

# The Power of the Child

"No, if nature has given the child this plasticity of brain which fits him to receive every kind of impression [...] all that concern his happiness and will some day throw light upon his duties, should be traced at an early age in indelible characters upon his brain, to guide him to live in such a way as befits his nature and his powers."

Rousseau (1762)

"The teacher who receives them both into her school, healthy, intelligent and unspoilt by wrong treatment, would be free now to treat them as individuals, and to help them not by mere specialization, but by sympathizing and helping them to use their real powers."

McMillan (1919, p.289)



Throughout history theorists have recognised the importance for children to be treated as individuals and encouraged to follow their own interests. Both Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) and Margaret McMillan (1919) referred to these interests as 'powers', demonstrating the strength that these interests have and the capacity they have to support a child's success in both education and in life. McMillan went on to explain how a child's interest in art could be used to connect them to history or geography lessons, suggesting that if a child is connected to the content through their power, or their passion, they are more likely to engage in the learning.

Pestalozzi (1801) discussed the "crime" of allowing younger children to follow their interests and build on their strengths and then as they get older stripping them of their passions as they are taught with words and structured lessons. In this sense Pestalozzi agreed with McMillan that the school system should change to reflect the knowledge of how children learn best through their interests and powers.

The concept of child focused practice is reflected in the UN Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) where article 29 refers to the importance of education developing "each child's personality and talents to the full". It is also echoed in the National Quality Framework (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2018) whereby educators are required to ensure their program is based around the children's interests in element 1.1.2 of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018 p.103), Regulation 74 of the Education and Care Services National Regulations (ACECQA, 2018, p.361) and throughout the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)(Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009).

In the EYLF the focus around children's interests comes mostly under the Practices, as it is seen as the role of the educator to find ways to support and encourage children to engage in learning around their interests (DEEWR, 2009). Educators need to have the skills and knowledge to adapt and respond to individual children's skills and needs, reflecting on their own pedagogy and how this supports or inhibits their ability to work around children's powers. It is also important to consider how educators co-construct learning (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009) with children, providing opportunities for children to have agency and direct the learning while gaining knowledge from their educators who scaffold and challenge their ideas (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Provocation:** McMillan's assumption that schools simply must change to reflect a more robust and collaborative education in early childhood (from 1919) has been proven wrong, as schools continue to teach around structured content that has little regard to the child's interests or learning style and is very much adult directed. How does teaching around children's powers in early childhood support that child's transition to school? Just because schools have not changed should early childhood practices change to reflect formal schooling?

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