



Weaving Cultures: Pedagogical Approaches to Social Inclusion in Finnish ECEC

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Finland's increasingly diverse ECEC landscape presents both opportunities and challenges as educators navigate complex family backgrounds, cultural identities, and evolving pedagogical demands. This research aims to strengthen children's cultural identity development and integration, enhance belonging and meaningful participation, and improve professional, guardian, and community preparedness. By addressing gaps between intention and practice, the development target is a structured, culturally responsive framework, with ECEC professionals, children, and families as the primary target audience

The results demonstrate that the three-circle pedagogical framework strengthens cultural identity, enhances belonging, and expands community collaboration through family cultural mapping, thematic planning, and participatory implementation. Key conclusions highlight its capacity to move Finnish ECEC beyond fragmented multicultural practices toward systematic, culturally responsive pedagogy grounded in ecological theory.

Practically, the framework can be applied in professional settings as a ready-to-use tool that guides educators in planning, collaborating, and embedding sustained cultural inclusivity into everyday ECEC practices.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

In the last decades, Finland's early childhood education and care (ECEC) landscape has been experiencing a significant societal change due to the increasingly diverse demographic composition of the nation. In fact, pedagogical work in early childhood education and care sectors has become more challenging because of the complexity caused by the increased diversity of families and children, complicated daily situations, and changes in political steering (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018). This shifting cultural canvas demands innovative, practical frameworks that move beyond surface-level multicultural activities to create genuinely inclusive learning communities as Finland's early childhood education and care is part of a culturally transforming and diverse society (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022, 29). Currently, the contemporary Finnish ECEC setting serves children from vastly different cultural backgrounds, each bringing unique family traditions, languages, values, and ways of understanding the world.

While this diversity presents remarkable opportunities for enriched learning experiences and is considered a resource (FNAE, 2022), it also poses significant challenges for educators striving to create inclusive learning environments where all children feel valued, understood, and empowered to participate fully and influence their learning journey. As ECEC educators with diverse backgrounds who are cultivating an inclusive learning community, we feel that current approaches to promoting inclusion and diversity appreciation in Finnish ECEC often lack systematic integration and comprehensive community engagement. Many well-intentioned diversity initiatives remain incohesive, focusing on sporadic cultural celebrations rather than embedding cultural responsiveness and social inclusion into the fabric of daily pedagogical practice. This gap between intention and implementation calls for a more structured framework that addresses inclusivity and diversity appreciation across multiple interconnected dimensions.

1.2 Objectives, research questions and aims

1.2.1 Objectives

Given this context of increasing cultural diversity in Finnish ECEC settings and the imperative for inclusive practice, our study aims to establish three objectives to address identified gaps in current approaches to cultural responsiveness. This development-based study addresses three critical needs in creating inclusive learning environment in Finnish ECEC setting:

Strong self-identity Development and Integration - We aim to develop a practical framework that enables all children to develop strong cultural identities while appreciating diversity and successfully integrating into Finnish society. This framework aims to address the approaches that may cause home cultural maintenance and Finnish integration as competing rather than complementary processes.

Enhanced Belongingness and Participation - The framework aims to promote individual wellbeing, meaningful participation, and genuine belonging in learning environments. This goes beyond mere tolerance to create spaces where cultural differences become sources of strength and enriched mutual learning experiences.

Professional and Community Preparedness - The research addresses the need for enhanced professional preparedness among ECEC staff, improved guardian engagement and involvement, as well as increased community involvement and cooperation in children's holistic development. This multi-stakeholders approach emphasizes that holistic and quality ECEC calls for collaborative effort across all levels of the child's ecosystem

1.2.2 Research Questions

These three interconnected objectives of supporting identity development, enhancing belongingness, and building professional preparedness shape the foundation for specific research questions that guide the framework's development. To operationalize these objectives within the Finnish ECEC context, the following research questions were formulated. Regarding the first two objectives, the very essence of the early childhood education and care sector in Finland is born out of principles of inclusion: equal rights for

all children, equality, equity, non-discrimination, appreciation of diversity as well as social inclusion and togetherness (FNAE, 2022). The “ECEC personnel’s responsibilities of creating an atmosphere that respects diversity (FNAE 2022, 18.) is strongly emphasized in the ECEC National Core Curriculum of Finland. Therefore, the incorporation of cultural aspects into the in-house curriculum and pedagogical plan of ECEC units in Finland is widely used practice. However, as briefly mentioned, rather than treating cultural responsiveness and social inclusion as separate initiatives or add-on activities sporadically, this thesis aims to position “culturally responsiveness” as fundamental, interconnected elements woven throughout the early childhood learning environment and daily routines of ECEC units.

As FNAE (2022) states, ECEC is built on a diverse cultural heritage, which continues to be formed interaction between the children, their guardian and the personnel, this thesis aims to develop a comprehensive pedagogical framework grounded in a three-dimensional model that recognizes ECEC as a learning ecosystem consisting of three critical spheres: family, curriculum, and community. In order to effectively and systematically develop a framework across the multiple contexts that shape children’s learning experiences and social inclusion, this development thesis is guided by the following research questions:

- How can a 3-circle model enhance cultural responsiveness in Finnish ECEC?
-Examining systemic integration of family, curriculum, and community aspects to create more meaningful and authentic culturally responsive practices
- How can the framework integrate family, curriculum, and community?
-Identifying sustainable cultural content and approaches that are personally meaningful and move beyond token celebrations to enhance diversity appreciation throughout the academic year
- What cultural themes support year-round inclusive learning?
-Constructing the practical mechanisms, strategies, and partnerships needed to create coherence across all three dimensions

1.2.3 Aims and planned output

These research questions, focusing on systemic integration, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable cultural content, establish the investigative direction for this study. To

address these questions effectively, a clear methodological approach and tangible outputs are required. Utilizing a portfolio-based format, this development-based thesis employs a participatory action research approach that integrates systematic literature review, pedagogical framework development stakeholder collaboration (families, educators, and community partners), and iterative framework testing through a Three-Circle Model connecting family heritage, classroom pedagogy, and local community resources. Implementation involves developing and piloting culturally responsive pedagogical strategies across multiple ECEC settings, creating comprehensive monthly thematic plans, and documenting outcomes through mixed-methods evaluation staff feedback, educator reflections, and child voice documentation.

The planned output is a fully functioning pedagogical framework to be seamlessly integrated into ECEC operational culture featuring (1) Family heritage documentation - Cultural mapping (2) 12-monthly cultural & diversity focused theme pedagogical plan (3) community cooperation and reinforcement. We aim to publish our completed and approved thesis electronically in the Theseus database (Theseus.fi) with the permission of the supervisor. The final product of this development-based thesis will be a booklet in both digital and printed versions complete with visuals, step by step instructions as well as monthly cultural based pedagogical themes that provides educators and ECEC personnel of the unit with a holistic, practical framework that moves beyond fragmented approaches to create truly inclusive learning communities where every child's culture is valued and every child can thrive.

1.3 Key Concepts and Definitions

Before presenting the theoretical framework and methodology that underpin this research, it is essential to clarify the key concepts that form the conceptual foundation of the study. The following section defines the core terms that guide the framework's development.

1.3.1 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in ECEC

The education system in Finland emphasizes cultural diversity in ECEC as a resource that promotes culturally sustainable development in the transforming and diverse society (FNAE,2022). In inclusive learning environment of ECEC, children, personnels and

communities are constantly learning together to value and appreciate different ways of thinking and acting, and also to create new ways of acting together as well as to see things from different perspectives and put themselves in the place of others (FNAE 2022, 29). In cultivating such a learning environment with diversity appreciation, it is important to look through the lens of individuals to truly understand their experiences and realities.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is defined as a “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Also, Durden et al. (2015) further emphasized that the pedagogical practices must not be relevant only to children’s lives and experiences but also be sustainable over time and withstand changes in early childhood policy, educational reform, and curricular and/or assessment trends. Therefore, to nurture a truly inclusive learning environment that enhances “individual's identity, functional capacity, and well-being”, it is crucial to incorporate a culturally responsive pedagogy that provides “familiarity with respect for one’s own cultural background and worldviews as well as those of others” (FNAE 2022, 22.).

1.3.2 Social inclusion in ECEC

According to FNAE (2022), the peer group and the experience of belonging to a group are key to children’s learning and participation as children learn best when they are feeling well and secure (p. 19). Vanderbroek (2015) sees ECEC setting as a child's first step into the society where they start forming their first self-image as well as are confronted with the first existential question of “Who am I and is it ok to be who I am?”. Multiple research emphasizes that a child's positive self-image and wellbeing as well as capacity to succeed in school and life are very closely linked.

According to FNAE (2022), the early childhood education and care sector in Finland recognizes that “each child is unique and valuable just as child is” (p.18) and ensures that each child feels accepted as himself or herself as a member of the group (p.53). Therefore, it is important that children's family identities and familial relationships are supported so that each child can perceive their own family as valuable, resulting in a positive self-image as well as a sense of security and self-perception as a welcomed,

accepted and valued member of the learning environment. It is important to note that promoting social inclusion goes beyond having children from diverse backgrounds in the same space and acknowledging the differences, but rather actively removing barriers, fostering belonging, ensuring equal access and creating conditions where everyone can thrive together to their fullest potential.

1.3.3 Inclusive learning communities in ECEC

The old saying “it takes a village to raise a child” has never been more true in the sense of cultivating inclusive learning communities in modern early childhood education. The responsibilities of supporting a child to grow physically, emotionally, socially, developmentally, and cognitively does not rest upon one set of shoulders but many. After all, the mission of ECEC is to promote children's holistic growth, development and learning in collaboration with their guardians alongside diverse stakeholders (FNAE, 2022).

An inclusive learning community in ECEC is where every uniqueness is celebrated and every member such as children, educators, families and local partners work together in an open, respectful and equal manner. According to FNAE (2022), an open and respectful attitude towards diverse families and their different languages, cultures, worldviews and religions, traditions and views of education creates preconditions for good educational cooperation (p.18). The collective aspiration of learning together, the shared ownership of shaping the education path for children, the strong partnership among community members and the democratic values of listening and making decisions together are what build truly inclusive learning communities where children flourish.

2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Having established the study's objectives and key conceptual foundations, it is essential to examine the theoretical underpinnings that inform culturally responsive pedagogy in ECEC. The following section presents the theoretical framework and relevant literature that guide the development of this pedagogical approach. This thesis presents an innovative three-dimensional pedagogical framework designed to address these

challenges through a comprehensive, layered approach to cultural responsiveness and social inclusion in inclusive learning environment of Finnish ECEC setting:

Inner Circle: Family Cultural Mapping - The inner circle is the foundation of the framework that begins with intimate understanding through initial discussions, individualized VASU (early childhood education planning) and cultural mapping interaction through secure channels to recognize each family's cultural narrative forms that is meaningful and impactful of a child's identity development.

Middle Circle: 12 Month Cultural theme Pedagogical Plan- The framework expands to the middle circle that encompasses monthly cultural experiences such as themes, events and celebration meaningful to the children and families. By integrating these exposures into daily routines and pedagogical activities, a living, breathing multicultural learning environment that celebrates diversity while fostering shared understanding is cultivated by members of the learning community.

Outer Circle: Cultural Exposure and Resource in a Community Level - The outermost circle further expands into the dimension that connects the learning environment of ECEC to the broader community level such as local cultural organizations, libraries, museums and community centers, embedding the learning community within the more complex local (Finnish) cultural context while exploring and enhancing connections and appreciation to diverse cultural resources.

2.2 Literature review

This three-dimensional framework, bridging family, curriculum, and community require a sound theoretical grounding to ensure its effectiveness and alignment with established educational principles. The following literature review examines the key theories and policy frameworks that inform and legitimize this multi-layered approach to culturally responsive pedagogy. This research is grounded in the integration of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as primary theories, creating a comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding and implementing cultural responsiveness and social inclusion in Finnish ECEC settings. Also, National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2022), FINEEC Guidelines (2013) and Inclusive Early Childhood Education: An analysis of 32 European examples (Theme 3 and 4) were also utilized as

contextual foundations where the our theoretical framework operates as well as regulatory context and quality assurance guidelines to ensure our pedagogical framework meets requirements of high quality education in Finnish ECEC setting.

2.2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems theory overview

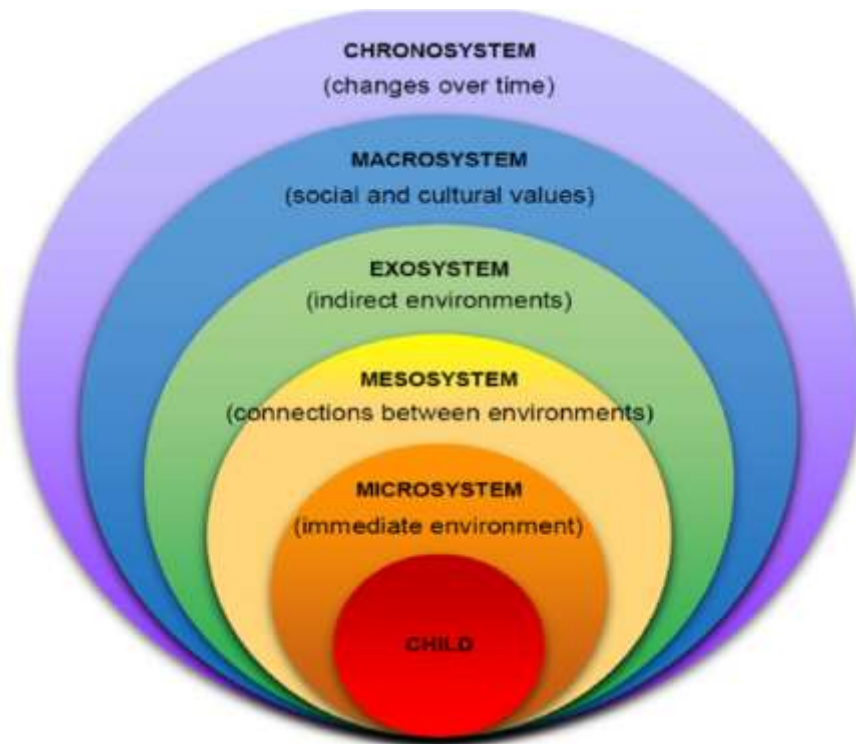


Figure 1: Image retrieved from Deirdre Budzyna, D. & Buckley, D. 2023. *The Whole Child: Development in the Early Years*

Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist (1917-2015)'s ecological systems theory of human development and socialization claims that a child's environment is a nested arrangement of environmental systems, each interacting and containing within the next that impacts and influences a child's development. Bronfenbrenner's model provides a more complex understanding of that environment, or context, comprising multiple layers as more than the immediate, tangible surroundings of a developing individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b. Due to the fact that emphasizing on the quality and context of the child's surroundings (Härkönen, 2007) fueling a child's development, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological systems theory is one of the most recurring in use and relevant frameworks in the early childhood and education sector.

Tudge et al., 2018 define the work of Bronfenbrenner's as ecological - human development occurs through complex, dynamic, and interdependent interactions between individuals and their environment. In other words, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model emphasizes the correlated interactions between the child and their environment, providing a framework for understanding and addressing the complex factors that shape children's learning and development. In earlier work of Bronfenbrenner, the developing individual (e.g., a child) at the center, the ecological system was composed of the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Navarro et al., 2020). This prominent and still relevant theory later evolves into the mature version of the bioecological model with an additional time related -chronosystem added. In alignment with this current study's context and focus, only the first three systems : micro, meso and exo-systems of Bioecological theory will be looked through from the lens of early childhood education and care perspectives.

Microsystem : Bronfenbrenner (1994) defined the microsystem as “a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features ... in the immediate environment” (p. 1645). Simply put, a microsystem refers to the things in a child's closest environments with the most direct-interactions and influence on the child's development. The most immediate relationships and environments such as guardians, siblings, family, friends, teachers, caregivers and kindergarten units etc. are part of the microsystem of a child and have the most impact on a child ´s development such as beliefs, actions and values.

Mesosystem : Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) defined a mesosystem as the “relationships existing between two or more settings; in short, it is a system of two or more microsystems” (p. 817). In other words, a mesosystem can be understood as interactions and influence among various microsystems of a child ´s life such as home and daycare, or parents, daycare and teacher etc. Bronfenbrenner emphasized the importance of mesosystem as supporting the transitions between these microsystems such as (home and drop-off, outside playtime and pick-up, moving from one group to another) with strong relationships and communication not only reduce the stress in transitions but also create an environment that permits the realization of human potential and the feeling of security (Bronfenbrenner (1971).

Exosystem : Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) refers exosystem as “activities and interactions taking place in microsystems in which the developing child is not engaged, but yet still influence the proximal processes of the child”, hence indirect influence of a child’s development despite the fact that a child may not have an active role in the settings. In short, the exosystem includes the external settings that impact indirectly to a child's development. Bronfenbrenner believed that deploying individuals who can promote productive proximal process such as educators, administrators, cultural ambassadors as well as creating an atmosphere that is open and interesting, well-organized without being rigid – one in which people, adults and children, can enjoy and trust each other” (Bronfenbrenner, 1971, p. 92) is of utmost importance for positive proximal process or indirect influential effect of exosystem.

Regarding proximal process of the systems, Bronfenbrenner (1995) maintains in several of his studies that “especially in its early phases, and to a great extent throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes (p.620).

Having established Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory and its nested environmental layers; microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem, it is now crucial to demonstrate how these theoretical constructs directly inform and structure the three-dimensional pedagogical framework proposed in this study. The following section maps the alignment between Bronfenbrenner's systems and the framework's three circles.

2.2.2 Theoretical Alignment with Three-Dimensional pedagogical framework model

Microsystem ↔ Inner Circle: Family Cultural Mapping

Bronfenbrenner’s works approached the development of a child as a nested system of multi-layer contexts and influencing interactions with a child at the center. In the 3 dimensional framework of this development-based thesis, microsystem of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model, defined as the most immediate environment of

an individual, serves as “inner circle” in where a child’s cultural foundation is first formed and continuously nurtured by the influencing factors such as parents, guardians, siblings and families. In order to support the growth and development of a child's self identity formation and first worldviews in the learning environment, it is important that a child's microsystem is understood and incorporated into pedagogical practices to enhance a child's respect of their own culture and early stage culture responsiveness.

In developing a culturally responsive pedagogical practices for the socially inclusive learning environment, the following key culture elements of the micro system or inner circle of the model are validated and incorporated by

- Documenting family culture narratives (culture backgrounds, migration story, family values, religious / spiritual practices, languages) via initial discussions, orientation questionnaires and VASU.
- Culture mapping (stories, song events, celebrations, traditions meaningful to the family) through secured channels between personnels and family
- Honoring home language (Greetings in morning circle).

In short, the microsystem or the inner circle is utilized to recognize a family’s culture and to affirm a child’s cultural identity.

Mesosystem ↔ Middle Circle: Inclusive Learning Environment with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Adaptation

Mesosystem is defined as inter-relations between two or more microsystems. Bronfenbrenner deemed the “linkages” or the relationships” of great importance in early childhood education. In ECEC, the relationships between the immediate settings such as family (both child and guardians) and kindergarten units (teachers/ peers/ learning environment) must be strong and constant. According to Bronfenbrenner (1971), “It is only by working jointly with the child and his parents that a daycare program can achieve its objective of creating an environment that permits the realization of human potential” (p. 88, italics in the original). Regarding fostering such a positive & productive proximal process in the mesosystem, educators must specially be proactive in partnering with culturally and linguistically diverse families to ensure the relations between home and daycare is positive (Hayes et al., 2017).

In alignment with the goals of this thesis to develop culturally responsive and socially inclusive pedagogical planning , the cultural bridging or connecting family cultural knowledge with the ECEC learning environment is facilitated through

- Family, child and ECEC partnership (shared decision making about culture content & family contributions to curriculum)
- Culturally responsive pedagogical practices & curriculum designs with 12 months culturally responsive pedagogical plans (monthly rotation, daily routines integration, resources & activities with diverse culture representations, continuous cultural learning & diversity appreciation)

Put simply, the role of the mesosystem or the middle circle is the cultural bridging as well as the active incorporation of diverse cultural aspects into the learning environment.

Exosystem ⇔ Outer Circle: Cultural exposure and resources in broader community

The exosystem incorporates the social structures and contexts that have an indirect impact and influence on a child´s development. As Bronfenbrenner repeatedly maintained, a child´s development never occurs alone within the interrelated nested systems of the bioecological model. While not directly interacting with the child, the exosystem has indirect as well as important influence on the microsystems of a child's life. A systemic optimization of formal and informal social structures of exosystem such as municipal, community, principles, teachers, friends,relatives, workplace, library, museums etc. can promote positive and productive proximal process as “ it create an atmosphere that is open and interesting, well-organized without being rigid – one in which people, adults and children, can enjoy and trust each other” (Bronfenbrenner, 1971, p. 92).

The exosystem or the outer circle of our 3 dimensional framework serves as a mediation that expands culture exposure in a more diverse manner as well as connects to the local (Finnish) culture and society in a broader sense by incorporating

- Culture institutions and public places as indirect influences (parks, zoo, library, cultural centers, museums)
- Educator's cultural capacity enhancement (Trainings, family, community & local culture partnerships)

- Community involvement (Authentic culture related resources from families & community, cultural workshop organizing)

In summary, the exosystem or the outer circle embeds cultural resources in a broader community while connecting and expanding the cultural responsiveness and exposure beyond the capacity of ECEC.

While Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model provides the structural foundation for understanding the nested contexts of children's development, culturally responsive pedagogy supplies the pedagogical principles that guide practice within these contexts. The following section examines the core principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and their integration within the three-dimensional framework

2.3 Culturally responsive pedagogy's core principles & theoretical alignment

As briefly mentioned in the section of key concepts' definitions, culturally responsive pedagogy is defined as "pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings (1994), pp. 17–18). The role of culturally responsive pedagogy in ECEC does not limit to mere enhancement of cultural competence but encompasses the learning outcomes, development and holistic growth of individuals. As Gay (2000) emphasizes, "When academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference for students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly".

The three main principles of culturally responsive pedagogy by Ladson-Billings (1995): maintaining high expectations, developing cultural competence and fostering critical awareness will be discussed in accordance with our three dimensional framework from the perspectives of early childhood education and care.

Brown-Jeffy & Cooper (2011)'s framework for culturally relevant pedagogy is adapted as the guides for discussing the relevance of our theoretical framework. To effectively implement a culturally relevant and sustainable pedagogy, teachers must first believe that all students can succeed, maintain an affirming student–teacher relationship, and see excellence as a complex standard that takes student diversity and individual difference into account (Paris 2012). In regards to maintaining high expectations of the

learners, our inner circle - microsystem recognizes the uniqueness of each identity while the middle circle - mesosystem ensures to provide culturally appropriate scaffolding to help children reach high expectations based on individuals' identity, values, backgrounds and capacities.

Culture responsive pedagogy goes beyond focusing on tokenistic gestures of celebrating differences only when expected or relevant but active engagement on transformative pedagogical practices regarding diverse cultures and worldviews in the learning community. Culture competence in culturally responsive pedagogy can be defined as an educator using children's culture as a vehicle of learning (Ladson-billings, 1995) and children value their own culture while learning about cultures of peers with open-mindedness and appreciation. The middle circle-mesosystem, the learning environment and curriculum adaptation creates the scenarios and opportunities to affirm, validate and value one's own uniqueness while becoming comfortable and supportive of diversity.

Fostering critical awareness through cultural responsive pedagogy is understood as "a process that invites learners to engage the world and others critically" (McLaren, 1989, p. 195). Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that "learners must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities". In the context of the ECEC learning environment, critical awareness will support children's development of understanding society/community in a broader sense. By employing the outer circle - ecosystem of our pedagogical framework, the community involvement and exposure will encourage children to explore and question about different cultures and behaviors in a positive way as well as empower them to challenge social injustice such as biases, social exclusion and bullying.

The theoretical integration of Bronfenbrenner's systems theory and culturally responsive pedagogy establishes a well-built conceptual foundation. However, we believe that this framework must also be in alignment within the specific regulatory and curricular context of Finnish ECEC. The following section examines how the National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2022) aligns with and supports the proposed framework's objectives.

2.4 National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2022)

In developing a culturally responsive pedagogical framework for an ECEC inclusive learning environment in Finnish settings, National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2022) 's objectives, underlying values and transversal competences are utilized as the grounding guidelines. ECEC is built on a diverse cultural heritage, which continues to be formed in interaction between the children, their guardians, and the personnels (FNAE 2022, 17.) and it perfectly captures the essence of the nested systems of bioecological model which our three dimensional framework is based on. Due to the high relevancy to the proposed three dimensional framework, the principles focusing on cultural competence, diversity and inclusion will be discussed in the aspects of individualized learning plans (VASU) , partnership with families, child-centered pedagogy, respect for diversity and last but not least community cooperation.

According to FNAE (2022), in order to ensure every child receives a systematic and goal-oriented education, instruction, and care, an individual ECEC plan must be prepared with the best interests of the child in mind. One of the most important elements of the ECEC plan is “ taking an account of children’s background in terms of their language, culture, and worldview and finding appropriate methods for determining the child's viewpoints” (p.7). Cooperation with the parents/ guardians is another very important matter in ECEC. According to FNAE (2022), , guardians must have the opportunity to participate in and influence the planning, implementation and evaluation of their child's ECEC. The practical steps of the inner circle - microsystem's culture mapping is carried out in accordance with the guidelines of FNAE (2022) to ensure the effectiveness of the pedagogical practices planning as well as the implementation in the learning environment.

FNAE (2022) defines cultural competence as “the ability to listen, identify and understand different perspectives as well as to reflect on one's own values and attitudes” (p.22). Furthermore, FNAE (2022) emphasizes on “the familiarity with diverse cultural backgrounds and worldviews and respect for one's own cultural background and worldview as well as those of others to promote children's cultural competence, which is one of the transversal competences of ECEC. Our middle circle - mesosystem - inclusive learning environment with culturally responsive pedagogy adaptation will provide the children with a model for encountering other people and diversity in languages, cultures, and worldviews positively” (p.22) through monthly rotation of culturally focused

pedagogical practices and activities designed based on the contribution of families and children's viewpoints .

One of the learning areas of National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2022), "Me and My Community" aims to develop children's capabilities of understanding the diversity of the local community and practise acting in it (p.43). In fact, this learning area particularly supports transversal competences related to the children's cultural competence, interaction, and expression as well as their thinking and learning (Chapter 2.7), which is in alignment to our outer circle- exosystem - Cultural exposure and resources in broader community. Through local partnerships, cooperation with different parties and cultural resources expansion of this step of the proposed model, diversity in the local community is respectfully observed with the children, diversity of people, genders and families is explored and the understanding of "that people are different but equal" is promoted. (p.44).

2.5 FINEEC Guidelines (2013)

Beyond the National Core Curriculum's content and pedagogical guidelines, quality assurance mechanisms ensure that ECEC practices meet established standards of excellence. The FINEEC Guidelines (2013) provide the quality framework and evaluation criteria necessary to validate and continuously improve the proposed pedagogical framework. The following structural factors of ECEC quality and the indicators describing them (FINEEC Guidelines -2013) are used in this study to serve as

- Quality Framework: Provides evaluation criteria for effective ECEC practices
- Professional Development Standards: Guides educator competence requirements for cultural responsiveness
- Continuous Improvement References: Supports iterative development and refinement of pedagogical tools

These specific areas of FINEEC; pedagogical activities and learning environments, peer interaction and group atmosphere, and interaction between staff and guardians align closely with the three-circle framework's emphasis on integrated, multi-stakeholder approaches to cultural responsiveness. The following indicators from these areas serve as benchmarks for framework development and evaluation.

Pedagogical activities and learning environments

8. ECEC activities are meaningful and inspiring for the children and challenge them to learn.

9. The staff and the children carry out versatile pedagogical activities based on play, physical activity, arts and cultural heritage that offer positive learning experiences for the children. The activities promote the achievement of objectives set for different areas of learning and transversal competence.

13. The pedagogical learning environment planned and built together by the staff and the children encourages the children to play, be physically active, explore, create and express. The learning environment is assessed and modified regularly as indicated by the children's needs and interests, ensuring that it challenges and inspires the children to learn.

Peer Interaction and Group Atmosphere

17. The staff build and maintain in the group an atmosphere based on appreciating the children's individual differences and different cultures, religions and world views. The staff support children's plurilingualism in the group.

Interaction between staff and guardians

25. Educational cooperation starts from appreciation for the children and their guardians as well as an open, equal and trusting relationship. The interaction reflects respect for the guardians' knowledge of their children and for the staff's professional knowledge and competence.

26. Guardians' participation in planning, carrying out and evaluating early childhood education and care activities is enabled. Different forms and practices of educational cooperation are planned together with the guardians.

The theoretical foundations and policy contexts outlined above provide the conceptual basis for this study. To translate these theoretical insights into a practical pedagogical framework, a systematic methodological approach is required. The following section

details the development-based research methodology employed to design, test, and refine the framework

3 Methodology

3.1 Development-Based Research Approach

Richey and Klein (2005) state that developmental research can have a function of either creating generalizable conclusions or statements of law, or producing context-specific knowledge that serves a problem solving function. Regarding this study, our primary goal is to create a tangible, usable product (the booklet) rather than just generating theoretical knowledge alone so a development based approach is utilized to conduct the developmental process.

Furthermore, this study aims to not only bridge theory and practice which is crucial in ECEC where educators need concrete, implementable tools, but also look at the pedagogical framework from a contextually specific perspective which involve constructing and validating unique design models and processes, as well as identifying those conditions that facilitate their successful use (Richey and Klein, 2005).

Moreover, the iterative nature of developmental research based approach allows for testing and refining our 3 circle model based on real-world feedback from peers and voices of the children. Finally, development based research's adaptability and flexibility as well as ongoing dialogues between research, practice and theories allows to create immediate practical value (the booklet) while also contributing theoretical insights about cultural responsiveness in diverse ECEC settings with varying cultural compositions.

3.2 Design Principles

3.2.1 Criteria for the framework

Having established the development-based research approach as the methodological foundation for creating this practical pedagogical tool, it is essential to articulate the specific design principles that guide the framework's construction. These principles

ensure the framework is not only theoretically sound but also practically applicable across diverse Finnish ECEC contexts.

(1) Family involvement : Cultural responsiveness adaptation and pedagogical practices for the inclusive learning environment cannot be achieved without active and genuine family involvement. Families are the primary cultural experts or as Bronfenbrenner (1994) stated, “ “the immediate environment ” regarding their own children's backgrounds, traditions, and values, therefore the co-planners/ educators in children ´s ECEC.

Design Implications:

- The inner circle - cultural mapping must include structured yet flexible methods for gathering cultural information from families (family narrative)
- Activities in the middle circle should include multiple entry points for family participation (in-person, digital, at-home extensions, contribution)
- The outer circle should explicitly identify roles for families as cultural resources, storytellers, and co-educators

Concrete Features in the Booklet:

- Family cultural profile templates that are conversational (semi-structured start-up discussion)
- Monthly "family bridge" activities that connect ECEC themes with home practices
- Guidance for educators on conducting culturally sensitive family conversations
- Acknowledgment that families may have varying comfort levels with sharing cultural information

(2) Child-led Process : FNAE (2022) emphasizes child-centered pedagogy and children's right to participate. Cultural learning must emerge from children's genuine interests and experiences, hence taking into account their language, culture, and worldview during the preparation process. (p.8).

Design Implications:

- Activities should honor children's hybrid/emerging cultural identities (e.g., Finnish-Japanese, multilingual families)

- Learning goals should balance cultural knowledge with critical thinking and identity development
- Activities and pedagogical practices in the 12-month rotation must be frameworks rather than rigid scripts, allowing children to direct their cultural explorations
- Documentation approaches should capture children's cultural meaning-making

Concrete Features in the Booklet:

- Each monthly theme includes "child-initiated variations" or open-ended ideas/suggestions
- Activities designed across multiple pedagogical approaches (play, inquiry, creative expression, nature-based learning, storytelling)
- Emphasis on "knowledge donation" approach—recognizing what children bring from home
- Activities that avoid cultural stereotyping or "tourist approach" (e.g., not just trying foods or wearing costumes)

(3) Aligned with the Finnish national core curriculum-for ECEC - VASU: The 3 circle model pedagogical framework must integrate seamlessly into existing Finnish ECEC philosophy rather than being an "add-on." Cultural responsiveness complement VASU's emphasis on holistic child development and diversity appreciation.

Design Implications:

- All activities must correspond to VASU's five learning areas (The rich world of languages, Many ways of expression, Our community and me, I explore and act in my environment, I grow, develop and move)
- Framework should align with VASU's transversal competencies (Thinking & learning, Cultural competence, interaction and expression, Taking care of oneself and managing daily life, Multiliteracy, Digital competence, Participation and involvement skills)
- Pedagogical approaches must reflect VASU's play-based, child-centered philosophy

Concrete Features in the Booklet:

- Integration with existing Finnish traditions (e.g., how to expand "Pikkujoulu" to include multiple winter celebrations)
- Activities that use familiar Finnish ECEC methods (morning circles, outdoor learning, arts & crafts, group work, field trip, story telling)
- Emphasis on "cultural competence" as defined in VASU (2022) (understanding, respecting and valuing one's own and others' cultural backgrounds)

(4) Target user considerations (Staff, Care unit, families) : Finnish ECEC settings vary widely (urban/rural, linguistic diversity, staff experience, resources) and so do the capacities and focused interests of the potential practitioners. The framework must be flexible enough to work across contexts while maintaining core principles.

Design Implications:

- Content must be scalable and modifiable (simple starting points for beginners, depth for experienced practitioners)
- Activities must be adaptable to different group sizes, ages (0-6 years), and resource contexts
- Framework should work whether a setting has high or low cultural diversity

Concrete Features in the Booklet:

- Quick-start guide for new educators
- Practical communication phrases in multiple languages (greetings e.g.)
- Concrete activities with justification and learning goals for easy implementation and future adaptation
- Sample invitation letters for cultural sharing

3.2.2 Summary Table: Design Principles & Key Features

Table 1: Summary Table: Design Principles & Key Features

Design Principle	Primary Criterion	Primary User Focus	Key Booklet Feature
Family Involvement	Family Contribution & Influence	Family + Staff	Cultural mapping tools (VASU, Initial

Design Principle	Primary Criterion	Primary User Focus	Key Booklet Feature
			discussions, cultural pooling WhatsApp group)
Child-Led process	Child-led activities based on children's voices, interests, strengths & influence	Staff + Children	Open-ended activity frameworks with child-initiated variations
FNAE Alignment	National Curriculum Alignment	Staff + Care Unit	Explicit mapping to VASU learning areas & competencies
Target Users Considerations	All Target Users	Staff + Care Unit	Differentiated content & adaptability features

3.3 Development phases overview (3 Months)

These four design principles-family involvement, child-led process, VASU alignment, and target user considerations-establish the foundational criteria against which the framework is developed and evaluated. To operationalize these principles into a functional pedagogical framework and booklet, a systematic, phased development process is required. The following section outlines the three-month development timeline, detailing each phase from initial needs analysis through final validation.

Month 1: Analysis & Initial Design Phase

3.3.1 Weeks 1-2: Needs Analysis & Literature Synthesis

We conducted a brief survey with in-house ECEC educators/administrators to identify specific challenges and needs regarding cultural responsiveness. Also, we started analyzing the existing Finnish ECEC curriculum framework (Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet) for cultural competence elements as well reviewing cultural mapping tools and pedagogical frameworks that we will be using. The documentation of demographic trends in the intended ECEC unit such as immigrant families, multilingual children, etc. was also completed.

3.3.2 Weeks 3-4: Framework Development

This is the phase where we started designing the 3-circle model structure and visual representation as well as developing criteria for the 12-month cultural themes rotation to ensure balance, age-appropriateness and relevance to the Finnish context. Moreover, we drafted the initial content for each circle. For Inner circle, the cultural mapping tools/questions for educators and families are reviewed and modified. For the middle circle, we selected 12 monthly themes with preliminary activities & pedagogical practices. For the outer circle, community partnership ideas, resource lists are collected for drafting the initial booklet prototype for the first time.

Month 2: Iterative Design & Feedback Phase

3.3.3 Weeks 5-6: Expert Review & Refinement

We started sharing our prototype with 3 experts (experienced ECEC teachers, principle, thesis-supervisors in this phase. We also gathered feedback on clarity and usability of the model, cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness, practical feasibility of activities and alignment with Finnish ECEC values and regulations. Finally, an extensive reviewing framework based on expert feedback was also completed.

3.3.4 Weeks 7-8: Real life Testing & Feedback

During this phase, we determined a specific period to pilot selected elements (months) from the booklet and started piloting two activities from different circles within the chosen months. Feedback was also collected through a reflective feedback chat or photo documentation from educators. We also employed sticker rating evaluation with

preschoolers to see “What worked? (Green), What was challenging? (Red), What needs clarification? (Yellow)”

Month 3: Finalization & Documentation Phase

3.3.5 Weeks 9-10: Final Revisions

In this period, we have integrated real life feedback from staff & children into the booklet to refine language for clarity and accessibility, especially considering educators with varying experience levels. We have also enhanced visual design and layout for user-friendliness and ensured all 12 monthly themes have complete activity descriptions with clear learning goals. Finally we added an implementation guidance section such as how to use the booklet, suggested timeline, adaptation tips etc.

3.3.6 Weeks 11-12: Documentation & Validation

We have, in this phase, completed the final version of the booklet and also documented the entire development process such as decisions made and rationale for changes. We tried to conduct a brief validation check by sharing the final version with 2 original participants for confirmation- Then we started completing the methodology chapter detailing each development phase, the participant involvement and feedback collection method, and ethical considerations. Finally, we prepared the supplementary materials and sample pages from the booklet to include in thesis appendices.

4 Three Circle Pedagogical Framework

Through the systematic development process described above, incorporating needs analysis, expert review, and real-life testing, the three Circle Pedagogical frameworks emerged as the core output of this research. This section presents the framework in detail, explaining how each concentric circle operates and interconnects to foster culturally responsive practice.

4.1 Framework Overview and interconnection

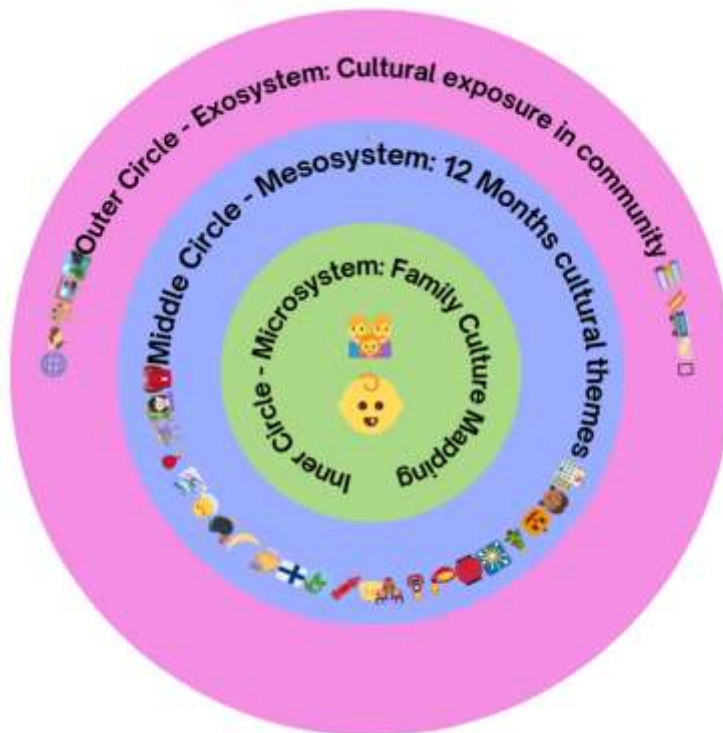


Figure 2: 3 circle framework

We developed this three-circle framework by adapting Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, whose nested systems approach is particularly well-suited for addressing culturally responsive pedagogy through three interconnected systems: family cultural mapping (microsystem), the learning environment (mesosystem), and community cultural resources (exosystem). The three-circle model for culturally responsive and socially inclusive pedagogy operates as an integrated, dynamic system where each circle continuously informs and strengthens the others. As seen in the visual model above, each circle builds upon and reinforces the others, creating a coherent ecological approach to cultural learning that honors children's identities while expanding their cultural exposures and appreciation. The framework's effectiveness focuses not in any single circle, but in the intentional connections and reciprocal influences among all three levels.

Family cultural mapping in the inner circle directly shapes which cultural themes are prioritized in the middle circle's 12-month structure, ensuring authentic representation of

enrolled families' lived experiences rather than generic multicultural content. These monthly themes, in turn, generate deeper family conversations and prompt families to share additional cultural knowledge, creating a reciprocal flow of information between home and educational setting. The middle circle's thematic structure also opens up a purposeful selection of community exposure in the outer circle, as monthly themes identify which cultural organizations and resources are most relevant to engage. The three circles working in sync transform the ECEC setting into a system that values children's home cultures, structures intentional cultural learning, and connects families to broader cultural communities and also integrates into local communities through cultural appreciation. In sum, this integrated approach facilitates cultural responsiveness as a pedagogical foundation embedded throughout the whole fabric of ECEC setting rather than occasional multicultural enrichment.

4.2 Inner Circle : family cultural Mapping

The purpose and rationale of this inner circle as in family culture mapping is to establish the foundational layer of cultural understanding through family narrative as well as to recognize families as primary cultural knowledge source and children's first educators. In order to realize the goals of family culture mapping, the following tools and Implementation strategies are utilized.

Start-up Discussion for Background Information and General Permission

- Conducted during initial enrollment or transition periods to build trust and rapport
- Explores family cultural backgrounds, languages spoken at home, and significant cultural practices
- Establishes informed consent for cultural exposure, information sharing and documentation

FNAE (Early Childhood Education and Care Plan) for Family Wishes, Expectations, and Requests

- Systematically documents family cultural values, childrearing practices, and educational priorities as a part of VASU
- Establishes collaborative goal-setting that integrates cultural continuity with pedagogical objectives

- Creates an evolving document that adapts as families' needs and children's development progress

Cultural Pooling WhatsApp Group with Guardians

- Provides accessible, low-barrier platform for ongoing cultural dialogue and information exchange
- Facilitates real-time sharing of cultural events, celebrations, and community happenings
- Strengthens sense of belonging through continuous, informal & inclusive connection

4.3 Middle Circle: Dynamic Cultural Exposure via 12 months cultural thematic pedagogical plan

The purpose and rationale of middle circle as in dynamic cultural exposure through 12 months thematic structures of pedagogical activities and practices in the learning environments are to build upon family cultural mapping to create structured yet flexible opportunities for broader cultural exploration. Also, this middle circle aims to empower children as active cultural participants and knowledge constructors rather than passive recipients and finally to balance intentional pedagogical planning with child-responsive cultural activities.

The 12-Month thematic structure is guided by the culturally responsive pedagogical framework that provides predictable rhythm that supports children's developmental need for routine while introducing cultural diversity. It also aims to promote inclusive, sustained engagement with cultural concepts rather than tokenistic exposure through a variety of pedagogical activities & practices. Finally, 12 months themes will hopefully accommodate the seasonal and calendar-based cultural celebrations across diverse traditions in a holistic and eye-opening manner.

There are a few fundamental developmental appropriateness that are taken into consideration while designing the 12 months thematic structures. The first and foremost is the month-long duration as the period aligns with early childhood attention spans most suitably for unhurried absorption and repetitive meaning-making processes. Also, the opportunities for multi-modal exploration through play, arts, storytelling, and experiential activities in the aspects of cultural exposure would be very beneficial and engaging for the

children. Finally, the 12 months thematic structure that are relevant, familiar and personally enjoyable allows children to form meaningful connections between cultural concepts and their lived experiences.

4.3.1 The 12-Month cultural theme pedagogical plan

This 12-month pedagogical plan implements culturally responsive pedagogical practice through monthly themes that authentically integrate the diverse celebrations and personally meaningful traditions of enrolled families representing nationalities : Finnish, American, Egyptian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Thai, Turkmenistan, Russian, French, British, Italian and Indian. Each month systematically addresses Finland's five ECEC learning areas and develops all six transversal skills through coordinated activities at family, learning environment and community levels. Rather than treating cultural celebrations as isolated events, the plan embeds them within meaningful learning experiences—from dragon dance promoting gross motor skills to Juhannus (Finnish Midsummer) preparations developing community exploration and natural science awareness.

The Three-Circle Model ensures that children's home cultures are honored through family heritage projects, explored through inclusive classroom practices, and celebrated through authentic community partnerships, creating an educational environment where every child's cultural identity is valued and diversity becomes a shared strength. The chosen themes are also adaptable and evolving annually to changing family composition and children's emerging interests in order to make them truly authentic, practical and pedagogically valuable. In order to realize the aim, the theme selection is guided by the following criteria :

- Includes multiple cultural perspectives rather than single-culture focus (e.g., "Celebrations and Light Festivals" encompasses Diwali, Lucia, Christmas etc.
- Prioritizes cultural themes reflected in the enrolled families ´s backgrounds and community demographics
- Includes both local Finnish cultural contexts and global perspectives to support intercultural competence
- Adapts annually based on changing family composition and children ´s emerging interests

- Covers multiple learning experience domains: language and literacy, arts and creativity, social-emotional learning, physical development
- Includes critical thinking opportunities where children compare, contrast, and synthesize cultural similarities and differences

The 12-monthly themes designed for the purpose of this study for 2025-2026 school year are as follows :

- August : Our Many Homes (Family origins and current community)
- September: Fall and Folklores (Oral traditions and family narratives)
- October: Harvest and Abundance (Food cultures and gratitude practices)
- November: Light in Darkness (Festivals of light traditions and season awareness)
- December: Celebrations and togetherness (Winter celebrations across cultures)
- January: New Beginnings (New Year traditions globally)
- February: Love language (Friendship and language)
- March: Nature Awakening (spring traditions and renewal)
- April: Spring's spirit (Growth and Celebrations)
- May: Community Helpers (diverse role models and careers)
- June: Midsummer Magic (Summer solstice and seasonal transition)

4.3.2 Integration with Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care

The 12-month culturally responsive pedagogical plan is grounded by the Finnish National Core Curriculum for ECEC's foundational principles, particularly its emphasis on equity, equality, and diversity as these are the democratic values of the Finnish society (FNAE 2022, 18.). One of the ultimate goals of ECEC is “children's family identities and familial relationships are supported so that each child can perceive their own family as valuable” (FNAE 2022, 18.). By purposefully integrating and celebrating the diverse cultural backgrounds of all enrolled children, the plan optimizes these core values in concrete, daily practices rather than treating them as a set of abstract guidelines. Each monthly theme is designed to ensure that no child's cultural identity is marginalized or treated as "other," but rather that every heritage is positioned as a valuable contribution to the collective learning community as cultural diversity is perceived as a resource (p.29). This

intentional cultural inclusion of the 12 months thematic structures creates an educational environment where equity is actively practiced through equal representation, respect, and opportunities for all cultural groups to share their knowledge and traditions.

At the heart of this pedagogical approach is authentic child-centered practice that validates children's cultural identities as the foundation for all learning. The Finnish ECEC curriculum emphasizes building on children's existing knowledge and experiences, and cultural identity represents perhaps the most fundamental aspect of a child's lived experience. When children see their languages spoken, their traditions celebrated, and their family practices respected within the educational setting, they develop stronger self-concepts and greater confidence as learners. This cultural validation creates psychological safety that allows children to take risks, explore new concepts, and engage more deeply with learning across all domains. The plan recognizes that cultural competence is not an "add-on" to learning but rather an integral component of holistic child development that supports cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth.

The plan systematically develops all six transversal competencies outlined in the Finnish ECEC curriculum, with particular emphasis on cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression. Cultural competence, the ability to listen, identify and understand different perspectives as well as to reflect on one's own values and attitudes (FNAE 2022, 22.), is woven throughout every monthly theme as children learn to recognize both the uniqueness of different cultural practices and the common human experiences that connect us all. Interaction and self-expression skills are cultivated through multilingual communication practices, cross-cultural peer learning, and opportunities to share personal and family cultural knowledge. Additionally, the plan strengthens thinking and learning skills as children compare and contrast cultural practices, multiliteracy as they engage with diverse languages and symbol systems, digital competence through information searching, and self-care capabilities through learning about diverse approaches to health, wellness, and daily living across cultures. This comprehensive approach ensures that cultural learning is not isolated but rather integrated into the development of capabilities that are essentials for our children.

Cultural themes provide rich, meaningful contexts for experiencing language-rich environments that introduce vocabularies such as food names and greeting words from various cultural contexts, supporting second language (English) development, home

language maintenance and Finnish language familiarization. The emphasis on storytelling traditions, multilingual greetings and songs and community interactions creates authentic purposes for language use that are relatable and memorable learning experiences. Furthermore, by positioning all represented languages as equally valuable, the plan supports genuine multilingualism contributing to children's metalinguistic awareness and cognitive flexibility.

Exploring and interacting with one's environment is enhanced through the exploration of diverse cultural relationships with nature and the world around them through monthly themes. Children learn that different cultures have developed varied but equally valid ways of understanding, interacting with, and caring for the natural world. From Finnish Juhannus celebrations connecting to midsummer natural phenomena to Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival moon observations, from Maslenitsa's marking of seasonal transitions to various harvest festivals' connections to agricultural cycles, each theme provides opportunities to investigate scientific concepts through cultural lenses.

Diverse forms of expression are also supported through authentic cultural expressions and creative traditions that are personally meaningful. Children engage with genuine artistic practices from their own and others' cultures—from Russian pysanky egg decorating techniques to Thai flower arrangement traditions, from Japanese Origami to Indian Diya lantern craft.. This authentic engagement develops both artistic skills and cultural understanding, showing children that creativity and cultural identity are inseparably connected, equally important and uniquely beautiful.

Finally, the plan advances ethical thinking and worldview development through regular, respectful exposure to diverse value systems and ways of understanding the world. The mission of ECEC is to develop children's capabilities of understanding the diversity of the local community and practise acting in it regardless of the traditions, operating models, values and views of their home (FNAE 2022). Through facilitated discussions, exposure to diversity, and community encounters, children learn to ask thoughtful questions, suspend judgment, seek understanding, and find common ground across differences. These capacities for ethical thinking and perspective-taking are essential for the children's cultural competence, interaction, and expression as well as their thinking and learning (p.43).

4.4 Pedagogical Documentation Requirements

The 12-month culturally responsive pedagogical plan generates a rich, comprehensive documentation material that authentically demonstrates children's cultural learning journeys while meeting Finnish ECEC documentation requirements. Each monthly theme provides multiple materials such as photographs and videos of cultural activities, children's multicultural artwork and projects, audio recordings of multilingual language use, and educator observational notes linking cultural experiences to learning objectives. The systematic nature of the monthly themes ensures that documentation is comprehensive across the full year, showing progression and development over time rather than isolated observations.

This documentation approach directly supports the VASU (Individual Early Childhood Education and Care Plan) process by providing concrete evidence of how cultural inclusion advances each child's individual learning goals. The VASU requires educators to plan, document, and evaluate learning in partnership with families, and the culturally responsive approach positions families as genuine partners with collaborating experts rather than passive recipients of educational services. The compulsory monthly portfolio and evaluation for preschool ensures that children are co-planning as well as co-evaluating their own learning experience while their opinions, worldviews and initiatives are heard and taken into account. (FNAE, 2022)

4.4.1 Implementation of Child-Led Brainstorming Sessions for Theme Selection

Four brainstorming sessions were conducted altogether in a time span of one month. During each session, one season (3 months) of cultural themes, celebrations and events are discussed and brainstormed together with the staff. Each session approximately lasted 20 minutes and we truly believed that these weekly Scheduled brainstorming sessions on Fridays allow children as curriculum co-creators for the purpose of current study. During the brainstorming sessions, age-appropriate facilitation techniques (visuals, stickers voting, small group discussions, drawing/mapping activities) were utilized to ensure all voices are heard. Children are also encouraged to suggest cultural topics based on their curiosities, family experiences, and peer interests. We ensured that all the child suggestions are genuinely incorporated in a transparent process of their ideas shaping the learning environment. It is to note that children's theme suggestions and

selection processes are documented and made visible to families. The following part is the monthly cultural theme sample breakdown to demonstrate the fundamental elements of our cultural theme designing. We chose the month of October as per children's interest and request.

4.4.2 Monthly cultural theme sample breakdown: October

October – Harvest and Abundance

Learning Objectives

- Develop knowledge of seasonal foods and cultural harvest traditions
- Enjoy dramatic play and self-expressions through costumes, different culture celebrations as well as arts and crafts
- Practice spookiness in a kind-hearted, inclusive and empathetic way
- Respects peer ´s preferences, choices of expressions and comfort levels as well as personal boundaries and effective communications

Weekly Breakdown for October theme

Week 1: Harvest festival and local culture focused week

Activities:

- Explore harvest traditions from all cultures via info searching
- Explore harvest traditions from all cultures via info searching
- Pumpkin investigation and kindergarten harvesting
- Pumpkin window painting

VASU Learning Areas: Me and my community, Exploring and interacting with environment

Transversal competences: Cultural competence, Thinking and learning, Digital competence

Materials: Pumpkins, autumn vegetables, gratitude tree materials, harvest photos from different cultures, measuring tools

Family/Community:

- Visit local farmer's market

Week 2: Food stories and recipes

Activities:

- Family recipe sharing and making up own silly recipes
- Reading stories with food as main characters
- Create "Favorite food" collage from magazine scrap
- From garden to Table" salad making with veggies from kindergarten

VASU Learning Areas: Diverse forms of expression, me and my community, Taking care of oneself

Transversal Competences: Taking care of daily life, Cultural competence, Multiliteracy

Materials: Kitchen utensils, ingredients for salad making, recipe cards, tablet, magazines and journals scraps

Family/Community:

- Families contribute recipes and stories

Week 3: Preserved Food & Gratitude

Activities:

- Forest foraging trip
- Preserved jars craft (Individual)& preserved shelf making (group project)
- What We're Thankful For' song learning
- Apple crisps baking session

VASU Learning Areas: Me and my community, I grow, move and develop

Transversal competences: Cultural competence, Interaction and self-expression, Taking care of daily life, Digital competency

Materials: Baking supplies, craft paper, cardboard, crayon, paint, glues & scissors, tablet

Family/Community:

- Community garden visit / harvest observation

Week 3: Dark and Light party

Activities:

- Halloween tradition exploration with costume party (American/British)
- Diwali day lantern making craft
- Halloween craft
- Batman - Light and shadow experiments

VASU Learning Areas: Diverse forms of expression, Exploring and interacting with environment

Transversal competences: Cultural competence, Thinking and learning, Interaction and self-expression, digital competence

Materials: craft materials. Face paint, flash-light, cling film, paper roll, and costumes

Family/Community:

- Costume planning with families

4.5 Outer Circle: Cultural exposure expansion and networking to a community level

The purpose and proposed benefits of the outer circle as in culture exposure expansion and networking into a broader community level are to extend cultural learning beyond ECEC settings such as authentic cultural experiences through direct engagement with community spaces and cultural practitioners. Also children will be gaining cultural knowledge in living communities, not just educational materials or curricula. Also, outer circle enriches cultural resources and expertise regarding the cultural knowledge, artifacts, and experiences unavailable within the educational setting. Lastly, it is an invaluable opportunity for children to encounter cultural diversity as a normalized aspect of their community landscape.

Regarding the community resource networking , the potential Community resources and partners proposed are public cultural institutions such as museums with cultural exhibitions, children's workshops, artifact exploration as well as theaters and performance spaces focusing on children's cultural performances, music and dance programs. Moreover, community spaces such as parks (national park such as Nuksio, educational park such as Traffic park , cultural park such as Roihuvuori Cherry park) and public institutions such as community centers and public libraries for multilingual story times & books as well as culture events.

Proposed strategies for building networks for broadening cultural exposure to a community level includes reviewing municipal diversity reports, cultural calendars, and community directories, attending public cultural events to identify potential partners and understand community cultural landscape, documenting existing informal connections educators and families already maintain as well as attending community cultural events as participants before requesting partnerships. Regarding pedagogical preparation and follow-Up techniques to optimize the learning in the ECEC learning environments includes providing children with authentic purposes for community engagement (questions to explore, items to observe, people to meet) and also bringing documentation tools (Tablet, picture bingo card) to capture children's cultural learning while visiting the places. Moreover, making the community experiences children just encounter visible through displays, books, and ongoing classroom activities would be a very beneficial yet memorable follow up for instilling cultural responsiveness and appreciation in the foundational years.

4.6 Three Circle framework evaluation plan

Our 3 circle culturally responsive and socially inclusive pedagogical framework for Finnish ECEC setting will be evaluated based on the feedback of the staff body of the ECEC unit, guardians and the voice of the children. Staff feedback will be gathered through reflective discussions that explore educators' experiences implementing family cultural mapping, thematic activities, and community trips or partnerships based on the “practical feasibility, cultural authenticity, and lastly, the pedagogical effectiveness”.

Evaluation plan format by Helsinki City will be utilized to carry out the evaluation. Guardian feedback will be welcomed through individual conversations during daily

interactions and secured WhatsApp channels to assess whether the implemented monthly thematic structure honors their cultural values, strengthens cultural continuity between home and setting, and enriches their children's cultural identity development.

Children's voices will be captured through age-appropriate methods including observational documentation of engagement and enthusiasm during cultural activities as well as child-led reflections through discussions about favorite cultural experiences / activities during morning circle. Our tried and true method “the sticker voting system for each activity (Green - Great, Yellow - Neutral, Red - Not Great)” would also be employed again.

This multi-stakeholder evaluation approach ensures the framework is evaluated not only for its theoretical soundness but for its hands-on effectiveness in fostering cultural responsiveness across the ecological learning community of ECEC.

4.7 Iterative Refinement Process

This comprehensive evaluation process of gathering feedback from staff, guardians, and children generates rich, multi-perspective data that reveals both strengths and areas for improvement within the framework. However, evaluation is not a one-time endpoint but rather an ongoing process for continuous refinement. The insights gathered through these evaluation methods directly inform a systematic iterative refinement process that ensures the framework evolves responsively based on real-world implementation experiences.

The framework will utilize continuous iterative refinement throughout the development and implementation process, to ensure that pedagogical structure remains adaptive to changing contexts and emerging needs and insights. Following each feedback collection from stakeholders, a collective review among authors is carried out focusing on modifications regarding cultural authenticity, practical sustainability, and alignment with children's developmental needs and interests. All refinements are carefully documented in a change log that records the specific modification; the rationale based on stakeholder feedback or observed challenges, the date of implementation, and anticipated outcomes, creating a systematic progress log that demonstrates the framework's responsiveness and evidence-based evolution. The iterative process maintains that the first iteration represents a starting point rather than a finished product, with ongoing learning, cultural

awareness expansion, and co-construction with families and community partners that ensures the framework remains relevant, respectful, and responsive over time.

4.8 Iterative refinement evaluation table

Table 2: Iterative refinement evaluation table

Date	Activity	What to evaluate	What was changed	why	Who suggested it : staff, children, Gurdians	Result
Week 5-6	October Theme name : Spookiness in Kindness	Practical feasibility, peadogogical effectiveness	Theme name, content	The word spookiness might sound too scary and too narrowly focused on Halloween	Children and principle	Dark light party focusing on Diwali (light), Halloween (dark), Batman experiment(STEM)
Week 7-8	Thanks giving feast & fun	Pedagogical effectiveness	Content and weekly focused	Too narrowly focused on one culture	Staff, authors	What are you thankful for! (emotional awareness , gratitude)

Week 9-10	Kokko - Bonfire exploratio n/ observatio n / experience	Practical feasibility	activity	Too hard to impleme nt	Staff, parents, authors	Kokko craft from recycled materials
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5 The Output - Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Framework Booklet

The comprehensive framework detailed in the previous section, including its three interconnected circles and evaluation mechanisms, forms the foundation for a practical implementation tool. To facilitate adoption by ECEC practitioners, this framework has been translated into an accessible, user-friendly booklet format, which is described in the following section. The final output of this development-based thesis is a comprehensive booklet titled "Weaving Cultures: A Three-Circle Framework for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Finnish ECEC" in both digital and physical versions. This booklet serves as both a theoretical guideline and practical resource for early childhood educators seeking to implement culturally responsive and socially inclusive pedagogy within their ECEC settings. The booklet's content consists of the three-circle framework structure, progressing systematically from foundational family engagement through structured thematic pedagogical designing and planning to expansive community resources exposures.

The introductory section establishes the booklet's purpose within Finnish ECEC contexts, explaining why cultural responsiveness has become pedagogically essential given Finland's increasing demographic diversity and connecting the framework explicitly to Finnish National Core Curriculum values of equity, diversity, and child-centered practice. A visual overview of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory grounds the three circles theoretically, helping educators understand how inner circle -microsystem (family), middle circle - mesosystem (Learning environment and pedagogical thematic structure), and outer circle - exosystem (community) interact and strengthens each others to shape children's cultural development.

The Inner Circle section provides detailed guidance on family cultural mapping through three concrete tools: start-up discussions that build initial trust and gather background cultural information, FNAE integration that systematically documents family cultural wishes and expectations, and Cultural Pooling WhatsApp groups that maintain ongoing cultural dialogue between families and the ECEC unit. Each tool includes sample questions, facilitation tips, cultural sensitivity considerations, and troubleshooting guidance for common challenges such as family reluctance to share or language barriers.

The Middle Circle section elaborates the 12-month thematic structure, offering educators a sample theme selection framework that balances representation of enrolled families' cultures with broader local and international diversity while ensuring developmental appropriateness and play-based, child-led learning approaches. This section includes a sample monthly theme breakdown demonstrating how a single theme integrates across multiple weeks offering a concrete example of 12-month planning template educators can customize to their specific family compositions. Critically, this section demonstrates explicit connections between cultural themes and Finnish National Core Curriculum learning areas—language and communication, mathematical thinking, environmental and natural sciences, arts and culture, and physical and motor development—as well as transversal competencies, particularly cultural competence and interaction skills, ensuring cultural learning is not perceived as supplementary but as integral to mandated curriculum implementation. The child-led brainstorming format empowers educators to facilitate engaging theme selection processes where children's curiosities, interests and voices genuinely influence their learning path.

The Outer Circle section suggests community cultural resources and possible networking, providing potential community partners ranging from formal cultural institutions like museums and libraries to grassroots community organizations and cultural associations representing diverse ethnic communities. Logistical guidance covers planning community visits, hosting guest cultural presenters, and troubleshooting common barriers such as transportation, entrance fees as well as the booking suggestions.

Finally, the booklet is completed with short and concise educator notes focusing on implementation guidelines regarding cultural sensitivity, flexibility and responsiveness and resource management etc. Also, additional templates such as VASU (Individual Early

Childhood Education Plan by City of Helsinki), start up discussion questionnaire and child-led brainstorming templates and suggested questions are also included.

With the framework and its practical implementation tool now fully presented, it is important to critically reflect on the overall contribution of this work. The following section discusses the strengths, limitations, and broader implications of the developed framework, while also considering directions for future research and application.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Strengths and Contributions

This three-circle pedagogical framework will hopefully make significant contributions to culturally responsive practice in culturally diverse ECEC units like ours by offering a systematic, theoretically grounded approach that promotes cultural inclusion across multiple ecological levels in the ECEC learning community. The framework's primary strength lies in its integration of family cultural mapping, structured thematic pedagogical planning, and community exposure expansion into an effectively interconnected framework that values children's cultural identities while expanding their diversity appreciation and integration into local community. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the framework demonstrates how culturally responsive pedagogy must extend beyond classroom practices to encompass families as primary cultural knowledge providers and communities as living collections of cultural resources. The 12-month thematic structure offers practical implementation guidance that balances pedagogical intentionality with child-led approach through participatory theme selection, while the emphasis on authentic community partnerships challenges tokenistic multiculturalism overlooked in many educational settings.

6.2 Challenges and limitations

Despite all the benefits in prospects and theoretical grounding, the framework faces notable challenges and limitations that must be acknowledged. Implementation requires substantial educator cultural competence, time investment, and institutional resources that may not be equally available across all Finnish ECEC settings. The framework's effectiveness depends heavily on educator commitment, family willingness to share

cultural information or sensitive family narratives, and availability of community resources and variables that cannot be guaranteed and may create inconsistent implementation quality. Additionally, the framework's focus on identifiable cultural categories risks essentializing culture or overlooking other possible social identities such as race, gender, class etc., and individual family variations within cultural groups. Also, ECEC settings with highly diverse populations may find the 12-month structure insufficient to represent all enrolled families meaningfully. Finally, focusing heavily on the cultural themes may overlook children's individual strengths, needs, or learning goals as well as underplay language development, social-emotional skills, or cognitive domains that need consistent attention.

6.3 Reliability and Ethical Considerations

Ensuring reliability and addressing ethical concerns requires vigilant attention throughout framework development and implementation. Reliability is strengthened through detailed documentation of development decisions, systematic tracking of revisions and their rationales, and consistent application of evaluation criteria across all framework components, creating transparency and replicability for other practitioners. Content accuracy and cultural sensitivity are safeguarded through systematic review processes that cross-reference cultural information across multiple authoritative sources, with particular emphasis on family narratives rather than solely mainstream representations to avoid stereotyping. The framework explicitly acknowledges limitations in cultural complexity and diversity representation that no single framework can capture the full extent of cultural variation, and the 12-month structure necessarily simplifies complex cultural realities into digestible themes appropriate for early childhood education, and more importantly focuses on the cultural elements that are personally meaningful to the currently enrolled families of the unit.

Ethical considerations are carried out with mindfulness about the sensitive nature of exploring different cultural representations as well the contributors (families and children)'agency, expertise, and consent throughout the process. The framework's ethical foundation relies on valuing families and community members as cultural partners and co-educators rather than subjects for this study or informants. For instance, the parents' messages from the cultural pooling whatsapp channel are considered formative input or co-create materials rather than "data for analysis. In other words, these whatsapp

messages informed theme selection for 12 month planning in the booklet development process, in alignment with participatory, family involvement ECEC principles emphasized in VASU (FNAE 2022 , p.10).

WhatsApp was chosen for cultural pooling because it served as a collaborative tool for co-creating pedagogical themes with families rather than a data collection method. Since the platform was already the center's established communication channel with GDPR-compliant procedures, it offered a familiar and accessible way for parents to contribute cultural elements meaningful to them without requiring analysis of their messages. However, to address ethical considerations:

- Participation was entirely voluntary with no impact on their child's care
- Families were informed about the purpose and use of their contributions
- Access to the channel was limited to staff only on the work device for the designated group within work hours
- Families could request removal of their contributions at any time
- No direct quotes or identifying information from messages appear in this thesis
- Only pictures and messages with clear consent from participants (Guardians and children) included in the study and booklet
- The channel will be archived securely following booklet completion

Cultural appropriation, stereotyping, and misrepresentation are also actively countered by centering authentic cultural voices and maintaining ongoing dialogue about cultural accuracy and respectfulness with the contributors via pilot newsletter concerning pedagogical activities as well as personal feedback on ongoing theme development. The framework also respects educator professionalism by providing theoretical grounding and practical guidance while preserving space for contextual adaptation and professional judgment, recognizing that educators possess crucial knowledge about their specific settings, children, and communities that cannot be overruled by any framework

6.4 Reflection, future Directions and Conclusion

Overall, this development process was a challenging but deeply rewarding journey. The most gratifying aspect was witnessing families feel genuinely seen, heard, and valued as co-creators of the culturally responsive pedagogical plan. Verbal feedbacks such as “No

one has really asked me about what is meaningful about our cultures” “It was really nice sharing” “So I am also a teacher now, that's exciting” “Thank you for caring” etc. shows genuine appreciation about the process.

Also, educators found the framework immediately useful in their daily practice, and observing children begin to ask meaningful questions about diverse cultures confirmed the framework's impact. Translating our existing daily routines, practices, and knowledge into a structured, theoretically grounded three-circle framework brought much-needed organization and coherence to our work, resulting in a comprehensive booklet that educators can confidently use. While we encountered challenges such as time constraints, varying educator confidence levels, resource limitations, and initial family reluctance, we addressed each systematically by creating streamlined templates, providing clear examples and alternatives, and building trust through transparent communication and opt-out options. This iterative problem-solving process reinforced that culturally responsive pedagogy is not a perfect, finished product but an evolving practice that grows stronger through genuine collaboration and continuous refinement. Future research and development should focus on studies that examine the framework's long-term impacts on children's cultural identity development, intercultural competence, and sense of belonging across diverse ECEC contexts. Practical tool development is also needed, including assessment methods for evaluating cultural responsiveness, professional development modules for building educator cultural competence, and digital platforms for facilitating family cultural mapping and broader and more active community partnership coordination. Furthermore, a study examining the framework's applicability on a larger scale would be beneficial to promoting culturally responsive ECEC with scalability and flexibility.

In summary, the framework challenges us, the authors of this study to move beyond tokenism cultural enrichment toward a constant and meaningful engagement with families as cultural partners and communities as living cultural resources, recognizing that children's cultural development is profoundly shaped by aligned messages across home, educational setting, and community contexts. As this final output - the booklet has been found effective with our working life, we do hope that a framework like this can become useful in supporting in other ECEC units with growing cultural diversity in supporting children's holistic development, sense of belonging, and preparation for

participation in increasingly diverse democratic societies within the inclusive learning environment.

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Annexes

- Pre-filled thesis agreement form
- Output Booklet - Digital version
- Child-led Brainstorming session visuals & template
- Startup discussion questionnaire
- FNAE (Individual Early Childhood Education Plan) template
- Cultural Pooling WhatsApp Contribution visual

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