Data driven assessment failing early childhood education

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Children's early years from birth to the age of eight are crucial for their social, emotional and intellectual development. However, early years education in Australia is fragmented. It operates across two spaces, the pre-compulsory period, often called early childhood education, and the first three years of compulsory schooling.

In recent times the focus in these three years has been on assessment that produces numerical data. Teachers need to demonstrate children are meeting standards.

In contrast, in the pre-compulsory years the focus is on observing and interacting with the child. Practices are based on the belief that all children have agency and are capable learners.

A chasm has opened up between these separate education systems. Children go from playing to being tested in the blink of an eye. This abrupt change in young children's education is problematic.

The review noted this meant many early years teachers have adopted a more formalised and narrow approach to learning in schools. It isn't appropriate for young children.

We can see the resulting divide between non-compulsory and compulsory early years education in Victoria.

On the one hand, teachers need to acknowledge the needs of children from birth to eight years.

On the other hand, for those between the ages of five and 12, the Victorian Curriculum requires teachers to assess and report against curriculum standards.

The focus on formal assessment and numerical data in the early years of schooling means children as young as six can be labelled as failing.

In countries like Finland and Singapore, which have been identified as high- performing, children do not even begin formal schooling before the age of six or seven.

One study has described the early years in countries like the United Kingdom, America and Australia as being at the mercy of top-down policy development, leading to "a highly prescriptive and assessment-driven early years climate".

UK researchers have identified the "datafication" of early years education and its impacts on children and teachers. And Australian researchers used the term "adultification" to describe the unrealistic expectations placed on young children.

What does research tell us about the early years?

A 2015 review of research on best practices in the early years identified key factors in successful teaching and learning. The review noted the importance of:

- A smooth transition between pre- school education and compulsory school education.
- Play-based learning.
- Seeing children as capable and having agency in their learning.
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Dialogic interactions involving rich discussions between children and between children and teachers.

Australia has introduced a mandated curriculum and a national assessment program in primary schools.

So what happens in our schools?

My doctoral research found “datafication” and “adultification” defined the early years of schooling in Victoria.

I engaged with more than 100 early-years teachers to explore their literacy teaching and assessment practices.

The recurring theme was these teachers were expected to frequently assess young children in formal ways that provided numerical data.

Teachers voiced frustration. One described the early years as “death by assessment”.

Another lamented that community expectations were unreasonable, saying “people are hung up on data, numbers”.

There was an overwhelming sense that the teachers knew their children best and should be given the agency to assess and plan for literacy teaching rather than being required to use a suite of commercially produced assessment tools.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) is designed to support early years teachers working with children and families.

Its premise is that children have the greatest opportunities to develop neural pathways for learning and are also most vulnerable to negative experiences from birth to eight years.

The framework is based on research into best practice for children in these years. Rather than formal assessment based on numbers, the VEYLDF advocates for assessment that is authentic and responsive to how all children can best demonstrate their learning and development.

The Victorian Education Department encourages teachers in schools to use the framework. However, little is known about how many actually use the framework to inform teaching and learning.

Making it mandatory to report against curriculum standards from the time children begin compulsory schooling sets the boundaries for how many teachers operate.

It is hard to have a foot in both camps when reporting against these standards is mandatory and you feel compelled to prepare children for what comes next – which includes NAPLAN, the national assessment program.

“St John’s Horizon (a school community- developed vision) clearly states ‘KIDS AT THE HEART’ which encapsulates our focus and belief in the image of the child – the child who is capable, curious, full of wonder, rich in knowledge, able to construct and co-construct his or her own learning. We believe in JOY – Joy in learning.”

A conversation with the then-principal, Gemma Goodyear, gave me an insight into these beliefs, which are inspired by teaching and learning in schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Goodyear said children do not come to school to be “fixed”, and the teachers engage them by providing meaningful, contextualised learning experiences. And, yes, through their focus on rich learning they still get great results without relentless testing.

It is time to revisit the early years of schooling and ensure teachers have the skills and understandings they need to support learners in this phase.

These years should be a time when children become engaged and excited about learning, a time of great joy, and a time when children are allowed to be children.

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Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.

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