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Towards an Ecology of Relations: Reconceptualising Relational Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract

Relational pedagogy has shifted educational focus from knowledge transmission to cultivating relational conditions for learning, foregrounding responsiveness, recognition, and democratic participation. In early childhood education and care (ECEC), however, "the relational" remains predominately anchored in the educator–child dyad, narrowing what becomes visible as pedagogy and obscuring the relational complexity of everyday life in ECEC settings. This conceptual article reconceptualises relational pedagogy in ECEC as an ecology of relations and brings four often-marginalised domains into view: children's self-relations, child–parent relations, peer relations, and more-than-human relations. Together with child–educator relations, these five relational domains are framed as interdependent and mutually shaping, such that shifts or ruptures in one domain reverberate across the others. Drawing together relational pedagogy scholarship, curriculum framings, and critiques of neoliberal market-accountability governance, this article shows how dyadic and metric-driven logics can position these wider relations as pedagogically secondary or render them invisible. An ecology-of-relations framing offers conceptual language for recognising, researching, and defending relational flourishing in ECEC, and for redirecting attention toward how ecological relations are made possible, sustained, and reshaped in ECEC contexts.

Keywords: relational pedagogy; early childhood education and care; pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Conceptualisations of pedagogy shape what becomes possible in early childhood education and care (ECEC)[1]: what is noticed, valued, and resourced in everyday practice. In recent years, growing recognition that "learning is a profoundly social process" (Sidorkin, 2022, p. 2) has fuelled interest in relational framings of pedagogy that place relationships at the centre of education. Relational pedagogy frames learning as co-produced through participation in situated encounters, where knowledge is generated in and through relationships (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008; Riddle & Hickey, 2024). From this perspective, ECEC settings are not simply instructional places where children "become educated" (Riddle & Hickey, 2024, p. 2). They are dynamic relational fields of practice in which relationships grow and develop through everyday interactions. The relational field is shaped by the broader arrangements that pattern everyday interactions in particular settings. Accordingly, relational practice in ECEC is never guaranteed by theory

and policy alone. It is mediated by the historical, cultural, and political conditions that prefigure how relationships are established, valued, and sustained (Kemmis et al., 2014; Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008).

Within this relational turn, much research anchors "the relational" in the educator[2]-learner relationship. This emphasis has been important in challenging traditional models of teaching as transmission of knowledge, and foregrounding responsiveness, recognition, and democratic participation. Yet it also quietly sets the boundaries of what becomes visible as "pedagogical": suggesting that the educator-learner relationship is what counts the most. This article argues that, locating "the relational" primarily in the educator-learner dyad risks misrecognising the relational complexity of everyday life in ECEC settings. In ECEC, children move within multiple relational networks throughout the day; they navigate relationships with parents and families, form and negotiate peer relations, and participate in more-than-human relations with materials, spaces, and ecologies. Crucially, they also engage in ongoing self-relational work, coming to know, position, and regulate themselves within these relational worlds. When relational pedagogy is theorised mainly through the educator-learner dyad, these other relations and conditions can appear as background context or "supporting factors," rather than as constitutive sites where pedagogical meanings and possibilities are made and remade. In other words, a dyadic lens risks shrinking the pedagogical field at precisely the point where ECEC practice is most relationally complex.

This article reconceptualises relational pedagogy in ECEC as an ecology of relations: a relational field that is continually composed, sustained, and reshaped through the interdependence of multiple relational domains (i.e., self, peers, families, educators, and more-than-human) and the practice conditions that enable and constrain them. From this perspective, pedagogy does not act only on the child through the educator's relational competencies; it also acts on the ecology by creating and sustaining the conditions for multiple relations to flourish. Reframing relational pedagogy in this way matters because what is not named is easily overlooked. Under contemporary conditions of marketisation and performative accountability, ECEC is increasingly governed through what can be standardised, documented, and audited (Moss, 2014; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). In such contexts, relational work beyond the dyad—attending to children's self-relational vulnerabilities, sustaining family continuity, or cultivating ethical relations with places and materials—can be marginalised as "extra" care rather than recognised as pedagogy. By making the broader relational field conceptually explicit, this article contributes a language for recognising, researching, and defending inherently interconnected relational nature of ECEC, and for arguing that relational flourishing depends not only on individual educator practice but on the conditions that make the ecology of relations possible and sustainable.

This article proceeds in eight sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 outlines a historical perspective on how learning has been conceptualised in order to situate the relational turn in education. Section 3 then explores relational pedagogy as a pedagogical orientation, before Section 4 considers how this literature has remained largely anchored in the educator-learner dyad. Section 5 identifies key gaps in the current conceptualisation of relational pedagogy, arguing that this dyadic emphasis can obscure the broader ecology of relations through which children's learning occurs. Section 6 then discusses how neoliberal market-accountability conditions narrow what becomes recognisable as relational pedagogy in practice. Section 7 proposes an ecology-of-relations framing as a reconceptualisation of relational pedagogy in ECEC. The article concludes by reflecting on the conceptual significance of this ecological reframing for researching and sustaining relational practice in ECEC.

2. A Historical Perspective on How Learning Has Been Conceptualised

Historically, education in Western culture has been conceptualised predominantly within an individualistic framework, shaped by what Gergen (2015) identifies as a long-standing privileging of the individual as the origin of reason, where "the individual mind is primary" and "relations are secondary and optional" (p. 242). Influenced significantly by Enlightenment thinking and Cartesian dualism, the mind was considered as a separate, rational entity distinct from social context and relationships (Gergen, 2015; Stetsenko, 2008). Within this tradition, knowledge was treated as a commodity to be transmitted, and education was thus largely viewed as a process aimed at filling the individual minds of students (Gergen, 2015). The teacher, positioned as the knowledgeable authority, was tasked with delivering prescribed content, while the student's role was one of passive reception. The underlying assumption was that individual cognitive mastery, detached from relational influences, represented the pinnacle of educational success. However, growing recognition of the inherently social and interactive nature of human development led scholars to question the validity of this traditional paradigm. Thinkers such as Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky advanced relational perspectives that directly challenged the subject-object divide, proposing instead that development unfolds through continuous dialogue and interaction with the world (Stetsenko, 2008). These shifts helped establish learning as situated and socially co-constructed, rather than privately "owned" by the individual mind.

The ontologically relational nature of learning not only reshaped scholarly understandings of education but also informed policy discourses. Building on this understanding of learning as co-constructed, early childhood policy frameworks increasingly position relationships not as background conditions but as central pedagogical commitments. In ECEC policy frameworks, relationships are explicitly foregrounded as a core condition for young children's learning, wellbeing, and belonging. For example, the Australian National Early Years Learning Farmwork (EYLF) (AGDE, 2022) positions "secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships" as a guiding principle for practice, emphasising connection with educators, peers, and families as foundational to learning. New Zealand's Early Childhood Curriculum: Te Whāriki similarly frames learning as emerging through responsive and reciprocal relationships with "people, places and things," weaving children's relational worlds into its principles and strands (MoE, 2017). In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework identifies "positive relationships" as one of four overarching principles shaping early years practice (DfE, 2025). It is within this wider relational turn, relational pedagogy emerged, reconceptualising learning as a lived, ethical, and dialogic encounter rather than merely the delivery of content or mastery of outcomes.

3. Relational Pedagogy

Sidorkin (2002) was among the first to name a pedagogy of relation, advancing the argument that learning is, fundamentally, "a function of relation" (p. 2). Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) articulate education as a practice grounded in the reality of human relationships, asserting that meaningful education occurs only when the relational dimension is prioritised over technical or behavioural control. Sidorkin (2002) argues that effective teaching strategies are not universally applicable, as their effectiveness relies heavily on the specific relational dynamics present within each educational context. Pedagogical efforts must attend to the quality and nature of those relationships, rather than rely on technical delivery alone. Educational focus therefore should shift from the individual learner toward the relationships and interactions that form the context of learning (Gergen, 2015). Sidorkin (2002) critiques models of education that reduce pedagogy to "useful things," urging instead a recognition of what is irreducibly human—risk, uncertainty, and ethical encounter. Biesta (2004) extends this argument, proposing that education's pedagogical significance

lies not in what is taught or learned, but in how we engage relationally—with knowledge, others, and uncertainty. Education is framed as an encounter where its focus shifts from "individuals, groups, and their practices" to the relations through which learning becomes possible (Noddings et al., 2004, p. 2).

Education, then, is not located in the transmission of knowledge, nor does it reside within the teacher or the student individually, but rather in the relational "gap" (Biesta, 2004, p. 2) between them—an "intersubjective space" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 18) where learning, meaning, and subjectivity emerge through interactions. Riddle and Hickey (2024, p. 3) elaborate on the pedagogical potential within this relational gap, manifesting through the evolving "bond" between educators and learners as they jointly negotiate meaning through curriculum. This relational orientation challenges traditional hierarchical models of knowledge transmission by embracing a democratic ethos where power, voice, and responsibility are shared across the educational relationship (Riddle & Hickey, 2024). Relational dynamics are deeply shaped by the diverse histories, dispositions, and interpersonal ways of being that both teachers and students bring into the educational encounter. Papatheodorou and Moyles (2008) in their writings on relational pedagogy in ECEC, emphasise how "culture, ethos and environment" (p. 20) significantly influence these reciprocal understandings. They highlight that the cultural context informs shared meanings and practices; the ethos establishes the relational climate, such as trust, respect, and openness which underpin authentic dialogue; and the physical and social environment offers affordances and constraints that influence how relationships are initiated, sustained, and experienced. Kemmis et al. (2017) note that learning is fundamentally social and "interactionally secured" through the everyday "sayings, doings, and relatings" that constitute educational practice (p. 46). From this perspective, knowledge emerges within the unfolding of relational encounters, grounded in the culturally, politically and materially situated dynamics of everyday life in educational settings. Thus, relationality is not a soft or secondary concern, but an essential precondition through which educational experiences become meaningful. Yet the field has tended to situate relationality primarily in the educator-learner relationship. The next section traces this dominant educator-learner focus, while keeping in view the possibility that other relations may be sidelined.

4. Relational Pedagogy and the Educator-Learner Focus

Across much of the relational pedagogy literature, "the relational" is most often theorised and enacted through the educator-learner relationship, which is positioned as the primary locus where pedagogical meaning is generated. For example, Riddle and Hickey (2024) note, "relational pedagogy emphasises the relationships that teachers and students generate in the conduct of producing knowledge as part of the educational encounter" (p. 6). Within relational pedagogy, educational relations are framed as dependent upon mutual recognition and responsiveness between educator and learner, positioning them as active participants who co-shape the pedagogical experience (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Gergen, 2015; Riddle & Hickey, 2024). In contrast to traditional hierarchical, monologic relationships between educators and learners, relational pedagogy advocates for dialogic, collaborative encounters. The educator is therefore refigured less as an authoritative transmitter of knowledge and more as a responsive relational subject who shifts roles between facilitator, mentor, coach, or companion, according to relational contexts (Gergen, 2015). The educator can therefore be characterised as a "provocateur"—who provokes thinking, disrupts certainty, and sustains a sense of possibility in learning (Riddle & Hickey, 2024, p. 33). In this way, educators "mind the gap" (Biesta, 2004, p. 2) as they remain attentive to the relational space between themselves and learners, and invite learners into encounters marked by care, openness, and challenge. Collectively, these framings centre

pedagogy in the relational space between educator and learner, viewing teaching as a meaning-making practice produced in and through their encounter. Yet the relational labour is weighted toward educators, who are positioned as the primary agents responsible for attunement and the cultivation of pedagogical possibility. As Riddle and Hickey explain (2024) "Pedagogically, the role of teacher is to mediate the possibilities for knowledge generation and discovery" (p. 30) in the moments of pedagogical encounters.

This educator-learner emphasis is not only central to how teaching is conceptualised in relational pedagogy, it also structures how curriculum and knowledge are positioned within relational framing. In contrast to standardised or pre-determined curricula, which are often disembodied and contextually detached (Thayer-Bacon, 2004), relational pedagogy frames curriculum as a dynamic, co-constructed process emerging from dialogue, shared interests, and mutual engagement among educator and learner (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Sidorkin, 2002; Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008; Riddle & Hickey, 2024). Curriculum is therefore a dialogic, democratic, and shared enterprise where educators and learners jointly negotiate meanings and knowledge (Riddle & Hickey, 2024). Curriculum is the central site where relational dynamics and learning are enacted, sustained, and made meaningful (Riddle & Hickey, 2024). From this perspective, curriculum is not a neutral container of facts delivered by educators, but a terrain of democratic negotiation and collaborative inquiry, made possible through educators' mediating work in opening and sustaining the relational space in which learners can participate as co-constructors of knowledge.

The preceding points highlight that the relational approach to curriculum, however, is still discussed mainly within educator-learner relationships. Such framing ignores the wider relational ecologies existing in ECEC, where learning unfolds through multiple relations and across routines, spaces, and settings. In ECEC, the relational approach is paramount. The relational, emotional, and ethical efforts are central rather than supplemental to teaching young children (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008). As Papatheodorou and Moyles (2008) argue, early learning is sustained through relationships that involve families, peers, and the environment, and they frame trust, reciprocity, and responsiveness as central conditions for pedagogy. However, these scholars also describe these relations as being adult-mediated domains, understood through the work adults do with children or with other adults. (for example, educators building partnerships with families, educators supporting peer relations, and educators shaping environments), rather than a relational ecology in which children's relations become pedagogically legible in their own right. This orientation is visible in Papatheodorou and Moyles' (2008) book 'Learning Together in the Early Years: Exploring Relational Pedagogy', where the organising structure is as follows: Part I, "Culture, environment and adult–child relationships"; Part II, "Adult–child relationships at micro level"; and Part III, "Adult–adult relationships for professional development". Such structuring does valuable conceptual work in foregrounding relationality in ECEC, but it also risks reproducing an educator-leaner dyad problem in what becomes pedagogically recognisable. Relational pedagogy is expanded beyond transmission of knowledge, yet it remains organised around educator–child (and educator-educator) relations as the main coordinates for naming and legitimising relational work.

By contrast, there exist international ECEC curriculum frameworks that define curriculum expansively in ways that conceptually exceed a dyadic locus. For example, the Australian EYLF (AGDE, 2022) defines curriculum as "all the interactions, experiences, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children's learning, development and wellbeing" (p. 7). In New Zealand, Te Whāriki explains that curriculum includes "all the experiences, activities and events, both direct and indirect, that occur within the ECE setting," (MoE, 2017, p. 7). These definitions locate curriculum not in a set of teaching moments but the lived, collective life of the setting, made

in and through everyday routines, encounters, and events. From this view, curriculum manifests through everyday participation in which children collaboratively and spontaneously compose learning in real time with others, including families, educators, peers, and the more-than-human world of materials, spaces, and ecologies. In other words, pedagogical meaning in ECEC is generated through an ecology of relations, where educator–child relationship is significant but not singular. Learning also emerges through family knowledge, peer negotiations, and children's engagements with place, objects, and nonhuman life. Overall, ECEC curriculum frameworks point toward a wider distribution of pedagogical significance across the relational life of the setting (AGDE, 2022; MoE, 2017). Yet these framings are often still centred on the educator–child dyad. For example, in the Australian EYLF (AGDE, 2022, pp. 30–63), each learning outcome is articulated through paired prompts. One specifies evidence in children's learning ("This is evident when children, for example: . . ."); the other specifies educator actions ("Educators promote this learning for all children when they, for example: . . ."). Together, these prompts make learning intelligible to the EYLF's audiences (predominantly educators) as something observable, documentable, and assessable in everyday practice. This structure can inadvertently centre pedagogy as what educators do to promote learning and what children display as evidence, even when the curriculum definition gestures to a wider relational ecology.

5. Gaps in the Current Conceptualisation of Relational Pedagogy

Relational pedagogy has made vital contributions by reframing education as a relational and democratic endeavour. Even so, much of the literature continues to centre the educator-learner dyad as the primary site of pedagogical meaning (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008; Riddle & Hickey, 2024). In ECEC, such dyadic centring can narrow what becomes pedagogically recognisable by positioning educator–child relationship as the main pathway through which learning is understood to occur. As a result, relationality can appear to take place primarily between educator and child, while other forms of meaning-making are rendered secondary or derivative.

This dyadic centring is particularly constraining in ECEC contexts, where children's learning unfolds within an ecology of relations that extends beyond educator–child interaction. Pedagogical meaning is also generated through children's relations with families and peers, and through their engagements with more-than-human others (animals, plants, materials, places, and landscapes) (Corsaro, 2018; Kuczynski, 2003; Speldewinde & Campbell, 2024). In addition, a further relational domain is often under-theorised within relational pedagogy: children's relations with themselves. Children continually undertake self-relational work as they interpret others' responses, negotiate belonging and exclusion, and develop capacities for self-regulation and self-understanding in everyday activity (Jackson et al., 2020). When relational pedagogy is narrowed to the educator–child axis, these wider relational processes, including children's self-relations, risk being treated as contextual backdrop rather than as constitutive dimensions of pedagogy. Attending to these gaps is therefore necessary for expanding the theoretical and practical horizons of relational pedagogy in ECEC. Importantly, these conceptual gaps are intensified by neoliberal logics that reorganise early childhood education around accountability, efficiency, and measurable outcomes, narrowing what counts as pedagogical work and rendering relational labour difficult to see, value, and sustain.

6. Impact of Neoliberalism on Relational Pedagogy

ECEC policy frameworks and relational pedagogy scholarship both position relationships as foundational to young children's learning, wellbeing, and belonging. Yet these relational practices are never guaranteed through policy or theory alone. The enactment

of relational practices is always site-specific, shaped by the conditions that enable and constrain what educators can say, do, and relate in particular settings, including local histories, organisational cultures, workforce conditions, regulatory regimes, and material resourcing (Kemmis et al., 2014). In other words, relationships may be articulated as a pedagogical "core," but what becomes possible in practice depends on whether conditions support time-rich, attentive, and ethically responsive engagement with children, families, colleagues, and more-than-human worlds.

The uneven realisation of relational commitments in everyday practice is shaped, in significant ways, by the growing influence since the 1980s of neoliberalism as a governing ideology in ECEC. Neoliberal reforms have drawn the sector into market logics of competition, measurability, and accountability, reshaping how relationships are positioned and valued (Moss, 2014; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sidorkin, 2022; Woodrow & Press, 2007). Neoliberal ideologies prioritise individualism, standardisation, performativity, and accountability—values that sit in tension with the inherently collective, mutual, and reciprocal nature of relational pedagogy (Sidorkin, 2022). Such paradigms reduce education to measurable outcomes and ignore its ethical, political, and relational dimensions (Moss, 2014). Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) critique neoliberalism's image of ECEC, in which the parent is positioned as a consumer who purchases ECEC "through the exercise of individual choice and economic calculation" (p. 91), while the ECEC centre is "constructed as a business competing to sell a commodity" (p. 101), refigured as a "site of efficient investment" (p. 102), that will "ready children for the future" (p. 102). Within this same imaginary, the young child becomes "a not-yet adult," "unready to be a market actor," and the early childhood educator is recast as a "competent technician" whose "primary task is to deliver, and document delivery of, prescribed outcomes" through "a script spelt out by pedagogical programmes or guidelines" (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, pp. 99–108). These scholars argue that once ECEC is organised around consumer choice, competitive provision, and return-on-investment logics, richer democratic and relational possibilities are displaced, and practice is re-scripted through managerial control and performativity (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

The neoliberal framing of ECEC narrows opportunities for meaningful relational engagement, diminishing the educational value of intersubjective connections, co-construction, and mutual responsiveness. It also concentrates responsibility in the educator, casting "being relational" as a form of individual labour to be performed, evidenced, and accounted for. In ECEC, this shift intensifies the contradiction between the relational conditions through which children learn and the metrics through which learning is recognised and rewarded. When market-accountability logics govern practice, relational life is reclassified as soft work and pushed to the margins of what counts as "useful" learning (Sidorkin, 2002). What is prioritised is what can be standardised, documented, and audited, while the time-rich, situated work of sustaining peer belonging, family continuity, and more-than-human engagements is treated as optional, unproductive, or simply out of view. The result is a narrowing of pedagogical possibilities, as the nuanced everyday negotiations underpinning these pedagogical encounters are often rendered invisible.

7. Towards an Ecology of Relations

This section proposes a reconceptualisation of relational pedagogy as a relational ecology, shifting attention from dyadic emphasis to the broader arrangements through which pedagogy is made possible. The term *ecology* emphasises interdependence and the broader relational conditions through which pedagogical life unfolds. It draws on ecological perspectives that understand development and education as occurring within dynamic, interconnected relational fields rather than through isolated individuals or singular rela-

tionships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). While educator–child relations remain vital, the argument developed here is that pedagogical meaning and possibility are generated, and constrained, through the wider relational arrangements that shape children's everyday participation in ECEC. Under neoliberal conditions that privilege measurable outcomes and individualised performance, these wider relations can become difficult to recognise as pedagogical work, even as they remain central to children's learning, belonging, and wellbeing. Reconceptualising relational pedagogy as an ecology of relations therefore makes visible the relational labour involved in composing, sustaining, and repairing multiple forms of connection across the day. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of this shift.

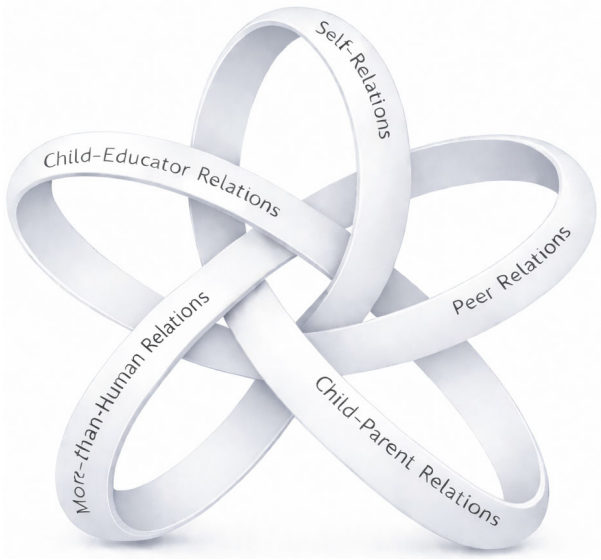

Figure 1. The Ecology of Relations in ECEC.

Rather than depicting relational domains as separate strands, the ecology of relations is presented as a single continuous form, signalling that children's relational worlds are constituted through entangled and mutually shaping connections. The loops label five interdependent domains: children's self-relations, child–parent[3] relations, child–educator relations, peer relations, and more-than-human relations. The twists and crossings emphasise that changes in one domain (for example, peer inclusion/exclusion or self-understanding) reverberate across the others, shaping what becomes pedagogically possible. On this basis, relational pedagogy is reconceptualised as an ecology of relations, elaborated through these five interdependent domains as constitutive dimensions through which pedagogy is enacted in ECEC: children's self-relations, child–parent relations, child–educator relations, peer relations, and more-than-human relations.

Although child–educator relations constitute one domain within this ecology, they are already extensively theorised across relational pedagogy scholarship and ECEC policy and practice literature; accordingly, the discussion that follows foregrounds the relational domains that remain comparatively less visible yet equally significant in pedagogical life—children's self-relations, child–parent relations, peer relations, and more-than-human relations.

7.1. Self-Relations

Including children's relationship with themselves in the ecology of relations is important because how children relate to others is always mediated by how they see, position and value themselves as participants in those relationships (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2000; Jackson et al., 2020; Reschke, 2019; Rochat, 2024). Institute of

Medicine and National Research Council (2000) describe the rapid transformation of young children's self-understanding in the early years as "The completely unself-conscious baby becomes a preschooler who not only can describe herself in great detail but also whose behaviour is partially motivated by how she wants others to view and judge her" (p. 89). Self-relation in early years can be understood as the child's ongoing work of making sense of themselves within relationships. Thus, children are not simply in relationships; they are continuously interpreting how they are seen, what roles are available to them, and what forms of closeness, care and recognition they can seek and expect from others (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2000; Jackson et al., 2020; Reschke, 2019; Rochat, 2024). This continuous self-work foregrounds that, questions of who one is and how one can be with others are not purely internal or abstract; they are worked out in and through children's everyday encounters with others. Self-relation is therefore, from the outset, itself a relational practice.

This self-relational dimension is evident in the Australian EYLF (AGDE, 2022) which places "Children have a strong sense of identity" as the first learning outcome. The framework describes identity as constructed through relationships with families, communities, people, places and things. Te Whāriki likewise positions identity as relational and situated, strengthened when children are accepted as who they are and when their languages, cultures, and world views are actively affirmed within everyday curriculum life (MoE, 2017). Jackson et al. (2020) conceptualise a strong sense of identity in ECEC as a unique sense of who one is, how one belongs and how one is valued in a learning community, with both personal and social identity emerging from everyday interactions and assessments in their environments. Young children come to know themselves not only as physical agents (what they can do) but also as "what others say I am" as they internalise the names, descriptions and evaluations offered by others (Reschke, 2019, p. 6). Everyday practices in ECEC such as how educators distribute attention, label behaviour, and how peers decide who gets included in play, negotiate roles and rules, all feed into children's emerging sense of: Am I someone who is listened to? Am I a "good friend" or "troublemaker"? Do I belong here? These self-relations, in turn, condition how children approach others: whether they feel able to initiate relationships, take relational risks, or withdraw to protect themselves (Cooke & Francisco, 2021).

This relational account of identity is echoed in empirical work on human self-consciousness, which argues that self-identity is always already oriented toward others' evaluative gaze (Rochat, 2024). From early infancy, human beings become "co-conscious", aware of themselves "with others in mind," so that the self is constituted as "an entity among other entities," always in relation to a social world (Rochat, 2024, p. 1610). Cross-cultural study on self-concept shows that children develop domain-specific understandings of themselves in social and learning contexts that reflect the values and expectations communicated in family and school life (Wang & Li, 2003). In this light, practices that emphasise compliance, comparison or deficit framings of behaviour may cultivate internalised self-criticism or self-silencing (Ashra et al., 2025). At the same time, emerging research on early childhood self-compassion highlights self-awareness, self-kindness and emotional self-regulation as key capacities supporting children's wellbeing and social adjustment in early educational settings (Engina & Ulutaş, 2024; Neuenschwander & Von Gunten, 2025). Thus, the self is not a fixed inner property that subsequently enters relationships, but is continually formed in interaction with others and the environment. This means that children's self-relations, how they understand their own visibility, voice and legitimacy, are themselves relational achievements, co-constructed through how they are recognised, valued, responded to, and invited to participate in relationships.

If relational pedagogy attends only to outward ties (child–parents, child–educator, peer-peer, more-than-human) without also considering children's evolving self-relations, it risks overlooking how feelings of worth, competence, shame, vulnerability and agency shape children's possibilities for connection and participation in ECEC. As Biesta (2021) argues, education must not reduce learners to objects of intervention or measurement, but should remain oriented to the child's "subject-ness"—their capacity to exist as subject "in and with the world" (pp. 2, 9). Treating self-relation as a distinct yet interconnected dimension of the ecology of relations therefore enables inquiry not only into how relationships are fostered, but also into how everyday arrangements of practices position children in relation to themselves. On this view, the question is not simply what kinds of relationships children are surrounded by, but what kinds of selves those relationships make possible. Bringing self-relation into the ecology of relations thus deepens what *relational* means in ECEC by foregrounding the pedagogical conditions through which children come to inhabit themselves as subjects among others.

7.2. Child–Parent Relations

The earliest conditions for growth are formed within family relationships and the ordinary, repeated practices of care, communication, and guidance that constitute children's everyday worlds. Parents are therefore foundational to children's learning, development, and wellbeing (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2000; Kuczynski, 2003; Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). The EYLF similarly acknowledges that children's first attachments occur within families and that these early trusting relationships provide a secure base from which children explore their environments and build new relationships (AGDE, 2022). This view aligns with foundational attachment theory, such as the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth, which emphasises the importance of secure attachment relationships between children and their primary caregivers within families for development (Bretherton, 1992). Parents thus occupy a distinctive, non-substitutable place in children's lives: "the development of young children unfolds in the context of their relationships with the important adults in their lives" (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013, p. 1640). Importantly, however, such influence is not adequately captured if it is described as flowing only from parent to child.

The child–parent relationship is not simply a unidirectional influence but is constituted through "nurturing relationships and mutually responsive interactions" between parents and children (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013, p. 1635). parents' everyday practices shape children's relational and developmental possibilities over time, while children actively shape parents' responses, family routines, and dynamics (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2000; Kuczynski, 2003). Parents continually adapt their practices in response to their children's characteristics, temperament, and needs; moreover, "the childcare programs that children attend, the peers they associate with" all contribute to "the network of context in which parenting is embedded" (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2000, p. 227). From this perspective, children, "as active agents in family life," influence parents' feelings, decisions, and practices just as parents influence them (Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003, p. 92; Morrow, 2003). The child–parent relationship, then, is best conceptualised as negotiated relational practices in which children can be both recipients of care and contributors to family life.

If children's development is co-constructed in reciprocal child–parent relations, then the pedagogical conditions for learning are not formed only through interactions inside ECEC settings. These conditions are also shaped by the continuities and discontinuities children experience and negotiate between home and ECEC (AGDE, 2022; Harju et al., 2024). Children may experience familiarity and similarity across settings in routines,

communication styles, and expectations about participation, which supports coherence and belonging (AGDE, 2022). At the same time, they may need to navigate discontinuities, such as mismatches in relational norms, language and cultural tools, or expectations of children's agency (Harju et al., 2024). Either way, children enter ECEC already situated within family relationships, histories, and cultural ways of being, and they return each day to families where what happens in ECEC is reinterpreted and carried into everyday routines, so that learning is continually shaped and reshaped as experiences move back and forth between the setting and home. Thus, a relational pedagogy that stays inside the setting (or inside the educator–child dyad) risks treating child–parent relations as mere "context," when they are actually part of the relational work through which children's agency, identity, and belonging are formed.

Yet what counts as "parent engagement" is contested, and it is often enacted in narrow, service-led ways (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Rogers et al., 2024; Sadownik & Višnjić Jevtić, 2023; Tayler, 2006). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) distinguish involvement in centre activities (e.g., participating in educator-led events) from engagement, arguing for a shift from parents supporting the institution toward a more equitable distribution of agency negotiated between families and educators. In practice, family partnerships can slide into one-way information delivery, professional jargon, and compliance routines that position families as recipients rather than co-contributors to curriculum decisions (Hadley & Rouse, 2018). These patterns are intensified under market-based and neoliberal conditions, where families can be framed as consumers or stakeholders to be managed, rather than relational partners, reproducing top down "protectorate" logics and a democratic deficit in which the modes and purposes of involvement are set without families' own terms (Rogers et al., 2024; Sadownik & Višnjić Jevtić, 2023, p. 3; Tayler, 2006). Taken together, this suggests that the problem is not a lack of policy commitment to partnership, but the institutional and political conditions that shape what kinds of family participation become possible, legitimate, and valued in everyday ECEC practice.

Relational pedagogy therefore requires more than involving parents through service-led activities or communication routines; it requires practices that recognise families as co-constitutive partners in children's learning and intentionally build "intersubjectivity and reciprocity" across the ECEC setting, families, and the wider community (Tayler, 2006, p. 262). This shifts partnership work from information exchange and compliance toward shared meaning-making and pedagogical deliberation, where quality is not measured by visibility (attendance, volunteering) but by whether relationships enable shared agency and hold space for intersubjective understanding (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Hadley & Rouse, 2018; Tayler, 2006); In doing so, it recognise that children's sense of belonging emerges through the interdependent relations they live within, move between, and help to (re)make across home, community, and ECEC settings.

7.3. Peer Relations

In ECEC, much of what children learn is negotiated not in direct dialogue with an educator but through spontaneous, often unpredictable exchanges with one another. These peer encounters foster social competencies such as negotiation, empathy, and conflict resolution, which research consistently links to children's developmental trajectories (Corsaro, 2018; Corsaro & Fingerson, 2006; Crosnoe, 2000; Tayler, 2015). In block corners, sandpits, and dramatic-play areas, children negotiate rules, invent shared narratives, and test the limits of cooperation and conflict. Such early joint engagement evolves into meaningful conversations and sophisticated social interactions, highlighting the developmental progression of peer relations from basic interactions to advanced collaborative dialogues (Adamson et al., 2014). Friendship also plays a formative role in shaping identity and social orientation, with

early bonds influencing later social attitudes and self-concept (Corsaro, 2018; Corsaro & Fingerson, 2006). Corsaro's interpretive reproduction theory offers a lens for understanding peer interaction as a collective, co-constructed experience rather than a simple outcome of individual socialisation (Corsaro & Fingerson, 2006). Within children's peer cultures, children collaboratively negotiate social norms and communal values, strengthening a sense of belonging and community, and creating relational possibilities that cannot be replicated through adult–child interactions alone (Corsaro, 2018; Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017).

Despite these acknowledgements of the importance of peer relationships, relational pedagogy has tended to focus its theoretical lens on educator–child interactions, leaving the knowledge generated between peers under-theorised and under-valued. This pattern is reflected in Ji et al.'s (2025) scoping review on two-year-olds' peer-related social–emotional learning in ECEC, which shows the literature is predominated by adult–child frameworks and home-based contexts, despite toddler peer encounters are "fertile grounds" (p. 15) where emotional understanding, cooperation, and self-regulation emerge through the dynamic relations children generate with one another. As Diphoorn and van Roekel (2019) suggest, friendships embody complex relational dynamics that are often undervalued in formal education systems, reflecting the broader societal undervaluation of peer-based relational competencies. This omission narrows the conception of where pedagogical work happens, inadvertently sustaining an adult-centric model in which meaningful learning is assumed to flow primarily from adults to children. Yet peer relations are not merely parallel to formal curriculum; they are formative sites of socialisation, knowledge-making, and identity work (Corsaro, 2018). The importance of these relations has become more visible in light of recent global disruptions. Prolonged periods of isolation and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic sharply reduced opportunities for sustained peer interaction, making evident how much children's relational well-being depends on these everyday exchanges (Allen et al., 2023; Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2024).

Recognising the pedagogical significance of peer interactions requires developing curricula and practices that deliberately create conditions for peer engagement, rather than treating it as a by-product of "free play" or classroom management. This involves establishing environments that not only validate peer-generated knowledge but also actively utilise children's peer cultures as authentic and influential educational settings (Tayler, 2015). Neri Tejada et al. (2022) show how teachers' capacity to create conditions for peer relationships can be constrained by institutional demands for control, task completion, and measurable outcomes, which can lead teachers to plan primarily for teacher-student interaction and leave little room for peer relations to be prioritised. From the child's standpoint, Neri Tejada et al. (2024) demonstrates that children actively work to build peer relationships within these constraints, using subtle strategies that keep them within "acceptable" classroom norms while sustaining peer connection. Taken together, these studies suggest that peer cultures are not merely social background but living educational settings where belonging is pursued and negotiated, often in the margins of adult-defined activity settings. What this implies for pedagogy is not simply "more opportunities to interact", but a shift in how environments are designed so that peer-to-peer relations can generate learning in their own right. Burns et al.'s (2024) review explains why this matters: peer collaboration is a symmetrical relation that more readily invites authentic negotiation, discussion, and perspective-taking than asymmetrical interactions organised around adult expertise. Their synthesis identifies concrete pedagogical strategies for cultivating peer collaboration, including purposeful grouping, role assignment, and adult observation and guidance, alongside activity designs that prompt explanation, clarification, discussion, and shared problem-solving. However, Burns et al. (2024) also caution that intervention effects are mixed and measurement is often product-oriented because it is easier to quantify, which

risks misrecognising collaboration as an output rather than a relational process with its own meanings and dynamics.

In this sense, valuing peer relations is not simply about enhancing children's immediate social experiences; it is a commitment to the democratic, collective capacities that education, at its most relational, aspires to foster. Children's sense of belonging is co-constructed through the shared narratives, tensions, conflicts, and negotiations that animate children's peer interactions (Corsaro, 2018). Peer relations are therefore not ancillary to the curriculum but key sites where the ethical and political dimensions of learning are practised in everyday life, as children learn what it means to live with difference, negotiate power, and take up responsibility in relation to others. This reframing invites educators to intentionally cultivate peer-generated knowledge that emerges through children's "being-with-others" (Gergen, 2015, p. 246), thereby enriching the relational fabric of educational practice and supporting children's holistic social and emotional development as co-constituted through their shared encounters.

7.4. More-Than-Human Relations

Children's encounters with the more-than-human world, including the animals, materials, spaces, and ecologies with which they live, are not incidental embellishments to their education, but formative and constitutive of it. These engagements involve multispecies entanglements through which knowledge, identities, and ethical considerations are co-constructed through mutual, embodied, and affective interactions (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2016; Taylor, 2013). In ECEC, these more-than-human relationships align closely with children's innate curiosity and sensory-driven learning processes. The more-than-human is present in every grain of sand, every insect observed, every tree climbed; these are sites where curiosity, care, and embodied understanding can be cultivated. Studies indicate that such encounters actively shape and enrich children's developmental trajectories, influencing their cognitive, emotional, and ethical capacities (Johnstone et al., 2022; Salmi et al., 2024). For example, systematic reviews of forest school and related outdoor approaches report benefits across domains including motor competence, health and wellbeing, and children's connectedness to nature (Sella et al., 2023). Bush kinder programs in Australia have been shown to foster empathy and responsibility through children's sustained care for wildlife, navigation of varied terrains, and attunement to seasonal changes—experiences that foster embodied environmental awareness and ethical sensibilities (Speldewinde & Campbell, 2024). These experiences significantly foster children's environmental consciousness, helping them build deeper connections to nature and develop foundational attitudes of care and responsibility towards the environment (Cliffe & Solvason, 2023).

Yet relational pedagogy, often framed within humanist boundaries, inadequately addresses these more-than-human dimensions. By overlooking these interactions, it reinforces an anthropocentric view of education, in which human relationships dominate the educational discourse, thus undermining the ecological interdependencies that sustain learning and growth, and obscures the mutual dependencies between human and non-human life (Taylor, 2013). At a time when ecological degradation is increasingly felt in the places children call home and in the communities where they learn—from biodiversity loss to intensifying heat extremes, flooding, and fire weather—such omissions are no longer tenable. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concludes that human influence is already affecting weather and climate extremes in every region, including increases in hot extremes and heavy precipitation (IPCC, 2023). UNICEF estimates that around one billion children live in countries at "extremely high risk" from climate and environmental hazards (UNICEF, 2021). National risk assessments echo these global patterns; for example, Australia's National Climate Risk Assessment highlights compounding and

cascading hazards, including more concurrent events and shorter intervals between severe events, with impacts emerging in locations with limited prior exposure (Australian Climate Service, 2025). For children, these are not only environmental crises but also pedagogical conditions that shape understandings of vulnerability, resilience, and shared existence. The lived reality of environmental precarity calls for pedagogies that foster reciprocal, ethical relations with the more-than-human world, not as an optional enrichment but as a central condition of learning how to live well with others—human and more-than-human.

The narrowing effects of neoliberal educational agendas further complicate efforts to enact relational pedagogy attuned to more-than-human worlds. By privileging measurable outcomes and economic imperatives, these agendas tend to sideline more-than-human relationalities as peripheral to "core" curriculum concerns. In response, posthuman and common worlds scholars urge educators and researchers to reconceptualise educational settings as dynamic ecological systems, where learning emerges through multispecies interactions—reciprocal engagements among humans, animals, plants, and other living organisms; multisensory interactions—learning experiences shaped through touch, smell, sound, sight, and movement; and multi-agentive interactions—encounters in which agency is distributed across human and non-human actors, including materials, spaces, and technologies (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2016). Such a reframing positions children not as autonomous learners in isolated classrooms, but as active participants in a dynamic multispecies commons, recognising their learning as inseparable from the non-human world around them (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2016; Taylor, 2013).

Bringing more-than-human relationalities to the centre of pedagogical practice requires educators to actively create spaces that value and respond to children's embodied and affective encounters with animals, plants, natural materials, and landscapes. To value these relationalities is to recognise that education cannot remain insulated from the planetary conditions in which it unfolds. It is to acknowledge that the capacity to imagine and enact more just, sustainable futures will depend not only on children's relationships with one another, but also on the quality of their engagements with the more-than-human worlds to which they are bound. This pedagogical shift not only enriches children's educational experiences but also fosters their long-term commitment to sustainability and ecological responsibility (Cliffe & Solvason, 2023; Speldewinde & Campbell, 2024). It also affirms the idea that belonging is not a passive state but an active responsibility—children are called not only to feel at home in the world but to help make it a world worth belonging to, one sustained through ethical, reciprocal, and caring relations with the more-than-human.

8. Concluding Thoughts

The ecology-of-relations framing clarifies that "ecology" is not a checklist of relationships but an account of how relational domains co-condition one another and shape what becomes possible to learn and to become in ECEC. It also redirects pedagogical attention from quality metrics towards questions of relational flourishing: what recognition and agency are enabled for children, what reciprocity and shared pedagogical decision-making are sustained with families, how peer cultures are supported, and what ethical relations with places and more-than-human others are invited and foreclosed. Finally, it emphasises that relational pedagogy is not merely an educator disposition or technique but is prefigured by culturally discursive, material–economic, and social–political conditions (Kemmis et al., 2014). Responding to accountability and market logics therefore requires not only reaffirming relational ideals, but also developing pedagogical and policy languages that can name, support, and resource relational work. The expanded ecology of relations offered here provides one such language. If ECEC is to more fully account for how learning and belonging are lived and shaped, relational pedagogy must recognise

children's self-relations, parent relations, peer relations, and more-than-human relations not as contextual extras, but as pedagogical domains through which education becomes possible. What this looks like in practice is a decentring of the educator–child dyad as the sole locus of pedagogical action, and closer attention to the relational dynamics of the ECEC landscape. Investigating how these ecological relations are composed, sustained, and repaired, and how such work is enabled and constrained in different contexts, therefore becomes a key agenda for future research.

This article argues that, in the current neoliberal climate where a return to an individualised view of teaching and learning is rife, promoting relational pedagogy in ECEC is of vital importance to children's health, wellbeing and learning. Whilst in theory relational pedagogy is embedded within ECEC, current conceptualisations and practical enactments becomes conceptually and practically constrained when "the relational" is anchored primarily in the educator–child dyad. To address this narrowing, we have proposed an expanded ecology of relations that understands learning as co-constructed across interdependent domains: children's self-relations, parent relations, peer relations, and more-than-human relations. Children's self-understandings, affect regulation, and agency are framed as relational achievements that shape participation and belonging. Child–parent relations are positioned as reciprocal and mutually shaping, reframing family partnerships as co-constitutive pedagogical work across home and ECEC. Peer relations are foregrounded as sites of collective meaning-making, challenging adult-centric assumptions about where knowledge and belonging are formed. More-than-human relations extend the account of pedagogy to children's entanglements with materials, places, and multispecies worlds, with heightened significance under ecological precarity. In doing so, we hope this article contributes to broadening early childhood pedagogy beyond a predominantly educator–child, dyadic framing by offering a conceptual language that foregrounds pedagogy as dynamic, ecological, and fundamentally relational.

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Notes

1 Programs support children's learning from birth to five years, delivered across settings such as long day care, preschools/kindergartens, and family day care.

2 Professionals in the field of early childhood education such as a teacher, educator, student teacher, principle involved in the practice of teaching and learning for children aged from infancy to five years.

3 Child's parent(s) and/or primary caregiver(s), including legal guardians and other recognised carers (e.g., kinship or foster carers), who hold day-to-day responsibility for the child's care.

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