

## Article brief: Bringing children's and teachers' agency together to create meaningful learning that matters in a diverse preschool

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### Introduction

In Australia, and across many Western nations, the early childhood education (ECE) sector is grappling with a pervasive neoliberal 'school readiness' discourse. Coupled with tenacious Western child development theories that disregard diversity and context, this discourse prescribes what should be taught to young children and what outcomes are valued. For example, literacy is understood narrowly as those skills and competencies that are valued in schooling, while literacies 'that sit outside of school readiness [are] rendered invisible and thus often unexplored by teachers' (p. 390). The emphasis on school readiness marginalises children's right to have their perspectives heard and valued, as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This article draws from a larger project that explored meaningful connections between the education principles of Reggio Emilia and key ideas that underpin culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) (p. 392). Together, these principles offer the potential for greater inclusivity in ECE settings and advance a robust alternative to school readiness discourses that can devalue play-based learning.

ECE teachers and leaders participating in the project met with peers and researchers in a professional learning community in order to identify a pedagogical challenge at their site and to explore the possibilities of 'turning around' (Comber & Hayes, 2023) their taken-for-granted practices through action research. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participating teachers and site leaders.

### The challenge

This article focuses on Gumtree Early Learning Centre, a large children's centre located in the suburbs of an Australian city. Many of the children attending Gumtree spoke languages other than English and/or had complex needs due to trauma, forced migration, and other vulnerabilities. In this complex environment, 'the teachers felt an enormous amount of pressure

to improve children’s literacy outcomes before children started school’. However, the teaching team (two teachers and one leader) were struggling to engage a group of 20–25 children in the learning experiences they had carefully planned. Instead, this group ‘resisted’ activities by spending a large portion of each day collectively running. The teachers were concerned and frustrated, wondering how ‘they would be able to support children to meet literacy goals if the group they called the “the runners” continued to refuse to participate in planned learning activities’ (p. 394)?

Initially, the team focused on limiting children’s running and luring them to planned learning experiences designed to meet predetermined development and learning goals (p. 394). Drawing on child development theory, the teaching team interpreted the running as a ‘physical need’ and an issue of ‘short attention span’ (p. 394). Consequently, they offered scheduled running time at the local oval, and rearranged the physical space to deter running (p. 394). Nevertheless, the running continued unabated.

### The breakthrough

Through their engagement with the professional learning community, the teaching team re-focused their inquiry through the lenses of ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992) and ‘the pedagogy of listening’ (Rinaldi, 2011). By carefully listening to the runners, they were able to ‘hear’ what they had previously missed due to their preoccupation with specific literacy outcomes. The team discovered that the children were drawing on their funds of knowledge from their own digital lifeworlds, including YouTube videos, digital games and television, as inspiration for the running. For example, when the runners chanted ‘Hello neighbour’, they were acting out a digital stealth game (pp. 395-396). Further observation uncovered other traces from popular culture embedded in children’s play (e.g. the video/game Angry Birds), providing insights into the digital worlds that mattered in these children’s lives (p. 396).

When the teachers really listened (Comber & Hayes, 2023) to the children, ‘they began to see their resistance from a new perspective’ (p. 399). The teachers turned around their implicit deficit notions of these children and their capacity to engage in learning. Instead, ‘a culturally responsive lens showed an inclusive activity that brought a range of children together regardless of gender, language or ability ... the teachers shifted their focus to see children’s participation in the running over long periods of time as a demonstration of children’s capacity for long attention spans when what they were doing mattered to them’ (p. 396)

With these new understandings, the teaching team adapted their planned learning activities to include the children’s voices and interests, while simultaneously supporting them to extend their

learning repertoires with new materials and activities that they may not have had prior experiences with (p. 397). The teachers became more supple in their pedagogical choices while also meeting individual learning goals in meaningful ways (p. 398).

## Conclusion

Children's right to have their perspectives heard and valued is upheld by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, 'dominant discourses of child development and school readiness can serve as a barrier to enacting children's rights' (p. 398). This research 'demonstrates the power of children's agency in helping teachers see the cracks in neoliberal structures of school readiness and developmentally appropriate practices' (p. 399). The article also highlights 'the critically important intellectual work of early childhood teachers as researchers and the role of professional learning communities' (p. 400).

## Key take-aways for practice

- ECE educators are in a prime position to uphold children's right to have their perspectives heard and valued – rights which can be undermined by dominant child development and school readiness discourses.
- The pressure on ECE educators to meet school readiness literacy goals can blind them to the literacies that children already have.
- By listening and observing carefully, educators can learn about children's lifeworlds and what matters to them.
- Engagement and learning is enhanced when educators incorporate aspects of children's lifeworlds into their planned learning activities.

## Further reading

Campbell, S. (2015). Feeling the pressure: Early childhood educators' reported views about learning and teaching phonics in Australian prior-to-school settings. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 38(1), 12–26.

Comber, B., & Hayes, D. (2023). Classroom participation: Teachers' work as listeners. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 55(1), 37–48.

Fleer, M. (2014). A cultural-historical view of child development: Key concepts for going beyond a universal view of the child. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*, 9(1), 19–37.

- Hedges, H., Cullen, J., & Jordan, B. (2011). Early years curriculum: Funds of knowledge as a conceptual framework for children's interests. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43(2), 185–205.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141
- Rinaldi, C. (2011). The pedagogy of listening: The listening perspective from Reggio Emilia. In C. Edwards, L. Gandini, & G. Forman (Eds.), *The hundred languages of children experience in transformation* (3rd ed., pp. 233–246). Praeger.