In their introduction to this volume, the editors note that “the idea that the primary goal of education is to provide nations with high-quality and globally competitive future workers may seem like a “given”” (p. 5). Their purpose, therefore, is to question the seemingly unquestionable dominance of these discourses of human capital, and market-driven economies. Along with contributors to this volume, they succeed in making visible multiple ways that discourses of human capital shape children, families and early childhood education itself, while also suggesting ways that new spaces and directions for contestation might be opened up.

Part 1 provides an introduction to the historic and economic contexts in which discourses of human capital have arisen (pp. 3–25). By engaging in the nexus of discourses of market-driven economics and childhoods, the authors critique the ways and means by which bio-power operates as “techniques used to control the welfare of a population” (p. 11). A second chapter offers a theorisation of the ways language and discourse are entwined with social action (pp. 27–43). Together, these chapters establish the urgency of the task of critiquing human capital discourses at a time when early childhood education and children are the focus of intense regulatory and rhetorical attention.

Contributors to part 2 offer deconstructions and critiques of ways human capital discourses circulate in the field of education across national contexts. Topics provide rich variety, from ‘entrepreneurial attitudes toward early education in Turkey’ (p. 71) and the construction of early childhood education as a ‘smart investment for the future’ in East Asia (p. 119), through a critique of ways Spanish language has been appropriated to the making of the ‘bilingual American citizen’ (p. 75), and deconstructions of human capital discourses operating in Indonesia, England and the United States.

Millei contributes an especially powerful chapter exploring ways that neuroscience (also known as ‘brain research’) has combined with discourses of human capital development to reshape ‘the notion of the human subject and affected entity in [Australia’s] ECEC policies and practices’ (p. 49). These conjunctions, she argues, operate as bio-power – shaping new regimes of control that govern ways parents and educators believe they should develop children’s potential as future economic citizens. She notes an important implication of the influence of these discourses – the potential devaluation of educators’ ‘pedagogical and content expertise’ (p. 61) in favour of the apparent incontestability of brain science.

The powerful evidence of the inflection of human capital discourses in early childhood education and conceptualisations of children and childhood that are presented in part 2 illustrate well the
difficulties of imagining alternatives. Part 3, however, offers ways of ‘reconceptualizing education outside of human capital language’ (p. 183). Kroeger, for example, describes the possibilities produced through the production of a ‘culturally relevant curriculum to act against and within human capital assumptions’ (p. 184) in a school serving a low-income community in the United States. In the research project, human capital discourses were resisted by recognising the social capital of the students, family and tightly knit community, and using these to remake teaching practice, and aspects of the curriculum.

Buchanan, meanwhile, offers a critique of progress-oriented discourses of ‘learning’ inflected in New Zealand’s Te Whāriki Approach by wondering ‘what, at the level of practice, the approach may be doing’ (p. 209, emphasis in original). Through examples of educators, families and children seeking and maximising opportunities for ‘learning’, Buchanan identifies the shaping of ‘a subject who should aim to enhance their child’s key resource: their desire and capacity to be and to act as a learner’ (p. 207). In this way, she contends that discourses of learning encourage children and adults to govern themselves via discourses of progress and developmentalism, and in ‘calculative and economistic terms’ (p. 209), despite Te Whāriki’s valuing of multiple voices and ways of learning.

In his chapter on revaluing early childhood education with the Capabilities Approach, Buzzelli suggests that ideas of human capital offer only a limited view of the ‘goals and impact of early education programs on children’s development’ (p. 216). This approach, he contends, may thereby undervalue the multiple ways early childhood education supports children’s development. By mobilising aspects of the Capabilities Approach, he argues for conceptualisations that emphasise children’s capacity for and agency in ‘convert[ing available] resources into valued achievements’ (p. 222). These contentions have diverse resonances with the other two chapters in part 3. On one hand, the practical possibilities of Buzzelli’s suggestions are borne out in Kroeger’s examples of ways available social capital was converted into meaningful learning. On the other, Buchanan’s critiques act as a caution against assumptions that apparently ‘desirable’ ‘mechanisms for empowering the child and for addressing the politics of knowledge in curriculum’ (p. 209) will enable, rather than limit their agentic possibilities.

This volume therefore makes a valuable contribution to critiques of ways human capital discourses construct children as future economic producers, and early childhood education as sites of bio-political production. As a volume, it has theoretical consistency, while offering contextual and substantive variety. Of the few weaknesses, two are the (in)visibility of early childhood educators, and slippage between early childhood education and notions of schooling. Although mentioned by Millei and Lightfoot-Rueda in their respective chapters, there is otherwise an absence of focused attention to ways that human capital discourses are shaping educators. With increasing numbers of children attending early childhood settings in many of the national contexts represented in this volume, and therefore, the increasing influence of educators in the lives of children, this silence seemed an obvious deficit.

In addition, there was little definition or deconstruction of what constituted ‘early childhood education’ for this volume. Some authors were clearly dealing with prior-to-school contexts, while others dealt with ‘schooling’ and ‘teachers’ without clarifying whether their commentary was specific to the early years of school. This slippage is important, as concerns are voiced across national contexts about the schoolification of the early childhood education sector (as e.g. in Buchanan’s chapter), and the complexity and specialisation of early childhood teachers’ practice is made more visible. Without further critique, human capital discourses could be further, and more readily, conducted rather than contested, as early childhood education is articulated into ‘education’ more broadly.