

# The capable child as a threshold concept for inclusive early childhood education and care

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# Overview

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- Context
- Issue
- Conjecture 1
- Understanding the issue
- Conjecture 2



## Book recommendation

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The material presented today appears as a chapter in this text



# INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

*Respecting and Responding to Differences in Learning*

Edited by  
Carmel Conn and Alison Murphy



# Context:

- Professional learning
- Focus:
  - *supporting curiosity and problem solving and*
  - *supporting concept development and higher order thinking.*
- The PL programme was experiential, based around the concept of the capable child, able to explore, reason and think.
  - Explored the adult role in supporting thinking through modelling wonder and enquiry.
- PL programme evaluated 6-12 months after implementation
  - **10% of respondents consistently reported deficit views of the children in their care.**
  - It is these views that we focus upon.

# Issue:

- A small minority of research participants maintained a deficit view of the capability of children in their care, despite the PL demonstrating the ability of young children to develop working theories through playful engagement with adults who are responsive to their exploration and thinking.
- I feel that our **children are very young for this process** and although it will introduce new experiences we have to remember that **the majority of children in our care have some sort of delay.**
- I do feel it's important **to remember the age of the children and take in to consideration the that they are from deprived areas and may have speech and language delays** and therefore I feel some content is hard to use day to day.
- It has helped us to add commenting and questioning alongside activities to enhance children's learning **when they are at a stage where they are ready.**

# Conjecture 1a:

- The construction of the capable child may be a privileged conceptualisation, and that a default construction of the dependent, deficit child is likely to be in evidence across ECEC practice contexts.
- Context of this provision:
  - high levels of multiple deprivation;
  - high incidence of development delay, especially in speech and language.
- Societal conception of the child:
  - a ‘default conceptual position’ (Cook 2009)
  - the *incapable* child
  - the un-knowing, innocent, deficit child, in need of protection, and adult-structured manipulation to reach a less deficient status.
- The **construction of the child**, is central to practice.
- This construction underpins our activity, attitude and approach to practice; it shapes the way we respond to theoretical ideas and practical policies. It shapes our pedagogy (Wilcox-Herzog 2002, Salamon and Harrison 2015, Biesta, Priestley and Robinson 2015, Barros Araujo 2022).

# Conjecture 1b:

- The responses presented above reflect a model of the young child that is centred around her innocence and incapacity, her need of nurture and protection.
- In such a model the adult has responsibility to orchestrate what is made available to the child, and when.
- A construction of the young child in this weakened position may *inadvertently* lead to practice that is partial and not inclusive.
- Such practice may be built upon an understanding that there is a hierarchy of skill development and that language skill precedes curiosity, that children without language cannot engage in play that is driven by curiosity or enquiry; that these children need to be protected from over-exposure to ideas lest they cannot cope.
- **Does a well-intentioned professional position mean that some children are restricted from access to play and pedagogy that might serve to support curiosity and conceptual thinking?**



# Understanding the issue (a):

- **The threshold concept** (Meyer and Land 2003) can be seen as akin to a portal that opens up new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking.
- It represents a **transformed** way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a **transformed** internal view of subject matter.
- Once a threshold concept is grasped there is no return to the previous state of knowing.
- That is: once we **genuinely** grasp the capable child construct we cannot respond to the child as *incapable*.



# Understanding the issue (b):

- As Cook (2009) explains, the cultural force, in the wealthy sectors of the Global North (2009) at least, of the child as immature innocent is such that overcoming this force requires significant effort.
- The need to conceptualise differently the state of childhood therefore is troublesome; it requires deep exploration of the meanings of the words being used ('active child') and the concepts being brought into play.
- It requires that as adults we reconsider how we view our childhood selves, that we reconsider our adult relationship with the children around us.
- Without such reconsideration (re-construction) we cannot simply start to view the child as capable.
- Studies by Taylor (2015), Cook (2009), Ashworth (2016) demonstrate the difficulty and deep thinking that ECEC students need to put into transforming their construction of the child, resisting the dominant discourse of deficiency, developmentalism and readiness.

# Scenario: Meg has a language delay



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- **The capable child:**
  - On reflection the staff note that during the activity Meg demonstrated interest in the concepts of fast/slow, heavy/light and was able to respond to problem solving queries and open-ended questioning through her actions. They planned to introduce different sizes and shapes of tubes, and water, into the area.
- **The developmentally vulnerable child:**
  - On reflection the staff note that during the activity Meg was able to begin to verbalise and label some colours. The staff decide to build on this by introducing some further colour-naming activities into their planning and to reinforce naming colours within Meg's one-to-one sessions next week.

# Conjecture 2:

- The conceptual construction of the capable child is a **threshold concept** in the study and practice of early childhood education and care; this underpinning construct impacts upon decisions and actions in practice that shape the inclusive – or otherwise – nature of early childhood and care.
- Our professional learning and professional preparation programmes for ECEC need to attend to the construct of the capable child in a manner that **genuinely** challenges deficit notions and engages us with troublesome ideas.
- This is not an easy process. Research evidence suggests this process is iterative in nature, takes time and requires explicit intervention, reflection and mentoring (Barros Araujo 2022).

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