

Social justice in early childhood education

Social justice is often embraced in early childhood education and care as a vision and philosophy which can drive pedagogical approaches. Central to this is a focus on creating more equitable and ethical spaces where all children can participate, and where children can relate to each other and to their communities in thoughtful and compassionate ways. When we engage with social justice in the early years, we often seek to explore issues and ideas around gender, sexuality, race, culture, and our environment. These are significant areas which can be exciting to explore with children; equally, they can raise challenges and uncertainties. This review explores the research on social justice and its significance in ECE. It will equip teachers with a heightened awareness around what social justice can mean and what it can contribute to their work with children, families, and communities, as well as how to navigate this area in confident and caring ways.

What is social justice?

The term 'social justice' has extensive meaning and history attached to it. Broadly speaking, social justice relates to a vision of equity for all. Relevant principles and issues often include those of human rights, access, and participation. Understanding how different people and communities experience the world is key, particularly with consideration towards aspects of identity (such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, dis/ability, age, location), how these intersect and interact, and experiences of privilege and marginalisation.

There is a range of different perspectives and understandings regarding 'social justice' as a concept. Some key areas in terms of how we understand social justice and matters relating to it include the conceptual history of the term¹; the wide-reaching effects of children's rights thinking²; and, with specific relevance to social justice in ECE, what is and what ought to be through a lens of love and hope³. There are different ways in which social justice is conceptualised and, as one author writes, 'As far as the conceptual history of social justice is concerned, this task is not yet complete'⁴. Even with this conceptual complexity, social justice in ECE is often driven by a strong focus on children's rights, which can serve communities in terms of supporting equitable access to education and supporting children's health, wellbeing, and safety⁵. As well as progressing forward through a lens of love and hope, critique and action are essential to effecting meaningful change across contexts and communities.

Why does social justice matter in early childhood education?

The significance of social justice is far reaching. It is relevant in educational contexts and beyond, and is very much a part of the lives that we all lead. Creating, sustaining, and enacting a vision of social justice can serve teachers in understanding, caring for, and supporting all children to learn and thrive. It is particularly important for teachers who may be navigating issues of justice or injustice in early childhood, which may include exploring children's questions and curiosities, working with family members, or navigating issues arising in the centre, school, or wider community.

What do teachers need to know about social justice?

Education and educational settings can be transformative for children, families, and communities, as well as for those teaching and leading in these settings. When we consider educational settings such as

early learning centres and schools as sites for change and transformation, there exists the potential to address issues of injustice. For example, one author writes:

Schools alone cannot transform the structural factors that lead to the maldistribution of wealth nor can they eliminate racism, sexism and other forms of social exclusion and cultural oppression. However, teachers in tandem with parents, teacher unions and community groups can play an active role in contesting inequitable education policies and practices, advocating for a fairer funding system for disadvantaged schools, developing more socially just curriculum and fostering a sense of optimism, belongingness and trust amongst students⁶.

In ECE settings, there is ample opportunity to undertake work of this nature in collaborative ways. The strong partnerships formed in ECE between teachers, children, families, and communities are conducive to engagement with advocacy and activism, as well as teaching for social justice. Key here is thinking across aspects of identity including gender, sexuality, race, culture, faith, and/or dis/ability, and how they exist in tandem and interact. In other words, an intersectional mindset is valuable⁷. Continued mindfulness towards socioeconomic disadvantage and its impacts is also important, as this was identified as a limitation of teachers' practice relating to social justice⁸ in a recent study.

An ongoing focus on children's lives and perspectives is also key. For example, a recent study exploring children's enactments of fairness in early years settings revealed that children think about and contend with fairness in complex, thoughtful, and contextual ways⁹. The findings of this study reinforce the strong [image of children](#) held in ECE and the centrality of this to advocacy work¹⁰.

In addition to embracing a strong image of children and a consciousness towards multiple and intersecting aspects of identity, there are many practical considerations for teachers seeking to enact a vision of social justice.

What does it look like to enact a vision of social justice in practice?

There are many ways in which ECE settings can be reimagined to honour and facilitate teaching for social justice. While there are principles, guidelines, and points of inspiration for teachers to embrace, there are also contextual considerations that must be factored in, such as the interests of children and the needs of the local community. Research reinforces the central importance of contextual relevance; for example, a recent study of Australian teachers in rural localities identified context and community as significant considerations¹¹. The following section steps through more holistic considerations which can inform local contextualised decision-making.

Teaching for social justice involves meaningfully understanding children, their identities, and the lives they lead. This includes [recognition of children's cultures](#) and engaging in [culturally responsive pedagogies](#), which can integrate critical literacy approaches to different texts, multicultural literature, and print-rich environments which are representative of diversity¹². Cultural competence is often advocated for in the early years; like social justice, this is a concept which is multi-faceted, with some ambiguity and contestation attached to it¹³. Research has been undertaken to understand teachers' understandings of and journeys with cultural competence, with resulting recommendations indicating that teachers should constantly question and reflect, and 'start from a place of not knowing; be open to possibilities; incorporate principles of respect, reciprocity, trust and understanding; all of which underpin Indigenous epistemologies and ways of doing'¹⁴.

Early childhood is a critical time for children to begin understanding and exploring gender¹⁵. As children navigate gender and their gendered lives¹⁶, it is important to examine discourses around gender¹⁷. There remains a persistent tendency in early years settings for gender to be binarised in everyday and

subtle ways¹⁸. For example, traditional gender roles may be reinforced through play experiences, such as continuing to equate superhero play with the masculine and princess play with the feminine, or typecasting particular professions as inherently male or female¹⁹. Teachers can engage in anti-bias²⁰ and gender-expansive²¹ practices which acknowledge the gendered nature of early childhood and seek to address gendered issues in meaningful ways. This can include challenging assumptions which stem from a binary and conventional view of gender, and seeking to create space for dialogue, exploration, and possibilities for all children.

Important also to enacting a vision of social justice in ECE is developing a meaningful understanding of the impacts of trauma on children, families, and communities. [Trauma](#) can have a significant impact on people throughout their lifetime. This may include Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) or events such as abuse, neglect, or natural disasters, which may be experienced individually or collectively. A recent and persistent example is the COVID-19 pandemic which continues to impact in individual and shared ways²². Guidelines relating to trauma-informed pedagogies for early childhood teachers may be further explored [here](#), with an emphasis on integrating philosophies and practices aligned to a social justice lens.

Teaching around culture and gender are two key examples among many possibilities in terms of enacting social justice in ECE. Other issues which are relevant and important include:

- Creating safe spaces where LGBTQI+ children and families feel welcomed, honoured, and supported – this includes resisting heteronormative ways of working²³ and ensuring rainbow families are meaningfully included and experience a sense of belonging²⁴.
- Decolonisation of education spaces, which focuses on acknowledging colonisation and its continued impacts, while seeking to disrupt and reconceptualise colonial understandings²⁵. It may mean critically reflecting on existing curriculum, resources, and practices, and considering whether they serve to sustain or privilege colonial narratives and how they can be reconsidered to make visible Indigenous and First Nations perspectives. In a conceptual paper focusing on the decolonisation of ECE, this is posited as a practice which can instil autonomy and self-belief in children to contribute to positive outcomes for all²⁶.
- Climate change and sustainability, which are matters of critical concern where children deserve a voice and can make a difference²⁷ – for example, by exploring ‘weathering-with’ pedagogies which foreground connectedness between children, weather, and the world²⁸.

Across these areas and how teachers engage with them, ethical considerations are essential. For example, one author writes that, when embracing activist teaching with ethics at the fore, ‘we must open rather than close dialogue, respect diverse perspectives in genuine ways, provide students with choices, be reflexive, and collaborate with others to ensure we don’t abuse the power of our positions’²⁹. These types of considerations can further inform how teachers honour children’s rights and enact a vision of social justice. In particular, critical reflection, which holds a central place in ECE, is a common theme in the literature surrounding social justice in education. Critical reflection should be undertaken regularly with focus on examining the privilege apparent in educational paradigms and curricula³⁰. Engaging in reflection around privilege can help teachers to understand their identities and experiences, as well as those of others, which can in turn develop and sustain quality practice³¹.

Embracing and enacting a vision of social justice in ECE is an ongoing project for any teacher. Importantly, it is a collaborative endeavour where teachers can unite, learn from each other’s perspectives and experiences, and support and care for each other. It gives teachers further opportunity to journey with children and families, in partnership, with a focus on understanding and supporting all children as individuals with their own voices and views. Meaningful engagement with philosophies and pedagogies

for social justice also opens up space to explore issues of profound importance, such as gender equity, LGBTQI+ rights, trauma and its impacts, and the climate crisis. While these are key examples, there are many other issues and ideas to explore, and a multitude of perspectives that children can bring to these important conversations as we continue working to honour children's rights and social justice in ECE.

Recommended further reading

Chapman, R. (2022.) Moving beyond 'gender-neutral': creating gender expansive environments in early childhood education. *Gender and Education*, 34(1), 1-16. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1902485>

Hargraves, V. (2019). Principles for culturally responsive teaching in early childhood education. <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/principles-for-culturally-responsive-teaching-in-early-childhood-education/>

Lee, S., Adair, J. K., Payne, K. A. & Barry, D. (2021). Revisioning fairness as social justice in Early Childhood Education. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01233-x>

Martin, K., & Berger, E. (2022). Childhood trauma and its impact. <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/childhood-trauma-and-its-impact-2>

Sinclair, K. (2021). Disrupting normalised discourses: Ways of knowing, being and doing cultural competence. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 50(1), 203-211. <http://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2018.23>

Glossary

Intersectionality: The connection or intersection of different aspects of a person's identity, such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, dis/ability. Examining identity through an intersectional lens helps in understanding multiple and overlapping factors which can create dis/advantage, marginalisation, or privilege for people and communities.

Marginalisation: Marginalisation relates to the exclusionary social positioning and limitation or denial of rights, status, access, opportunities, and/or resources to particular people or groups. It may be related to aspects of a person's identity or lived experience.

Privilege: Social privilege refers to the advantage and power afforded to particular people or groups based on their identity/identities or status within society.

Endnotes

- 1 Jackson, B. (2005). The conceptual history of social justice. *Political Studies Review*, 3(3), 356 – 373. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9299.2005.00028.x>
- 2 Smith, A.B., McLeigh, J.D, & Spaulding, W. (2016). Achieving social justice for children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 86(5), 500-507. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000191>
- 3 Bloch, M. (2019). Social justice in early education and child care: What is and what ought to be. In S.A. Kessler & B. B. Swadener, *Educating for Social Justice in Early Childhood*. Taylor & Francis Group. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/detail.action?docID=5894126>
- 4 Jackson, 2005.

- 5 Smith, McLeigh, & Spaulding, 2016.
- 6 McInerney, P. (2012). Rediscovering discourses of social justice: Making hope practical. In B. Down & J. Smyth (Eds.), *Critical voices in teacher education: Teaching for social justice in conservative times*. Springer.
- 7 Konstantoni, K. & Emejulu, A. (2016). When intersectionality met childhood studies: the dilemmas of a travelling concept. *Children's Geographies*, 15(1), 6-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1249824>
- 8 Nolan, A., & Lamb, S. (2019). Exploring the social justice work of early childhood educators. *Policy Futures in Education*, 17(5), 618–633. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210318796282>
- 9 Lee, S., Adair, J.K., Payne, K.A. & Barry, D. (2021). Revisioning fairness as social justice in Early Childhood Education. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01233-x>
- 10 Lee et al., 2021.
- 11 Christopher, V., Turner, M., & Green, N. C. (2022). Educator perceptions of early learning environments as places for privileging social justice in rural and remote communities. *Education Sciences*, 12(1), 40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/educsci12010040>
- 12 Bennett, S., Alberton Gunn, A., Gayle-Evans, G., Barrera, E. S. & Leung, C. B. (2018). Culturally responsive literacy practices in an early childhood community. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(2), 241-248. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0839-9>
- 13 Sinclair, K. (2021). Disrupting normalised discourses: Ways of knowing, being and doing cultural competence. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 50(1), 203-211. <http://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2018.23>
- 14 Sinclair, 2021.
- 15 Callahan, S. & Nicholas, L. (2018). Dragon wings and butterfly wings: Implicit gender binarism in early childhood. *Gender and Education*, 31(6), 705-723. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1552361>
- 16 Robinson, K.H. & Diaz, C.J. (2016). *Diversity and difference in childhood: Issues for theory and practice*. McGraw Hill.
- 17 Chapman, R. (2022.) Moving beyond 'gender-neutral': creating gender expansive environments in early childhood education. *Gender and Education*, 34(1), 1-16. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1902485>
- 18 Callahan & Nicholas, 2018.
- 19 Callahan & Nicholas, 2018.
- 20 Campbell, S., Smith, K., & Alexander, K. (2016). The gender factor: Continuing the dialogue. In R. R. Scarlet (Ed.), *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood* (3rd ed., pp. 41-50). Multiverse.
- 21 Chapman, R. (2022.) Moving beyond 'gender-neutral': creating gender expansive environments in early childhood education. *Gender and Education*, 34(1), 1-16. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1902485>
- 22 Phelps, Chavez & Sperry, Linda. (2020). Children and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, & Policy*, 12.

- <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000861>; Tosone, C. (2021). Shared trauma, shared resilience during a pandemic (pp. 1-11). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-61442-3>
- 23 Callahan & Nicholas, 2018.
- 24 Cherrington, S., Cooper, K. & Shuker, M.J. (2021). Beyond invisibility: Early childhood teachers' inclusion of rainbow families. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 1099–1111. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01121-w>; Liang, X. M., & Cohnsen, C. (2020). Towards creating inclusive environments for LGBTIQ- parented families in early childhood education and care settings: A review of the literature. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 45(1), 43–55. <https://doi.org/10.3316/ielapa.094674145589366>
- 25 Atkinson, S. (2016). The challenges and successes of Indigenous parents as decolonisers of 'mainstream' early childhood spaces in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. In R. R. Scarlet (Ed.), *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood* (3rd ed., pp. 145-156). Multiverse.
- 26 Oppong, S. (2020). Raising a new generation in a postcolonial era through decolonised early childhood development and care services. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120970238>
- 27 Benevento, S.V. (2022). Communicating climate change risk to children: A thematic analysis of children's literature. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01294-y>
- 28 Rooney, T., Blaise, M., & Royds, F. (2021). With shadows, dust and mud: Activating weathering-with pedagogies in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 22(2), 109–123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120939202>
- 29 Hytten, K. (2015). Ethics in teaching for democracy and social justice. *Democracy & Education*, 23(2). <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss2/1>
- 30 Vilson, J.L. (2017). Love as a language for educational justice. *The Educational Forum*, 81(4), 360-362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2017.1353324>
- 31 Nolan & Lamb, 2019.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Madeleine Dobson

Dr Madeleine Dobson is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education & Care and the Director of Student Experience & Community Engagement in the Curtin University School of Education. Her research focuses on children's rights, social justice, and caring and trauma-informed pedagogies in ECEC and other educational contexts.