RECONCEPTUALIZING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (RECE) 2026
Localising ECE: Powerful children, families, languages, and cultures at the centre of ECE
Ōtepoti Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand Tues 24 Nov 2026 9:00-10:30am
www.developmentalcascades.org

Myths of Milestones: Developmental Cascades and the Power of What Comes Next

Developmental Cascades Co-LAB
Presented by Danielle McLellan-Bujnak and Josh Thompson (josh.thompson@etamu.edu)
With Daniela Uribe Montserrat, Melissa Heinrich, Roderick Whitley, and Zlata Stanković-Ramirez

No Developmental Moment Stands Alone

The language we use to describe development influences how we understand children—and what we notice when we observe them.

Traditional descriptions of *ages and stages* often suggest that development follows a predictable, linear sequence of accomplishments. Developmental milestones can provide valuable information, including indicators of when additional support or assessment may be needed. Yet milestones are snapshots of a much more complex, dynamic process.

A child is never developing in one domain alone.

Development unfolds through interconnected processes involving movement, communication, cognition, emotion, relationships, culture, experience, and environments. Each moment emerges from what has come before and contributes to what may become possible next.

What changes when we look beyond the milestone to the relationships, processes, and possibilities surrounding it?

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From Ages and Stages to Developmental Cascades

Developmental cascades offer a framework for understanding how changes in one aspect of development influence—and are influenced by—changes in others over time.

This perspective invites us to consider:

- **Interconnection:** Developmental processes influence one another across conventional domains.
- **Reciprocity:** Children, caregivers, relationships, and environments influence one another.
- **History:** Previous experiences shape current possibilities without determining future outcomes.
- **Variability:** Development includes overlapping waves of emergence, consolidation, change, and sometimes regression.
- **Context:** Language, culture, community, relationships, and environments are integral to development.
- **Emerging possibilities:** Development is dynamic and cannot be fully captured by a fixed sequence of milestones.

Rather than asking only **"What can this child do?"**, we can also ask:

“What is unfolding here?” **“What becomes possible next?”**

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EXPLORATION · OBSERVATION

An Invitation to Explore: Constructing a Cascade

Using ramps, playdough, rocks, and water, explore how developmental pathways might be understood as dynamic, interconnected, and responsive to changing conditions.

As you construct and observe your cascade, consider:

1. What influences the direction and movement of the water?
2. What happens when one part of the system changes?
3. How does what happened earlier affect what happens next?
4. What new possibilities emerge when conditions change?
5. What happens when you, as an observer and participant, alter the system?

Reflect: What does this experience illuminate about development? Where does the metaphor fall short?

Water responds to physical forces. Children are active participants in their own development, bringing agency, interests, intentions, and relationships to their experiences. No physical metaphor can fully represent the complexity of a developing child.

What did you notice?

Use this space to record an observation, question, or unexpected discovery.

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Seeing the Whole Cascade: A Developmental-Cascades-Informed Observation Framework

Working framework drafted by Danielle McLellan-Bujnak

OBSERVATION LENS	GUIDING QUESTION
1. OBSERVE	What happened?
2. CONNECT	What is happening together?
3. LOCATE	What is this moment embedded within?
4. FOLLOW	What is changing through time?
5. WONDER	What might this be shaping?
6. REFLECT TOGETHER	What becomes visible from another perspective?
7. RETURN	What should we look for next?

This framework invites educators to move beyond recording isolated behaviours toward noticing relationships, patterns, context, developmental history, and emerging possibilities.

It is an invitation to ongoing inquiry, not another checklist of expected achievements.

RELATIONSHIP · RESPONSE

What shapes what we see?

Consider the influences that may be present in any developmental moment:

Within the child: Interests, motivations, temperament, physiological state, abilities, previous experiences, intentions, and agency.

Within relationships: Reciprocity, attachment, communication, expectations, trust, and shared meaning.

Within the environment: Physical spaces, materials, opportunities, barriers, routines, resources, and sensory experiences.

Within culture and community: Languages, family knowledge, identities, values, traditions, social expectations, and systems of support.

Within the observer: Assumptions, theoretical knowledge, cultural perspectives, professional experience, expectations, emotional responses, and relationships with the child.

These are not independent categories. Their interactions are part of what we are seeking to understand.

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The Observer Is Part of the Relationship

Observation is not simply a neutral act of recording what a child does.

What we believe about development influences what we notice. What we notice shapes how we interpret an experience. Our interpretations influence how we respond, and our responses may change the conditions within which development continues.

What we understand → What we notice → How we interpret → How we respond

This invites professional humility, reflection, collaboration, and responsiveness.

It also raises questions of equity and power: Whose perspective is represented? Whose knowledge is included? How do we recognise the child as an active participant rather than simply the object of our observation?

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From Observation to Responsive Practice

Before intervening, consider:

Pause and observe. What is actually happening, and what assumptions am I bringing?

Reflect and connect. What might I understand differently if I consider relationships, context, history, and the child's perspective?

Respond with intention. What might support or expand the child's possibilities without unnecessarily directing their developmental pathway?

Return and reconsider. What has changed? What might I notice now that I could not see before?

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Continuing the Conversation

Co-LAB is exploring how developmental-cascades-informed approaches may transform educators' images of children, observation practices, and curriculum.

Our emerging research directions include:

- Exploring how educators' experiences and disciplinary backgrounds shape their images of children.
- Investigating whether professional learning changes how educators interpret development.
- Examining developmental cascades as an organizing lens for teaching and learning, rather than simply another topic within a child development curriculum.

Questions to Take With You

What assumptions about development shape my observations?

What becomes visible when I attend to relationships rather than isolated behaviours?

How might changing the way I observe change the way I respond?

What might become possible next—for the child and for me?

Selected References

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Seeing development differently.
Observing with curiosity.
Responding to what becomes possible next.