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The Australian Early Years Learning Framework: learning what?

SUSAN KRIEG
School of Education, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

ABSTRACT Early childhood education and care have assumed importance in many government policy agendas. This attention is often accompanied by calls for greater accountability regarding the anticipated learning outcomes for young children. In Australia, the expected learning outcomes for children aged birth to five years are outlined in the recently published Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). In this article, the author examines the relationship between the EYLF's outcomes and subject area or content knowledge. The article draws from post-structural and social constructionist understandings of knowledge as unfinished, contestable and contextual. The author concludes that it is not content knowledge itself that is problematic, but it is the way the child and teacher are often positioned in relation to that knowledge that constrains the potential for effective teaching and learning in the early years. The author suggests that revisiting traditional assumptions about content knowledge extends and develops many of the ideas about teaching and learning that are identified in the EYLF, and opens up new identity positions for both children and early childhood educators.

Introduction

The Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF; Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) outlines the expected outcomes of early childhood education for children from birth to five years. In this article, I argue that the EYLF has begun significant work in articulating many aspects of effective teaching and learning in the early years. The strengths of the learning framework include its focus on identity and a sense of belonging as important outcomes of early childhood education. Another of its valuable extensions to thinking about teaching and learning in the early years is the way the framework emphasises the role of the early childhood educator as a contributor to the learning process. However, similarly to many other early childhood frameworks, the EYLF leaves teachers uncertain about ‘how the processes and content’ embedded in the outcomes are to be ‘identified and achieved’ (Cullen, 1999, p. 14). In the interests of extending the work begun by the EYLF, in this article I revisit the relationship between process and content. I also discuss how the positions that are taken in regard to the relationship between process and content have profound implications for teacher identities.

Many discussions regarding content in early childhood education lead to debates about the place and value of subject or learning area knowledge in early childhood pedagogy. The place of subjects or content knowledge poses ‘philosophical dilemmas’ for early childhood educators that often result in polarised positions (Hedges & Cullen, 2005, p. 66). This article engages with these debates and takes its position alongside the work undertaken by international researchers regarding the importance of early childhood teachers’ subject area knowledge in relation to children’s learning (Aubrey, 1994; MacNaughton, 1999; British Educational Research Association, 2003; Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Anning & Edwards, 2006; Anning et al, 2009). I build on and extend Hedges & Cullen’s (2005) use of a sociocultural perspective by examining the relationship between content knowledge and the identity positions on offer for both children and early childhood educators.
The Australian Early Years Learning Framework: learning what?

approach to teaching and learning in early childhood. The article begins by considering the place of content in early childhood education and then proceeds to revisit traditional understandings of ‘content knowledge’. Following a brief analysis of how content knowledge is positioned in the EYLF, I discuss the implications of this positioning for teacher identities. The final sections of the article draw from the work of Foucault (1980), Mason (2000) and Taguchi (2007) to offer new ways of bridging some of the tensions concerned with the place and value of content knowledge in early childhood pedagogy.

The Place and Value of Content Knowledge in Early Childhood Education

Content or subject area knowledge occupies a tenuous place in early childhood pedagogy. The Early Years Special Interest Group of the British Educational Research Association states that in early childhood settings, by folklore and tradition, areas of knowledge are not normally taught in subjects ... children and adults’ everyday activities are used as the basis for planning ... practical, experiential learning is prioritized over abstract, dis-embedded knowledge. (British Educational Research Association, 2003, p. 21)

The situation in the United Kingdom is similar to early childhood practice in Australia. MacNaughton’s (1999) review of the Tasmanian early childhood curriculum indicated that Australian early childhood educators consistently argued that early childhood education is a developmental, child-centred process, not a subject-centred process, and that it had a process, not a product, orientation.

Revisiting the Relationship between Process and Product

In a child-centred, developmental approach to teaching and learning in the early years, educators are faced with an important question: Is the process of learning all that matters for young children or does the product also matter? Throughout this article, I use the word ‘product’ to refer to the kinds of meaning that children make in the process of learning. In many early childhood settings, the process of learning assumes more importance than the product (Gibbons, 2007). Not only does privileging process over product avoid giving some products more attention than others, but it also ‘defends a particular valued construction of the young and “innocent” child’ (Gibbons, 2007, p. 303). For example, when children are intensely involved in play that re-enacts (or acts) violence, they could be described as focused, highly engaged and actively making meaning (indicators of effective learning processes). However, it is difficult to imagine that any early childhood educator would argue that the ‘product’ (which, in this case, could be that the children see violence as the solution to a difficult situation) is unimportant. It is naive to think that activity and involvement always equate to valued learning and that children’s ‘interest and involvement’ are ‘sufficient as well as necessary conditions for worthwhile learning’ (Windschitl, 2002, p. 138). Yinger contends that for many teachers working in a constructivist paradigm (a paradigm dominant in early childhood education), ‘activities, as opposed to ideas, are the starting points for basic units of planning and little thought is given to the intellectual implications of an activity’ (quoted in Windschitl, 2002, p. 138). This article re-engages with the importance of the intellectual implications of young children’s learning and takes the position that the ‘products’ or the kinds of meaning that children make do matter. The article also argues that the kinds of meaning that children make can be enhanced by using concepts and methods of inquiry drawn from subject areas.

The EYLF weaves many concepts and ideas drawn from subject areas throughout the descriptors of the outcomes. In positioning content knowledge in this way, the EYLF blurs boundaries between process and product. Re-examining some traditional assumptions about content knowledge provides a basis for understanding the repositioning that occurs in the EYLF.
Content Knowledge: revisiting some assumptions

In many debates about teaching and learning in the early years, content knowledge is positioned negatively. This positioning is partly due to a reductionist view of subject area or content knowledge as lists of irrefutable ‘facts’: a perception that is not limited to debates in early childhood alone. For example, in their recent study of primary and secondary South Australian curriculum development over the past four decades, Collins & Yates (2009, p. 133) concluded that Australia has a ‘positivist assumption that construes disciplinary knowledge as items of information’. Associated with this assumption are claims that content knowledge is discrete, hierarchic and ‘dis-embedded from the context in which it was generated’ (Fleer, 2010, p. 72). These constructions of content knowledge have contributed to curriculum development that organises and compartmentalises knowledge into subject areas. One of the most problematic aspects of many traditional views of content knowledge is that, over time and as a result of struggles between players in the ‘curriculum’ game, it has been ‘boxed’ and ‘each little box is bounded within a key subject or learning area and each little box contains a little piece of knowledge that must be learned/taught, measured and recorded’ (Thomson, 1999, p. 25). Whilst this way of organising knowledge into subject ‘boxes’ is not common in early childhood curriculum development, the dominance of ‘process over product’ in early childhood curriculum development raises issues of equal significance regarding the value of subject area knowledge in young children’s learning. I suggest that a post-structuralist perspective offers conceptual tools for repositioning early childhood teachers, children and content knowledge in the learning process.

This article takes a post-structuralist perspective to examine some of the issues concerned with the place of subject area knowledge in early childhood pedagogy. Post-structuralists contest the concept of knowledge as ‘truth’ and argue that knowledge is documented, codified and communicated through social practices which represent the perspectives of dominant groups at particular times and places (Foucault, 1972, 1980). From a post-structuralist perspective, content knowledge is conceptualised as socially constructed, contestable and unfinished. This perspective contrasts with early definitions of disciplines or learning areas which were fairly unproblematised. King & Brownell (1966, p. 29) identified three ways that disciplines could be described: firstly, ‘as areas of study, (i.e. history, biology, etc.), secondly as the network of facts, writing and other works of scholars associated with the field’ or, thirdly, as the group of ‘human beings with a common intellectual commitment who make a contribution to human thought and human affairs’. Shulman (1986, p. 14) adds ‘inquiry’ into his definition when he states that content or subject area knowledge is the ‘understanding of the structure of the subject matter, its conceptual organization and principles of inquiry in that domain’. Content is defined by Brady (1995, p. 112) as the ‘subject matter of teaching and learning. It involves more than mere factual information: it includes knowledge, skills, concepts, attitudes and values’. I suggest that these definitions offer some opportunities for reframing what is meant by content knowledge and reconsidering its place in early childhood education.

The concept of discipline knowledge as ‘communities’ with a sense of shared concerns demonstrates a perspective that is useful for thinking about teaching and learning in early childhood. This much broader conceptualisation of a discipline offers a way forward for early childhood educators working in the complexity of the contemporary knowledge environment. The concept of disciplines as groups of people pursuing similar lines of inquiry opens up the possibility of using the conceptual tools from the disciplines in the process of learning.

The EYLF positions content knowledge in a way which suggests that teachers are to use subject area knowledge to support children’s learning. This implies a multidisciplinary approach where actual problems are the focus for inquiry and children ‘are not confined to the few tools of a constricted subject matter’, but rather ‘roam across whatever domains are necessary in terms of the goals, ransacking, borrowing, extricating, annexing, combining, reformulating, and amalgamating in any way necessary for the most effective outcome’ (Gergen, 1995, p. 38). For example, young children are often investigating questions that relate to their intent to understand their worlds. Such a question might be: ‘What is the difference between butterflies and fairies?’ In the process of exploring this question, children will possibly be supported to use scientific processes to hypothesise, observe, compare and experiment with ideas of living and non-living, flight and air. Ideas and concepts drawn from literacy and literature could support them to think about fantasy
and fact or non-fiction texts. As they record their wonderings and findings, they could be using technologies and symbols (literacy and numeracy) in order to communicate these with others. This approach to learning where children ‘roam’ across whatever tools might be necessary in order to explore and extend their interest is reflected in the EYLF.

The EYLF does not organise knowledge into subject areas but states that: ‘In response to children’s ideas and interests, educators assess, anticipate and extend children’s learning … Responsiveness enables educators to respectfully enter children’s play and ongoing projects, stimulate their thinking and enrich their learning’ (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 5). Although the EYLF highlights the importance of teachers’ responsiveness to children’s ideas and interests, such an approach can be highly problematic. In any early childhood setting, questions arise about ‘whose’ and ‘which’ interests might be used to ‘co-construct curriculum’, and there seems to be very sparse academic literature to guide teacher decision making regarding this important aspect of curriculum development (Hedges, 2010, p. 26). What guidance does the EYLF provide in relation to the questions about ‘whose’ and ‘which’ interests might be the basis for curriculum decisions? In order to answer this question, I now examine the framework more closely.

The Outcomes: generalised capabilities

The EYLF is organised using three interrelated ‘elements’: ‘principles’, ‘practice’ and ‘outcomes’. The discussion in this article focuses on the following five outcomes:

– Children have a strong sense of identity
– Children are connected with and contribute to their world
– Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
– Children are confident and involved learners
– Children are effective communicators.

(Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 8)

These outcomes reflect the values that have traditionally characterised early childhood education, where a ‘holistic view of the child that caters for mind, body and emotions’ determines how programs and services should be designed (Anning, 2009, p. 67). The Australian framework emphasises identity, connection, well-being, learning and communication as broad outcomes that are anticipated for young children. The outcomes focus on general capabilities (for example, effective communicators). When learning goals are phrased in terms of general capabilities, they are often so general that they are basically the same, regardless of the focus, problem or issue. According to Bernstein (quoted in Beck, 2002, p. 624) ‘trainability’ – the hidden central concept of generic modes – has a curious but highly significant characteristic: ‘there is at its heart an emptiness which makes the concept self-referential’. General capabilities, such as ‘expressing oneself clearly in speech or writing’, are ‘aspects of our ways of handling what we are talking or writing “about”’ (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 281). The EYLF outcomes are generalised; however, the descriptors of the outcomes provide considerable guidance about ‘what’ children are to learn.

There is content knowledge in the EYLF. Sometimes content knowledge is named using the nomenclature of traditional subject/discipline areas such as mathematics, science and the arts. Throughout the outcomes, there are references to concepts and processes drawn from subject areas. For example, in the descriptor for Outcome 2 – ‘Children are connected with and contribute to their world’ – the concepts of ‘natural and constructed environments’ (drawn from geography) are repeated often. The descriptor for Outcome 3 – ‘Children have a strong sense of wellbeing’ – includes ‘dance, drama, movement and games’ (drawn from the arts and physical education). Processes drawn from design technology – ‘designing, drawing, editing, reflecting and composing’ – are named in Outcome 5. The content in the EYLF is thus woven through the outcome descriptors in an integrated way.

Mathematics is given primacy throughout the description under Outcome 4 – ‘Children are confident and involved learners’ (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 35). In this section, which is concerned with problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating (processes predominantly
drawn from science), it is mathematics that provides the ways of ‘identifying and communicating’ predictions and generalisations about the ‘natural world and environment’. This dominance of mathematics continues in the description of how educators are to support children’s learning. In this section, ‘science’ is relegated to one mention of ‘scientific language’ along with ‘language associated with the arts’. It seems that the framework foregrounds some disciplines and this gives prominence to these subject areas. This is not uncommon, for post-structuralists argue that curriculum texts establish and maintain the privileged positions of some ideas over others as particular statements, concepts and meanings are ‘linked’ together (Foucault, 1972, p. 38) in ways that form particular discourses about teaching and learning. I now examine how the discourses in the EYLF work together to construct particular identities for early childhood teachers.

**Constructing Teacher Identities**

The pedagogical practices that are expected of the early childhood educator in promoting the learning outlined in the outcomes provide evidence of what the framework considers good early childhood practice. Many of the verbs associated with the educator in the EYLF provide the opportunity to analyse the identities that are on offer. This is because activities are often associated with certain social categories and, in identifying the activity, a social identity is implied (Silverman, 2001). An analysis of the verbs pertaining to the educator in the EYLF reveals that the early childhood educator is responding to children’s interests and ‘providing opportunities’ for learning. Verbs such as ‘acknowledge’, ‘respond’, ‘support’, ‘recognise’, ‘provide’, ‘maintain’, ‘mediate’, ‘motivate’, ‘encourage’, ‘ensure’, ‘listen’ and ‘build on’ occur repeatedly throughout descriptions of the educator’s role. Verbs denoting intentional teaching, such as ‘modelling’, ‘teaching’, ‘planning’, ‘challenging’, ‘sharing information’ and ‘collaborating’, are also used. The things that early childhood educators are expected to ‘teach’ or ‘model’ often refer to attitudes, capabilities, processes, language and dispositions. The educator is expected to model ‘care, empathy and respect’ and ‘explicit communication strategies’ (Outcome 1); ‘language’, ‘respect, care and appreciation for the natural environment’ (Outcome 2); ‘health, nutrition and personal hygiene practices’ (Outcome 3); ‘inquiry processes’, ‘mathematical and scientific language’, and ‘reasoning, predicting and reflecting processes’ (Outcome 4); and ‘language’ (Outcome 5).

Intentional teaching is featured in some outcomes and not others. For example, the word ‘teach’ is not used in relation to the educator’s responsibilities in Outcomes 1, 2, 3 or 4 relating to identity, connection with the world, well-being and learning. Whilst it could be argued that phrases such as ‘draw children’s attention to’, ‘engage’, ‘introduce’ and ‘intentionally scaffold’ are all aspects of teaching, the word ‘teach’ is not itself used in relation to these outcomes. In contrast, Outcome 5, which is related to communication, uses the word ‘teach’ often. The educator is expected to ‘teach art as language’ and ‘teach children skills and techniques that will enhance their capacity for self-expression and communication’ and, lastly, to ‘teach skills and techniques and encourage children to use technologies’. My brief analysis of the activities associated with the early childhood educator provides evidence that the framework acknowledges the importance of intentional teaching, but the analysis also raises questions about why ‘teaching’ is recognised and named so explicitly in relation to communication alone. I posit that this inconsistency requires further investigation regarding the ways the EYLF positions teachers and learners in relation to content knowledge.

**Repositioning Teachers and Learners**

Researchers investigating in the early childhood field have focused on children’s learning and development, with little attention to teachers (Ryan et al, 2001). This lack of attention has led to a situation where “[i]n many Western societies a consensus has emerged that early childhood provision should be individualised and play-based and that adults should be non-directive and ‘facilitate’ learning rather than ‘teach’” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009, p. 147). I contend that this consensus has limited the possibility of examining alternate philosophies of teaching in the early years.
In the EYLF, teaching young children is defined as ‘deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful’, but it is also defined by what it is not: ‘Intentional teaching is the opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have “always” been done that way’ (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15). The reference to ‘rote’ learning and associating this with the idea of ‘traditions’ seems to re-enforce the either/or binary between a child-led or subject-led approach to teaching and learning. The document further elaborates some of the important things that early childhood teachers do. The section headed ‘Intentional Teaching’ uses words such as ‘interacting’, ‘conversing’, ‘modelling’, ‘demonstrating’, ‘questioning’, ‘speculating’, ‘explaining’ and ‘engaging in shared thinking’, and also states that the early childhood educator flexibly ‘moves in and out of different roles’. These words suggest an active and agentic teacher identity. In this section, it is stated that early childhood educators ‘plan opportunities for intentional teaching and knowledge-building’; however, the place of subject areas in supporting this planning is not addressed. I suggest that this situation reduces the possibility that the teacher and children might access the concepts and methods of inquiry found in the learning areas to support their investigations and inquiries as they construct knowledge.

The EYLF draws attention to the ways that children will be constructing knowledge and identity in Outcome 1 – ‘Children have a strong sense of identity’: the educator is expected to be ‘building on the knowledge, languages and understandings that children bring’ and ‘providing rich and diverse resources that reflect children’s social worlds’ (p. 23). The emphasis in this statement is on the knowledge that children bring, without reference to how this knowledge connects with other ways of knowing. For example, supporting children to think about the changes they have experienced as they have grown is part of developing a sense of identity, and concepts of ‘time’, ‘continuity’ and ‘change’ (big ideas drawn from both history and science) would support their thinking about these changes. Teacher questions such as ‘What can you do now that you could not do when you were a baby?’ support children to think about time, continuity and change in ways that are meaningful and sustain identity. Identity is also closely related to ‘place’, and using geographical concepts of ‘place’ and ‘space’ (big ideas from history and geography) would support young children’s understanding of their own ‘place’. Disputes in the sandpit and block corner are valuable opportunities to explore concepts such as ownership, boundaries, colonisation and identity in real ways. Whether these opportunities are taken up or not depends on whether the teacher can make connections with the big ideas drawn from subject areas. Here, I am not arguing that early childhood teachers need to draw from lists of ‘facts’ found in the subject areas as they co-construct meaning with children. But I am arguing that early childhood educators should be familiar enough with the concepts and methods of inquiry found in subject areas so that when, for example, a child is fascinated by the speed at which a ball rolls down a slope, physics may provide some useful ways of investigating this further. The teacher then works alongside the child as they make meaning together of this situation.

Reframing the Content Knowledge Debate in Early Childhood Education

In this article, I argue that approaches to teaching and learning in the early years that deny the interplay between ‘content’ and the child’s interests limit the possibility for what Lillian Katz (2008, p. 5) refers to as ‘authentic’ learning. My argument is not based on a deficit view of the child as ‘needing’ subject area knowledge in order to be made complete, but that the concepts and processes of inquiry found in subject areas may be useful for the child’s learning. As Jordan (2010, p. 96) contends: ‘Many of our cultural tools required for understanding the world are located within subject domain bodies of knowledge, such as the sciences, the arts and commerce’. I suggest that a lack of engagement with the concepts and methods of inquiry found in subject areas denies children the opportunities to use many of the ideas that might contribute to their understanding of the complex and ‘worthwhile things around them’ (Katz, 2008, p. 6).

Although the EYLF has begun important work in naming significant learning outcomes, there is still significant work to do if these outcomes are to be realised. Whilst the framework names some aspects of some learning areas, this work needs to be developed further. The ‘conceptual grammar’ offered by the subject areas not only supports children’s thinking, but adds to the repertoire of ideas about their interactions with the world (Taguchi, 2010, p. 66). For example,
when children are using play dough or clay, if they are exposed to processes and words (drawn from the arts strand of sculpture) such as 'rolling', 'squeezing', 'pinching', 'stretching', 'squashing', 'flattening', 'patting' and 'moulding', this not only supports and extends the child's thinking and ability to sculpt, but also enables the child to describe more accurately the processes he or she has used. This support will only occur if early childhood teachers have a grasp of the 'conceptual grammar' and the big ideas offered by the disciplines. Using concepts and methods of inquiry found in the learning areas does not necessarily imply a didactic, teacher-driven approach. A repositioning of both teacher and learner in relation to content knowledge is necessary.

Rethinking Early Childhood Teaching

In this section of the article, I consider how post-structuralist and social constructionist perspectives offer new identity positions for both teachers and learners in the process of teaching and learning. In a social constructionist framework, teachers actively participate in the learning process as 'intentional mediators' (Mason, 2000, p. 347). I suggest that this concept of 'teaching as mediation' opens up new possibilities for thinking about teachers' work with young children. The EYLF begins this process, for the teacher is continually referred to as 'mediating', 'acknowledging' and 'building on' the child's knowledge and ideas, and there are repeated references to teachers supporting children to engage with 'increasingly complex ideas' (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, pp. 17, 19, 26). The teacher as a 'mediator' reduces the oppositional positioning of 'child-centred' or 'subject-driven' pedagogies, for the role involves teachers using children’s knowledge in ways that connect them with the thinking that has been done before (in the disciplines) about their issue or focus of inquiry. This requires pedagogical skill of the highest order because the 'connection' is not done in a way that privileges one way of 'knowing' over another and involves a 'socially critical' role (Mason, 2000). As Mason elaborates:

The role of an arts critic does not rely on a trivial sense of the term – to criticise the weaknesses of the work. It is to make the work more accessible to the viewer, in all its nuances and subtleties, in what it says, and its silences, in its history and context ... in the questions it raises and their consequences. (Mason, 2000, p. 349)

So, the teacher from this perspective is not only a 'mediator of knowledge' but a 'critical mediator of knowledge', whose role involves making the 'culture, worldview and social arrangements and everyday practices of their society more accessible to their students' (Mason, 2000, p. 349). The EYLF gives examples of this important pedagogical approach.

The EYLF descriptors associated with 'identity', 'belonging' and 'well-being' indicate the expectation that early childhood educators will 'mediate and assist children to negotiate their rights in relation to others'; 'build upon culturally valued approaches to learning'; 'build on the knowledge, languages and understandings that children bring'; and 'provide opportunities for children to investigate ideas, complex concepts and ethical issues that are relevant to their lives and local communities'. The concepts and methods of inquiry found in subject areas that might support children’s development of identity and belonging are evident in some descriptors. For example, 'social and cultural heritage' and 'culture, heritage, backgrounds and traditions' draw from history and would support children’s understanding of diversity and identity. Naming these aspects of social and cultural worlds must be considered alongside the pedagogical skills involved in 'mediating' the relationship between children's lived experiences and other 'ways of knowing'. I suggest that Foucault (1980) and Taguchi (2007) contribute to an understanding of this important aspect of teaching.

A view of the teacher as a mediator of knowledge resonates with my reading of Foucault’s (1980) ideas regarding the relationship between local, subjugated knowledge and existing, scientifically legitimated knowledge. Foucault contends that local (and, in this case, the child’s) knowledge is important and that it should be 'entertained' against the claims of well-established knowledges. The word 'entertained' opens up many possibilities for thinking about teaching and learning. Foucault (1980, p. 83) maintains that the task is to 'make use of this knowledge’ in a tactical way. ‘Entertaining’ could involve comparing, contrasting, questioning and challenging. This requires the early childhood educator to work with children in ways that support their
interaction with the new ideas found in content knowledge through a process where this new knowledge is used to test their own experience. This approach does not assume the dominance of one knowledge over another, as Taguchi (2007, p. 285) argues: different knowledges are not ‘valued as more or less true ... but are put side by side and treated equally important as different ways of understanding’. This process repositions both the child’s knowledge and subject area knowledge in the process of co-constructing meaning. Such an approach opens up the possibility for both teacher and child to work together in an inquiry process.

An inquiry approach to teaching and learning in the early years is consistent with an epistemological perspective that views knowledge as constructed rather than as ‘truth’. Within such a frame, the teacher is working alongside the child, ‘co-constructing knowledge’. Viewing learning as ‘co-construction’ is premised on the belief that people see a ‘context, a situation, or a phenomenon, which is “objectively”’ the same in qualitatively different ways ... and if we become aware of others’ ways of seeing this, then we have a certain degree of collective consciousness’ (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 189). By working with others, we are exposed to a much wider range of ‘ways of seeing’ than is available when working alone. The individual child finding his or her own way into a ‘landscape of ideas’ is learning. However, in this solitary process, individuals are limited by their own perspectives. By learning how others see things, we are broadening our ideas of the multiple ways that something can be seen, rather than ‘seeing what something is like’ (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 189). In this process, learners contribute to defining the object of learning by learning about it and, by doing so, ‘the object of learning is set in new human contexts and its meaning is enriched in the process’ (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 190). I use Nickerson’s words (quoted in New, 2009, p. 311) to conclude my discussion: ‘if we all had precisely the same knowledge, we would not be able to inform one another, to learn from one another, or to surprise one another’. From this perspective, the concepts and processes of inquiry found in subject areas can be viewed as yet ‘another way of knowing’ that might be useful in supporting young children’s learning.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that the EYLF has begun significant work in articulating effective aspects of teaching and learning in the early years. I have used a post-structural perspective to further develop many of the ideas introduced in the framework. I have argued that a repositioning of content knowledge in early childhood pedagogy opens up new possibilities for children’s learning, and also offers different identities for both teacher and child. In the process of repositioning content knowledge, I have refocused attention on the conceptual structure, skills and methods of inquiry in the learning areas as a way of revisiting what is meant by ‘content’. I have therefore challenged the perception that content knowledge consists of disembedded lists of facts and information. This repositioning draws from post-structuralist and social constructionist understandings of knowledge as socially constructed, unfinished, contestable and contextual.

Teaching from a social constructionist perspective offers a way forward from the inherent tensions between child-centred or subject-driven approaches. Within a social constructionist paradigm, the teacher does important work, described succinctly by Mason (2000, p. 347) as ‘leading the learner to increasing levels of complexity’. Such a description of teachers’ work builds on the ideas introduced in the EYLF and opens up possibilities for different ways of being an early childhood educator than those constructed by the traditional facilitative role on offer in a developmental, child-centred paradigm or a didactic approach to teaching and learning. Working from an inquiry stance offers new identities for both teachers and learners. Within such a paradigm, curriculum development and inquiry builds on children’s ideas as skilled early childhood educators use the big ideas drawn from the disciplines as other ways of ‘knowing’ whatever is being investigated. Rather than viewing discipline knowledge as ‘truth’, these other ways of knowing contribute different ways of thinking about, investigating, recording and communicating, and offer children useful tools for understanding their worlds. It is my hope that this article speaks to early childhood educators in ways that engage them with the possibilities offered by the EYLF, and contributes to more diverse ways of working with knowledge in contemporary times.
References


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SUSAN KRIEG is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood and Program Coordinator of the early childhood programs at Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. Prior to her 2006 appointment at Flinders, Susan worked at Edith Cowan University (2000-06) leading the development of a Bachelor of Education specifically designed to develop continuity between the early and primary years. Susan’s experience includes teaching and leadership at local, state and national levels in her work as a district coordinator, school principal, curriculum manager and President of the Junior Primary Principals’ Association of South Australia. Her work as a school principal in a large suburban integrated early childhood program has been researched and documented in research reports including 100 Children Go to School (Hill et al, Commonwealth of Australia: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998). Her educational leadership, research and teaching within the university context focuses on social justice and repositioning children in the learning process as a way of achieving more equitable outcomes in early childhood education. Correspondence: Susan Krieg, School of Education, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA 5000, Australia (susan.krieg@flinders.edu.au).