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Early childhood educators' viewpoints on linguistic and cultural diversity: A Q methodology analysis

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ABSTRACT

Language and linguistic diversity play a key role in disparities in academic achievement. With around 25 % of preschool children in Australia communicating in a language other than English at home, developing a greater understanding of early childhood educators' viewpoints towards, and engagement with, children's linguistic and cultural resources is vital. This research project asks how educators in early childhood settings view children's linguistic and cultural diversity. Employing Q methodology, the study investigated subjective viewpoints among educators at the early childhood level in Australia. Three distinct viewpoints were identified, shedding light on the complexities of language and culture related issues, as well as some of the challenges for EC educators in responding to the diverse needs of children. The findings reinforce the need for tailored pre-service and in-service professional learning that supports the development of teacher identity as well as their theoretical and pedagogical knowledge of multilingual language development.

1. Introduction

Language and linguistic diversity play a key role in disparities in academic achievement (Piller, 2016). Combined with linguistic diversity in societies, the influence of global mobility, population displacement, and technological advances contributes to the ongoing development of diverse multilingual forms of communication. Despite this, ongoing tensions between the needs of linguistically diverse communities and schools as monolingual institutions continue to contribute to disparities in educational outcomes (Piller, 2016). While these monolingual constraints range from the policy and curriculum level through to teaching practices, teachers are arguably the ultimate point of departure for education policy (Lo Bianco, 2010) and serve as a "central message system in education" (Gale et al., 2017, p. 345). The pedagogic work of teachers, conceptualised as *belief, design*, and *action* in teaching (Gale et al., 2017), can therefore play a critical role in redressing problems of educational disadvantage.

As a migrant majority country, 51.5 % of Australians were born overseas or have one or more parents born overseas, including English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries of origin (ABS, 2022b). The number of Australians who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has also continued to increase, standing at 3.2 % in 2021 (ABS, 2022a, b). The linguistic and cultural diversity in these demographics presents an immediate imperative for the Australian education system, including at the Early Childhood (EC) level, where over 25 % of all Australian children speak over 300 languages other than English at home (Australian Government, 2019). Despite the high level of diversity at the EC level, only a small range of research has focused on educators' understanding of and beliefs towards the linguistic and cultural diversity of children within Australian EC settings, and EC settings more broadly, including children who are learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) and those learning other languages (e.g., see Devlin et al., 2017; Dobinson and Buchori, 2016; Molyneux et al., 2016).

Developing a greater understanding of educators' viewpoints towards and engagement with children's linguistic and cultural resources is vital given increasing levels of multilingualism globally. This is particularly important when non-attendance of children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds at the EC level is considerably higher than non-CALD children: 13 % as compared to 7 % for non-CALD children in the Australian context, for example (Gide et al., 2022). Young, emerging multilinguals enter EC settings with richly diverse backgrounds, skillsets and cultural ways of being and

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knowing. Providing children with nurturing and culturally and linguistically sustaining education programs encourages young children to communicate their experiences, thoughts and discoveries in many ways, and to "perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism" (Paris, 2012, p. 93; Cun, 2021; Mitchell & Bateman, 2018; Morrison et al., 2019; Panagiotopoulou et al., 2020). It has been widely confirmed that a teaching approach that draws on linguistically and culturally inclusive strategies can strengthen children's multiple identities, assisting them in their development of English and engaging them as confident multilingual communicators (Krakouer, 2016; McLeod et al., 2014; Ragnarsdóttir, 2020; Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2016). Critical to this process, however, are the beliefs or viewpoints of EC educators in relation to the linguistic and cultural resources of children and their intersection with teaching practices. In light of this, the key question for this research project asks - How do EC educators view children's linguistic and cultural diversity in EC settings? In doing so, it seeks to understand whether these resources are positioned as an asset or a hinderance, as well as the key imperatives that inform EC educators' practices when working in diverse EC contexts.

To explore educator beliefs, this study used Q methodology, a philosophical and conceptual framework for the study of subjectivity (Brown, 2019). Positioned within a social constructivist frame, Q methodology seeks to shift the study of subjectivity away from individual or personal knowledge and understandings towards uncovering shared viewpoints (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Q methodology helps identify predominant viewpoints relative to a particular context, which in the case of this research project involves deeply held perspectives of linguistic and cultural diversity in EC settings. The findings provide insights into teachers' beliefs about supporting linguistic and cultural diversity and identify more challenging aspects to empowering children's multilingual language development. This research project also provides an important illustration of the rigour of Q methodology for investigating teacher subjectivity in complex educational contexts.

2. Positionality

To frame a discussion of the literature that informs this research project, it is important to outline the epistemological stance taken by the researchers in this study, one which privileges a view of language and communication as a complex interplay of speakers' cultural, linguistic, and semiotic meaning-making resources. This position rejects the deficit views of emerging bilingualism or multilingualism among children that focus on what children "lack", or their linguistic deficits in the majority language. Instead, we argue that the valuing of, and support for language development should not be confined to the majority language but should consider a child's diverse linguistic capabilities as a single integrated communication system. By implication, we argue that educators have a responsibility to acknowledge and facilitate the development of meaning-making skills for children across the breadth of their linguistic repertoires. This does not mean that educators must speak or even understand the languages of children, but that they should employ teaching practices that affirm and value children's cultural and communication practices, regardless of language and modality.

3. Literature review

This framing of language and communication, a translanguaging frame (Wei & García, 2022), underpins fundamental shifts in language learning research and pedagogy in recent decades. The main shift has been from geopolitically defined notions of "named" languages as discrete, independent entities to one "where the mixing of languages does not transpire in a way that suggests each language functions separately from the other, rather that languages work as one singular linguistic system" (Slaughter & Cross, 2021, p. 41). Wei's (2018) theorisation of translanguaging stems from the practical concern "of understanding the creative and dynamic practices human beings engage in with multiple named languages and multiple semiotic and cognitive resources" (p. 27). Alongside many academics, Wei disputes the belief that individuals think and communicate solely in specific named languages, as *languaging* surpasses these constraints. Language is instead considered "a multisensory and multimodal semiotic system" connected with other cognitive systems (Wei, 2018, p. 20).

In referencing Otheguy, García, & Wallis (2015) work on the deconstruction of named languages, Wei (2018) also notes that the language we produce is an idiolect, a personal language reflecting the grammars and lexicon of languages and language varieties, alongside the effect of social, political, and class-based variables, among others. From an education perspective, this explanation of language provides an opportunity for language communities, teachers and education stakeholders, as well as researchers, to challenge the monolingual framing of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy (D'warte & Slaughter, 2023). In understanding the role of language and culture in early childhood development, teachers' views towards children's linguistic and cultural resources and whether they are acknowledged and supported, become vital issues to address (Alstad, 2020; Cohrssen et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2014; Ragnarsdóttir, 2020).

While there is an ongoing imperative to "develop practices to ensure empowerment, dialogue and social justice for diverse parents and children" (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020, p. 580), a growing body of research is demonstrating how EC educators are becoming increasingly comfortable with creating culturally responsive environments in diverse EC contexts (e.g., Kirsch, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir, 2020; Sung & Akhtar, 2017). Only a smaller range of research, however, has focused on language development, language ideologies and multilingual language development at the EC level (see, e.g., Alstad, 2020; Peleman et al., 2022; Ragnarsdóttir, 2020; Wright Karem & Hobek, 2022).

In the United States, for example, Sung and Akhtar (2017) undertook a study of the beliefs of 21 preschool teachers towards linguistic diversity. Overall, they found that the teachers did not view linguistic diversity as problematic, nor did they believe that linguistic diversity impedes learning. In contrast to earlier studies, Sung and Akhtar found that teachers were confident "in their abilities to work with linguistically diverse students" (2017, p. 167). They did, however, find differences in how educators respond pedagogically to diversity, with one group of teachers focusing more on shifting their practices in response to the needs of individual children, while the other group of teachers focused more broadly on "helping children develop general values of tolerance and open-mindedness" (Sung & Akhtar, 2017, p. 168). Sung and Akhtar argue that there is the danger in the latter perspective of privileging the transmission of knowledge without connecting this to the lived experiences of students, potentially perpetuating linguistic and cultural subjugation. They note the importance of professional learning to support teachers, arguing that "effectively supporting language-minority students' success, even at this young age, may require preschool teachers to re-conceptualize the connection between student diversity and teaching practices" (p. 169).

In the Australian EC context, small-scale research projects have looked at a range of interrelated issues involving educators in culturally and linguistically diverse EC settings, highlighting the need for greater support and professional training. Jenkins at al. (2019), for example, investigated the role of language background on perceptions of bilingual children among EC educators in Australia. Their research found that monolingual and bilingual educators held similar beliefs in relation to bilingualism, but that bilingual educators were more likely to agree with positive statements about bilingualism. The study also found that education levels impacted on educators' understandings of language acquisition, with degree-qualified educators demonstrating a better understanding of language acquisition, while non-degree-qualified educators identified more challenges than benefits in working with bilingual children and their families, including "communication difficulties with children and families, lower academic achievement, [and] challenging behaviours and confusion" (Jenkins et al., 2019, p. 225).

Cabezas and Rouse (2014) investigated whether EC educators support and understand the needs of young English language learners. Within a complex interplay of experience and knowledge of additional language acquisition and pedagogy, they found that theoretical understanding of bilingual language development was low among the teacher participants. In addition, many of educators based their planning and practices for young English language learners on "experiential and intuitive approaches in planning and teaching" (p. 68).

Focusing more specifically on cultural competency, Sinclair (2019) explored EC educators' understanding of the concept in relation to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Sinclair drew on the definition of cultural competency within the Australian national Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, DEEWR, 2009, p. 18), which states that "educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity, and have an ability to understand and honour differences". Sinclair found two predominant viewpoints among the educators and, while both viewpoints demonstrated some common understandings of cultural competency, Sinclair identified discrepancies in the how educators worked with families and communities. While one viewpoint saw cultural competency as a long-term journey to be undertaken with Aboriginal families and communities, the other viewpoint saw cultural competency as the work of individuals and did not seek to engage collaboratively with local communities.

All three of these research projects in the Australian context underscore the need to understand what is informing teachers' "intuitive approaches" as well as to identify relevant knowledge and training gaps in teacher education curriculum. Informed by the findings from the prior studies, and situated within a translanguaging frame, this research project investigates the beliefs of EC teachers in Australia, both monolingual and bilingual, towards culturally and linguistically diverse EC contexts. It contributes to these lines of investigation by employing Q methodology for a rigorous study of subjectivity and seeks to advance knowledge in relation to key shared viewpoints among EC educators working across diverse EC contexts.

4. Method

The choice of methodology is critical in educational research where educational practices and pedagogy, in particular, are highly situated, and are linked closely with socio-political and educational frameworks (Cross, 2010; Slaughter & Cross, 2021). What "might be an ideal strategy under one set of conditions may have unintended consequences when taken up in other sites and contexts" (Slaughter & Cross, 2021, p. 40), leaving educators with the ongoing challenges of "local conditions limiting generalizations and theory building" (Lundberg et al., 2020, p. 1). As a complement to "so-called" objective science, Lundberg et al. (2020) argue that the study of subjectivity is therefore crucial to ensuring the collection of reliable evidence for educational research.

This study employs Q methodology (Stephenson, 1935) to examine educator viewpoints in relation to linguistic and cultural diversity in the contemporary Australian EC context. A systematic review of Q studies published in the field of education since 2010 (Lundberg et al., 2020) demonstrates the wide range and suitability of Q methodology in educational research. Moreover, Q methodology's technical and analytical processes combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, with Brown (2019, p 565) arguing that it provides a "philosophical and conceptual framework that in tandem with its technical and analytical procedures, provides the basis for a science of subjectivity". In addition to its suitability for the study of subjectivity, Q methodology is also well suited to research with smaller numbers of participants as it does not seek to extrapolate data to widely held viewpoints but is more interested in the extent that a viewpoint is of significance to key actors in the research sample (Lo Bianco, 2015).

In keeping with the traditional stages of this methodology (Thumvichit, 2022), we followed a series of steps, including: (1) developing the Q sample from the concourse, (2) recruiting participants, (3) conducting the Q sort activity, (4) analysing data, and (5) interpreting findings, as outlined in the following sections.

4.1. Developing the Q sample

In Q methodology, "concourse" refers to a broad representative sample of the area of interest - the topic under discussion - which can be gathered from a range of sources (Stephenson, 1978). An initial 194 statements were drawn from existing state and national government policy documents (DEEWR, 2009; Department of Education and Training and Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016), pedagogic support documents (Clarke, 2009; VCAA, 2020), and academic papers focused on EC educator understandings of linguistic and cultural competence (Sinclair, 2019; Sung & Akhtar, 2017). These statements provided a "ready-made" sample (McKeown & Thomas, 1988, p. 25) and broadly covered seven themes related to the topic including pedagogy, cultural awareness and traditions, language awareness, multilingualism (including home languages and English as a first and additional language/dialect), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being, monolingual perspectives, and identity. The 194 statements were then refined to a balanced but comprehensive Q sample (Brown et al., 2019). The researchers initially undertook this sorting work individually, then as a team, resulting in a final set of 34 statements for participants to sort (see Appendix 1).

A Q sort activity was then undertaken by participants. This activity involves arranging the statements on a grid from "most like my point of view" to "most unlike my point of view". While this activity has typically been carried out manually using printed statement cards and grids, more recently studies have used online technology to complete the Q sort activity (e.g., Goodrich, 2017; Lundberg & Stigmar, 2022; Slaughter et al., 2022). Due to COVID-19 lockdowns, our research was undertaken remotely via an online program called *Qmethod* software (Lutfallah & Buchanan, 2019).

4.2. Recruiting participants

This research project was funded, in part, through a grant awarded by a teacher professional association. The grant conditions require academics and teachers and/or educational stakeholders to engage in collaborative research to develop or enhance the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. The research team consisted of researchers from across two universities and fka Children's Services, a not-for-profit organisation that advocates for children's linguistic and cultural rights, offering educators support in providing culturally rich EC learning environments (fka Children's Services, 2015). A recruitment notice was placed in the electronic newsletter of fka Children's Services calling for interested participants from amongst its members. Given that the membership of fka Children's Services is interested and invested in the linguistic and cultural development of children, it was expected that participants would hold favourable views towards children's cultural and linguistic diversity. As the purpose of Q methodology is to recruit "individuals who are familiar with and likely to have an opinion on the topic under study" (Thumvichit, 2022, p. 7), the recruitment pool was well matched to the methodology, given the limitations of research recruitment during the COVID pandemic.

Twenty EC educators – all members of fka Children's Services from centres across the state of Victoria (metropolitan and regional areas) – took part in the study, and as the primary goal of Q methodology is to disclose "the quantity and character of diverse viewpoints within the target group" and not to obtain large datasets for generalization, this set of participants was sufficient for Q research (Thumvichit, 2022, p. 7).

4.3. Data collection

Data was collected online using an online program called *Qmethod* software (Lutfallah & Buchanan, 2019). The research participants were emailed a link to the application and once they accessed the online program, they were able to view an instructional video explaining the Q sorting activity. The recording explains the process for ranking and ordering the Q statements on a grid. Participants then completed a brief survey on relevant demographic and workplace data (Tables 2–4) as well as the Q sort activity. Like manual sorting, the online program asked participants to initially sort the Q statements into three broad groups – statements participants either agree with, disagree with, or are unsure about – and then place each statement on the grid (see Fig. 1), based on the following condition of instruction: *To what extent does each statement reflect your beliefs about cultural and linguistic diversity?*

Participants had the opportunity to review the placement of the cards before submitting their Q sort, and then moved to a one-to-one interview via Zoom to discuss the ordering of their sort. At this stage, participants discussed why they had placed specific statements at the "plus" and "minus" ends of the grid and were also asked to select one or two statements from the middle column and explain why they had placed them there. Participants reflected on the overall sort and commented on the statements they found particularly interesting or difficult to place, or themes they felt were missing. Finally, participants were asked to consider how their viewpoints, as expressed through their Q sort, were reflected in their educational practices and to provide examples of strategies, activities and practices they used in culturally and linguistically diverse settings.

4.4. Data analysis

A factor analysis of the collected Q sorts was undertaken using KADE (Banasick, 2019), an open-source application for Q by-person factor analysis. After a series of analyses, a three-factor solution with 70 % explained variance and significant loadings of +/−0.62 for 16 out of 20 participants provided the best fit while retaining the highest number of participants with most defined factor loadings (Table 1). Each of the three confirmed factors produced a composite exemplar Q sort grid, with 10 participants sharing the first perspective, five sharing the second, and one participant loading on the third factor. Although more than one participant is typically a criterion for selecting a factor, a benefit of Q methodology is that potentially informative viewpoints can emerge, even if these are held by just one participant (Brown, 1993; McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Watts & Stenner, 2012). That is, as Brown (1993, p. 94) argues, the interest of Q methodology is in the nature of the viewpoints, "and the extent to which they are similar or dissimilar." The significance of numbers is "relatively unimportant" with the focus primarily on the quality of the viewpoints.

Anomalies, called confounding sorts, do occur. This is when a participant's sort loads significantly on more than one factor. In this study, four of the 20 participants produced a confounded sort, which is when a sort loads significantly on more than one factor (see Table 1). As per standard procedure for Q methodology, these four sorts were excluded from this analysis to support a clearer representation of the salient features of each factor (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

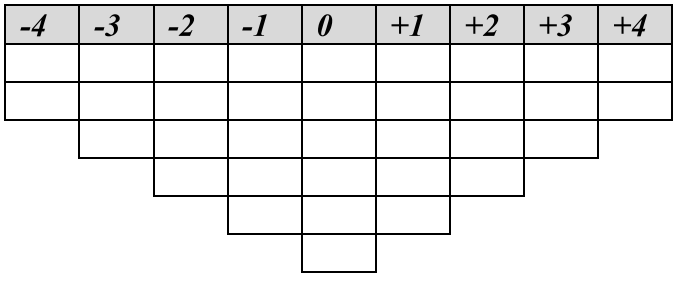

Fig. 1. Q sort grid for study.

Table 1
Three factor matrix.

Participant	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1	**0.7911 X**	0.203	0.0958
2	**0.8351 X**	−0.0098	−0.0994
3	**0.7291 X**	0.4412	0.303
4	**0.7024 X**	0.328	0.4165
5	**0.657 X**	0.4677	0.2045
9	**0.7149 X**	0.3156	0.2722
11	**0.6188 X**	0.2145	0.4228
14	**0.7257 X**	0.2054	0.251
16	**0.6375 X**	0.4174	0.3906
19	**0.7255 X**	0.4394	0.3103
6	0.3274	**0.7188 X**	0.1189
13	0.4564	**0.6523 X**	0.2478
15	0.4028	**0.6234 X**	0.3102
17	0.4181	**0.6832 X**	0.2871
20	0.0014	**0.807 X**	−0.1271
7	0.1998	−0.0093	**0.9091 X**
Confounded sorts – no clear loading on a single factor			
8	0.0431	0.5225	0.5167
10	0.5967	0.5457	0.1901
12	0.5044	0.4584	0.5401
18	0.3872	0.5215	0.3804
% Explained variance	33 %	23 %	14 %
No of defining variables	10	5	1

Each composite sort generated in this study represents a different viewpoint (factor) towards linguistic and cultural diversity in EC settings. The interpretation of each factor involved both a focus on the arrangement of statements with each factor, as well as comparing arrangements across factors. Comparing rankings across the factors (−4 to +4) enabled us to focus on the relative statement ranking for each group, while looking within the entire arrangement, with a particular focus on consensus and distinguishing statements, enabled a holistic appraisal of perspectives on the topic. Consensus statements are those for which there was a general agreement across all three factors ($p < 0.05$, statement numbers are marked with + in the left-hand column of Appendix 1), while distinguishing factors are those whose positioning on the exemplar grid for each factor is significantly different to its positioning in the other factors ($p < 0.05$, marked with * in the right-hand column of Appendix 1). Quotes from post-sort interviews have been included to provide a more holistic analysis and to add relevant contextual information. In Q methodology research, the results section involves an exploration of the Q statements that were identified as salient for each viewpoint identified in the factor analysis, enriched with the qualitative data from the post Q sorting interviews, to present a holistic representation of each factor.

5. Results

5.1. Consensus statements

Prior to delving into the unique attributes of each viewpoint, it is useful to consider consensus among the participants as indicated by consensus statements, or those statements that have been placed in a similar position statistically on the grid across all viewpoints. The analysis identified that there is a commonly held belief among participants of the important of children retaining their home languages and that parents should support language maintenance at home (S22, S27). This orientation is supported by the shared belief that cultural identity shapes learning and development (S28), and a rejection of the view that multilingualism causes miscommunication and that English language learners have a negative impact on other children's language development (S1, S19).

Against the backdrop of these points of consensus, the key characteristics that distinguish the three viewpoints are now explored below.

5.2. Viewpoint 1 – children's linguistic and cultural resources as an asset

Ten EC educators shared the first viewpoint. Based on their biographical data (Table 2), there were no apparent distinguishing commonalities among this grouping of participants. Their teaching experiences ranged from 4 to 35 years, with a majority having worked in the field for a minimum of 5 years. Although there was some variation in the amount of diversity in the EC settings encountered, most participants worked in settings with more than 50 % of children coming from CALD backgrounds. Participants that loaded on this viewpoint were linguistically diverse, with four English monolingual, and six bi- or multilingual educators.

There are two distinct features of this viewpoint. Most notably, the viewpoint is child centred, privileging children and the resources that they bring with them into the EC settings as the most important focal point for educators. This is visible in the positioning of statements, as well as through the interview data, as exemplified through the following comment from P9:

> The two statements that I've placed [at the positive end] are specifically about children. They're not about carers or anybody else. It's about, that's where our focus ultimately needs to be. It's that language and children. It doesn't matter what language they speak, where they come from.

Another notable feature is a strong belief in the centrality of languages and cultures for identity, and as an asset for learning and development. For example, statements positioned at the positive end of the Viewpoint 1 exemplar grid reinforce the relationship between language and culture – *Languages and cultures are inextricably linked to children's identity* (**S**tatement **33, +4** position on grid (**S33, +4**), see Appendix 1), as well as characterising children's linguistic resources as an asset, both for the child's development now and into the future. As P19 argues:

> I would say that they're core beliefs that I have; that children, part of who they are is how they express themselves, it's how they learn, and that language and culture is integral to that. How we see the world is integral to how we understand it, which is how we are brought up and the world we live in.

This viewpoint positions language as a resource for learning; for example, Children's use of their home language in the EC setting can help them learn English (S32*, +4), Early bilingualism is an asset that can lead to many long-term benefits (S24*, +3), and Having children with varying English abilities in EC settings is beneficial (S30, +3). Statement 26 (2^{+}), as a consensus statement – All children's languages should be valued and supported – indicates that all three viewpoints understand children's multilingualism as key to their learning and development; however, with Statements 32 and 24 as distinguishing statements for Viewpoint 1, we can see a firm narrative forming that elevates the focus on language as a resource.

The positioning of Statement 10 – *If a child does not speak English, I cannot do much to help them learn* at −4 – also supports the view that educators holding this viewpoint feel confident that they can still support learning regardless of the language of the child, as supported by comments from P2:

> I do not believe in exclusion. So, I feel language is not a reason to exclude or say that you can't help them. As an educator, your job is to help everybody in an inclusive, holistic manner. Do educators really think that if they don't speak – if a child doesn't speak English, you can't help them?

This viewpoint also rejects the notion that home languages should be spurned in the house in favour of English – *At home, parents should avoid speaking other languages to help their children learn English faster* (S27, −4). These beliefs are supported more broadly across all viewpoints with the consensus statement, S21* (−2), which rejects the notion that *It is difficult to teach when there are too many children learning English as an additional language in one room* and that *Having children from different language backgrounds in an EC setting often leads to miscommunications between educators and children* (S19*, −2). Educators firmly hold linguistic and cultural diversity as an asset for learning. For example:

> Well, I guess it's the polar opposite of what I've just said, isn't it really? We want to expose children to as much as we can, and the richness and the variance of different languages just teaches children so much more than language, by exposing children to each other. No matter who they are, where they come from, it is an absolute richness. It is education that is in no curriculum. We can't teach this sort of stuff from a book or from a framework. It is empathy. It is understanding … Children themselves are an amazing teaching resource. They come to us free of charge really. So, if I had a classroom of 30 identical children, what can I teach them? (P11)

Statement 28 (+3) also supports the argument that *Children's cultural identity shapes their learning and development* and rejects the notion that *Cultural competence is an educational buzzword* (S9, −3), with P2, for example, arguing that, "…their cultural, their language, their history – where they come from – is very important to not only build their self-identity, but to build a relationship with them. And why is that a buzzword now? It should just be embedded in our program of our service".

5.3. Viewpoint 2 – professional learning and cultural competency

Five participants loaded on the second viewpoint (Table 3). The teaching experience of these educators ranged from 5 to 25 years, with four participants working in settings that had more than 80 % of children from culturally and linguistic diverse backgrounds. Four of the educators had had long careers in the EC sector and, except for one educator who spoke only English, were multilingual.

There are also two distinct features for this viewpoint. First, the viewpoint is focused on cultural competence, with *I value different cultural ways of knowing and being* (S18: +4) and *Awareness of cultural differences is the first step to becoming a culturally competent educator* (S12*: +3) being highly valued. This viewpoint also holds, as a distinguishing

Table 2
Participants loading on Viewpoint 1.

ID	Languages spoken	Age	Years teaching	Qualifications	% CALD	Role
P1	English, Vietnamese	30–39	5–10	EC Diploma	>80	Leading teacher
P2	English, Gujrati, Hindi, Marathi	40–49	11–20	EC Postgraduate	>80	Centre director
P3	English, Italian, Japanese	50–59	> 20	EC Postgraduate	50–80	Centre director
P4	English	40–49	11–20	EC Postgraduate	50–80	Leading teacher
P5	English, Mandarin	30–39	11–20	Other (non-EC)	>80	Playgroup facilitator (supervised)
P9	English	50–59	11–20	EC Diploma	>80	Playgroup facilitator
P11	English	50–59	> 20	EC Bachelor	<20	Leading teacher
P14	English, Tamil, Sinhala	40–49	11–20	EC Postgraduate	20–50	Teacher
P16	English, Hindi, Punjabi, German	40–49	0–5	EC Diploma	>80	Leading teacher
P19	English	40–49	5–10	EC Postgraduate	50–80	Leading teacher

Table 3
Participants loading on Viewpoint 2.

ID	Languages spoken	Age	Years teaching	Qualifications	% CALD	Role
P6	English, Filipino	50–59	11–20	Postgraduate	>80	Teacher
P13	English, German	60+	> 20	Bachelor	>80	Centre director
P15	English	60+	> 20	Bachelor	>80	Leading teacher
P17	English, Korean	40–49	0–5	Postgraduate	>80 %	Leading teacher
P20	English, Hindi, Malayalam	50–59	11–20	Postgraduate	20–50 %	Teacher

statement, that *Skilfully handling cultural and language differences in the classroom is one of the most important parts of being an effective EC educator* (S2*, +1), as exemplified by comments from P13:

> Because I think without a sense of belonging, children won't learn … they won't have that agency to try new things, make friendships, and explore the world around them. So, I think having a sense of belonging is integral to children's learning and development. So, if we have settings that – and practices that have a limited understanding of children's culture, language, background, their whole family context, then we're only capturing part of what that child is about … and that's why I've put those two at that first line, for educators to have a good understanding of cultural competence to support children's learning and development. Because children first and foremost must have a sense of wellbeing to be able to learn.

The second feature of viewpoint 2 is the positioning of professional learning as key for meeting the needs of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) learners (S14*: +4). This statement is distinguishing for this viewpoint, placed at +4, in comparison to its placement at 0 and −1 for Viewpoints 1 and 3 respectively. Comments from P6 exemplify why professional learning was positioned in this way:

> I've worked with children – a lot of children – having English as their second language … I strongly believe that as an educator you should be aware of the needs of these children. Being able to experience it myself, you need to have the knowledge to see from their perspective as well … that's how you build that relationship, because you get to know the families … if you have that knowledge in how to deal with that … you'll be more confident to be able to speak up with them and be able to build that relationship. That's why I see the importance of having those professional learning.

These educators also believed that *A good quality EC program should foster rich language interactions for all children, inclusive of all languages* (S5: +3); hence, S8, *Parents and carers who speak languages other than English are a valued resource in EC settings* (S8*: +2), is a distinguishing statement. This viewpoint also supports the centrality of language and identity for children's development, aligning with the consensus statement that *It is important that learners of English as an additional language maintain their home language skills* (S22, +2). The statements rejected by this viewpoint are that *At home, parents should avoid speaking other languages to help their children learn English faster* (S27, −4), *In an EC setting, learning English should be the priority* (S31*, −3), and that *English should be the only language of instruction in EC settings in Australia* (S3, −3),

For educators represented in Viewpoint 2, using different languages in an EC setting should not be discouraged as they do not believe it confuses children (S16: −3), with many educators sharing pedagogical practices that encourage multilingual language use, as illustrated in the following comment by P20:

> I have a child who speaks only Cantonese this year and he can't even speak any English at all. I went to the parent and asked basic language things, so going to the toilet, drinking water, what do you say and things, so I started learning more words so I can communicate with that child. I did my best and we have ongoing conversations.

5.4. Viewpoint 3 – value in learning additional languages

This viewpoint has been labelled "Value in learning additional languages" because, while the first two viewpoints commented on the use of languages for the wellbeing of the child, this is the only viewpoint that specifically focusses on languages. Only one participant loaded on the third viewpoint and as was noted in the methodology section, a factor based on one participant is not typical but can emerge in particular circumstances. What set this participant apart from all other participants was that their employment is financed by a supplementary program for the teaching of Languages[1] at the EC level. This small-scale initiative is funded by the Victorian State government. As a result, this educator is not employed as an EC educator at the centre but is employed as a Languages educator for three hours a week. In addition to English and Cantonese, this participant speaks Mandarin and has been teaching the language for two years in a setting that has less than 20 % of children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Table 4).

This viewpoint differentiates itself from the previous two in its representation of the educator's particular role in their EC setting – as a language teacher. This experience strongly shaped how they interpreted and positioned the statements and is characterised by the privileging of languages and language learning. From the position of a language educator, P7 strongly believes that *Speaking multiple languages is beneficial for children* (S4*: +4) and that *Languages and cultures are inextricably linked to children's identity* (S33, +4), as elaborated in this comment:

> Because I'm linking this one to the next one, for the children's identity. Yeah. If we identify our own as, "okay, I'm living in Australia. I'm Australian. And I also speak Mandarin. I'm also part of the Chinese," then I will be interested in both cultures. So if I'm interested, then – I'm talking about the children – if I'm interested in both cultures, I will want to learn some more behind this. And language is actually a tool for us to opening our eyes and our minds to learn the culture.

It is perhaps because of their role as a teacher of Mandarin (only) for a short period of time each week, and not as an ongoing EC educator, that P7 indicated that *If a child does not speak English, I cannot do much to help them learn* (S10*: +3), as their purpose of employment is to focus on the teaching of Mandarin. Moreover, they believe that *An educator's teaching approach should not change based on young children's cultural and language backgrounds* (S23: +2), again reflecting their role as a teacher of Mandarin, bringing their experience teaching English to children in China and teaching Chinese here in Australia as examples of introducing and consolidating content:

Table 4
Participant loading on Viewpoint 3.

ID	Languages spoken	Age	Years teaching	Qualifications	% CALD	Role
P7	English, Cantonese, Mandarin	30–39	0–5	Other	<20 %	Mandarin teacher

[1] In the Australian curriculum, languages other than English are referred to as Languages.

> While this participant remained ambiguous about whether English should be the only language of instruction in EC settings in Australia (S3*: 0), they disagreed that Children's use of their home language in the EC setting can help them learn English (S32, -2) and that Parents and carers who speak languages other than English are a valued resource in EC settings (S8, -2); again, as they did not see these as related to their work as a teacher of Mandarin.

Although the placing of one of the statements suggests that this educator did not believe that *Skilfully handling cultural and language differences in the classroom* is one of the most important parts of being an effective EC educator (S2*, −3), comments during the post-sort interview seemed to suggest an awareness of the importance of language and strong communications:

> … language is actually a tool for us to opening our eyes and our minds to learn the culture … So, my strong belief is that I may not speak the same language, but if I love my career as teaching, as an educator, and I will try to find a way to build up the relationship between me and the students (P7).

6. Discussion

Educators' positioning of children's linguistic and cultural knowledge, or their "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez and Moll, 2005; Moll, 2019; Moll et al., 2013), as a resource has been identified as making a key difference to children's literacy learning (Comber & Barnett, 2003). A wide range of research illustrates how children's linguistic repertoires, in English and in other languages, can be "welcomed, developed and extended" in education contexts around the world (Molyneux et al., 2016, p. 338). Such orientations also support the "development of collaborative (as opposed to coercive) relations of power that academically and personally empower all students and their families" (Molyneux et al., 2016, p 338). This research was driven by the important connection between linguistic diversity and educational attainment (e.g., Mitchell & Bateman, 2018; Molyneux et al., 2016; Paris, 2012) and the limited research into educators' understanding of and attitudes towards the linguistic and cultural diversity. The key research questions are focused on whether educators view such diversity as an asset or a hinderance in EC settings, and what their key imperatives are in their teaching.

Three viewpoints, identified in the factor analysis, provide clear insights into different perspectives among the educators. For Viewpoint 1, there was a strong focus on the centrality of language and culture to children's wellbeing, which reflects the core tenets of the national and state-based Early Years Learning Frameworks (DEEWR, 2009; DET, & VCAA, 2016) which emphasize the importance of engaging with and promoting the breadth of children's language skills (Cohrssen et al., 2021). However, a key distinction from the other viewpoints is the positioning of professional learning to support this work as important but not critical as "teaching comes from their gut" (P4). So, while professional development should be accessible in an ideal situation, this view holds that its absence is not a barrier to educators' ongoing work. This finding aligns with other Australian-based research. Cabezas and Rouse (2014), for example, reported that none of the EC educators in their study could recall undertaking any study in relation to additional language acquisition in their teacher training courses but that they rely on their "gut" and the understandings they had developed over their years of teaching. Likewise, Sinclair's (2019) study found a statistically significant difference between educators who sought to develop and extend their knowledge with the local Indigenous community, and those who chose not to engage with professional learning and collaboration to extend their knowledge and understanding.

In contrast, the most strongly held beliefs for Viewpoint 2 differed in their prioritization of professional learning to support work with culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Interestingly, all participants represented in Viewpoint 2 have completed undergraduate or postgraduate studies, which may influence their beliefs about professional learning (PL) being critical to their ability to manage diversity. As we did not ask about when and how recently studies were completed, it is not possible to determine any relationship between qualifications and the valuing of PL. However, recent experiences with PL may provide educators with a positive disposition to its importance for these professionals or, conversely, the prioritizing of PL may have led to continued engagement with PL for these educators. Further research into this area is warranted given that Jenkins et al. (2019) found a significant relationship between level of qualification and disposition towards bilingualism.

The sole participant on Viewpoint 3 was retained as they were the only participant to explicitly focus on language development. This was due, in part, to their role as a teacher of Mandarin in their EC setting, where the teacher focused solely on helping the children learn and play through Mandarin as part of an additional language program. P7's role as a language teacher strongly shaped their response to the Q sort activity, where they privileged the belief that multilingualism is beneficial for children as well as the critical connection between language, culture and identity. With a long history of teaching languages to young children, P7 had the knowledge and experience to understand and talk about language, language learning and the relationship between language and identity in a more direct manner than was seen across the other interviews. Although a majority of the other participants were multilingual, there was limited mention of language development per se. This finding is in line with Cabezas and Rouse's (2014) research with multilingual EC educators which showed that theoretical understandings of bilingual language development was low, with support for young English language learners based on "experiential and intuitive approaches in planning and teaching" (p. 68).

The findings in this research project speak to the broader challenges around diverse EC settings as linguistic and cultural diversity increases globally. As Alstad (2020, p. 587) notes,

> Language issues in education have changed in many countries as a response to societal changes, implicating more focus on emergent literacy, an increasing number of second language (L2) learners and emergent multilingual children, and lowering the age for introduction of a foreign language.

While research indicates that many EC educators are positive about multilingualism and are comfortable in supporting cultural diversity and in their cultural competency, there is less of an understanding about how to "make the practices and settings more linguistically diverse" (Alstad, 2020, p. 597). Alstad (2020) argues that educators are uncertain about how they can support children's language development and that even for trained language teachers, their language teaching is, to a large extent, "experience-based and based on a holistic approach to young children's learning and well-being" (p. 586). Where a focus on language development is provided, research demonstrates that there is a tendency for EC teachers to focus on supporting children to learn the majority language as quickly as possible (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012).

A significant factor influencing the positioning of linguistic resources in education settings is that the responsibility for maintaining languages other than a majority language, or an official minority language, has not been seen as the work of teachers but as the work of families, playgroups and religious or ethnic communities (Eisenchlas & Schalley, 2020; Palviainen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2020). In addition, non-majority languages – community languages and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and dialects in the Australian context – are often subject to ideologies and power dynamics that perpetuate deficit and racialized linguistic hierarchies (Lauwo et al., 2022). This, in turn, can lead to experiences of ethnic and linguistic racism, and embarrassment and shame about the use of languages other than English (Dovchin, 2020).

While findings in this research project and in previous research (e.g., Alstad, 2020; Ragnarsdóttir, 2020) clearly point to the need for

pre-service and in-service professional learning on supporting the complex emerging language and literacy needs of children, careful consideration needs to be given to what shapes educators understanding of language as a resource. Professional learning must support both monolingual and multilingual educators to explore how their own lived experiences with language and culture have shaped their attitudes towards language as a resource, and the role of education policies and EC centre practices in perpetuating monolingual perspectives in education. Building on this understanding, professional learning on second/additional language learning and teaching, and multilingual language development can better equip educators to holistically support language and identity development for all children.

Q methodology, as utilised for this research project, can also play a role in professional learning for educators. The concourse, or set of statements developed for this project, represent a broad range of ideas about cultural and linguistic diversity. Given that any individual's viewpoint can shifts and changes over time, undertaking the activity again, as part of ongoing professional learning, either individually or collaboratively, can provide colleagues with insights into shared or differing perspective towards matters such as cultural and linguistic diversity and even professional learning itself. Although this activity is not limited to these statements, with the activity itself providing a tool for understanding shared or subjective experiences, regardless of the topic.

7. Concluding comments

This research project, investigating EC educators' perspectives on linguistic and cultural diversity through Q methodology, has identified a complex range of beliefs and priorities. The viewpoints identified, each with its distinctive emphasis, shed light on the complexities of language and culture related issues in diverse EC settings, and the strengths and limitations of EC educators in responding to the diverse needs of children. Fostering linguistic as well as cultural identities among all young learners requires urgent attention and targeted intervention that supports teacher identity development, as well as their theoretical and pedagogical knowledge of multilingual language development. In particular, the findings reinforce the need for tailored pre-service and in-service professional learning that equips educators with both culturally and *linguistically* responsive pedagogies.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Appendix A. Statement placement for each factor from −4 to +4

No.	Statement	F1	F2	F3
1+	Children who are learning English as an additional language can have a negative effect on the English language learning of other children.	−3	−4	−3
2	Skilfully handling cultural and language differences in the classroom is one of the most important parts of being an effective EC educator.	−1*	1*	−3*
3	English should be the only language of instruction in EC settings in Australia.	−3	−3	0*
4	Speaking multiple languages is beneficial for children.	0	0	4*
5	A good quality EC program should foster rich language interactions for all children, inclusive of all languages.	−1*	3	1
6	I prefer to emphasize similarities, not differences, among children in my EC setting.	−1	−1*	−2
7	Most children have no trouble learning English as an additional language while maintaining their home language.	−2	−1	0
8	Parents and carers who speak languages other than English are a valued resource in EC settings.	0	2*	−2
9	Cultural competence is just another educational buzzword.	−3	−1	−1
10	If a child does not speak English, I cannot do much to help them learn.	−4	−2	3*
11	Parents should be encouraged to speak their language at home, if this is what they wish.	0	0	−1
12	Awareness of cultural differences is the first step to becoming a culturally competent educator.	1	3*	−1
13+	I endeavour to understand the central values and practices of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families that access my centre.	0	1	1
14	All EC educators should receive professional learning on how to best meet the needs of English as an additional language learners.	0	4*	−1
15	It is important to recognise children's home languages and cultures in developing their sense of belonging, being and becoming.	1	1	0
16	Using different languages in an EC setting confuses children and should be discouraged.	−2	−3	−3
17+	I am aware of my own worldview and how it impacts on my practice.	0	0	0
18	I value different cultures' ways of knowing and being.	1	4	1
19+	Having children from different language backgrounds in an EC setting often leads to miscommunications between educators and children.	−2*	−2	−4
20	Having peers from different cultural and language backgrounds is beneficial for young children's social development.	1	2	−1*
21	It is difficult to teach when there are too many children learning English as an additional language in one room.	−2	−2	0
22+	It is important that learners of English as an additional language maintain their home language skills.	1	2	1
23	An educator's teaching approach should not change based on young children's cultural and language backgrounds.	−1	−2	2*
24	Early bilingualism is an asset that can lead to many long-term benefits.	3*	1	1
25	I support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's learning and use the cultural tools of the community.	2	3	−2*
26	All children's languages should be valued and supported.	2	1	2
27+	At home, parents should avoid speaking other languages to help their children learn English faster.	−4	−4	−4
28+	Children's cultural identity shapes their learning and development.	3	2	2
29	Children should be allowed to speak whatever language they prefer on the playground and during play activities.	2	0*	3
30	Having children with varying English abilities in EC settings is beneficial.	3	−1*	2
31	In an EC setting, learning English should be the priority.	−1	−3*	0
32	Children's use of their home language in the EC setting can help them learn English.	4*	−1	−2
33	Languages and cultures are inextricably linked to children's identity.	4	0*	4
34	EC educators can play a vital role in the maintenance of children's home languages.	2	0*	3

Note: Score range is from −4 to +4 and negative scores indicate disagreement. Consensus statements are marked with + in the left-hand column, while distinguishing factors are marked with * in the right-hand column.

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