

Belonging:

An Authentic Inclusion of Children's Voices

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Abstract

Belonging, as a term and a concept, has entered the popular lexicon and is a current theme that is extensively referred to in a variety of everyday and academic contexts. The term presumes a shared understanding, yet despite its common usage, theoretical literature suggests that this is not an accurate assumption. This research investigated what 'belonging' meant to a group of young children aged between 3 and 5 years in an early childhood service, and the implication of their understandings for both policy and practise. A rights based, participatory approach framed the research and a modified Mosaic approach supported data generation and allowed for the inclusion of the child's voice. The possibility that the children were capable of engaging with a conceptual topic like belonging was assumed, and the findings supported this assumption. The results revealed new aspects of belonging that reflected these young children's conceptualisations. Core concepts of 'belonging to people' and 'belonging to place' had been identified in the literature. However, what emerged was the significance of elements of time, belongings from home, shared interests and agency which, when linked to these children's emotional connections with others and their connection to place, gave meaning and depth to their conceptualisations. The research confirmed that young children are indeed capable of understanding and expressing complex cognitive concepts like belonging when provided with a context conducive to this.

Statements

The data and analysis presented in this thesis is solely my own work and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.



Selma J Wastell

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Portions of this study have been presented in poster form at the Early Childhood Australia *Seasons of change* conference held at the Melbourne Convention Centre - September 2014 and as a workshop at the University of Wollongong Inaugural Early Start Conference: *Improving Children's Lives* - September 2015.

Ethical and scientific approval was granted from Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee with the research proposal meeting the requirements set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

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(See Appendix F)

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction:

Belonging, as a term and a concept, has entered the popular lexicon and is a current theme extensively referred to in a variety of everyday and academic contexts. In New South Wales it has been a major focus of study in the English Higher School Certificate (Board of Studies, 2012 p.2), and in the Early Childhood sector was foregrounded by the introduction of a national curriculum in the form of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in 2009. This cemented the place of belonging in the thinking and practice of early childhood scholars and educators in Australia. Belonging is the first element mentioned in the vision section of this curriculum document, and it begins with: "Experiencing belonging – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 7), thereby highlighting the central role of belonging in the lives of all people, especially children.

This thesis is presented in four chapters. In this chapter literature linking belonging and wellbeing is explored in order to ground the research in a wider body of knowledge. The ontological origins of belonging are examined as a way to contextualise the paucity of concrete writing around the idea. The research informing our current understanding and the impact this has on the reality of young children's contemporary experiences of belonging will also be explored. The literature review was compiled to reflect components of belonging using categories that had previously been identified – namely place, relationships, agency and inclusionary and exclusionary play. Chapter 1 concludes with the construction of the research questions which then informed the methodology outlined in Chapter 2. The research design for this project incorporated a qualitative, rights based, participatory framework allowing for the inclusion of children's perspectives, their 'voice' and the promotion of their sense of agency. Data was gathered over several days in an early care and education (preschool) setting, then analysed and reflected on using an interpretivist approach that allowed for multiple possible explanations. The study findings are presented in Chapter 3 and include some previously unconsidered elements of belonging that emerged as a result of the inclusion of the children's

perspectives. This chapter also presents a new way of conceptualising these aspects of belonging – that is, as components (place and people) weighted by strands of belonging that have been afforded significance through emotional connection. In the final chapter, the opportunity for interested parties to re-examine the role of belonging in an early childhood setting is presented which includes the perspective of children. The research confirms that young children have the ability to conceptualise and articulate complex concepts such as belonging, thereby providing an opportunity for reflection on our reading of compliance documents such as the National Curriculum and the National Quality Standards.

Literature Review

Belonging, wellbeing and their place in early childhood discourse

The Early Years Learning Framework has framed 'Belonging' the first of three elements that define children's lives. Wellbeing is linked to the definition of belonging, with learning outcome 3 stating "wellbeing...is central to belonging, being and becoming" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 30). Wellbeing has long been a focus in the discourse around working with young children and its link with belonging has paved the way for the ready acceptance of that concept into the terminology (Haza Gutierrez & Fuentes, 2008; Lahman, 2008). Gordon, O'Toole, and Wiltman (2008) propose the following definition of wellbeing: "it is the realisation of one's physical, emotional, social, mental and spiritual potential" (p.8). Chehab (2008) clearly links the two with "helping a child to develop a positive sense of belonging is most important for her or his psychosocial wellbeing" (p.38).

Another contemporary early childhood curriculum that gives belonging and wellbeing significant weighting is Te Whāriki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum. In this document, wellbeing has a focus on health, safety and emotional wellbeing (Ministry of Education, p. 46), while belonging, foregrounds family, the 'wider world', place, routines and behaviour (Ministry of Education, p. 54). Te Whāriki states that children develop "a feeling of belonging and having a right to belong in the early childhood setting" (Ministry of Education, p. 58).

The above examples illustrate the link between the more historical concept of wellbeing and the experience of a sense of belonging in children, and substantiates the references to wellbeing that occur throughout this research. In both the New Zealand and Australian curricula there is a shared interpretation of these concepts, establishing a contemporary link between children's wellbeing, their sense of belonging and healthy emotional and social development. The currency of these concepts as they relate to the field of early childhood has therefore been identified, but despite the EYLF instructing educators to "promote children's sense of belonging, connectedness and wellbeing" (Learning Outcome 1 & 3) the reality of how this is to be played out in children's everyday lives is not clearly articulated.

Sumsion and Wong (2011) reflect on the current position by stating that belonging - despite being highly visible in broader contemporary discourses - has been the "subject of relatively little focused conceptual examination" (p.30). To accommodate this lack of data, a broad based approach that included research on both older children and adults was adopted for the present literature review, similar to that used by Gordon et al. (2008). A wide variety of readings was used to identify common interpretations and components of (or ways of experiencing) belonging and formulate a framework for the proposed research with younger children. Taking into consideration that there are few conceptual studies of belonging, it was even more challenging to locate empirical studies within the corpus of contemporary knowledge. Much of the research that relates to young children has, in fact been philosophical and conceptual in nature with very little empirical evidence to reflect children's perspective on this complex concept. Information that focused specifically on the meanings and implication of belonging for young children, and particularly young children in early childhood education and care settings was minimal.

Conceptualising Belonging

Peers and Fler (2013) explore the difficulties in defining belonging, contending that it is historically a philosophical concept bound in ontological origins. They propose that without understanding the philosophical, theoretical or scientific aspects of a concept, it is impossible to fully understand the everyday. These authors contend that the EYLF presumes a shared understanding of the philosophical concept "human existence" thereby missing the opportunity to fully investigate the everyday meaning of belonging (Peers & Fler, 2013, p. 5). This relates to the quote: "experiencing belonging – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to

human existence" (DEEWR, 2009, p.7). Peers and Fler (2013) point out that paradoxically, it is belonging's origins as a philosophical concept that provides the 'mystery' which is part of the appeal of the EYLF. Their article proposes that the inclusion of belonging in the EYLF entices people into the document with the promise of "sustained engagement" (p.5).

Belonging, being and becoming were original motifs of the EYLF and support for these in the draft version of this document indicate it was an early and consistent point of agreement (Sumsion and Wong 2011). Data from the review period also indicates that the concepts "resonated emotionally, culturally and professionally with the vast majority of feedback" (Sumsion & Wong, 2011, p. 29), supporting Peers and Fler's (2013) findings. Part of the appeal of these concepts appears to be their 'elasticity' and therefore the ease with which they can be included in a variety of theoretical perspectives and adapted to multiple contexts. This elasticity, however, may also contribute to the difficulty with definition as it becomes a 'taken for granted' concept, rendering it unnecessary to define or explicate (Sumsion & Wong, 2011). When examining the definition of belonging, its link to wellbeing again emerges as Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler (2012) record a struggle with the definition of the concept wellbeing. They state that "Wellbeing is abstract, multidimensional and socially and culturally constructed" (p. 235). This problematic relationship with definition extends to the early childhood sector where there is a significant gap in the literature around the clarification of what belonging and wellbeing look like for young children. Mashford-Scott et al. (2012) set a challenge by arguing for "the inclusion of children's perspectives on wellbeing...in early childhood settings" (p.232).

Components of belonging

In the process of identifying aspects of belonging, it became apparent that people can belong in "many different ways and to many different objects of attachments" (Sumsion & Wong, 2011, p. 32). Accepting this post-modern reality of multiple understandings of belonging existing within different contexts, this literature review utilises writings that have deconstructed belonging into different components to formulate a framework for investigation. This partitions the topic into more tangible aspects of belonging with the intention of facilitating its observation and documentation with young children. These are summarised into categories and linked to the literature as indicated in the table below.

Table 1.1: Identified components of belonging and related literature

Components of belonging	Elements of belonging with related authors
People (Relationships with adults and peers)	<p>Belonging to a group (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008)</p> <p>Social belonging (Sumsion & Wong, 2011)</p> <p>People and groups (Board of Studies, 2007)</p> <p>People, groups, wider community (Marsh, Bradley, Love, Alexander, & Norham, 2007)</p> <p>Family, community (Chehab, 2008)</p> <p>Relationships (DEEWR, 2009)</p>
Agency	<p>Political (Sumsion & Wong, 2011)</p> <p>Empowerment, proactive skills (Chehab, 2008)</p> <p>What is my influence? (DEEWR, 2009)</p>
Place	<p>Spatial, temporal, physical (Sumsion & Wong, 2011)</p> <p>Place (Board of Studies, 2007)</p> <p>Place (Marsh et al., 2007)</p> <p>Surroundings (Chehab, 2008)</p> <p>Place and identity (DEEWR, 2009)</p>
Inclusion and Exclusion	<p>Relating to people (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008)</p> <p>Acceptance and understanding (Board of Studies, 2007)</p> <p>Children become aware of fairness (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13)</p> <p>Insiders and outsiders (Sumsion & Wong, 2011)</p>

Literature around each of the identified components of belonging will be examined individually later, while the process of identifying the different components will be introduced here. In this respect the work of Sumsion and Wong (2011) was particularly helpful. They identify ten 'ways of belonging' labelled 'dimensions'. These are: emotional, social, cultural, spatial, temporal, physical, spiritual, moral/ethical, political and legal, which have been drawn on to construct the components of belonging for this study. The NSW Board of studies supports a construct of belonging as emerging from the connections made with people, places and groups and experienced through notions of identity, relationships, acceptance and understanding (Board of

Studies, 2007). This is another useful demarcation in relation to the present research as it links comfortably with the connections that exist within an early childhood setting - that is the connection between people (children and educators), places (home and care and learning centre) and groups (family and friendship groups). These notions of identity and relationships categorised by the Board of Studies (2007) and Sumsion and Wong (2011) are supported as themes in the EYLF as Learning outcome 1 (p.20) states: "Children have a strong sense of identity", and Principle 1 focuses on "Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships" (p.12). "Relationships are the foundations for the construction of identity – 'who I am', 'how I belong' and 'what is my influence?'"

Due to the paucity of research on how belonging manifests itself in a concrete way with young children, I proceed by drawing on readings relating to older children and adults that explored possible components of belonging. In *Belonging in the 21st century* (Marsh et al., 2007) the concept of belonging is identified as central to how we define who we are. This paper contends that a sense of belonging emerges from the connections made with people, places, groups, community and the larger world. Brooker and Woodhead (2008) also include belonging to a group as central to an individual's perception of belonging, and identify other components as: relating to people and places, to belief and ideas. In *Promoting a sense of belonging in an environment of conflict*, Chehab (2008) offers a contextually diverse perspective and concurs that families, communities and surroundings are crucial to self-identity and belonging. In the above writings the common elements that constitute a sense of belonging have been condensed into relationships, place, agency and inclusion and exclusion for the purposes of the present project (Table 1.1).

Relationships

Current thinking and practice in the early childhood sector has been strongly influenced by the emergence of sociocultural thought (Berthelsen, Brownlee a Johansson, 2009; Cannella, 2005; Edwards et al., 2006; Garhart Mooney, 2000). This paradigm shift from focusing on the child as an individual, to viewing children as strongly influenced by their social context - while contested - has placed relationships at the centre of most studies of young children. Brooker and Woodhead (2008) define belonging as the "relational dimension of personal identity" (p.3) thereby linking the concept to relationships. The EYLF reflects sociocultural principles and supports the above

definition by stating that “Belonging acknowledges children’s interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities” (DEEWR, 2009 p.7). The connection that exists between belonging and people is through relationships so from here forward this component will be labelled: belonging *through* people. The two significant ‘groups’ that children in early care and education settings establish relationships with are their peer group, and the educators entrusted with their care.

Educators:

For very young children, the developmental task of attachment is fundamental to their healthy growth and development (Duchesne, McMaugh, Bochner & Krause, 2013). It forms the basis of emotional and social wellbeing and by implication is central to a sense of belonging. The EYLF identifies that “children develop a sense of belonging when they feel accepted, develop attachments and trust those that care for them” (p.20). This document goes on to state that “educators’ practices and the relationship they form with children...have a significant effect on children’s involvement and success in learning (p.9).” It can be deduced from these quotes that educators need to work towards establishing strong relationships with the children in their care if they are to contribute to the construction of their sense of belonging. One way of achieving this is for educators to be attuned to children’s thoughts and feelings and to interact positively with young children (EYLF Principles p.12). Reflecting on relationships between children and educators, it has been identified that: “the main sign that a baby has a sense of wellbeing is that they are comfortable and relaxed and will engage with you” (PLP No. 61, 2013). Degotardi and Pearson (2014) expand on this by identifying that the sharing of emotions is critical for the development of strong relationships between infants and their caregivers, while Winter, 2008 suggests that relationships in which children feel recognised, understood and empathised with will support their growth of wellbeing and develop a sense of agency. When these qualities exist in child/adult relationships, it is anticipated that supportive and healthy connections will develop and the child’s experience of belonging will be enhanced. Howes (as cited in Rubin & Bukowski, 2011) goes further and links a secure attachment with a teacher to the ability of young children to form positive relationships with peers (p.185).

Peers:

The EYLF informs us that “Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community

participation” (DEEWR p.26). Acceptance by a peer group has important implications for the development of children's wellbeing as it is children's membership of particular groups that is central in constructing their sense of identity (Marsh et al., 2007; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). Early friendships within a child care setting can be said to exist within a cultural community and early care and education settings with their shared spaces and experiences constitute such a community (Rubin & Bukowski, 2011). The complexity of these shared experiences is explored by Howes when she discusses young children's friendship formation and acknowledges that friendships can cause sadness and hurt as well as being a source of comfort and sharing (as cited in Rubin & Bukowski, 2011). These relationships that children develop with each other are an important aspect of this study as acceptance within a peer group is central to enhancing children's sense of self as well as promoting their sense of belonging (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008). Developing meaningful relationships with peers is therefore a fundamental task for young children in early childhood and has long term implications for their wellbeing. Early friendships may persist over several years and children who have developed successful communications with other children in preschool at age three and four, are able to carry over the ability to develop friendships with other children as they enter kindergarten (de Groot Kim, 2010, p. 62).

In Katz's address to the Sydney Kindergarten Union Conference (Katz, 2013) she described how 'shared content' builds relationships between children. Martin (2005) supports this by stating that “perspectives emerge out of activity and enable increasingly complex forms of activity” (p.234). This sharing of a complex activity will develop connections between children as it builds shared meaning which is established through the joint process of expressing and interpreting perspectives (Degotardi, 2014). Sharing of meanings between two or more people is often referred to as intersubjectivity (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010) and emerges as a key component when children develop relationships with peers. Cooper and Hedges (2014) note how shared interests between peers can link their existing funds of knowledge and support relationships. Children's ability to develop friendships in a skilful way with their peers depends not only on their own capacities, but also on the patterns, policies and practices of the child care setting that they are attending (de Groot Kim, 2010; Rubin & Bukowski, 2011). This sphere of influence on peer relationships could be seen as affecting – either positively or negatively -

children's sense of belonging. Relationship building requires sustained involvement over time so a friendship can develop (de Groot Kim, 2010) and any number of different factors can have an impact on that sustained involvement. If this study can establish a link between belonging and peer relationships, this could then have implications for curriculum and policy development relating to how structural and pedagogical processes can support the development of shared meanings in early childhood settings.

Agency

Agency was another element of belonging that emerged from the initial readings which invited further investigation. At a basic level, agency is realised when a child is able to influence the activity and the people he or she is involved with (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2009). Contemporary writers have connected a child's sense of agency with their experience of belonging. "If children feel they are empowered to participate and contribute to their settings, a sense of belonging will ensue" (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008). These authors also state that belonging is a two-way process where children are entitled to have their needs and rights recognised, while at the same time being provided with opportunities to express personal agency and feeling that they have a role to play in decisions that affect their lives. Rogoff (2003) also defines this ability to influence as a child's agency (cited in Edwards et al., 2006 ,). Sumsion and Wong (2011) introduce a political element into agency by acknowledging that where power relations exist, there is always the possibility of resistance. The extent to which this resistance is accommodated and encouraged in an early childhood setting can be interpreted as the degree to which children's agency is supported.

From a majority world context Chehab, (2008) supports the relationship between agency and belonging when he writes: "we also need to teach them how to proactively work toward a sense of belonging..." (p.39). Grajczonek, (2012) alludes to empowered children who have a "readiness to challenge all that would constrain the human spirit" (p. 3). These are examples of how the literature on agency is populated with verbs, or 'doing words' reflecting the participatory nature of engaging young children with the experience of agency. The EYLF supports this link between belonging, participation and agency by recognising that a child's influence is part of their construction of identity – 'who I am', 'how I belong' and 'what is my influence?' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 20). Children being afforded influence is then linked with another

aspect of agency which is that “children should be active participants in all matters affecting their lives” (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 5,20). This connection that is made in the EYLF between agency and belonging is paralleled in international frameworks. In New Zealand's Te Whāriki, the need for children to develop an “increasing ability to determine their own actions and make their own choices in order to develop wellbeing” is identified (p.50). In that same framework, belonging goal 2 states that children have “an increasing ability to play an active part in the running of the programme” (p.58) and goal 4 proposes that children have the capacity to discuss and negotiate rules, rights, and fairness (Ministry of Education, 1996). The Early Years Foundation Stage framework in England supports the development of agency with young children with the statement in its overarching principles that children “learn to be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured” (EYFS, 2014, p. 5).

Place

A sense of place as an essential component of belonging is a consistent theme in most readings around this topic (Board of Studies, 2007; DEEWR, 2009; Marsh et al., 2007). Sumsion and Wong (2011) identify spacial belonging as a familiarity with place – a kind of “everyday belonging” or a “place one leaves and returns to” (p.42). Nsamenang (2008) supports this by referring to belonging as “going beyond human relationships and extending to familiarity with place and environments” (p.13). He continues to elucidate that when places become invested with memories and meaning, they can become extensions of the self. This notion of “place attachment” is viewed as a powerful aspect of belonging as well as being a contributor to emotional and identity development. The German word *heimat*, encapsulates this connection between belonging and place: “to feel at home and take for granted that you belong to this place”(Wagner, 2008).

In recent research about place, *Recognising young children's understandings*; Dockett, Kearney, and Perry (2012) found that young children are able to demonstrate a depth of knowledge about, and a real interest in, their own community. This was despite educators participating in the study voicing doubt about young children being able to understand abstract concepts like community (Dockett et al., 2012). In another situation, Haza Gutiérrez (2008) identified the strong connection that young people develop with place, but then expands this notion with the idea that children are capable of having feelings of belonging simultaneously to a variety of places or

environments . This concept supports the supposition that children can feel a sense of belonging to their primary place (home environment) as well as to the early childhood care and education setting which is where this research will take place. Meeuwig and van der Werf (2008) give weight to the notion of a child being able to experience a sense of belonging in an environment other than home, and link this experience to the child's sense of agency. They contend that agency and a sense of place work together when a child care setting becomes a place where culture is not just conveyed *to* children, but is made collectively *by* them. The combining of place, culture and agency is linked in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory identifying the four elements influencing development as: person, process, context and time. With his conception of a series of nested circles each influencing an individual's development, we can see the multiple influences on place as represented by the context of neighbourhood and child care setting (Duchesne et al., 2013, p. 379). Chehab (2008) supports this with his reference to surroundings as being crucial to self-identity and belonging. This research set out to establish if place when represented by the early care and education setting can be significant in a child's construction of belonging.

Inclusion and Exclusion

Reading around the topic of belonging consistently highlighted acceptance and peer approval as essential for the development of children's sense of belonging (Board of Studies, 2007; DEEWR, 2009). In an article examining identity and local culture in a globalised world, Bame Nsamenang (2008) states that: "tacit in the concept of a 'sense of belonging' is the opposite experience of 'not belonging', which may translate into exclusion and discrimination" (p.16). This establishes a connection between not belonging and exclusionary behaviours, suggesting a link between a sense of belonging and inclusionary behaviours. The EYLF frames inclusion and exclusion around children's sense of belonging with: "They develop understandings that their actions or responses affect how others feel or experience belonging" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 25) but then also states that children are aware of the impact of this behaviour: "they become aware of ways in which people are included or excluded from physical and social environments" (p.28).

Chehab (2008) identifies that by age four, "children have a strong sense of 'same' and 'different'"(p.37). Expanding on this idea leads to the probability that children who perceive difference may engage in inclusionary and exclusionary play in order to consolidate and confirm

their own identity and sense of belonging. The article continues to explore the idea that while a comprehension of difference is important in helping a child to develop a positive sense of self and belonging it should also be used to support the development of respect for others who may be perceived as different (Chehab, 2008). When children include others in their play, they are able to reflect on the consequences of the exclusion of others (Boulton-Lewis, Brownlee, Johnsson, Wainman & Whiteford, 2012). The implications for educators wanting to promote belonging in children marginalised by their peers are clear. If those peers are able to engage in intersubjective thought, they could be supported to practice more inclusive behaviour. Brooker and Woodhead (2008) explain it this way: "the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are learned early in life" (p.3) and that exclusionary behaviours are often associated with a sense of superiority. These authors go on to explore how a child's status as a member of a group impacts on their sense of identity, and how this group identity (an aspect of belonging) can lead to inclusionary and exclusionary behaviours.

This has ramifications in an Australian context as according to Nesdale (2008) young Anglo-Australian children typically do not show positive attitudes towards other ethnic groups and, in particular Indigenous Australians (as cited in Boulton-Lewis et al., 2012). There is also evidence (Ailwood et al. 2011) that the lack of focus on citizenship and social justice issues in the early years of schooling results in low expectations for early childhood educators to explicitly teach this (cited in Boulton-Lewis et al., 2012). These two factors combined present the possibility that many young Australians may not be challenged to question prejudice and exclusionary behaviours in their early care settings.

Just as adults hold diverse perspectives, so will children. It appears that addressing inclusion and exclusion could enhance a child's perception of belonging and draw attention to the moral and social justice implications of the concept of not belonging.

Sumsion and Wong (2011) address these ethical issues around inclusion and exclusion by asking the reader to consider the dichotomies of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and the role of power relations when creating openings and closures with respect to belonging. The above examples of children's understandings of same and different can be developmental but have a clear social justice and moral imperative as well. It is only if the critique of power relations is continually

addressed that we can be hopeful of giving children's perspectives the weighting that a rights based approach affords them (Johansson & White, 2011).

Currency of the child's voice

The publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) saw the emergence of a rights based perspective to early childhood that spawned a multitude of new imaginings and approaches to thinking in relation to young children (Clark & Moss, 2011). Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention focus specifically on the participatory rights of children, which has fostered an interest in research methodologies that incorporate young children's voices (Berthelsen et al., 2009) and which include authentic representations of informed consent. Despite the contemporary intention to reflect a participatory and rights based perspective in research, the abstract and philosophical nature of the concept 'belonging' has limited the number of investigations into its meaning as it relates to the field of early childhood. Many of the aspects of belonging identified above have originated from research conducted with adults and older children due to a lack of related data specific to young children. What is largely missing in this discourse are children's voices, or an understanding of what the concept of belonging means to them.

Despite a plethora of writing that supports viewing young children as powerful agents of their own learning, (Cannella, 2005; Clark, 2005; Dockett et al., 2012; Dunphy, 2012) there are few examples in research where children's ability to comprehend abstract concepts is presumed - for example, when seeking children's perspective on wellbeing, their ability to comprehend abstract ideas was questioned (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). This anomaly is explained by Berthelsen (2009) with the observation that the extent to which children can participate "depends not only on their capability but also on adult perceptions of those capabilities" (p.6). Despite these reservations, there is an increasing body of research that has established children as agents of change who are capable of providing rich and insightful glimpses into their worlds (Clark, 2007; Clark & Moss, 2011; Sorin, 2003). An example of this is the Mosaic approach devised by Clark, which successfully enabled the inclusion of children's 'voices' in a project that reconfigured their play space in a United Kingdom Kindergarten (Clark, 2007). Children were empowered to take a participatory role in deciding what they perceived should be included or excluded from an outdoor play area. Clark describes the impact that a restricted adult view can have by contending

that young children's abilities can be made "visible or hidden by the lenses adults use to view them and their lives" (p. 76). To accommodate this possibility of diverse interpretations arising, an interpretivist approach to analysis and reflection was adopted (Mukherji & Albon 2010).

Including the perspective of children in research raises issues of power dynamics that inevitably arise if the researcher is perceived as being in control of all adult/child interactions (MacNaughton, Siraj-Blatchford & Rolfe, 2010). In order to support a rights based approach, an environment needs to be established that challenges the construction of power, one group over another, and "reinforces transformative actions that celebrate activist bodies" (Cannella, 2005, p. 32). Research that encourages children's participation will automatically support an agenda that is focused on children's agency. We should not attempt consensus or seek to establish a universal 'voice' but authentically record the complexity that is the lived experience of children (Clark & Moss, 2011). Heinrich Joerdens (2014) reminds us that if research is genuine about including these perspectives - resulting in the empowerment of children and the inclusion of their voices as co-researchers - then the issue of informed consent also needs to be addressed.

Conclusion and research questions

It is apparent from the above reading of the literature that there is a widely held interest, both nationally and internationally, in the concept of belonging and the implications of this for young children, the people who work with them and for policy development. Despite this focus, there exists a paucity of research reflecting young children's understanding of belonging, and how this might manifest itself in a concrete and definable way. It appears to be counterproductive for a document, as far reaching as the Early Years Learning Framework is in the early childhood sector in Australia, to foreground a concept like belonging, when no shared understanding of the term has been established, and little work exists that examines belonging from a child's perspective. The universal and emotive appeal of the concept has been identified as a possible reason for its ubiquitous place in regulatory documents and its consistent inclusion in early childhood discourse. The elasticity of this concept makes it flexible enough to encompass a diversity of perspectives and interpretations, adding to its broad appeal. It appears timely for some of the gaps in knowledge that exist around young children's experiences of belonging to be investigated.

Emerging from the readings was evidence that an effective and authentic inclusion of children's voices would be supported using a rights based, participatory framework. These readings assisted with the identification of components of belonging, yet little is currently known about whether these categorisations authentically represent the understandings of belonging held by young children in early care and education settings. This research therefore, set out to expand our current understanding of belonging in an early childhood context by investigating young children's conceptualisations of the word and then incorporated the findings into the existing body of knowledge. It started with the following research questions:

1. How do young children understand and express their experience of belonging in their early care and education setting?
2. If we *can* capture young children's voices to reflect their conceptualisations of belonging, how would this impact on our existing practises and body of knowledge?

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter draws on the literature review and outlines the theoretical frameworks, methodology and data collection and analysis techniques selected to support and interpret this research project. It drafts how these were implemented and explains how planning and serendipitous moments came together to justify and validate the methodological choices that were made.

Theoretical frameworks

A Rights based paradigm

Rights based, participatory approaches were selected for this research where both children and adults can influence the direction of the research as well as the information gathering techniques that are employed. In 1989 when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrined the need to respect the views of children along with their right to have a say in decisions that affect them (UN, 1989, p. 12), it moved this rights based perspective to the foreground of current research practise with young children and shifted the thinking of early childhood researchers and practitioners. Article 12 of the convention states that: “the child has a right to express his or her views freely in all matters affecting the child, and to have them taken into account” (UN, 1989). Incorporating this paradigm into research with young children continues to elicit mixed and contentious results.

An exploration in preparation for the adoption of an interpretivist and participatory approach (Mukherji & Albon 2010) revealed that current literature on how young children think about complex topics exposes multiple contradictions. Many authors advocate for children to be viewed as competent social beings who are capable of having insight into, and being experts in their own lives (Baird, 2013; Rinaldi, 2006), but as Dockett et. al. (2012) point out, “children’s participation is sometimes limited by the boundaries imposed by a restricted adult view of children’s competence” (p.287). Some researchers acknowledge that although children may struggle to verbally articulate complex thoughts (Peers & Fleeer, 2013) - such as their sense of belonging - in a consistent way through language, their thinking and ideas are able to be captured using a variety of alternative information gathering techniques.

The need to acknowledge and foster children's agency is reflected in many recent rights based research studies (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2010), and was an integral aspect of implementing this approach. Agency is, however, a concept contextualised by power and control, and is subsequently contested in an environment inhabited by both adults and children where power differentials may form a barrier to children's authentic expressions of their perspectives (Dunphy, 2012; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). A commitment to the agency dimension of a children's rights approach necessitates the researcher being willing to modify anticipated research structures to accommodate the contributions of children. Collaboration of this nature challenges the traditional power dynamic that may exist in an early care and learning setting. The inclusion of children's voices, the gathering of informed consent, a multi-modal method data collection and the choice to use interpretivist principles for analysis and reflection were built into the construction of the research process. This ensured an adherence to a rights based approach and the inclusion of children's agency throughout the project. These features, combined with a knowledge of current best practise principles resulted in children's participation being respected and informed in every aspect of the research. From the commencement of the project the position was assumed that the children would convey their understandings clearly if it were anticipated that they were capable of conceptualising them. "If you think they can do it – then they can"(Duncan, 2009. p. 179).

The Qualitative framework

Qualitative research was selected as the research paradigm as its focus on words and meaning (Mukherji & Albon, 2010) matched the intended content of the research which was to investigate an interpretation of a socially constructed concept. This research methodology also supported the construction of the research project as its aim was to identify the meaning of something (belonging) to a particular group of people (in this case, preschool children) (MacNaughton et al., 2010). The gathering of narrative and image based data in a naturalistic setting that is characteristic of qualitative research (Mukherji & Albon, 2010) also suited the context and content of this project. Other features common to qualitative approaches include ethnographic principles - where the researcher spends time immersed in a particular setting and an ethical concern for the subjects of the research (MacNaughton et al., 2010). I wanted to be able to draw valid and reliable conclusions from a small sample of people and unlike a quantitative structure

which aims for a larger number of context stripped cases, a qualitative structure supported these demands (Huberman, 1994; Mukherji & Albon, 2010).

When selecting analytical models for this qualitative research, the interpretivist approach was adopted as it contains elements of reflexivity that allow for multiple possibilities of interpretation (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). This aligns comfortably with the structure and content of a rights based research study which, as described above, needs to be adaptable - in this case to support children's agency by including their voices. Mac Naughton and Hughes, (2009) explain interpretivism as each person continually making sense of their own circumstances, which again makes it a well-appointed framework to support the inclusion of children's voices and educators' perspectives into the research. It was central to the premise of the research that the richness of children's understandings was able to be captured in the communication medium chosen by those children. By using children's insights "we can try and understand how they see the world" (Clark, 2007, p. 76). This is precisely what this exploration of children's sense of belonging set out to achieve by utilising the adaptive approaches outlined above.

Participants and recruitment

The research investigated how belonging was interpreted by a group of 34 preschool children, attending an early care and education setting in the mixed residential/educational/industrial suburb of Erina. The children were aged between 3 and 5 years and attended on a Monday and Tuesday. All of these children and families had opportunity to participate in the study but recordings were only used when they related to the topic and where permission had been granted. Data was collected over 8 days within a 4-week period, with 6 hours spent in the setting each day. This choice of time and days maximised the variety of contexts in which the children could be observed – for example, arrival and departure, lunch, quiet time and outdoor play. The location of this preschool meant that the families who attended represented a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The intention was that this diversity would support the findings being relevant in a wide variety of settings despite the small sample size. The director of the service was approached and was enthusiastic about the possibility of participating in and learning from the research. She agreed to distribute information to parents and educators, to inform them of the aims and structure of the project and to assist in gaining informed consent. The director and

educators in this service were aware of the research ethos and processes and were positive about their, and the children's, role in the investigation.

The families of all the children attending on the selected days were invited to participate and those who chose to, were given consent forms (Appendix A) approved by the Macquarie University ethics committee (Appendix F). This ensured that participation was voluntary and that family consent was informed. Within a rights based approach the informed consent of children is identified as an ethical issue (Nutbrown & Clough 2009) and as such was another essential component of this research study. Although many of the children could write their names, written permission was not sought as this was deemed tokenistic by the researcher in this context. Instead, the children involved were introduced to the concept and meaning of research and their right to not participate in it, in the first guided discussion session. It was explained that photographs, observations and discussions would be recorded for inclusion. This topic was revisited each research day, with children showing their comprehension with comments such as: "you can keep my drawing for your research" (Appendix D. Journal 08/07). The educators' consent forms included information describing indicators in children that may reflect their reluctance to participate. This was to ensure the children's participation was always voluntary and that their exposure to the research project was never detrimental. Educators working with this group of children were also provided with information that met with the requirements of informed consent, and were made aware of their option to withdraw their participation at any time (Appendix; B & C).

Data generation

In order to accommodate the above framework, interactive and reflective data collection techniques were required (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). Methods which allowed for rich descriptions, accommodated unforeseen possibilities, validated the local context, provided multiple mediums for expression and were respectful of the participants were sought out. In order to achieve this as authentically as possible, data was collected using ethnographic procedures occurring in children's natural environments over a period of time. The inspiration for the design of this research project was drawn from the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss,

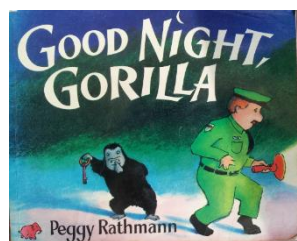
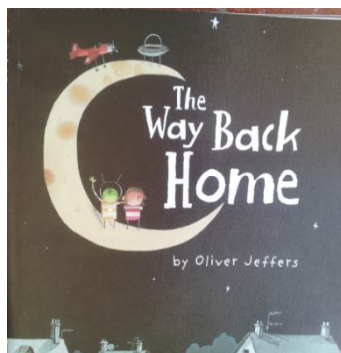
2001; 2011), which has two main aspects consistent with a participatory, interpretivist and rights-based perspective.

1. The first allows the researcher to utilise a variety of data collection techniques, ensuring that children's perspectives and opinions are recorded in a manner that suits each child's level and preferred medium of communication. While very young children may not always be able to verbally articulate complex thoughts in a consistent way through language (Clark & Moss, 2011), utilising a range of data collection methods allows for a variety of data collection opportunities resulting in a triangulated reflection of these children's experiences of belonging being documented.
2. The second aspect allows for the incorporation of emergent research methods that accommodate the modification of data collection techniques in response to the 'child's voice' (Mac Naughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). This approach reflects a view of the child as a competent and active agent in their own learning (Edwards, Gandini & Foreman, 1998).

Data gathering

Techniques were chosen that would maximise opportunities for the researcher to interact with the children in a naturalistic setting thus providing the greatest possibility for authentic participation and recording (Huberman & Miles, 1994). It was deemed essential for this study to provide opportunities where one mode of expression was not privileged over another. The data gathering techniques employed are described in detail below.

Guided discussion supported by storytelling



This data generation technique was modified from the group discussion method put forward by Clark (2005) and was central for the construction of a shared understanding of the nature of the research project. Story books with a theme of belonging were used as a vehicle to support a

co-construction of knowledge between adults and children. Each of the books presented to the children had a title page stating: "This book belongs to..." (Fudge, 2002; Graham, 1999; Rathman, 1994) which was a construct familiar to most of the children. This starting point provided a useful platform from which to launch a discourse on what belonging meant to this group of children. These guided discussion sessions would begin with a re-counting of previous discussions on belonging, reminding the children of their documented input so that their conceptualisations and

knowledge were consolidated and extend. As the stories progressed, different aspects of the concept of belonging would be explored through questions such as: "What makes you feel like you belong here?" (See Appendix E for a more complete question list and Appendix D. Journal 08 /07 for extended discussion). This technique of guided participation put forward by Rogoff (cited in Dunphy, 2012) suggests that when children collaborate to make new meaning they increase their skills and offer educators new ways to "think about and describe children's learning" (p.291). Similar guided discussions took place on all of the research implementation days, and did indeed afford the participating children a platform to reflect on their individual interpretations of belonging which provided the research with some new opportunities to conceptualise this.

Imaginative play

Imaginative play incorporating open ended materials and persona dolls, was selected as another mode of expression provided for children not as confident or competent with the spoken word to



convey their meanings through. The area traditionally used for block play in the early care and education setting was modified to include a variety of imaginative play materials such as small wooden logs, crocheted circles, a basket of pinecones and persona dolls (mini-me's made using small containers with photographs of the children and educators attached). This play combination supported the constructs of the research study as open ended materials allow children to pursue their own play agendas (Barblett & Maloney, 2010) and the mini me's provided the children with a mechanism to include themselves in the exploration of social constructs in a non-threatening way (Clark, Kjørholt & Moss 2010). The children were sometimes distracted from exploring belonging as they invented and pursued play themes of their own making, particularly when not supported by an adult. The researcher, however was able to capture data rich with information relating to relationships and agency by focusing the play with statements like:

“If the snow pony has a house to go into, she may feel like she belongs there”
and “Does your snow horse want to go in the stable that Ma Mi has built?”
(Appendix D. Journal 09/07).

Imaginative play was set up on days all of the research implementation days.

Drawing opportunities

Drawing was offered as another expressive medium in this research study as it provides children with a narrative tool that is both familiar and nonthreatening (MacDonald, 2009). This proved to



be a universally popular form of expression which gave meaning to the construct that if we are sincere about understanding young children's perspectives, then we as researchers need to provide opportunities for children to express themselves in ways that are most meaningful or familiar to them (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). Drawing was provided on all of the research implementation days, and although

children were free to make their own creations, they were often keen to represent their interpretations of belonging when supported by the researcher.

Letter writing was added to drawing on day 4 as children had begun to do this spontaneously, and incorporating it into the research was an acknowledgement of the children being experts in their own lives as well as supporting them to have some agency in directing their own learning (Clark & Moss 2011). As the children drew, I scaffolded their learning by prompting an alternative interpretation of their construction of belonging:

Selma: "Would you like to leave a message for someone who makes you feel like you belong here?" (I explained that they could draw a picture and I would do the writing for them if they chose). (Appendix D. Journal 16/07).

This generated rich data some of which is represented in the examples below.



Child conferencing based on a story scenario

On day 2 of the data collection process, it emerged that the idea of time as a component of belonging was a recurring theme in the children's thinking. In addition to this was the children's consistent inclusion of the concept of belongings brought from home as an aspect of belonging that was significant for them. In order to reflect the rights based, participatory and interpretivist perspectives selected (Fleet & Merewether 2014) and to be respectful the child as an active agent in the construction of their own thinking (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry 2011), a new data collection technique was constructed to effectively capture and record these emerging strands. A story box was assembled with artefacts representing different possibilities for promoting belonging. Children who appeared engaged with the concept of belonging were invited to be part of an individual conference (Clark 2005). They were told a short imaginative story about a new child in the service (represented in the photo below by the wooden figurine).



The participating child was then invited to select which items they thought might enhance that new child's sense of belonging. The options provided were: an educator from the service, a friend, a comfort blanket, food from home, a ticket allowing for choice (agency), a family photo, a toy from home and a toy from the service. This experience was presented to the children on days 3 and 4, and all children who showed an interest were given the opportunity to participate.

The table below summarises the data that was generated when children made their choices.

Table 2.1: *Story Scenario Choices*

Item (From left to right in photo above)	Number of children who chose this as their first, second or third option.
An educator (mini-me)	10
A friend (mini-me)	13
Favourite blanket from home	12
Food from home	12
Ticket that says you can do whatever you want (agency)	6
Photo of family	12
Toy from school	0
Food from home	12

Analysis and Reflection

The rights based paradigm that incorporated a qualitative and participatory framework proved an effective scaffold for this research study which collated data that was largely descriptive. Under the heading *Recurring features of qualitative research*, Huberman and Miles (1994) identify that within this framework, most analysis is done with words. This also accommodated children's voices which moulded and informed the structure of the research. Children were given the opportunity to express themselves in ways that were not just verbal or language based (Harcourt et al., 2011), for example drawing, imaginative play and guided storytelling. Listening as a conscious discipline was incorporated to ensure that children's input and thinking were valued and included in an authentic way, and that the research project was driven by the acknowledgement of the active, agentive child (Dockett et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 1998).

The analysis and reflection used interpretivist methods and was conducted inductively - where all pieces of data were viewed, read and considered in order to derive themes that represented these children's understandings of belonging. Examples consistent with these themes were detected in the multiple and varied data sources and sorted to establish patterns and meanings for

analysis. These themes were then compared with the components of belonging that had been identified in the literature review - people, place, agency, and inclusionary and exclusionary play which provided a starting point for the qualitative analysis. A small amount of the data was codified with numerical values (see Table 2.1 above) which allowed for the inclusion of some quantitative analysis to support the existence of the emerging strands of belonging. A more nuanced, and personal conceptualisation of belonging emerged from the triangulated data which was then layered across the existing themes in an attempt to accommodate the unanticipated information in a meaningful way (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The initial themes were reconceptualised to reflect an inclusive representation of the children's perspectives. Analysis of this type of data can be hard to quantify but by analysing and identifying consistent patterns and themes as they emerged, an understanding of the topic was able to emerge and develop (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mukherji & Albon, 2010). A willingness to alter some of the initial assumptions of the proposal was evidenced throughout the project and the anticipated data collection techniques were progressively modified. This allowed the researcher to uncover aspects of belonging that had not been previously identified and presented the opportunity to incorporate these new constructions of children's conceptualisation of belonging into the existing body of knowledge.

Trustworthiness of the analysis

Patterns of conceptualisation reflecting the components of belonging were documented in a variety of naturalistic contexts over time, supporting the validity and reliability of the data. These elements increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research and are a way to support validity and reliability (Glesne, 2011). Other structures that ensured trustworthiness, were the inclusion of regular supervision and mentoring sessions where analysis and reflection on the research occurred in partnership with the research supervisor. Peer review occurred during networking meetings with other research students and the preliminary findings of the research were presented as a poster display at the 2014 AECA Conference in Melbourne (Appendix G). This occasion provided opportunity for discussion generating feedback from peers and experts that informed elements of the future direction of the research.

Validation through literature was evident as many of the findings are substantiated in the literature review, further adding to the trustworthiness of the results. Opportunities for the triangulation of data, where multiple data collection techniques are used to ensure that the same patterns are identified across a variety of situations (Glesne, 2011; MacNaughton et al., 2010) were incorporated as a complimentary way to maximize the extent to which the results could be interpreted as valuable and reliable. Reflexivity is an element common in many qualitative studies as it enhances researchers sensitivity to the field by ensuring they are aware of their own biases and subjectivities (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). This willingness to not be bound by the initial construct allowed for a slight reshaping of the design of the study (MacNaughton et al., 2010) and ensured that the child's voice could be naturalistically included. Incorporating agency in research about children means that the possibility of the unexpected has to be anticipated.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 has identified the theory and conceptualisations supporting the selection of the chosen methodology and research strategies for this study. The multiple data collection techniques that supported a rights based, participatory and interpretivist approach are explained. Their efficacy is demonstrated in that they allowed for a diversity of modes of expression to be recorded, documented and analysed while accommodating the triangulation of results. This combination ensured that the children's contributions could modify and inform the structure of the research and be reflected in the final analysis. This reflected the notion of the child as a powerful participant in their own learning and supported the children's agency in an authentic way. Trustworthiness and validity occurred organically as a result of the collaborative nature of the Macquarie University's Early Childhood Department and the multiple consultation and reflection opportunities made available through the supervision and structure of the Master of Research programme.

Chapter 3: Results

Four main components of belonging (place, people, agency and inclusion/exclusion) emerged from the literature review presented in Chapter 1. These components provided the starting point for the present investigation as they were identified as possible contributors to the establishment of what belonging may mean to young children. The investigation therefore commenced giving equal significance to each of these elements.

This chapter describes how the children introduced new aspects of belonging that had not been anticipated by the initial readings, and how these were incorporated into the structure of the study. The use of a graphic construction – the lattice pie – is introduced illustrating how the analysis of these findings prompted the shift from the identified aspects of belonging as stated previously, to the reduced components of 'belonging through people' and 'belonging to place'. This chapter proceeds to demonstrate how some of the other original elements (inclusion and agency) are now conceptualised as 'strands' that give substance to children's recorded experiences of belonging with 'emotional connection' performing a connective function. The role of 'shared interests' as well as new aspects of belonging, ('time' and 'belongings') are explained here and all are included in the lattice pie infographic. This chapter commences with an examination of how a shared interpretation of belonging was established with the children and then extended on. The processes and findings of the research project are laid out, referenced to the investigative readings and linked to examples from the data that illustrate each supposition.

Establishing a shared interpretation of belonging

As explained in Chapter 1, belonging is an abstract concept that is philosophical in origin and open to multiple interpretations dependent on context (Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler, 2012; Peers & Fler, 2013). Because this research was framed within a rights based, participatory and interpretivist framework (Berthelsen, Brownlee, & Johansson, 2009; Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2009) which acknowledged the centrality of including the child's perspective, it was deemed logical to begin by establishing the children's current interpretations of belonging. Once established, this base allowed for a shared understanding of this complex concept to be co-

constructed with the researcher and the children, and the new understandings to emerge in an organic way from the data generation methods employed (Dunphy, 2012).

On the first day, part of the introduction to the children was a guided discussion supported by storytelling (a data gathering technique outlined in Chapter 2). This was implemented with the sharing of a story book with a theme of belonging entitled, 'I know a Rhino' (Fudge, 2002). The title page contained the words: "This book belongs to..." and it was anticipated that this familiar format would support the pedagogical process of scaffolding the children to move from what they know, to what they are capable of understanding (Garhart Mooney, 2000), and that this would also connect to their prior experience of belonging (Harcourt, Perry, & Waller, 2011). This strategy supported the children's learning by identifying their pre-established understandings of the concept - and built on this - so that new constructions of what it meant to the children who attend this early childhood service to belong (Sorin, 2003) emerged. Confirmation of children's existing understanding of belonging and an example of the co-construction process is illustrated below.

Selma: Who do you think this book may belong to?

Oliver: It belongs to you

Selma: What makes you think that?

Anna: You brought it from your house with you

Selma: If I left the book here, who might it belong to then?

Oliver: You, it would still belong to you and you could fetch it again

(Appendix D. Journal 08/07).

Articles 12 and 13 in the Convention on the rights of the child (UN, 1989) state that the extent to which children can participate depends "not only on their capability but also on adult perceptions of those capabilities" (p.6). It was reassuring at this early stage of the research project to have my assumption that even young children are capable of thinking about complex and abstract concepts like belonging confirmed, and to realise that the children were engaged and interested in the topic. Supporting this was the following response to the question "What makes you feel like you belong here"?

Morgan: I've been here for years, do you know how many I've been here?

About 11 thousand I've been here.

Felix: I come here Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. 4 days.

(Appendix D. Journal 08/07)

The example above records the first occasion when the element of time was introduced as an aspect of belonging that the children identified as significant.

New themes and a new construction

As the research project progressed it became clear that the children were thinking and talking about elements of belonging that differed in content and quality from the four distinct elements which had emerged from the literature. The data began to settle naturally into two main components: 'belonging through people' and 'belonging to place'. Ongoing analysis of the data revealed common threads – referred to here as strands – that wove through these components of belonging and gave substance to them because they afforded meaning and significance to belonging for these children. These strands of time, agency, shared interests, belongings and inclusion were identified by the children as contributing to the significance of place and people in their conceptualisations of belonging – especially when experienced with an emotional connection. Agency, shared interests (as part of relationships) and inclusion had emerged as important from the literature. It was the way that emotional connection gave these strands



This lattice pie is used to visually illustrate the relationship between the components of belonging: place and people (the pie filling) and the strands (lattice) that enhance these themes and give substance to the children's experiences of belonging. Emotional connection is the strand that unites all the others.

meaning and the impact this had on the components of place and people as conceptualised and expressed by the children, that appears to be unique to this research.

'Time' as a strand

This element had not been identified in the literature but emerged consistently from the data, as illustrated in the discussion between Morgan and Felix in the section above. It became clear that using a story as a stimulus for discussion elicited rich information from the participating children as this mode of expression allowed them to become 'meaning makers' (Clark, 2007; Clark & Moss, 2011) in their individual and shared constructions of what belonging might be. Having adopted a participatory research approach from the outset, I proceeded to include a guided discussion method, based on close listening (Clark, 2005; Harcourt et al., 2011), as a data collection technique throughout the research period as a tool to support the children's participation. The role that time plays in children's experiences of belonging will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

'Belongings' as a strand

As mentioned previously, the importance of items brought from home was consistently raised in the variety of play contexts available to the children, so it was incorporated as a strand of belonging. It is common to refer to items of possession as 'belongings', and in academic literature such possessions, when used for emotional security are referred to as transitional objects or 'lovvies' (Brandt, 2014). Transitional objects are defined as objects that are not part of the child's body that can be used for comfort and are primarily a reminder of the mother (Hobara, 2003). There are examples – confirmed in this research project - that indicate that it is not just the mother that can be recalled via a transitional object, but other significant relationships as well (Davar, 2001). The reality that belongings had significance to the children in an early care and education setting and that these informed their sense of belonging, emerged almost immediately from the data and was consistent throughout the collection and analysis process. It has been identified that people can belong in multiple ways and to many different objects of attachment (Sumsion & Wong, 2011), and it appeared that for this group of children these objects of attachment were more varied than the transitional objects defined in the literature. They played a complex and central role in their experiences of belonging and offered different layers of meaning involving status, agency, power, familiarity, shared interest with

others and comfort. These meanings depended on the child, the location, the element of risk (transgression) and the meaning afforded to the object.

'Shared interests' as a strand

Shared interests had emerged from the readings as an aspect of belonging related to inclusion and exclusion of the peer group. During the data collection process, it became apparent that this construct was being played out differently in the lives of the children. When the children in this study shared an interest – with either adults or peers – the shared interest strengthened the relationship and contributed to that child's perception of belonging. The idea of shared interests can be expanded on when combined with the concepts 'sustained shared thinking' and 'shared playfulness' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Although these concepts have previously been referred to as indicative of high quality pedagogical interactions between adults and children, it was evident in this research that these shared interests may be of similar significance when building relationships with both peers and adults. We know "shared meaning is established through the joint process of expressing and interpreting perspectives" (Degotardi, 2014, p. 187), so it could be extrapolated that shared interests would build relationships through the sharing of ideas. Due to the role that shared interests played in all relationships, they positioned more logically in the context of this research as a separate strand of belonging.

'Inclusion', 'agency' and 'emotional connection' as strands

Inclusion and agency were identified in the initial review as components of belonging but have been reframed by the research as strands that gain significance for the children in the presence of emotional connection. Rogoff explains agency as a child's ability to "influence the activity and the people he or she is involved with" (cited in Edwards et al., 2006, p. 45). We also know that agency supports a child's experience of belonging when they feel empowered to participate and contribute to their settings (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008). The central role that the experience of feeling included has on a child's sense of wellbeing and belonging was outlined earlier (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008; Sumsion & Wong, 2011) and the remainder of this chapter will illustrate how all these strands of belonging were conceptualised by the children to give meaning to the two components of belonging: people and place, especially in the presence of emotional connection. The construction of the strand inclusion/exclusion is complex and although tacit in

the concept of inclusion, is that of exclusion, for the purpose of simplicity this strand is henceforth referred to as inclusion.

Belonging through people

The incorporation of sociocultural perspectives into early childhood philosophy has resulted in children being viewed as strongly influenced by their social context and has placed relationships at the centre of most studies of young children (Berthelsen et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2006; Garhart Mooney, 2000; Yelland, 2005). The EYLF identifies relationships as significant for the development of a sense of belonging: "Belonging acknowledges children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities" (DEEWR, 2009 p.7). It was not surprising therefore that the most consistent component of belonging to emerge in the literature review was belonging through people. The research confirmed this as did the data gathered through 'child conferencing based on a story scenario' (Chapter 2 p.32), which resulted in three of the top four choices made by the children when selecting an item that would enhance a sense of belonging, embodying relationships:

- photo of family,
- the mini-me (representing a friend)
- the mini-me (representing an educator)

Two sub-themes of 'belonging through people' are explored below – Peers and Educators.

Relationships with Peers

The establishment of meaningful relationships with peers within an early care and education setting is acknowledged as central to the development of a child's positive sense of belonging (DEEWR, 2009; Harcourt et al., 2011). Jonsdottir (cited in Engdahl, 2012) linked the notion of peer relationships and belonging when she identified that children who were labelled by a peer experienced a sense of belonging. This research study verified this, as the children concerned were able to clearly articulate the importance of peer relationships using the range of mediums of expression available to them. This was evident on one occasion when these children were invited to create a picture of someone who made them feel like they belonged.

Olivia: (to her sister) "draw a picture of me – you belong to me"

Olivia proceeded to construct a picture of herself, her sister Maddy and their friend Freya.

Selma: "Why did you choose to put Freya in the picture?"

Olivia: "She makes me feel at home".

Selma: "If you came here without Olivia would you still belong here?"

Maddy: "No" (Appendix 4. Journal 08/07)



Olivia uses the medium of drawing to articulate that her sister and her friend are significant to her experience of belonging.

Olivia is reflecting an authentic contextual understanding of belonging and the dimension that peer relationships contribute to that. Acceptance within a peer group is central to a sense of belonging as it will enhance not only children's sense of self but their feeling of being accepted (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008). Olivia clearly links the feeling of comfort and safety from home (an emotional connection), with the sense of belonging that this peer affords her. It is the strand of emotional connection that gives meaning to her conceptualisation of belonging through peers in this early childhood care and education setting.

To support the implementation of the commitment to provide the children multiple opportunities for self-expression (Clark 2007), they were also presented with a story box scenario (see Chapter 2 p.31) and offered the opportunity to select an item that they felt would support



belonging in their pre-school. The persona doll that represented a "friend", was the second most popular choice out of 9 possibilities and reinforced the importance that the research group placed on peer connection in promoting a sense of belonging. One of the children had the following explanation for his choice:

Max: "If he has no friends he will cry and cry and his Mum would have to come and pick him up" (Appendix D. Journal 15/07).

Here again it is demonstrated that emotional connection gives meaning to the component of belonging that is peer relationships. The following extracts elicited during a guided story discussion illustrate in a similar manner how emotional connection gives the component relationships (with peers) significance. This time through the strands inclusion and shared interests.

Selma: "Who is special for you here at preschool? Who makes you feel like you belong?"

Olivia: "Freya, she loves me...we play school and she lets me be the teacher sometimes."

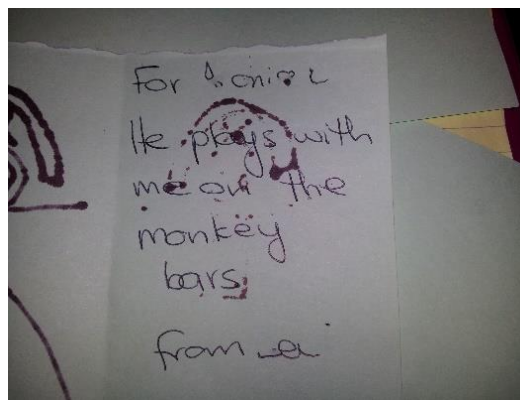
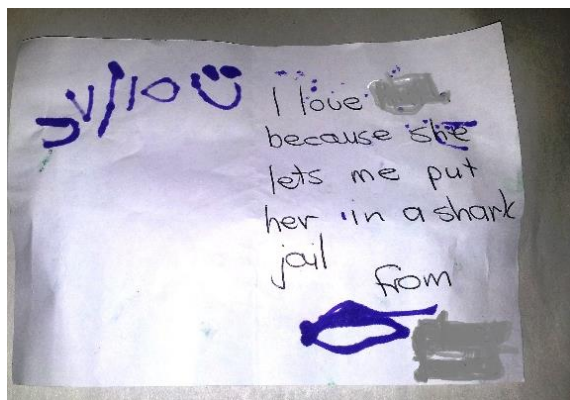
Morgan: "Benwe play Lego and star wars together."

Isaac: "Me and Aiden, we like to go on the monkey bars"

(Appendix D. Journal 08/07)

Additional data supporting these strands of inclusion and shared interests was gathered through the 'letters' children wrote to each other when encouraged to express why certain children made them feel like they belonged.





The examples below reflect the role of the two new strands of belonging, time and belongings in peer relationships. The first quote occurred in a group discussion.

Emily: "I come lots of days and Freya comes lots of days. Salina doesn't come lots of days" (Appendix D. Journal 16/07).

In reality Emily attended 3 days per week, the same amount as Salina while Freya attended 5 days per week. Emily, however, frequently assumed a leadership role during group play while Salina tended to take a more following role (Appendix D; Journal 16/07/14). Her response suggests that she has constructed a reality that presumes she attends for more time than those she deems less powerful. Examining this from another perspective Sumsion and Wong (2011) link familiarity to belonging, and unfamiliarity to feeling 'alien'. If we interpret length of time spent in a service with level of familiarity, it becomes clear why belonging and time have been associated in the conceptualisations of these children. It also appears that the perceived length of time attended empowers them to participate and contribute to their settings, impacting on another strand of belonging - agency (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008) and how that influences a sense of place. It is evident that the "true spirit of places resides not only in their physical parameters, but also in the symbolic meanings that grow up around them as a result of the history, participation and belonging of the people who use them" (Olds, cited in Fleet & Britt, 2011, p. 145).

Reflected below is another recording where, agency and time, (in this case age) as strands of belonging give meaning to peer relationships. The emotional connection is represented here by the conviction with which the children are expressing these sentiments.

Freya: "I'll tell them what to do because I'm 5"

Anna: "I'm 5 too"

Freya: "Yes, but you're little 5 and I'm big 5"

Anna: "I'm real 5!" (Appendix D. Journal 09/07)

Rinaldi (2001) tells us that part of children's learning process is that as they communicate their mental images or theories to others, they also represent them to themselves, developing a more conscious vision. It appears that the children are indeed influenced by others' mental images and this impacts on their perception of peer relationships and their conceptualisations of belonging. Hedges, Cullen, and Jordon (2011) support this role of friendships stating that they "enable children to extend each other's learning, thinking, and interests by drawing on each other's experiences and funds of knowledge" (p.196). Mead (cited in Degotardi, 2014) described children's participation in shared communal games as "a period in which he likes to belong"(p.193), clearly linking a shared experience with a sense of belonging. This is explained as an extension of intersubjectivity or a togetherness that is achieved as children establish common ground (Degotardi, 2014). In the next example Felix experiences his toy (a dino-pet) as a shared interest that provides a connection in the relationship that he has with peers.

Felix: "Oliver and Cooper both have green ones. Josh has one, but it's not the same colour, it's blue" (Appendix D. Journal 09/07).

The following two children had a similar interpretation of belongings as shared interest.

Julian: I like playing with Josh. We play trash packs. We bring them from home (Appendix D. Journal 16/07).

It is useful to examine the role of belongings and peer relationships in the light of Hugglund and Lofdahl (2012). Although their work is mainly around diversity, they provide some insights into belongings if they are regarded as providing meaning and opportunity for shared social knowledge, just as experiences are: "Children's different experiences...are embedded in the setting, give meaning to the setting and as such contribute to these children's shared social knowledge" (p.121). The following section explores how belongings were afforded multiple attributes which related to both place (setting) and relationships through shared social knowledge. Emily and Salina (who were not frequently observed interacting together)

demonstrated the power that belongings (in this example, coins) can have in constructing shared social knowledge. Emily gave Salina some money that she had retrieved from her locker.

Emily: Have some money (she counts out 2 coins.)

Salina: Thanks

Emily: That's to buy the snow pony (the girls move off together)

Selma: Why did Emily give you the money?

Salina: She was mean to me but now she's my friend

(Appendix D. Journal 16/07).

Emerging from this data is evidence of a socially constructed situation where children use their common belongings to establish and maintain meaningful peer relationships. Their shared social knowledge is then integrated into their peer culture (Hugglund & Lofdahl, 2012) assisting to build shared funds of knowledge (Hedges et al., 2011). The children appear to understand that there are strict rules around when and where belongings from home can be accessed, but when these rules are transgressed it enhance status and power and supports shared interests within relationships through the heightened emotional tension.

In this research when children remove items from their lockers at times that are 'not sanctioned' it appears to enhance their agency which is then reflected positively in their peer relationships. The status of belongings accessed at these times appears to be elevated compared to times when their use is sanctioned (for example, rest time). In the play scenario below, Emily secreted a "snow pony" from her locker thereby providing a shared interest and elevating her status within the group. This enabled her to be the one who selected which children participated in the play and allowed her to assign roles in that play.

Selma: Emily, Ma Mi thinks you are ignoring her. Can she play too?

Emily: She is playing; she is wicked fairy. Do you want to be the wicked fairy?

Ma Mi: Shakes her head.

Emily (to Freya): You must be the wicked fairy

Freya: I don't want to be (Appendix D. Journal 09/07).

On another occasion when having a discussion about the mini-me's, we see how belonging can empower a child's decision making, reflecting agency in that setting.

Felix: "At the end of the year when we go to big school can we take these home?"

Selma: "Actually, when I leave at the end of my research you can take them home if that's OK with Naomi and Bev."

Felix: "I will leave mine at preschool until the end of the year when I go to big school." (Appendix D. Journal 15/07).

Relationships with Educators

Children's right to meaningful and sustaining relationships are integral to many of the conventions, frameworks and regulations that support and guide educators in children's services (Clough & Nutbrown, 2009; Garhart Mooney, 2000; UN, 1989). The EYLF states that "children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing when educators show genuine affection and respect and promote children's sense of belonging" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 31). In this research, as part of the consistent implementation of the mixed method options promoted by the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005) thereby triangulating the data (Glesne, 2011); the children were given a variety of opportunities to express their views on the role the educators at the service played in the construction of their sense of belonging. In response to the question: "Who makes you feel special at preschool, like you belong?" one of the children offered this insight into his relationship with an educator:

Morgan: "Naomi massages my shoulders when I'm sad and then I'm laughing to nearly explode my heart." (Appendix D. Journal 15/07)

When the educator concerned was asked to comment on this information, she reflected that this particular child sometimes became overwhelmed with situations and she had discovered that this technique assisted him to "move on." This is an illustrative example of an adult identifying the need to support a child and that child then attributing the substance of that emotional connection as giving meaning to the relationship which he experiences as a sense of belonging. The EYLF tells us that belonging acknowledges "children's interdependence with others and the basis of

relationships in defining identities”(DEEWR, 2009, p. 7). This child had been attending this early childhood setting for 2 years, resulting in a shared history that supports and gives meaning to this relationship. The combination of time and emotional connection have contributed to his experience of belonging. It is a case of two partners bringing past experiences into their interactions and thereby developing the relationship (Berthelsen et al., 2009). The EYLF states that “In early childhood settings children develop a sense of belonging when they feel accepted, develop attachments and trust those that care for them” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 20). When considering how relationships between children and educators are developed, the above is evidence of children feeling recognised, understood and empathised with. The presence of these emotions is associated with a child's sense of wellbeing and agency (Winter, 2008). The relationship between this child and his educator is reflective of skilled support of a child's agency as Naomi implements a strategy that is favoured by Morgan, that she has found affirms her relationship with him in multiple situations. Rogoff (2003) identifies that agency is the experience of an ability to influence (Edwards et al., 2006) and in the above example, this child knows that something that is significant to him has been retained by the educator to be implemented when most required. He is experiencing influence and agency in his early childhood setting, identified by him when asked a question about belonging.

In addition to giving meaning to the sub-theme of peer relationships, children also identified shared interests as a significant element of the relationships that they had with their educators. Morgan commented on what was significant about his relationship with another educator in room with:

“Bev helps me with rockets.” (Appendix D. Journal 15/07)

In this instance, the child's relationship with a different educator has been given weight due to the previously identified strand of a shared interest. In research that explores the effective use of children's interests in programming, (Hedges et al., 2011) the significance of a shared interest between children and adults is established. Providing further evidence is the following drawing of an educator that was in response to the question: “Who makes you feel special at preschool, like you belong?”

The concept of intersubjectivity is useful when building an understanding of the complexity of the relationships that exist between educators and children. That is, a recognition of the togetherness that is established through shared activity, communication of perspectives and the sharing of motivations (Van Oers & Hannikainen cited in Degotardi, 2014). It appears that this intersubjectivity, where children share meaning through an experience, is identified by children as important in establishing relationships, whether with peers or with adults. We see evidence of this sharing and intersubjectivity in at least one of the cited interactions between children and educators (Morgan and Naomi) and the relationship they have suggests a link between the strand of shared experiences and emotional connection.



Anna responded by drawing a picture and then offered: "Naomi – she's my friend. She plays hide and seek with me". Anna has clearly articulated in dual mediums the link between shared interests with an educator and belonging.

The above discussion and examples have illustrated the role that the strands of time, agency, shared interests, belongings and inclusion have with emotional connection and how these contribute to a sense of belonging through people. The connection between these and the second major component of belonging, place, will now be explored.

Belonging to Place

Identified in the literature review was the notion that place attachment can be a very powerful aspect of belonging and that the 'school' can have an important role in building a positive sense of belonging (Chehab, 2008). Nsamenang (cited in Brooker & Woodhead, 2008) refers to belonging as "going beyond human relationships and extending to familiarity with places and environments" (p.13). This research therefore commenced with the supposition that place would

be a significant contributor to children's sense of belonging in the early care and education environment. This expectation was confirmed in the data, especially when physical locations were given meaning through emotional connection. When the children were provided with the opportunity to explore what place meant in their experience of belonging, many were able to identify places that held special significance for them. For example, in response to the query: "What places make you feel like you belong at preschool?" the following were recorded:

Olivia: "I love inside the most because I love the colouring in and the textas"

Morgan: "The drawing table inside preschool makes me feel busy. I can make a drawing to make my Mum happy".

Joshua: "I like it in the kitchen, it's cosy". (Appendix D. Journal 09/07)

The children conveyed the sense of belonging that physical spaces afforded them through emotional connection represented by the words: "love", "busy", "happy", "like" and "cosy". During one of the data collection processes, the children were asked to select objects that would enhance belonging from the story scenario. The least selected object was the toy from school – perhaps because this represented place without any emotional connection (Table 2.1). This contrasts with the toy from home which was the most popular choice amongst the children. The importance of 'belongings' was therefore highlighted, as a means through which children's sense of belonging in the preschool could be reinforced acting as a bridge between two places through the emotional connection with home.

Belonging has been associated with the feeling of being suitable, or of being the right person to be in this place (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008). This sense of suitability or being included was explored in a variety of situations with the children. Data was gathered using the medium of "story time with guided discussion" when the story *Queenie the bantam* about a chicken who ended up in an unfamiliar place was shared (Graham, 1999). The discussion began with how Queenie might have felt being in a place where she didn't belong:

Morgan: "Not comfortable"

Freya: "It is just not her place; it is Bruno's place"

(Bruno is the dog in the story). (Appendix D. Journal 16/07)

In this instance the participating children identified emotional connection with the negative concept of not belonging by using words such as: 'not comfortable' and 'not her place'.

The following conversation was recorded reflecting the allure of secrets – in examples that follow, secrets link agency and place, but on this occasion, secrets were part of behaviour that excluded from place.

Felix: We're making a house for just me and Cooper

Angus: Can I come in too?

Felix: No, it's a secret cubby (Appendix D. Journal 15/07).

If we agree that children have a right to participate in things that concern them (UN, 1989) then promoting agency becomes part of reflecting a rights based approach in early childhood.

Harcourt et al., (2011) explain that when human relationships are associated with place, they can assume a significance that is greater than just physical location. Agency connected with belonging to place is demonstrated by the following response to a question: "What places make you feel like you belong at preschool?"

Isaac: "Me and Aiden, we like to go on the monkey bars, the teacher can't go on them, only the kids can go" (Appendix D. Journal 08/07).

We see Isaac's experience of belonging to place anchored by the sense of agency that he has associated with that place (Edwards et al., 2006). In previous data, children demonstrated that places where they could set their own agenda (resulting in agency) were regarded as special, and that slightly risky or secret activities could take place there. This was evidenced in a continuation of the play experience quoted earlier (p.29) using the "snow pony" that had been brought from home by Emily. The children were playing in secret (behind the block corner shelf which was concealed from the educator's line of vision) and it appeared that because the snow pony belonged to Emily, she was afforded elevated status which increased her agency in this place.

Emily: She is playing; she is the wicked fairy. Do you want to be the wicked fairy?

Ma Mi: Shakes her head.

Emily (to Freya): You must be the wicked fairy

Freya: I don't want to be.

Selma: "Does your snow pony want to go in the stable that Ma Mi has built?"

Emily: "No, she's sleeping on a snowflake" (Appendix D. Journal 09/07).

As the play progressed, Ma Mi took on the role of the wicked fairy, as Emily was clearly in charge of this particular play scenario, linking her agency to that 'forbidden' place.

Time was not initially identified in the literature review as a significant aspect of belonging, although Sumsion and Wong (2011) do refer to a 'temporal' dimension to belonging. The children in this study, however articulated the role of time in belonging as not so much a function of past, present and future as reflected in the temporal sense, but a more concrete linking to how much time is spent in an early care and learning setting. This is perhaps an illustration of the different perspectives that can emerge from data gathered in philosophical studies and empirical ones such as this.

In response to a question during guided discussion: "What makes you feel like you belong at preschool?" the first response from children frequently identified issues around time as providing a sense of belonging to place. These responses – cited previously - illustrate this:

Morgan: "I've been here for years. Do you know how many I've been here?
About eleven thousand".

Felix: "I come here Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Four days."

Rafi: "I've been coming a big time" (Appendix D. Journal 08/07).

As the investigation around belonging progressed, other children were able to voice their conceptualised relationship between belonging and time. This grew into a co-construction of the concept that time impacted on belonging, and the longer children had attended or the more days they came, the more status they seemed to be afforded in that place. Time was therefore identified as a new strand that enhanced emotional connection and strengthened children's experience of belonging.

As illustrated previously, belongings brought from home played a significant role in children's construction of what belonging through people entailed (p.45). We see a similar importance afforded 'belongings' in relation to place, when in response to the line of enquiry: "What makes you feel like you belong", the following were recorded:

Felix: "When I'm resting I feel at home because I bring my dino-pillow pet"

(Appendix D. Journal 09/07).

Ma Mi: "My cuddly – it's called happy bear" (Appendix D. Journal 09/07).

The exchange below occurred because the child's attachment to his book was serving as an emotional bridge between the early childhood setting and what happens at home.

Selma: "Tell me about what you have brought from home today."

Rafi: "Books from home, dinosaur books and 'polices' book that Dad reads".

(Goes and gets a book about police) "It makes me remember Dad and my Lego"

(Appendix D. Journal 16/07).

This data was supported by the story scenario technique (Chapter 2 p.31) when it emerged that 'a blanket brought from home' was one of the most frequently selected items to choose as something that might make a child feel like they belonged in a setting. When combined with the qualitative data presented above, it can be deduced that comfort items contribute to belonging to place through the meaning that the emotional connections to home gives them. This emotional connection did not always result in positive outcomes for the children. Jacob had some toys that he brought to preschool which the educators did not support so he was not permitted to keep them with him.

Selma: "Why did you bring the toys with you today"?

Jacob: "He wanted to come with me for a visit. He loved me and I found him in the car."

Selma: "What happened then"?

Jacob: "The teacher said no to my robot so I was cross"

(Appendix D. Journal 08/07).

The following week Jacob was still able to recall this incident in detail, reflecting the strong level of emotional connection that he had to that belonging brought from home. The above data and analysis illustrates a belonging to place that these children experience through emotional connection. There emerged from this data collection process, less evidence of the importance of place, than of the importance of people, in the construction of a sense of belonging in young children.

Conclusion

Chapter three has presented data to illustrate how the originally identified components of belonging (place, people, inclusion and agency) were re-conceptualised and explains the addition of new strands (shared interests, belongings, time). When strands of belonging co-existed with a strong emotional connection belonging to place and belonging through people held increased significance for the children. This reconfiguration is illustrated with an infographic which aims to enhance analytic purchase and is supported by reference to, and analysis of, the data. The efficacy and appropriateness of the chosen methodology is reflected on and referenced throughout this chapter.

Chapter 4: Reflections and Conclusion

This research set out to investigate how young children understand and express their experience of belonging in an early care and education setting, and what the implications of this may be for current policy and practice. Contemporary implications of belongings' historical origins were examined (Board of Studies, 2007; Marsh et al, 2007; Peers & Fleeer, 2013) and collated to establish a common understanding. This was the starting point used to expand and develop the concept. The supposition from a review of the literature was that the components: people, place, agency, and inclusion would reflect these children's conceptual sense of belonging. The analytical structure of the research was selected to be consistent with the above conceptualisations while supporting the incorporation of new meanings arising from the inclusion of the children's voices. The original elements of belonging were confirmed but were reconceptualised, modified and expanded on. A new way of interpreting belonging was devised to accommodate these unexpected aspects which were revealed when the investigation looked through the prism of the child's perspective. Brooker and Woodhead (2008) identified that there are many ways to describe the experience of belonging for example the experience of feeling secure, feeling suitable, feeling 'like a fish in water', feeling recognised, feeling able to participate (p.4). All of these were expressed in different ways by the children participating in this research, and they prevailed to contribute a few of their own construction. This brought the project full circle to truly reflect an authentic inclusion of children's voices.

Methodology

The methodology reflected a qualitative, rights based, participatory framework, posing the possibility that, if we assumed that the children in the study were capable of engaging with the complex topic of belonging, then they would most likely live up to this expectation (Duncan, 2009). The appropriateness and efficacy of this methodology was affirmed by the encouraging and unforeseen outcomes generated (Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2011; Huberman, 1994), and the methodological framework selected validated as one that supports children's agency, rights and participation. The incorporation of a modified multi-method Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005) supported the utilisation of a variety of methods for data collection which provided opportunities

for the young children in this study to process and express complex concepts. This solicited rich and relevant findings that were analysed and reflected on using an interpretivist analysis. The notion was dispelled that children under the age of 5 would have metacognitive difficulties in expressing their thinking about an abstract topic (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). This affirmation that children were capable of articulating an understanding of what a conceptual word like belonging meant to them was one of the most rewarding outcomes of the project. It also confirmed that children can be trusted to be capable experts in their own lives (Harcourt, Perry, & Waller, 2011).

Discussion and new findings

Previous research had explored aspects of belonging and represented these in diverse ways. Sumsion and Wong (2011) for example, proposed a 'cartography of belonging' that proved instrumental when formulating this research as its construction of dimensions and axes of belonging were non-hierarchical, flexible and reflected the complexities of the concept. The components of belonging: 'Relationships', 'Agency', 'Place' and 'Inclusion and exclusion' that were constructed from this were all confirmed in this study as essential to children's sense of belonging. These were, however, reconfigured into a lattice pie format to accommodate new information and findings. In this new construct it was the components of 'place' - signified by Sumsion and Wong as spatial, temporal and physical - and 'people' (social belonging) that were central to all experiences of belonging and therefore are represented as the components of the pie 'filling'. It did emerge from an analysis of the children's responses that people were more central to their experience of belonging than place in this early care and learning setting. Other research also contributed to the framework - Brooker and Woodhead (2008) for example, chose to examine belonging in categories linked to "feelings" with the use of words such as 'secure', 'suitable' and 'recognised' (pp.4 - 5) (see table 1.1). Feelings, or emotional connections, were continually identified by the children as giving meaning and substance to their experience of belonging. This element of belonging proved pivotal in the theoretical construction that emerged as it was the element that gave substance to, and connected the other factors. Emotional connection is reflected in the EYLF with statements such as: educators "recognise the connections between children, families and communities and the importance of reciprocal

relationships and partnerships" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13) but the manner in which it interacted with all the other aspects to add meaning to belonging was unforeseen.

Also identified in the literature as significant elements in a construction of belonging were 'Agency' and 'inclusion'. These were confirmed by the data generated in the present study and as with all the elements of belonging, they were afforded weight and substance when associated by the children with an emotional connection. Agency and inclusion were maintained as playing a role but were re-interpreted as "strands" to accommodate the new finding that, while children recognised these as part of their conceptualisations of belonging, it was their impact on the components of place and people that seemed to afford the most traction in this context. The children engaged in the research presented themselves as agents of change who were consistently capable of providing rich and insightful glimpses into their worlds (Clark, 2007; Clark & Moss, 2011; Sorin, 2003).

The current focus on belonging does, however obscure the negative but real possibility for children, of not belonging. If we accept that exclusionary behaviours can be associated with a sense of superiority (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008; Chehab, 2008) then inclusion becomes an imperative for those wanting to incorporate a social justice perspective in early childhood settings. Working within a rights based paradigm compels us to actively ensure the participation and inclusion of all children and to challenge the construction of power of one group over another (Cannella, 2005). Educators wanting to support a socially just playroom environment could do this effectively by encouraging children to engage in transformative actions that support their agency and their right to be included. Ailwood (cited in Boulton-Lewis, Brownlee, Johnsson, Wainman, & Whiteford, 2012) confirms that in Australia, there is little reference to social justice in policy documents, leading to few expectations that this will be included in curricula. According to the research findings however, supporting such inclusion would enhance young children's perception of belonging in an early childhood setting.

Shared interests was initially considered an aspect of relationships with peers, but these were so regularly cited by the children in this study as fundamental to meaningful relationships – both with peers and with educators - that it became conceptually more appropriate to represent these

as another strand of belonging. This was enlightening as the readings had identified shared interests as important in the context of inclusion and exclusion with peers (Katz & Chard, 2000; Marsh et al., 2007), but not as impacting on the connection that children have with adults. This established link between children's perceptions of belonging and relationships that are built through shared interests has implications for educators and curriculum/policy development. The EYLF consistently references relationships as central to children's sense of wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009), and the National Quality Standard (Standard 5.1) states that "respectful and equitable relationships are developed with each child" (ACECQA, 2013). The highlighting of this by the children as an essential component of meaningful relationships and belonging has structural as well as pedagogical implications for early childhood practitioners if there is to be an authentic inclusion of young children's voices.

The previously unidentified elements central to belonging that were introduced and reinforced by the children throughout the research were 'belongings' (brought from home) and 'time' – both how many days a child attends and length of time spent in the service. The findings reflecting this significance of time are supported by de Groot Kim (2010) who highlights programming, continuity of care and use of time as significant in children's ability to feel comfortable and make peer connections in early childhood services. Belongings, when interpreted using research on attachment theory (Duchesne, McMaugh, Bochner, & Krause, 2013; McMahon, Reck, & Walker, 2007), and transitional objects (Davar, 2001; Hobara, 2003), have long been acknowledged as fundamental to children's emotional wellbeing. It was the children's experiences of belongings as essential in their conceptualisations of belonging – both to people and to place in an early care and education setting that was surprising in this research. This, when combined with the emotional connection that the children associated with belongings and time resulted in their additions as a strands in the 'lattice pie' construction of belonging.

Both time and belongings in a new construction of belonging have the potential to be problematic in a formal early care and education setting. The former because, with the exception of a few early childhood services, it is often circumstances other than the needs of the children that determine how many days a child attends a particular service. This is highlighted in the work done by de Groot Kim (2010) which identifies that the discontinuity of care reflected in the 'comings-and-

goings' of children's attendance is often dictated by service policy or parental preferences. Foregrounding this aspect is timely in relation to the current political focus on service provision being driven by parental workforce needs rather than the best interests of children (Gibbs, 2015). These factors have the potential to conspire resulting in the identified needs of young children being over-ridden by economic imperatives. The manner in which the second addition to the construction of belonging - belongings brought from home - is managed is typically dominated by adult perceptions of the negative role of these items, and their access is often tightly controlled. An outcome of the authentic inclusion of children's perspectives on belonging would be a re-negotiation of the status of belongings brought from home, based on the key role that children attribute to them. This change is supported by research that has long informed the sector that transitional objects that bridge the gap between home and other places provide significant emotional support to children (Brandt, 2014). If we are to accept that time and home/care connections are significant, then policies and processes may be required to support this (de Groot Kim, 2010), to ensure these aspects of belonging that have been identified as crucial to children are not overlooked.

The introduction of the lattice pie metaphor supports the new conceptualisation that for children, 'belonging' is a multi-layered concept, with strands that afford meaning to a sense of place, and connections through people for both individuals and groups. It is acknowledged, however, that any construct that attempts to categorise and explain a concept as complex and nuanced as belonging, will suffer from some stretching and straining to accommodate the multiplicity of possible connections. Although adding a new construct may run the risk of contributing to the 'conceptual confusion' referred to by Sumsion and Wong (2011), it is included with the expectation of enhancing analytic purchase to support the new associations that arose in this exploration of the belonging concept. The reframing and modification of existing structures reflects the inclusion of the child's voice or perspective, thereby incorporating previously unidentified dimensions of belonging into the existing corpus of knowledge. The implication for current practice is that *belonging* can be more effectively supported when the role of emotional connection and its relationship to shared interests, belongings from home, inclusion, agency and time are more fully understood.

Limitations

This research has added conceptual depth to current understandings of belonging as presented in theoretical literature. There are however, limitations to the present findings and conclusions that need to be addressed. Firstly, the research was conducted in one service, constituting a small sample group with the 'culture' of the service supportive of children to readily engage with the concept of belonging. In services where this notion may not be so positively framed, children may have less rich, or even very different conceptualisations. It is not possible therefore to extrapolate these findings to other contexts other than to flag that they may be trends that are replicable in other settings.

The unique and important role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have when examining belonging in an Australian context is acknowledged but was also not able to be addressed in this small study. A future investigation that incorporated particular aspects of belonging that children from cultural backgrounds other than a mainstream Australian experience, would broaden our developing body of knowledge, reflect greater diversity and be more inclusive. Nsamenang (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008) believes that promoting a sense of belonging is a human rights issue as the UN Convention on the rights of the child enshrined a child's right to their cultural identity (UN, 1989). He warns that imported notions of child development are undermining African children's sense belonging, thereby highlighting the possible downside of attempting to establish a shared understanding of belonging – even when the child's perspective has been incorporated. Children from both individualistic and relational cultures could be concurrently sharing an early childhood care and education setting with their experiences of belonging grounded in contrasting sociocultural practices. Equally, children from cultures where strong power differentials between teachers and children exist, will be struggling to establish their sense of belonging alongside children from a background with a more egalitarian paradigm. Hedges (2015) acknowledges that educators need to build cultural knowledge and skills in order to accommodate children's complex contexts. This confirms the need for those working with young children to be sensitive about including all cultural possibilities that may constitute individually constructed senses of belonging.

Future Directions

Chehab (2008) stated that early childhood practitioners can proactively support children to work towards a sense of belonging by supporting inclusionary play. This research has highlighted the role that shared interests can play in the construction of a sense of inclusion and belonging with young children. Future research to examine how children who do not have a strongly established sense of belonging could be supported through the promotion of sustained shared interests with both peers and adults is a possible avenue for future investigation.

Having documented a clear voice for preschool aged children, it would be logical to explore how belonging is experienced by younger children. A link between shared interests and belonging was demonstrated by this research and a link between 'togetherness' and shared interests has been identified with younger children (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014). This invites the possibility of exploring this aspect of belonging with a younger age group. While very young children may not be able to express their ideas as proficiently as their older peers, the model of multiple methods of expression could be adapted to develop observational frameworks allowing for the experience of belonging be studied in infants and toddlers.

Conclusion

Sumsion and Wong (2011) challenged early childhood educators to not allow the metaphysical and conceptual nature of the word belonging to enable it to 'fly below the radar' and Peers and Fler (2013) supported the theorisation of belonging as well as attempts to connect it to the practice of teaching and learning. This research has made a modest and limited attempt to address both of these challenges.

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Appendix A:

Parent consent form

PARENT/CAREGIVER INFORMATION SHEET

Research Project: Children's experiences of Belonging

The study is being conducted by Selma Jo Wastell, who is a student of Macquarie University. Her research is being conducted to meet the requirements for the Masters of Research – Early Childhood degree under the supervision of Dr. Sheila Degotardi PhD.

The purpose of this study is to establish how young children experience a sense of belonging in an early childhood service.

We will require participants (the children) to take part in everyday play experiences within the preschool setting. They will be informed that observations are being done and that the research is taking place, but will not feel that anything different is happening from their normal day in the preschool. Their usual educators will be with them at all times.

Your child's participation in the study is completely voluntary – you are not under any obligation to consent. Your child may withdraw from the study at any time – or you may withdraw your child from the study – at which point data will cease to be collected on your child. Your child's withdrawal from this study will in no way affect their relationship with the preschool.

All aspects of this study, including the results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information about participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication but individual participants will not be identifiable in the written recordings of such a report.

I draw your attention to the following factors that may influence your decision to allow your child to participate. A small aspect of the research is observing and documenting how children experience belonging through relationships. The educators and researchers are aware of this, and kindness and consideration will be expected and supported throughout. . The children will be informed that they can approach you, the Director or the other educators if they should feel uncomfortable at any stage of the research project. I will be available throughout the research process for discussion and consultation with you.

I draw your attention to the fact that this project involves photographic and audio recordings of participants. These recordings will be collected over 7 days from 30 June to 19 July, between the hours of 9.00 and 3.00. Both indoor and outdoor interactions will be captured. A documentation of the children's play and learning will be made for children to re-visit and reflect upon. This will be made up of photographs, and some discussion about the children's play and the analysis of this information. This documentation will be made available for the educators and the children to have input into. The documentation may be used in professional forums such as conferences and in academic journals to support the information collected during the research process. Please note that children may be able to be identified through the photographs, but the name of the service and the children's names will not be included.

The images will be stored in the researcher's secure home office for up to 10 years, after which they will be destroyed. They will be accessed by the researcher, and her supervisor only. The images used to construct the documentation are to support and illustrate the research. Those used will have prior approval of the service.

If you have any concerns about what has been recorded, you may access recordings of your child within the period of storage. These recordings can be accessed by contacting the Director, the researcher or her supervisor.

You may exclude recordings of your child from the study by choosing to not participate in the research.

Once you have read the information I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions should you so choose. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact:

Dr. Sheila Degotardi. Senior Lecturer Institute of Early Childhood. Macquarie University, NSW.
sheila.degotardi@mq.edu.au Tel:02 98509895 FAX: 02 98509890

Selma Jo Wastell
selma.wastell@tafensw.edu.au Tel:43484425 FAX: 43484430

This information sheet is for you to keep.

CONSENT FORM: Parent/caregiver

Research Project: Children's experiences of Belonging

I (*print name*).....give consent to the participation of my child (*print name*)
.....in the research project described below.

TITLE OF THE PROJECT: Children's experiences of Belonging

CHIEF RESEARCHER: Dr. Sheila Degotardi. Senior Lecturer Institute of Early Childhood. Macquarie University, NSW. sheila.degotardi@mq.edu.au Tel:02 98509895 FAX: 02 98509890

CO-RESEARCHER: Selma Jo Wastell selma.wastell@tafensw.edu.au Tel:43484425 FAX: 43484430

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction
2. I have read the Parent Information Sheet and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my child's involvement in the project with the researchers
3. I have discussed participation in the project with my child and my child assents to their participation in the project
4. I understand that that my child's participation in this project is voluntary; a decision not to participate will in no way affect their academic standing or relationship with the school and they are free to withdraw their participation at any time.
5. I understand that information on my child's is strictly confidential
6. I understand that photographic recordings will be made as part of the study. These recordings will take place during the hours of:.....On the following days:.....
7. I understand that some of these photos will be used in a documentation to be displayed in the service and in professional forums for the purpose of sharing the information generated by the research process.

I give permission for my child's photo to be used in documentation to be displayed in the service ☐

I give permission for my child's photo to be used in future professional publications and journals ☐

Signed.....

Name.....

Date.....

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics and Integrity (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

(PARENT COPY)

Signed.....

Name.....

Date.....

Appendix B

Director consent form

Dr. Sheila Degotardi. (Research Supervisor)
 Senior Lecturer Institute of Early Childhood. Macquarie University, NSW.
sheila.degotardi@mq.edu.au
[Tel:02 98509895](tel:0298509895) FAX: 02 98509890

Selma Jo Wastell
selma.wastell@tafensw.edu.au [Tel:43484425](tel:43484425) FAX: 43484430

Information and consent form: Director

Research Project: Children's experiences of Belonging

Dear Director

I am a research student at Macquarie University enrolled in the the Masters of Research – Early Childhood degree under the supervision of Dr. Sheila Degotardi PhD. I am also a TAFE early childhood studies teacher with the Hunter Institute.

I am hoping you will be able to accommodate my small research study in your service. The purpose of this study is to establish how young children experience a sense of belonging in an early childhood service, specifically in relation to the children's understanding and experience of place, relationships and agency.

If you decide to participate, I will visit your service for 7 days in June and July. Each visit will be between 4 and 6 hours duration. The exact days will be negotiated with your service. During this period you will be asked to:

- Allow me to conduct a discussion about belonging with a select group of children. This will take the form of a story telling followed by guided discussion.
- Allow myself to present 2 creative/imaginative experiences with the children that explore concepts related to belonging.
- Provide input into a photographic and narrative documentation about the children's experiences.
- Support parents, educators and children who may want to withdraw their consent to participate in the research study.
- Otherwise go about your normal working day.

Please note that I am an experienced early childhood educator and will be sensitive to any signs of upset or discomfort that may be experienced by the children. In the unlikely event of this happening the data collection will be stopped and not recommenced until a discussion has occurred with yourself or the other educators about how to best proceed. The children will be informed that they can approach you, the other educators or their parents if they should feel uncomfortable at any stage of the research project. Please feel free to contact myself, or my supervising researcher Dr Sheila Degotardi using the details at the top of this letter should you have any queries. You are invited to contact the Ethics Committee of the university should any concerns of this nature arise through the duration of the investigation.

Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study are confidential (except as required by law). No individual will be identified in any publication of the results, but your attention is drawn to the fact that photographic representation of the children at play will be collated into a pedagogical documentation. No photographic images will be included in this without your prior approval. Only myself and my Research Supervisor will have access to the data.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary- you are not obliged to participate and if you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence. Your decision regarding participation in this research will not influence any ongoing or future relationship you may have with Macquarie University or Hunter TAFE, my employer.

I do hope that you will consider participating in this study. Please feel free to contact myself or my supervisor should you have any questions.

Yours sincerely

Selma Jo Wastell

This information sheet is for you to keep.

CONSENT FORM: Director/Participating Educators

Research Project: Children's experiences of Belonging

I,(*participant's name*) have read (*or, where appropriate, have had read to me*) and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that this centre will participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name and Position: _____

(Block letters)

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Centre Name:

Co-Researcher: Selma Jo Wastell

Co-Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics and Integrity (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

(DIRECTORS COPY)

Signed.....

Name.....

Date.....

Appendix C

Educator Consent Form

Dr. Sheila Degotardi. (Research Supervisor)

Senior Lecturer Institute of Early Childhood. Macquarie University, NSW.

sheila.degotardi@mq.edu.au

[Tel:02 98509895](tel:0298509895) FAX: 02 98509890

Selma Jo Wastell (co-researcher)

selma.wastell@tafensw.edu.au [Tel:43484425](tel:43484425) FAX: 43484430

Information and consent form: EDUCATOR

Research Project: Children's experiences of Belonging

Dear Educator

I am a research student at Macquarie University enrolled in the the Masters of Research – Early Childhood degree under the supervision of Dr. Sheila Degotardi PhD. I am also a TAFE early childhood studies teacher with the Hunter Institute.

I am hoping you will agree to participate in my small research study being conducted in your preschool. The purpose of this study is to establish how young children experience a sense of belonging in an early childhood service, specifically in relation to the children's understanding and experience of place, relationships and agency.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to allow me (co-researcher) to visit your room for 7 days in June and July. Each visit will be between 4 and 6 hours duration. The exact days will be negotiated with your service .During this period you will be asked to:

- Allow myself to conduct a discussion about belonging with a select group of children. This will take the form of a story telling followed by guided discussion.
- Allow the co-researcher to present 2 creative/imaginative experiences with the children that explore concepts related to belonging.
- Provide input into a photographic and narrative documentation about the children's experiences.
- Otherwise go about your normal working day.

Please note that I am an experienced early childhood educator and will be sensitive to any signs of upset or discomfort that may be experienced by the children. In the unlikely event of this happening the data collection will be stopped and not recommenced until a discussion has occurred with yourself or the director about how to best proceed. The children will be informed that they can approach you, the Director or their parents if they should feel uncomfortable at any stage of the research project. Please feel free to contact myself, or my supervising researcher Dr Sheila Degotardi using the details at the top of this letter should you have any queries.

Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study are confidential (except as required by law). No individual will be identified in any publication of the results, but your attention is drawn to the fact that photographic representation of the children at play will be collated into a pedagogical documentation. No photographic images will be included in this without the prior approval of the Director. Only myself and my Research Supervisor will have access to the data.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary - you are not obliged to participate and if you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence. Your decision regarding participation in this research will not influence any ongoing or future relationship you may have with Macquarie University or Hunter TAFE, my employer.

I do hope that you will consider participating in this study. Please feel free to contact myself or my supervisor should you have any questions.

Yours sincerely

Selma Jo Wastell

This information sheet is for you to keep.

CONSENT FORM: Director/Participating Educators

Research Project: Children's experiences of Belonging

I,(*participant's name*) have read (*or, where appropriate, have had read to me*) and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that this centre will participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name and Position: _____

(Block letters)

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Centre Name:

Co-Researcher: Selma Jo Wastell

Co-Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics and Integrity Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

(EDUCATORS COPY)

Signed.....

Name.....

Date.....

Appendix D:

Journals

08 July 2014

Educators: Naomi, Sue, Breanna

Time: 10.00 – 1.30

Recordings:

Group discussion:

Talked about meaning of research, how children could withdraw at any time. Would be writing, recording and taking photos. Needed to do careful thinking together. Told them about parent forms. Later in the day when at the drawing experience Olivia offered
 “You can keep my drawing for your research”

Who do you think this book may belong to?

It belongs to you (Oliver)

Selma: What makes you think that?

You brought it from your house with you (Anna)

Selma: If I left the book here, who might it belong to then?

You, it would still belong to you and you could fetch it again: Oliver
 discussed, What makes you feel like you belong here?

Morgan: I've been here for years, Do you know how many I've been here? About 11 thousand
 I've been here. Felix :I come here Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. 4 days

Selma: Who is special for you here at preschool? Who makes you feel like you belong?

Maddy H: Olivia – she's my best friend in the whole wide world and she is my twin.

Olivia: Draw a picture of me – you belong to me

Selma: If you came here without Olivia would you still belong here?

Maddy: No

Selma: Who is special for you here at preschool? Who makes you feel like you belong?

Olivia H: Freya, she loves me.

Selma: How do you know that she loves you?

Olivia: We play school and she lets me be the teacher sometimes

Selma: What adults make you feel special at preschool – like you belong?

Morgan: Naomi and Sue both make me feel special – I love them. Naomi massages my shoulders when I'm sad and then I'm laughing to nearly explode my heart. Bev helps me with rockets

Selma: What adults make you feel special at preschool – like you belong?

Anna: Naomi –she's my teacher. She plays hide and seek with me

Selma: What would you do if Naomi wasn't here?

Anna: I'd find another person

Selma: Another child or another grown up?

Anna: Another grown up

Selma: What places make you feel special at preschool – like you belong?

Isaac: Me and Aiden – we like to go on the monkey bars. The teacher can't go on them, they are only for us

Selma: What places make you feel special at preschool – like you belong?

Olivia: "I love inside the most because I love the colouring in and the textas"

Selma: "Tell me about these people"

Olivia: "This is me and this is preschool and this is Naomi." She looks at her picture for a long time. "I think Maddy is inside"

Selma: "Maybe she's colouring in?"

Olivia smiles (see drawing)

Selma: "What places make you feel special at preschool – like you belong?"

Freya: "I like my blanket and my pillow"

Selma: "which one is your blanket and which one is your pillow?" Pointing to drawing

Freya: "This is my blanket, and my pillow and this is my red bag."

Selma: What places make you feel special at preschool – like you belong?

Josie: My most special place is painting

Selma: Who is special for you here at preschool? Who makes you feel like you belong?

Maddy D: I like to play by myself

Selma: What places make you feel special at preschool – like you belong?

Felix: I like to play with my Dad, he walks and I ride my scooter.

Selma: "who is this?" (Pointing to drawing)

Felix: "That's God. He watches over us"

Selma: So Morgan, when you are at preschool, are you ever the boss?

Morgan: Shakes head vigorously

Selma: Are there places at home where you are the boss?

Morgan: I'm the boss of my bedroom

Selma: Who is special for you here at preschool? Who makes you feel like you belong?

Morgan: Ben

Selma: How does he make you feel like you belong?

Morgan: We play lego and star wars together.

Jacob had some toys that he brought to preschool that the educators were not happy about. He was not allowed to keep them with him

Selma: Why did you bring the toys with you today?

Jacob: He wanted to come with me for a visit. He loved me and I found him in the car.

Selma: What happened then?

Jacob: The teacher said no to my robot so I was cross

Jacob then went on to draw pictures of the "blue robot"

09 July 2014

Educators: Naomi, Bev, Deb

Time: 10.00 – 1.30

Recordings:

Story: Goodnight Gorilla, Another discussion about research and the children's role in that. Many had remembered details from the previous day's discussion: Levi: "You will take photos and record talking on your phone."

Yesterday Anna asked when I was going to record her voice and told me that I could keep her drawing for my research.

Selma: What could we do that would make preschool feel more comfortable, like you belong?

Felix: If I brought a picture of my house it would make it feel like my home. All the stuff in my room is my stuff. When I'm resting I feel at home because I bring my dino pillow pet. Oliver, Jacob and Cooper they both have the green ones. Jacob has one but it's not the same colour, it's blue. I'm not allowed to take it out if it's not resting time. Sometimes it feels like it's resting time but it's not. (Drew a picture of his dino pillow and himself)– With a lot of numbers too "to learn up to eleven is a big number"

Selma: Where at preschool do you feel the most safe or comfortable, like you belong?

Jacob S: I like it in the kitchen, its cosy (drew a picture)

Selma: What do you do in the kitchen?

Jacob: Just help and stuff

Selma: Where at preschool do you feel the most safe or comfortable, like you belong?

Freya: When I have my blanket and my pillow I feel comfortable.

Selma: Would you like to draw a picture of those things?

Freya: Nods and starts to draw. Simplistic drawing but particular about what is which item and what colours they are.

I will put them in my locker (drawing) – they are only for rest time

Selma: (to Freya who is playing with Anna, Ma mi and Emily) When you are all playing together like this, who is the boss of this play, who is in charge?

Freya: I tell them what to do because I'm 5.

Anna: I'm 5 too

Freya: Yes, but you're little 5 and I'm big 5. (Freya is physically bigger than Anna)

Anna: I am real 5

Selma: If Freya wasn't here today who would be in charge?

Anna: Me

Freya: Anna and then Emily and then Ma mi

Later...

Ma mi: Emily is ignoring me

Selma: Emily, Ma mi thinks you are ignoring her. Can she play too?

Emily: She is playing, she is the wicked fairy. Do you want to be the wicked fairy?

Ma mi: Shakes her head.

(Emily has a "snow horse" that she has brought from home)

With encouragement from Selma Ma mi builds a house for the snow horse out of blocks (photo of her putting in the floor)

Freya: what are you making?

Ma mi: A house for the snow pony with a floor (photos of this)

Selma: if the snow pony has a house to go into, she may feel like she belongs there. Does your snow horse want to go in the stable that Ma mi has built?

Emily: No, she's sleeping on a snowflake. She picks up the pony and makes a noise close up to Ma mi .

Ma mi laughs (bit nervously)

Emily (to Freya): You must be the wicked fairy

Freya: I don't want to be

The children continue to play together in this area, but Ma mi and Anna are mostly doing their own thing

Selma: What are the things or people here at preschool that you look forward to seeing when you come here?

Cooper: I like the cars and trucks best. I like how they make really loud sounds when they leave. I like the cars at home and at school both. If I come to school I can play with the cars here and at home I play with my cars.

Selma: What at preschool makes you feel more comfortable, like you belong?

Ma mi: my cuddly – it's called happy bear. It's only for rest time.

15 July 2014

Educators: Naomi, Bev, Breanna

Time: 10.00 – 1.30

Story: The way back home. Oliver Jeffers Talked about not belonging in a place.

Freya: if he had his things there, he would feel happier”

Selma: That’s an interesting idea, what kinds of things do you think?”

Freya: Stuff that is from his bed – pillow and toys and stuff from his bed

Julian: “If the alien had a friend – or someone he knows from his house”

Freya: “He had the boy with him”

Freya: “They could be together and do stuff and make a way to get home”

Morgan: He needs to have food so that he doesn’t feel hungry

Julian: Things for eating and drinking

The children seemed concerned at the conclusion that the boy and the Martian were not going to see each other again

Recordings:

Interview: This little person comes to this preschool and is feeling like he/she doesn’t belong.

There are some things here that you can choose from that might help them feel better about belonging. There is a toy from home, a photo of her/his family, their favourite blanket, some food from home, a ticket that lets you choose exactly what you would like to do, a friend, a toy from school and a teacher. Which would you choose for this person?

Anna:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friend to be friends so she can be happy (3) 2. Toy from home (2) 3. Food in case she gets hungry (1) <p>She did this twice but chose in different order</p>
Julian	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Photo of family – that’s where he is belonging 2. A friend. He will have someone to play with 3. Toy from home – will stop him crying
Felix	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. His soft blanket in case he needs a cuddle 2. Ticket. If he can choose he can play blocks all day 3. Photo. Because he misses his family
Isabel	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Blanket. She just wants it 2. Toy from home. She feels sad with no toy 3. Photo. She loves her family

Maddy (not twin)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friend and teacher. She belongs with her teacher 2. Blanky – because she loves it 3. Toy from home – because she got it from her family
Josie	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Toy from home – she loves it the most 2. Food from home 3. A teacher to play with
Freya	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Blanket – so nice and warm 2. Photo – will make her feel safe 3. Ticket – if you can do what you want you are special
Olivia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Food because she like eating 2. Photo – she wants to remember her family 3. Friend – she needs someone to play with so she's not alone
Morgan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ticket – because he can do what ever 2. Food, he loves to eat 3. Teacher – she will help him

Felix, Angus, Kai, Jacob and Isaac are building a castle together out of blocks. They put all their mini-me's inside. Selma asked the children individually: If there were an enemy coming, who would lead you out of the castle. Felix, Angus and Kai chose themselves (by pointing to their mini me's) Jacob and Isaac said "not me".

Felix L, Angus and Kai are building an enclosure with the blocks in the block area. They have put their mini me's inside the enclosure. Jacob and Isaac are playing nearby. Jacob tries to enter the "building" with his mini me. Felix: Go away Jacob, you're not in here.

Later...Cooper: I'm building a house for all the mini me's.

Morgan approaches with a mobile vehicle that he has built. "Can I come in?" Cooper: "Yes"

Morgan then starts to knock the walls over with his vehicle. Selma: If you knock that down how will Cooper feel? What will you do?

Morgan: Help him build it up

Morgan: This is a helicopter and it putting out fires

Isaac: (who also has a mobile vehicle) this is the fire engine and it has things to put out fire

Cooper: You can park it I here Morgan

Morgan: Thank you

Later...

Felix L: We're making a house for just me and Cooper

Angus: Can I come in too?

Felix: Maybe, you need to help.

Kai: I'm making a garage for my car and my person

Jacob: Can I park in here?

Kai: I'll make another one

Felix: At the end of the year when we go to big school, can we take these home?

Later.....Jacob: My car is for rescuing Julian

16 July 2014

Educators: Naomi, Peta, Bev

Time: 9.30 – 1.30

Recordings:

Read the story About Queenie the chicken today. Discussed feelings of belonging and not belonging. Selma: How does she feel when she is in a place where she doesn't belong ? Morgan:

“Not comfortable” Freya: “It is just not her place, it is Bruno's place (the dogs)”

Selma: How could we make her feel like she belongs there?

Emily: Bring her Mum and Dad there”

Felix L: or just her mum”

Rafi: more chickens, if she had more chickens

Interview: This little person comes to this preschool and is feeling like he/she doesn't belong. There are some things here that you can choose from that might help them feel better about belonging. There is a toy from home, a photo of her/his family, their favourite blanket, some food from home, a ticket that lets you choose exactly what you would like to do, a friend, a toy from school and a teacher. Which would you choose for this person? Why would you choose that?

Emily:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Food – because it smells good and she will be happy 2. Toy from home – because it's from home 3. Photo – it's nice to remember her family
Maddy D	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.
Max	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Food – when I'm upset Mummy gives me something to eat 2. Photo of family – he belongs in that family 3. Friend – if he had no friends he would cry and cry and his Mum would have to come and pick him up

Judah	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher 2. Toy from home 3. Food – because he's hungry <p>Judah did not choose/ was unable to answer the why questions</p>
Jacob	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher – she will do stuff he likes 2. Food – he can share with his friends. Then he can say you can have a cup of tea with me 3. Blanket – makes him warm on cold days
Rafi	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Toy from home 2. Friend he will play play dough with him 3. Blanket – make him not sad

Recordings:

On this particular day, Emily and Salina were playing together which I had not witnessed before. Emily gave Salina some coins that she had got out of her locker. Emily: Have some money” as she counted out 2 coins.

Salina: Thanks

Emily: That's to buy the snow pony.

The girls move off together

Selma: Why did Emily give you the money?

Salina: She was mean to me but now she's my friend

Selma: When her other friends come back will she still be your friend?

Salina: Yes, she is kind to me

Emily: Look what's on my bag (pointing out little toggle)

Salina: Cool. I have a star one

Selma: How long have you been coming to this preschool?

Rafi: I been coming a big time (attends 4 days)

Selma: Do you think that means you belong here?

Rafi: “I belong here with Oliver and Felix Lowe”

Selma: What teachers do you belong with?

Rafi: (looks around) “Naomi”.

Emily: I come lots of days, (3 days) and Freya, (5 days) all come lots of days. Salina doesn't come lots of days (3 days).

Who is special for you here at preschool – who makes you feel like you belong? Asked this as part of the letter writing and the mini-me's

Would you like to leave a message for someone who makes you feel like you belong here?

You can draw a picture and I will do the writing

Rafi: Felix L, Oliver and Oliver. - Because they will come to my birthday. Oh, Oliver can't come, Just Oliver and Felix.

Anna: Emily, because her plays with me all the time. Hide & seek & magic pony

I had not witnessed Anthony and Jacob playing together before and on this day Jacob took his mini me to a mobile vehicle that Anthony had constructed. He held out his mini-me to Anthony's mini-me (that was inside the vehicle) and said "can I come on your truck?"

Anthony: No

Selma: Maybe you can build your own truck and then you can play together?

Anthony: Nodded

Jacob did build a (much simpler) truck and then Jacob in the play with Anthony..."There's your mini-me"

Julian: I like playing with Jacob. We play trash packs. We bring them from home

What places are special for you here at preschool? – Like you belong? (Jacob S kitchen)

Julian: I like the blocks the most

Oliver: I like lunch because I can sit with my friends

Tell me about what you have brought from home.

Rafi: Books from home, dinosaur books and "polices" book that Dad reads. (Goes and gets a book about police) "It makes me remember Dad and my lego"

Jacob: Not any more, the teacher said I not allowed. (Frowning)

Appendix E:

Guided discussion questions

Questions/Discussion

People: Who do you think the person in the story's friends are?

Who do you like to play with?

How do the animals in the story belong to the child?

How do you choose who you play with at preschool?

Place: What are special places for this person in the story?

How does this boy/girl feel when they are in that place?

Which are special places for you at preschool?

What makes us feel that we belong in a place?

What makes you feel like you belong here

Agency: Who do you think decided to play this game?

What makes them in charge?

When are you allowed to be in charge?

What about when you are at preschool?

Appendix F

Ethics Approval

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the Deputy Vice-Chancellor

(Research)

Office

Research HUB East, Level 3,

02 July 2014

Dr Sheila Degotardi
Institute of Early Childhood
Faculty of Human Sciences
Macquarie University
NSW 2109

Dear Dr Degotardi

RE: Children's Experiences of Place, People and Agency and How This Relates to Their Perception of Belonging

Thank you for submitting the above application for ethical and scientific review.

Your application was first considered by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities)) at its meeting on 30 May 2014 at which further information was requested to be reviewed by the Ethics Secretariat.

The requested information was received with correspondence on 20 & 29 June 2014.

I am pleased to advise that ethical and scientific approval has been granted for this project.

This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007- Updated March 2014) (the *National Statement*).

Details of this approval are as follows:

Reference No: 5201400577

Approval Date: 02 July 2014

The following documentation has been reviewed and approved by the HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities):

Documents reviewed	Version no.	Date
Macquarie University HREC Application Form	2.3	July 2013
Correspondence from Dr Degotardi addressing the feedback from the HREC		20 & 29 June 2014
Parent/Caregiver Information Sheet	2	29 June 2014
Information and consent form: Director		
Information and consent form: Educator		
Sample questions/Discussion for story reading experience		
Sample guided questions for group drawing		

Please ensure that all documentation has a version number and date in future correspondence with the Committee.

This letter constitutes ethical and scientific approval only.

Standard Conditions of Approval:

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the *National Statement*, which is available at the following website:

<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research>

2. This approval is valid for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval for this protocol.

3. All adverse events, including events which might affect the continued ethical and scientific acceptability of the project, must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.
4. Proposed changes to the protocol must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Should you have any queries regarding your project, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on 9850 7850 or by email ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely



Dr Karolyn White

Chair, Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities)

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) and the *CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice*.

Appendix G

Poster



Selma Jo Wastell • Dr Sheila Degotardi

Children's concept of belonging

An authentic inclusion of children's voices

Experiencing belonging – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence. (DEEWR, 2008, p. 7)

Context

The term 'belonging' has entered the popular lexicon and is a current theme in a variety of everyday and early childhood professional contexts. The presence of the word presumes a shared understanding of its meaning, yet despite its common usage the literature reflects there is little known about how young children perceive and interpret belonging in an early childhood setting (Sumson & Wong, 2011).

This research investigated how young children understand and experience belonging in their everyday early childhood environment.

Methodology

Current literature on how young children think about complex topics reveals multiple contradictions about children's competence. This research began with the premise that 'if you think they can do it – then they can' (Duncan, J. in Barthelsen, Brownlee, & Johansson, 2009, p. 179). In other words, we believed that children would convey their understandings clearly to us, if we assumed that they were capable of conceptualising them.

A rights based perspective framed the methodology of the study which saw children influencing the direction of the research as well as the data gathering techniques employed.

These included:

- Guided discussion supported by storytelling
- Imaginative play incorporating open ended materials and persona dolls
- Drawing opportunities
- Individual interviews based on a story scenario

Themes that had emerged from the literature review as key points were identified in the data and then codified to establish patterns and meanings for analysis. New data that emerged was layered across the existing themes to accommodate the information in a meaningful way.

This is a preliminary analysis and the process is ongoing.

If we are to be authentic about including children's voices when maximising their experience of belonging; we need to reflect their identified priorities, not just those of the already empowered adults.

Belonging to place

Place attachment can be a very powerful aspect of belonging.

In an interview, Nsamenang (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008, p. 13) refers to belonging as 'going beyond human relationships and extending to familiarity with places and environments'.

Time and place

In response to the question: 'What makes you feel like you belong here?' the first response from children was frequently related to time. This element of belonging was introduced by the children more consistently than any attachment to physical spaces in the preschool. 'I've been here for years. Do you know how many I've been here? About eleven thousand'. Another child said 'I come here Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Four days.' This strong sense of belonging related to time – both how many days a child attends and length of time spent in the service – was an unanticipated outcome of the research.

Spaces in place

The children in this study were also able to identify particular spaces as significant for belonging. For example Morgan articulated that: 'The drawing table inside preschool makes me feel busy. I can make a drawing to make my Mum happy.' We see again – now with the element of space – how the addition of an emotional connection elevates the significance of the experience just as it did with relationships.

Another child responded when asked to identify a place where he felt he belonged, with 'We like to go on the monkey bars; the teachers can't go on them, only the kids can go.' Here we see the introduction of the dimension of agency or power. There were multiple examples of situations where, when children operated outside of the boundaries controlled by adults, the experiences seemed to gain a heightened level of importance with the children.

Belonging to people

Belonging acknowledges children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. (DEEWR, 2008, p. 7)

Relationships with peers:

The establishment of meaningful relationships with peers within an early care environment is acknowledged as central to the development of a child's positive sense of belonging.

When the children were invited to draw a picture of someone who made them feel like they belonged they had some clear ideas:

Olivia: (to her sister) 'draw a picture of me – you belong to me'

Olivia proceeded to draw a picture of herself, her sister Maddy and their friend Freya. When questioned as to why Freya was in the picture, Olivia offered that: 'she makes me feel at home'.

Selma: 'If you came here without Olivia would you still belong here?'

Maddy: 'No'

We also witnessed that shared interests were an integral aspect of connectedness and therefore belonging with this group of children.

In response to the following question: 'Who is special for you here at preschool? Who makes you feel like you belong?' the following was recorded:



Olivia identifies her sister and her friend as part of her sense of belonging.



Morgan: 'Ben'

Selma: 'How does Ben make you feel like you belong?'

Morgan: 'We play Lego and star wars together.'

Relationships with educators:

The children participating in this research contributed to a discussion focusing on how and why educators enhance their sense of belonging with insights including this from Morgan: 'Naomi massages my shoulders when I'm sad and then I'm laughing to nearly explode my heart. Bev helps me with rockets.'

The theme of shared experiences and emotional connectedness were again raised by the children. (Winter, 2008) states that: 'Relationships in which children feel recognised, understood and empathised with...contribute to the growth of wellbeing and a sense of agency' (p35). It appears that this intersubjectivity, where children share meaning through both an experience and an emotional connection is identified by children as important in establishing relationships and building a sense of belonging.



Reflections

This research suggests that young children demonstrate insight into their personal sense of belonging and are able to identify aspects contributing to this.

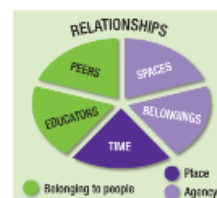
Relationships with peers and relationships with educators emerged as significant themes, and children consistently articulated that for them,

shared interests were central to these. Also evident in the data, was the significant role that an emotional connection played when unpacking what belonging to people means to young children.

Many participating children cited the length of time spent in a service and the number of days a week attended as significant elements of belonging to place. This was a consistent but unanticipated theme emerging from the research.

Belongings brought from home by the children emerged as another important yet unanticipated aspect contributing to a sense of belonging to place. These items were significant and seemed to act as a bridge or transitional object between two places for the children.

From all the conceptualisations of belonging that were recorded in this research study it emerges that emotional connection and a sense of empowerment or agency can heighten the perception of importance of that element of belonging for children.



Belongings: a bridge between places

The importance of items brought from home was consistently raised by the children, both in conversation and through observations of their play. Synchronously, we call such items from home: 'belongings'.

(Sumson & Wong, 2011, p. 199) identify that people can belong in 'many different ways and to many different objects of attachment', and it was revealed that for this group of children, these objects of attachment played a complex and central role. Sometimes they were status items, for example when Sofia secreted her 'snow pony' out of her locker. This appeared to elicit Maddy's status in the group so that she could then choose who participated in play and was able to assign roles.

Other belongings brought from home could be categorised as comfort items and items associated with a family member. Felix observed 'When I'm resting, I feel at home because I bring my dino pillow pad' and when asked why he brought a particular book from home, Levi replied: 'It makes me remember Dad and my Lego'.

When the rules surrounding items brought from home were transgressed, the related items seemed to enhance the child's social capital. This could be related to the sense of agency or control that this bestowed on the owner of the item.

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