

# Right-ism and Neoliberalism: ECE at War

Philip Saagyum Dare<sup>i</sup>

*Southern Cross University, Australia*

*ORCID ID 0000-0001-9676-89*

## Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) is often portrayed as a neutral service sector, yet it functions as a social infrastructure through which political ideologies are normalized, contested, and institutionalized. This article argues that right-wing politics and neoliberalism operate in mutually reinforcing ways within ECE, producing conditions of surveillance, exclusion, precarity, and curricular narrowing. Neoliberalism restructures ECE through marketisation, audit cultures, and the erosion of public responsibility, while right-wing politics mobilize moral panic, nativism, and cultural protectionism to regulate what educators may teach and what identities are constructed. These forces reposition educators as compliance workers rather than relational professionals, intensifying pressure on already structurally marginalized families and communities. The article examines how these interlocking logics shape policy, pedagogy, workforce conditions, and inclusion across multiple contexts, concluding that advocating for ECE requires more than isolated resistance to censorship or austerity but a combined struggle for economic justice, professional autonomy, and cultural pluralism.

## Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE), often viewed as a neutral service sector, is better understood as a social infrastructure that shapes children's initial encounters with language, play, belonging, and safety. Any change in policy politics means that ECE is the first place where ideas become part of everyday conversation. This is evident in the funding requirements, the curriculum limits, and the very question of who can be included as a native and Indigenous in local stories. My critiques are not cynical but are shaped by my transnational experience across Ghana, China, Thailand, and Australian academic contexts. As both an insider, aware of Indigenous values, and an outsider trained in the West, this essay was informed by how Rightist ideologies and neoliberal market-driven reforms construct ECE through accountability, standardization and control. I see ECE as a 'political battlefield' where power, ideology and inequality are (re)produced and legitimized.

Two global forces are particularly relevant in this case. Firstly, the rise of Right-wing ideology across regions manifests as nativism, authoritarianism, and the suppression of pluralism and the rights of minoritized populations. This trend is shown by the rhetoric of protecting children and parents' rights, banning conversations and representations of race, migration, gender, and sexuality. Secondly, neoliberal policy logics complicate Rightism and constantly change the ECE system, marketizing it and shifting costs and risks onto families, parents, and providers. This conversation highlights the growing use of audit systems that focus on meeting performance standards rather than on promoting long-term investment in human resources and supporting inclusion efforts.

Marketized logics and traditional moral ethics naturally interact, allowing global far-rightism and neoliberalism to flourish. The key argument is that Rightist ideology and neoliberalism coexist and reinforce each other, creating pragmatic problems for good teaching and relationships that affect authority, staffing, teaching decisions, and inclusion. Rightism then channels this insecurity into moral panic about undeserving and indoctrinating social groups. This positions educators as surveillance apparatuses, narrowing down teachable concepts and what can be legitimized. Here, teachers are on

their own when it comes to promoting inclusion, well-being, and high-quality learning without help from the school system.

### **Neoliberalism as Quiet Violence**

Neoliberalism infiltrates ECE not via overt declarations but the incremental deterioration of public involvement in education. Governments in the Global North and South have gradually shifted their views on ECE from a public good to individual consumer choices (Mitchell et al., 2025; Moss, 2012). This shift materializes through defunding, deregulation, and the proliferation of market-based provision models that position parents as consumers rather than citizens with collective entitlements.

The childcare subsidy system in Australia exemplifies this logic. Families must deal with complex means-testing, and providers must balance making money by providing excellent service (Brennan & Oloman, 2009). In the United States, although federal ECE funding exists, longer approval wait times and rejections mean service providers and families must make do with what they have, often impacting the quality of care. Austerity measures have weakened ECE infrastructure, even in countries with stronger welfare systems. Aotearoa New Zealand's recent moves toward competitive funding models put the Te Whāriki framework at risk, which once made the country a world leader in culturally responsive ECE pedagogy (Mitchell et al., 2025).

This marketization logic impacts ECE, where underpaid teachers, mostly women and underrepresented groups, are overburdened, leading to burnout and attrition. Documentation requirements are not meant to support reflective practice; they are intended to meet audit needs and address parents' concerns framed in terms of consumer rights. Neoliberalism does not just cut funding; it also reshapes how we think about families, children, and education more broadly. Children become future workers whose value lies in their eventual economic productivity. Families become separate groups that influence competitive markets. Teachers become technicians who follow set curricula rather than professionals with teaching expertise. This subsequently reinforces Rightist groups' involvement by limiting what is considered a legitimate educational purpose.

### **Rightism's Explicit Assault**

Neoliberalism works through economic logic, while Rightism works through cultural warfare. The recent surge of anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and anti-Critical Race Theory legislation across various U.S. States exemplifies this trend's most prominent expression (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Teachers in Florida, Texas, and Idaho cannot talk about racism, structural inequality, or LGBTQ+ identities because the law says they CANNOT (Anderson, 2026), as doing so could lead to job loss or even jail terms. These rules transcend ECE settings, where teachers are now being monitored for teaching divisive concepts, a term weaponized to eliminate any content acknowledging historical or contemporary injustice.

Rhetorically, these policies are framed as protecting parental rights and children's innocence. But this protection narrative obscures a deeper project: the enforcement of a monocultural, heteronormative vision of childhood that erases the lived realities of many children and families. We do not protect innocence when a four-year-old with two mothers cannot see their family in class discussions, when Indigenous creation stories are left out because they are controversial, or when 'Black and Brown' children are taught to see their histories only through stories of oppression and marginalization.

Book banning in the USA is at levels not seen since the McCarthy era, and books with diverse characters, those that talk about racial justice, and support LGBTQ+ identities are being targeted more than others (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). Public and school

libraries, which once fostered learning and exploration, are now battlegrounds. Educators self-censor and avoid materials that invite parental complaints or administrative investigations. This alarming effect extends beyond official bans, forcing teachers to police their [own] work out of fear.

Globally, similar dynamics are evident. In the United Kingdom, the British values agenda has been critiqued for imposing assimilationist expectations on diverse communities while surveilling, particularly, Muslim families (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2017). In Hungary and Poland, government assaults on gender ideology have focused on comprehensive sexuality education and LGBTQ-inclusive materials, with ECE increasingly considered a venue for nationalist cultural (re)production. Even when there are no official rules against it, Right-wing ideologues create moral panics for educators.

### **The Reinforcing Loop**

Neoliberalism and Rightism are intertwined, function as mutually constitutive logics that legitimize and reinforce each other. Neoliberal defunding creates resource scarcity, professional precarity, and institutional fragility. Rightist movements then exploit this weakened infrastructure, positioning themselves as defenders of ‘common sense’ against educators supposedly indoctrinating children with radical ideologies. Imagine how the system works in real life: Centers with insufficient funding lack the resources for robust professional development that would help teachers lead difficult conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Administrators under financial pressure are more likely to defend professional judgment by responding to complaints from the Right, removing materials, or silencing teachers. For instance, administrators may remove books featuring same-sex materials due to complaints, avoiding conflict but limiting inclusive curriculum and silencing educators’ professional judgement.

Right-wing attacks on ECE as a place of ‘woke indoctrination’ make it easy to cut funding even more. Why allocate public funds to an ideology-controlled field? This framing fits perfectly with neoliberalism’s dislike of public goods, which allows governments to position budget cuts as a legitimate way to fight culture. The outcome is a vicious cycle in which material degradation and ideological constraints reinforce one another, responsabilizing families and teachers. Neoliberalism personalizes educational outcomes, legitimizing success and failure as a matter of choice and effort rather than structural investment. Rightism then weaponizes parental anxiety generated by this competitive environment, channeling it into control over curriculum and pedagogy. Worried parents in unstable job markets are more likely to fall for moral panics, viewing inclusive education as a distraction from the basics or as indoctrination that threatens family values.

### **Living the Contradictions: Teachers Under Attack**

Educators find themselves caught between these Rightist and neoliberal logics. They are told that ECE is essential, that responsive relationships are foundational, that children need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, and that inclusion benefits all learners. Yet they are simultaneously denied professional autonomy and the resources necessary to enact these commitments. Educators reported going the extra mile to purchase classroom supplies with their own funds while also dealing with heavy paperwork meant to demonstrate their responsibility to bureaucratic and parental oversight. For instance, Reporter (2025) in a Kenyan news channel, reported that “teachers often dig into their own pockets to bridge the gap, [providing for resources] that the system does not supply.”

Meanwhile, educators are supposed to make learning more personal in increasingly diverse classrooms while managing high student-to-teacher ratios. They must cultivate trusting relationships with families while fearing that any mention of race, gender, or

family diversity could trigger complaints framed through Rightist discourses. Educators cannot keep doing the emotional work that these conditions require. Kateregga et al. (2021) reported that Ugandan educators are caught between their professional ethics and institutional constraints, unsure how to choose between doing right and keeping their jobs. Women and educators from minoritized groups, who make up most of the ECE workforce, are especially vulnerable because they are watched more closely and face tougher punishments for perceived misconduct. In this environment, Black educators who discuss racism, queer educators who mention their own families, and immigrant educators who share cultural practices from their communities all risk being targeted as too political or insufficiently neutral.

This situation leads to widespread attrition, with educators leaving not because they lack commitment but because the conditions affect professional practice. Those in the workforce survive through subversion and strategic compliance that contradict the responsive, authentic pedagogies they entered the field to practice. Most families and children marginalized through neoliberal inequities and Rightist experience have reduced access to educators who share their backgrounds or are willing to affirm their experiences.

### **Resistance and Opportunity**

Despite this bleak landscape, teachers, families, and communities are coming together to fight back. Coalitions have successfully fought book bans and curriculum restrictions in several U.S. States through legal action, public advocacy, and electoral organizing (Nagasawa et al., 2023). Teachers are forming networks to share resources, help each other out, and come up with ways to teach that include everyone, even when policies are making such organizing more dangerous. Some are working with families to help them understand why representation and inclusion discussions are important, even for young children. They are doing their part by using evidence about child development and social-emotional learning to counter Rightist ideologies about indoctrination.

Globally, movements advocating for culturally responsive and bilingual education provide significant exemplars. Indigenous educators and communities have historically opposed colonial impositions in ECE, preserving language and cultural transmission in the face of State antagonism (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015). These struggles show that reclaiming education as a space for communal self-determination requires both short-term resistance to harmful policies and long-term work to create new institutions and practices grounded in shared values rather than market logic.

Industry unions and professional groups play important roles in protecting academic freedom, professional independence, and working conditions that enable excellent teaching. Where ECE remains fragmented and poorly organized, it is crucial to build collective power. This includes fighting for public funding, de-marketizing ECE, and setting professional standards that protect educators. When this occurs, educational expertise resists both Rightist censorship and bureaucratic micromanagement.

Such resistance must address both neoliberal and Rightist logics. Fighting funding cuts without confronting exclusions leaves vulnerable children unprotected. Defending curriculum inclusion without challenging the market forces that deter teachers from using it yields symbolic victories that do not translate into real change. We need movements that link economic justice to cultural justice as children struggle in environments where teachers are exploited, and teachers struggle in environments that fail to recognize children's full humanity.

### Conclusion: Whose Future Is It?

I argue that the main question for the ECE field is what kind of future Right-wing policies would create for these young children. Neoliberal and Rightist ideologies present a vision characterized by competition, scarcity, and exclusion, in which children are prematurely categorized as winners or losers. Only specific families and identities are deemed legitimate, and education functions to perpetuate hierarchy rather than contest it. Educators who care about justice have a different vision for ECE. Some see it as a place where all children can explore who they are and whom they might become, while others see it as a place where educators are trusted professionals supported to do meaningful work, and where learning is considered relational and cultural rather than individualised and neutral.

Envisioning this into reality will require confronting the forces that harm and limit ECE. Building political and institutional power to protect the field and reclaim ECE as a place of opportunity rather than a site of policing. The fight for ECE should not just be an idea. It should happen every day in classrooms that lack the resources, in teachers who must make impossible decisions, and in children who learn early on which parts of themselves are okay to show and which to hide. We [educators] all must pick a side and fight the system that oppresses us.

#### References

- Anderson, J. (2026). A Glimpse into US Federal and State Policies on Diversity and Equity in Education. *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal*, 12(2). <https://www.iccpsonlinejournal.org/iccps/index.php/childhoods/issue/view/35>
- Brennan, D., & Oloman, M. (2009). Child Care in Australia. *Our Schools/Our Selves*, 18(3). [https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/NationalOffice/2009/04/Child\\_Care\\_in\\_Australia.pdf](https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/NationalOffice/2009/04/Child_Care_in_Australia.pdf)
- Elton-Chalcraft, S., Lander, V., Revell, L., Warner, D., & Whitworth, L. (2017). To promote, or not to promote fundamental British values? Teachers' standards, diversity and teacher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(1), 29–48. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3253>
- Friedman, J., & Johnson, N. F. (2022). Banned in the USA: The growing movement to censor books in schools. PEN America.
- Kateregga, A., Ssenkusu, M. P., Genza, G. M. (2021). Teachers' handling of Ethical Dilemmas in Rubaga Division (Uganda): complexities and education management implications. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 9(4), 194-202 <https://hdl.handle.net/102.100.100/553040>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). Critical race theory—What it is not! In *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education* (pp. 32–43). Routledge. <https://10.4324/9781351032223-5>
- Mitchell, L., Botes, V., & Kamenarac, O. (2025). Early childhood education as a public good: Challenges and possibilities. *Early Childhood Folio*, 29(2), 8–14. [https://www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/journals/ECF\\_2025\\_online\\_first\\_Mitchell\\_et\\_al..pdf](https://www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/journals/ECF_2025_online_first_Mitchell_et_al..pdf)
- Moss, P. (2012). Governed Markets and Democratic Experimentalism. In: Kjørholt, A.T., Qvortrup, J. (eds) *The Modern Child and the Flexible Labour Market*. Studies in Childhood and Youth. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230314054\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230314054_8)
- Nagasawa, M. K., Peters, L., Bloch, M. N., & Swadener, B. B. (Eds.). (2023). *Transforming early years policy in the U.S.: A call to action*. Teachers College Press.
- Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Taylor, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Unsettling the colonial places and spaces of early childhood education* (p. 43). New York, NY: Routledge.

Reporter. C. (2025, November 20). Global Education Week Highlights Persisting Classroom Gaps. Citizen Digital. <https://www.citizen.digital/news/global-education-week-highlights-persisting-classroom-gaps-n373401>

---

<sup>i</sup> Philip Saagyum Dare received his PhD in Education, with a focus in Early Childhood Education from Monash University, Australia and is a lecturer and researcher in the Faculty of Education at Southern Cross University, Australia. His work focuses on decolonial educational leadership, particularly Indigenous and culturally responsive enactment in the Global South, with emphasis on reconceptualizing early childhood education and leadership informed by Freirean critical pedagogy. [philip.saagyum.dare@scu.edu.au](mailto:philip.saagyum.dare@scu.edu.au)