

Beyond Structural Quality: The RIGHTS Framework for Child-Rights-Responsive Quality in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is still commonly represented through structural indicators such as staff qualifications, child-to-adult ratios, facilities, curriculum documentation and administrative compliance. These conditions matter, but they do not by themselves show whether children are listened to, included, protected, responded to or supported when a concern has been identified. This conceptual-policy article develops the RIGHTS Framework as a child-rights-responsive approach to ECEC quality. A directed conceptual synthesis was conducted across four source groups: international child-rights instruments, established ECEC quality, participation and rights-oriented monitoring frameworks, evidence on process quality and integrated early-years services, and current Indonesian education and child-protection policy. Concepts were first clustered by substantive meaning; the mnemonic RIGHTS was assigned only after six domains had been derived. The framework comprises Responsive relationships, Inclusion and non-discrimination, Genuine participation, Harm prevention and safeguarding, Tracking and follow-up, and Shared responsibility. RIGHTS is explicitly multilevel and multi-method: it distinguishes child-facing interaction, organisational safeguards, continuity and accountability, and ecological or interprofessional support, while treating children's rights as a normative lens across the whole system rather than as an end-point. Twenty-four candidate indicators are proposed for empirical validation, with evidence drawn from observation, children's perspectives, records and procedures, family input and interprofessional coordination. The framework is not presented as a validated scale and should not yet be used to produce high-stakes composite scores. Its contribution is to connect structural conditions, process quality, rights, safeguarding and follow-up in a single testable architecture for quality improvement.

Keywords: child rights; early childhood education; participation; process quality; quality assurance; safeguarding

1. Introduction

Expanding access to early childhood education does not automatically produce high-quality experiences. Two settings may have similar staffing profiles, facilities, curricula and child-to-adult ratios yet feel very different to the children who attend them. In one, adults notice children's cues, make room for initiative, respond to distress without humiliation and act when a concern emerges. In another, the same structural conditions may coexist with highly adult-directed interaction, repeated exclusion, unaddressed distress or assessment records that never lead to support. The distinction matters because quality is ultimately encountered by children through everyday relationships, routines and decisions.

ECEC research has long distinguished structural quality from process quality. Structural quality refers to conditions that can be regulated relatively directly, including staff qualifications, group size, ratios, physical environments, leadership and professional development. Process quality concerns what happens within those conditions: children's interactions with adults and peers, their engagement with materials and activities, the emotional climate, and the pedagogical exchanges through which learning and participation occur (Edwards, 2021; Ha et al., 2025; Pianta et al., 2016; Slot, 2018; Støve et al., 2026). This distinction does not make structural quality

unimportant. Rather, structure is best understood as an enabling condition whose value is realised through experience.

Established quality frameworks have advanced this field in different ways. CLASS provides a well-developed observational account of teacher-child interaction, particularly emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support (La Paro et al., 2004; Pianta & Hofkens, 2023). ECERS-3 takes a broader environmental perspective, covering both provisions and interactions within centre-based preschool settings (Harms et al., 2015). OECD work has linked process quality to curriculum, pedagogy, workforce and other policy levers (Edwards, 2021; OECD, 2021). These approaches are valuable, but their primary purpose is not to translate the full normative architecture of children's rights into everyday quality assurance.

Rights-oriented approaches specific to early childhood also provide important comparators. Henderson-Dekort and May (2024) introduced the Children's Rights Advancement Framework (CRAF), a four-stage model designed to move early childhood educators from conceptual understanding of children's rights towards implementation, application and actualisation. The Right to Education Initiative (2025) subsequently published a human-rights monitoring guide for ECCE that organises indicators across structures, processes and outcomes and covers legal frameworks, equality, quality, financing, governance, parental engagement and privatisation. These contributions preclude any priority claim for RIGHTS as a rights-based framework or indicator approach for ECEC. The question is narrower: whether a framework already integrates child-facing process quality, explicit rights standards, safeguarding, closed-loop follow-up and shared responsibility within one multilevel quality architecture.

Children's rights introduce a different evaluative question. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) positions children as rights-holders rather than merely recipients of services. General Comment No. 7 makes clear that young children, including infants, hold the full range of Convention rights; General Comment No. 12 elaborates the right to be heard; and General Comment No. 14 explains the best interests of the child as a substantive right, an interpretative principle and a rule of procedure (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, 2013, 2023; United Nations, 1989). In early childhood settings, these principles change what counts as convincing evidence of quality. A setting cannot be regarded as fully high quality if it is well resourced but routinely silences children, excludes particular groups, tolerates degrading discipline or fails to act on known needs.

Participation illustrates the gap particularly clearly. Lundy's model of Article 12 shows why 'voice' alone is insufficient: children require space to express a view, an opportunity and means to communicate it, an audience with responsibility to listen, and some evidence of influence (Lundy, 2007). A systematic review of participation in early childhood education likewise found that children's perspectives were still used less often than adults' accounts and that robust measures of participation remained limited (Correia et al., 2019). A rights-responsive concept of quality therefore needs to examine not only whether adults invite children to speak, but whether children's expressions - verbal or otherwise - can shape matters that affect them.

A second gap concerns what happens after a need becomes visible. ECEC systems routinely collect developmental observations, attendance records, behaviour notes, family information and safeguarding concerns. Yet recording a need is not the same as responding to it. Early-years research on integrated and family-centred services highlights the importance, and difficulty, of service coordination, role clarity and continuity around the child (Fukkink & Lalihatu, 2020; Ooms et al., 2026; Pacheco-Molero et al., 2025). The Nurturing Care Framework similarly places children's development within connected systems of caregiving, learning, health, nutrition and protection, and its implementation guidance explicitly calls for action across sectors (World Health Organization et al., 2018, 2019). These insights point to follow-up and shared responsibility as quality issues rather than administrative extras.

This article therefore asks: how can ECEC quality be conceptualised so that structural conditions, process quality and children's rights do not operate as separate agendas? It develops the RIGHTS Framework as a conceptual and policy proposition. RIGHTS does not replace established quality instruments or national standards. Its purpose is to add a rights-responsive architecture that asks what structural arrangements and pedagogical processes mean for the individual child, what happens when a concern is identified, and who remains responsible until support is connected.

The article makes four contributions. First, it positions novelty comparatively rather than claiming priority: RIGHTS is distinguished from established quality instruments, CRAF and human-rights ECCE monitoring by the particular architecture through which it links child-facing process quality, rights, safeguarding, closed-loop follow-up and shared responsibility. Secondly, it provides an audit trail showing how six substantive domains were derived before the acronym RIGHTS was assigned. Thirdly, it treats quality as multilevel and multi-method, distinguishing interaction-level experience from organisational safeguards and cross-service continuity. Fourthly, it proposes 24 candidate indicators for empirical validation while explicitly rejecting premature use as a high-stakes composite score.

2. Conceptual Foundations and Comparative Positioning

Three conceptual tensions justify a framework that connects quality and rights more explicitly. The first is the tension between description and judgement. Process-quality research can describe whether an interaction is emotionally supportive, cognitively stimulating or well organised, but a child-rights perspective asks an additional normative question: is the experience consistent with the child's dignity, equal status, participation rights and entitlement to protection? The distinction is subtle but important. A practice may be efficient or developmentally productive while still allowing avoidable exclusion or insufficient influence. Rights therefore do not replace evidence about process quality; they provide criteria for judging what that process should secure for every child.

The second tension concerns the difference between child-centred pedagogy and rights-based participation. Child-centred practice can increase choice and respond to children's interests, yet choice alone does not demonstrate that Article 12 has been realised. Lundy's (2007) formulation is useful precisely because it requires more than expression: there must be space, voice, audience and influence. In early childhood settings, this moves analysis away from the question of whether children were offered an activity choice and towards whether their communication - including non-verbal communication, refusal, uncertainty and distress - reached an adult with the capacity to respond. Correia et al. (2019) similarly show why participation should be treated as an empirical quality issue rather than an assumed property of child-centred provision.

The third tension concerns continuity. Most classroom quality frameworks focus, appropriately, on what happens during provision. Yet children experience the consequences of what happens after an observation, disclosure, developmental concern or referral as well. A setting may identify a need accurately and still fail the child if responsibility becomes unclear, if information is not transferred lawfully, or if no one checks whether support was actually connected. Research on interprofessional collaboration and family-centred early intervention repeatedly identifies communication, role clarity, coordination and working conditions as practical determinants of whether integrated support functions as intended (Fukkink & Laliatu, 2020; Ooms et al., 2026; Pacheco-Molero et al., 2025). This literature provides an empirical foundation for treating follow-up and shared responsibility as quality functions rather than as administrative detail.

The ecological orientation of the Nurturing Care Framework strengthens this argument. Nurturing care locates early development within connected conditions of health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for early learning, while its operational guidance emphasises coordinated action across sectors and actors (World Health Organization et al., 2018, 2019). UNESCO and UNICEF (2024) likewise frame early childhood care and education as a rights-related foundation rather than a narrow preparatory service. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that high-quality ECEC cannot be reduced either to a list of structural inputs or to a single interaction score. It is produced through the relationship between enabling conditions, child-facing processes, institutional safeguards and continuity across the child's ecology.

This does not mean that an integrative framework should collapse established instruments into one omnibus scale. CLASS and ECERS-3 were developed for different purposes and possess forms of behavioural and environmental specificity that a new conceptual framework should not pretend to reproduce (Harms et al., 2015; La Paro et al., 2004; Pianta & Hofkens, 2023). The intended contribution of RIGHTS is therefore architectural rather than substitutive. It identifies where existing approaches can be brought into conversation with children's rights and where additional evidence is required. In particular, it makes visible three forms of evidence that may be missed

when quality is treated as a classroom-only construct: children's own perspectives, the institutional handling of safeguarding and follow-up, and the continuity of responsibility across family and service boundaries.

The two closest rights-oriented comparators clarify the boundary further. CRAF is primarily an implementation-development framework: its four stages scaffold educators' movement from understanding children's rights towards their actualisation in practice (Henderson-Dekort & May, 2024). The Right to Education Initiative's ECCE guide is primarily a human-rights monitoring instrument: it translates international obligations into structural, process and outcome indicators for system-level monitoring and advocacy (Right to Education Initiative, 2025). RIGHTS addresses a different analytic problem. It asks how quality within and around an ECEC setting can be evidenced across interaction, organisational response and service continuity, while children's rights operate as the normative lens across those levels. The distinction is one of purpose and unit of analysis, not a claim that the underlying rights principles are new.

Table 1. How RIGHTS differs from selected established quality and rights-oriented frameworks

Framework	Primary focus	Typical evidence	Major strength	What RIGHTS adds
CLASS	Quality of teacher-child interactions, including emotional, organisational and instructional support.	Structured classroom observation.	Strong behavioural specification and extensive evidence base for interaction quality.	Adds explicit rights, inclusion, safeguarding, follow-up and cross-service responsibility; does not replace CLASS interaction scoring.
ECERS-3	Broad classroom and environmental quality for centre-based programmes serving preschool-aged children.	Observation of provisions, routines, interaction and learning environment.	Broad environmental coverage that combines provisions and interactions.	Adds an explicit normative child-rights lens and accountability for identified needs.
OECD process quality	Children's daily interactions and experiences, and the policy levers that shape them.	Policy analysis, system indicators and research synthesis.	Connects process quality to curriculum, pedagogy, workforce and system conditions.	Adds rights-based standards for judging experience and continuity after concerns are identified.
Nurturing Care Framework	Conditions that enable young children to survive, thrive and develop across caregiving systems.	Policy, programme and cross-sector implementation evidence.	Strong ecological and cross-sector perspective.	Links cross-sector responsibility to ECEC quality while extending attention to participation and everyday institutional accountability.
Lundy model	Meaningful implementation of Article 12: space, voice, audience and influence.	Participation processes and evidence of influence.	Clarifies the difference between hearing children and meaningful participation.	Places participation within a broader quality architecture that also addresses relationships, inclusion, safety, follow-up and shared responsibility.
Children's Rights Advancement Framework (CRAF)	Advancement of children's rights in ECE through staged educator understanding and practice.	Conceptual and literature-based framework; educator knowledge and implementation processes.	Makes movement from rights awareness to actualisation explicit within early childhood practice.	Shifts from educator implementation stages to a multilevel quality architecture incorporating child experience, safeguarding, follow-up and cross-service evidence.
RTE ECCE human-rights monitoring guide	Monitoring the right to ECCE against international human-rights obligations.	Structural, process and outcome indicators using quantitative, qualitative and community-perspective evidence.	Provides detailed rights-based indicators for legal frameworks, equality, quality, financing, governance, caregivers and systems.	Moves the analytic focus closer to setting- and child-level quality, differentiating interaction, organisational response and continuity rather than monitoring State obligations alone.
RIGHTS	Child-rights-responsive ECEC quality across interaction, organisation and service ecology.	Multi-method: observation, child-perspective evidence, records, family input and coordination evidence.	Integrates structure, process, rights, safeguarding and continuity in one testable architecture.	Conceptual contribution only at this stage; empirical validity remains to be established.

Note. Source: Author's synthesis based on Edwards (2021), Harms et al. (2015), Henderson-Dekort and May (2024), La Paro et al. (2004), Lundy (2007), OECD (2021), Pianta and Hofkens (2023), Right to Education Initiative (2025), and World Health Organization et al. (2018).

Table 1 shows that RIGHTS is not proposed as a superior replacement for established tools. CLASS offers fine-grained interaction evidence; ECERS-3 captures environmental quality; OECD work connects policy levers to process; Nurturing Care brings an ecological and cross-sector perspective; and Lundy provides a rigorous account of participation. CRAF is the closest comparator for translating children's rights into ECE practice, while the Right to Education Initiative provides the closest comparator for rights-based ECCE monitoring. RIGHTS differs from both by treating child-rights-responsive quality as a multilevel architecture that requires evidence from everyday interaction, organisational safeguarding and follow-up, and continuity across family and service boundaries. Its

novelty therefore lies in this configuration and unit of accountability, not in originating the underlying rights principles.

3. Method: Directed Conceptual and Policy Synthesis

This article uses a directed conceptual and policy synthesis. The aim is theory construction rather than effect estimation, and the approach should not be confused with a systematic review. The literature base was deliberately bounded around authoritative and conceptually influential sources that could answer a specific design problem: what domains are needed if ECEC quality is to be judged simultaneously through children's lived experience, rights, protection and continuity of response?

Source selection followed four criteria. A source had to contribute at least one of the following: a normative obligation concerning children's rights; a well-established conceptualisation or measure of ECEC quality; empirical or review evidence concerning children's participation, interaction quality, family-centred practice or interprofessional coordination; or a current Indonesian policy mandate relevant to early childhood education, protection, process or institutional management. Recent reviews were used where available to reduce dependence on isolated studies, while landmark sources were retained when they defined a field or framework.

The synthesis was organised into four source groups. The first comprised the CRC and General Comments Nos. 7, 12 and 14. The second comprised established ECEC quality and participation frameworks, including CLASS, ECERS-3, OECD process-quality work, the Nurturing Care Framework, the Lundy participation model, CRAF and the Right to Education Initiative's ECCE monitoring guide. The third comprised empirical and review literature on process quality, participation, family-centred services and interprofessional collaboration. The fourth comprised Indonesian child-protection legislation and recent education regulations on process standards, management standards and safe and comfortable school culture.

Analysis proceeded in four steps. First, recurrent normative and quality concepts were extracted in their original substantive form, for example responsive interaction, non-discrimination, influence, safeguarding, continuity and coordination. Secondly, closely related concepts were grouped without reference to any proposed acronym. Thirdly, each cluster was tested against three questions: does it describe a distinct quality function; can it be evidenced in practice; and would its absence leave a meaningful gap in a rights-responsive account of quality? Fourthly, clusters that passed these tests were named and mapped to possible evidence sources. Six domains remained. Only at that point was the mnemonic RIGHTS assigned. The acronym therefore functions as a communication device, not as a coding frame that predetermined the result.

This approach has clear limits. Because the synthesis is not exhaustive, it cannot establish that the six domains are the only possible dimensions of child-rights-responsive quality. Nor can conceptual coherence establish measurement validity. The purpose of the method is to make the reasoning traceable and contestable so that later empirical work can confirm, revise, merge or reject domains.

4. Findings: The RIGHTS Framework

4.1 Conceptual audit trail

The most important methodological safeguard is to show that the six domains were not created to fit the word RIGHTS. Table 2 records the conceptual path from source principle to quality function and then to the final domain. The table is intentionally concise: it does not claim that each domain has a single theoretical parent. Instead, it makes visible the converging lines of reasoning that justify each cluster.

Table 2. Audit trail for the derivation of the six RIGHTS domains

Source principle or construct	Problem if absent	Synthesised quality function	Final domain	Key sources
Responsive caregiving; teacher sensitivity; emotional and instructional interaction.	Structural resources may exist without adults noticing or responding well to individual children.	Relational responsiveness that combines emotional safety, dignity and pedagogical support.	R - Responsive relationships	La Paro et al. (2004); Pianta & Hofkens (2023); World Health Organization et al. (2018)
CRC non-discrimination; equitable access; adaptation; inclusive participation.	Children may be physically present but unequally heard, supported or able to participate.	Equitable participation with reasonable adaptation and attention to patterned exclusion.	I - Inclusion and non-discrimination	Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023); United Nations (1989)

Source principle or construct	Problem if absent	Synthesised quality function	Final domain	Key sources
Article 12; space, voice, audience and influence; child as informant.	Adults can solicit views without allowing them to matter.	Developmentally appropriate opportunities for expression, consideration and feedback.	G - Genuine participation	Correia et al. (2019); Lundy (2007)
Protection from violence; safe learning climate; psychological and digital safety.	A setting may look pedagogically strong while children experience fear, humiliation or unsafe responses to disclosure.	Prevention of foreseeable harm plus accessible safeguarding and response pathways.	H - Harm prevention and safeguarding	Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013); Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Republik Indonesia (2026b); Republic of Indonesia (2014)
Assessment-to-action; monitoring; referral; role clarity; continuity around the child.	Needs can be recorded yet disappear between documentation, referral and review.	A closed-loop process in which concerns lead to assigned action and later review.	T - Tracking and follow-up	Fukkink & Laliatu (2020); Ooms et al. (2026); World Health Organization et al. (2019)
Family-centred practice; integrated services; interprofessional collaboration; nurturing care.	Responsibility can be shifted between families and services, leaving no actor accountable for continuity.	Shared, clearly bounded responsibility across setting, family and relevant services.	S - Shared responsibility	Ooms et al. (2026); Pacheco-Molero et al. (2025); World Health Organization et al. (2018, 2019)

Note. Source: Author's conceptual synthesis based on the CRC and General Comments, Correia et al. (2019), Fukkink and Laliatu (2020), La Paro et al. (2004), Lundy (2007), Ooms et al. (2026), Pacheco-Molero et al. (2025), Pianta and Hofkens (2023), and World Health Organization et al. (2018, 2019).

4.2 Multilevel and multi-method architecture

A central revision to the framework is the recognition that RIGHTS does not operate at a single level. Responsive relationships, inclusion and participation are primarily visible in child-facing interaction. Safeguarding spans interaction and organisation. Tracking and follow-up depend heavily on organisational routines and case accountability. Shared responsibility reaches beyond the setting to families and other services. Treating these domains as if they were equivalent items on one classroom observation scale would therefore be conceptually misleading.

RIGHTS is better understood as a multilevel architecture. Children's rights provide the normative lens across every level; they are not an outcome placed at the end of a linear chain. Structural conditions shape what staff can do, but child-facing processes also reveal where structures are inadequate. Follow-up and interprofessional coordination generate information that should feed back into staffing, policy, practice and professional learning. The model is therefore recursive rather than linear.

CHILD-RIGHTS NORMATIVE LENS			
Dignity • non-discrimination • best interests • development • participation • protection			
ENABLING STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS			
Workforce • ratios • leadership • time • facilities • policy • professional learning			
R Responsive relationships	I Inclusion & non-discrimination	G Genuine participation	H Harm prevention & safeguarding
T - TRACKING & FOLLOW-UP Closed-loop accountability from concern to action and review		S - SHARED RESPONSIBILITY Family partnership and interprofessional continuity	
CHILD EXPERIENCE AND RIGHTS REALISATION			
Is this child safe, respected, included, heard, supported and able to flourish?			
FEEDBACK: evidence from children, families, records and practice informs improvement in structure, process and coordination			
Direct observation	Child-perspective evidence	Records & procedures	Family/interprofessional evidence

Figure 1. Multilevel architecture of the RIGHTS Framework

Note. Source: Author's conceptual model derived from the synthesis reported in Tables 1 and 2.

The architecture also clarifies a second point raised by the reviewers: RIGHTS is a multi-method assessment framework, not an observational instrument alone. Direct observation is indispensable for relational and interactional domains, but it cannot establish whether a referral was completed, whether a family was genuinely involved or whether a child has a safe route for seeking help. Evidence must therefore be triangulated across sources rather than reduced to a single observation session.

4.3 The six RIGHTS domains

Responsive relationships

Responsive relationships form the interpersonal foundation of quality. Young children depend on adults who notice cues, respond predictably, provide emotional reassurance and extend thinking without taking over children's agency. The Nurturing Care Framework places responsive caregiving among the core conditions for early development, while CLASS-related research has shown the value of observing sensitivity, emotional climate and instructional interaction (La Paro et al., 2004; Pianta & Hofkens, 2023; World Health Organization et al., 2018). In RIGHTS, responsiveness is not shorthand for warmth. It includes the adult's capacity to recognise an individual child's communication style, respond proportionately to distress, preserve dignity during guidance and make pedagogical support contingent on what the child is doing and expressing.

Inclusion and non-discrimination

Inclusion is treated as an experience rather than a registration status. A child can be enrolled, present and formally entitled to the same curriculum while still receiving less attention, fewer opportunities to lead, limited access to play or repeated removal from activities. The CRC principle of non-discrimination requires attention to patterned differences in whose participation is enabled and whose is constrained (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023; United Nations, 1989). RIGHTS therefore asks not only whether opportunities exist, but whether children with different abilities, languages, behaviours, family circumstances or social positions can actually use them. Equality of entitlement may require different forms of support.

Genuine participation

Genuine participation concerns influence, not performance. Young children may communicate through speech, gesture, movement, play, refusal, facial expression, silence or changes in behaviour. A rights-responsive setting creates developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to express preferences and concerns, ensures that relevant adults attend to them, and provides some response showing how the view was considered. This is consistent with the Article 12 logic elaborated by Lundy and with evidence that early childhood participation research has too often relied on adult perspectives alone (Correia et al., 2019; Lundy, 2007). Participation does not remove adult responsibility. Adults remain responsible for safety, fairness and the rights of other children.

Harm prevention and safeguarding

Safeguarding is part of educational quality, not an adjacent compliance function. A classroom cannot be described as high quality if children learn in an atmosphere of fear, humiliation, bullying, unsafe supervision or poorly handled disclosure. RIGHTS includes physical, psychological, social and digital safety; non-violent guidance; accessible ways of seeking help; staff capacity to recognise signs of distress; and clear response pathways. It also

rejects a common but weak inference: the absence of reported incidents is not evidence that children are safe. Young children may not have the language, confidence or power to report harm directly. Indonesian policy now explicitly frames safe and comfortable school culture in terms that include physical protection, psychological well-being, sociocultural safety and digital safety (Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Republik Indonesia, 2026b).

Tracking and follow-up

Tracking and follow-up addresses what happens after a meaningful concern has been identified. The domain is deliberately narrower than general assessment. Its concern is the accountability loop: notice, document proportionately, decide what should happen, assign responsibility, act, and review whether the child's situation changed. Integrated early-years literature shows why this matters. Collaboration can fail through unclear roles, weak communication or fragmented services, and referral without follow-through can leave children between systems (Fukkink & Laliatu, 2020; Ooms et al., 2026). RIGHTS therefore treats 'referred' and 'supported' as different states. Tracking should remain proportionate and privacy-conscious; the aim is continuity, not surveillance.

Shared responsibility

Shared responsibility recognises that no early childhood setting can meet every need alone. Families hold essential knowledge about children's routines, communication, strengths, culture and circumstances. Health, social and protection services may hold other forms of expertise or authority. Family-centred and interprofessional literature consistently emphasises collaboration, role clarity and service coordination, while also showing how difficult these are to sustain in practice (Ooms et al., 2026; Pacheco-Molero et al., 2025). The Nurturing Care Framework likewise assumes coordinated action across sectors (World Health Organization et al., 2018, 2019). Shared responsibility is therefore not the transfer of responsibility to families. It means that responsibilities are explicit, information is exchanged lawfully and proportionately, and no child is left unsupported because each actor assumes another has taken over.

4.4 Candidate indicators and evidence sources

The indicators below are deliberately described as candidate indicators. They have not yet undergone expert content validation, cognitive testing, reliability studies or construct validation. Their purpose is to make the framework testable. The evidence column also makes clear that no single method is sufficient for all six domains.

Table 3. Candidate indicators, levels of analysis and evidence sources

Domain	Candidate indicator	Primary level	Preferred evidence	Caution
R1	Adult responses are contingent on children's verbal and non-verbal cues.	Interaction	Repeated direct observation.	Frequency of adult talk is not responsiveness.
R2	Children receive calm, developmentally appropriate support when distressed.	Interaction	Observation across transitions, conflict and upset.	One isolated episode is insufficient.
R3	Behaviour guidance preserves dignity and avoids humiliation, threats or intimidation.	Interaction	Observation plus safeguarding/professional-learning evidence.	Absence of physical punishment alone is too narrow.
R4	Adults extend play and thinking without unnecessarily controlling children's activity.	Interaction	Observation of play and learning episodes.	Interpretation must consider developmental and cultural context.
I1	Children with differing characteristics have equitable opportunities to join, contribute and lead.	Child/classroom	Repeated observation and participation mapping.	Equal opportunity does not always mean identical treatment.
I2	Activities or environments are adapted when access barriers are identified.	Classroom/organisation	Observation, planning records and adaptation evidence.	Avoid unnecessary labelling.
I3	Patterns of adult attention, correction and opportunity do not systematically disadvantage particular groups.	Classroom	Structured interaction audit across several sessions.	Patterned evidence is needed; do not infer bias from a single event.
I4	Exclusion from activity is not used as a routine response to difficulty or difference.	Child/classroom	Observation and incident/classroom records.	Temporary separation may be justified for immediate safety if proportionate.
G1	Children have real, developmentally appropriate choices in everyday activities.	Child/classroom	Observation and child-perspective methods.	A predetermined choice with no meaningful alternative is not participation.
G2	Children can initiate ideas, activities or lines of inquiry.	Child/classroom	Observation and documentation of child-initiated activity.	Initiative does not have to be verbal.

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Domain	Candidate indicator	Primary level	Preferred evidence	Caution
G3	Expressions of discomfort, refusal or concern are noticed and responded to.	Child/interaction	Observation, child-perspective evidence and incident records where appropriate.	Adult safety duties remain in force.
G4	Children receive feedback, where appropriate, about how their views influenced a decision.	Child/organisation	Conversation, visual feedback or decision documentation.	Listening without any response can become tokenistic.
H1	The physical environment and routines reduce reasonably foreseeable harm while preserving appropriate opportunities for challenge and play.	Classroom/organisation	Safety review plus observation.	A zero-risk environment is neither realistic nor developmentally desirable.
H2	Discipline and behaviour guidance are free from violence, degradation and intimidation.	Interaction/organisation	Observation, policy and complaint evidence.	Psychological harm must be considered, not only physical harm.
H3	The setting has a usable response pathway for distress, suspected abuse, disclosure or other safeguarding concerns.	Organisation	Procedures, staff knowledge checks and anonymised pathway evidence.	A written procedure is not evidence of implementation.
H4	Children have age- and communication-appropriate ways to seek help or indicate that something is wrong.	Child/organisation	Child-perspective methods, visual mechanisms and observation.	Accessibility must include children with diverse communication needs.
T1	A significant assessment or observation finding leads to a documented, proportionate action decision.	Case/organisation	Record audit.	Avoid data collection without a clear purpose.
T2	Each follow-up action has an identifiable responsible person or team.	Case/organisation	Plans, meeting notes or case-management records.	Responsibility should not rest invisibly with one classroom practitioner.
T3	There is a defined point at which progress or risk is reviewed.	Case/organisation	Review dates and follow-up notes.	Review frequency should match the seriousness and type of need.
T4	External referrals are followed far enough to establish whether support was connected or a barrier remains.	Organisation/system	Referral and feedback records, with lawful information-sharing.	Data minimisation and confidentiality remain essential.
S1	Communication with families is genuinely two-way rather than primarily instructional or informational.	Family/organisation	Family feedback, communication records and meeting observation.	Families differ in time, language, confidence and resources.
S2	Family knowledge about the child informs support and educational decisions where relevant.	Family/case	Planning records and family accounts.	Partnership should not shift professional responsibilities onto families.
S3	Roles are clear when more than one service is involved.	Organisation/system	Coordination plans, pathway records and professional accounts.	Role ambiguity is a known barrier to interprofessional continuity.
S4	Relevant information is transferred safely and proportionately during significant transitions.	Organisation/system	Transition summaries, consent processes and receiving-service feedback.	Only necessary, lawful information should be shared.

Note. Source: Author's proposed candidate indicators derived from the conceptual audit trail in Table 2. The indicators are presented for empirical validation and are not a validated scoring instrument.

Several implications follow from this table. First, candidate indicators should initially be interpreted by domain rather than summed into a total RIGHTS score. Secondly, some indicators are likely to behave as reflective indicators of a latent interaction construct, whereas others are better understood as formative components of organisational capacity. Thirdly, observation windows, sampling rules and evidence thresholds will need to differ across domains. These are measurement questions to be tested, not assumptions to be concealed.

4.5 Policy translation in Indonesia

The Indonesian policy context makes a rights-responsive account of quality particularly timely. At the normative level, the CRC and Indonesia's Child Protection Law establish a broad obligation to protect children and respect their rights. At the education-system level, recent regulations have updated standards for educational process, management and safe and comfortable school culture (Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Republik Indonesia, 2025, 2026a, 2026b; Republic of Indonesia, 2014, 2016).

The value of RIGHTS is not that it creates a parallel national standard. Its role is interpretative. A process standard can specify planning, implementation and assessment, but RIGHTS asks what those processes mean for the child's actual experience. A management standard can establish organisational requirements, but RIGHTS asks whether responsibility remains clear when a child's need crosses classroom or institutional boundaries. A safe-school regulation can establish protection duties, but RIGHTS asks whether children can actually seek help, whether degrading discipline has disappeared from practice, and whether a concern triggers a reliable response.

This vertical connection - international norm, national law, education regulation and child-facing practice - also reduces the risk that rights remain rhetorical. It makes the policy question concrete: what evidence would show that a legal or regulatory commitment is reaching the child?

Table 4. From rights obligation to evidence of implementation in Indonesian ECEC

Policy layer	Illustrative source	Relevant RIGHTS domains	Implementation question
International child-rights norm	CRC; General Comments Nos. 7, 12 and 14	All domains	Are quality decisions consistent with non-discrimination, best interests, participation, development and protection?
National child-protection law	Law No. 35/2014 and Law No. 17/2016	I, G, H, T, S	Can protection duties be traced into prevention, reporting, response and responsibility?
Educational process standard	Permendikdasmen No. 1/2026	R, I, G, T	Do planned and assessed processes produce responsive, inclusive and participatory experiences, followed by action where needed?
Management standard	Permendikdasmen No. 26/2025	H, T, S	Does institutional management create clear responsibility, safe procedures and continuity?
Safe and comfortable school culture	Permendikdasmen No. 6/2026	R, G, H, S	Do children experience physical, psychological, sociocultural and digital safety in practice?

Note. Source: Author's synthesis based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Republic of Indonesia (2014, 2016), and Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Republik Indonesia (2025, 2026a, 2026b).

5. Discussion

The comparative analysis narrows the originality claim in a way that strengthens it. Rights-based ECEC practice and rights-based ECCE monitoring are not new: CRAF provides a staged pathway for advancing rights in educator practice, and the Right to Education Initiative provides a detailed indicator system for monitoring the right to ECCE (Henderson-Dekort & May, 2024; Right to Education Initiative, 2025). RIGHTS contributes at the intersection left between these approaches and mainstream quality frameworks. It conceptualises the quality question around the child's lived experience and the accountability chain that follows a recognised need, while preserving the structural and ecological conditions that make such responsiveness possible.

5.1 Child-perspective evidence and ethical safeguards

Treating children's perspectives as evidence of quality creates an ethical obligation as well as a methodological opportunity. Young children should not be turned into informal inspectors of their teachers, asked to disclose sensitive experiences without a response plan, or made to feel that participation is compulsory. Evidence activities must respect dignity, privacy, voluntariness and the child's best interests.

Methods should be developmentally appropriate and multimodal. Depending on age and communication style, evidence might include short conversations, drawings, photographs selected by children, mapping of spaces they like or avoid, observation of choice and refusal, or play-based elicitation. The purpose is not to force verbal accounts, but to make room for children's preferred forms of expression. The Ethical Research Involving Children guidance stresses reflexive ethics, respectful relationships and attention to children's well-being across the research process (Powell et al., 2013).

Any empirical validation of RIGHTS that directly involves children should therefore include proportionate consent and assent procedures; an explicit right not to participate or to stop; confidentiality and data-minimisation rules; a safeguarding protocol for disclosures or signs of harm; procedures for avoiding retaliation or stigma; and a plan for feeding findings back in a form that children can understand. In quality-improvement use, the same principles should apply even when the activity is labelled monitoring rather than research.

5.2 Implications for quality assurance and practice

From formal compliance to substantive evidence

Quality assurance often needs documentary evidence, but documents should not be mistaken for outcomes. RIGHTS adds a second question to any compliance check: what changed in the child's experience because this

requirement exists? A safeguarding policy matters, but so does whether guidance is non-degrading and whether children know how to seek help. An assessment system matters, but so does whether concerns lead to assigned action. This approach focuses attention on the gap between formal compliance and substantive implementation.

Professional learning

Rights-responsive practice requires more than knowledge of the CRC. Professional learning should help staff read children's cues, support regulation without humiliation, facilitate genuine choice, recognise patterned exclusion, respond safely to safeguarding concerns, communicate with families and document follow-up proportionately. Structural conditions remain relevant: expectations of highly individualised and reflective practice are unrealistic if staffing, workload, leadership or time make such practice impossible.

Leadership and organisational learning

Leaders shape whether rights-responsive quality is routine or dependent on individual goodwill. Staffing, scheduling, supervision, complaint routes, professional reflection, referral pathways and family partnership all sit partly at organisational level. RIGHTS can therefore be used as a framework for enquiry: which children are least visible in our interaction patterns; what concerns are still open; where do referrals stall; what do families know that has not reached planning; and what have children told or shown us about feeling safe and included?

A cautious approach to accountability

RIGHTS should initially be used for formative enquiry, professional learning and research rather than high-stakes ranking. Premature scoring creates predictable risks: staff may optimise visible behaviours for observation, complex safeguarding work may be reduced to checklist completion, and settings serving children with greater needs may appear weaker simply because more concerns are documented. Any future accountability use must therefore be preceded by evidence of reliability, validity, fairness and consequences.

The central implication is that RIGHTS changes the unit of accountability without abandoning institutional quality. Instead of asking only whether a setting possesses the required resources or procedures, it asks whether those conditions are translated into a defensible experience for particular children and whether the system remains accountable when that experience reveals a concern. This makes the framework especially relevant to quality-improvement systems that are strong on documentation but weaker on feedback loops. It also prevents a common false choice between rights and pedagogy: responsive teaching, meaningful participation and safeguarding are treated as mutually reinforcing quality functions rather than competing priorities. This distinction is especially important for early childhood settings because children's dependence on adults makes institutional follow-through part of the quality of the experience itself.

5.3 Empirical validation and research agenda

The framework can become useful only if later studies are willing to test where it fails. A staged validation programme is preferable to immediate scale construction.

1. Content validity: a multidisciplinary panel including ECEC, child-rights, safeguarding, inclusion, psychometrics and practitioner expertise should assess relevance, clarity and domain coverage.
2. Cognitive testing: practitioners, leaders and prospective observers should explain how they interpret each candidate indicator, exposing ambiguous wording before field testing.
3. Feasibility pilot: the evidence model should be tested across diverse ECEC settings to establish data burden, missingness, floor and ceiling effects, and whether some indicators are impractical.
4. Inter-rater reliability: indicators based on observation or record judgement should be scored independently to establish agreement and identify domains that require tighter descriptors.
5. Construct analysis: exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis should be used only where the measurement model and sample size justify it. Formative indicators should not be forced into reflective factor models.
6. Convergent and discriminant validity: RIGHTS domains should be compared with established measures of interaction quality, classroom climate, participation, safeguarding or partnership where conceptually appropriate.

7. Criterion and predictive validity: studies should test associations with child well-being, belonging, engagement, social-emotional development, participation and continuity of support.
8. Responsiveness to change: intervention studies should examine whether RIGHTS evidence changes after professional learning, safeguarding improvement or coordination reform.
9. Fairness and measurement invariance: the framework should be tested across setting types, regions, languages, disability status and other relevant groups before comparative use.
10. Consequential validity and implementation study: researchers should examine workload, cost, incentives, gaming risks and unintended consequences before any use for accreditation, sanctions or public ranking.

Validation should proceed conservatively because the framework intentionally spans levels and evidence types. A successful psychometric result in the interaction domains would not, by itself, justify combining organisational or cross-service indicators into the same latent score. The more defensible aim is first to establish whether each domain produces reliable, interpretable evidence and then to test how domains relate to one another. This sequencing preserves the conceptual distinction between measuring a quality construct and documenting whether an organisational function is present.

- Do the six domains remain distinct when examined empirically, or do they form a hierarchical or network structure?
- Which RIGHTS domains converge most strongly with established measures such as CLASS or ECERS-3, and which capture genuinely additional variance?
- How closely do observer ratings align with children's, families' and practitioners' accounts of the same setting?
- Which structural conditions - including staffing, ratios, leadership, workload and professional learning - most consistently enable rights-responsive practice?
- Does tracking and follow-up predict continuity of support more strongly than the mere presence of assessment or referral procedures?
- How can child-perspective evidence be embedded ethically in routine quality improvement without turning participation into surveillance or performance?
- How do RIGHTS domains operate in settings serving children with disabilities, multilingual communities and socio-economically diverse populations?
- Can targeted improvement in RIGHTS domains produce longitudinal gains in children's safety, belonging, engagement, participation and development?

5.4 Limitations

RIGHTS is a conceptual proposition, not a validated instrument. The directed synthesis and explicit comparison with CRAF and the Right to Education Initiative's ECCE monitoring guide make the framework's conceptual neighbourhood clearer, but they do not constitute an exhaustive priority search across every language, jurisdiction or unpublished framework. The article therefore claims originality for the proposed configuration and analytic architecture, not for the underlying child-rights principles or for the general idea of rights-based ECEC monitoring.

The 24 candidate indicators have no validated thresholds, weights or scoring rules. Their mixed levels of analysis also mean that a single total score may be inappropriate. Some may ultimately prove redundant, difficult to observe or better treated as contextual evidence rather than indicators.

Integrating developmental, educational, protection and rights traditions creates productive overlap but also conceptual tension. Responsive practice, participation and safeguarding may occur within the same interaction, while follow-up and shared responsibility can cross organisational boundaries. Empirical work will need to determine whether this overlap reflects poor discrimination or the genuinely interdependent nature of quality.

The framework could also become burdensome if applied without regard to workforce conditions. Rights-responsive expectations cannot be sustained through individual effort alone when staffing, time, training or institutional support are inadequate. Any evaluation of child experience should therefore be interpreted alongside the structural conditions that enable or constrain practice.

6. Conclusion

ECEC quality becomes real in children's everyday experience. Qualifications, ratios, facilities, curricula, policies and management systems remain essential, but they are means rather than the final test of quality. The stronger question is what those structures allow each child to experience and what the system does when that experience reveals a need.

The RIGHTS Framework offers a way to ask that question across six connected domains: Responsive relationships, Inclusion and non-discrimination, Genuine participation, Harm prevention and safeguarding, Tracking and follow-up, and Shared responsibility. Its distinctive contribution is not a claim to be the first child-rights framework for ECEC, nor to replace existing quality or monitoring tools. It is the proposed integration of child-facing process quality with an explicit rights lens, safeguarding, closed-loop follow-up and ecological responsibility across the settings and services surrounding the child.

The framework is deliberately unfinished. Its candidate indicators require empirical challenge, and its multilevel evidence model may need revision. That openness is a strength rather than a weakness. A framework intended to protect children's rights should not be insulated from evidence. At this stage, RIGHTS provides a transparent, testable architecture for moving quality assurance beyond the question 'Is the standard present?' towards the more demanding question: 'Does this child experience the standard as safety, dignity, inclusion, participation, support and the possibility to flourish?'

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