

Defying deficit: Children as capable citizens of the now ^[1]

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Excerpt from executive summary

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (2009) created a new curriculum for early childhood education that challenged educators to think beyond existing approaches and to work in new ways.

Achieving these aims, however, was constrained by the widespread view of children as being in deficit; that is, they needed to be fixed or filled up with knowledge and skills defined by developmentally appropriate practice. This perspective views the child as an empty vessel: that children's capacity to contribute to their own education is limited if not non-existent.

What we need is an alternative narrative, one that moves away from the conception of children as incapable, dependent or needy, to a recognition that children are capable. This perspective can then act as the underpinning of teaching practices, policy and structures and the research that informs them.

We also need to move away from an over-reliance on child development and human capital theory that has generated a narrow view of how early childhood research is constructed and implemented; how this research is used to make policy and the ways in which it does not value the contribution of all children. The education and value of all children is much more than a consideration of their future ability to perform labour and contribute to the economy.

The concerns and focus of early childhood research are also often too narrowly concentrated on children who are perceived to be 'at risk' because they have not attained benchmark behaviours. Research projects are often designed as 'interventions' to provide 'solutions' in specific dosages to alleviate perceived deficits from what is constituted as 'normal'. Often these interventions are then scaled up, but it is also often not clear what is being scaled up since the initial programs were designed to close a specific deficit. The challenge remains that many of these programs strive towards a universal, or non-existent, ideal of what constitutes normal educational progression.

While the early childhood years are internationally recognised as being from birth to eight years of age, in Australia early childhood research and policy focuses on children from birth to age five. With a birth to five perspective, education and care are thus separated in early childhood research, policy and practices so that there is no continuity in policy or practices, which disrupts early foundational learning skills.

Research generated through the collaborative relationships established between universities and industry, and between teachers as researchers, offers the conceptual and pedagogical evidence base needed to inform the technical – the structures and policies that define early childhood understandings and practices. This kind of research, which also acknowledges children as capable citizens, needs to be valued, supported and funded.

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