

Article

# Educators' Construction of a Sense of Belonging in ECEC: An Australian Case Study

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**Abstract:** The involvement of refugee families in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a complex issue in many countries. In this paper, we explore how early childhood (EC) educators construct refugee families' sense of belonging in two metropolitan and one regional EC setting in Victoria, Australia. We undertook a multiple case study, analyzing interview data. We implemented Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and identity capital, drawing on the Provision Articles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Australian Early Years Learning Framework 2.0. Our study revealed the tensions between creating a sense of belonging and recognizing the identity and cultural capital of refugee children and their families as they access ECEC programs. We conclude with suggestions for ways forward to navigate this space, including the need for greater awareness of research on the importance of a sense of belonging for refugee families in ECEC settings.

**Keywords:** belonging; refugee children; early childhood education and care; provision article



**Citation:** Keary, A.; Zheng, H.; Garvis, S. Educators' Construction of a Sense of Belonging in ECEC: An Australian Case Study. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 510. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13050510>

Academic Editor: James Albright

Received: 18 March 2023

Revised: 12 May 2023

Accepted: 15 May 2023

Published: 18 May 2023



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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores how early childhood (EC) educators construct refugee families' "identity of belonging" in three EC education settings in Victoria, Australia. Victoria is the second smallest state of Australia, located in south-eastern Australia, yet is the second most populated state in Australia. In this multicultural state, every year, 4000 refugees settle in Victoria through the Humanitarian Program [1].

The sense of belonging is connected to the social, cultural and emotional notions of belonging that are central to the Australian Early Years Learning Framework 2.0 (EYLF) [2]. We argue that belonging provides opportunities for transformations and other ways of thinking about diversity and the inclusion of refugee children and their families in EC education settings.

First, the paper outlines the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child [3]. Next, literature is reviewed that explores the notion of identity of belonging. This discussion is continued by engaging with Bourdieu's ideas about cultural and identity capital. The findings are presented and analyzed and implications for practice and recommendation for further research in the field are discussed.

### 1.1. Background

Refugees and asylum-seekers are distinguished from other migrants as they have escaped their country of origin due to persecution, are unable to return safely, and cannot choose a country for resettlement [4]. The 2022–2023 Australian Humanitarian Program has an intake of approximately 18,000 places to ensure the permanent resettlement of refugees [5].

The UNHCR reports that about 42% of children with refugee experience access EC education; that is, the years prior to schooling. The early childhood education and care

(ECEC) landscape in Australia is complicated and complex. While there is the Australian Early Years Learning Framework 2.0 (EYLF) at the national level, some states may choose to create their own framework or guideline based on the National Framework (e.g., the states of Victoria with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework for all Children aged birth to 8 years). ECEC policies and programs differ between Australian states and territories according to structural factors (e.g., the ratio of adults to children can differ across states and territories or the current equivalency regulations of early childhood teachers also vary. Variation can also occur in requirements around early childhood teacher registration across the states and territories). Differences in the national ECEC landscape link with varying policy settings to create challenges associated with affordability and workforce planning. The benefits of ECEC for all children, including refugee children, have been well established in Australian and international research [6]. High-quality ECEC consisting of intentional play-based programs planned and implemented by quality educators results in better outcomes for children experiencing disadvantages [7].

### *1.2. A Rights-Based Approach*

A rights-based approach to the resettlement of refugees is grounded by the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) [3] and the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNCROC). The UN Quota for Refugees [8] is broad and focuses on children from birth to 18 years old. Three categories classify children's rights and include provision rights, protection rights and participation rights [9]. We will draw on the UNCRC articles about provision rights to explore EC educators' perceptions about and the experiences of working with refugee children and their families within an Australian context.

Resettlement policies for refugee children and their families represent shifting strategies for positioning their needs and rights. Mitchell and Kamenarac [9] contend that they convey "a country's intentions, aspirations, aims for refugee children and families which ensures their participation, protection, rights and provision in a resettlement state" [10] (p. 3). The Australian Humanitarian Program provides resettlement for refugees who require humanitarian need and protection, and targets people who arrive lawfully and satisfy Australia's protection obligations, including being found to be a refugee and satisfying health, character and security requirements to gain a Permanent Protection Visa. In recent years, regional settlement, in contrast to metropolitan settlement, has increased to around 38%, with the goal of refugees rebuilding "their lives in a safe and welcoming environment" (p. 6).

## **2. Literature Review**

In the category of Provision, the UNCRC articles "recognize the social rights of children to minimum standards of health, education, social security, physical care, family life, play, recreation, culture and leisure" [11] (p. 36), while protection articles govern children's rights to be safe from any sort of abuse, discrimination, exploitation, injustice and conflict [11]. Associated with civil and political rights, participation articles acknowledge children's rights to "a name and identity, to be consulted and to be taken account of, to physical integrity, to access to information, to freedom of speech and opinion, and to challenge decisions made on their behalf" [11] (p. 36). Our focus in this paper is on the provision to explore children's social rights in EC education settings.

When refugee families enrol their children in the Victorian education system, they are eligible for the Childcare Subsidy. In Australia, this is a percentage-based subsidy to cover childcare fees [12]. The percentage that families can receive is based on families' income. For instance, families whose annual income is between AUD \$0 and \$70 015 can receive 85% of the Childcare Subsidy [12]. Refugee families in Australia are eligible for this subsidy, with opportunities to apply for the Additional Childcare Subsidy. However, these may not cover the total childcare fees, which means families are responsible for paying some of the childcare costs [12].

### 2.1. Identity of Belonging in EC Curriculum

In 2009, the Australian government launched their first ever early years framework for Australia entitled *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF)* [13]. The steering document was developed in four stages, beginning with a literature review of the curriculum and frameworks for EC education [14], then a commissioned background paper [15] and development of a trial draft, including supporting materials for professionals and families, before subsequent amendment by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). A motif of “belonging, being and becoming” was featured and had a number of advantages in that it resonated with key priorities and a wide range of professionals from a consortium, including the elasticity made possible [16]. This meant many ideas, constructs and priorities could be included within the flexibility and elasticity of the terms. In 2011, Sumsion and Wong (where the first author was involved in the development of EYLF) included the word “belonging” within the document. First, they developed a cartography of the word “belonging”, before looking for these dimensions within the steering document. Their findings showed that “belonging” within EYLF fitted with “social dimensions”, “cultural belonging” and “emotional belonging”. No statements in their findings were identified with “spiritual” or “legal belonging”. As such, Sumsion and Wong (p. 37) found that belonging fills three functions of enticing engagement, opening up alternatives, and providing reassurance while inviting critical interrogation. They suggest that the focus on “belonging” allows for many transformations within EC education and care.

In 2023, a revised version of the document was released, which was entitled *Belonging, Being and Becoming—the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia 2.0* [2]. The description of Belonging was published as follows:

“Experiencing belonging—knowing where and with whom you belong—is integral to human existence. Children belong to diverse families, neighbourhoods, local and global communities. Belonging acknowledges children’s interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. In early childhood, and throughout life, trusting relationships and affirming experiences are crucial to a sense of belonging. Belonging is central to being and becoming in that it shapes who children are and who they can become.” (p. 6).

As such, children are viewed as belonging to a culture, shaped by experiences with their family and in the community. This also suggests that cultural awareness is important for EC educators to support all children’s sense of belonging.

### 2.2. ECEC Research on Refugee Communities: An Australasian Perspective

There is limited but increasing research in the field of refugee families and ECEC. De Gioia [17] discusses how childcare can be the initial point of contact for refugee families within an Australian context. She interviewed four educators and found that constructing spaces and opportunities for refugee mothers and educators to build partnerships was important. By this means, educators act as conduits in connecting refugee families with the broader community, enhancing social capital. Work by Mitchell et al. [18] and Mitchell and Kamenrac [9] reports on refugee children and families from an Aoterea New Zealand perspective. This research examines how ECEC can create a sense of belonging and identity for the refugee community.

Lamb’s Australian study [19] investigated the barriers and enablers to participation in ECEC for refugee families. From data collected from interviews and focus groups with refugee parents and ECEC educators, Lamb found that for some families, fees were prohibitive, or at times they withdrew, as educators seemed to not understand the needs of the refugee children.

Keary and colleagues [20,21] report from two perspectives on small-scale Australian research that explores the bridging of the divide for refugee families accessing ECEC. In 2022, Keary et al. [21] framed the generated data within an ethics of care framework centered on the conceptual understandings of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. They argued that

genuinely listening to refugee families was crucial to adopting ethical principles based on feeling cared for and cared about when working with refugee children and their families in ECEC. In 2023, Keary et al. [21] engaged with a postcolonial theoretical framework employing Bhabha's notion of third space to discuss the positioning of refugee families in ECEC in Australia. They uncovered the multilayered complexities of researching with refugee families who are accessing ECEC and the challenges of the research process.

This study focuses on the perspectives of EC educators, given their role in developing a sense of belonging for refugee families accessing ECEC. We are interested in exploring the alignment and tensions that emerge from the data collected.

### 2.3. Conceptual Framework

In this study, we use Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to conceptualize the identity of belonging for refugee children in Australian ECEC. Different from economic and social capital, cultural capital is more disguised as legitimate competence [22]. Cultural capital can be in three different forms, which are as follows: embodied, objectified and institutionalized states [22]. The embodiment of cultural capital implies "inculcation and assimilation" [22] (p. 18), which takes time to accumulate. For migrant children who enter a new ECEC space, the devaluation of their cultural capital such as language and relationships with peers can lead to a lack of sense of belonging [23].

Côté [24,25] focuses on the interdisciplinary issue of the interrelationship between culture and identity. He engages with this issue through conceptualizing "the culture-identity link" through the notion of identity capital. He contends that this link represents three social-structural periods at the following three analytical levels: the macro, the micro and the psychological. Accordingly, identity capital illustrates the individual processes of negotiating life pathways in a complex society [24]. Côté's model of identity capital illuminates the connection between social context and identity formation, where significant relationships are related to identity capital resources. Specifically, the identity capital model provides a "developmental-social psychological approach to identity formation that integrates psychological and sociological understandings of identity" [25] (p. 578). This model depicts how societal institutional support for the individual's developmental transitions are often insufficient, leaving many of them to their own devices during significant life transitions [25].

Côté (2005) suggests that in late-modern societies, the nature of learning has shifted, and the ability to undertake individualized life courses has increasingly become significantly divided for deciding the path of individual life trajectories. Hence, in employing the notion of identity capital, he stressed the importance of choice-making in working with direction-determining processes of individualization. Côté argues for educational assistance in terms of choice-making in the curriculum. This, he contends, is for generating broader benefits for the individual and their learning and to support community-level respect for social capital construction in intergenerational processes.

### 3. Methodology

This paper derives from a larger research project that involved interviews with educators and refugees in four research settings. The settings and interviewees were selected through educator contacts working in the field of ECEC for refugees in these settings located in Victoria, the second largest state of Australia. For this paper, we drew on the interviews with educators but have reported on the refugee community perspective in other publications.

A social constructivist approach to qualitative research was employed to offer perspectives on immigration in an Australian context. Specifically, a qualitative multiple case study design was adopted to gain insights into how ECEC curriculum constructs families' sense of belonging, and how educators through their practices guide an assumed identity for families and children. A multiple case study design involves the identification of how

different environments influence the experience of a case, providing powerful insights [26]. According to Thomas [27], case studies can be described as follows:

“analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other systems which are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame—an object—within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates”.

To understand the details of the selected cases [27], we adopted a multiple case study design to investigate how curriculum and educators’ practices in an Australian ECEC context shapes the refugee experience in ECEC.

The research team believed that by gaining a better understanding of the complex needs of refugee families, EC educators and services would be in a more informed position to provide meaningful, respectful and engaging programs that provide a balance between care and education, and support the transition not only into ECEC but also into the more formal structures of schooling. So, the lead researcher set up contacts in the field, and gathered information about the context and background of the research participants. The research team decided to adopt a case study approach to the study, selecting a small number of participants representing educators and refugee parents from three metropolitan settings and one regional setting. The lead researcher guided the ethics application and data collection and the research team were involved in analyzing the data to uncover themes.

The countries of origin of the refugees were diverse (see Table 1). Many of the refugees had spent years in refugee camps in countries other than their country of origin before they were resettled in Australia.

**Table 1.** Country of origin.

Setting	Refugee Group (in the Main)
Metropolitan Setting 1	Myanmar
Metropolitan Setting 2	Myanmar and African nations
Metropolitan Setting 3	African nations
Regional Setting	Congo

Purposive sampling was used as a sampling method as it is connected to case study analysis. It considers why specific participants feel in particular ways, how their perspectives are constructed and the role they enact in dynamic processes [28]; in this case, within ECEC settings. In purposive sampling, the focus is on who a participant is and where they are located. In this research, participants were chosen according to being well-placed to articulate their perspectives.

The interview participants were five EC professionals, a multicultural education aide from the refugee community, a school principal and three adult English language educators in Victoria, Australia. All participants were working with refugee families. Three interviews were conducted face to face at the regional setting, while the remaining interviews were conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions. Two individual and four paired interviews were conducted for all participants (see Table 2).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, as they offered a flexible data collection tool for generating verbal and non-verbal data to respond to the research questions. The research team developed a set of open-ended questions as a guide for data collection. Depth, richness and comprehensiveness were obtained through the open-ended question format [29]. Interviews took the form of individual interviews, paired and group interviews.



**Table 2.** Data collection information.

<b>No. of Participants</b>	<b>10</b>
Average length of time per interview	42 min
Participants	1 × school principal 1 × multicultural education aide from the refugee community 5 × early childhood professionals 3 × adult English language educators working with refugee families
Type of interview (individual, pair, group)/focus groups	2 × individual interviews 4 × paired interviews
Mode of interviews	Face to face = 2 individual + 1 × paired interviews Online = 4 × paired interviews

The interview questions focused on the provision of ECEC for newly arrived families, and stories of how these refugee families understand ECEC for young children; how newly arrived refugee families make sense of their experiences in relation to the challenges and opportunities for maintaining their own cultural and linguistic identities when young children begin to participate in ECEC. The interview questions included the following:

- (i) How many refugee families are at the EC centre and what are their backgrounds? Do you know much about their settlement experience?
- (ii) What support networks are in the community to support refugee families?
- (iii) What is the focus of the ECEC program?
- (iv) How are home languages incorporated into the ECEC program?
- (v) What are the challenges associated with catering for refugee families in the ECEC program?
- (vi) What are your hopes for the ECEC program and community engagement for the refugee families?

For the purpose of this paper, we draw on interview data from five participants in this study (see Table 3). Each participant brings a unique view of lived experience that is based on their contextual and cultural understandings.

**Table 3.** Participants.

Name of Participant	Role	Early Childhood Education Setting
Denise	Center Director, childcare center	Regional
Joanne	Preschool educator	Regional
Sally	Council Early Years team leader	Regional
Kimberley	Principal of primary school who set up a playgroup for refugee women	Metropolitan setting 1
Leanne	Adult English educator, parent–child Mother Goose Family Literacy Program consultant	Metropolitan setting 2

When analyzing the multiple case study, we built categories and themes to conceptualize the data [30]. We employed a thematic analysis approach following Braun and Clarke's [31] six steps. After familiarization with the interview data, we generated initial codes in relation to the EC professionals' experiences working with refugee families. We then developed and connected both cases' common themes to the Provision Article Framework.

The research adhered to the ethical requirements, with ethics approval being obtained from the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET), Ethics No. 2019-004210,

and the Human Research Ethics Council of the university in which the researchers are based, Ethics No. 22551. All the participants' names are pseudonyms.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

UNCRC is broad and focuses on children from birth to 18 years old (United Nations, 1989). Three categories classify children's rights and include provision rights, protection rights and participation rights [9]. Provision articles "recognize the social rights of children to minimum standards of health, education, social security, physical care, family life, play, recreation, culture and leisure" [11] (p. 36). The provision articles are the framework for the following analysis of our findings.

##### 4.1. Health and Physical Care

Health and physical care emerged as a theme from the interviews. Denise, a director of a childcare center on the campus of the TAFE setting where the refugee women learn English, commented on health requirements for children to be enrolled at the center; for example, immunizations: "And there's all those things that we continue to share with the program co-ordinators around, well, what's necessary when a child starts? Because we've had to turn them away because they didn't have the immunization statement". She continued to discuss the importance of fulfilling these requirements so families and children can feel like they belong: "All those gaps need to be filled [ . . . ] there's a sense of wellbeing and belonging". Denise described how the center supports families with everyday needs in the following manner:

"Because they have a sense of identity: they've got their own hat, bag, drink bottle—often, they're the only things that they need—and a change of clothes [ . . . ] One of the mums very clearly, last year, was able to communicate that with us. Said, 'No money, no money'. And we've sent them home in changes of clothes, and they often don't come back, and we don't expect them to come back. That's okay. They keep them, too. But you want a sense of nice belonging for when they're here, that they are a little person like everyone else, and they have their own things".

In the regional childcare context, Denise talked about how the center supports children to obtain a sense of belonging. She spoke about the importance of the refugee children having their own personal possessions such as a hat, bag, drink bottle and so on. She described how at times, they loan families clothes for the children and do not expect the clothes to be returned. Belonging and identity become conflated in this example of support provided for refugee children. According to the EYLF, belonging is based on relationships and a sense of community, as outlined in the following statement: "Belonging acknowledges children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities" [13] (p. 7); whereas in Denise's construction of identity, it is associated with physical attire and items that provide a sense of belonging or identity capital. This identity capital or belonging can be interpreted in relation to social capital. Bourdieu argued that social capital indicates a mutual recognition of one's membership in a group, which "provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital" [22] (p. 21). That is, this EC educator is viewing identity and belonging in terms of the child's belongings and how they look. By looking the same, the child will develop an identity of belonging to the center and this identity of belonging will shape their identity within the bounds of this EC education setting. We suggest that the educator's comment is in tension with the EYLF and the notion of 'identity of belonging'. It is underpinned by the assumption that the children need to develop an individualistic "Australian' identity capital", which may be at odds with a more collective cultural identity.

In this case, the EC educator views socio-economic identity according to whether families can afford to outfit their children for ECEC. This resonates with arguments from Côté (2005) that societal institutional support for the individual's developmental transitions can be insufficient due to the complexity of children's identity formation. We contend that more reflection and discussion need to occur around a sense of identity and belonging. On

the one hand, the EC educator has expectations that the clothes given to families will not be returned, yet on the other hand, it is positioning the family in terms of “charity” and what it is to be “charitable”.

This childcare setting cares for the refugee families and children by taking the view that it is important that children look and feel like the other children at the center so they can develop a sense of identity and a feeling of “nice” belonging to the community. For refugee families who struggle with economic capital, the conversion of their economic capital to cultural capital (e.g., clothes and a drinks bottle) was less successful as cultural capital can develop from economic capital [22]. Since every field function is based on its own distribution of capital, a shortage of the recognized cultural capital impacts refugee children and families’ sense of belonging.

#### 4.2. Education and Language Use

Another theme that emerged was education and language use. Joanne, the educator at the neighbouring education department preschool, shared how they have an action plan for the African children in their care and a key focus is the teaching of English: “We have on our action plan which, for every African child or who speaks English as an additional language, so it could be any child—to learn English is one of their strategies. That’s through how we teach language, I suppose just being immersed in English and talking.” She talked about the adapted data collection tool, which she uses to gauge improvements in the refugee children’s communicative attempts. Joanne gathers information about English use and communicative attempts through activities such as drawings and labelling of drawings in English, as outlined in the following statements:

“We do Brigance screens with—it probably isn’t the most accurate way to collect data—but, for me, I get to see if they want to come and have a go and they can point to things or they can still draw the pictures. I know one of the little girls I had last year didn’t have any English and this year she was: ‘Red! Orange! Duck!’ She knew a few. She probably knew half of it, and she was so confident to come and talk to me, whereas she’d only talk to me and tap on my shoulder and point”.

Joanne does not use the Brigance EC screen, a norm referenced test that compares children’s efforts, in its intended way, but rather uses it as a guide to measure children’s language and communication growth; for example, confidence for communicating in English. Flynn [32] argues that teachers’ professional and linguistic capital, as part of cultural capital, positions teachers as power holders who can make professional pedagogical choices for children’s languages development. In this case, Joanne recognized the diversity of refugee children’s linguistic capital instead of reinforcing the symbolic role that English can play in the refugee children’s experiences. Bourdieu [22] contends that linguistic capital, being a product of a particular field, is always endowed with certain values. In Joanne’s case, although she was unable to understand the child’s home language, she was able to value the child’s home language, which aligns with the Early Years Learning Framework 2.0 that “Relationships are strengthened when educators recognise and affirm children’s home languages and cultural identities” (p. 9).

Sally, the Regional Council Early Years team leader, shares the scenario of a young refugee girl who was telling her about a drawing in her own language. She commented how even though she and the child spoke different languages, she was able to make out that the child was telling her about her drawing:

“And there was this little girl, she must have been two or three, she was doing some drawing and she was sitting next to whoever I came with, I can’t remember now. She was doing a drawing and she said, ‘Look [ . . . ]’ And told me all about her picture. And I went, ‘Well, if we knew what she was saying, if we had her language, we’d go “yep, you’re developing well, you’ve got good language skills da da da”’. We just don’t know because we don’t know their language. We talk about they don’t know ours. We don’t know theirs, so we don’t get a really good understanding of where they’re up to”.



With educators and refugee children in their care speaking different languages and owning different linguistic capital, it is challenging for educators to gather information about and assess these children's language and communication skills. Yet, some inferences can be made about children's efforts to communicate with their educators about their artwork such as drawings.

Sally also commented on the children's cultural and linguistic capital that supports them in developing social connections and making friends at preschool:

"As they increase in their English, I would assume that there will be support for children to broaden their social network group within the preschool program. But these children are quite vivacious and lively and confident. They're going to be all right".

The accumulation of the "legitimate" linguistic capital (English in this case) is through education and social trajectories [33]. In the end, Sally believes that these refugee children are "going to be all right", as they are outgoing and assured in their play with other children. However, Bourdieu [33] reminds us that linguistic strategies and competencies go beyond interactions, as they can be influenced by one's position in the field, virtues of the language, and linguistic power.

#### 4.3. Social Security Benefits

A range of government departments administer social security benefits for newly arrived refugee families who can be on different visa types. Leanne, a metropolitan adult English educator and parent-child Family Literacy Program consultant, talked about the communication barriers between these different departments, which leads to access issues for refugee families, in the following manner: "That's an outcome of the issues with access and understanding those systems and navigating those systems and the gap between the communication between Services Australia, Centrelink, and the childcare service". Leanne gives a specific example of a situation related to childcare fees that refugee families sometimes find themselves in:

"And what that means is through our Referral and Support Service, RASS, we get women coming to us who have a debt because they've continued taking their child to the childcare center. For some reason the Centrelink subsidy or payment hasn't gone through or there's been a misunderstanding, or something hasn't been registered, and the childcare center haven't stopped them. Sometimes we contact the childcare center and say, "Please tell them they can't attend or that there's an issue with the payment". And then it's nobody's fault or responsibility according to childcare and according to Centrelink".

Leanne described how the adult migrant English center she works for supports refugee women navigate the challenges they face understanding the social security system, and the difficult circumstances they can find themselves in. Leanne's center refers the refugee women to financial counsellors for advocacy and support:

"These women end up having huge debts. We have to refer them to financial counsellors for advocacy and support. And I just think it's terrible that these women are put under such financial stress for just trying to take their kids to a childcare service that they're entitled to attend".

Accessing social security services can be complex and require a good understanding of the system and the English required to engage with the system. In this sense, the navigation of the system demands cultural and linguistic capital that refugee families grapple with. In addition, different government departments and organizations seem to falter in their communication with each other, let alone with the refugee families they are servicing. Leanne's workplace, whose prime service is the teaching of English, has taken on a broader support role in helping refugee families to access a range of services when they get into difficulty.

#### 4.4. Play

Kimberley, the principal of a metropolitan primary school, set up a playgroup for refugee women on the school grounds. She talked about the mothers' understanding of their role in young children's play in the following manner:

"Originally challenges were around I guess changing mindsets in regard to the mother's role in play or play in general. Or talk and that's—in my head when you're journey from Australia is around survival it's a completely different reality for somebody to start suggesting you prioritise play, talk, books, reading".

She shared some of the challenges for the refugee women in, for example, "creating some structures and orders and routines that we could then transfer into a school setting. Because schools are ordered and have routines and key structures and expectations in place. Whether it means school starts at nine—you should be ready for learning at nine. Or whether it's around sitting at your table or whatever". Kimberley views these routines and structures as the core business of schools and describes how they set up some routines for the playgroup setting to initiate the mothers into the culture of Australian schooling: "we were trying to establish some of those routines in place in the playgroup—the same thing". Kimberley goes on to remark on how the mothers have transferred this idea of routines to the home setting:

"Interesting overlay here is what's been taken up by many of the mums is the routine in the home at the moment. Some of the ones we're seeing have actually got kids sitting in uniforms doing their schoolwork in the first couple of hours of the day. And really, I guess, replicated some of that routine".

Kimberley comments that "I'm not saying that's perfect or that's the be all and end all". She notes that now, after four years of playgroup, there is a balance between wild and carefree times:

"But I guess if you'd walked into playgroup four years ago, you would have seen a very much more wild and carefree context. Whereas now there's time to be wild carefree. But there's time to be sitting on our bottoms and doing some singing together and sharing our food nicely and, you know, that's that whole interesting overlay I guess".

Kimberley, in aligning with the Australian Early Years Learning Framework, views the curriculum as comprising interactions, routines and activities, planned and unplanned, that foster children's learning and development in the EC education setting. Through the school playgroup, the principal of the school views it as important for the refugee women to understand the culture of schooling in Australia. She is enculturating the refugee families into the notion of school transition and readiness. The school principal is showing families how to support their children's preparation for formal schooling. The EYLF [13] discusses this idea in terms of partnering with families, since to children of diverse backgrounds, partnerships can provide them with opportunities for active participation in learning.

However, this school Principal is modelling this process. The EYLF 2.0 [2] talks about this process as assisting "children to understand the traditions, routines and practices of the settings to which they are moving and to feel comfortable with the process of change" (p. 24). Framed by Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the traditions, routines and practices can be viewed as cultural assets or requisites to navigate in the EC field in Australia [33]. The principal's practices demonstrate the "cultural goodwill" [34] (p. 62) to assist refugee women and children to be familiar with the school culture, while accumulating distinctive cultural capital in Australia. However, by doing so, the structure of the distinction tends to be reproduced, while those who have different cultural capital will continue to struggle acquiring the "distinctive competence" [34] (p. 65).

## 5. Conclusions and Implications for Practices

This research set out to explore how educators working in EC contexts with refugee children and families construct an identity of belonging for this community. We undertook a small-scale multiple case study set across two metropolitan and one regional setting in Victoria, Australia and therefore, generalizations are not possible. This was a qualitative

study where the reliability and validity of data were not features of the research design, but processes were built in to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and the findings may be transferable to some contexts. That is, readers may reflect on the findings in terms of their own EC education practices and the following implications and recommendations may be relevant to a range of situations.

To build children's and families sense of belonging in EC education contexts, it is important that the backgrounds, histories and diversity of capital of refugee communities are taken into account. In this study, it was reported that conflict emerged between a sense of belonging and preserving one's own cultural needs. Inclusive pedagogical practices need to consider the attitudes, beliefs and traditions of refugee communities so that links can be made between ECEC and their homes. EC education routines and practices need to be transparent and meaningful for all families, to support children to build from their home languages and cultures and recognize and respect the rights of the child [3]. As suggested by O'Connor [35], this suggests that EC educators must be aware of a range of identities and cultural capital that young children bring to the EC setting "in terms of linguistic and cultural knowledge and place equal value on these" (p. 124).

The growing of partnerships with families and communities is central to supporting young children's learning and development. Consulting with families and communities is vital in making provisions for their linguistic and cultural traditions, as well as future aspirations for their children. Carefully engaging with families and communities in discussions around the awareness of social service and educational institutions can help develop shared understandings of systematic processes. Through such engagement, educators also enact the notion of belonging for children and their families, rather than a superficial understanding.

Recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity so that refugee children and their families are not disadvantaged for having different capitals provides opportunities to develop a sense of belonging in EC education. This study has analyzed different capitals and shown key messages for educators to support notions of belonging through changes in practice and understanding. The EC education setting can then be open to transitioning children from diverse backgrounds.

It is important for future studies to work with refugee communities, so families and children have a voice in informing EC education policies and practices. Such voices acknowledge variation in the lived experience based on different perspectives. This includes implementing respectful methods to collect voices that are culturally sensitive, that acknowledge histories and contexts and "recognize the social rights of children to minimum standards of health, education, social security, physical care, family life, play, recreation, culture and leisure" [11] (p. 36). We believe there are strong possibilities for transformation within EC education settings to develop stronger connections with refugee children's sense of belonging. The starting point, however, is reflecting on current practices and policies for refugee children and their families. As shown in this article, the conceptual framework of Bourdieu is useful in supporting this process of reflection.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A.K., H.Z. and S.G. methodology, A.K., H.Z. and S.G.; formal analysis, A.K., H.Z. and S.G.; investigation, A.K.; data curation, A.K., H.Z. and S.G.; writing—original draft preparation, A.K., H.Z. and S.G. writing—review and editing, A.K., H.Z. and S.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethics approval to conduct this study was obtained by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) [Ethics No. 2019–004210] and the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee [Ethics No. 22551].

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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