of the EYLF. Themes derived were *risk, protection, safety, health, hygiene, learning, resilience* and *connection* (see Table 1).

Following analysis of the entire data set (UNCRC, Acts, Regulations and Quality Standard, NQF, EYLF and guides, plus information sheets), multiple and disparate categories were derived. Latent content analysis allowed for a reduction of these categories into expressed themes, conveyed below in Table 1. Within Table 1, the presence of the derived themes within each document is indicated by a filled square. Where the theme was not evident within the document, the space within the column is blank.

5 Discussion

Following the analysis, two initial conclusions and one question are herewith offered for discussion, with suggested implications for ECEC policy, pedagogy and practice:

- multifold and disparate usage of the term ‘wellbeing’
- ‘wellbeing’ definitions are rare and lack contemporary perspectives
- What implications come from ‘wellbeing’ being viewed as a Learning Outcome?

5.1 Wellbeing usage is multifold and disparate

The term ‘wellbeing’ is used in a multitude of ways in the analysed documents with definitions being rare and extensional. Manifestly and latently, wellbeing is used and described (rather than defined) as many and varied concepts and domains—from risk, protection and safety; health, hygiene and comfort; family, connection and resilience; to learning, development, physical and health, and as an outcome. ‘Wellbeing’ usage is, in short, multifold and disparate. Patterns of usage do appear (see Table 1) whereby documents from law and regulation (such as the Acts and The Guide to the NQF) cluster around themes of *risk, protection, safety* and *health*, and pedagogical documents (the EYLF and guide) cluster around themes of *learning, outcomes* and *resilience*. However, there is minimal usage overlap, with multiple inferred meanings across the data set.

Inherent messages of child wellbeing as something that is externally focused—a state to be protected and secured by external forces—is evident in the law and regulatory documents. Child wellbeing as internal, a trait or outcome to be encouraged, is prevalent in documents for ECEC teachers and educators. The term ‘wellbeing’ is used as pedagogical process or idea (something for teachers to debate, or as an outcome) and a catch-all term or extender, added routinely to the end of phases (*safety, health and wellbeing; learning, development and wellbeing; belonging, connectedness and wellbeing*).

While multifold and disparate usage may not be surprising given the varied authors and nature of these documents, they are intended to target a similar audience (that of ECEC professionals). As discussed, literature concurs that wellbeing is a multifaceted, complex and debated construct and this is reflected in the multiple and broad themes found in the

documents. What does this mean for professionals in ECEC? Under the NQF, quality is assessed and rated against the National Quality Standards, and National Regulations must legally be adhered to and evidence that wellbeing is protected and taught (as a Learning Outcome) is required. While some of the documents and policies may appear to be in the 'background' of the realities of everyday practice and pedagogy (such as the National Law), they become immediately foregrounded and consequential during regulatory authorities' compliance, rating and assessment procedures (which are publicly reported online <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/>). If teachers, service providers and/or officers of the relevant state and territory regulatory authorities have different conceptualisations and expectations of wellbeing pedagogy and practice, based on the multifold usage across the documents, impacts for practice exist. ECEC professionals and authorities working in different contexts with philosophies and practice lenses that focus more on one area of discourse or documents (such as the Regulations and Safety Act that express themes of *risk*, *protection*, *safety* and *health*) may educate and operate in contrast to those that foreground the EYLF and its Guide (which speaks more to themes of learning, outcomes and resilience). While this is not inherently or automatically problematic, confusion and even conflict within workplaces and between ECEC professionals can occur as child wellbeing practices differ, adding extra burden on the already complex, demanding and emotionally exhausting roles in ECEC (Harrison et al., 2024).

While we in no way suggest ECEC professionals lack the competency to navigate complexity, the disparate usage of 'wellbeing', and the broad themes and descriptions that underly the documents, nonetheless has the potential to create confusion, ambiguity and complication. This is particularly relevant in the Australian ECEC sector where the workforce is mandated to address wellbeing policies and outcomes range in educational training, and resultant pedagogical capacities, from certificate or diploma qualifications through to bachelor's and master's degrees (Grieshaber & Graham, 2017). The EYLF V2 states 'Children's wellbeing can be affected by all their experiences within and outside their early childhood settings' (AGDE, 2022, p. 44) and this refers not only to the underlying themes and discourse around wellbeing, but how ECEC professionals interpret and enact these in pedagogy. ECEC services and providers could support policy, practices and professionals of varying capacities, within their unique contexts, and address potential conflict and confusion, by discussing the varying nature of wellbeing definitions/descriptions and articulating their own assumptions and resultant expectations about child wellbeing practices.

5.2 Wellbeing definitions are rare and lack contemporary perspectives

This analysis looked for descriptions and/or definitions of the term 'wellbeing' in the documents, but with few results. No definition of the concept was offered in the National law or Regulations, or the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (despite its specific remit of wellbeing). A singular description was offered across the data set by way of the glossary term in the EYLF and guides. As this paper's introduction submitted, definitions and descriptions of child wellbeing in literature and policy are more extensional than intentional. The EYLF glossary term is an example of this, being somewhat of a 'shopping list' of what wellbeing might *include* or *result* from. Further discussion across the EYLF V2.0 (2022) and Guide speaks to what wellbeing is *correlated with*, *includes*, *incorporates*, is *affected by*, how it can be *impacted*, *strengthened*, *debated*, *promoted* and *attended to*. The existence or defining constructs of wellbeing are inferred by its relationship to other phenomena rather than a clear definition in and of itself. Moreover, other prevalent themes in the document

landscape, such as *risk*, *protection*, *safety* and *health*, are not evident in the wellbeing glossary term description.

This description of wellbeing provided in the EYLF references Laevers (1994). Derived from papers presented at a conference on quality of early education, in Belgium in 1991, edited by Laevers, this is now a 30+ year old reference. A data lag can be considered the price paid for developing a global understanding of a concept such as wellbeing (UNICEF Office of Research, 2013), however early education in Australia in 2024, post pandemic, is a context and evidence-informed space far removed from Belgium mid-1990s. Connections to psychological and wellbeing constructs are evident (for example self-determination theory as satisfaction of basic needs; Deci & Ryan, 2008) and EYLF V2.0 has seen the inclusion of 'mental health' (as an opportunity to strengthen mental health promotion, Barblett et al., 2021), however Laevers appears to be the founding citation for the term 'wellbeing'.

Theoretical and pedagogical shifts have occurred in recent decades, including our understanding of early childhood, neuroscience and optimal development; an increased focus on indigenous ways of being and knowing, and vast growth in wellbeing science research (Kong et al., 2020; Lippman et al., 2011; Lomas et al., 2021). In this contemporary light, how relevant, complete or sound, for policy or pedagogical practice, is the basis of the EYLF V2.0 wellbeing glossary term? What gaps exist and what contemporary theories, conceptualisations or models of wellbeing are available that could inform pedagogy and practice of ECEC professionals, and the development of government policy and educational documents? It is useful to consider contemporary conceptions from wellbeing science and related disciplines to add to the descriptions and usage of wellbeing, not only in the EYLF V2.0 as the guiding curriculum framework, but across the document set. Key characteristics of contemporary wellbeing conceptions include a literature and research focus on more positively valenced experiences and outcomes, and that 'wellbeing' is more than the absence of 'illbeing', moving discourse beyond the traditional risk-based, deficit and dysfunction foci (Lomas, 2022; Lomas et al., 2021). Recent wellbeing scholarship also encourages us to integrate the 'dark' and 'bright' sides of life and develop an increased understanding of the contextual factors of wellbeing, maturing our western thinking beyond the individual to consider wider interdisciplinary and systems-informed thinking, sociopolitical dynamics of globalisation, interdisciplinary science and more-than-human thriving (Kern et al., 2020; Lomas, 2022; Steger, 2024; Wong, 2019). Additionally, an increasing focus on a child's rights perspective is evident in recent decades, understanding that children can and do have a viewpoint on their own of wellbeing (beyond the assumptions made by adults) and that their immediate ideas and experience of their wellbeing are as important as those occurring in the future (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Camfield et al., 2010; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012; Statham & Chase, 2010). For ECEC professionals this may require collaborative discussions, professional development and/or critical reflection about the role of the child in wellbeing interventions and practices, and consideration of what skills are being promoted in the ECEC setting that builds children's wellbeing capabilities and literacy within and beyond the ECEC setting (Baker et al., 2021).

5.3 What practice and/or policy implications arise from 'wellbeing' positioned as a Learning Outcome?

Linking with the idea of building children's wellbeing capabilities and the complex nature of child wellbeing, a provocation and future direction is offered from this study, informed by the *outcome* theme and the EYLF V2.0 positioning of wellbeing as a Learning Outcome

(AGDE, 2022). An outcomes-based education (OBE) approach has been adopted by Australian states and territories since the mid-1990s, however the inclusion of outcomes was a major change for early childhood curricula under the NQF (Donnelly, 2007). While outcomes remain the dominant discourse in education, and the 2020–2022 review of the EYLF considered the use of learning outcomes as a strength (Barblett et al., 2021), how does this outcomes-based pedagogical approach to wellbeing align with contemporary wellbeing research and discourse? The EYLF presents 'Children have a strong sense of wellbeing' (AGDE, 2022, p. 44) explicitly as a Learning Outcome, but can 'wellbeing' itself be considered a proximal learning outcome of education?

Research indicates there is a heritability and relative stability of wellbeing, influenced by genetics and inherited pre-dispositions (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996) however there is also evidence that it can and does change. Dynamism is reflected in the view that wellbeing is a process or unfolding life project linked to context and time, malleable and externally influenced, rather than an outcome (Dodge et al., 2012; Thoilliez, 2011). A wellbeing guide, offered not by ACECQA, but by the Victorian Department of Education to support its state approved ECEC learning framework (VCAA, 2016), acknowledges wellbeing in the early years as a *prerequisite* for an outcome of learning—an emerging, cumulative capacity, rather than an outcome or endpoint itself (Marbina et al., 2015). How can we then pedagogically view this dynamic process as a learning outcome?

Moreover, Learning Outcome 3 describes a 'sense' of wellbeing (AGDE, 2022, p. 44), implicitly referencing a subjective, rather than objective perspective of wellbeing. Wellbeing from a subjective dimension infers one's sense of positive affect, subjective evaluation of satisfaction with life and fulfilling potential (Diener et al., 1999), however are these learning outcomes or a subjective experience? It is the position of the authors that wellbeing can be a process or pedagogical *objective* but not a learning *outcome*. If children are learning skills that enable them to experience a strong sense of wellbeing, it is those *skills* that represent the learning outcome, not the *experience* of wellbeing itself. Instead, wellbeing literacy is offered herewith as a set of wellbeing skills and capability relevant to ECEC pedagogy, practices and policy, and that ECEC professionals could promote and be held accountable for as a learning outcome across their complex and diverse settings. Defined as the mindful use of language for and about wellbeing (Oades et al., 2021) and a relevant construct in ECEC to facilitate child wellbeing (Baker et al., 2021), wellbeing literacy is suggested as a future direction in a sector where wellbeing is valued, but meanings are multifold and disparate, and definitions are rare.

5.4 Future directions

Insight into the questions and findings raised here could be sought in wellbeing scholarship and contemporary sciences. In Australia, where ECEC service delivery is diverse and complex across the country, it is not only necessary to honour the unique, contextual and dynamic nature of child wellbeing, including Australian indigenous perspectives, but to continue to develop new ways to conceptualise, improve and measure it (AERO, 2024; Marbina et al., 2015). One such direction, as discussed, may be the application of wellbeing literacy to the context of ECEC. Wellbeing literacy is the language-use skill set of comprehending and composing language for and about wellbeing and the metacognition and choices of when and how to use them, intentionally, in context (Oades et al., 2021). How this knowledge may support ECEC professionals to teach young children vocabulary and knowledge about their wellbeing, expressive and receptive language skills (in multimodal

ways) and to adapt these to their individual contexts for the intention of experiencing and improving the wellbeing, is a topic worth future dialogue and research (Baker et al., 2021). Baker et al. (2021) argue that wellbeing literacy, as a wellbeing language *capability* (rather than learning *outcome* or *skill*) not only adds to current ECEC thinking but could inform and support existing pedagogy, practice and policy. While not defining or measuring wellbeing in itself, wellbeing literacy may be a frame through which ECEC professionals can view current practices, conceptualise and discuss child wellbeing and make sense of the regulatory and document landscape and learning outcomes as they exist. Further research and collaboration between early education and wellbeing science, for shared discourse, theoretical and practical applications is encouraged.

6 Conclusion

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, now over 30 years old, prompted international conversation about children's special rights and wellbeing. Wellbeing as a social, moral and economic imperative may be now at its greatest (Gromada et al., 2020) and as we know more about this elusive construct, we are charged to do more. Gaps and opportunities exist when it can be argued that uses, descriptions and definitions of the term 'wellbeing' in ECEC is not only multifold and lacking wellbeing science perspectives, but disparate and confusing. Contemporary wellbeing interventions and literacies need to be more readily available to early childhood professionals, in Australia and internationally. The provision of multidisciplinary informed pedagogy, practice and policy, for and about wellbeing is not only timely, but vital.

Author contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Lisa M. Baker. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Lisa M. Baker, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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

Informed consent None.

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