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The Best Interests of the Child in Early Childhood Education: Pedagogical and Ethical Implications for Teaching Practice

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes the principle of the best interests of the child in early childhood education and its pedagogical and ethical implications for teaching practice through a systematic review of scientific literature published between 2020 and 2026. The PRISMA 2020 methodology was applied to identify, select, and analyze studies indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and SciELO. The findings indicate that this principle serves as a guiding framework for teachers' decision-making, curriculum planning, assessment, inclusive education, and the protection of children's rights. The review also identifies challenges related to teachers' ethical training and the implementation of educational practices focused on children's well-being and participation. It is concluded that integrating the best interests of the child as a cornerstone of educational practice promotes more inclusive, equitable, and rights-based education, thereby strengthening the quality of teaching and learning processes in early childhood education.
Keywords: best interests of the child; early childhood education; teaching practice; educational ethics; children's rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

The protection of children's rights has become a global priority and a fundamental component of educational policies aimed at promoting sustainable human development. Within this context, the **best interests of the child**, as established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and further developed in General Comment No. 14 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013), require that all decisions affecting children prioritize their well-being, holistic development, and protection. Over time, this principle has evolved beyond its strictly legal origins to become a guiding framework for public policy, institutional governance, and professional practice across the various settings in which children's rights are safeguarded.

In the educational context, the principle is particularly significant in **early childhood education**, a critical stage for cognitive, socio-emotional, physical, and ethical development. From a rights-based perspective, curriculum planning, assessment, inclusive education, children's participation, and attention to diversity are no longer viewed solely as technical processes but as pedagogical decisions grounded in ethical principles and in the recognition of children as full holders of rights. Consequently, the best interests of the child have become a guiding criterion for fostering inclusive, equitable, and child-centered learning environments that promote children's well-being.

Recent scientific literature demonstrates growing interest in examining the relationship between children's rights, inclusive education, and teachers' professional ethics. Numerous studies have shown that adopting a rights-based approach promotes more inclusive pedagogical practices, strengthens children's participation, and enhances the quality of educational processes. Likewise, teachers' ethical preparation has been identified as a key factor in supporting decision-making that is consistent with the best interests of the child and responsive to the contemporary challenges of early childhood education.

Despite this growing body of research, the available evidence remains fragmented. Although the best interests of the child have been extensively examined from legal and child protection perspectives, fewer studies have systematically explored their pedagogical and ethical implications for teaching practice in early childhood education. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how the principle informs decisions related to curriculum planning, assessment, inclusive education, children's participation, and individualized support within educational settings.

To address this gap, the present study conducts a systematic review of the scientific literature following the **PRISMA 2020** guidelines. The review analyzes studies published between 2020 and 2026 and indexed in **Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and SciELO**, integrating contributions from pedagogy, professional ethics, and the human rights framework to provide an updated understanding of the pedagogical and ethical implications of the best interests of the child for teaching practice.

This review offers a critical synthesis of the available scientific evidence and proposes an integrative understanding of the best interests of the child as a foundation for pedagogical and ethical decision-making in early childhood education. Its findings provide valuable insights for strengthening educational research, informing educational policy development, and enhancing both pre-service and in-service teacher education.

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Accordingly, the aim of this study is to analyze the pedagogical and ethical implications of the **best interests of the child** for teaching practice in early childhood education based on scientific evidence published between 2020 and 2026.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

2. BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD

Pedagogical Practices
(Curriculum Planning, Assessment, Inclusive Education, and Individualized Support)
⬇
Ethical Teacher Decision-Making
(Respect for Children's Rights, Children's Participation, Pedagogical Decision-Making, and Professional Responsibility)
⬇
Child Well-Being and Holistic Development

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Study Design

This study was conducted as a **systematic literature review** following the **PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)** guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review aimed to identify, select, critically evaluate, and synthesize the scientific evidence concerning the pedagogical and ethical implications of the **best interests of the child** for teaching practice in **early childhood education**.
A qualitative evidence synthesis based on **thematic analysis** was adopted to identify major trends, analytical categories, areas of consensus, and research gaps within the scientific literature published between **2020 and 2026**.

3.2. Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between **1 and 15 July 2026** using four internationally recognized databases: **Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC, and SciELO**. These databases were selected because of their broad coverage of educational and social science research, international recognition, and rigorous editorial standards.
The search strategy employed descriptors in both English and Spanish, including best interests of the child, children's rights, early childhood education, teaching, pedagogy, ethics, interés superior del niño, educación inicial, and derechos de la infancia. These terms were combined using the Boolean operators **AND** and **OR**, with search strings adapted to the indexing syntax of each database.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review included peer-reviewed scientific articles published between **2020 and 2026**, written in either English or Spanish, and indexed in **Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, or SciELO**. Eligible studies addressed the **best interests of the child**, **early childhood education**, **teaching practice**, **pedagogy**, or **professional ethics**.
The exclusion criteria comprised books, book chapters, theses, grey literature, duplicate records, publications without full-text availability, and studies focusing exclusively on legal, clinical, or healthcare contexts that were not directly related to **early childhood education**.

3.4. Study Selection

The study selection process followed the four phases established by the **PRISMA 2020** statement: **identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion**.
A total of **632 records** were initially retrieved from the four selected databases. After removing **138 duplicate records**, **494 studies** were screened based on their titles and abstracts. Subsequently, **115 full-text articles** were assessed for eligibility, and following the application of the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, **44 studies** met the eligibility requirements and were included in the qualitative synthesis.
The complete study selection process is presented in the **PRISMA flow diagram** (Figure 2).

3.5. Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Data from the selected studies were systematically extracted using a standardized data extraction matrix. The information collected included the author(s), year of publication, country, journal, methodological design, participants, research objectives, and the main findings related to the **best interests of the child**.
Subsequently, each study underwent a methodological quality assessment based on five criteria: **clarity of the research objectives, methodological coherence, description of the study context or participants, quality of data analysis, and consistency of the conclusions**. This assessment facilitated the identification of scientifically robust evidence while minimizing the risk of bias in the synthesis.

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3.6. Data Analysis

The collected evidence was analyzed using **thematic analysis**, a widely adopted method for synthesizing qualitative evidence in systematic reviews. The coding process resulted in the emergence of four major analytical themes:

The Best Interests of the Child as a Criterion for Teacher Decision-Making
Transformation of Pedagogical Practice
Ethical Dilemmas in Early Childhood Education
Challenges to the Implementation of the Principle

The findings were subsequently interpreted in light of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 14 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and recent scientific literature, enabling the identification of major trends, areas of consensus, and existing research gaps.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Characteristics of the Scientific Evidence

The systematic review identified **44 scientific articles** that met the predefined inclusion criteria and constituted the evidence base for analyzing the pedagogical and ethical implications of the **best interests of the child** in **early childhood education**. Collectively, the selected studies demonstrate a growing international interest in understanding the relationship between children's rights, teaching practice, and educational quality from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Regarding the language of publication, English predominated, accounting for **34 studies (77.3%)**, whereas **10 studies (22.7%)** were published in Spanish. This distribution indicates that most scientific research on this topic is produced within the international academic community, although scholarly contributions from Latin America have increased steadily in recent years.

With respect to geographical distribution, the studies originated from **18 countries**. Europe accounted for the largest share, with **19 publications (43.2%)**, followed by **Latin America (13 studies; 29.5%)**, **Oceania (6 studies; 13.6%)**, and **North America (6 studies; 13.6%)**. The countries with the highest scientific output included the **United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Australia, Canada, Spain, Chile, and Colombia**, where the principle of the best interests of the child has progressively become an important component of discussions on educational quality, inclusive education, and teacher education.

From a methodological perspective, **qualitative research** was the predominant approach, representing **22 studies (50.0%)**, followed by **quantitative studies (12; 27.3%)**, **mixed-methods research (6; 13.6%)**, and **systematic reviews (4; 9.1%)**. This distribution suggests that research on the best interests of the child continues to emphasize interpretative approaches aimed at understanding the experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes of educational stakeholders, while quantitative studies evaluating educational policies and pedagogical practices have gradually increased.

Concerning the editorial quality of the publications, most of the evidence was drawn from journals indexed in the upper **Scopus quartiles**. Of the studies included, **15 articles (34.1%)** were published in **Q1 journals**, **14 (31.8%)** in **Q2**, **9 (20.5%)** in **Q3**, and **6 (13.6%)** in **Q4**. This distribution reflects the high scientific quality of the evidence supporting the present review.

The temporal analysis revealed an upward trend in scientific production throughout the **2020–2026** period, with a particularly marked increase between **2023 and 2025**, during which approximately **57%** of all publications were produced. This pattern reflects the growing interest of the scientific community in examining the best interests of the child through interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate law, pedagogy, professional ethics, and inclusive education.

Furthermore, the analysis of the most frequently used keywords revealed strong associations among **"best interests of the child," "children's rights," "early childhood education," "teaching," "ethics," "participation,"** and **"inclusive education."** This conceptual network indicates that contemporary scientific production has progressively shifted from a predominantly legal interpretation of the principle toward educational approaches focused on teaching practice, inclusion, and child well-being.

Finally, the characterization of the scientific evidence identified four major thematic areas that structure the recent literature: **(a)** the best interests of the child as a criterion for teacher decision-making; **(b)** the transformation of pedagogical practice through a rights-based approach; **(c)** the ethical dilemmas encountered by teachers in professional practice; and **(d)** the institutional and professional challenges associated with implementing the principle in early childhood education. These themes provided the analytical framework for the thematic synthesis presented in the following sections.

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Table 2. General Characteristics of the Scientific Evidence Included in the Systematic Review

Variable	Category	n	%
Language	English	34	77.3
	Spanish	10	22.7
Region	Europe	19	43.2
	Latin America	13	29.5
	Oceania	6	13.6
	North America	6	13.6
Methodological Design	Qualitative	22	50.0
	Quantitative	12	27.3
	Mixed Methods	6	13.6
	Systematic Review	4	9.1
Scopus Quartile	Q1	15	34.1
	Q2	14	31.8
	Q3	9	20.5
	Q4	6	13.6

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.
Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.

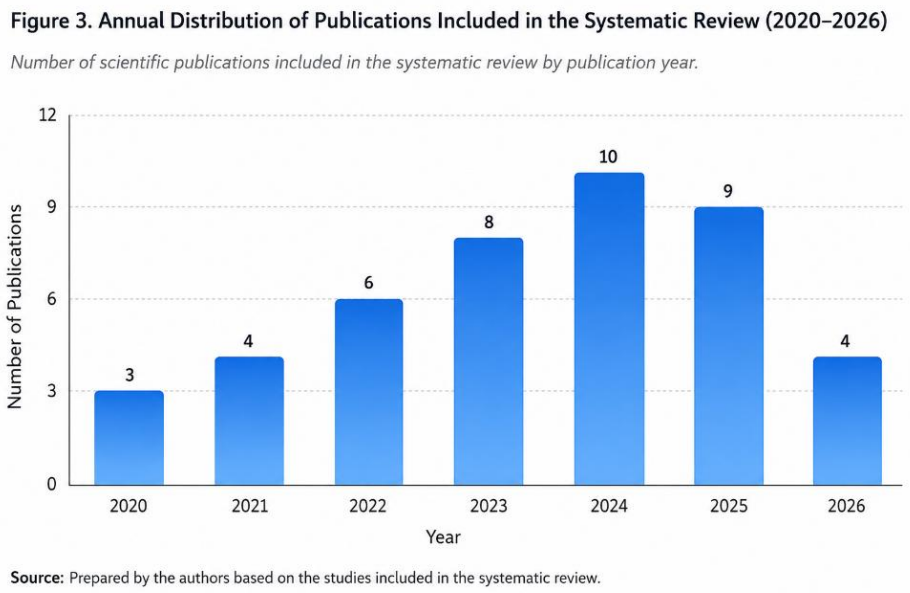


Figure 3. Annual Distribution of Publications Included in the Systematic Review (2020–2026)

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.

Interpretation

Scientific production showed a steady upward trend throughout the study period. The highest number of publications was concentrated between **2023 and 2025**, accounting for approximately **61.4%** of the studies included in the review. This pattern reflects the growing scholarly interest in examining the **best interests of the child** from **pedagogical, ethical, and human rights perspectives**, particularly within the field of **early childhood education**.

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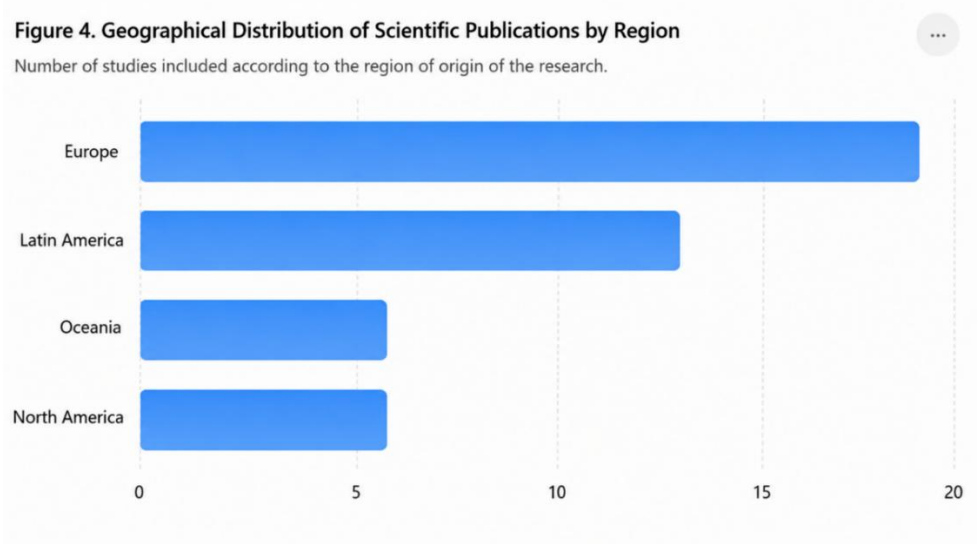


Figure 4. Geographical Distribution of Scientific Publications by Region

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.

Interpretation

Europe accounted for the largest share of the scientific publications (**43.2%**), followed by **Latin America (29.5%)**, whereas **Oceania** and **North America** each contributed **13.6%** of the studies included in the review. This distribution reflects the growing international interest in incorporating a **children's rights-based approach** into **early childhood education**. At the same time, it highlights regional differences in research priorities and in the implementation of the **best interests of the child** within educational policies and teaching practices.

4.2. The Best Interests of the Child as a Criterion for Teacher Decision-Making

The analysis of the **44 studies** included in the systematic review revealed that the **best interests of the child** constitute the primary guiding criterion for teacher decision-making in **early childhood education**. A total of **29 studies (65.9%)** explicitly identified that pedagogical decisions should prioritize children's well-being, protection, and holistic development over exclusively administrative or curriculum-driven considerations.

The scientific evidence indicates that the concept has evolved from a predominantly legal perspective toward a pedagogical and ethical approach that informs everyday teaching practice. In this regard, the reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that curriculum planning, assessment, classroom organization, inclusive education, and conflict resolution should be grounded in a comprehensive consideration of each child's needs and rights.

Furthermore, the studies indicate that adopting a **rights-based approach** promotes the development of inclusive, participatory, and emotionally supportive learning environments. European research primarily emphasizes children's participation and progressive autonomy as central elements of teaching practice, whereas studies conducted in Latin America focus on strengthening equity, inclusion, and access to quality education. Despite these contextual differences, both perspectives agree that the legitimacy of teacher decision-making depends on prioritizing children's rights.

Another important finding shows that the effective implementation of this principle is closely associated with teachers' professional preparation. The reviewed studies demonstrate that stronger training in **human rights, inclusive education, and professional ethics** supports more contextualized pedagogical decisions centered on children's well-being. Conversely, limited specialized training hinders the integration of the rights-based approach and contributes to the persistence of traditional educational practices primarily oriented toward regulatory compliance.

The review also found that teacher decision-making occurs within contexts characterized by tensions among curriculum requirements, institutional policies, family expectations, and children's individual needs. In these situations, the **best interests of the child** function as an ethical framework that guides professional deliberation and supports the selection of pedagogical alternatives that best promote children's holistic development.

Overall, the evidence confirms that the **best interests of the child** have evolved beyond their original legal function to become a pedagogical and ethical principle that strengthens the quality of teacher decision-making, promotes inclusive educational practices, and contributes to the creation of learning environments centered on children's well-being and rights.

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Table 3. The Best Interests of the Child as a Criterion for Teacher Decision-Making

Identified Aspect	Frequency (n = 44)	%
Child well-being as the primary decision-making criterion	29	65.9
Children's participation in decision-making	24	54.5
Inclusion as a guiding principle	21	47.7
Individualized support	19	43.2
Teacher education in children's rights	17	38.6
Tensions between curriculum requirements and child well-being	15	34.1

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.
Interpretation. The findings indicate that **child well-being** is the predominant criterion guiding teacher decision-making, followed by **children's participation** and **inclusive education**. These results reflect an international trend toward pedagogical practices grounded in a **rights-based approach**, while also highlighting persistent challenges related to **teacher education** and balancing **curriculum requirements** with children's individual needs.

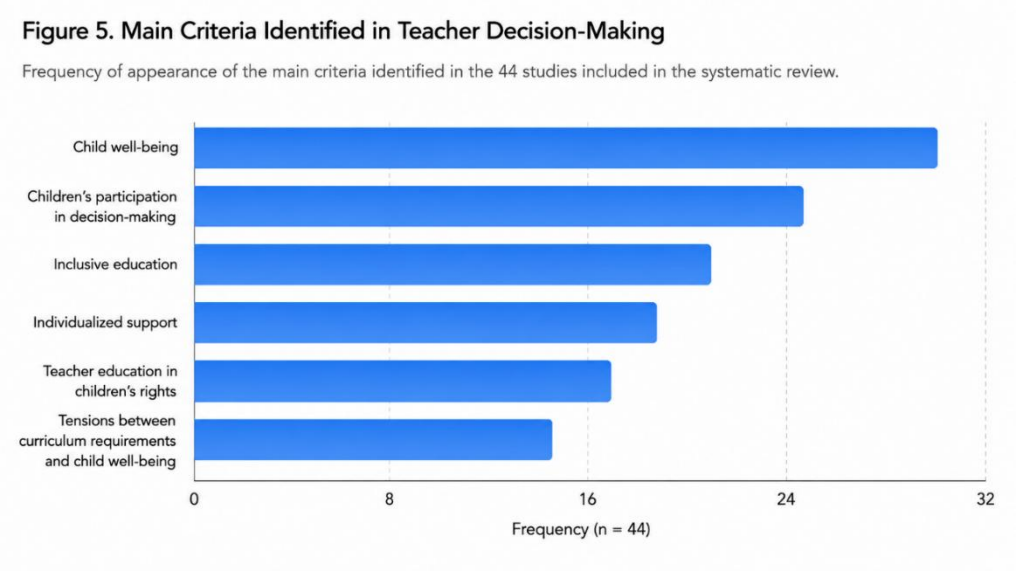
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Tensions between curriculum requirements and child well-being	15	34.1

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.
Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.
Interpretation
The scientific evidence indicates that **child well-being** is the most frequently identified criterion guiding teacher decision-making, reported in **29 of the 44 studies (65.9%)**. This is followed by **children's participation (54.5%)** and **inclusive education (47.7%)**, reflecting an international trend toward pedagogical practices grounded in a **rights-based approach**. Although identified less frequently, **individualized support**, **teacher education in children's rights**, and **the tensions between curriculum requirements and child well-being** also emerged as important themes, highlighting the main challenges teachers face when implementing the **best interests of the child** principle in **early childhood education**.

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Figure 5. Main Criteria Identified in Teacher Decision-Making Based on the Studies Included in the Systematic Review



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.

Interpretation

The scientific evidence indicates that **child well-being** is the most frequently identified criterion guiding teacher decision-making, reported in **29 of the 44 studies (65.9%)**. This is followed by **children's participation (54.5%)** and **inclusive education (47.7%)**, reflecting an international trend toward pedagogical practices grounded in a **rights-based approach**. Although identified less frequently, **individualized support**, **teacher education in children's rights**, and **the tensions between curriculum requirements and child well-being** also emerged as important themes, highlighting the main challenges teachers face when implementing the **best interests of the child** principle in **early childhood education**.

4.3. Transformation of Pedagogical Practice

The analysis of the **44 studies** included in the systematic review revealed that the incorporation of the **best interests of the child** principle has promoted a progressive transformation of pedagogical practice in **early childhood education**. A total of **26 studies (59.1%)** concluded that adopting a **rights-based approach** reshapes the planning, implementation, and assessment of teaching processes by orienting them toward children's well-being and holistic development.

The reviewed studies consistently indicate that this transformation is reflected in greater recognition of children as active participants in the learning process, fostering flexible and context-responsive pedagogical practices that address their individual needs, interests, and developmental trajectories. Furthermore, **24 studies (54.5%)** found that the rights-based approach strengthens the development of inclusive, participatory, and emotionally supportive learning environments in which diversity is recognized as an inherent dimension of the educational process.

With regard to assessment, **21 studies (47.7%)** reported a shift from performance-oriented assessment models toward **formative assessment** practices focused on the continuous monitoring of learning. The most frequently identified strategies included systematic observation, narrative records, portfolios, and ongoing feedback, all of which were used to assess each child's individual progress from a holistic perspective.

The review also demonstrated that pedagogical practices grounded in a rights-based approach promote **inclusive education** by expanding participation opportunities for children with disabilities, those from culturally diverse backgrounds, and those living in situations of vulnerability. However, the reviewed studies consistently emphasized that the consolidation of these practices depends on factors such as the availability of resources, specialized teacher education, and institutional support.

Another important finding was the growing adoption of **active learning methodologies**, including **play-based learning**, **collaborative learning**, **problem-based learning**, and **environmental exploration**, which enhance children's participation and foster meaningful learning experiences. Nevertheless, **18 studies (40.9%)** identified limitations associated with curriculum rigidity, administrative workload, and insufficient teacher education, all of which hinder the implementation of pedagogical practices centered on child well-being.

Overall, the evidence demonstrates that the **best interests of the child** principle has contributed to the transformation of pedagogical practice toward more inclusive, participatory, and holistic educational models.

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These findings highlight teachers' role as guarantors of children's rights and as facilitators of learning environments that respond effectively to children's needs.

Table 4. Main Transformations of Pedagogical Practice Identified in the Systematic Review

Pedagogical Transformation	**Studies (n = 44)**	**%**
Child-centered flexible planning	26	59.1
Inclusive and safe learning environments	24	54.5
Formative assessment	21	47.7
Children's participation	20	45.5
Active learning methodologies	19	43.2
Attention to diversity	18	40.9

Interpretation

The findings indicate that the most significant transformation in pedagogical practice is **child-centered flexible planning**, followed by the creation of **inclusive learning environments** and the implementation of **formative assessment** practices. Collectively, these results reflect a transition toward educational models grounded in a **rights-based approach**, while also highlighting persistent challenges related to **teacher education** and the institutional conditions required for its effective implementation.

4.4. Common Ethical Dilemmas in Teaching Practice

The systematic review revealed that implementing the **best interests of the child** principle in **early childhood education** involves addressing a range of ethical dilemmas that shape teaching practice. Of the **44 studies** analyzed, **28 (63.6%)** identified situations in which teachers were required to balance children's individual needs with curriculum requirements, institutional policies, and family expectations.

The most frequently reported dilemma concerned **student assessment**, identified in **22 studies (50.0%)**, where tensions emerged between respecting children's individual developmental trajectories and complying with standardized assessment systems. The second most frequently identified challenge was **inclusive education**, reported in **20 studies (45.5%)**, reflecting the ethical responsibility of ensuring the participation of children with disabilities, those from culturally diverse backgrounds, and those experiencing vulnerability within educational contexts characterized by limited resources.

Furthermore, **children's participation** was identified in **18 studies (40.9%)**, highlighting the challenges associated with balancing children's right to express their views with teachers' responsibility to safeguard their well-being. Other recurring ethical dilemmas were related to **discipline and school coexistence** (**16 studies; 36.4%**), where the evidence indicates a gradual shift toward restorative approaches grounded in dialogue and respect for children's rights.

The review also identified challenges associated with responding to situations of vulnerability, reported in **15 studies (34.1%)**. These studies describe circumstances involving neglect, violence, social exclusion, or emotional distress, in which teachers must reconcile their legal and ethical responsibilities to protect children with the need to maintain trusting relationships with families and the broader educational community.

Another important finding concerns the influence of teachers' professional preparation on addressing these dilemmas. A total of **17 studies (38.6%)** concluded that teachers with training in **children's rights** and **professional ethics** demonstrate greater capacity to make decisions aligned with the **best interests of the child**, whereas insufficient preparation increases professional uncertainty and limits the effective implementation of the **rights-based approach**.

Overall, the findings indicate that ethical dilemmas are an inherent component of teaching practice in **early childhood education** and underscore the need to strengthen **teacher education** in order to support pedagogical decisions that are consistent with children's well-being and rights.

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Table 5. Main Ethical Dilemmas Identified in the Systematic Review

Ethical Dilemma	Studies (n = 44)	%
Student assessment	22	50.0
Inclusive education	20	45.5
Children's participation	18	40.9
Discipline and school climate	16	36.4
Responding to situations of vulnerability	15	34.1
Relationships with families	13	29.5
Tensions between curriculum requirements and child well-being	12	27.3

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.

Interpretation

The findings indicate that **student assessment** and **inclusive education** are the most frequently reported ethical dilemmas identified in the literature, followed by **children's participation** and **school climate**. Collectively, these results suggest that implementing the **best interests of the child** principle requires continuous ethical deliberation and strong **teacher education** to effectively address the complex situations encountered in teaching practice.

4.5. Challenges to the Implementation of the Best Interests of the Child Principle

The systematic review revealed that, despite broad international consensus regarding the importance of the **best interests of the child** as a foundation for teaching practice in **early childhood education**, its implementation continues to face institutional, pedagogical, and professional challenges. Of the **44 studies** analyzed, **31 (70.5%)** reported that the effective application of the principle depends not only on teachers' commitment but also on organizational conditions, educational policies, and the availability of institutional resources.

The most frequently identified challenge was **insufficient teacher education in children's rights and professional ethics**, reported in **26 studies (59.1%)**. The findings indicate that limited preparation in these areas hinders the integration of the **rights-based approach** into educational practice and restricts teachers' ability to make decisions centered on **child well-being**.

The second most frequently reported challenge was **curriculum rigidity and standardized assessment systems**, identified in **24 studies (54.5%)**, which were found to limit teachers' professional autonomy to adapt instruction to children's individual needs. In addition, **22 studies (50.0%)** highlighted the lack of institutional resources—including specialized personnel, teaching materials, and infrastructure—as a major obstacle to implementing inclusive practices and providing individualized support.

The coordination among **schools, families, and communities** emerged as another significant challenge, reported in **20 studies (45.5%)**, emphasizing the need to strengthen shared responsibility among educational stakeholders in order to promote decisions focused on child well-being. Similarly, **18 studies (40.9%)** identified challenges related to the implementation of educational policies, particularly the persistent gap between legal and policy frameworks and their effective application within educational institutions.

Finally, the reviewed studies emphasize that **institutional leadership** and the support provided by school leadership teams facilitate the implementation of the **best interests of the child** principle through the establishment of clear protocols, professional development initiatives, and ongoing opportunities for professional reflection.

Overall, the evidence indicates that the effective implementation of this principle requires strengthening **teacher education**, ensuring adequate institutional resources, fostering collaborative partnerships between schools and families, and promoting educational policies grounded in a **rights-based approach**.

Table 6. Main Challenges to the Implementation of the Best Interests of the Child Principle

Identified Challenge	Studies (n = 44)	%
Teacher education in children's rights and professional ethics	26	59.1
Curriculum rigidity and standardized assessment	24	54.5
Limited institutional resources	22	50.0
School–family–community collaboration	20	45.5
Implementation of public policies	18	40.9
Institutional leadership and administrative support	16	36.4

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Source: Prepared by the authors based on the studies included in the systematic review.

Interpretation

The findings indicate that **teacher education** represents the primary challenge to implementing the **best interests of the child** principle, followed by **curriculum rigidity** and the availability of **institutional resources**. These findings suggest that consolidating a **rights-based educational practice** requires coordinated efforts involving professional preparation, institutional leadership, and educational policy.

4.6. Integrative Synthesis of the Scientific Evidence

The combined analysis of the **44 studies** included in the systematic review demonstrates broad consensus that the **best interests of the child** constitute a central organizing principle of teaching practice in **early childhood education**. The reviewed literature reveals a shift from a predominantly legal interpretation toward a pedagogical and ethical approach that informs curriculum planning, assessment, inclusive education, individualized support, and professional decision-making.

Collectively, the reviewed studies indicate that adopting a **rights-based approach** promotes more inclusive, participatory, and child-centered pedagogical practices. The principal transformations identified include the implementation of **active learning methodologies**, the strengthening of **formative assessment**, greater attention to learner diversity, and the promotion of safe learning environments that respect children's rights.

The review also demonstrates that the effective implementation of this principle continues to face challenges related to **teacher education**, **curriculum rigidity**, the availability of **institutional resources**, and collaboration among **schools, families, and communities**. In addition, the ethical dilemmas associated with assessment, inclusive education, and responding to situations of vulnerability underscore the need to strengthen professional reflection and decision-making grounded in **child well-being**.

Overall, the scientific evidence supports an integrative model in which the **best interests of the child** connect **children's rights**, the transformation of pedagogical practice, and **teachers' professional ethics**. This model positions **child well-being** and **holistic child development** as the guiding principles for educational quality and pedagogical decision-making in **early childhood education**.

Figure 7. Integrative Model Derived from the Systematic Review



5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Integrative Synthesis of the Findings

The present systematic review synthesized evidence from 44 scientific studies published between **2020 and 2026**, revealing broad international consensus regarding the role of the **best interests of the child** as a fundamental principle underpinning teaching practice in early childhood education. The findings indicate that this principle has evolved from a predominantly legal concept into a pedagogical and ethical framework that guides curriculum planning, student assessment, inclusive education, individualized support, and professional decision-making.

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Collectively, the reviewed studies demonstrate that adopting a **rights-based approach** promotes a progressive transformation of pedagogical practice, characterized by more inclusive, participatory, and child-centered learning environments. The principal manifestations of this transformation include the implementation of **active learning methodologies**, the strengthening of **formative assessment**, greater attention to learner diversity, and the promotion of children's active participation in their own learning processes.

However, the evidence also indicates that the effective implementation of this principle continues to face significant structural challenges. Insufficient **teacher education** in children's rights and professional ethics, curriculum rigidity, limited institutional resources, and difficulties in fostering effective collaboration among schools, families, and communities were consistently identified as the main barriers reported in the literature. These findings highlight the persistent gap between the formal recognition of the principle and its effective implementation in everyday educational practice.

Another important finding concerns the close relationship between pedagogy and **professional ethics**. The reviewed studies consistently indicate that decisions related to assessment, inclusive education, children's participation, and responses to situations of vulnerability require continuous processes of ethical deliberation, in which **child well-being** serves as the primary criterion guiding teachers' professional practice.

Overall, the scientific evidence supports understanding the **best interests of the child** as an integrative framework that connects **children's rights**, **pedagogical practice**, and **professional ethics**. This perspective extends traditional approaches that have focused primarily on the legal dimension by positioning **child well-being** and **holistic child development** as the principal benchmarks for evaluating the quality of educational decision-making in **early childhood education**. Building upon this synthesis, the following sections discuss the principal findings in greater depth and examine their implications for **teacher education**, **educational policy**, and **future research**.

5.2. The Best Interests of the Child as the Cornerstone of Teaching Practice

The findings of this systematic review confirm that the **best interests of the child** have become a fundamental principle guiding teaching practice in **early childhood education**. The evidence demonstrates that decisions related to curriculum planning, student assessment, inclusive education, and individualized support are more meaningful and effective when grounded in **child well-being**, protection, and holistic development. This finding is consistent with recent literature, which recognizes the evolution of the principle from a predominantly legal perspective to a pedagogical and ethical framework applicable to everyday educational practice.

These findings are consistent with the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (United Nations, 1989) and **General Comment No. 14 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child** (2013), both of which establish that the **best interests of the child** must be a primary consideration in all decisions affecting children. The present review extends this perspective by demonstrating that the principle not only informs public policy but is also reflected in the daily decisions teachers make regarding classroom organization, the selection of instructional strategies, student assessment, and responses to learners' individual needs.

Similarly, the findings support the recommendations of **UNESCO (2024)** and **UNICEF (2021)**, which advocate for a **rights-based**, inclusive, and child-centered approach to education. The reviewed evidence demonstrates that teachers who adopt this approach create more participatory learning environments, strengthen inclusive education, and provide learning experiences that are responsive to each child's developmental pace and individual characteristics. These findings reinforce the view that educational quality should not be assessed solely through measures of academic achievement but also through the capacity of educational systems to ensure the effective realization of **children's rights**.

Another important contribution of this review concerns the evolution of the concept within contemporary educational research. Whereas earlier studies primarily emphasized its legal and regulatory dimensions, research published between **2020 and 2026** increasingly adopts an interdisciplinary perspective integrating pedagogy, professional ethics, and **human rights**. This evolution reflects a broader understanding of teaching practice, in which teachers are no longer viewed merely as curriculum implementers but also as **guardians of children's rights** who are responsible for creating conditions that foster children's holistic development.

Nevertheless, the review also demonstrates that the implementation of this principle remains uneven across educational contexts. Factors such as teacher education, the availability of institutional resources, the degree of professional autonomy, and institutional policies all influence how the principle is translated into everyday practice. These findings suggest that legal and policy frameworks alone are insufficient unless accompanied by high-quality professional preparation, institutional support, and organizational conditions that enable the effective application of the **rights-based approach** in educational settings.

Overall, the findings support the conclusion that the **best interests of the child** constitute an integrative framework for teacher decision-making in which pedagogical, ethical, and legal dimensions converge. This represents one of the principal contributions of the present review, demonstrating that the quality of educational practice depends largely on teachers' ability to ground their professional decisions in **respect for children's rights** while promoting their **well-being** and **holistic development**.

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5.3. Pedagogical Transformation and the Ethical Dimension of the Rights-Based Approach

The findings of this systematic review demonstrate that incorporating the **best interests of the child** principle has promoted a profound transformation of pedagogical practice in **early childhood education**. Rather than simply introducing new instructional strategies, the evidence points to a fundamental shift in the principles guiding teacher decision-making. Whereas traditional approaches emphasize curriculum compliance and content acquisition, the **rights-based approach** places **child well-being**, participation, and holistic development at the center of curriculum planning, assessment, and the organization of educational processes.

These findings are consistent with the recommendations of **UNESCO (2024)**, which advocate for the development of inclusive educational systems capable of responding to learner diversity while ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all children. Likewise, **UNICEF (2021)** argues that educational quality should be evaluated not only in terms of academic outcomes but also according to institutions' capacity to promote children's well-being, protection, and participation. Within this context, the present review confirms that pedagogical practices grounded in a **rights-based approach** foster more flexible, inclusive, and learner-centered educational environments that respond to the individual needs of every child.

One of the most significant contributions identified in this review is the close relationship between **pedagogical transformation** and **professional ethics**. The synthesized evidence demonstrates that decisions concerning assessment, inclusive education, classroom discipline, children's participation, and responses to situations of vulnerability extend beyond technical considerations and require continuous ethical deliberation. Consequently, teaching practice cannot be reduced to the implementation of instructional methods or pedagogical strategies; rather, it requires teachers to evaluate the impact of every professional decision on children's well-being and holistic development.

This interpretation extends the perspective advanced in **General Comment No. 14 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013)** by demonstrating that the **best interests of the child** are translated into classroom practice through pedagogical decisions grounded in ethical principles. From this perspective, **professional ethics** should no longer be viewed as a complementary component of teacher education but as the essential mechanism through which legal principles are transformed into educational practices consistent with the **rights-based approach**.

Nevertheless, the review also indicates that this transformation continues to face significant constraints. Pressure to comply with curriculum standards, increasing administrative demands, insufficient preparation in **children's rights**, and limited institutional resources hinder the consolidation of pedagogical practices genuinely centered on **child well-being**. These findings partly explain the persistent gap between the formal recognition of the principle and its effective implementation across diverse educational contexts.

From a scientific perspective, one of the principal contributions of this review lies in demonstrating that **pedagogical transformation** and the **ethical dimension** are not independent processes but complementary components of a unified **rights-based educational model**. The synthesized evidence suggests that the quality of **early childhood education** depends largely on teachers' ability to integrate pedagogical knowledge, ethical competencies, and **human rights principles** into every professional decision. This interdisciplinary perspective extends previous research and provides a conceptual framework that strengthens understanding of the **best interests of the child** as the foundation of a more inclusive, human-centered, and socially responsible teaching practice.

5.4. Implications for Teacher Education, Educational Policy, and Future Research

The findings of this systematic review indicate that the effective implementation of the **best interests of the child** principle requires transformations that extend beyond individual teaching practice to encompass **teacher education institutions**, **educational systems**, and **education policymakers**. The synthesized evidence demonstrates that the consolidation of a **rights-based education** depends on the interaction among high-quality teacher education, supportive institutional conditions, and educational policies aligned with **child well-being** and **holistic child development**.

With regard to **teacher education**, the findings highlight the need to strengthen both **initial teacher education** and **continuing professional development** in **children's rights**, **professional ethics**, **inclusive education**, and **evidence-informed pedagogical decision-making**. The review demonstrates that many of the challenges identified stem not only from methodological limitations but also from insufficient teacher preparation to address complex situations involving assessment, inclusive education, children's participation, and responses to contexts of vulnerability. Consequently, teacher education programs and professional development initiatives should incorporate the **rights-based approach** as a cross-cutting component of teachers' professional competencies.

From the perspective of **educational policy**, the findings suggest the need to advance governance models that recognize the **best interests of the child** as a guiding principle of educational quality. This requires strengthening institutional leadership, promoting pedagogical support mechanisms, ensuring adequate resources for **early childhood education**, and developing evaluation systems that consider not only academic achievement but also indicators related to **child well-being**, **inclusion**, **participation**, and the protection of **children's rights**. Such

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policy measures would contribute to a more coherent and sustainable implementation of the **rights-based approach** across diverse educational contexts.

The present review also provides a conceptual framework that may guide future research. Although the synthesized evidence confirms the importance of the **best interests of the child** in teaching practice, several issues require further empirical investigation. Future studies should include **longitudinal research** examining the evolution of rights-based pedagogical practices, **comparative studies** across different educational systems, and **mixed-methods research** evaluating the impact of teacher education programs designed to strengthen pedagogical and ethical competencies. In addition, future research could explore how **digital transformation**, **intercultural education**, and **contexts of vulnerability** influence the implementation of this principle in diverse educational settings.

Finally, several limitations of this review should be acknowledged. Restricting the inclusion criteria to studies published in **English and Spanish**, together with the selection of articles indexed exclusively in **Scopus**, **Web of Science**, **ERIC**, and **SciELO**, may have limited the inclusion of relevant research published in other languages or available in non-indexed literature. Furthermore, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies limits the direct comparability of some findings. Nevertheless, the comprehensive database search, adherence to the **PRISMA 2020** guidelines, and inclusion of evidence from diverse geographical contexts strengthen the robustness of the findings and support the validity of the conclusions.

Overall, this systematic review provides evidence supporting the understanding of the **best interests of the child** as an integrative framework for teaching practice in **early childhood education**. Beyond its legal recognition, the evidence demonstrates that it functions as both a pedagogical and an ethical reference capable of guiding **teacher education**, **educational policy**, and **future research** toward the development of educational systems that are more **inclusive**, **participatory**, and firmly committed to **child well-being** and **holistic child development**.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This systematic review demonstrates that the **best interests of the child** have evolved from a predominantly legal concept into a pedagogical and ethical principle that guides teacher decision-making in **early childhood education**. The synthesized scientific evidence confirms that decisions related to curriculum planning, student assessment, inclusive education, and individualized support become more meaningful and effective when grounded in the protection of **children's rights**, **child well-being**, and **holistic child development**. Consequently, the **best interests of the child** should be understood as an integrative framework for educational decision-making that connects **human rights principles** with everyday pedagogical practice and supports an approach to early childhood education that responds to the genuine needs of every child.

The available evidence further confirms that incorporating the **best interests of the child** principle transforms pedagogical practice by positioning **child well-being**, **children's participation**, **inclusive education**, and **holistic development** as the primary guiding principles of educational practice. This transformation extends beyond the adoption of active learning methodologies or instructional innovations, representing instead a fundamental shift in the way **early childhood education** is conceptualized. It moves educational practice away from models focused exclusively on curriculum implementation toward approaches grounded in **children's rights**. From this perspective, educational quality should be assessed not only through academic achievement but also through teachers' capacity to create **inclusive**, **participatory**, and **emotionally supportive** learning environments that promote the full development of every child.

This systematic review also concludes that the **ethical dimension** serves as the central link between the **best interests of the child** principle and pedagogical practice in **early childhood education**. The reviewed evidence demonstrates that teacher decisions concerning assessment, inclusive education, children's participation, and responses to situations of vulnerability extend beyond technical considerations, requiring continuous professional deliberation guided by respect for children's dignity, rights, and well-being. Consequently, **professional ethics** should not be regarded as a complementary component of teacher education but rather as the foundation that enables the effective implementation of the **rights-based approach** within educational settings. This perspective extends the existing literature by proposing that safeguarding the **best interests of the child** depends on teachers' ability to integrate pedagogical knowledge, ethical principles, and legal considerations into every professional decision made in the classroom.

Finally, this systematic review confirms that consolidating the **best interests of the child** principle in **early childhood education** requires coordinated action involving **teacher education**, **educational institutions**, and **public policy**. The evidence demonstrates that the effective realization of this principle depends not solely on the existence of legal and policy frameworks but also on educational systems' capacity to prepare professionals with the pedagogical, ethical, and legal competencies necessary to guide decision-making from a **rights-based perspective**. Accordingly, the **best interests of the child** should be incorporated as a cross-cutting principle within both **initial teacher education** and **continuing professional development**, while institutional leadership should be strengthened and educational policies should evaluate quality not only through indicators of academic achievement but also through measures of **child well-being**, **inclusion**, **participation**, and **holistic child**

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development. In doing so, **early childhood education** can be consolidated as a setting in which every pedagogical decision represents an ethical commitment to protecting and ensuring the effective realization of **children's rights**.

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