

Learner engagement: Has the child been lost in translation?

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Abstract

A corpus of literature has argued the fundamental importance of learner engagement in early years' classrooms and identified the association between engagement and academic and social success. In the current education policy, educational theories typically influence curriculum development which, in turn, guides pedagogical practice. In the case of literature pertaining to learner engagement, the relationships between theory, curriculum and teaching pedagogy are unclear; hence the interconnections are often implied. Furthermore, decision making about learner engagement is assumed to be in the best interests of the child. However, upon assessment of the literature, the child's presence in learner engagement in classrooms appears to be absent. This paper explores the existing concepts of learner engagement in relation to adult observations of the child. Engagement, as reflected in current Australian early years' curriculum frameworks, is examined. An argument is then presented for the inclusion of the child perspective on learner engagement

Introduction

The term 'engagement' is being used with increasing frequency in new educational provisions around Australia, and is particularly prevalent in manifests providing curriculum guidelines for a range of early years' settings catering for children aged from three to eight years. Harris (2010) suggests engagement is being proposed as an indicator of a positive and sought-after process, reliant on successful, meaningful teacher–learner relationships. However, when the notion of engagement is carefully examined in these documents, what becomes evident is that engagement is consistently being identified as an *internal state*, falling under what Hughes et al. (2008) described as *involvement in learning*. This then places the identification of a child's engagement as a learner in the precarious position of a professionally measured inference at best, and therefore can only be representative of an observed experience. What appears to be absent in the current educational provisions, including developments around state and national early years curriculum frameworks, is due consideration to the position of engagement from the lived experience of the child. The purpose of this paper is to propose that learner engagement be considered from multiple perspectives, including that of the child.

Theoretical constructs of engagement

Recent literature indicates concerted international interest in learner engagement, particularly as it relates to educational outcomes. Harris (2010) suggests that contemporary research positions positive engagement in learning as impacting on a child's sense of belonging. Engagement is also understood to be a good predictor of children's long-term academic achievement (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck & Connell, 1998) and their eventual completion of school (Connell, Spencer & Aber, 1994). While Harris (2010) notes there is inherent 'educational potential' (p. 132) in the examination of the concept of learner engagement, an agreed-upon descriptor of what engagement actually is has yet to emerge.

Broadly defining engagement, Reichow et al. (2010) noted behaviours such as the purposeful manipulation of learning materials in an appropriate manner or attending to a teacher or peer who is speaking. The authors also defined non-engagement, and suggest waiting (because no activity was present), attending to something other than the required activity, being out of the assigned seat/place, or engaging in any

inappropriate behaviours (outside individually predetermined or stereotypical behaviour) as being indicators of non-engagement. Fredericks et al. (2004) found from the literature that it could be broadly categorised under behavioural engagement (involvement in academic and social/ extracurricular activities), emotional engagement (positive and negative interactions with people/activities while at school) and cognitive engagement (involvement in learning/ intrinsic motivation). While these authors argue that all three categories have individual merit, their findings highlight the divergent ways learner engagement is perceived and articulated across the existing research literature.

Hughes et al. (2008) suggest that, in relation to the early years of schooling, the literature on engagement has generally focused on two subtypes of behaviour engagement. Conduct engagement which relates to both antisocial/ prosocial behaviours and compliance with classroom rules (Gest, Welsh & Domitrovich, 2005; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Trzesniewski, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor & Maughan, 2006) and involvement in learning which relates to activities such as on-task behaviours (Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer & Pianta, 2005), effort, attention, self-direction, and persistence in the classroom (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999; Normandeau & Guay, 1998).

Measuring engagement

Taking the perspective that learner engagement is influenced by interactions between the student and their environment and is responsive to subsequent changes in this environment (Connell, 1990), the role of the teacher in facilitating the engagement of children in the early years classroom would seem critical. In practice, however, while teachers may observe and interpret behavioural signs of engagement, such as whether the child is on-task and persists in achieving a learning goal, there is limited research available about how teachers might identify and facilitate engagement with the curriculum.

Some attempts have been made to identify specific variables that may be associated with learner engagement and to measure these in different ways. This has given rise to a number of different measurement tools, some of which have subsequently been used to determine the relationship between learner engagement, academic

outcomes, and the variables that may arise from these factors. McWilliam and his colleagues have undertaken a series of studies examining child engagement, which they define as the amount of time children spend interacting appropriately with their environment (McWilliam, Scarborough & Kim, 2003; Raspa, McWilliam & Ridley, 2001). They categorise engagement based on type (e.g. with peers, objects, self, or other adults) and level of engagement (the complexity of the interactions between the child and the environment). Engagement in these studies is typically measured through behavioural observations, and a key measure developed by these researchers is the Engagement Quality Measurement System or E-Qual. The E-Qual identifies nine levels of engagement that range from non-engaged to differentiated and symbolic behaviour. In addition to the E-Qual, McWilliam and colleagues have developed the Children's Engagement Questionnaire (CEQ) to gather additional information about teacher perceptions of child engagement. Other researchers have also developed measures to gather data on aspects of the child's learning environment that may impact on engagement. These measures include the Early Childhood Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) and the Ecobehavioral System for Complex Assessment of Preschool Environments (ESCAPE) (Greenwood, Carta & Dawson, 2000).

In addition to considering these measures, Table 1 provides summary information about a small sample of studies that have primarily used teacher report and observation to examine learner engagement in the early years. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive review of these engagement measures but to elaborate on a few examples of how some researchers have approached the measurement of engagement from this perspective. (For a more detailed examination of measures, readers are referred to Keen, 2009.)

Table 1. Sample of studies examining learner engagement

Study	Age group	Variables	Measures
Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey (1997)	First Grade	Absences	School records
		Lateness to class	Teacher and parent questionnaires
		Total time spent watching TV	Interviews with students
		Combination of work habits and classroom deportment	

Birch & Ladd (1997)	Kindergarten	Relationship with school environment: liking school, less avoidant of school, self- directed, cooperative	Rating scales completed by children and teachers
Valeski & Stipek (2001)	Kindergarten + First grade	Willingness to seek challenges, persist and work independently and responsibly	Rating scale completed by teachers
Keen, Pennell, Muspratt, & Poed (2011)	Preschool + First and Second grade	Goal Directed Learning Task Selection Teacher Responsiveness Intensive Teaching Planning the Learning Environment	Rating scale completed by teachers

Alexander et al. (1997) used data from the Beginning School Study (BSS) which monitored the academic progress and personal development of a sample of children in Baltimore from when they commenced school in first grade. As part of this study, the researchers included three measures of engagement that relate to school attendance rather than learner engagement in classroom curriculum. These variables were school absences, lateness to class, and time spent watching TV at home. However, the researchers used a fourth measure, which rated academic engagement behaviour more directly. This measure combined marks for work habits (e.g. completes assignments, pays attention, works independently) with a rating of classroom deportment which involved teacher ratings of externalising behaviours (e.g. 'teases' and 'fights') and adaptability (e.g. enthusiasm and creativity). Results showed that absences in first grade were predictive of later school dropout, with each additional day absent in first grade increasing the likelihood of dropout by about five per cent. This was also found to predict later school dropout, with a one unit

decline in this measure of engagement behaviours increasing the odds of dropout 2.5 times.

The study by Birch and Ladd (1997) examined how three aspects of the teacher–child relationship (closeness, dependency and conflict) were related to various aspects of school adjustment for children in Kindergarten. School adjustment was conceptualised not only in terms of performance, but also in terms of school affect and attitude, and engagement with the school environment. The researchers hypothesised that children who had positive relationships with their teachers would be more positively engaged with the school environment by being less avoidant, more self-directed and participating more in activities. The study therefore collected data on the child's liking of school, level of school avoidance, extent of self-directed learning, and cooperation. The children were interviewed using the researcher-developed School Liking and Avoidance Scale which consisted of 14 items requiring an answer from the respondent of 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes'. For example, the child was asked 'Do you like being in school?' and 'Do you ask Mummy or Daddy to let you stay home from school?' The Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA) developed by the researchers was used to ascertain the teacher's perceptions of the child's academic engagement. The TRSSA consists of five subscales, four of which were considered to measure engagement: School Liking, School Avoidance, Cooperative Participation, and Self-Directed Learning. Respondents were required to answer each item on a three-point scale: doesn't apply, applies sometimes, and certainly applies. This study found that the closeness of the teacher–child relationship correlated with engagement in the school environment, with the researchers suggesting that this relationship may help the child to use the teacher as a source of support, thereby being better able to benefit from learning activities in the classroom.

The study conducted by Valeski and Stipek (2001) used the Feelings about School (FAS), a child-completed questionnaire developed by the researchers, to measure the perceptions of Kindergarten and Grade 1 students about their (i) academic competence, (ii) feelings about the teacher, and (iii) general attitudes toward school. The study's authors hypothesised that these three factors would be associated with academic engagement. They used items from the TRSSA (Birch & Ladd, 1997) that focused on children's willingness to seek challenges, persist, and work

independently and responsibly. Scores from the selected items were combined into a single score representing academic engagement. Valeski and Stipek (2001) found that feelings about school were associated with academic skills, and, that for those in Kindergarten, attitudes to school were more negative in highly structured, teacher-directed classrooms. Interestingly, first graders' perceptions of their academic competence were significantly associated with academic engagement but this was not the case for those in Kindergarten.

Keen et al. (2011) developed the Learning and Engagement Questionnaire (LEQ) as a tool for teachers to measure their perceived use of instructional and environmental variables associated with learner engagement. The LEQ was completed by 274 teachers of children in their first three years of formal schooling. An analysis of the LEQ found five scales which the authors defined as: Goal Directed Learning; Task Selection; Teacher Responsiveness; Intensive Teaching; and Planning the Learning Environment.

The use of teacher report and observation to make judgements about levels of learner engagement is not uncommon in the engagement research literature. This raises some important issues in that it relies on the perspective of only one of the participants in the learning environment (i.e. the teacher). Furthermore, the specific variables used in the studies reflect adult conceptualisations of the levels of learner engagement.

More recent studies specifically report research on learner engagement in the classroom (e.g. Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Chien et al., 2010; George & Greenfield, 2005; Hughes et al., 2008; Li-Grining, Votruba-Drzai, Maldonado-Carreno & Haas, 2010; Moody, Justice & Cabell, 2010; Nelson et al., 2009; Warren & de Vries, 2009). In school settings, engagement is seen as important because it functions as a behavioural pathway by which children's motivation contributes to their subsequent learning and development (Wellborn, 1991). Engagement is also deemed crucial because teachers (e.g. practitioners) rely on it as an observable indicator of their students' underlying motivation during instruction (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). However, while teachers' observations are a critical dimension in the assessment of learner engagement, there are dangers in relying solely on this 'observed' perspective.

Multiple perspectives

Luo et al. (2009) suggest that most classifications distinguish between the outwardly observable aspects of engagement and those which are more psychological in nature and where it may actually be necessary to seek the child's perspective (Alexander et al., 1997; Appleton et al., 2008; Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004). Luo et al. (2009) explore the gathering of information on engagement from *multiple* perspectives, with teachers, researchers, children and their peers all contributing. Teachers rated primary school children's (aged five to eight years) effortful engagement and prosocial and antisocial behaviours. Mastery orientation was observed by the researchers; children reported on their own academic self-efficacy beliefs and liking for school; and peers reported children's relationship with the teacher. Supporting this notion of multiple perspectives, Kishida and Kemp (2009) noted that the observer can only *perceive* the child to be engaged and there is yet 'no absolute criterion as to what constitutes an acceptable degree of engagement' (p. 113). It could therefore be concluded that learner engagement is a complex notion, being an observable physically intense activity as well as involving the intellectual and emotional quality of an activity, which may only be inferred by the observer.

Teacher observations that seek to measure learner engagement should clearly identify the ways educators and other adults can accurately present both the observed and the lived experiences of such a process. It could be anticipated that learner engagement would feature prominently in educational frameworks, with a particular focus on the experiences of children in the early years.

Identifying 'engagement' in Australia's curriculum documents

Australia is in the midst of educational renewal and is experiencing a plethora of new reform agendas. As a result, new curriculum frameworks are being developed to respond to the best interests of Australian children and their future success. These frameworks have been circulated widely for consultation. While many educational provisions are being approved *for* children, there appears to be very little evidence, if any, that points to consultation *with* children. This is particularly noticeable for

children below the age of eight years who are affected by curriculum guidelines aimed at the early years. There seems to be a major focus in the curriculum frameworks on what is taught and to be assessed rather than on ensuring learner engagement.

Early Years Learning Framework

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) is a national document developed 'to assist educators to provide young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning' (p. 5). It purports a relationship to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) and refers to the principles related to a child's right to an education (Articles 28 and 29) and the child's right to play (Article 31). The EYLF also broadly makes links to Goal 2 of the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) in that young Australians become 'active and informed citizens' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). The EYLF's Glossary of Terms does not specifically mention engagement, but does refer to children's active involvement in learning which is identified by 'their facial, vocal and emotional expressions, the energy, attention and care they apply and the creativity and complexity they bring to the situation' (p. 45). Further, teachers are encouraged to support children's engagement by 'allowing time for meaningful interactions, by providing a range of opportunities for individual and shared experiences' (p. 16).

Outcome 4 in the EYLF (2009) positions children as confident and involved learners who, when engaged in learning, 'can be recognised as (in) deep concentration and complete focus on what captures their interest' (p. 33). In addition, Outcome 4 provides educators with examples of evidence that might be gathered to support the notion of engagement and include when children:

- are curious and enthusiastic participants in learning
- follow and extend their own interests with enthusiasm, energy and concentration
- persevere and experience the satisfaction of achievement
- persist even when a task is difficult (p. 34).

Engagement identifiers such as curiosity, enthusiasm, concentration and satisfaction are clearly internal states which must be inferred by teachers based on their observations of student behaviours. Alternatively, observations might be further informed when teachers seek additional information about children's engagement. This could include the child's own perspective through offering a range of intentional and specific opportunities to engage with the child's viewpoint; and we refer to Clarke (2001, 2004, 2005, 2010) who has demonstrated the merit of including, encouraging and supporting the child perspective.

Designing the learning processes to include children as active participants recognises their inherent competence (Blasi, 1996). Article 13 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) stipulates that children have the right to impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other mediums of the child's choice. In this way teachers' observations of children's engagement, and the ensuing decision-making processes, are informed from a more equitable and robust position.

Queensland Kindergarten learning guideline

Based on the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), the Queensland Kindergarten learning guideline (QSA, 2010) 'embraces the inclusive vision that all children experience learning that is engaging and builds success for life' (p. 2). The guideline defines engagement as a pedagogical perspective where 'learning and teaching is enhanced through the active engagement of the child, parent and teacher' (p. 4). While the 'engaged child' in the guideline is positioned as a competent and capable learner who is 'empowered to express ideas and make choices' (p. 4), it is the notion of an 'engaged teacher' that is given much greater focus and elaboration. There is specificity in the identity of an engaged teacher who is noted as being culturally competent, capable of examining their own assumptions, able to challenge children's actions, work collaboratively and be a strong advocate (p. 5). However the child, like the child in the EYLF (2009), is referred to as demonstrating only internal states of engagement and observed as competent, secure, happy, and/or confident (p. 4). In terms of *measuring* engaged learning, or what the guideline refers to as 'active learning', a confident and involved learner:

- is building positive dispositions and approaches to learning
- shows increasing confidence and involvement in learning
- engages in ways to be imaginative and creative
- explores tools, technologies and ICTs (QSA, 2010, p. 53).

Like the EYLF (2009), the QSA (2010) guideline focuses on engagement as being an internal state (e.g. enthusiasm, confidence, a sense of wonder), to be measured in equal portions of intellectual and emotional activity. What is problematic about the QSA document is its strong focus on what the teacher can do to promote learning but offers little to assist the teacher in clearly identifying what engagement might be as an *experienced activity*. The photographic exemplars of engagement in learning (e.g. see p. 53 of document) do little to allay fears of the child being 'lost in translation' in a rigorous, holistic and just examination of learner engagement. These images appear to position engagement as a subjective measurement. For example, the image below (Figure 1) suggests that the child is 'engaging in imaginative play' (QSA, 2010, p. 53), yet we would argue that using such superficial exemplars to assist teachers in measuring engagement do little to position the child as an active participant in judging that measurement. Indeed, the child's experience of that activity could be quite different from that of the perceived engagement from the adult recorder of the experience.

Figure 1



Australian Curriculum

The proposed release of the new Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2010) provided for teachers of Foundation to Year 12 has been, and remains, a source of debate and controversy as a national agenda for formal schooling in this country. The Australian Curriculum also draws upon the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for

Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) and the ideals of students as active participants and as 'present' in their learning. Yet we note that the notion of learner engagement is conspicuous for its absence in this document. We are left to assume that, while there is no explicit discussion on learner engagement in the Australian Curriculum, this omission will be addressed through the professional development opportunities usually associated with any curriculum reform. For the majority of young Australians in the early years (i.e. Foundation to Year 3), this will be their first experience of a formal subject-based curriculum framework, and we would argue it would be of critical importance that the measurement of learner engagement is informed, in a complementary manner, by the standpoint of the students' lived experience of the curriculum.

Lived experience imperative

Legal mandate

In the face of this dominant teacher perspective, we draw upon some of the mandates that may offer imperatives for including the child perspective on learning and their engagement with learning. The UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) is widely regarded by the international community as the most comprehensive statement on children's rights, offering a foundation for developing policies and making decisions about children. While the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) refers to the *provision* of children's educational rights and respects children's right to play, the UNCRC (1989) also recognises children's entitlement to *participate* in decisions which affect their lives (Article 12) and, as such, encourages a specific space for children to communicate and share their views (Article 13). These provision and participation mandates resonate with both the emerging sociology of childhood (Mayall, 2002) and childhood studies (Smith, 2007), which position children as social actors with the agency to actively participate in society and contribute valid opinions. When teachers seek to actively listen to children, they are acknowledging the human rights of children to participate in relevant social processes.

The competent child

In the context of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), the notion of the young child as capable and competent has been emerging in the literature (e.g. Dockett & Perry,

2003; Farrell, Tayler, Tennent & Gahan, 2002; Harcourt, 2009; Thorpe et al., 2005). However, Neale (2004) suggests that 'we often act as if children are not there' (p. 98). It would seem Neale's perception of the child's absence is reflected in some of the existing Australian curriculum documents, with engagement largely being determined by adult observations. This view is reinforced in Mayall's (2002) research which indicates that young children in British school settings identify themselves as holding a 'subordinate position' (p. 135) in their relationships with adults (teachers and parents) and report an imbalance between their own and adults' social status. Wyness (2000) suggests children and childhood have been overshadowed by more 'socially significant institutions' (p. 25) such as the family and schools. Certainly the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the Queensland Kindergarten learning guideline (QSA, 2010) have a very strong focus on the adult's role in engagement, both in the construction of an environment for engagement and the measurement of intended outcomes. In their study on children's views on starting school, Dockett and Perry (2003) remark that including children in dialogue about their direct experiences has the potential to better inform adults of the implications and outcomes of these experiences.

Listening to children

There is a growing body of knowledge that clearly identifies the social and political significance of listening to children. Thorpe et al. (2005) acknowledge that children's accounts of their experiences yield credible information that 'can be used to advance knowledge of children's everyday practices, relevant for policy and research directions in education and child advocacy' (p. 117). Neale and Smart (1998) suggest that the sociological importance of children is that it offers a bottom-up perspective: 'an empirically grounded view of young children which privileges their agency and accords them respect' (p. 37). These viewpoints resonate strongly with the participation rights of Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and support the legal, moral and ethical imperatives for including children in decisions involving matters relating to learner engagement.

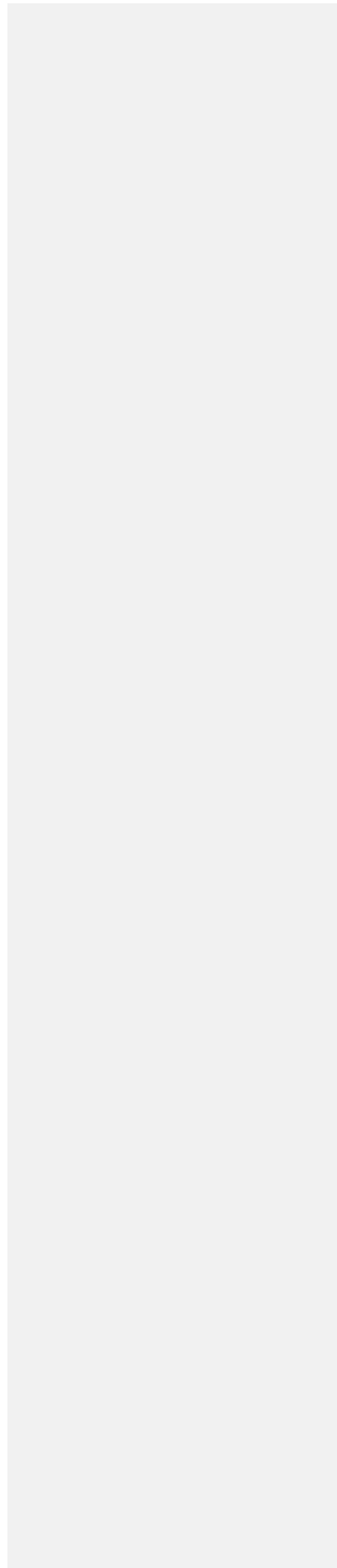
Methodologies and methods for including children

In acknowledging children as active participants, using methods that enable a collaborative effort *with* children rather than an examination *on* children (Robbins, 2003) is imperative.

Research using a range of data collection approaches is consistently providing evidence that young children are reliable informants, capable of providing valuable and unique information about their lived experiences not available from other sources (Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2005a, 2005b; Einarsdottir, 2003, 2005; Evans & Fuller, 1996; Harcourt & Conroy, 2011; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Warming, 2005; Wiltz & Klein, 2001). In these collective works, children were viewed as having unique knowledge to exchange and debate with each other/interested adult/s, and were perceived to have the competence to contribute to the data collection process (Clark, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2010). By drawing upon these participatory approaches, teachers can provide a genuine context for children's competencies, complementary to professional observations captured by teachers.

Conclusion

Learner engagement in the early years' classroom is influenced by interactions between the learner, their peers, adults and their environment. Although an interactive process, we have argued that engagement has consistently been conceptualised, observed and often measured only from the adult perspective. Ways of knowing whether a young learner is engaged appear to be reliant upon adult observations and inferences in relation to the child's behaviour and internal state. While early years curriculum documents stress the importance of engagement in relation to young children's learning, we contend that the current curriculum guidelines give little credence to the child's lived experience. Critical to gaining a deeper understanding of learner engagement is to seek, include and act upon the child perspective. To do so we uphold the legal, moral and ethical imperatives of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and offer a unique but more complete and robust picture of what it means for a young child to be engaged in learning.



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