

Child Safety in Early Childhood Teacher Education: Gaps in Australia's Accelerated Graduate Diploma Programs

Australasian Journal of
Early Childhood
2025, Vol. 50(4) 364–374
© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/18369391251376709
journals.sagepub.com/home/aec



Lauren Brocki^{1,2} 

Abstract

Ensuring child safety is paramount in early childhood education yet concerns persist regarding the preparedness of educators from accelerated Graduate Diploma programs in Australia. This study critically examines eleven such programs through qualitative content analysis to assess how child safety is integrated into the curricula. Findings revealed significant inconsistencies, an often-implicit treatment of safeguarding, over-reliance of professional placements for practicum, and limited leadership, trauma-informed practice, and mandatory reporting. These gaps raise serious questions about whether graduates are adequately equipped to fulfil their legal and ethical responsibilities. This paper advocates for urgent reforms in pre-service teacher education, arguing that child safety must be embedded as a core professional competency. Recommendations include mandating explicit curriculum content, implementing dedicated leadership training, and strengthening regulatory oversight. Addressing these systemic inconsistencies is essential to ensure that all early childhood educators are fully prepared to provide safe, ethical, and high-quality education across diverse early learning settings.

Keywords

safeguarding, ECEC (early childhood education and care) policy, teacher preparation, systemic risk, child protection, child safety

Introduction

Globally, ensuring the safety and protection of children is recognised as a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for children's wellbeing and development (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 1989). Child safety is a critical foundation of early childhood education and care (ECEC), where any compromise can have profound consequences for children and families. In Australia,

the National Quality Framework [NQF] (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2023b) and the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

¹University of New England, Australia

²Southern Cross University, Australia

Corresponding Author:

Lauren Brocki, University of New England, Australia.
Email: lbrocki@une.edu.au

(Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2018) mandate rigorous child protection standards for educators. Despite this, recent reports have revealed persistent lapses in safeguarding practices across ECEC services. A prominent example is the 2025 *Four Corners* exposé by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which highlighted serious regulatory failures, including inadequate mandatory reporting and systemic under-supervision of children (Ferguson & Gillett, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). These revelations have raised concerns about the effectiveness of Australian initial teacher education programs, especially fast-track and accelerated programs, in adequately preparing graduates to safeguard child safety.

In Australian early childhood teacher education, *fast-track* programs typically refer to undergraduate degrees shortened through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) granted for prior qualifications, such as the Diploma of ECEC. In contrast, accelerated programs are postgraduate qualifications delivered over a condensed time frame, with content and professional experience compressed into a shorter duration than the standard 3-to-4-year undergraduate degree. This paper focuses solely on the 1-year Graduate Diploma in ECEC, an accelerated program that enables students to qualify as early childhood teachers in 9–12 months (Australian Qualifications Framework, n.d.). In contemporary policy discourse, such accelerated qualifications are often positioned as a rapid workforce supply measure, sometimes describes as “fast-tracked” solutions to teacher shortages (Ferguson & Gillett, 2025b). The Graduate Diploma degree is one such program: an intensive, typically 12-month program designed for individuals holding a bachelor’s degree often in a non-education field. The course primarily attracts career changers and international students seeking quick entry into the ECEC workforce, with the appeal further enhanced by the inclusion of early childhood teaching on Australia’s Skilled Occupation List, which can support permanent residency pathways. However, this combination of accelerated timeframe, high demand, and visa incentives raises concerns that

these programs may prioritise workforce entry over rigorous preparation, particularly in critical areas such as safeguarding, ethical leadership, and legal obligations (Ferguson & Gillett, 2025c; Meagher & Fenech, 2025).

In recent years, there has been a concerning increase in Graduate Diploma courses in Australia in response to the critical workforce shortages in the ECEC sector (15 in 2024 to 24 in 2025) (Meagher & Fenech, 2025). However, despite strong national policy imperatives, it remains unclear whether accelerated teacher education programs consistently and comprehensively address child protection. This ambiguity is particularly significant as many students may be new to the Australian context and unfamiliar with local legal and ethical standards. The assumption that professional experience placements alone can adequately develop child safety competence further raises questions about graduates’ preparedness to navigate complex and critical safeguarding scenarios independently.

This paper explores how child safety related concepts are represented in Graduate Diploma programs in early childhood initial teacher education. Through a qualitative content analysis of program documents from eleven Australian universities Graduate Diploma programs, this study identifies gaps in safeguarding coverage, raising critical questions regarding whether current teacher education models sufficiently align with national expectations for safeguarding and child safety, as outlined in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2022) and the National Quality Standard for ECEC (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2022).

Background and Literature

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is the national policy that defines the standards for all Australian education qualifications. Within ECEC the Certificate III in ECEC (AQF Level 3) is the foundational vocational qualification, enabling graduates to work as assistant educators under supervision.

The subsequent qualification is the Diploma of ECEC (AQF Level 5) which provides advanced vocational preparation and qualifies graduates to undertake lead educator roles with increased curriculum and supervisory responsibilities. At the higher education level, the Graduate Diploma in ECEC is classified at AQF Level 8, equivalent to a bachelor honours degree, and meets national regulatory requirements for registration as an early childhood teacher ([Australian Qualifications Framework](#), n.d.). Students enter Graduate Diploma programs from diverse backgrounds: some are domestic students with prior ECEC vocational qualifications, while others are often international students who have previous study in non-education fields. Clarifying this hierarchy is important for understanding concerns in recent research and policy commentary (e.g., [Ferguson & Gillett, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c](#); [Meagher & Fenech, 2025](#)) regarding whether condensed Level 8 qualifications can provide sufficient pedagogical and professional preparation in critical areas such as child safety and safeguarding, particularly in light of policy settings that promote accelerated Graduate Diplomas as a rapid workforce supply measure.

The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations were developed in response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse ([Commonwealth of Australia, 2017](#)) and are designed to ensure that organisations working with children create environments that are safe and supportive. Endorsed nationally in 2019, the 10 standards provide a nationally consistent framework for embedding child safety into organisational culture, governance, and practice ([AHRC, 2018](#)). While the National Principles apply across all sectors working with children, individual states and territories have embedded them into legislation and regulatory systems through jurisdiction-specific Child Safe Standards. In ECEC these standards operate alongside the NQF ([Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2023a](#)) and the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Code of Ethics ([2016](#)),

collectively requiring that safety is prioritised not only through compliance, but through proactive leadership, continuous professional development, and organisational accountability. Embedding the National Principles and their associated Standards within initial teacher education is critical to ensuring that all graduates, regardless of qualification pathway, can uphold Australia's safeguarding expectations.

The recent failures in child safety within Australia's ECEC sector have significantly intensified scrutiny of educator preparation. A pivotal moment was the March 2025 *Four Corners* expose, *Betrayal of Trust: Australia's Childcare Crisis* produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). This national investigative journalism program revealed over 300 regulatory breaches by a single private operator, including unsupervised children and systemic under-reporting of harm. These findings starkly contrast with Australia's National Principles for Child Safe Organisations ([AHRC, 2018](#)) and the NQF ([Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2023b](#)), both of which mandate proactive and comprehensive safeguarding measures across all ECEC services. Despite these strong national frameworks, recent research highlights a persistent gap between child safety policy ideals and practice in ECEC. Regulatory reviews have identified significant inconsistencies in the implementation of mandatory reporting requirements, variations in the quality and delivery of safeguarding training and a lack of clarity around leadership accountability for child safety across Australian jurisdictions ([Commonwealth of Australia, 2017](#); [Sims et al., 2018](#)).

Contemporary research emphasises that ethical early childhood teaching demands more than procedural compliance; it requires relational judgement, critical reflection, and a strong sense of moral agency ([Molla & Nolan, 2020](#); [Sims et al., 2018](#)). Legal awareness alone does not equip educators to recognise or respond effectively to trauma in real-world contexts. A recent scoping review of trauma-informed interventions in Australian ECEC contexts

highlights that most programs remain nascent and consistently rely on teacher upskilling through training and coaching with limited evaluation of organisational or child-level outcomes (Sun et al., 2023). These findings underscore a critical gap: Graduate Diploma programs frequently omit structured guidance on trauma-informed pedagogy, ethical leadership, and child advocacy, leaving graduates underprepared to enact safeguarding responsibilities or translate policy into effective practice.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) underscored the critical importance of training new teachers to identify grooming behaviours, understand trauma, and respond effectively to signs of abuse (Whelan, 2020). However, recent research highlights that initial teacher education programs often emphasise procedural compliance, focusing mainly on reporting obligations and maltreatment indicators, while overlooking relational safeguarding strategies, trauma-informed practices, and leadership preparation (Sun et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2023). This is particularly concerning given that early childhood teachers across all Australian states and territories are designated mandatory reporters, legally required to identify and report suspected abuse or neglect (Ayling et al., 2020). The professional and ethical responsibilities inherent in this role demand comprehensive preparation, especially for those entering the sector through accelerated pathways, to ensure they can effectively fulfil their legal obligations and protect children (Commission for Children and Young People, n.d.).

Despite a shared national commitment to child safety in ECEC, the delivery of child protection training remains fragmented and inconsistent. Under the Education and Care Services National Law and NQF, approved providers are legally required to ensure staff complete relevant child protection training. However, the mechanisms through which this obligation is enacted differ significantly between jurisdictions and service types. A 2023 national

review found that while some states mandate accredited and role-specific training with periodic refreshers, others rely on general awareness-raising approaches that are neither standardised nor consistently monitored (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). For example, while South Australia requires comprehensive Responding to Risks of Harm, Abuse and Neglect – Education and Care (RRHAN-EC) training for educators other States permit short videos or non-accredited materials to fulfil the obligation. The scope, depth and regulatory oversight of training varying accordingly.

This inconsistency is particularly profound in the education and qualification pathways that lead individuals into the ECEC workforce. Certificate III and Diploma qualifications often include child protection as core content. In contrast Graduate Diplomas and other tertiary pathways, especially those enrolling students from non-ECEC backgrounds, offer limited structured content on safeguarding, trauma-informed practice, or ethical leadership. These disparities reflect broader structural differences in curriculum oversight between vocational and higher education providers. As a result, some pre-service educators enter the workforce with a compliance-based understanding of their responsibilities, without ethical or relational competencies necessary to identify and respond to harm effectively (Walsh et al., 2023).

Concerns about the adequacy of educator preparation are compounded by evidence that regulatory frameworks do not always translate into effective practice. The 2023 Review of Child Safety Arrangements under the NQF identified uneven implementation of mandatory reporting obligations, gaps in leadership accountability, and limited auditing mechanisms to ensure consistent professional standards across services (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2023b). These shortcomings not only place undue responsibilities on individual providers to interpret policy but also create significant risks to child safety in everyday practice.

The real-world consequences of these systemic gaps are evident in recent exposés of ECEC services where staff failed to follow basic safety and reporting protocols, such as seeking timely medical care or reporting suspected abuse. These failures point to a lack of confidence, clarity, and leadership within the sector. When educators are not equipped to lead or challenge unsafe practices, a culture of silence and fear can take hold, where reporting is avoided due to fear of reprisal or uncertainty about relevant processes (Ayling et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2021).

Addressing this issue requires more than regulatory amendments; it demands a sector-wide shift in how educator preparation is conceptualised and delivered. Training should cultivate a strong sense of ethical leadership, collective responsibility, and child advocacy, ensuring all educators understand their role as mandatory reporters within a broader safeguarding ecosystem. As noted by the National Children's Commissioner, recent failures in the ECEC sector signal a need for urgent, system-wide reform, not incremental change. A unified, nationally consistent approach to safeguarding education is essential to ensure all early childhood professionals are equipped to protect children across diverse settings, regardless of their qualification pathway. Despite the strength of existing national policy frameworks, there is limited empirical evidence on how child safety is explicitly addressed within the curricula of accelerated Graduate Diploma programs in ECEC. Much of the available research on educator preparation in Australia examines professional learning and leadership development within traditional undergraduate initial teacher education pathways (e.g., Molla & Nolan, 2018; Sims et al., 2018), with little focus on safeguarding content in accelerated, Level 8 programs. This study addresses that gap by analysing the curriculum content of eleven Australian accelerated Graduate Diploma programs to examine how child safety is addressed.

The research is guided by the following questions:

- (1) Is child safety addressed in the curricula of accelerated Graduate Diploma programs in ECEC?
- (2) How, and to what extent, do these programs align with national safety policy frameworks and professional standards?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis (QCA), a systematic method for interpreting textual data by identifying patterns, themes, and categories that convey meaning in context (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). This approach was selected for its capacity to provide a structured yet flexible framework for analysing program materials while remaining sensitive to how safeguarding concepts are embedded within broader descriptions of curriculum and pedagogy.

Eleven Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching programs from different Australian universities were purposively selected based on three criteria: (1) their use of accelerated delivery models, (2) public availability of program documentation, and (3) representation of geographic and institutional diversity. All programs are accredited by ACECQA.

Data were drawn from publicly available course materials, including university websites. Course handbooks, unit outlines, and subject descriptions. Over 100 individual units were analysed across thematic domains such as curriculum, pedagogy, wellbeing, literacy, leadership and professional practice. These documents were selected for their capacity to provide insight into how safeguarding-related concepts are presented to pre-service teachers during their programs.

A coding matrix was developed to guide the analysis, drawing on prior studies of child protection content in teacher education (e.g., Walsh et al., 2011). The matrix identified three types of content: (1) explicit references, such as standalone child protection units or assessment

task addressing mandatory reporting; (2) implicit mentions, where safeguarding was briefly embedded in broader discussions (e.g., in leadership or behaviour management units); and (3) absent coverage, where no identifiable content on child safety or ethical responsibilities could be found. Each unit was assessed for key terminology, including “mandatory reporting”, “harm”, “trauma-informed practice”, “well-being”, and “ethics”.

Coding was undertaken by the author. To enhance reliability, the coding framework was piloted on three programs to refine category definitions and to ensure clarity before full analysis. Throughout the process, coding decisions were documented in an audit trail, and previously coded units were periodically revisited to check for consistency. This iterative approach ensured stability in the identification and classification of safeguarding-related content across the dataset.

The analysis prioritised the visibility, consistency, and depth of safeguarding content across the sample. Attention was paid to how child safety was addressed in theoretical coursework versus professional experience placements. This approach enabled the identification of thematic inconsistencies across institutions and informed discussion about the adequacy of accelerated pathways in preparing graduates to meet their legal and ethical safeguarding responsibilities.

Findings

Of the eleven Graduate Diploma programs reviewed, nine included at least one unit with explicit safeguarding or child protection content, one addressed safeguarding only implicitly, and one contained no identifiable safeguarding content in the publicly available program documentation. Across all 109 units analysed, 57 (52.3%) contained explicit references to safeguarding or child protection, 3 (2.8%) addressed these concepts implicitly, and 49 (45.0%) had no clearly identifiable safeguarding content.

The analysis revealed significant variability in how child safety is addressed across Graduate Diploma programs in ECEC. Although all reviewed programs demonstrated some engagement with child protection content, the scope, depth, and integration of this content varied markedly between institutions.

Only a small number of programs included units with explicit titles referencing child protection, safeguarding, or mandatory reporting. In most cases, child safety was embedded implicitly within broader subjects such as professional practice, wellbeing, or leadership. Some programs referred to legal responsibilities and child protection obligations in course descriptions, yet without specifying how these topics would be taught, assessed, or linked to broader professional competencies.

A consistent pattern emerged across the data: child safety content, when present, was more commonly addressed in placement-related units or capstone professional experience subjects. This indicates a reliance on practicum settings to deliver essential safeguarding learning. However, this approach risks placing the responsibility for critical training onto host services, which may themselves vary in capacity, quality, and confidence in modelling child-safe practices. This reliance on placement as the primary safeguarding education reflects a pedagogical assumption that practical exposure can substitute for structured, theory-based instruction and assessment, an assumption that is not supported by research on teacher preparation.

Notably, few programs included structured content on trauma-informed pedagogy, ethical leadership, or relational safeguarding, areas central to creating and maintaining safe learning environments. Leadership, where referenced, was typically discussed in terms of curriculum or staff management, rather than as a vehicle for upholding child protection. This gap suggests a broader issue in framing child safety as an ethical and professional responsibility rather than a compliance issue. Terminology across programs was also inconsistent. While terms such as “wellbeing”, “ethics”, and “risk”

appeared in several unit outlines, they were not always linked explicitly to safeguarding concepts or mandatory reporting obligations. In some instances, these terms were used in general statements of professional responsibility, without clear indication of the knowledge or skills being developed. Collectively, the findings suggest that current Graduate Diplomas provide an uneven foundation for child protection preparedness. Although all programs operate under the same national regulatory standards, the lack of a mandated curriculum framework results in wide variation in how (and whether) critical safeguarding concepts are taught. This inconsistency poses significant risks, particularly for graduates who may enter the workforce as mandatory reporters without a clear understanding of their legal and ethical responsibilities.

Discussion and Implications for Policy and Practice

Despite Australia's strong national policy frameworks, namely the *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations* and the *National Quality Framework*, there is currently no consistent requirement for Graduate Diploma programs in Early Childhood Education to explicitly teach child protection as a core component. This disconnect between national safeguarding expectations and tertiary curriculum standards poses several risks, both the children and to the integrity of the ECEC sector.

Three critical issues emerged from this analysis. First, many programs appear to operate under the assumption that child protection is either self-evident or sufficiently addressed through peripheral references. In most cases, safeguarding was implied rather than explicitly embedded in unit learning outcomes or assessments. This implicitness diminishes the perceived importance of child safety, relegating it to a secondary concern and weakening its integration into the professional identity of future educators.

Second, the reliance on professional placements to deliver child protection learning places undue pressure on services and reflects a flawed pedagogical model. While experiential learning is vital, safeguarding knowledge, particularly legal, ethical, and relational components, must precede practice. Research consistently affirms that effective educator preparation requires structured, intentional teaching, not informal exposure alone (Nolan & Molla, 2016). Placement setting also vary in quality and may not consistently model best practices, further compounding this risk.

Third, there is a notable leadership gap: most leadership units within these ECEC programs focus on operational and administrative competencies, rather than equipping graduates with the confidence and ethical acumen to lead in safeguarding contexts. Leadership in ECEC must include the capacity to advocate for children's rights, challenge unsafe practices, and foster a culture of vigilance and protection. Without explicit development of these skills, graduates may be ill-prepared to respond decisively to harm, let alone prevent it. Gibbs (2020) highlights this need in the Australian context, showing that leadership in ECEC must be understood as a socially-just practice grounded in advocacy for children's rights and ethical responsibility, rather than being confined to compliance or managerial tasks.

This disconnection between policy and practice has real consequences. Inadequately prepared educators may fail to identify or act on signs of abuse, not from neglect, but from insufficient training. Moreover, this gap reflects a broader undervaluation of child safety as a central dimension of professional quality. A compliance-orientated approach, focused on checklists and risk avoidance, fails to reflect the proactive, relational safeguarding needed in modern early childhood education.

Child safety must be embedded throughout pre-service preparation, not treated as assumed knowledge or delegated to practicum settings. Coursework, assessments, and leadership development must be aligned to ensure educators

enter the workforce with the confidence, knowledge, and ethical grounding to fulfil their responsibilities as mandatory reporters and child advocates.

Despite Australia's comprehensive national policy frameworks, including the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (AHRC, 2018) and the NQF (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2023b), there is currently no consistent requirement for Graduate Diploma programs in ECEC to explicitly teach child protection as a core component. This disconnect between national safeguarding expectations and the Graduate Diploma curriculum standards poses several risks, both to children and to the integrity of the ECEC sector.

These risks are amplified in the current ECEC workforce environment, where services are facing acute staffing shortages, high attrition, and rapid recruitment of less-experienced educators to fill vacancies (Thorpe et al., 2020). High turnover disrupts the continuity of care that underpins safe, trusting relationships with children and places additional pressure on remaining staff, who may have limited capacity for mentoring or modelling best practice safeguarding. Accelerated Graduate Diplomas are being used as a key workforce supply measure (Productivity Commission, 2024), meaning any gaps in child protection have direct and immediate implications for the quality and safety of provision.

In this context, the recommendations that follow are not only concerned with aligning curriculum with policy, but also about developing and sustaining safeguarding capacity in a sector under significant strain. Embedding robust child protection education into Graduate Diploma programs can help ensure that graduates are entering the workforce with the knowledge, ethical grounding, and confidence to uphold children's safety in environments where systemic pressures can heighten risk.

To address the systemic gaps identified in this study, reforms must go beyond incremental adjustments to become part of a coherent

national approach to safeguarding education in Graduate Diplomas.

First, the inclusion of explicit child safety content should be mandated across all Graduate Diploma programs, with clearly defined learning outcomes and assessed competencies. As the findings show, programs without such explicit content risk relegating safeguarding to an assumed skillset, undermining graduate preparedness.

Second, legal and ethical responsibilities, such as mandatory reporting, duty of care, and risk management, should be embedded within core curriculum units, rather than being treated as peripheral topics, or left to practicum settings to teach. Integrating these responsibilities into the centre of program content affirms their centrality to professional identity and aligns with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisation (AHRC, 2018) and the ECA Code of Ethics (ECA, 2016).

Third, dedicated trauma-informed practice, child advocacy, abuse indicators, and rights-based education is essential, particularly for those students from non-teaching backgrounds. These domains are essential to relational safeguarding, which moves beyond compliance toward proactive protection. Evidence shows that educators trained in trauma-informed pedagogies are better able to create safe, supportive learning environments (Walsh et al., 2023), however, such training requires intentional and structured delivery before entry into professional experience placements.

Fourth, leadership development must extend beyond operational management to include safeguarding leadership. Graduates need the confidence and ethical acumen to manage risk, advocate for children's welfare, and challenge unsafe practices within ECEC services. As Jackson (2020) notes, a potential role for government exists in supporting ECEC leadership development, particularly in reducing workload stress that can compromise leaders' capacity to prioritise child safety.

Fifth, stronger regulatory oversight is needed. ACECQA and higher education quality agencies

should explicitly review safeguarding content as part of program accreditation, including curriculum audits and evidence of graduate competencies. Such oversight would close the current gap between policy requirements and program delivery, ensuring that safeguarding is not left to chance.

Sixth, involving practising ECEC professionals in curriculum design and review processes can ensure that program content reflects real-world safeguarding challenges.

Finally, the establishment of national benchmarks for safeguarding education, including minimum content requirements, training standards, and regular quality reviews, would create the consistency currently absent across Graduate Diplomas. In a workforce marked by high staff turnover and rapid recruitment (Thorpe et al., 2020), such benchmarks are vital to ensure that every educator, regardless of qualification pathway, is prepared to meet their legal, ethical, and professional obligations to protect children.

These measures are not incremental; they are foundational to ensuring every child's right to safety and care; they are ethical imperatives. If accelerated Graduate Diplomas are to remain a viable pathway into the ECEC workforce, they must be pedagogically rigorous, professionally credible, and firmly founded in the rights and safety of children. Child protection cannot be assumed to emerge from experience alone; it must be intentionally taught, modelled, assessed, and championed as a foundational element of every educator's professional identity and formation.

Conclusion

Graduate Diplomas in Early Childhood Education have emerged as a key workforce strategy, addressing staffing shortages, and attracting career changers and international graduates. However, the current design of many of these programs does not guarantee that child protection is taught as a foundational professional competency. This analysis reveals that safeguarding content is often implied rather than explicit, inconsistently embedded across units,

or deferred to professional placements, patterns that risk leaving graduates underprepared to fulfil their ethical and legal responsibilities as mandatory reporters.

Unless universities commit to formally embedding child protection and safeguarding content within course structures, and until regulators such as ACECQA establish and enforce clearer standards and consistent accreditation expectations, there is a risk that system-level policy commitments to child safety may not translate into everyday professional practice. The urgency of this reform is underscored by recent investigative reporting (Ferguson & Gillett, 2025a, 2025b) which has exposed systemic failures, confusion regarding reporting obligations, and a culture of silence in parts of the ECEC sector. These findings confirm that child safety must be treated not as an assumed byproduct of experience, but as a critical and foundational domain of professional development, equivalent in importance to pedagogy, curriculum, and leadership.

Future research is needed to evaluate the impact of pre-service training on educators' preparedness for child protection responsibilities. Longitudinal studies examining how knowledge, confidence, and reporting behaviours evolve post-graduation across both accelerated and traditional pathways would offer valuable insight into the effectiveness of current approaches. Aligning all initial teacher education programs with the National Quality Standard and national safeguarding frameworks will be critical to ensuring that every graduate, regardless of pathway, is equipped to uphold children's rights to safety and wellbeing. Only via such integrated, evidence-informed reform can Australia develop a child-safe ECEC sector that meets both professional standards and community expectations.

ORCID iD

Lauren Brocki  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5341-8887>

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2025). *Betrayal of trust: Australia's childcare crisis* [Television broadcast]. Four Corners. <https://www.abc.net.au/4corners>
- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2022). National quality standard. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard>
- Australian Children's Education, & Care Quality, Authority. (2023a). Review of child safety arrangements under the national quality framework. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/Review-of-Child-Safety-Arrangements-under-the-NQF.pdf>
- Australian Children's Education, & Care Quality, Authority. (2023b). National quality framework. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework>
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018). National principles for child safe organisations. <https://humanrights.gov.au>
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2022). Australian professional standards for teachers. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/standards>
- Australian Qualifications Framework. (n.d.). AQF levels. <https://www.aqf.edu.au/framework/aqf-levels>
- Ayling, N. J., Walsh, K., & Williams, K. E. (2020). Factors influencing early childhood education and care educators' reporting of child abuse and neglect. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 45(1), 95–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939119885307>
- Baker, A. J. L., LeBlanc, S., Adebayo, T., & Mathews, B. (2021). Training for mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect: Content analysis of state-sponsored curricula. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 113(March 2021), 104932. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.104932>
- Commission for Children and Young People. (n.d.). Standard 8: Staff and volunteers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children and young people safe through ongoing education and training. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/the-11-child-safe-standards/standard-8/>
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2017). Final report of the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>
- Early Childhood Australia. (2016). Code of ethics. <https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/eca-code-ethics/>
- Ferguson, A., & Gillett, C. (2025a). Betrayal of trust: Australia's childcare crisis. *Four Corners, Part I. Australian Broadcasting Corporation*. [Television broadcast]. <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/four-corners/series/2025/video/NC2503H007S00>
- Ferguson, A., & Gillett, C. (2025b). *Shaken toddlers and slapped babies: Documents expose childcare crisis* [Television broadcast]. Four Corners, Part II. Australian Broadcasting Corporation. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-12/shaken-toddlers-and-slapped-babies%3A-documents/105284350>
- Ferguson, A., & Gillett, C. (2025c). *Fast-tracked childcare courses are putting Australian children at risk, insiders warn*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-07-07/fast-track-childcare-courses-put-children-at-risk-insiders-warn/105483042>
- Gibbs, L. (2020). "That's your right as a human isn't it?" The emergence and development of leading as a socially-just practice in early childhood education. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 45(4), 295–308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939120966093>
- Jackson, J. (2020). *Every educator matters: Evidence for a new early childhood workforce strategy for Australia*. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Meagher, L., & Fenech, M. (2025). Submission to the NSW legislative council inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in New South Wales [Unpublished submission to government inquiry].
- Molla, T., & Nolan, A. (2020). Teacher agency and professional practice. *Teachers and Teaching*, 26(1), 67–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2020.1740196>
- Nolan, A., & Molla, T. (2016). Teacher professional learning in early childhood education: Insights from a mentoring program. *Early Years*, 38(3), 258–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2016.1259212>
- Productivity, Commission. (2024). A path to universal early childhood education and care: Final report (Inquiry into early childhood education and care). <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries-and-research/childhood/report/>
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Sage.
- Sims, M., Waniganayake, M., & Hadley, F. (2018). Educational leadership: An evolving role in Australian early childhood settings. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(6), 960–979. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217714254>
- Sun, Y., Blewitt, C., Minson, V., Bajayo, R., Cameron, L., & Skouteris, H. (2023). Trauma-informed interventions in early childhood education and care settings: A scoping review. Trauma, violence, & abuse. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231234567>
- Thorpe, K., Jansen, E., Sullivan, V., Irvine, S., & McDonald, P. (2020). Identifying predictors of retention and professional wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce in a time of change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 21(4), 632–647. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-020-09382-3>
- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. (1989). *United nations convention on the rights of the child*. UNICEF Australia. <https://www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>
- Walsh, K., Ey, L. A., Hand, K., Smith, R., Howard, S., Fenton, A., Whiteford, C., Brown, M., Pinnock, R., & Rodier, L. (2023). Child protection and safeguarding in initial teacher education: A systematic scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 150(July 2023), 106951. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.106951>
- Walsh, K., Laskey, L., McInnes, E., Farrell, A., Mathews, B., & Briggs, F. (2011). Locating child protection in preservice teacher education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(7). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n7.1>
- Whelan, J. D. (2020). A response to the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse in Australia. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(14), 1458–1469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1730811>