



Bringing Children's and Teachers' Agency Together to Create Meaningful Learning That Matters in a Diverse Preschool

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Abstract

This article addresses children living and learning under difficult circumstances by problematising taken-for-granted views of what counts as learning and school readiness that perpetuate deficit views of children who have been impacted by forced migration. Drawing from a larger study focused on exploring how early childhood teachers re-design their pedagogy in culturally responsive ways, this article presents the findings of one team who shifted their views about a group of children impacted by forced migration who resisted planned learning experiences. The analysis focuses on how an assemblage of knowledge, actors, expressions and experiences came together to constitute children's play and digital worlds as matter(ing) in teachers' planning and pedagogy and teachers' planning and pedagogy as matter(ing) in children's play, demonstrating how children and their mediators of learning re-imagined their repertoires, identities and agencies to co-construct meaningful learning.

Keywords Culturally responsive pedagogies · Assemblage · Children's agency · Co-constructed pedagogy

Résumé

Cet article traite des enfants qui vivent et apprennent dans des circonstances difficiles en remettant en question les points de vue tenus pour acquis sur ce qui compte comme apprentissage et préparation à l'école qui perpétuent les points de vue déficitaires sur les enfants qui ont été touchés par la migration forcée. S'inspirant d'une étude plus vaste axée sur l'exploration de la manière dont les enseignants de la petite enfance représentent leur pédagogie de manière adaptée à la culture, cet article présente les conclusions d'une équipe qui a changé d'avis sur un groupe d'enfants touchés par la mi-

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gration forcée qui ont résisté aux expériences d'apprentissage planifiées. L'analyse se concentre sur la façon dont un assemblage de connaissances, d'acteurs, d'expressions et d'expériences s'est réuni pour constituer le jeu des enfants et les mondes numériques en tant que matière(s) dans la planification et la pédagogie des enseignants et la planification et la pédagogie des enseignants en tant que matière(s) dans le jeu des enfants, démontrant comment les enfants et leurs médiateurs d'apprentissage ont réinventé leurs répertoires, identités et agences pour co-construire un apprentissage significatif.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda a los niños que viven y aprenden en circunstancias difíciles al problematizar las opiniones que se dan por sentadas sobre lo que cuenta como aprendizaje y preparación escolar que perpetúan las opiniones deficitarias de los niños que se han visto afectados por la migración forzada. A partir de un estudio más amplio centrado en explorar cómo los maestros de la primera infancia rediseñan su pedagogía de manera culturalmente receptiva, este artículo presenta los hallazgos de un equipo que cambió sus puntos de vista sobre un grupo de niños afectados por la migración forzada que se resistieron a las experiencias de aprendizaje planificadas. El análisis se centra en cómo un conjunto de conocimientos, actores, expresiones y experiencias se juntaron para constituir el juego de los niños y los mundos digitales como materia(s) en la planificación y la pedagogía de los docentes y la planificación y la pedagogía de los maestros como materia(s) en el juego de los niños, demostrando cómo los niños y sus mediadores del aprendizaje reinventaron sus repertorios, identidades y agencias para co-construir un aprendizaje significativo.

Introduction

Inspiration for an inclusive society must start with inclusive learning environments that listen to our youngest citizens and honour their lived experiences. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by 192 nations, identifies children's right to have their perspectives heard and valued. Enacting children's rights is critical to cultivate a sense of belonging and responsibility as global citizens. Enacting children's rights is thus an important aspect of early childhood teachers' work.

In countries rich in diversity like Australia, it is more important than ever to ensure that children develop a sense of belonging to their communities. Australia ranks first for cultural diversity amongst populations over 10 million, with 28% of Australians born overseas (Markus, 2016, p. 1). Australia plays a pivotal role in resettling people who have been forced to migrate, half of whom are children and adolescents (Lau et al., 2018). After arrival, however, children who have been impacted by forced migration continue to face challenges such as racism, poverty and language barriers (Singer et al., 2019). Furthermore, neoliberal policy agendas of school readiness based on Western normalised standards of development perpetuate deficit views of children impacted by forced migration which have lasting

negative impacts on already socially and academically marginalised children (Burgess & Evans, 2017; Pence & Marfo, 2008; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). This article attends to the core component of this Special Issue, children living and learning under difficult circumstances, by presenting findings from one early childhood centre from a larger study exploring culturally responsive pedagogies (CRP) in Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool settings through critical action research and ethnographic methods (Author). In particular, this article explores how teachers “turned around” (Kamler & Comber, 2005) their pedagogies when children resisted their planned learning experiences by drawing on children’s funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and funds of identities (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) in a diverse preschool.

Deleuze and Guattari’s (2000) notion of assemblage is used to explore how knowledge, actors, expressions and experiences intra-acted to constitute the reciprocal mattering of children’s play, digital worlds and teachers’ planning and pedagogy. By asking, “what do scientifically proven curricula matter if children are not interested in engaging in them?”, this article challenges neoliberal policy agendas of school readiness that promote narrow views of literacy through standardised curriculum and highlights the critical role of pedagogy in children’s learning.

Literature Review

Discourses of Child Development and School Readiness

The field of early childhood education has had a long dependency on Western child development theories (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020). This dependency on Western theories of child development stems from the pursuit of professional status tied to scientifically proven knowledge during the nineteenth century (Bloch et al., 2001).

Researchers have since critiqued the use of child development theories as the primary body of knowledge informing early childhood education, arguing children’s development is culturally and contextually situated (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Pence & Marfo, 2008). Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2020) argue the dominant discourse of child development in early childhood education prescribes “what early childhood education should be, who the child should be, who the educator should be, and what the curriculum should be” with the goal of moulding the child “into an ideal citizen who will serve an already specified society” (p. 633). Universal views of child development are problematic for framing early childhood practice and policy as they perpetuate deficit views of already marginalised children (Farquhar & Fler, 2007; Fler, 2014; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Wood, 2010). Neoliberal policy agendas concerned with school readiness intensify the demanding focus on child development by framing the child as an investment for the future.

Neoliberal early childhood policy thus demands teachers’ attention to achieving outcomes based on “quality” standardised norms and performativity measures, particularly literacy and numeracy outcomes, to compete in the national market (Comber & Hayes, 2023; Moss, 2013). The demand for children to be “ready” for

school has led to increased pressure to teach specific aspects of literacy such as phonics (Campbell, 2015), at the cost of the erosion of play-based learning (Barblett et al., 2016), and the appropriation of play to meet prescriptive outcomes (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). Aspects of children's literacy learning that sit outside of school readiness have been rendered invisible and thus often unexplored by teachers (Gregory et al., 2004).

The neoliberal policy context positions early childhood teachers as technicians of scientifically proven curriculum and interventions. Institutional power structures informed by neoliberal policies impact on the identities and practices of both teachers and children in ways that perpetuate the status quo. Tesar (2014), however, demonstrated how children's acts of resistance to neoliberal structures in early childhood education can shine light on the instability of this power dynamic for other children. Findings presented in this article contribute to this literature by exploring how children's resistance to planned interventions also opens the possibility for teachers to question taken-for-granted practices and re-imagine their pedagogy in inclusive ways that matter to children in super-diverse settings where the pressure for children to reach school readiness is particularly high.

Pedagogies of Listening and Cultural Responsiveness

Teachers' pedagogical work has been identified as important to moving beyond deficit views of children (Iorio & Yelland, 2021) and their teachers (Rigney et al., 2020). Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw's (2020) notion of pedagogy as a body of knowledge, rather than a set of directions instructing learning, gives energy and focus to knowledge creation, rather than meeting predetermined outcomes. This conception of pedagogy brings people together in a creative and transformative process to co-construct educative experiences that "help the subject coexist with the precarity, uncertainties, and challenges of our times" (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020, p. 632).

Rinaldi (2011) argued a pedagogy of listening plays a key role in the search for meaning and requires exploration of the purpose of education, the nature of knowledge and relations of power. All parties within a "listening context" become legitimate contributors to knowledge co-construction, which enables the evolution of ideas and the creation of shared worlds. Rinaldi's (2011) pedagogy of listening builds from Freire's (1970/2007) notion of dialogue which requires a deep and open engagement of listening that is essential to "discover the rich possibility of doing things and learning things with different people" (p. 196).

Gay's (2000) notion of culturally responsive teaching also emphasises the importance of listening by teaching to and through the cultural and individual strengths of learners. CRP thus are not scripted or standardised; rather, they require teachers to become ethnographers and learners of children's life worlds with the aim of making learning more meaningful (Rigney et al., 2020; Zipin et al., 2012). Moll and colleagues (1992) use the term funds of knowledge to refer to cultural bodies of knowledge that are essential for the wellbeing of families and for children's sense of identity and belonging. Funds of knowledge become funds of identity when people use

them to define themselves (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 37). Funds of identity are important in educational settings as they highlight the importance of recognising not only the historical knowledge of households but also the interests, knowledge and skills of learners (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014).

Research shows engaging with children's funds of identities in educational settings can be tricky. Teachers' awareness of children's funds of knowledge are often limited to what can be directly observed (Andrews & Yee, 2006) and teachers' ability to make sense of children's interests (Hedges et al., 2011), reducing opportunities for other aspects of a child's identity to inform meaningful learning experiences. Comber (2017) warns that a preoccupation with delivery of information to learners can lead to "fickle literacies" where practices of compliance with teacher-directed activities have little connection to learning for individual children and further marginalise diverse children. Comber and Hayes (2023) argue that "teacher listening is a practice that remains under-researched in education, yet ... listening really matters" (p. 37). They call for research that focuses on how teachers acquire repertoires that intra-act with learners to make learning more meaningful.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2000) and Barad (2007), this analysis explores how children and their mediators of learning can re-imagine their repertoires, identities and agencies to co-construct meaningful learning experiences that matter. Deleuze and Guattari (2000) describe teachers' pedagogical choices as two lines, "constantly interfering, reacting upon each other, introducing into each other either a current of suppleness or a point of rigidity" (p. 196). The pedagogical choices teachers make in these moments produce different trajectories for children's learning, actions and willingness to engage with teachers and activities (Thiel, 2015). Teachers have agency in making these pedagogical choices or agential cuts (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021), but they are not autonomous; they are made through teachers' intra-actions with a range of discourses, knowledge, people, places and materials.

Barad's (2014) notion of "re-turning" is useful in exploring how teachers' intra-actions with different discourses, knowledge, people, places and materials can make new meaning. Barad (2014) describes re-turning as different from going back to the past and reflecting on an event, but rather a process of "turning it over and over again—iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities (space time matterings), new diffraction patterns" (p. 168). This analysis will explore teachers' intra-actions when they focus their attention on discourses of school readiness and standardised literacy outcomes and again when they focus their attention on children's funds of identities.

Methodology

This qualitative research engaged early childhood leaders and teachers in a whole-year action research cycle supported by a collaborative learning community of teachers, leaders and researchers. Participants attended two project professional learning community meetings each term where they explored how the education principles from Reggio Emilia come into dialogue with key ideas from CRP. The participants within this analysis focused on the CRP key idea of engaging with children's life worlds and Rinaldi's (2011) pedagogy of listening. Participant teachers and leaders were supported by the research team to engage in action research to re-design an aspect of their pedagogy in culturally responsive ways. Dialogue during these meetings focused on reflecting on taken-for-granted practices that serve as barriers to inclusion.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection used for this analysis included semi-structured (Merriam, 1998) initial interviews with site leaders to explore challenges to creating inclusive pedagogies and leaders' perspectives on strengths and areas for further learning for staff. Follow-up interviews with teachers and leaders focused on exploring their experiences of engaging in a professional learning community and their reflections on re-designing their pedagogy in culturally responsive ways. Researcher field notes from learning community meetings and presentations were used to inform the development of interview questions and provided an opportunity for participants to share their struggles and brainstorm possibilities for pedagogical re-design.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of reading and re-reading interview transcripts and researcher field notes in tandem to identify common themes across all members of the teaching team (leaders and teachers) for each site. Using the words of participants as much as possible, portraits (Smyth et al., 2014) were written for each site to encapsulate the key events, perspectives and practices that emerged from the data. Member checking (Creswell, 2016) consisted of sharing portraits with participants to ensure accurate representation of their experiences.

For the analysis presented in this article a second round of analysis included a process of connecting literature, theory and data sources (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013), with a particular focus on making sense of how an assemblage of knowledge, actors, expressions and experiences intra-acted to constitute how children's play and digital worlds came to matter in teachers' planning and pedagogy and how teachers' planning and pedagogy came to matter in children's play, drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2000) and Barad (2007).

Context of Gumtree Early Learning Centre

The council area of this early childhood centre is identified as a “refugee welcome zone” with 30% of the council population born overseas and 26% of families identified as low-income households. Gumtree Early Learning Centre was a large children’s centre with 94 children enrolled in preschool (46–48 per session). The director described the centre as a “poster child for super diversity”. Within each session the children and families represented more than 20 different cultural groups with 11–12 different languages across 35–45% of the children. Many of the children and families were identified as having “complex needs” as a result of trauma and developmental vulnerabilities that were both identified and unidentified/awaiting assessment.

At the beginning of the project the teaching team from Gumtree, which included one leader and two teachers, identified that their pedagogical challenge was engaging a group of children they called “the runners” in planned learning experiences. The runners were a group of 20–25 children who would spend a large portion of the day collectively running. This phenomenon had been occurring every day since the start of the year, two months before the project began. Findings from this analysis demonstrate how the loud discourse of school readiness narrowed teachers’ attention in ways that led to reading children’s behaviours as signs of deficits from which they planned rigid interventions. It also demonstrates how teachers “turned around” their pedagogy drawing on CRP to create open and inclusive learning experiences with children that mattered to them both.

Findings

The Loud Discourse of School Readiness Distracting Teachers

As Gumtree was a culturally and linguistically diverse site, the teachers felt an enormous amount of pressure to improve children’s literacy outcomes before children started school. At the time of the study, system-level aspirations to become “world class” led to numeracy and literacy becoming a required focus for site Quality Improvement Plans. When asked about challenges they faced in creating culturally responsive learning environments, the director described the complexities surrounding the diversity of their site and the pressure to improve literacy data:

We’ve got a really complex cohort of children and families. You saw the diversity and then there’s the special needs. There’s the children who are undiagnosed that we’re meeting for the first time and going, “Oh my goodness.” We can’t understand what they’re saying because they’ve got a severe speech delay. So, there’s all that complexity. At the moment, the last couple of years, the big push is on being a world class system within ten years and the big push is on literacy, particularly reading ... It’s kind of like everything else has fallen to the wayside. ... you’ve got education directors who are our line managers ... [saying] “We’ve done enough wellbeing”. It’s not that they don’t support it, but

it's like this big push is on the literacy and NAPLAN data. And some of the kids aren't even turning 5! (Director Christy)

With mounting pressures for school readiness and “world-class” literacy outcomes, the Gumtree team were concerned about 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. The team described the phenomenon where large groups of children collectively resisted planned activities by running:

Director Christy: [Children] spend their whole day just lapping the yard ... like a conga line, one starts, and they all would just join the line.

Rebecca: So, across both sessions we had two groups—well we had large groups of children running, and we kind of worked out that in Term 2 it wasn't really settling. It's normal for children to run at the beginning of the year, but we realised, you know, we still had massive groups really in both sessions that would run and run and run. And no matter what we [did] to try to support them, it just kept happening.

Their first reading of the phenomenon was guided by teachers' attention to literacy requirements for school readiness and children's developmental goals. This centred the team's focus on trying to limit or deter children's running and lure them to planned learning experiences designed to meet their development and learning goals. Drawing on their knowledge of child development, the teachers described children's running as a “physical need”, as an “issue with children's attention span” and as an “issue with the physical environment”. These readings, along with pressure to produce particular literacy outcomes, led teachers to offer rigid interventions and activities (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000) designed to modify children's behaviour such as offering “scheduled running time”, trying to “capture children in one-on-one activities” and “re-arranging the physical space to deter children from running”. Director Christy said such strategies failed:

For example, taking children up to the oval, where they've actually got more space to try things, bringing up different resources up there. But what we found was that, when we took them up there, we'd come back, and they'd still run.

Teachers had a range of different perspectives to draw upon; however, pressure to meet literacy and developmental outcomes dominated teachers' attention. The rigid interventions and activities offered by teachers did not matter to the children. Each time the children responded with intra-actions of their own agential cuts (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021) to collectively resist teacher agency and continue with their running, thus rendering teachers' plans unsuccessful in achieving their designed outcomes.

New Intra-actions and Re-readings of the Runners

The intra-actions between the teaching team, the education principles from Reggio Emilia and key ideas from CRP during professional learning community meetings with colleagues inspired a shift in focus for reading the running phenomenon. In particular, the key ideas of connecting with children's life worlds as funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and a pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2011) informed how teachers re-focused their attention to exploring the connection between children's interest in running and children's funds of knowledge.

Rebecca: We did a lot of investigating, a lot of forensic investigating and trying to work out, yeah, what was driving the children to want to do this? Like what was—like were they seeking connection? Was it their play? And it took a really long time to delve into.

Amelia: Yeah, videotaping the children and when we really, like, interviewed them and showed them the tapes and really [asked them] ... I think if we hadn't gone down the line of question that we did, we probably wouldn't have worked it out [the purpose of running].

The team described the series of intra-actions between the teachers, children, video of children's running and digital games that led to a deeper understanding of the connection between children's life worlds and their interest in running.

Sydney: There was key things coming up about ...

Amelia: It was the baddies, I think the good and the bad guys or that the language had started.

Rebecca: Well, I interviewed one child and, yeah, he was watching the video and he was saying, "Oh, I'm playing hello neighbour." And you know, I asked, "What's that? I've never heard of that." And he's like, "Oh, it's this game and you know there's a knife and you know there's blood." And you know all this stuff which was quite horrifying to hear. And then I came back to the [other teachers] and I said like, "Look, this is what this child has said. Like, what is hello neighbour?" and we had no clue.

The re-focusing of teachers' attention from meeting literacy outcomes to exploring children's funds of knowledge and identities positioned children as experts in their own experiences from which teachers wanted to learn more, which led to teachers' own intra-actions with the game.

Sydney: And then we watched the little YouTube snippets. It's a game and you know we watched a snippet of it and we're like, oh this is what he means. It is a ... you know, a first perception of a running game, so it was kind of like ding, ding, ding.

Amelia: Yeah, that's it.

Sydney: And then suddenly, we noticed all the children saying that ... they were either playing something they'd seen on TV or a game or YouTube.

Children's running play and chanting of "hello neighbour" had no meaning for teachers prior to their intra-action with the children and their digital worlds. By turning to children as experts in their own play and engaging in new intra-actions teachers were able to see further connections between digital worlds and children's movements and utterances. This led to uncovering other traces from popular culture within children's play and further insights into the digital worlds that mattered to the lives of children in this group.

Making Learning Matter: Intra-action Between Children's Digital Worlds and Preschool

Teachers' intra-actions outside the discourse of school readiness and literacy outcomes provided an opportunity to see children's capabilities within their play through a strengths-based view. Reading the running phenomenon through a culturally responsive lens showed an inclusive activity that brought a range of children together regardless of gender, language or ability. Rather than focusing on children's minimal engagement with interventions and activities as an issue with children's short attention span, 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:

Rebecca: So, what became obvious was that the running was a social connection for the children as also perhaps a lack of [knowledge about] the environment and the experiences on offer and that the children were exercising this prior knowledge from home. We sort of assumed that at this stage of the year [Term 3] that lots of these children should have a fair idea of what certain material and resources and experiences in their environment, that they would have a fair idea of what to do with them; we were very wrong.

The team reflected on what the experience of preschool might be for children of forced migration and how unfamiliar the learning environment must have been. When asked about how the project changed them as educators, the team spoke about how they overcame feeling "uncomfortable" with some of the content of children's digital worlds:

Amelia: It's been actually like checking that privilege of, like, as a white middle-class woman and educator, what was acceptable in the space ...

Rebecca: I don't know. It has always made me feel really uncomfortable about the way that, probably not even so much the content of some of the games, which are not really appropriate in my view for the age group of the children, but—it's turning children into little consumers and that's not what I valued for them. But then when speaking to another colleague ... she was saying, because her and I have had a lot of discussions about when the Frozen phenomena happened, I was working with Marie and we had a lot of discussions about is it appropriate to play Disney music with children: they love it, but really, like, are we extending them? Are we valuing their—you know? So we've always

had this uncomfortableness, but she made a really good point that it's actually, if we open it up, it makes the children able to be critical of what they are seeing. It's not just hidden curriculum, it's not just under the rug and the kids are doing it anyway ... have them actually analyse what they're watching and what they're doing and what the characters are doing.

Participants' intra-actions in a professional learning community and time together as a team to critically analyse and reflect on how they would respond to children's interests in their digital play worlds was critical to re-turning the phenomena of children running in different ways. As a result of an assemblage of intra-actions with multiple perspectives, people and children's digital worlds they decided connecting their planned activities to children's digital worlds was important to creating a meaningful learning environment that children could connect with.

Teachers' Reflections on Outcomes for Children

A clear leader of the running group in one of the preschool sessions emerged. Despite there being a large following of children participating in the running, the teachers found few actually understood the game and there was no opportunity for children to make collective democratic decisions about this play:

Rebecca: Only one of them, the leader, understood the context of the game and the other children were just following without any understanding. This is what we were observing on a daily basis and why it was so challenging to work out the meaning behind the children's running.

The child leader of this group shared with Rebecca that the running game was based on Angry Birds, using a slingshot to catapult a piggy into a house and then running back and forth. Rebecca described how she engaged the child leader in critically reflecting on how the other children might be experiencing this play:

Rebecca: You know, [I] said, actually the other children actually don't know what you're doing. Can you explain it? So, I got him to explain it to a whole new group of children and then they played it and, you know, then we were critical about it. You know, like okay, so if you did that, that many times, would you be, you know, would that be okay? Would it still be fun?

Rebecca's example of how she supported a child in negotiating his play to be inclusive of other children demonstrates her continued focus on creating an inclusive learning environment that mattered to children. Just as Rebecca and her colleagues took a broader view and turned around to children and their experiences, she was also helping children to do the same. Rebecca further described how this focus connected with her intentions to support the lead child in achieving two learning goals: 1. expanding their relationships and 2. engaging with a variety of materials to expand learning. Rebecca described how new intra-actions between children, their digital worlds and the environment extended children's repertoires and exploration of new materials they may not have had prior experiences with:

Rebecca: I introduced [him to] a group of children that were not the runners and so I used them then as support, peer-to-peer sort of teaching about, like, but what about if we did this in the game or ...

Researcher: So they come up with other ideas about how they could modify the game that didn't necessarily involve running.

Rebecca: Yeah, yeah! So, they actually transferred it into block building in one of our discussions.

Researcher: Was that successful with the runners?

Rebecca: It was with, I had, what, two in that group, yeah. So, with those two children and then, you know, three or four other peers that were not the typical runners, it was yeah.

Teacher Rebecca deemed the Angry Birds project successful in terms of assisting children to meet learning goals. The team described the significance of this outcome for the child leader:

Rebecca: His engagement has just absolutely skyrocketed, like he was a child that really didn't go inside at all and if he did it would be a little bit ... and then straight back outside. But since we started the project, he has been engaging in a range of experiences.

Sydney: I think it's given him a little bit of an understanding of kindy as like—It's not just this weird foreign thing that he's come to.

Amelia: And he was a child that spent a lot of time on screens ... from the information we could gather. I'd go on from what he talked about was just television shows and just kind of games.

Rebecca: But you know, when we started to kind of value what he knew and what he was interested in and kind of connect that to experiences here, it just, yeah, his interest in different experiences and different areas of the kindy really improved.

Sydney: And I think his confidence, like just his overall sense of wellbeing and the way he is as a learner has changed. Like, I think he's a lot more confident and a lot happier and, you know, more open [to learning experiences].

The accountability of teachers for supporting children to meet school readiness outcomes remained; however, they found that their intra-actions with CRP helped to widen their focus and they became more supple (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000) in their pedagogical choices to prioritise connecting to children's interests and life worlds while also meeting individual learning goals in meaningful ways.

Discussion

Children's right to have their perspectives heard and valued is recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The findings presented in this article, however, shed light on how dominant discourses of child development and school readiness can serve as a barrier to enacting children's rights, particularly when they call for teachers to focus their attention on narrow views of what counts as literacy and school readiness. Comber and Hayes (2023) warned

that consuming teachers' work with standardised norms and performativity draws their attention away from listening to children in ways that really matter (Comber & Hayes, 2023). The findings presented here respond to Comber and Hayes' (2023) call for research to focus on how and why teachers' work matters in the lives of children by demonstrating how listening to children and honouring their lived experiences under difficult circumstances matters not only to children but also to teachers.

Previous research has shown how children's agency in resisting neoliberal structures exposes the instability of power and enables other children to enact agency (Tesar, 2014). The research presented in this article demonstrates the power of children's agency in helping teachers see the cracks in neoliberal structures of school readiness and developmentally appropriate practices. When teachers turned to children to listen, they began to see their resistance from a new perspective. Children's agency inspired teachers to question taken-for-granted practices and empowered them to enact agency by re-imagining their pedagogy and practice in ways that mattered.

The use of Barad's (2014) notion of intra-action in this analysis sheds light on the importance of an assemblage of teachers' intra-actions within a variety of discourses, knowledge, people, place and materials and their pedagogy as an assemblage rather than a linear transaction. In doing so, this article problematises the neoliberal view of best practice as policy developed by experts to inform the practice of teachers and interventions developed by teachers to fill the gaps in knowledge of a novice child.

In this study, participants' intra-actions in a professional learning community focused on exploring culturally responsive pedagogies and principles from a Reggio Emilia education project supported teachers to broaden their linear focus and to "re-turn" the phenomenon of the children's running over and over again to see new diffractions of meaning (Barad, 2014). For example, they began to see children's capabilities within their running rather than focusing narrowly on deficits which made visible children's funds of knowledge and funds of identities as an asset for informing planning.

Teachers' intra-actions led them to re-imagine their identities as learners or researchers of children's funds of knowledge and re-imagining children's identities as competent and capable leaders. These new identities sparked new intra-actions with children and their digital play worlds and the inclusion of children's voices in the planning of daily learning experiences, which extended teachers' and children's repertoires for learning. The dominant discourse of school readiness became part of the assemblage rather than remaining the focus of teachers' pedagogical decisions.

The agency demonstrated by children was initially read by teachers as a developmental and behavioural issue to be controlled, further perpetuating deficit views about children of forced migration, and led to interventions that continued to fail. Teachers' intra-actions as researchers within a professional learning community supported them to investigate children's running more closely, providing permission to broaden their gaze from school readiness to learning about children, their life worlds and their capabilities.

Teachers' re-reading of the phenomenon through a culturally responsive lens shifted their focus from being knowers of developmentally appropriate practice to becoming learners of children. This finding highlights the critically important intellectual work of early childhood teachers as researchers and the role of professional learning communities. Such intellectual work required opportunities for teachers to engage in an assemblage of intra-actions that extended their professional identities as researchers. As researchers, teachers engaged in critical analysis and reflection as they "re-turned" their observations of the running phenomena through multiple perspectives, which led to a deeper understanding of what mattered to children in their learning. This important intellectual work must happen in context and thus cannot be standardised. As such, future policy must give priority to teachers' time and support for critical analysis of children's learning through multiple perspectives to inform the development of meaningful practice that honours children's rights.

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Declarations

Conflict of interests There are no competing interests.

Ethical Approval Ethics approval was obtained from the University of South Australia.

Consent to Participate All participants signed consent and were able to leave the study at any time without penalty. The author listed on this manuscript is the sole author of this paper.

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