Infants’ encounters with curriculum: Levinas, the ‘benediction’ and ‘sayings’ as catalysts for infants’ say in matters that affect them

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To my parents

Nell and Ron Cheeseman

Children of the depression and young adults of the war—their lives so different to mine.

They had so little opportunity themselves, but made all this possible for me.

Oh, and Gough Whitlam…

…without whom none of this would ever have happened.
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Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis.

Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of theses.

[Signature]
Statement of Contribution

This is my statement of contribution to the journal articles contained in this thesis. Below I list the titles and publication details of the articles written by me under the supervision of Professor Jennifer Sumson and Professor Frances Press.

I confirm that all data gathering and analysis contained in these articles was undertaken by me. The first three articles included both my supervisors as co-authors. The fourth article included only my principal supervisor. In all of these co-authored articles, I had primary responsibility for all aspects of their preparation. This included conceptual framing, review and analysis of the literature, preparation of the manuscript and revisions. My supervisors as co-authors of these papers agree to their inclusion in this thesis. The fifth article was solely authored by me, with my supervisors providing feedback on the final draft only.


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Date 17/03/2017

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Date 17/03/2017

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Ethics Approval

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Paid editorial assistance was obtained from Kim Woodland Editing. Written permission was granted before obtaining the editorial assistance. Services provided were limited to formatting and editing for spelling, grammar and style (according to the Australian Standard for Editing Practice ASEP Standard D—Language and Illustrations and ASEP Standard E—Completeness and Consistency).
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Publications


Presentations


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Abstract

The increased participation of infants in non-familial childcare has been accompanied by an intensification of political and research interest in their childcare experience. Despite a marked increase in research activity about, on and with infants, along with an escalation in government initiatives to shape their childcare experiences, the perspectives of infants—what they think, feel and know about their childcare experiences—remains significantly overlooked. This thesis is about infants’ encounters with curriculum and an attempt to come closer to understanding what it is like for infants to experience curriculum in their childcare setting.

Among a growing number of international initiatives aimed at enhancing children’s life outcomes has been the recent phenomenon of government-initiated curriculum or learning frameworks for ever younger children. These frameworks frequently call on educators to view infants as agentic and capable contributors to their own and others’ learning. There is as yet, however, little written about how infants’ contribution to curriculum can be fostered.

This thesis reports on a study that aimed to better understand, as far as possible from the infants’ perspective, how they experienced curriculum. It sought to get close to the experience of three infants—Clare, William and Hugh (aged between 6 months and 28 months)—as they encountered curriculum in their childcare setting. Using a critical hermeneutics theoretical frame, this study sought to reveal the potential hidden, silenced or taken-for-granted aspects about curriculum for infants, alongside the use of narratives to reflect the infants’ lived experiences. Drawing on the work
of Emmanuel Levinas and his ideas about the concept of ‘encounter’, the study offers a reconceptualisation of infants as curriculum consumers.

The study followed the day-to-day experiences of these infants as they attended a Sydney childcare setting over a 9-month period in 2010. The single case study design used a ‘Mosaic’ methodological approach, including video footage, still photographs, field notes and reflective journal entries. Narratives, derived from these data sources, were developed and analysed using both inductive, thematic coding, and later, theory-driven analysis drawing on Levinas’ key ideas of ‘benediction’ and ‘sayings’.

Benedictions (the infants’ invitations) were found in the gestures, suggestions and adaptations to the curriculum that these infants offered their educators. The sayings of curriculum were seen in the unexpected and surprising capacities of these infants, to encounter learning beyond normative developmental assumptions, which are prominent in the infant early childhood literature. Together, the theoretical frame of benedictions and sayings provided windows through which I was able to illuminate the capabilities of these infants to be active contributors to their curriculum encounters.

This thesis contributes to a growing body of work that challenges normative assumptions about infants and educators’ practice. It illuminates the exceptional thinking and theorising of infants as they engage in everyday encounters with curriculum. It proposes that there may be alternative ways of observing, planning for and documenting infants’ learning than are currently practiced. This work promotes a re-imagining and new understandings of critical pedagogic practice with infants.
Chapter 1: Introducing the Study
Chapter 1: Introducing the Study

This thesis is about infants’ encounters with curriculum. It aims to contribute to a growing body of research about the experiences of infants in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. In particular, this thesis reports on a study that sought to better understand the role of curriculum in infants’ lives. Given the increasing participation of infants in ECEC settings and their increased exposure to texts of curriculum (Sumsion, Harrison, & Bradley, 2016), this study set out to ask ‘how questions’ about curriculum for infants.

As File (2012) argues, ‘if questions’, such as ‘if curriculum works’, have largely dominated curriculum research in early childhood. Very little is yet understood about how curriculum works for very young children. To date, and to the best of my knowledge, the literature is all but silent about the how of curriculum for infants. As a contribution to addressing this silence, this thesis reports on an Australian case study of three infants’ experiences of curriculum, all of whom were under 2 years of age at the beginning of the study. It provides a glimpse into what life was like for them as they encountered curriculum in their Sydney childcare setting. In considering how these infants experienced curriculum, this study contributes to richer understandings of the complexities of teaching and learning with infants.

To introduce the thesis, I begin with an overview of the socio-political context of curriculum for infants, highlighting an emerging trend, internationally and in Australia, for governments to produce curricula documents for ever younger children. Within this context, I then discuss the rationale and aims of the study and provide a brief overview of the research.
questions, methodology and theoretical frame that underpinned this study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the significance of the study along with an orientation to the structure of the thesis.

**The Context of the Study**

What infants experience in ECEC settings is subject to an expanding array of ideological, institutional and socio-political influences (Dalli & White, 2017). These influences include not only currently accepted theories and ideologies about infants and their learning and development, but also the political and economic contexts that increasingly imbue their lives and experiences (Press & Mitchell, 2014). Changes to the ways that families live their lives, and the expansion of ‘shared care’ for ever younger children, have brought about new experiences for infants in formalised education and care arrangements. This study has sought to understand more about these experiences, particularly in a time where there is heightened interest on behalf of governments to determine and monitor what the experience of infants should be in an early childhood setting.

As the trend for infants’ participation in ECEC settings grows (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015), so too has the political interest and involvement of governments in determining what takes place within these settings. As discussed in Chapter 2, the coupling of the growing body of evidence highlighting the importance of the early years with seemingly unquestioned links to national productivity gains, has heightened the focus of governments on the experience of infants (Grieshaber & Graham, 2015; Sumsion et al., 2016) and human capital agendas (Kampmann, 2013; White, 2011). Early childhood education is
now more visible on political agendas and there has been a growing willingness on behalf of governments to take a more active role in ECEC policy than ever before (Millei & Jones, 2014). From the intimacy of familial relationships, to the business of government, early childhood education has undergone dramatic shifts.

As Elfer and Page (2015) note, this shift has heralded a societal change in the way that the care and education of very young children is conceptualised. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that among its member states, while variable across countries, up to 35% of children under 2 years of age now participate in some form of out-of-home care (OECD, 2016). Within Australia, approximately 22% of children under the age of 2 years attend some form of formal childcare (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). This represents a more than two-fold increase since 1984 when less than 10% of Australian infants were enrolled in formal childcare (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013). Noting this shift from the private responsibility of families to a shared responsibility between families and the State, Brooker (2010, p. 194) has declared this a “minor social revolution… requir[ing] us to reconfigure our account of children’s socio-emotional development and the contexts in which this occurs”.

Hand in hand with this shift in social and economic influences has been the rise of social justice discourses and a growing child rights agenda. Commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 1989) has intensified global awareness of the rights of children to the provision of resources to support a healthy life, their protection from harm,
and to participate and have a say in matters that affect them. In particular, the child rights agenda has highlighted gaps in health and education outcomes for some children with a resulting promotion of ideals that support initiatives for greater equity and opportunity for all. The growing awareness of educational gaps and the effects of disadvantage have prompted a sharper focus on the early years and the significance of early experience on later life outcomes (Council of Australian Governments, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Investment in the early years as an ameliorating strategy for social disadvantage is increasingly visible in a number of high level international reports. Prominent United Kingdom researchers looking specifically at quality ECEC for children under 3 years of age proclaimed, “There is no period in human development after three where such radical changes occur” (Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou, & Ereky-Stevens, 2014 p. 11). The social and scientific arguments for attention to the early years are well supported by prominent economic arguments attesting to the human capital gains and positive return on investment in the early years (Garcia, Heckman, Leaf, & Prados, 2016). Together, the convincing social, scientific and economic evidence has created an imperative for governments to act, not only in the individual interests of citizens but in the interests of the nation as a whole (Cleveland, 2012).

Within this thesis the term curriculum is used broadly to refer to curriculum as both text and experience. Drawing on Huebner’s (1975) ideas that curriculum is both language that describes intent, and reality which is the lived experience of learning, the thesis strives to understand curriculum for infants, as both the learning intent defined in curriculum documents,
alongside the lived experience of curriculum that is subject to the human
response. Acknowledging that curriculum includes what is both planned and
intended but also what is experienced as[which may be] spontaneous and
unintended, I have drawn on the Australia’s Early Years Learning
Framework (EYLF) which defines curriculum as, “… all the interactions,
experiences, activities and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an
environment designed to foster children’s learning and development”
(Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and
Workplace Relations, 2009, p.9).

When specifically referring to the written texts and endorsed guides of
curriculum, produced by governments around the world, I have used the
term ‘curriculum framework’, which is consistent with the way that the
OECD refers to such texts. When referring to a specific curriculum
document I have used it by name. In sharing the lived experience of these
infants’ encounters with curriculum, I have used the more generic term
‘curriculum’. Chapter 2 includes a more in-depth discussion of the various
understandings and constructs of the term curriculum as it is used
internationally.

The rise of curriculum for ever younger children. The increased
government interest and intervention in early years’ policy has seen the rise
of more formalised approaches to learning in the early years including the
production of government-endorsed curriculum frameworks and learning
frameworks. In their benchmarking report looking at ECEC across the
world, The Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) noted that:
Consciously setting aside a time to stimulate young children’s development is a relatively new phenomenon ... as economies shift towards more knowledge-based activities, awareness about child development—the need to improve their social awareness, confidence and group interaction skills, and to prepare them for starting primary education—continues to grow. (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012, p. 5)

While referring to ECEC settings for children aged from 3 to 5, the sentiments reflected in this report echo those of other prominent international reports that recommend curriculum frameworks for ever younger children. While almost all OECD countries now have a curriculum or learning guide for children aged from 3 years to compulsory school age (OECD, 2012), Sumsion et al. (2016) observe that this growing trend towards formalised curriculum frameworks, increasingly extends to younger children.

The trend towards curriculum for infants was flagged in the OECD’s Starting Strong III report, where it was noted that, “In infant-toddler settings with a weak pedagogical framework, young children may miss out on stimulating environments that are of high importance in the early years” (OECD, 2012, p. 83). Of the 52 jurisdictions where curricula were reviewed, 31 had in place some form of curriculum for education and care for children under 2 years of age. The increasing phenomenon of curriculum for infants in the early 2000s and, in particular, Australia’s move to endorse a curriculum framework for children from birth was the impetus for the study reported in this thesis.

The announcement of the Australian Early Childhood Reform Agenda in 2008 (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) heralded a new era for early childhood in Australia. I was fortunate to be a member of the 30-strong Consortium that was charged with the task of developing Australia’s
first national early years’ curriculum framework—*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The EYLF was a key strategy of the Reform Agenda, with a national learning framework seen to drive a consistent approach to quality ECEC and to “…extend and enrich children’s learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school” (p. 5). Inherent in this government initiative was an assumption that a learning framework that included infants from birth was a natural extension of the assumption of curriculum for older preschool children.

My study emerged in part from fundamental questions that arose for the Consortium as they undertook the considerable task of representing the significant span of development and learning that happens in the first five years of life. A growing awareness of the multiple theoretical perspectives and competing policy agendas that were circulating in the ECEC space in relation to infants participating in childcare was also raising complex questions for the Consortium. How might the EYLF reflect the government’s equity ambitions and the educational entitlements for all children birth to five years? How might this be done in such a way as to capture the uniqueness of infancy and avoid the risks of a reductionist preschool program for the youngest children? (see Sumsion et al., 2009).

**The assumption of curriculum for infants.** The assumption of the need for a curriculum for infants is often couched in persuasive and rational terms of, for example, giving children the “…best start in life…” (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 4), enabling children to “…fulfil their potential…” (Department for Education, 2014, p. 5) and “…laying the
foundations for lifelong learning, health, and behaviour” (Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2008, p. 14). It is difficult to argue against the inherent logic and good intention of such statements and there was no plan on my part to unduly contest the increased political and social interest in the early years. Rather, I have been interested in better understanding the intents of curriculum for infants and how the infants themselves experience these intents.

As Horm, Goble, and Branscomb (2012) suggest, to date, approaches to infant curriculum have largely reflected the political and theoretical perspectives current at their time of development. They cite three examples of infant curriculum developed in the United States of America (USA): Resources for Infant Educarers (RIE) (Petrie & Owen, 2005); Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC) (Lally & Mangione, 2009); and Creative Curriculum (Dodge, Rudick, & Berke, 2010). Each of these approaches reflects the contexts and theories prominent during their time of development. Horm et al. explain, for example, that the RIE approach stems from a period where maturational theories were influential and designed for infants experiencing considerable trauma and loss. One of the key messages of this approach—“observe more – do less” (Gerber, 1998, p. 63)—is laden with maturational confidence in the infant to find their own way. PITC’s focus was on relationship-based care, reflecting the interest of the time in attachment and developmental theories of the 1970s and 1980s. The Creative Curriculum includes curriculum content and builds a continuum toward school readiness. This school readiness approach reflects contemporary pressures influenced by productivity discourses and ambitions to close educational disadvantage gaps.
Beyond the USA, other notable approaches, such as that of the schools of Reggio Emilia, are also premised on prominent political and social leanings. The Reggio Emilia image of a strong and capable child reflected a desire to build a new society, post-World War II and maintain a “…vision of children who can think and act for themselves” (Dahlberg, 1995, cited in Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 12). Contesting a regime that promotes in children a culture of conformity, the ambition of the schools of Reggio Emilia was to see schools as sites for “ethical and political practice” (Rinaldi, 2004, p. 2).

The Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden have collectively embraced the Nordic ideal of the ‘good childhood’ (Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006). Described as a set of values that presumes that children should enjoy childhood, have their rights respected and their voices heard, the Nordic ideal is represented across early childhood education policies with a flow-on to their respective curriculum frameworks. The prominence of the good childhood in the Nordic curriculum documents reflects that region’s strong commitment to listening to children and promoting values of democracy and citizenry for children from birth (Bath & Karlsson, 2016).

New Zealand’s Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) is built on a commitment to bi-cultural early childhood education based on cultural heritage partnerships. The New Zealand approach reflects a robust commitment to socio-cultural, cultural-historical and constructivist perspectives. Nutall (2013) suggests that this approach reflects a widely accepted understanding of the connection between culture and early learning and reflects a uniquely New Zealand approach to early learning.
Australia’s EYLF reflects a commitment to the importance of the early years as foundational to maximising children’s future life trajectories. Emphasising relational pedagogies through a vision of Belonging, Being and Becoming (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), the learning outcomes outlined in the EYLF emphasise the skills and knowledge that Australian’s believe will equip children for life and learning (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008).

Articulating a vision for children’s early learning, the EYLF, like most other early learning frameworks, reflects contemporary notions of infants as learners from birth with rights to contribute to matters that affect them. As the focus of these frameworks, infants’ learning in the context of this study is understood in a broad sense and draws from the EYLF definition of learning, as “a natural process of exploration that children engage in from birth as they expand their intellectual, physical, social, emotional and creative capacities. Early learning is closely linked to early development” (p.46). Within this thesis, infants’ learning is seen as infants’ responses to their engagement with people and things and can be seen as self-initiated, guided by others or stumbled upon incidentally. I have drawn on the work of Lally (2013) and his observations that infants possess an innate learning agenda. I have sought to better understand this learning agenda, through close observation and inquiry as to what infants’ intents and motivations for learning might be.

Learning is also examined as a political intent, where texts of curriculum in the form of curriculum or learning frameworks are developed, with the explicit intent to shape learning in order to produce desired outcomes.
The political and social discourses reflected in the range of curriculum frameworks noted above, is evidence of the broad and diverse agendas and approaches that underpin these texts of curriculum as they relate to children under two years. There is no suggestion that social and political influence in curriculum is a new phenomenon. As discussed in Chapter 2, curriculum theorists such as Apple (1992), Giroux and McLaren (1989), Green (2010), and Pinar (2003) have long warned of the politicisation and industry influence on curriculum for older children. It is the seemingly natural flow-on of these influences to ever younger children that has been of interest to me in this study. I also acknowledge that unlike many school-based curricula or syllabus documents, early years curriculum frameworks are generally broad, aspirational guides that require contextual interpretation. On the one hand, this level of flexibility offers a range of possibilities for early years’ educators; on the other hand, it leaves much to the individual choice of the educator responsible for the delivery of the aspired learning outcomes. What infants experience as curriculum could vary greatly, according to the interpretation and implementation of their educators (Grieshaber & Graham, 2015; Sumsion et al., 2016).

The nature of curriculum frameworks as broad and open reveals an inevitable and ever present influence that became integral to this study. While the focus of the study has been on the experience of the infants, the role of educators working with them could not be set aside as separate to, or quarantined from, the experience of the infants. The literature has highlighted the inevitability that infants’ experiences are always filtered through the decisions, actions and inactions of their educators (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2006; Salamon & Harrison, 2015). In my study, the EYLF
offered one source of knowledge and guidance to educators but the diversity of educators’ qualifications, backgrounds and exposure to other sources of information could not be disregarded within the context of each infant’s encounter with curriculum.

The role of educators in infants’ curriculum experience. In the Australian policy context, the notion of ‘care’ as the primary work of infant educators persists as a prominent and influential discourse. The nature of infant educators’ work and the qualification requirements for those who work with infants in ECEC settings continues to be a contested and controversial workforce issue (Sumsion, 2017). While improvements to the educator qualifications and ratios of educators to infants were announced as part of Australia’s Reform Agenda (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2013), these improvements were relatively modest in comparison to the attention given to the requirements for those who work with older preschool children. The reforms presented a convincing evidence base to support the employment of university qualified teachers for children aged over 3, yet the case for children under 3 years of age has been vastly different. Australia’s Productivity Commission, in its Report on its Inquiry into Childcare and Early Learning, declared that there was no compelling evidence to support a case for a highly qualified workforce for children under three years (Productivity Commission, 2014). Broadly drawing on maternalist discourses (Ailwood, 2007; Bown, Sumsion, & Press, 2010) of good mothering and assumptions that warm and responsive care is sufficient for good infant care, the findings of the Productivity Commission indicate that the case for more highly qualified infant educators has gained little political traction.
The persistent focus on ‘care’ as being the primary work of infant educators is noted by a number of researchers who suggest that the prominent theories of child development and attachment have dominated the preparation programs for educators who work with infants (Salamon & Harrison, 2015; Trevarthen, 2011). This emphasis on development and attachment has resulted in focusing educators’ attention on the physical behaviours and physiological needs of infants (Degotardi & Davis, 2008). Further, Degotardi and Pearson (2009, p.149) argue that attachment theory positions infants as “relatively passive”, resulting in adult driven decisions about their learning needs. The strength of these theoretical positions in relation to guidance for infant educators has resulted in less attention being given to infants as more complex learners or to pedagogical approaches to working with infants that move beyond responsive caregiving.

Perhaps unintentionally framing infants as fragile and with many needs, these prominent theoretical understandings of infants and popular approaches to infant care have been interpreted as providing prescriptions for action on behalf of infant educators. Situating infants as the passive recipients of adults’ actions, notions of responsive caregiving (Lally, 2013), sensitivity (Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995), attunement (Stern, 1985), and even care as curriculum (Bussey, 2013), reinforce notions of the passive infant and the responsible educator. These approaches have somewhat focused educators’ attention on the infant’s physical needs and their emotional states. A growing body of work, however, is more recently emphasising notions of infants as thinkers, theorists or protagonists in learning (Bath & Karlsson, 2016; Johannesen, 2013; Page, Clare, & Nutbrown, 2013; Trevarthen, 2011; White, 2016). At present, there appears to be some
ambiguity about the nature of infants as learners, creating uncertainty about the role of infant educators.

In a comprehensive literature review of quality ECEC for infants, Dalli et al. (2011) contend that the style of pedagogic practice with infants is specialised and different to approaches taken with older children. The authors of this review assert that infant pedagogies should be marked by a “dialogic relationship that recognises the importance of infant contributions as central to adult intervention and response” (p. 3). As Recchia, Lee, and Shin (2015, p. 102) likewise suggest, working with infants involves careful observation and the development of relationship-based pedagogy that includes individual routines and playful interactions as the core of the curriculum. They contend that working with infants goes “…beyond the preset activities and teaching techniques that are commonly enacted in preschool programs”. McMullen, Yun, Mihai, and Kim (2016) support this view and have identified three key ways that working with infants and toddlers is different to preschool and kindergarten education. They assert that the tremendous growth and development of infants and toddlers in the first three years, the need to work in close partnership with families, and the significance of caring relationships on the lifelong learning outcomes for children, require a specialised educator. Along with Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (2011), Manning-Morton (2006), and Press and Mitchell (2014), Recchia et al. (2015, p. 117) conclude that this work requires “…specialised knowledge and experience and different understandings of professionalism”.

Moreover, Cooper, Hedges, and Dixon (2014) have recently suggested that popular approaches to infant care and education create theoretical tensions
for infant educators in working across multiple theoretical perspectives and approaches. They suggest that the broader socio-cultural theoretical frame of many contemporary curriculum frameworks conflict with more attachment focused approaches such as Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) (Petrie & Owen, 2005). Cooper et al., highlight the complexity of work with infants and assert that a critical stance and thoughtfulness is needed to negotiate the tensions and contradictions inherent in the diverse guidance available to infant educators.

It was this complex landscape of theory, ideology and good intentions informing curriculum for infants that prompted this study. Looking critically at this complexity and seeking to understand curriculum from the infants’ perspectives has been an opportunity to contribute to deeper conversations about how curriculum might work for infants. At a time when infants are increasingly participating in ECEC settings, this study offered a timely and important opportunity to shed new light on infants’ encounters with curriculum and contest what Olsson (2009, p. xx) contends is the “natural and necessary” tone of the assumption of curriculum for infants.

**Aims of the Study**

The doctoral study was part of a larger Australian Research Council Linkage project titled Infants’ Lives in Childcare (ILC) (LP0883913) (see Sumsion et al., 2011). The broader project aimed to investigate the lived experience of infants in Australian childcare settings and investigate “What life is like for infants’ in childcare”. Nested within this broader body of work, my study has focused on infants’ encounters with curriculum.
My study was designed to examine how infants encounter curriculum in an early childhood setting. The broad research questions guiding the study were:

- How do infants encounter curriculum in childcare settings?
- How can these encounters be understood in relation to the dominant discourses and grand narratives that currently frame curriculum understandings?
- How can the practice of intentional teaching - a key practice requirement of the EYLF - be understood in relation to infants’ encounters with curriculum?

Drawing on Levinasian ideas of encounter, I was interested to explore not only how infants were influenced by curriculum frameworks, but also how they might influence their own and other’s learning experiences. Such experiences are acknowledged as being subject to a complex interaction between the written texts of curriculum frameworks, understandings and interpretations of those texts, the contributions of the infants themselves, along with the intentional actions or inactions of the infants’ educators. The three research questions aimed to capture the complexity of these interactions and influences and acknowledge that an important aspect to consider in this study were the educators’ intents.

**The Case Study Site**

The context for data gathering for this study was the infants’ room of a not-for-profit childcare setting located in Sydney’s Eastern Suburbs. The centre was one of approximately 150 operated by KU Children’s Services, a partner organisation and co-funder of the Australian Research Council grant
of which this doctoral study was part. Operating between the hours of 7.30 am–6.00 pm, five days per week, this childcare setting catered for children from birth to six years. Childcare settings in Australia typically cater for children of working parents. The children who became the protagonists of this case study—Clare, William and Hugh (pseudonyms)—were aged between 6 months and 19 months at the beginning of the data gathering phase of the study.

The study took place across the years 2010–2016. Data gathering began in April 2010 and was completed in December 2010. It should be noted that this was a period of significant reform for ECEC in Australia. In 2008, and just prior to the commencement of this study, the newly elected Australian Labor Government announced the introduction of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood (NQF). Sims, Mulhearn, Grieshaber, and Sumion (2015, p. 13) refer to this period of reform as “…the largest and most urgent Early Childhood Reform Agenda ever to take place in Australia”. A multi-pronged reform agenda, the NQF heralded considerable changes to the laws, regulations and accountabilities that applied to ECEC settings.

Over the period of data gathering and during the later stages of this study, several reforms that impacted infant rooms were officially implemented. Ratios for the number of educators required to work with infants were improved, resulting in a reconfiguring of both the staffing arrangements and grouping of infants. The requirement that all educators working with infants would hold a minimum Certificate III vocational qualification meant that previously unqualified educators were undertaking professional development to upgrade their qualifications. The introduction of the EYLF
was a significant change for the infant educators, moving from the previously state-based New South Wales Curriculum Framework. Although the two curriculum frameworks share many similarities, the EYLF was the first national learning framework for Australia to emphasise learning outcomes for children from birth, requiring educators to document and plan for infants learning, using the learning outcomes as a guide (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011).

Changes brought about by these reforms were reflected within the study site. Toward the end of the data gathering period, the numbers of infants enrolled in the centre were reduced to prepare for the upcoming change to educator/infant ratios. Two staff members were undertaking further professional learning to upgrade their qualifications to meet the new requirements. All educators were familiarising themselves with the EYLF, which was launched in 2009 but not required to be used officially until the NQF took effect in 2012 (Sims et al., 2015). This period of reform is significant to this study as this was a period of heightened awareness about quality that was becoming increasingly formalised through government guidelines and regulatory instruments.

**Overview of the Study**

The methodological approach that I took in this study was guided by the approach of the larger ARC project. The ‘Mosaic’ approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) used in the larger project was an attempt to get as close as possible to the lived experience of infants and gather layers of meaningful data to create a comprehensive picture of infants’ experiences that would inform discussion and analysis. As previously mentioned, from the outset I was
motivated to take a criticalist approach (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) to this work, to unearth the assumptions that underpin the introduction of a learning framework for children from birth and to discover more about how infants engage in learning that is guided by such a framework.

My study proposed to examine closely the notion of infants as learners, thinkers and theoirisers. It sought to contribute to emerging conversations that reconceptualise images of infants, from those reflecting them as the passive recipients of adults’ responsiveness, to more expansive images of infants as agents in their lives and experiences, and protagonists in their encounters with curriculum. Within this thesis, the agency of infants is understood as a child right, or as EYLF describes it as “…being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and have an impact on one’s world” (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.45). Mindful of Woodhead’s (2006) observation that simply stating the rights of infants in a curriculum document does not ensure those rights will be realised, I sought to understand how curriculum that reflects images of infants as rights holders, and with capacities to make contributions to their learning, might be experienced by infants.

Early in the design of this study I made the decision to experiment with narratives as a way of reflecting the experiences of these infants. Having encountered the work of Ingrid Engdahl (2008) and her use of personal narratives to give prominence to the voices of toddlers in Swedish preschool, I was interested to see how narratives might enable a closer proximity to the experiences of pre-verbal infants. In this endeavour, I was initially drawn to the work of Jean-François Lyotard (1979). His
interrogation of the dominance of grand narratives provided a critical lens through which to examine the perhaps taken-for-granted assumptions and reductionist potentials of the dominant discourses that pervade guidance for infant educators. In Chapter 3, I take up a more extensive discussion of the origins of these grand narratives and the influence that they have had on the ideologies and practices of infant educators.

Contesting the often unquestioned nature of the grand narratives, Lyotard (1979) found a place for ‘little narrative’, which he claimed suffers from the privileging of the ‘grand narratives’ and can often be overlooked. His thinking about the importance of the little narrative prompted me to look more intently for the individual story of each infant. According to Lyotard, such individual stories can be easily shrouded by the assumptions and the dominance and importance of the pervasive grand narratives. I was interested to see how little narrative might enhance my understanding of the ways that infants encounter curriculum beyond the assumptions of child development and attachment theories and how discourses of child rights might influence their experiences. I was aware of critique of Lyotard’s polarising of the grand and little narratives and Bernstein’s (1991) warning that each is equally subject to a series of interpretations. Bernstein’s warning was a caution to me that little narrative could not be considered the universal solution to ‘knowing’ more about infants. I was nonetheless encouraged to be open to the possibilities that little narratives might offer, in better understanding the experiences of these infants.

The critical stance for this study was initially inspired by the work of Liselott Olsson (2009). Her work focusing on older preschool children (from 18 months) raised concerns about the nature of learning for young
children. Olsson contended that, “In contemporary educational contexts young children and learning are tamed, predicted, supervised, controlled and evaluated according to predetermined standards” (Olsson, 2009, p. 2). Her theorising of how notions such as ‘movement’ rather than ‘containment’, and ‘experimentation’ rather than ‘certainty’, offered a challenge to the well-intentioned tone of curriculum frameworks, prompting me to look critically at the emerging phenomenon of curriculum for infants.

In following Olsson’s lead, I was introduced to the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri (1987). Their thinking about control societies and the ways that curriculum can act to contain possibilities for young children offered an opportunity to consider the relationship between curriculum as policy and the experience of infants. These ideas are explored in Chapter 2, where the literature is reviewed to reveal international trends in reframing the early years as government business. Further to the thinking of Deleuze and Guatarri, contemporary curriculum theorists such as Green (2010) and Biesta (2006) provided a scaffold for thinking about how experiences of curriculum in other arenas of education might inform my thinking about curriculum for infants. Together, their theorising encouraged me to interrogate the taken-for-granted, ‘natural and necessary’ tone of curriculum for infants and look for possible hidden or silenced assumptions that, however well intended, might act to shape—for better or worse—the experience of infants.

Wider reading led me ultimately to the Lithuanian-born French philosopher and phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas (1985), who offered the possibility of conceptualising curriculum for infants as ‘encounter’. Curriculum conceptualised as encounter recognises the infant as more than
the object of the curriculum experience. Encounter situates the infant as a subject who influences and has a say in their learning. Inspired by such thinking and theorising, I began to focus my attention on how infants encounter curriculum—within and beyond the political and ethical intents that imbue texts of curriculum. My interest was in learning more about the experience of a small group of infants as they encountered the introduction of Australia’s first mandated national learning framework for children from birth (the EYLF).

Levinas’ ideas about ‘encounter’ as the source of all experience, and his critical reflection on an understanding of the self in relation to the ‘Other’, proved to be irresistible ideas to support my thinking about infants’ encounters with curriculum. The very notion of encounter—the reciprocity, rights and respect for the relationship—has assisted me in confronting the complexity and contradictions that surround notions of curriculum for infants and in finding new ways to conceptualise infants as curriculum consumers.

Levinas’ thinking encouraged a further layer of complex thinking to that offered by Lyotard (1979) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). His thinking took this study beyond a broad investigation of narratives of curriculum and the influence of the State, to a close-up case study of the learning relationships encountered by infants and their educators. Levinas’ thinking enabled a departure from constructions of infants as passive and needy (prominent in much of the child development and attachment literature), to promoting a view of infants—emerging through the child rights literature—as not only equal partners but also initiators and protagonists within each learning encounter. Unpicking the complexity of these, at times,
contradictory images of infants, suggested a broader view of the infants’ experiences—beyond their immediate care and protection needs, to notice and wonder about their thinking, theorising and intents for learning. Levinas’ influence prompted a desire to attempt to get as close to the infant and their thinking and theorising as possible. I was keen to look beyond universal assumptions about infants to gain a closer proximity to the individual experiences of Clare, William and Hugh.

The use of narratives alongside this criticalist approach to the research threw up some epistemological challenges for me. The humanist nature of narratives did not necessarily sit comfortably with the critical stance I was hoping to take. I was directed to Kinsella’s (2006) ‘critical hermeneutics’ frame (p. 1), and somewhat tentatively began to explore possibilities of working synonymously with the critical approach of Levinas alongside the humanist potential of narratives. In taking this approach, I was attempting to consider both the lived experience that is witnessed, alongside a critical interpretive stance which can illuminate important but easily overlooked events. An exploration of this complexity is more fully discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, where the data are presented as narratives and analysed against Levinasian theorising using a critical hermeneutics stance.

Working with these complex ideas of melding the humanism of narratives with critical analysis was based on Polkinghorne’s (1995) concept of narrative analysis. The narratives were developed from the data. This approach always involved checking with others who either witnessed the event or who later viewed the data with me. The sharing of initial analysis with the educators who participated in the study, members of the larger ARC project research team, and participants in conference presentations,
raised many conversations where multiple perspectives and differences of interpretation were evident. These often subtle and sometimes competing differences highlighted the very individual nature of interpretation and the significance of one’s background and experience in informing these interpretations.

My background as an early childhood teacher with many years of experience working in infant rooms underpinned much of what I saw and interpreted. Those who worked most closely with the children who participated in this study often drew on their knowledge of that child over several months, contributing background details that were not visible to me. Others in the larger research team often drew on their areas of specialty to focus their attention on particular aspects of the interpretation. In short, analysis of the narratives was not exact nor did it claim to offer a singular truth. It was rather an attempt to puzzle over what can never be factually explained. The richness of the collaborations over these narratives offered something different to broader, more scientific studies. While I do not claim to have provided absolute knowledge through any narrative, I did hope to explore ways that I could gain insight into aspects of children’s learning and thinking that were less possible through more formularised and standardised data analysis methods.

**Significance of the Study**

Less than seven years ago, and at the commencement of this study, Berthelson (2010) contended that within the broader arena of early childhood research, infant/toddler research was in its ‘youth’. Greve and Solheim (2010) supported this claim, but noted that the evidence base was
growing. More recently, Press and Mitchell (2014) noted a ‘groundswell’ of research about infants and toddlers. While this expansion of work (see for examples: Elwick, 2014; Goouch & Powell, 2013; Johannesen, 2013; Kalliala, 2014; Puroila & Estola, 2014; Salamon & Harrison, 2015; Stratigos, 2015; Sumsion et al., 2016; White, 2016) contributes substantially to the previously notable paucity of research with and about infants, to the best of my knowledge, my study is unique in critically examining infants’ relationships with curriculum frameworks, and contributes to this growing body of work considering a range of ways that infants engage with curriculum.

As an under-investigated area of early childhood research, and with little prior experience of how curriculum frameworks work for infants, there is a need for critical examination of the assumption of curriculum for infants. My study contributes to this current gap in knowledge about how infants encounter curriculum. Deeper understandings of the relationship between texts of curriculum and infants’ experiences is needed to ensure that curriculum is used wisely and that those charged with the responsibility for infants’ learning come to the curriculum encounter with curious minds—in this way avoiding what MacLure (2010, p.277) contends is the “reproduction of the bleeding obvious”.

Critical analysis of the assumption of curriculum was not intended by me to polarise views about curriculum for infants and present an either/or case for infant curriculum; rather, my hope for this study was to open new possibilities for thinking critically about curriculum for infants.
Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into ten chapters. It includes five published articles and five traditional thesis chapters. I was the lead or sole author of all of the published articles, four of which were co-authored with my supervisors and one was sole authored. The articles were submitted to four different journals and as such there is variation in formatting and referencing style. An outline of the chapters follows.

Chapter 1: Introducing the study. Chapter 1 introduces the research project and outlines the context in which this investigation took place. It discusses both the political and social context in which curriculum for infants is currently situated. It provides a justification for the significance of the study and a brief overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study along with the research methodology that shaped this work.

Chapter 2: Curriculum for infants. Chapter 2 presents the first published article. ‘Infants’ of the knowledge economy: The ambition of the Australian Government’s Early Years Learning Framework’ (2014), published in Pedagogy Culture and Society, 22(3). This article reviews the international literature that reports on the trend towards the production of texts of curriculum for ever younger children. It contends that human capital discourses and ideas such as ‘learning begins at birth’ and ‘lifelong learning’ are pervading curriculum frameworks internationally with the potential to influence the experiences of infants in perhaps unrecognised ways.

Chapter 3: Curriculum in the Australian context. Chapter 3 presents the second of the published articles. ‘Infants’ of the productivity agenda:
Learning from birth or waiting to learn?’ (2015), published in The Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 40(3). This article explores the literature as it relates to the socio-political context of ECEC for infants in Australia. Juxtaposing the political intent of the Australian early childhood reform agenda and image of a capable and resourceful infant against prominent and persistent discourses reflecting infants as vulnerable, needy and at the mercy of adults, this article raises questions about the workforce required to foster learning opportunities for infants. This article provides a backdrop to the contemporary political context of infant childcare in Australia.

**Chapter 4: Overview of the theoretical frame.** Chapter 4 presents the third published article and introduces the theorising of Levinas as it relates to infants encounters with curriculum. ‘An encounter with “sayings of curriculum”: Levinas and the fomalisation of infants’ learning’ (2015), published in Educational Philosophy and Theory, 47(8). Levinas’ ideas of ‘said’ and ‘sayings’ provided a new way to conceptualise curriculum for infants. His notion of the ‘benediction’ as an invitation was a pivotal concept for this study and it opened up possibilities to reconsider the role of the infant in relational pedagogies.

**Chapter 5: Overview of the methodological approach.** Chapter 5 is presented as a traditional thesis chapter and provides a detailed overview of the methodological approach taken in the study. It outlines the justification for the case study approach and my commitment to participatory research methods. This chapter explains the context of the data gathering using visual methods along with my approach to the development and analysis of the
narratives. It then addresses issues of trustworthiness, fidelity and the ethics of working alongside very young children.

Chapter 6: Presenting the data Part 1. Chapter 6 presents the fourth of the published articles. ‘Narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum: The benediction as invitation to participate’ (2016), published in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 17*(3). Drawing on Levinas’ notion of the ‘benediction’, I present a narrative of Clare, an infant aged 19 months. Clare’s skilful and seductive benediction represented a pivotal point in the study and was the impetus for looking more closely at benediction within the larger data corpus.

Chapter 7: Presenting the data Part 2. Chapter 7 is the second of the published data articles. ‘Narratives of infants encounter with curriculum: Beyond the curriculum of care’ (2017), published in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 18*(1). This article looks beyond the ‘benediction’ of the infant to notice how educators respond to infants as initiators of curriculum. It suggests that prominent discourses drawn from attachment and child development theories might limit educators to actions prompted by a responsibility to the infant. Chinnery’s (2003) notion of the ‘response-able’ educator is introduced in relation to a narrative of Hugh, an infant aged 15 months, as he pursues an adventure on a ‘castle’.

Chapter 8: Presenting the data Part 3: Further narratives. Chapter 8 is presented as a traditional thesis chapter offering three further narratives. This chapter explores the fleeting nature of the infants’ encounters with curriculum and illuminates what they bring to each encounter. The narratives of William (at ages 8 months and 9 months) and Hugh (at ages 11 months and 16 months) highlight the possibilities for infants to be partners
in learning, but also reveal the significant role that educators can play in fostering participatory curriculum with infants.

**Chapter 9: Considering the findings.** Chapter 9 is presented as a traditional thesis chapter where the findings from the three data chapters are discussed in response to the research questions posed in Chapter 1. This synthesis of the findings shows that these infants encounter curriculum in often unexpected ways. Their ‘benedictions’, or invitations, are often overlooked and they frequently pursue interests and learning agendas that sit outside what prominent discourses might suggest are appropriate for them.

**Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusion.** Chapter 10, the final thesis chapter, offers a reconceptualising of curriculum for infants as ‘encounter’. Drawing on the findings presented and discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, this chapter argues the need for critical reflection on the assumption of curriculum for infants and further examination of the theoretical influences that currently shape what infants might experience as curriculum. It also outlines the limitations and contributions of this study along with possibilities for future research.

Together, the chapters of this thesis provide a qualitative in-depth study of how curriculum is experienced by three infants. Their stories illuminate some problematic assumptions, as well as a number of overlooked opportunities, that inhibit their meaningful participation in their own and others’ learning. Findings from the study reported in this thesis suggest that there is room to reconceptualise the relationships that infants have with curriculum. Levinasian theorising has provided an opportunity to consider new ways of thinking about infants’ encounters with curriculum.
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Introduction to Chapters 2 and 3
Introduction to Chapters 2 and 3

Each of the two published articles that comprise Chapters 2 and 3 outline the international and Australian policy context in relation to the production of curriculum frameworks for ever younger children. The two articles interrogate the taken-for-granted tone of discourses that are commonly found to shape approaches to infants’ experiences in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings and expose the political intent imbued within what can appear to be seemingly innocuous sentiments. These chapters provide the contextual backdrop to my study, establishing the need for critical examination of what can appear to be inherently good and pragmatic early childhood policy.

Chapter 2: Curriculum for Infants

The article presented in Chapter 2 (‘Infants of the knowledge economy: The ambitions of the Australian Government’s Early Years Learning Framework’) identifies two prominent discourses that are found in many current curriculum frameworks: ‘learning begins at birth’ and ‘lifelong learning’. This article interrogates the origins of these discourses. While not arguing that the discourses are necessarily problematic in themselves, I probe the unquestioned nature of the assumption that infants’ lives might be shaped from birth by the political intent of a curriculum document. Noting that the shift towards more formalised approaches to infants’ learning is not a localised phenomenon relevant only to the Australian context, this article identifies the global nature of this shift.

The theoretical frame taken in this article was influenced by the writing of French poststructuralist theorists, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.
(Deleuze & Guatarri, 1987). Their framing of texts such as curricula as tools of ‘control societies’ enabled me to think more deeply about the assumptions of curriculum for infants and the discourses that become naturally embedded in the vernacular of professional dialogue. I have argued here that research evidence can be crafted to fit with political agendas and ultimately curriculum frameworks. I have cautioned that those charged with working with such documents would benefit from taking a reflective stance, conscious of the political intent of texts of curriculum guides.

**Chapter 3: Curriculum in the Australian Context**

In the second article, which constitutes Chapter 3 (‘Infants of the productivity agenda: Learning from birth or waiting to learn?’), I examine the productivity and human capital discourses as they appear in the Australian context. I argue that the shift towards a cosmopolitan image of the capable infant who will ultimately contribute to nation building is also a key driver in the Australian ECEC policy landscape. This article notes one such shift in the Australia political agenda of the time.

At the time of writing this article (2014), there were significant events taking place in Australia that had the potential to dramatically change the experience of infants in ECEC settings in this country. Australia’s Productivity Commission—an independent research and advisory body of the Australian Government—was commissioned to inquire into Australia’s Childcare and Early Childhood Learning policy and provision. Initiated by the then incoming Australian Liberal-National Coalition Government, the terms of reference focused attention on creating a “…more flexible,
affordable and accessible child care system” (Productivity Commission, 2014a, p. v). The political imperative to create an effective childcare ‘system’ was premised on a need to support parents’ workforce participation. The article notes how political discourses can be used to promote particular images of infants to fit with a political imperative. It further highlights how these images can ultimately shape the rights and entitlements of infants to early childhood education and care.

The final report of the Productivity Commission (Productivity Commission, 2014b), which was released after this article was written, made no changes to their controversial recommendation that children under three years did not require a highly qualified workforce. The Commission “steadfastly maintained that there is a lack of robust evidence that under 3’s require more than minimally qualified educators” (Sumsion, 2017, p. 122). While, as yet, there has been no downgrading of qualification requirements for educators working with infants, on the day of writing this introduction to Chapters 2 and 3 of my thesis, a cross-bench Senator in the Australian Government (Senator David Leyonhjelm) made highly controversial public statements claiming that he would not support proposed reforms to childcare policy because they were “too costly” (Darvall, 2017, n.p.), and that the work of childcare educators is little more than “wiping noses and stopping kids from killing each other” (n.p.). Leyonhjelm’s public statements stand as ongoing evidence that the rights of infants to a highly qualified workforce remains a key battleground for Australian early childhood advocates and families.
Summary

Together, the two articles that comprise Chapters 2 and 3 provide the backdrop for this doctoral study, which aimed to take a fine-grained and critical look at the assumptions underpinning curriculum for infants. These articles expose hidden and potentially taken-for-granted discourses that imbue texts of curriculum and act to shape the experiences of infants. These articles do not suggest that, in and of themselves, any one of these discourses is necessarily dangerous or damaging. However, taken together and without critical reflection, they have the potential to influence the experiences of infants—for better or for worse—as they encounter curriculum in their early childhood setting.

References


Chapter 2: Infants of the Knowledge Economy:

The Ambition of the Australian Government’s

Early Years Learning Framework
Infants of the knowledge economy: the ambition of the Australian Government's Early Years Learning Framework

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Infants of the knowledge economy: the ambition of the Australian Government’s Early Years Learning Framework

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Shifts in global education policy to formalise curricula and make explicit learning outcomes for ever younger children have become popular for a number of countries responding to changes in global market economics. Human capital discourses, broadly aimed at shaping national prosperity, have entered the early childhood education and care policy landscape as somewhat of accepted wisdom. Using the Australian early childhood reform agenda and its accompanying Early Years Learning Framework as an example, this article interrogates two prominent productivity discourses that have permeated the early childhood education space – \textit{learning begins at birth} and \textit{lifelong learning}. We consider the relationship of these discourses to global/neoliberal ambitions for curriculum and question their place in the childcare experiences of infants under 12 months. Drawing on postmodern theory, we examine the complexity of universalistic ideals aimed at creating platforms for socially just goals, against their potential to promote universalistic notions of childhood and infancy. In problematising the image of a cosmopolitan infant of the knowledge economy, we encourage thoughtful resistance to the reductionist tendencies of economic discourses in early childhood education and claim space for a balance of the personal, democratic and economic dimensions within a vision of the ‘best start in life’.

\textbf{Keywords:} infants; lifelong learning; Early Years Learning Framework; productivity agenda; curriculum

Introduction

Increased attention to early years public policy agendas, both internationally and within Australia, has largely been welcomed by early childhood advocates. Convincing arguments promising a return on investment through enhanced long-term outcomes for children and the nation have captured political interest, resulting in expanded government investment and involvement in matters of early childhood education and care. Of particular importance to this paper is the introduction of Australia’s first national curriculum

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document for children from birth to five years – the Early Years Learning Framework (the EYLF) (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). This document plays a significant role in the Australian Government’s early childhood reform agenda which reflects an ambition to contribute to Australia’s future as a knowledge economy (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority 2011). In particular, the paper considers the positioning of the nation’s very youngest children within the EYLF and the intended influence of such a framework on the experiences and life outcomes of infants in early childhood settings. It interrogates the aspiration of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) ‘to equip [children] for life and learning...’ (Productivity Agenda Working Group – Early Childhood Development Sub Group 2008, 2) and reflects on the ideals of the reform agenda’s vision that ‘By 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation’ (Council of Australian Governments 2009, 4).

Looking specifically at the relationships between infants in childcare and the intent of curriculum, we consider the ways in which productivity ideals, embedded within the Australian early childhood reform agenda, imbue curricula. We examine the complex potential of these ideals to create platforms for socially just goals such as equity, rights and wellbeing, against their potential to promote normalising and universalistic notions of childhood and infancy – problematising the construction of the ‘infant of the knowledge economy’. While these issues may well be relevant to children of all ages, it is the recent intensification of interest in infants as learners, along with the conflation of the concepts of ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘learning begins at birth’, that prompts us to interrogate the influence of these discourses particularly in relation to infants under 12 months.

The article is in two parts. In the first part we consider the tradition of curriculum in early childhood education and note the increasing involvement of government in developing curricula documents for ever younger children. We use the example of Australia’s National Quality Framework (NQF), its associated policy documents and the EYLF to highlight nationalistic discourses that are embedded within early childhood curriculum ideals. In the second part, we draw on Lyotard’s (1979) theorising about the influence of grand narratives and Deleuzian (1995) ideas about control societies, to examine two prominent discourses within the Australian early childhood reform agenda: ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘learning begins at birth’, and suggest that these discourses position infants as ideal cosmopolitans. The article concludes by challenging the hegemony of these discourses and, using Deleuzian thinking, invites those responsible for curriculum in early childhood settings to reassess what might superficially appear inherently pragmatic or ‘good’ in relation to curriculum possibilities for infants.
Curriculum as government business

In the broader education sector, the term curriculum is variously defined. According to Null (2008, 478), curriculum is ‘the preparation and transmission of knowledge within an institution whose purpose is to educate…’. Stemming from the Latin meaning ‘life course’ (Masschelein et al. 2006), the notion of curriculum is filled with intentions, expectations and aspirations for the future and premised on Spencer’s famous question ‘What knowledge is of most worth?’ (in Apple 1992, 4).

Spodek (1991) contends that a country’s approach to education reflects culturally embedded values and expression of the nation’s ideals. He asserts that approaches to curriculum are not ‘natural’ but cultural inventions and along with Apple (1992) notes that it is during times of social change and upheaval that political involvement in curriculum becomes more visible. Current social and economic challenges arising from globalisation and advances in technology impel governments to ensure a future workforce capable of achieving the nations’ aspirations (Pinar 2003; Green 2010). Contemporary neoliberal ideals that encourage free market and competitive economics also promote a particular focus for curriculum as a tool for developing in individuals the necessary skills and dispositions for personal satisfaction and success.

For many years, curriculum theorists (see Giroux and McLaren 1989; Apple 1992; Pinar 2003; Green 2010) primarily focusing on school-based curriculum have warned of the politicisation and increasing influence of business and industry goals in the development of school curriculum. Emphasising the privileging of some voices over others in curriculum development, Apple (1992, 4) has reframed Spencer’s question to ask ‘Whose knowledge is of most worth?’ Far from representing a neutral body of knowledge, ‘What counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations, struggles and compromises among identifiable class, race, gender and religious groups’ (Apple 1992, 4).

Contemplating curriculum from this perspective in relation to the experiences of infants in early childhood settings exposes an important but relatively uncharted space in curriculum research and theorising. Traditionally considered the domain of schools and higher education, mandated curriculum has in recent years permeated the early years. Now commonplace in early childhood literature, the terms ‘learning framework’ and ‘curriculum’ encompass government-endorsed documents that specify outcomes and learning intentions for children participating in early childhood education and care settings. This represents a shift in the vernacular of early childhood education from terms such as ‘programming’ and ‘planning’, once used to denote the tradition of teacher-developed experiences based on broad and loosely defined developmental goals (Nuttall and Edwards 2007). This shift is perhaps most prominent in the case of infants where attention has
traditionally focused more on their health and welfare than on cognitive domains of their learning.

As Krütiæsson (2006) attests, in order to maximise human resources, there is an increasing pressure by policy-makers to introduce formal education to children at an ever younger age. Such recognition of the importance of the early years is not necessarily new thinking. The ancient Greeks first recognised the importance of ‘utilising the plastic period of infancy for implanting moral and aesthetic ideals and for developing a sound physique’ (Noisworth 1912, in Weber 1984, 19), and Gammage (2006, 235) notes that there has long been a recognition of the significance of childhood represented by the commentary of ‘philosophers, clerics and poets’. These beliefs have been more recently substantiated by the increasing influence of scientific evidence, including that derived from neuroscience, psychology and population studies. Prompted by a number of influential international reports, heightened interest in the potential of young children to benefit from early childhood education while also contributing to nation building has led in many cases to co-ordinated and centralised policy responses in many western industrialised countries (Kampmann 2013).

State interest in young children’s learning is often couched in terms of redressing inequality and overcoming the deficits of disadvantage to benefit individuals. According to Grieshaber (2010), this interest reflects human capital theory and is broadly aimed at shaping national prosperity through labour market productivity and social stability. Such ambition has translated into what Kampmann (2013, 1) notes as ‘the politics of early childhood education’. Focusing on ever younger children, productivity policies today are aimed at harnessing potential early and ameliorating risk factors before they become entrenched. The policy focus has manifested into an intensification in the learning dimension of early childhood, evidenced in part through the increased production of national curricula documents (Kampmann 2013). The introduction of state-endorsed curricula documents for children from birth is consistent with the view that preparation of future citizens begins well before compulsory schooling and that there is benefit for government to invest in such a measure for very young children (McCain and Mustard 1999; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). That a newborn baby in its first months of life might be subject to a curriculum or life course against which those responsible for the infant will be held accountable, is perhaps a relatively recent phenomenon – one which has quietly infused the early childhood policy landscape and remains largely unquestioned. Within this context, Spencer’s seemingly simple question ‘what knowledge is of most worth?’ holds new significance for infants.
The assumption of curriculum for infants in the Australian policy context

While planning for young children’s learning according to identified developmentally appropriate and desirable goals is not new to Australia, it has been the development of the EYLF that has consolidated a commitment to a more comprehensive accountability for children’s learning in prior-to-school settings. Immediately following their election in 2007, the Rudd Labor Government introduced widespread reforms to early childhood education and care provision. The introduction of the NQF and its accompanying quality assurance system – the National Quality Standard (NQS), was an ambitious national approach to improving standards, regulating and assuring quality, and increasing the participation of children in early childhood education with a focus on children from birth. The EYLF, as a key element of the new system, requires educators to provide evidence of their planning and assessment of children’s learning against five broad but unambiguous learning outcomes. This requirement can be clearly linked to the Labor government’s national ‘productivity agenda’ where it is understood that:

National effort to improve child outcomes will in turn contribute to increased social inclusion, human capital and productivity in Australia. It will help ensure Australia is well placed to meet social and economic challenges in the future and remain internationally competitive. (Council of Australian Governments 2009, 4)

Such explicit intent on behalf of government is suggestive of a potential for curricula documents like the EYLF to not only benefit individual children but also to act as instruments of government influence towards nationalistic ideals. The inclusion of children from birth in the curricula expectations of the NQF heralded a new era for Australian infants – their childcare experience now defined by learning outcomes premised on a government agenda for a country’s future.

It must be acknowledged that the Australian EYLF has never been presented as a content-oriented curriculum document in and of itself. It is described as providing ‘broad direction for early childhood educators … to facilitate children’s learning. It guides educators in their curriculum decision-making … it underpins the implementation of more specific curriculum relevant to each local community and early childhood setting’ (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009, 8). The notion of a ‘framework’, rather than a content-oriented curriculum, lends itself to a broader understanding of curriculum with weaker emphasis on inputs and outputs and a greater emphasis on local interpretation. Although these contemporary definitions of curriculum do not emphasise explicit outcomes or pre-determined expectations, the political intent of the EYLF is clearly framed with implicit expectations for
children’s learning determined through articulated outcomes for a future productive population (Sumison et al. 2009). As Osberg and Biesta (2008) contend, even when outcomes are vaguely defined they carry significant responsibility for the educator to deliver the outcome successfully.

We now move on, in the second part of this article, to draw on postmodern ideas to interrogate the grand narrative of the productivity discourses that currently circulate the Australian early childhood reform agenda and the accompanying EYLF. We use the example of two relatively unquestioned discourses, ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘learning begins at birth’, and contend that these discourses are integral to the grand narratives of the knowledge economy and significant in shaping expectations for learning outcomes of the EYLF.

**Productivity as curriculum for infants**

Taking a criticalist perspective (Kincheloe and McLaren 2005), we are encouraged to question the acceptance of what might appear as logical or as inherently pragmatic or ‘good’. Curriculum for infants can be examined for its potential to carry hidden, silenced and taken-for-granted assumptions that shape the lives of young children in unintended ways – reinforcing globalised, neoliberal agendas. Lyotard (1979) called these types of universal assumptions ‘grand narratives’, identifying them as institutional and ideological forms of knowledge. Claiming the status of universal truth (Readings 1991), these narratives persist largely unquestioned as the basis for generalised approaches.

Stemming from the commanding economic imperatives and the grand narratives of the knowledge economy, the assumption of curriculum for infants is perhaps an example of one such unquestioned generalised approach. Within the globalised discourse of western industrialised countries, Biesta (2006, 171) notes the seemingly rational and inevitable tenor of the ‘learning – or knowledge economy’ describing it as ‘the spell of the economic imperative’. The grand narrative’s translation into education promotes, in his view, an interest in certain types of skills and knowledge with a reduced interest in ‘forms of learning that are considered not to be of economic value’ (169). As Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) propose, in becoming increasingly government business, early childhood has created a reliance on inputs and outputs and a form of what Lyotard (1979, 252) termed ‘instrumental reason … [or] performativity’, with ‘the feasibility of shaping society so as to fit with a rationalist scheme’ (Browning 2000, 3). These ideas are further supported by Wain (2007, 47), who notes this potential as ‘the managerialist/vocationalist culture’, where learning is reduced to measurable outcomes based on the promotion of certain skills and competencies.
Similarly, Deleuze and Parnet (2006, 13) are also alert to the State’s capacity to shape or repress thinking ‘as it conforms to the goals of the real State, to the dominant meanings and to the requirements of the established order’. Deleuze (1995) contends that societies have shifted from what Foucault called ‘disciplined societies’ – those that rely on institutions such as schools, hospitals, family and prison – with their inherent rules to discipline or govern society, to a form of ‘control societies’ – rather than confining people within institutions they are contained by the need to fit in and take responsibility for their success or failure within implicit societal expectations. In contemporary market economies, these controls are reinforced by the imperatives to up-skill oneself continually to achieve success in a constantly changing competitive global marketplace. The grand narratives of the knowledge economy play a significant role in control societies as they help to modulate and describe the expectations of the society and to articulate the prescription for success.

In considering the role of curriculum in control societies, Olsson (2009, xix), drawing on Deleuzian ideas, speaks of the potential for curriculum to translate into ‘an apparatus of taming instead of a place for learning’. She warns of the dangers of curriculum when it privileges particular ways of thinking, talking and doing. At its most extreme, curriculum can operate as an instrument of government – taming the education of young children towards the advancement of particular national ideals. While these ideals might present as universally desirable, we might question the limitations and containments that they imply. When unchallenged, such instruments might limit the possibilities for thinking differently – we can uncritically accept the universal grand narratives and be blinded to other possibilities. The following discussion looks to the origins of two prominent global discourses that can be found in curricula documents. We use the Australian context and the EYLF as an example to question the significance of these discourses in the lives of infants and interrogate their potential to limit or contain the experiences of infants as they are enlisted as nation builders of the knowledge economy.

**Lifelong learning**

Ideas about education, classically regarded as the task of school-aged children and young adults, have in recent decades been re-examined in response to changing global, social and economic circumstances (Aspin and Chapman 2012). Beginning with a focus on adult education at the UNESCO Conference, Montreal in 1960, and later through two prominent reports – the UNESCO Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow (Faure et al. 1972) and the OECD Lifelong Learning for All (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 1996), the notion of lifelong learning was initially premised on Deweyan ideas of education as ‘a constant
reorganizing or reconstructing of experience’ (Dewey 1916, 76). Such ideas challenged the notion of a static education system where one’s learning is finite and all but complete by the end of institutionalised education. Increasing technology, the rapid pace of change along with growing concern for social justice, prompted education theorists to re-examine assumptions about education with a view to creating a vision for lifelong learning – building on Dewey’s (1916) ideas of education as life, not a preparation for life.

Originally understood to be a largely democratic and collective project (Biesta 2006), the Learning to Be report of 1972 was based on four assumptions. The first was the existence of an international community – a recognition of emerging globalisation and the inherent possibilities and challenges of this new era; second was a belief in democracy and the rights of all people to realise their own potential and contribute to their own future; third, the complete fulfilment of man [sic] in all aspects of his life – a recognition of rights beyond the workplace; and fourth, learning to be – a recognition of the need for a continually evolving body of knowledge responding to innovation (Faure et al. 1972). At its inception, the notion of lifelong learning was complex and multidimensional and suggested an interplay between these competing assumptions. Reinforcing this notion of complexity, Biesta (2006) speaks of three dimensions of lifelong learning: the personal, the democratic and the economic. These dimensions acknowledge the relationships between the individual, the community and the nation, and suggest a balance between and among the dimensions. Biesta (2006) claims that the notion of lifelong learning, in its original form, was understood to emphasise the democratic dimension with the economic always subordinate. Aspin and Chapman (2012), however, have identified the propensity of governments to reconceptualise the notion of lifelong learning by reordering the emphasis of the dimensions. They claim that lifelong learning:

... is regarded as offering a strong foundation to underpin education and training provision, for ends that have to do with matters of an economic, social and individual kind, upon which countries, systems and individuals wish to lay ethical importance and to base their education, training and policies for the future. (Aspin and Chapman 2012, 12)

The global economic imperative

According to Wain (2007, 43), the Utopian ideals of lifelong learning expressed in the reports of the 1960s and 1970s were aligned with ideas of the ‘learning society’, a democratically driven concept that promoted investment in knowledge, learning and teaching to enhance qualifications of individuals and therefore their life chances. Prompted by the reunification of Europe, along with the rise of Asia as economic competitors in a new global marketplace, the shift in emphasis from a largely democratic to a mostly
economic discourse was driven by the ‘internationalization of trade, the
dawning of the information society, and the relentless march of science and
technology’ (EU Commission 1995, in Wain 2007, 43). The personal fulfil-
ment of citizens was relegated to the coda in the summary of the 1995
European Union White Paper on Lifelong Learning, while economic con-
cerns dominated the report (Wain 2007). The notion of ‘learning society’
was soon replaced by ‘knowledge economy’ (Masschelein et al. 2006; Wain
2007), with a stronger focus on performative outputs rather than education
inputs, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of individual worker responsibility and
competition. By 2003, the European Commission declared ‘lifelong learning
as a major strategic asset in making the European Union “the most competi-
tive and dynamic knowledge-based economic market of the world”
(Commission of the European Union 2003, in Tuschling and Engemann
2006, 454). Similarly, the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper
(Australian Government 2012, 2) shares this imperative for a competitive
human capital agenda declaring that Australians need to act in order to suc-
cceed in the Asian century: ‘Our greatest responsibility is to invest in our
people through skills and education to drive Australia’s productivity perfor-
ance and ensure that all Australians can participate and contribute’.

Wain (2007, 42) suggests that lifelong learning is now a variously
defined and understood concept often ‘presented uncritically as something
good in itself’. Proponents of lifelong learning frame it as integral to the
good or worthwhile life and in neoliberal terms an inevitability of increased
globalised complexity and uncertainty (Edwards 2012, 157). Within these
constructs, people are understood as ‘entrepreneurial selves and entrepre-
neurs of the self’ (Masschelein et al. 2006, 419). Greater emphasis on indi-
vidual responsibly and personal gain has prompted a shift in education
ideology with a focus on the need for new knowledge, skills and dispositions
for the successful self, along with a new role for government. Simons
(2006) notes that neoliberal governments see it as their task to assure ade-
quate infrastructure and a policy environment for entrepreneurship that
encourages freedom and informed choices, which is very much in keeping
with Deleuzian (1995) ideas of ‘control societies’. Traces of entrepreneur-
ship are apparent in the sentiments of the Asian Century White Paper with
a strong discourse of government enabling individuals to take up the chal-
lenge of the Asian Century (Australian Government 2012). The entrepre-
nerial self manages his or her own life and is judged according to the
value she or he can add.

Lifelong learning for Australian infants

Australian government policy on education extols lifelong learning. The
Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People (MCEETYA
2008, 12) speaks of providing children with an ‘appetite for lifelong
learning’, while the National Quality Standard (Council of Australian Governments 2009, 10) sees enriched early childhood experiences as the ‘foundation for successful lifelong learning’. Labor’s 2007 plan for early childhood declares that ‘education is a life-long endeavour’ (Rudd et al. 2007, 2). According to Skilbeck (2012), commitment to lifelong learning then naturally extends and flows from policy to curriculum and in turn practice, promoting learning that encourages dispositions such as high level of skill, flexibility, problem-solving, continuous activity, collaboration, innovation and a responsible citizenry. In addition, Skilbeck (2012) notes that strategies of meta-cognition, problem-solving, reflective inquiry, self-management and constructivism, along with dispositions of curiosity, adaptability and creativity, are required by entrepreneurs who will master the uncertainty of change and the challenges of the knowledge economy.

These attributes can be found as key ideas in the EYLF, described in its purpose as, ‘assisting educators to provide young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop foundations for future success in learning’ (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009, 5). Qualities promoted within the EYLF, such as ‘autonomy’, ‘inter-dependence’, ‘resilience’ and ‘sense of agency’ (22), ‘social responsibly’ (29) along with dispositions of ‘curiosity’, ‘cooperation’, ‘confidence’, ‘creativity’, ‘commitment’, ‘enthusiasm’, ‘persistence’, ‘imagination’ and ‘reflexivity’ (34), all align closely with those qualities deemed necessary for the successful lifelong learner. There is little argument that these are desirable qualities that aim to promote socially just, fair and democratic principles. As Biesta (2006, 173) reasons, ‘who … would want to argue that lifelong learning is not a good thing?’ Given, however, the political and economic nuance imbued in lifelong learning, one may well question the uncritical acceptance of these qualities as intrinsically good. Critique of these assumptions exposes a complex and perhaps more ambiguous ambition. Tischling and Engemann (2006) discern a shift in government, to relate the conduct of the individual’s life to the performance of the state. Simons (2006, 530) warns that within such a construct, ‘Life, for example, can be seen in its totality as a function of economic development’.

Learning begins at birth
Parallel to interest in the notion of lifelong learning has been a corresponding recognition of the importance of early experience and the influence of these experiences on long-term outcomes for children. Attention to the status and entitlement of children younger than school-age began to gather widespread government interest. While largely framed in discourses of concern and remediation and driven by the emergence of international and cross-nation research, the importance of the early years has now become
widely accepted as a component of robust public policy. The formal adoption in 1989 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) heralded an international commitment to children (UNICEF 1989). Premised on a commitment to ‘best interests of the child’, the UNCROC can be seen as an important international turning point for a focus on young children and the State’s responsibly for their health and wellbeing.

Building on this commitment to young children, the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) signalled the importance of early childhood development as crucial to later educational outcomes (Pence 2004) where it was acknowledged that, ‘Learning begins at birth … calling for early childhood care and initial education’ (UNESCO 1990, 9). The origins of this awareness can be traced in part to developments in neuroscience beginning in the 1960s (see Hubel and Weisel, in Kirp 2007) which gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s with improved diagnostic imaging technology. Numerous scientific studies revealing the effects of environmental conditions on the development of the brain (see Chugani and Phelps 1986; Nelson 1994; Huttenlocher and Dabholka 1997, in Shonkoff and Phillips 2000) were emerging as evidence of the importance of early experience on brain development. Early childhood advocates, extending to influential film-makers and economists, seized upon this growing body of research and joined with high-profile developmental psychologists to build a persuasive case that the first years of life are crucial (Kirp 2007). Amid ambitious claims such as ‘brain development during the first three years of life was the key to problem solving at every level of society (in Bruer 1999, 9) and ‘the early years last forever’ (I am your child foundation, in Kirp 2007, 100), powerful messages were generated, directed at parents and policy-makers. Neuroscience was seen as a source of hard, scientific data (MacNaughton 2004) that was not subject to the same level of scrutiny and scepticism as most qualitative early childhood research (Bruer 1999). The seemingly convincing nature of the scientific proof prompted unprecedented political and media attention – particularly in the US where the majority of the research originated. Bruer noted the following media headlines from the 1990s:

The headlines did get one’s attention: “To Shape a Life, We Must Begin Before a Child is 3,” “Building a Better Brain: A Child’s First Three Years Provide Parents Once-in-Lifetime Opportunity to Dramatically Increase Intelligence,” and “Youngest Kids Need Help, U.S. Told: Federal Government Urged to Focus on Their 1st Three Years.” The articles under the headlines said that new brain research could now tell us how and when to build better brains in our children. The first three years – the years from birth to 3 – we were told, are the critical years for building better brains. (Bruer 1999, 2)
The collaborative work of scientists, psychologists and economists (see McCain and Mustard 1999; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Heckman and Masterov 2004) all emphasising the evidence that early experiences shape brain wiring and function with implications for future behavioural patterns (Greenough, Iurasaka, and Volkmar 1979, in Nelson and Bloom 1997) enabled a convincing argument to be built on the economic premise that strategic investment in the early years would pay dividends in the future.

Since these heady days a number of critiques of the highly acclaimed studies have been published. MacNaughton (2004), for example, warns of the logic of applying clinical data, mostly derived from studies involving rats, kittens and chickens, to the complex lives of young children. Bruer (1999) derides the media hype as misleading and argues that the brain research is not evidence of the advocates’ claims. Greenough, one of the scientists involved in the early studies, has pointed out that his study ‘confirms the negative consequences of living in extreme deprivation – rather than the benefits of enrichment’ (in Kip 2007, 107). Despite the possible overstatement of claims accompanying the neuroscience, it has proved a powerful source of evidence with the grand narrative of ‘learning begins at birth’ gaining significant traction in both the early childhood professional literature and the policy objectives of governments.

*Learning begins at birth for Australia’s infants*

Following the release of the OECD *Starting Strong* report (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2001), the then Liberal National Coalition Government in Australia began working on a national agenda for early childhood, addressing a number of the report’s recommendations. The 2004 Draft National Agenda for Early Childhood (Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) 2004) is heavily influenced by the notion of ‘learning begins at birth’ and draws on one of the most credited reports (see McCain and Mustard 1999), claiming ‘There is convincing evidence that children who miss out on appropriate nutrition and stimulation during the early years will have greater difficulty compensating for this later in life...’ (Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) 2004, 4). Similarly, the policy document developed by the Australian Labor Party in the lead up to the 2007 national election cites the convincing arguments of Professor Jack Shonkoff (leading paediatric researcher) and Professor James Heckman (Noble Laureate in Economic Sciences) to present a policy case for investment in the early years, claiming ‘The economics of early childhood learning is supported by a common sense logic ... When brain research is combined with economic analysis of the benefits of early childhood education, the case for greater investment in childhood learning becomes overwhelming’ (Rudd et al. 2007, 2). By 2009, two years after the election of the Rudd Labor Government, policy documents were more
cautious in their claims about neuroscience. They also somewhat tempered their commitment to the overwhelming (our emphasis) argument for greater (our emphasis) investment with a measured approach to improving current provision. ‘The strategy advocates for building on the substantial current investment being made ... This entails implementing a range of existing reforms, rethinking current approaches, addressing gaps and building a strong Australian evidence base’ (Council of Australian Governments 2009, 4).

The Government’s more measured approach to neuroscience is apparent in the policy documents relating to the NQF. Despite limited direct reference to neuroscience, the discourse of ‘learning begins at birth’ remains prominent. More prudently stated now as ‘The drive for change is based on clear evidence that the early years of a child’s life are very important for their present and future health, development and wellbeing’ (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority 2011, 3). Numerous references within the supporting documents to the NQF continue to reinforce the importance of the notion of ‘learning begins at birth’ within the reform agenda. From an intent to capture political attention and greater investment in the early years, ‘learning begins at birth’ has been effectively massaged to sit comfortably within the rhetoric of the current government’s productivity agenda.

Despite the contested nature of the notion of ‘learning begins at birth’, it is now a powerful grand narrative that has quietly translated from scientific evidence into the nation’s curriculum intent for children from birth. It has played a prominent role in the development of policy and resources that aim to reform early childhood provision and often co-exists with economic arguments about investment in the early years. The development of the NQF was strongly influenced by a belief in the discourse of ‘learning begins at birth’ with an emphasis on shaping future citizens to build a successful future for the nation.

The agreed aspiration is that children are born healthy and have access, throughout early childhood, to the support, care and education that will equip them for life and learning ... This is critical to achieving long-term participation and productivity gains for Australia. Schooling and skills development must be improved now, and must start early as children are the nation’s future. (Productivity Agenda Working Group – Early Childhood Development Sub Group 2008, 2)

Most significantly, a commitment to ‘learning begins at birth’ underpins the way that infants are imagined – framed as learners from birth with educators responsible for ensuring their learning contributes to both personal and national goals. An apparently rational concept (albeit derived from contested origins) has become a powerful and persuasive discourse in potentially shaping the experience of infants in early childhood settings.
Producing the ideal Australian infant

As part of a government-driven agenda and investment in a future Australia, an image of an ideal child emerges in policy documents supporting the early childhood reform agenda and development of the EYLF. A leading quote in the key Development Strategy document of government sheds light on the ideal child of the reform agenda. ‘We simply cannot afford to ignore the issues [for children] if we want to succeed in a world where what is needed are competent, intelligent and socially capable people’ (Stanley, Richardson, and Prior 2005, in Council of Australian Governments 2009, 6). Further, both the NQS and the EYLF learning outcomes describe the desirable consequences of children’s participation in the reform agenda. These include children with a ‘strong sense of identity’, those who ‘connect with and contribute to their world’, have a strong sense of physical and emotional ‘well-being’, display dispositions as ‘confident and involved learners’ and are ‘effective communicators’ (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009, 19). These attributes describe an ideal Australian child – one who will develop not only into a capable and satisfied individual but also into a desirable future citizen, capable of contributing to the prosperity of the nation. Given the assumption of ‘learning begins at birth’ and ‘lifelong learning’, infants engaged in approved early childhood settings are therefore to be instilled with the attributes reflected in the learning outcomes. Educators are required to use these descriptors to plan, document and assess learning that fosters these desirable outcomes. As such, the learning outcomes become a guide for the ideal successful lifelong learner from birth.

Duhn (2006, 191) warns that what might appear as a vision of good educational practice, can disguise the more ‘subtle shades of political desires for a particular kind of future citizen’. Political involvement in the shaping of curriculum has the potential to influence the type of child that curriculum aims to produce. Curriculum then has the potential to fashion learning to meet the needs and expectations of a government’s vision for a nation. Popkewitz (2004, 189) claims this as the production of the ‘cosmopolitan project in pedagogy’ aimed at producing the child whose qualities and character complement the nation’s ambition. Duhn (2006, 199) notes similar ‘traces of cosmopolitanism’ with New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki and contends that the ideal New Zealand child ‘seems to refer to the successful child, the child who can contribute, is an apt communicator, who shows a disposition toward lifelong learning, problem solving and belonging’ – qualities bearing remarkable similarity to those hoped for from the ideal Australian child of the knowledge economy. The similarities between the two nations’ aspirations for young children is perhaps suggestive of what Popkewitz (2004, 1) claims as the global ambition to ‘fabricate the child and family as self-governing actors who were simultaneously
responsible for social progress and the personal fulfilment of their own lives’. The potency of the grand narratives to contribute to constructions of idealised notions of children and childhood invites critique of the seemingly logical and unquestioned acceptance of the notions of ‘learning begins at birth’ and ‘lifelong learning’.

The question for educators is perhaps not so much what is wrong with these qualities but more how the expression of desirable qualities, framed within expectations for nation building, might serve to limit or contain the experiences that infants might have through a government-endorsed curriculum document? It calls into question the intent of the Australian reform agenda vision of ‘the best start in life’ (Council of Australian Governments 2009) and what is meant by this seemingly straightforward aspiration. If the best start is based on predetermined or idealised notions of future citizenship, does it limit the possibilities to make space for multi-vocal and multi-conceptual narratives of learning and education (Cannella 2010)? Does it promote a singular ideal cosmopolitan (Popkewitz 2004; Duhn 2006)? Importantly, how do educators working with infants understand these grand narratives and how do the notions of ‘learning begins at birth’ and ‘lifelong learning’ shape the infants encounter with curriculum?

Challenging the assumption of the grand narratives

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) invite possibilities to move beyond the containment of the grand narratives of early childhood and to re-imagine the work of young children as ‘nomadic … with unpredictable becomings’, rather than operating on assumptions of the ‘natural and necessary’ (Olsson 2009, xx). Such thinking encourages ways of seeing beyond the limitations of an apparatus of taming and takes the focus from that which is known and believed – in a scientific sense – to that which is not already known (Olsson 2009, 24). In this way, curriculum can challenge the hegemony of the grand narratives.

Giroux (1988, in Kincheloe and McLaren 2005, 139) maintains that ‘schools can become institutions where forms of knowledge, values and social relations are taught for the purpose of educating young people for critical empowerment rather than subjugation’. Suggestive of this ideal, the EYLF encourages educators to use ‘professional judgement … to draw on their creativity, intuition and imagination …, on a range of perspectives and theories…’ (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009, 12) and ‘to engage in critical reflection which involves closely examining all aspects of events and experiences from different perspectives’ (13). Far from being accepted, necessarily, as an instrument of control society, the EYLF invites educators to interpret the document in locally, culturally and contextually relevant ways (Productivity Agenda Working Group – Early Childhood Development Sub Group 2008).
Likewise, the authors of the EYLF have promoted resistance to government concerns about political risk and encouraged educators to ‘push boundaries of what might currently be considered possible’ (Sumption et al. 2009, 8). Resistance could well entail critical reflection on the grand narratives of the knowledge economy as a driver for curriculum for infants. Such critical reflection might consider ways the EYLF learning outcomes can be interpreted, planned for and assessed as part of a national accountability tool (the NQS) that emphasises the imperative of the productivity agenda. Skilbeck (2012) asserts that an awareness of the reductionist tendencies of curriculum can counter their potency and make space for considering other possibilities for learning. In recognising the potential for curriculum to contain possibilities, educators are well placed to use their creativity, imagination and intuition to feel empowered to interpret curriculum in such a way as to promote Biesta’s (2006) vision of democratic rights, personal fulfilment along with national goals for the future.

**Conclusion**

There is no suggestion that curriculum for infants is ill-intentioned, nor do we proclaim that early childhood practice prior to the development of government-endorsed curricula was immune to grand narratives and political discourse. What we hope to achieve through this article is a deeper awareness of key ideas that hold intent to shape infants in particular ways that can be hidden in widely accepted assumptions constituted in government policy. We anticipate that it may be possible through a deeper examination of the grand narratives to claim space to ensure a balanced approach to the personal, democratic and economic dimensions within a vision for the ‘best start in life’. One might hope that the recent appointment of Australia’s first National Children’s Commissioner has the potential to create a space for an Australian conversation about a rights-based notion of early childhood education, to balance the power of the economic imperative of the knowledge economy. In the early days of the implementation of its reform agenda, Australia is yet to realise the full intent of the government’s vision for children. As we continue to examine critically the foundations of the reform agenda and the influence of the EYLF in the lives and experiences of infants, we have opportunities to reassess what might superficially appear inherently pragmatic or ‘good’, and to strive for clearer understandings of the political intent of curriculum and its impact on infants in early childhood settings.

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References


Chapter 3: Infants of the Productivity Agenda:

Learning from Birth or Waiting to Learn?
Infants of the productivity agenda: Learning from birth or waiting to learn?

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THE AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD Reform Agenda, initiated in 2008 by the then Labor government, heralded a commitment to a focus on child outcomes in early childhood education and care policy in order to give Australia’s children the ‘best start in life’. A number of workforce policy initiatives aimed at achieving this ambition were announced, prioritising improvements in child-to-staff ratios and the qualifications of educators working with young children. More recently, the draft report of the Australian Productivity Commission Inquiry into child care and early learning has challenged these workforce reforms by reviving historic divisions between education and care and differentiating the learning needs of children over three from those under three. Claiming evidence that infants’ participation in early childhood education contributes to any long-term benefit is inconclusive, the Productivity Commission called for a substantial lowering of qualifications requirements for educators working with children under three years. A juxtaposition of the reform agenda and the Commission’s recommendations reveals a disjuncture in understandings of infants and consequently the type of workforce needed to support their wellbeing and learning. While contemporary Australian early childhood policy promotes images of infants as learners from birth, the Productivity Commission draft report portrays them as waiting to learn. In examining the pendulum of shifting ideas about infants, we highlight the vulnerability of infants in early childhood policy, especially in relation to the shaping of the workforce responsible for them.

Introduction

The participation of infants in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings has long been conceptualised according to the childcare needs associated with mothers’ paid workforce participation. Surrounded by discourses of concern for very young children in non-familial care arrangements, this conceptualisation reinforced the notion of care—characterised by attention to physical safety and emotional attachment (Page, Clare & Nutbrown, 2013; Rockel, 2009; Trevarthen, 2011). The introduction of Australia’s National Quality Framework (NQF) heralded a shift to a more contemporary image of infants. Expanding on notions of infants’ care needs, there has been an increasing recognition of infants as competent, powerful learners (Expert Advisory Panel on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009). The release of the Childcare and early childhood learning Draft Report of the Australian Government’s Productivity Commission (Productivity Commission, 2014) in July 2014, however, signalled the tenuous nature of images of infants as strong and capable learners, suggesting a possible return to images of infants as in need of little more than custodial care.

This article juxtaposes conceptualisations of infants reflected in current Australian early childhood policy against recommendations put forward in the Childcare and early childhood learning Draft Report (Productivity Commission, 2014). Focusing in particular on the nexus between images of infants and the flow-on to workforce policy recommendations for children under 36 months, we highlight disjunctions between images of infants reflected in current early childhood policy against the draft workforce recommendations flagged by the Productivity Commission. We begin with a brief discussion of ways that infants have historically been reflected in the Australian early childhood...
policy context. Examining more recent images in the NOF that reflect infants as strong and capable learners from birth, we consider the vision for infants’ learning and the associated expectations for those who work with them. By focusing on responsibilities for planning and assessment of learning, we question what skills and knowledge educators require to work with more complex images of learners from birth. We then contrast this against images of infants reflected in the recent Draft Report of the Productivity Commission and analyse the requirements of educators to work with infants imagined as vulnerable and in need of little more than custodial care. In light of the Productivity Commission’s draft recommendation that ‘all educators working with children aged birth to 36 months are only required to hold at least a certificate III, or equivalent’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 58), we then examine the capacity of the Certificate III credential to adequately equip educators to take responsibility for infants’ wellbeing and learning. We conclude with a call for greater attention to infants within early childhood policy, particularly in relation to the qualifications and expectations of the infant–educator workforce. Identifying silences within the rhetoric of workforce policy, this article illuminates what may be a tenuous commitment to the nation’s vision for the ‘best start in life’ (COAG, 2009, p. 4).

Images of infants

According to James and James (2004), images of children reflected in early childhood policy represent a complex interplay between cultural norms, social aspirations and political ideology. Historically, a combination of opinion, commentary and research were responsible for influencing images of children. In particular, images of infants reflected in early childhood policy can be seen to be imagined and re-imagined to fit with changing expectations and political imperatives. Creating somewhat of a pendulum of policy logic, these shifting images of infants in turn shape and re-shape expectations for their early childhood experience. Australian early childhood policy has long reflected images of infants as physically and emotionally vulnerable and, as a consequence, at some risk in non-familial childcare arrangements (Brennan, 1998). Throughout history, child care has been entrenched in discourses of maternalism (Aliwood, 2007; Bown, Sumsion & Press, 2010), emphasising notions of care as the priority for young children. These discourses are particularly pronounced with respect to infant child care. With the infant program traditionally overseen by the health nurse (often referred to as Nurse in Charge), there has historically been little to no attention given to educational aims or learning outcomes of infants in the childcare context (Huntsman, 2005; Page et al., 2013). In essence, the infant has been depicted as the naturally growing and developing child, primarily in need of protection from physical danger and emotional harm—cared for while ‘waiting to learn’.

While socially and culturally constructed images of infants can influence and shape policy, James and James (2004) note that these images can also be effectively re-shaped to suit a particular stance or political ideology. More recently, growing recognition of the importance of the early years has re-positioned infants beyond notions of ‘waiting to learn’ to that of ‘learners from birth’. Largely responding to widespread acceptance of neuroscience—recognising the plasticity of the brain of the newborn, along with a growing body of evidence linking educational outcomes with a nation’s productivity—the infant is now seen as a being full of potential that can be shaped by experience (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This reframing of images of infants, from those requiring custodial care while their mothers participated in the paid workforce to those of learners from birth, can be evidenced in part by enhanced expectations for their childcare experience. Beyond notions of purely care, the NOF reflects an expanded pedagogical responsibility for infants, framed by explicit learning and development outcomes. Reflecting this contemporary view of the importance of the early years in laying the foundations for future health, development, learning and wellbeing (COAG, 2009), infants were included in the general definition of children in both the NOF and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). This inclusion signalled a growing commitment to not only address infants’ needs for care and safety but to also recognise their learning potentials and rights to education. Described along with all children as ‘competent, powerful and valuable members of a community who co-construct knowledge and relationships’ (Expert Advisory Panel on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009, p. 10), infants experienced a dramatic shift in their status. The NOF recognised not only the considerable evidence base for re-visioning their capacities but also their rights and agency within society.

A workforce for learners from birth

Following many years of ambivalence and relatively weak regulatory requirements for educators working with infants, the NOF acknowledged a more complex image of infants and consequently the need for a more skilled and professional workforce. According to the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) (2012), “[t]here is increasing recognition that the work of caring for and educating young children is complex and requires enhanced qualifications and ongoing professional development” (p. 4). Drawing on evidence from a range of international reports (see OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012) and research studies (see NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004), the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) declared that the ‘quality of the workforce is a key factor in achieving good outcomes for children’ (COAG, 2009, p. 8). Acknowledging the increasing
complexity of the work of early childhood educators, along with aspirations for stronger learning and development outcomes, a range of workforce reforms were initiated.

Perhaps the most overt evidence of an increased policy commitment to infants can be seen in the changes to infant-to-educator ratios that were among the first of the reforms to be enacted following the 2009 launch of Australia’s NQF. The commitment to improve the infant-educator ratio was perhaps a key acknowledgement by government that the increasing phenomenon of infant child care and the importance of experience in the lives of infants deserved specific and immediate attention. Now embedded in national legislation, the 4:1 ratio for infants to educators is one of the few reforms where a truly nationally consistent agreement across all jurisdictions has been achieved.

Further to this change in infant-to-educator ratios, a raft of workforce initiatives were announced, broadly designed to promote nationally consistent standards and increased professionalism of the sector. Five key strategies frame the workforce reforms announced in 2012. These include:

- an increase in the size and retention of the early childhood workforce
- improvement to the capacity of the workforce to be responsive to the sector
- improvements to the qualifications requirements for educators
- increased professionalism and accountability for educators to demonstrate educational outcomes for all children
- enhanced capability of the workforce to work collaboratively across child health, education and welfare professional disciplines (SCGEEC, 2012).

Of particular significance for infants were commitments to improvement to the qualifications requirements for educators, along with increased professionalism and accountability for educators to demonstrate educational outcomes for all children. The inclusion of infants in these broad workforce reforms was a strong statement of commitment to invest in infants’ learning as well as their wellbeing. Moving on from images of simply requiring care, the reforms reflected the rights and entitlements of infants to specialist educators with ‘… deep knowledge of child development and the ability to form caring, trusting relationships’ (Expert Advisory Panel on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009, p. 3). Such statements within the reform agenda demonstrate a shift in the way infants were imagined in the NQF and the consequent reshaping of policy to suit this emerging image of infants as learners from birth. The introduction of a mandated minimum qualification of Certificate III for all educators, a commitment to a requirement that 50 per cent of educators hold a Diploma-level qualification or above, along with the requirement to employ a university-qualified teacher in all early childhood settings from 2014, was a significant improvement for infants in most jurisdictions. Infants appeared to make considerable gains in relation to the qualifications of educators. Prior to the reforms they were perhaps the group most likely to have a majority of minimally qualified or unqualified educators working directly with them (Rockel, 2009). An enhanced workforce with specialist knowledge and skills in early childhood education was considered essential to the aspiration of improved child outcomes.

A framework for learners from birth

Further acknowledgement of infants as learners from birth was evidenced in their inclusion in the EYLF. Heralding a strong commitment to ensuring that the experience of all children in early childhood programs would result in positive learning outcomes, the EYLF was developed to ensure that all children participating in early childhood education experienced quality teaching and learning. Described as assisting educators “…to provide young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop foundations for future success in learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5), the EYLF emphasises the importance of extending and enriching all children’s learning. The need for educators with specialist knowledge and skills was reflected in the expectations for planning and assessing infants’ learning and development against five broad learning outcomes. The decision to mandate for at least half of the educators to hold a Diploma-level qualification or higher reflected these higher expectations and suggested the importance of pedagogical leadership. More highly qualified educators would lead educator teams in using the EYLF as a curriculum guide and the increased professionalism and accountability required under the NQF.

As the recent Starting well report (Watson, 2012) notes:

A country’s [approach to curriculum] is guided to some degree by the quality and training of its workforce. Those with highly educated teachers have far less need for a more detailed curriculum, but can simply set the overall principles and expectations … By contrast, those with a weaker workforce would likely benefit from closer guidance, especially in the form of prescriptive lesson plans (p. 28).

Described as a ‘hybrid-like’ curriculum (Sumsion et al., 2009), the EYLF is essentially a framework, requiring substantial knowledge of early childhood learning and development as the foundation for translating the broad principles, practice and learning outcomes into meaningful and relevant learning experiences. It includes some elements of detail but leaves space for adaptation and interpreted possibilities to enable responsiveness to cultural, contextual and individual differences. Authors of the EYLF acknowledge that the diverse workforce of the Australian early childhood sector was a consideration in
determining the level of detail and the complexity of the language used. They have stressed the intent that more highly qualified educators would take leadership to guide discussion and debate and ensure a robust interpretation and use of the document (Sumison et al., 2008).

The necessity for a knowledgeable and skilled workforce is further evidenced in examining the underpinning intent and contribution of the EYLF to the broad goals for child outcomes. Premised on an obligation to the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, the EYLF is underpinned by the principle ‘that all children have the right to an education that lays the foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, culture and other identities and languages’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). These ambitious expectations require educators to not only use considerable knowledge of children, their learning and development but also skills in working with families from a range of cultural and social backgrounds. Educators are required to be responsive to a range of children’s interests, abilities and ways of knowing and learning. They are asked to engage children actively in learning, identify children’s strengths and interests, and choose appropriate teaching strategies and design the learning environment’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). They are also asked to draw on a range of perspectives and theories to challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning, and encourage educators, as individuals and with colleagues, to:

- investigate why they act in the ways that they do
- discuss and debate theories to identify strengths and limitations
- recognise how the theories and beliefs that they use to make sense of their work enable but also limit their actions and thoughts
- consider the consequences of their actions for children’s experiences
- find new ways of working fairly and justly (DEEWR, 2009, p. 11).

Suggesting relatively high order knowledges and skills, these are ambitious expectations of a workforce that holds variable levels of qualifications in early childhood learning and development. As Elliott (2006, p. 29) states:

... at the heart of appropriate pedagogies is the ability of practitioners to structure environments that promote optimum engagement for children. Key elements of this pedagogy are the richness and appropriateness of staff interactions with children and their scaffolding strategies, especially guiding, modelling and questioning. Other key factors linked to children’s developmental outcomes are staff knowledge of children’s development and learning needs, and their knowledge and understanding of curriculum.

The reform’s ambitions for child outcomes are reflective of the need for a highly educated workforce that has the capacity to interpret curricular expectations to suit local and cultural contexts, to not only base their work on theories of learning and development but to debate, critique and reflect on their practice (DEEWR, 2009). The need for strong leadership to support this work is reflected in a range of international and national research findings suggesting that this type of professional behaviour is more likely to occur where highly qualified educators are present. As Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Mutton, Gilden and Bell (2002) found, the presence of more highly qualified staff has a positive influence on the behaviour of other staff. Fenich, Harrison, Press and Sumison (2010) found that a core group of university-qualified teachers is more likely to create a learning community and facilitate higher quality pedagogic practices which in turn enhance curriculum and outcomes for children. Recognising the variously qualified workforce in the Australian context, the need for a mix of qualified educators, including some with higher qualifications to act as pedagogical leaders, was fundamental to the aspiration of the EYLF (Sumison et al., 2008). This policy commitment reflected a strong image of infants along with older children as learners, entitled to a suitably qualified workforce.

**Flagging a return to infants waiting to learn**

In stark contrast to this image of infants as learners from birth, along with ambitious expectations of those who work with them, the 2014 Draft Report of the Australian Productivity Commission Inquiry into child care and early learning (Productivity Commission, 2014) reinvigorated images of fragile and needy infants. The Draft Report reintroduced notions of child care as ‘detrimental’ (p. 5) and having ‘potential for negative effects’ (p. 13), along with a suggestion that child care for infants ‘… should focus on quality care and not be required to include a significant educational component’ (p. 277). Distanced from the active language of the NOF to support both ‘care and education’ (COAG, 2009, p. 10), the Productivity Commission Draft Report favoured the more passive terms of ‘growth, learning, welfare and development’ (p. 5). These terms reinforced images of the naturally growing and developing child who, in most cases according to the Commission, ‘will likely continue to do so even without participation in formal ECEC at a very young age’ (p. 13).

Attention to the learning benefits and wellbeing of infants participating in early childhood education and care were negated in the Draft Report with a return to an emphasis on the childcare system and in particular ‘affordability, flexibility and access’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 6) for parents. Prioritising parents’ workforce participation, Assistant Minister Ley’s comments promoting the Productivity Commission inquiry demonstrated her influence and bias toward the economics and convenience of the system to meet family workforce pressures.
‘So, we need to fix [the system] and then we’ll have more work being done, we’ll have better employment, we’ll have better economic output, so it’ll be better for the nation as a whole’ (Fordham, 2014). This re-focusing of attention on the system enabled infants’ interests to be sidelined and promoted an emphasis on pragmatic, economic solutions to address a narrow agenda of systemic concerns. Given the limited terms of reference that the Productivity Commission had to work with, their recommendations unsurprisingly reflected the economic imperative to find solutions within the ‘... current funding parameters’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. vii).

With the Productivity Commission seeking cost-saving solutions, infants were re-framed as simply requiring care and protection—reducing any need for a highly qualified workforce. Proposing that minimally qualified nannies, au pairs and grandparents be recognised and eligible to access funding subsidies was symbolic of this reductionist framing of infants. Using persuasive arguments of concern for infants in child care, the Productivity Commission promoted the use of nannies, au pairs and grandparents over the more costly and highly regulated centre-based child care or family day care.

“Higher fees for younger children should discourage long hours and encourage parental care for babies (less than 12 months). The Commission sees this as a desirable outcome as excessive time in childcare can be detrimental for young children, particularly babies” (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 520).

Drawing on literature stressing the role of parenting and regular caregiving relationships, the Commission focused attention on infants on building social and emotional regulation as the key learning in the early years (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, cited in Productivity Commission, 2014). Infants were once again constructed as simply in need of sensitive caregiving—waiting to learn. Denying the agency, entitlement and learning capacities of infants, the draft recommendations negated the need for infant educators to have specialist expertise.

A workforce for infants waiting to learn

The assumptions underpinning the draft Productivity Commission’s view that infants will ‘likely grow and develop naturally’ then frames their recommendation for a minimally credentialed workforce who will adequately respond to infants’ naturally occurring learning and development. Recommendation 7.2, that ‘all educators working with children aged birth to 36 months are only required to hold at least a certificate III, or equivalent’, along with the recommendation that ‘the number of children for which an early childhood teacher must be employed is assessed on the basis of the number of children in a service aged over 36 months’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 58) presented as a powerful contradiction to contemporary images of infants as learners reflected in the NQF. Revitalising the often contested education and care divide and recommending a substantially less qualified practitioner for children under 36 months, the Productivity Commission used a re-imagined infant as justification to substantially differentiate their learning needs from that of older children. Framed in this way, the Commission’s defence for a minimally qualified workforce was based on the claim that ‘... little compelling evidence that requiring a proportion of those caring for children aged birth to 36 months to hold certain higher level education qualifications is necessary’ (p. 58).

Constructing infants’ learning as largely unnecessary conveniently removes any imperative to engage a more highly qualified workforce.

Claiming that a reduction in qualifications requirements for educators working with children under 36 months could be lowered ‘without compromising quality’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 35) raises questions about understandings of the relationship between notions of quality and the workforce. Such a claim appeared to overlook the growing body of evidence demonstrating that higher qualified staff engage in more positive caregiver interactions (Manlove, Vazquez & Vernon-Fegans, 2008) and demonstrate more complex levels of reasoning about infant development and behaviours (Degotardi, 2010). There was an implicit assumption that the Certificate III credential alone could fulfil the roles and responsibilities that the current more highly qualified workforce undertakes. This claim demands a critical examination of the Certificate III credential and its capacity to equip educators to contribute to all dimensions of infants’ childcare experience without compromising quality.

Is Certificate III sufficient?

Closer scrutiny of Certificate III suggests it does not equip educators to take full responsibility for the overall wellbeing of young children, nor does it enable them to deliver the enhanced learning outcomes expected under the current higher qualifications requirements. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) describes Certificate III as enabling ‘limited responsibility in known and stable contexts within established parameters’ (AQF, 2013, p. 32). Working with very young children cannot be considered a stable context. On the contrary, it is an inherently unpredictable and unstable working environment for educators, given that infants demonstrate considerable individual differences, respond at times unpredictably and cannot clearly articulate their needs and desires.

With no pre-requisite entry requirement, Certificate III is designed for those with limited work experience and in many cases for those with relatively low levels of high school achievement. It emphasises foundational skills for those taking on a supporting role to work with more highly qualified educators.
The units of study within the Certificate III program cover children in the age range birth to five years and are heavily weighted to content covering physical health, development, welfare and care of children. Of the 18 units of study, only a single unit specifically addresses working with infants and toddlers. The ‘Provide care for infants and toddlers’ (p. 12) unit includes content covering physical care, feeding, responding to and communicating effectively with children aged birth to 24 months and prepares students to ‘ensure that the children’s physical and emotional wellbeing is maintained’ (Industry Skills Council, 2013a, p. 2). Similarly, the only unit dealing directly with children’s learning, ‘Use an approved learning framework to guide practice’, introduces students to the range of approved learning frameworks including the EYLF and assists them to understand the principles and practice that contribute to children’s learning generally. Designed to introduce students to working with learning frameworks, the assessment criteria for this unit emphasise a supporting role in working collaboratively with other more highly qualified educators (Industry Skills Council, 2013b).

Typically completed within a total nominal workload of 614 study hours (usually six months), the Certificate III program includes just 16 days of practical experience. Given the limited coverage of content and the very minimal amount of practical experience, the credential may equip educators to attend to the immediate health, development, welfare and care needs of infants, under the supervision of a more highly qualified educator. Any assumption however, that this credential can stand alone in preparing students to take responsibility for the learning, growth and development of infants without supervision is highly questionable. Indeed, the largest provider of children’s services in Australia, Goodstart Early Learning, highlighted such concerns from a risk and governance perspective in their response to the Productivity Commission’s draft recommendations (Goodstart Early Learning, 2014). The Goodstart submission pointed to significant differences between the Certificate III credential and the Diploma qualification, indicating that there was insufficient recognition by the Commission of the differing levels of skill and knowledge between the two programs. Their submission highlights a lack of clarity within the current policy framework of the roles and responsibilities of variously qualified educators and the current ambiguity of the term ‘educator’.

The term educator—ambiguous and misleading?

Introduction of the term ‘educator’ within the NQF to refer to ‘early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood settings’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 45) was arguably an attempt to improve the professional status and standing of those working in the early childhood sector. Describing all practitioners, regardless of their qualifications or industrial classification, was perhaps a pragmatic attempt to not only streamline policy but to promote a more professional image for the early childhood sector. The term however can refer equally to those holding a six-month entry-level credential as well as those who hold a four- or five-year university Bachelor or Master’s degree. Veiled under the generic term ‘educator’, the precise qualifications and levels of expertise that individual educators hold can be shrouded. Parents and the broader community may assume a more highly qualified workforce then is actually the case.

Such an assumption perhaps obscures the full implications of the Productivity Commission’s recommendation for a minimally qualified workforce for infants ‘without compromising quality’. The expectation that the Certificate III program will adequately prepare educators to ‘provide children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop a foundation for future success’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 6) is a questionable ambition. In reality the Certificate III contains only minimal coverage of content involving children’s learning and development and cannot be considered a specialist qualification. It is not a qualification that the Productivity Commission considered appropriate to take responsibility for the learning of children over three years. Somewhat tellingly, the only qualification deemed appropriate for those responsible to deliver the educational program under Preschool Universal Access provisions is that of a Bachelor or Master’s Degree teacher. This recognition of the need for highly qualified teachers to take responsibility for learning programs for older pre-schoolers is silenced in regard to children under 36 months despite persistent evidence that learning begins at birth and that the first years are the most important (CCAG, 2000; Expert Advisory Panel on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The Productivity Commission’s recommendations are evidence of the vulnerability of infants within the policy context. Conveniently partitioned from older children, their learning potential can be easily dismissed as trivial and replaced with persuasive arguments to protect them from danger.

Conclusion

As Moss and Petrie (2002) argue, ‘Our construction of childhood and our images of the child represent ethical and political choices, made within larger frameworks of ideas, values and rationalities’ (p. 55). The examples provided above from two prominent public discourses demonstrate how images of infants might be transformed and re-shaped in order to reflect particular political ideologies and achieve specific policy objectives. The images then become powerful levers for a logical flow through to related policy decisions. Extending workforce reforms to include all children from birth acknowledged a more complex image of infants as learners and a corresponding commitment to an appropriate workforce. However, the tenuous nature of this image was evidenced in the Productivity Commission’s Draft Report and recommendations to segregate children under 36 months, significantly undermining workforce initiatives and returning to historic images of infants as waiting to learn.
This analysis suggests a discrepancy between the ambition of current Australian early childhood policy and the recommendations that the Productivity Commission put forward. We question the veracity of a recommendation claiming that the Certificate III credential can ‘without compromising quality’ deliver the best start in life for Australia’s children. Despite the Commission’s claims that an educational program should not be the focus of the care program for children aged birth to 36 months, the available evidence (Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sims, 2013) would suggest that this is a retrograde view of contemporary infants. Such a view takes insufficient account of the considerable body of evidence showing that the foundations for lifelong learning begin at birth. Contemporary images of infants—as learners from birth—demand a different workforce to that proposed by the Productivity Commission. Foundational to the aspiration of a ‘best start in life’ is a workforce that can act beyond custodial care to a deep understanding of infants, their development and learning. Indeed if the recommendations of the Productivity Commission Draft Report were to be implemented there is no doubt that Australian early childhood would return to an era of custodial care for infants with little scope for realising the powerful capacities of infants as learners. It is likely that more specific and immediate attention to the impact of workforce policies in the experiences of infants is needed if Australia is to hold on to and realise its ambition for the ‘best start in life’.

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References


Introduction to Chapter 4
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Chapter 4: Overview of the Theoretical Frame

Chapter 4 presents another of the published articles of this thesis (‘An encounter with “sayings” of curriculum: Levinas and the formalisation of infants’ learning’). It builds on the thinking presented in Chapters 2 and 3 and offers a further critical reading of curriculum for infants. In Chapter 2, I used the theoretical frame of Deleuze and Guatarri (1987) and their concept of ‘control societies’ to argue that texts of curriculum for young children are intentionally imbued with political intent. Following the publication of this article, I undertook further reading which broadened my understanding of the ways that texts can be interpreted and used.

This further reading led me to the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1961). Taking my study beyond a consideration of the broad role of texts of curriculum, Levinas’ thinking provided a way for me to sharpen the focus of my study on the experiences of infants. Levinas’ concepts of ‘saids’ and ‘sayings’ of texts opened possibilities to consider the influence of infants on the ways that curriculum frameworks might be interpreted and used. While I did not completely abandon the theoretical contribution of Deleuze and Guatarri (1987), I did make an intentional shift at this point to expand the theoretical frame of the study to focus more intently on infants’ experiences. This extension of theorising is represented in this chapter.

The article in this chapter also responded to the inevitable relationship, raised in the article in Chapter 3, between the experience of the infants and the actions of their educators in any curriculum encounter. While my intent was to focus primarily on the experience of infants, it was becoming
increasingly clear that I would not be able to extract the experience of the infant from that of their educators. Examining the expectations placed upon infant educators that are expressed within texts of curriculum, this article explores notions of the ‘responsibility’ of educators. Chinnery’s (2003) theorising of Levinas, and her notion of ‘response-ability’, invited a consideration of the infant’s role in the curriculum encounter. Levinas’ notion of ‘encounter’ and the possibilities for ‘sayings’ of curriculum presented possibilities for infants to be protagonists and leaders of their own and other’s learning, rather than the objects of adults’ curriculum decisions. This was an important moment in the life of this study as the key concepts of ‘encounter’ and ‘sayings’ would go on to guide the conceptually led phase of data analysis, as explained in Chapter 5.

The theorising within this article was the basis for establishing the analytic codes which informed the analysis and interpretation of the data. Levinas’ notions of ‘encounter’ and ‘benediction’ became central foci for analysis of the data. Heeding Levinas’ caution that ‘knowing’, ‘coding’ or ‘categorising’ the ‘Other’ (in this case, the infant) was a form of violence, I was impelled to take a hesitant and susceptible stance towards the data, always acknowledging that my interpretations could only ever represent partial understandings.

References


Chapter 4: Overview of the Theoretical Frame. An Encounter with Sayings of Curriculum: Levinas and the Formalisation of Infants’ Learning
An encounter with ‘sayings’ of curriculum: Levinas and the formalisation of infants’ learning

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Abstract

Increased global attention to early childhood education and care in the past two decades has intensified attention on the education of infants and assessment of their learning in education policy. This interest is particularly evident in the focus upon infants in the early childhood curriculum frameworks developed in recent years in many countries. To date, there has been little examination of implications of this policy/curriculum emphasis in relation to its possible implications for how infants are understood. In this article, using Levinas’ notion of ethical encounter, we present a critical reading of curriculum for infants. Drawing on his ideas of the ‘Other’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘unknowability’ we argue that the rapidly growing corpus of knowledge about infants and their inclusion in education policy and curricula texts, has the potential to narrowly define educators’ responsibilities and prescribe pedagogies in ways that may have unintended consequences. Using the Australian National Quality Framework (NQF) and its associated Early Years Learning Framework as examples, this article highlights the tensions inherent in a system that aims to provide equity, consistency and certainty, premised on a particular ‘knowing’ of the infant. We draw on Levinas’ ideas about ‘said’ and ‘saying’ to propose ways of working with policy and curricula texts that recognise that they can offer only partial understandings of the possibilities for infants’ learning.

Keywords: infants, Early Years Learning Framework, Levinas, curriculum, ethical encounter

Introduction

The work of the Lithuanian born, French philosopher and phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) and in particular his thinking about ‘ethical encounter’ have been widely used to support critical thinking in education theorising (see
Biesta, 2003; Chinnery, 2003; Todd, 2001) and more recently in the area of early childhood education (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Levinas did not speak directly of teaching or early childhood education. Nevertheless, in an age of increasing government involvement in early childhood education and the regulation of curriculum and practice through written texts (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) Levinas’ complex and often contested thinking about ethics and encounter, can be useful for critically examining the demands of teacher ‘responsibility’ within increasingly formalised frameworks for children’s learning. Levinas provides a challenge to attempts to codify, and in so doing over-simplify, the complexity of children’s learning and reduce it to quantifiable measures that generalise and totalise learning and experience. Moreover his thinking enables a critical reading of assumptions that can pervade grand schemes and systems that appear on the surface, to be ethical, moral and rational and prompt us to think more deeply about the often taken for granted. In this article we work, as Chinnery (2010) suggests, ‘alongside Levinas’ (p. 1705), seeking insights from his work and joining with others who have engaged with his ideas to consider implications for curricula in early childhood education.

This article problematises the approach of successive Australian governments to regulate and systemise the education and care of increasingly younger children. Acknowledging that the intent of government policy may be to ensure equity, consistency and certainty, we raise concerns about the possible risks hidden within apparently rational and logical large scale reforms claiming to be in a nation’s best interests. We examine closely how the systemisation of education for infants might be based on a particular ‘knowing’ of the infant and how this ‘knowing’ might define the experiences of infants as they increasingly encounter written representations of learning in the form of government produced curricula. Using Levinas’ notion of ethical encounter, we explore his ideas of the ‘Other’, ‘unknowability’, and ‘responsibility’ and contemplate how knowledge about infants, used to inform curricula texts and often expressed in certain terms, might offer only partial understandings of the infant’s encounter with curriculum.

This article is in three parts. It begins with a brief overview of the exponential growth of knowledge about infants over the past century. It contends that as a result of the expanding evidence base, infants have shifted from being of limited concern and interest in education policy, to becoming more prominent in contemporary Western governments’ ambitions for nation building through education. In the second part, using the Australian National Quality Framework (NQF) as an example, we draw on Levinas’ ideas of ethical encounter to critically read the curricula landscape for infants and contemplate the potential for articulated outcomes and standards to contribute to a containment of infants. We consider how the inclusion of infants in broadly based education policy and in particular curricula expectations articulated through text based documents might construct a certainty about infants that represents only a partial account of an infant’s learning experience. In the third part, drawing on Levinas’ ideas of ‘said’ and ‘saying’ (Levinas, 1998b), this article invites possibilities to see infants’ contributions to the curriculum experience beyond a transmission of desirable knowledge. Moving beyond being simply ‘responsible’ for the infant’s learning—according to a framework text—we examine the notion of
‘response-able’ in recognising each infant’s competencies and agency. In this way we propose many possible ‘sayings’ of curriculum and promote a curriculum encounter for infants beyond the limitations of the ‘said’.

Knowing infants

The expanding corpus of knowledge about infants over the past century has contributed to particular constructions and ways of ‘knowing’ infants. Such knowledge, derived initially from philosophers such as Plato, Socrates and later Locke and Rousseau, focused on their development, health and well-being. Theorists such as Pestalozzi, Froebel and Piaget all shared an interest in the role of learning and development in infancy, particularly on the implications for later childhood and adult development. More recently, infant study has become a province of psychologists, developmental theorists and neuroscientists and increasingly grounded in ‘scientific’ methods. Premised largely on experimental or observation studies this knowledge base about infants often represents a generalised approach to understanding the characteristics of infants as a sub-group of the wider population. A move for researchers to understand infants more intimately and personally has emerged over the last decade alongside an increasing desire to better understand the life of infants as they become much more visible within the social policy arenas of many industrialised nations.

The revolution of knowledge about infants since the latter part of the twentieth century has expanded on the observation studies of psychologists to the technological advances of neuroscience and biology (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Technology now enables live visual imaging of the entire living brain. More recently, the significance of genetics and the potential for decoding the blueprint for every individual (Eliot, 1999) has enhanced the complexity of infant study, as the possibilities for explaining the phenomenon of infancy becomes ever more plausible. Knowledge of infants, derived from research, provides particular representations of their subjectivities. As Bradley (1989) argues, ‘... scientific observations about babies are more like mirrors which reflect back the preoccupations and visions of those who study them than like windows opening directly on the foundations of the mind’ (p. 10). Likewise, many have warned that the plethora of knowledge about infants remains tentative, incomplete and is of varying reliability. While Stern (1998) notes that we now have ‘... more systematic observation on the first two years of life than any other period in the entire life span’ (p. 2), Shonkoff (2000) warns that the scientific knowledge of early childhood should be viewed cautiously as a combination of established knowledge, reasonable hypotheses and unwarranted assertions. The evolution of research into infants has created knowledge that Bradley (1989) urges us to view as ‘ambiguous’-making ‘... many different sorts of sense, depending on how one views it’ (p. 3).

Despite these cautions, for advocates aiming to increase the visibility of infants in broader political agendas of government, certain forms of knowledge have been used to pique the interest of governments striving to achieve both social responsibility and future national prosperity goals. Visionary statements such as that of the previous Australian Government to give all children ‘... the best start in life to create a better future for
themselves and for the nation’ (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 4) clearly express a confidence in research about the importance of the early years and situates infants within government thinking about education. This signals a shift from earlier government concerns, primarily about infant health, mortality and welfare to an explicit interest in their learning and education (Page, Clare, & Nutbrown, 2013). Not surprisingly little if any research to date, on or about infants, is concerned with their relationship with curricula. While knowledge about the nature of infant learning may have increased, very little research has focused on the role of curricula texts in the lives of infants. It is for this reason that we now seek ways to better understand the relationship between infants and curricula texts. Levinas’ theorising invites us to read critically the intent of initiatives which appear on the surface to be logical and rational. Thus, with reference to Levinas, we critically examine the inclusion of infants in curriculum and consider implications for the day to day experiences of infants, now considered as important to the future of the nation.

The infant as Other

We now draw on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, and in particular his ideas about ethical encounter, to critically consider how knowledge from research seeks to make sense of infancy in a policy and curricula context. We consider how the inclusion of infants in broadly based education policy, and in particular curricula expectations articulated through text based documents, can establish a confidence in ‘knowing’ the infant, yet narrowly define their learning and experience.

According to Levinas (1987) ‘the Other is what I myself am not’ (p. 83). To identify the Other is to understand what is not me. In attempting to ‘know’ the infant, we search for labels, descriptors and assumptions that explain the infant as different and separate from older children and adults. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) explain ‘I come to know the Other with my typical ways of knowing, and make sense of the Other by applying them. If I can know the Other then I banish uncertainty and ambivalence for order and predictability’ (p. 77). From a Levinasian perspective, certainty can be exposed for its capacity to contribute to images of infants as ‘graspable’ and ‘knowable’ in the quest to provide simplicity, order and predictability (Vandenberg, 1999). Such certainty is referred to by Levinas (1999) as totalising knowledge.

For Levinas (1999) totalising knowledge is a grouping of objects or points of a whole that describe and objectify phenomena to the form of the thinkable. Knowledge that orders and groups into a rational whole, unites understandings and makes cogent the subject—in this case the Other—the infant. Levinas contends that totalising knowledge is ‘... a necessary illusion [that] exerts a regulatory function in scientific knowledge’ (1999, p. 41). The situating of infants into a curriculum document is premised on totalised images that describe infants in rational and graspable terms. The available evidence base on which these images are constructed provides graspable images of infants reflecting them, for example as, wired for learning (McCain & Mustard, 1999), emotionally fragile and vulnerable to the responses of adults around them (Abbott & Langston, 2005; Bowlby, 1953), delicate in their emotions and
responses to stressors (Sims, Guilfoyle, & Parry, 2005) and somewhat susceptible to danger from environmental and emotional risk (Margetts, 2004). These powerful images of infants are persuasively used to recommend particular approaches and practices for working with infants while discouraging or discounting others. Levinas (1998a) describes this as striving for certainty.

Certain or totalised knowledge Levinas (1998a) contends, is a form of ‘violence’ and explains this as ‘... the guise of beings who affirm themselves “without regard” for one another in their concern to be’ (p. xii). In the context of early childhood education, Dahlberg and Moss (2005, p. 77) explain violence as ‘a form of transparent understanding which reduces the unknown to the known’ (p. 77). The totalising and generalised certainty that is created through static images of infants precludes other possibilities and thereby acts to constrain understandings of infancy. Such constraints to thinking are seen as acts of violence—preventing other possibilities and thereby doing harm. This notion of ‘violence’ perhaps sits uncomfortably within a discussion about infant curriculum, yet Levinas’ (1998a) description of violence forces us to confront the potential of even well intentioned knowledge to constrain as well as to enable. In an attempt to draw on the certainty represented in much of the infant research and know the infant in order to work most effectively with them, the violence of reducing them to a graspable Other becomes evident. It is these ideas of the certain Other, the knowable and violence of totalised knowledge, that lead Levinas to his exploration of the ethical encounter. He contends that there are possibilities beyond the limitations of the knowable that enable more ethical and responsive encounters than those defined by the certainty inherent in totalised knowledge.

*Alterity as a susceptibility to the Other*

In opposing this idea of totalised knowledge as violence, Levinas (1988) speaks of ‘alterity... the unencompassable... the transcendent’ (p. 170). He explains that alterity is not simply that there is difference, but that there is a need to resist adding up, synthesising and treating people as objects. Alterity makes way for multiplicities, avoiding reductionist tendencies to simplify thinking through an over-reliance on totalising codes and graspable knowledge. This thinking suggests that knowledge about Others can only ever be partial, inviting a susceptibility to the unknown. In place of being certain in knowledge of the Other, alterity creates space to learn from the Other. This thinking seems particularly pertinent in working with infants. The unknowability of the infant—the adults’ inability to understand with any certainty the infants’ intent and thinking, along with the limited frames of research about infants, makes them never absolutely knowable or graspable. The notion of alterity provides a way to be tentative in the know-ability of the infant—to see each infant as individual, embracing the ‘... contradiction and contrariety’ (Levinas, 1999, p. 30) of the knowable.

Levinas’ idea of ethics disrupts our imperative to know or to grasp the Other. Rather, Levinasian ethics is based on the importance of susceptibility in encountering the Other as not graspable, as unknowable. His thinking at first appears to contradict the very premise of an education system that seeks to make predictable and stable, knowledge of children in order to provide an equitable and just system, and guide
educators in their responsibilities. A more expansive reading of susceptibility, however, can lead to a deeper understanding of the place of knowledge in a potential curriculum encounter. Far from suggesting that research knowledge is of no use, Levinas alerts us to a possible reading of knowledge as an essential but partial basis for encountering infants learning, leaving space for a susceptibility to the unknown. In this way, opening space to conceptualise infants’ experience of curriculum, as encounter rather than as device.

For Levinas (1987) the ‘ethical encounter’ describes an ethical face-to-face exchange where there is no assumption of the Other as knowable. Levinas explores the notion of ‘responsibility’ for the Other as not conditioned by certain knowledge, but happening at the moment we encounter the face of the other (Levinas, 1985). Referred to by Levinas (1985) as the ‘phenomenology of the face’—the uniqueness of each face and the un-knowability of the Other (Cohen, 1986) makes the face-to-face encounter for Levinas asymmetrical and susceptible. Instead of being expert in the knowledge of the Other, susceptibility to the unknown opens up possibilities for thoughtfulness that does not assume certainty or sameness. In the case of an infant participating in a childcare programme, such a face to face encounter can be easily conceptualised within the informality of an infant/educator relationship. The production of regulatory, quality assurance and curricula documents that reflect certainty, however, introduce what Levinas (1999) calls a ‘third party’ in the encounter—disrupting what Levinas sees as the pureness of the face-to-face encounter by introducing symmetry in the form of codes and rules to organise, make predictable and provide stability and equity.

The third party challenge to alterity

The arrival of the third party, according to Levinas (1999), introduces symmetry to the face-to-face encounter, reflecting a human plurality. Emphasising sameness and fading the uniqueness of each person, the third party attempts to organise and systemise, and in so doing creates plural forms to identify and make familiar the subject. According to Levinas (1999), the greater the plurality and the more certainty that is generated through the third party, the more violence is done to the individual—in the quest to organise and provide symmetry, the alterity is debilitated. Societal systems such as curriculum frameworks thereby formularise the face, giving them a code or label, requiring the encounter to be measured and equitable. Levinas (1985) acknowledges this as justice, recognising both its role and inevitability in modern society but argues that justice should not be superior to ethics. Vandenberge (1999) suggests that while codifying of rules and regulation is essential to social order and harmonious life, Levinas’ thinking about ethics can help us to think beyond the limitations of sameness, and avoid ‘... levelling people to mere objects of the “totalising gaze”’ (p. 34). Questioning the absolute authority of certainty within government systems of justice, leaves space for some un-certainty and the possibility of engaging ethically within the codes and rules. Levinas (1985) reminds us that ‘Justice, exercised through institutions, which are inevitable, must always be held in check by initial interpersonal relation’ (p. 90).
Regulatory systems such as Australia’s National Quality Standard (NQS) (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011) place a ‘responsibility’ on educators to ensure learning in specified learning outcomes and to show evidence of this specified learning through an NQS instrument. The NQS presents as a device promoting aspirational ideals of quality and equity and is premised on such inherent rationality and logic that it can constrain critique. It is an example of a third party text that purposefully creates a plurality that calls for conformity and equity. Säström (2003), in drawing on Levinas’ (1985) thinking suggests that such rational systems can position educators on ‘the safe side of knowledge’ (p. 22), promoting a view of teaching as instrumental (p. 20). The aim of education in such rational systems and the role of the teacher according to Biesta (2003), is then reduced to getting the child to know ‘... what the teacher already knows’ (p. 66). The teacher is compelled to act responsibly and ensure that learning is framed by the intention of the rational text. The danger according to Trevarthen (2011) is a scheme whereby well intentioned attempts to ensure that all children attain the best possible level of competence and well-being is established according to ‘... a priori criteria that assume a list of intellectual and social skills... to satisfy adult concerns and to solve the future, adult economic or political problems’ (p. 176). Such criteria, drawn from widely accepted research and theorising then become the texts on which rational schemes are based.

The infant in curriculum

Perhaps stemming from an intentional push to illuminate the findings of infant research and put infants on the mainstream political agenda, a consequence has been that in many parts of the world, infants are now included in government policy portfolios of education and represented in curricula documents, with exposure to identified learning and assessment expectations. Long absent from education discourses, infant learning is quietly moving from being regarded as solely the responsibility of families and indeed mothers, to take its place in government policy as a social responsibility, amid only tacit concerns as Page et al. (2013) note, that curricula for infants may result in hot-housing or be little more than a watered-down version of learning designed for older children. In a rare challenge to the assumption of curriculum for infants, Gammage (2003) mused, ‘How long one wonders before someone puts forth the view that there should be an in utero curriculum?’ (p. 353). The assumption of curriculum for infants is perhaps worthy of deeper analysis and raises questions about what learning and for what purpose do we engage infants in a curriculum encounter?

Government, or third party involvement in the development of curricula for infants has somewhat necessitated a graspable and reliable image of infants. Long held traditions in infant caregiving focus attention on growth and development along with physical and emotional care. More recently however we see images of infants shift from an image of the voiceless ‘waiting to learn infant’ to more contemporary images of the ‘ready to learn from birth infant’. Amid a changing state for infants—where once arguments surrounding the very young child were grounded in a concern to reduce infant mortality and improve their health and welfare—contemporary understandings
of infants now recognise their ‘... powerful capabilities, complex emotions and essential social skills...’ (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 383).

Trevarthen (2011) alerts us to this changing state of knowledge about infants and a consequent need to re-vision what infant learning involves in a context of formalisation of curricula expectations. He identifies the need to see beyond traditional images of infants as needing care, protection and attention to their normal development. He notes:

Children under three have many competencies that appear paradoxical to a rational, individualistic and logocentric cultural world and that are remarkably neglected in standard education theory, and especially in administrative practices and policies by which nurseries and childcare centres are regulated by governments in modern cities and states. The natural creativity and cooperation of infants and toddlers, their self-produced motives for acting and knowing with other people, are given less attention than their needs for care and protection. They are perceived to require instruction in skills of moving, speaking, reasoning and behaving well socially. Childcare institutions to replace traditional care in families and communities must be more than protective. (p. 175)

Trevarthen (2011) provides a provocation to totalising ways of thinking about infants based on a limited range of scientific studies. His warning alerts us to the potential for regulatory and accountability systems that rely on images of infants, produced through a limited research frame, to be interpreted in somewhat simplistic ways and the dangers of generalising any particular image of infants as learners. He encourages us to look for more complex images of infants and their capacities in order to provide a learning environment that reflects less certain images of infants.

Levinas (1985) enables a reading of the text of curriculum as ethical encounter or a responsibility for the other that extends beyond the know-ability and instrumental simplicity critiqued by Trevarthen (2011). As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) explain, for Levinas, ethics is a way of seeing beyond the confines of a technical interpretation of ‘... right and wrong, good and bad, normal and not normal’ (p. 68). In looking beyond instrumentalism, Levinas (1985) describes the way that language can act to define action. He identifies that both a ‘said’ and a ‘saying’ are possible within any text. Levinas (1985) explains the ‘said’ as ‘... the same order as which imposes a society with laws, institutions and social relations’ (p. 88). The written texts of regulatory standards and curricula documents can be seen as ‘said’ drawing on the grand narratives of research and theory to represent ‘knowledge’. Smith (1986) explains that the ‘said’ comes in the form of statements—the structurally coherent text created by language... the evidence, theme and logic '(Smith, 1986, p. 61). Widely accepted as essential to systems aiming for equity and quality, ‘said’ or third party texts, make clear the intent and purpose of education and seek unity in their expression of values and ideals.

The ‘saying’ according to Levinas (1985) ‘... is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it’. (p. 88). The saying is the response to the ‘said’—the unique response, that opens up the possibility for alterity—the
encounter that is not confined by the ‘said’. Levinas reminds us that the systems and underpinning totalising knowledge of ‘said’ are only partial to the possibility of the encounter, and that the actions and interpretations of educators, and their susceptibility to the Other creates alternate ways of viewing the responsibility of curricula. While Levinas (1998b) notes that the saying is often subordinate to the said—which dominates in its logic and certainty, he argues for the importance of the ‘saying’ in avoiding the totalising ‘violence’ of ‘safe’ knowledge.

Sayings of curriculum

Levinas provides a way of thinking about curricula beyond the bounds of ‘safe’ knowledge—as purely a technical ‘responsibility’. Viewing the curriculum document—the ‘said’, as only partial to the curriculum encounter, there is scope to find many ‘sayings’ of curriculum. Todd (2001), in her work with primary school children, suggests a shift from the safe side of knowledge to listen and watch children as ‘inferior’ or ‘susceptible’. Engaging in ‘sayings’ of learning, creates an individualised and personal response to each face to face encounter. She states that ‘Levinas’ philosophy refuses to be assimilated as something that can be known in order to be applied, as that something that can be operationalised or instrumentalised’ (p. 71). This thinking seems particularly relevant to curricula work with infants as it can prevent an overly instrumentalised approach that views curricula as primarily a ‘said’—a device to be implemented. A shift from the safe side of knowledge invites the possibility that infants might be influential and intentional in their own learning and not merely passive to the transmission of desirable knowledge expressed in the ‘said’. Positioning curricula for infants as ‘ethical encounter’ acknowledges both a ‘responsibility’ to act in the infants best interests, but also as Chinnery (2003) proposes to be ‘response-able’—recognising the individual infant’s competencies and agency to contribute to decisions and learn beyond the limitations of the ‘said’. An ethical encounter therefore can include both the responsible and the response-able and therefore not polarise or subordinate the ‘saying’ over the ‘said’.

Far from being an ‘anything goes’ approach, ‘saying’ involves both ‘passive’ and ‘active’ decisions built on informed choices to be involved, or to look and listen (Chinnery, 2003). ‘Saying’ involves wisdom and artistry. Chinnery (2003) uses the imagery of improvised Jazz to stress the importance of thought, study and knowledge in ‘sayings’. Improvised jazz is informed by the structure of music and knowledge of jazz forms and what can appear as hap hazard or thoughtless, is finely crafted based on both a deep knowledge of music and an openness to listen in the moment. This thinking emphasises an ‘able’ educator—one who can respond with the shared wisdom that is drawn from the ‘said’ to provide a rich and inviting environment for learning that includes adapting and responding to infants’ intents and interests in individualised ‘sayings’ of curriculum.

It is likely that those working with infants, already balance their responsibilities for children’s learning against their desires to be respons-able to individuals. There is no suggestion that educators working with infants feel necessarily bound by the limitations of the text of curricula. Given however the increased influence of government in
the creation of curricula texts for ever younger children and the increasing formalising of learning expectations through articulated outcomes and assessment for learning, Levinas’ thinking provides a framework for questioning the perception of curricula as text as necessarily an inevitable push down of curriculum for older children (Page et al., 2013). Levinas’ thinking opens up possibilities to seek both more explicit knowledge of infants and their learning in relation to curricula but is also a reminder of the importance of the unknown infant—to work comfortably with susceptibility. This thinking invites possibilities to find new ways to evidence infants’ learning that are not bound by limited assumptions of infants drawn simply from the ‘said’s of scientific research, but demonstrate many ‘sayings’ of learning in a truly ethical encounter with the partiality of the ‘said’?

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References


Chapter 5: Overview of the Methodological Approach
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Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I suggested that the introduction of curriculum for children under 2 years of age is a relatively new phenomenon, but one which is rapidly gaining acceptance as the importance of the early years is better understood. I have also noted the current paucity of research about infants and curriculum and identified that there are multiple and often competing political, social and theoretical agendas that permeate assumptions about the role and purpose of curriculum for infants. I identified the need for deeper understandings of the role of curriculum in the lives of infants and in what ways assumptions about curriculum might act to both enable and constrain the types of encounters infants might have with curriculum.

In this chapter, I outline the methodological approach that I took to investigate how infants experience curriculum in a childcare setting. The chapter begins by situating my study within the larger Infants’ Lives in Childcare (ILC) ARC-funded project. I then go on to explain the case study design, the case study site and the process of recruitment of participants. The rationale for and approach to ‘Mosaic’ data gathering is then discussed along with a rationale for, and explanation of, the use of narrative analysis. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the trustworthiness, fidelity and ethical considerations of the study.
The Infants’ Lives in Childcare Project

The work undertaken for this doctoral project was part of the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded Linkage project titled Infants’ Lives in Childcare (ILC) (LP0883913) (see Sumsion et al., 2011) The broad aim of the larger project was to better understand the lived experience of infants in Australian childcare settings including both centre-based Long Day Care and home-based Family Day Care. The guiding question for the project was, “What is life like for infants in childcare?”. The project brought together researchers from a range of disciplines including early childhood education, social policy, psychology and linguistics, and as such drew on a range of theoretical frames and research methods. The project used a Mosaic methodology, derived from the Mosaic approach (Clark, Kjorholt, & Moss, 2005; Clark & Moss, 2001) “…to piece together fine-grained details of infants’ experiences, generated from multiple sources of data and interpreted from multiple perspectives, to form … a comprehensive picture of [infants’] lives in early years’ settings” (Sumsion et al., 2011. p. 115).

The Mosaics were made up of layers of data which included digital video footage and photography, observations and field notes—contextual information relevant to the early childhood settings along with information about the external policy context that impacts on infants’ childcare experiences.

Contributing to the Mosaic of the larger project, my doctoral research focused on infants’ encounters with curriculum in centre-based long day care. The data gathered and analysed for my study included video footage, still camera images, researcher field notes, and diary entries including reflective notes, incidental comments from discussions with parents and
educators at the settings. In a sense, this project utilised the premise of Mosaic methodologies but in a less extensive form than the larger project did. Underpinning both projects was a commitment to engage in participatory research methods—to capture lived experiences, respectfully include infants’ perspectives, and reflect their stories.

**Case Study**

The doctoral work reported in this thesis was a single case study that took place in a Sydney childcare setting. My study aimed to gain a fine-grained insight into the lived experiences of infants as they encountered curriculum in their early childhood setting. Reissman (2008) contends that case studies focus attention on narrative detail (the “little things”) (p. 194), while Flyvbjerg (2006) asserts that it is the context-dependent knowledge and experience generated from case studies that is at the very heart of expert activity (p. 222). It is for these key reasons that a case study approach was taken in this study.

Firstly, this study was an attempt to give focus to the ‘little things’, those things that in broader studies may go unnoticed and be disregarded. The use of a single-site case study enabled a close examination of infants’ experiences that could then be reflected as narratives, capturing the nuance of the everyday. Visiting the site over a period of 9 months enabled the data gathered to be understood within the particular context and situation of the setting.

Secondly, the study aimed to examine in fine detail, a relatively under-researched area of infant experience and to gain expert insight that might have previously been overlooked. As Flyvbjerg (2006) suggests, a case
study can also promote thinking beyond rule-based knowledge. My ambition in this study was to look beyond what is typically researched about infants in early childhood settings, to that which may be hidden, silenced or taken-for-granted. The single-site case study approach lent itself to an in-depth and intensive search for expert insight. As Gerring (2007, p.1) contends, the product of good case study is insight: “Sometimes, in-depth knowledge of an individual example is more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a larger number of examples. We gain better understanding of the whole by focusing on a key part”. Acknowledging the limitations of a single-site case study and the impossibility of generalising more broadly, I was inspired by the notion that it is “…possible to learn important things from almost any case” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 446). Through this case study, I sought to learn more about the experiences of infants’ as they encountered curriculum, a relatively under-investigated area of early childhood education and care (ECEC) research.

Site, Participation and Recruitment

The selection of the site for this case study was determined as part of the agreement between Charles Sturt University and the Industry Partner and co-funder of the Infants’ Lives in Childcare project, KU Children’s Services. Within the larger Infants’ Lives in Childcare project, a number of early childhood settings were identified as possible sites. They included sites across the wider Sydney basin, all of which had sufficient numbers of infants and toddlers to be considered viable research sites, as well as staff and families who indicated a willingness to be involved in such a project. The site for my doctoral work was allocated to me following negotiation with other research assistants. While initially some consideration was given
to including more than one site in my doctoral study, it became clear very 
early in the data gathering phase that the data from this single site was rich 
and complex, providing a substantial data set on which to base a single-site 
case study doctoral project.

**The setting.** The early childhood setting involved in this study was a 
59-place long day care centre located in Sydney’s Inner East, approximately 
five kilometres from the city centre. It was located in a relatively high socio-
economic area of Sydney with most families attending the centre coming 
from professional backgrounds. Census data for 2011 revealed that 46% of 
the population of Sydney’s Eastern Suburbs was born overseas (Bureau of 
Statistics, 2011). This cultural mix was reflected in the children and families 
attending the centre. As outlined in Table 1, the centre had three playrooms.

Table 1: Profile of the case study setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Room arrangement and numbers of children per group each day</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gumnuts: Infants</td>
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<td>Monkeys: Toddlers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crocodiles: Preschoolers</td>
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While the children enrolled in the infant room at this setting were from a 
range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and many were exposed to 
languages at home other than English, all infants participating in this study 
were exposed to English from birth. The educators working in the infant 
room also represented a broad cultural mix, bringing a range of cultural 
perspectives and languages to their work. Within the infant room at the time 
of data gathering there were 18 children enrolled over the week representing 
seven cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds.
The Gumnuts Room and Playground. The infant room was originally designed to accommodate two groups of children. It was a large room with a dividing bench which doubled as a cupboard and storage space (see Figure 1). The original intention for this room configuration was to have younger infants on one side of the room and older infants on the other. Nappy change facilities, toilets and sleep areas were centrally located to be used by children in both rooms. Some years earlier it was decided to use the spaces differently: one side of the room was to be used as a dining space and to offer small group messy play or cooking experiences; while the other side would be a quieter space for floor play, dramatic play and small group story or music experiences. There was also a store room with a range of play materials including art and craft materials, musical instruments, and construction toys such as Lego and Duplo. The toys and equipment available to children were often changed or rotated.

![Figure 1. The divided indoor spaces.](image)

The outdoor space was shared with the older group of toddlers (known as the ‘Monkeys’). It too was a large space which included an area of artificial grass, some paved areas and a large sandpit (see Figure 2). A smaller area to the north of the property offered natural grass with gardens around the
The fenced playground opened on one side to the car park and on another side to the main road (although there was quite a wide nature strip separating the centre from the road). There was also a dividing fence which separated the infant/toddler playground from the preschoolers (the ‘Crocodiles’) playground. The children in both playgrounds were able to see and talk with each other. It was not uncommon for older children to visit the infant/toddler spaces—particularly in the early morning or late afternoon.

The play equipment in the infant/toddler playground included a range of trestles and climbing equipment, sandpit toys, small tricycles, and some loose objects such as scarves, hats, balls, brooms and construction toys. There was a well-stocked shed, and play equipment available to the infants and toddlers was frequently changed and re-arranged.

At the time of data gathering, the centre was reducing its number of infants from 16 each day to 13 to prepare for the improved ratios between infants and educators introduced as part of changes under the National Quality Framework (see Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2013).
Recruitment of participants. Participants in this study included infants in centre-based childcare, the educators working with them, and family members of the infants. The recruitment of participants began with initial discussions between the Chief Investigators of the Infants’ Lives in Childcare study and the Centre Director, along with the team of educators from the infant room. A parent information evening was held, where the parents, educators, management and researchers met to discuss the project. This was an opportunity for parents and educators to ask questions, clarify aspects of the project design and discuss ethical considerations. Information sheets and consent forms were distributed to parents/guardians and educators at this meeting (see Appendix 1).

Eight parents attended the meeting along with two educators, a representative of KU Head Office and the Centre Director. Seven parents provided consent for their child/ren to participate, while one family decided not to consent. Permission was later sought from families who were not in attendance at the meeting. On my initial visits to the setting I gained consent from a further five families. Parental consent was also sought from older children who might appear in video footage during, for example, outside play (where a playground was shared by a group of children of mixed ages) or in the early morning and/or late afternoons when children were often in multi-age groups. Consent was sought from all staff at the centre including casual staff and ancillary staff such as the cook. This was necessary to ensure that all those likely to be captured in the video footage were aware of the nature of the research project.

In gaining consent for the infants, every attempt was made to include both boys and girls and to involve children in the full age range from birth to 24
months. This purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1990) aimed for a typical case sample which was suitable for study in-depth. At the commencement of data gathering, permission was gained from parents of 12 infants from the Gumnuts Room. At the time of recruitment they were aged from 6–19 months. Initially, data were gathered that included most of these 12 children; however, over the 9-month period of data gathering, some of these children moved to another room in the centre, left the centre or did not attend on days that I was gathering data. As a result, the majority of data gathered focused on five children. As explained later in this chapter, following several rounds of coding and analysis of the multiple data sources available for these five children, I decided to narrow the focus of this doctoral study to three of these children. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of these three children in order to protect their anonymity (see Table 2).

Table 2: Focus children of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus children and their ages throughout the period of data gathering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inclusion of these three infants was based on the following criteria:

1) Their age—they were within the age range of birth to 24 months at the time of beginning data gathering.

2) Their parents consented to their involvement.

3) They demonstrated a willingness to participate and seemed comfortable in my presence and in the presence of the camera equipment.
4) They were in regular attendance at the setting on the days I visited for data gathering.

**Involvement of educators.** While the focus of this study was largely on the experiences of the infants, the educators who worked with them played a significant role in the experiences of the children. I came to realise that I would not be able to successfully separate the experiences of these infants from the actions of their educators and as such it was important to identify and acknowledge the contribution of educators to this study. The educators in this study were also assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

It is also important to note that the data gathering for this project took place during 2010. As explained later in this chapter and in Chapter 4, this was a period of significant change in Australia’s National Quality Framework. Imminent changes to requirements for all educators to hold a minimum Certificate III in Children’s Services (see Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2013) meant that at the time of data gathering, all staff held a qualification or were currently involved in upgrading to the entry level Certificate III in Children’s Services (see Table 3).
Table 3: Educators and their qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Qualification and Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Diploma of Children’s Services, in her final year of study in Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood). Full time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish</td>
<td>Diploma of Children’s Services. Full time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Certificate III in Children’s Services. Part time (4 hours per day).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood). Casual teacher, covering shifts for educators on leave.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Michelle, the Centre Director (Bachelor of Education birth to 8 years) was also a frequent visitor to the room and knew the children well. She would often relieve staff for breaks and assist during very busy times throughout the day. She also appears as a significant adult in the video footage.

**The Mosaic Approach**

**Participatory research.** The development and acceptance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 1989), and in particular Article 12: *The child’s right to express their own views about things that affect them*, has prompted a growing awareness of the need to not only listen to what children are saying but to also involve them in the design and conduct of research studies about them (Pascal & Bertram, 1989).

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1 Diploma of Children’s Services is a vocational qualification—usually completed over a period of 18 months to 2 years of full-time study.
2 Certificate III in Children’s Services is an entry level credential—usually completed over 6 months of full-time study.
3 Bachelor of Teaching is a 3-year University Degree specialising in teaching children from birth to 5 years.
4 Bachelor of Education (birth to 8 years) is a 4-year university degree specialising in teaching children from birth to Year 2 of compulsory school.
2009). This was an underpinning value and guiding principle for the selection and approach to the methods employed in this study. According to Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000), experiences of children in educational settings cannot be fully understood by inference and assumption of an adult researcher. I was mindful of trying to listen deeply, to think in multiplicities and to challenge my first assumptions about what I was seeing. I was guided by Tolfree and Woodhead’s (1999) thinking that participatory methods are:

…not so much a matter of eliciting children’s performed ideas and opinions, it is much more about a question of enabling them to explore the ways in which they perceive the world and communicate their ideas in a way that is meaningful to them. (p. 21)

Throughout my study, I was mindful of the impossibility of accurately reflecting the thoughts, perspectives and feelings of another. The methods selected for this study were an attempt to get closer to doing so, but always acknowledging that my understandings would only ever be partial.

Creating the Mosaics. The Mosaic methodological approach refers to “the drawing together pieces from different sources to create a complete picture of children’s perspectives” (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p. 253). This approach affirms a commitment to a study design that works ‘with’ infants, viewing them as active participants in research about their lives, as opposed to passive objects of the study (Clark, 2005). Within my study, the Mosaic approach enabled the focus to be on the contributions that the infant participants offered. It sought, as far as possible to view the lived experience from the infants’ perspectives as a way of facilitating a deeper understanding of their lived experiences than would otherwise be possible. As Veale (2005, quoted in Clarke, 2010, p.323) explains, “a core principle of participatory research is generation of knowledge (rather than its
extraction) through a merging of academic and local knowledge…”. My intent in using the Mosaic approach was to shine a light on infants as rich, competent contributors—giving primary attention to their perspectives while always acknowledging my presence and influence as a researcher.

While there is growing acceptance of applying participatory Mosaic approaches to research with young children, Waller and Bitou (2011) warn that the approach “…should not be considered uncritically” (p. 6). They alert researchers to the many adult decisions and strategies employed that can ‘frame’ the research and point out that while children’s voices may be present, they are still largely interpreted via the adults’ point of view. Similarly, Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) have expressed concern that the notion of child agency is framed on a premise of adults ‘empowering’ children whereby the adults retain power to ‘empower’, for example, by defining the boundaries of how children will participate.

Being alert to my presence and influence, along with my inherent biases and assumptions in analysing what I was seeing, was a constant point for reflection throughout the study. In particular during the data analysis phase, I was mindful of Elwick, Bradley, and Sumson's (2014) assertion that claiming to represent the perspective of the child is fraught with “inherent uncertainty” (p. 208) given that researchers always draw on their own knowledge, concepts and theoretical understandings to “…construct plausible interpretations of the infants ‘expression of meaning” (p. 203). I acknowledge that there is no way of escaping the ‘fraughtness’ of this attempt to seek the infants’ perspectives. I was, however, determined that such limitations should not prevent me from seeing what might be possible.
In short, the desire to involve infants in this study about them was an attempt to get as close to participation as is possible, given current understandings of participatory research with infants. My aim was to be as mindful as possible of my own perceptions, biases and assumptions. I acknowledged from the outset that I would have considerable influence over what aspects of infants’ daily experience were captured and focused on as part of this study. I strove to be sensitive to the infants’ varied forms of communication and conscious of tuning in to the many ways that infants can ‘voice’ their feelings, views and intents. I am aware that my analysis can never represent an accurate portrayal of an infant’s experience; however, this methodological approach offered possibilities not available through more traditional means of gathering data.

**Listening.** Given the very young age of the children participating in this study and their limited capacity for communication via more traditional research methods involving spoken and written words, in this study I sought to take a broad view of the notion of listening. I was alert to the infants’ capacities for communication, beyond that encountered in spoken or written form. As Rinaldi (2005, p. 21) explains, “Listening is the premise for any learning relationship”. Through listening and narration, theories and interpretations we can “re-know” or “re-recognise” these theories. According to Rinaldi, this broad concept of listening is “…not just about listening with our ears, but with all our senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, orientation)” (p. 20). The Mosaic approach lends itself well to this understanding of listening. The act of gathering multiple perspectives in a variety of data forms enabled me to use a range of sensory pathways to gradually build deeper and richer layers of understanding.
Listening can give prominence to the importance of the ordinary in infants’ lives. While much of an infant’s experience may not seem extraordinary or exceptional, it is through the everyday that I was able to come to better understand holistically the experiences that contribute to the lived experiences of infants. Important to any attempt to listen to another is recognition of the impossibility of being free from power (Clark, Kjorholt, & Moss, 2005). In particular, the young age of the infants in this study required an awareness of my potential to selectively listen in order to emphasise a particular point. I needed to be mindful that my own biases and assumptions could blind me if I were not careful to keep re-checking and revisiting the data to constantly question what I might be missing. In addition, there was a need to be cautious of the danger of representing human thought as “manageable or governable” (p. 11) through oversimplifying what was ‘heard’.

From the outset, I acknowledged the impossibility of listening without assumption or bias in this study. As Elwick et al. (2014) declare, “…it is profoundly difficult, if not impossible, to know how infants’ experience their worlds with any certainty…” (p. 196). They suggest, therefore, that any attempts to understand infants’ experiences “… should be seen as sites of ethical rather than epistemological practice” (p. 196). It is here that the work of Levinas (1985) and his embracing of uncertainty provided me with the possibility to move beyond the limitations of epistemologically grounded methodologies, and as a researcher to work with ideas of uncertainty within ethical and responsible encounters with infants.

**Data contributing to the Mosaic.** As noted earlier in the Introduction to this thesis (Chapter 1), Mosaic methodology (Clark & Moss, 2001) has
been conceptualised as a way of listening to children. It involves the
gathering of multiple data sources to build a more complex understanding of
lived experience than a single data source alone might provide. Data
gathering took place over a 9-month period from the beginning of April
until the end of December 2010. As outlined in Chapter 4, this was a period
of significant change for early childhood in Australia as services underwent
changes to ratios and requirements for educator qualifications as part of the
introduction of Australia’s National Quality Framework.

Data gathering visits took place approximately 1 day per week in the first 3
months and 1 day per fortnight in the following 6 months. The length of
each visit varied from 4 to 6 hours per visit and every attempt was made
across the period of data gathering to record events across the range of the
centre’s hours of opening. This strategy was intended to capture the full
range of experiences and events at the centre from setting up and welcoming
children in the morning to greeting parents and farewelling children in the
afternoon/evening. I sought to gather data for both planned and unplanned
play experiences as well as care routines and spontaneous activities.

Given that the day in the life of any early childhood setting is varied and at
times unpredictable, I needed to be responsive to the special events, changes
to scheduling, complexities and even the moods and temperaments of
children and adults in the setting. To this end, a range of data gathering
strategies were used over the 9-month period, including: still photography;
video and audio capture; contextual field notes; and reflective journal
entries. At any given time, I adopted the strategy that I thought would work
best. On some occasions, I would turn off the video camera and focus more
on note taking or talking with educators or parents. This was particularly the
case early in the data gathering process as children, educators and families become more comfortable with the presence of the video equipment. Over the period of data gathering, digital recording strategies, along with field notes, researcher journal entries and notes from informal conversations, were combined to build a complex impression of infants’ experiences in childcare. The final data corpus included 24 hours of video footage and associated field notes, 120 still camera images and over 100 pages of handwritten notes taken following discussions with educators and families. The aim was to capture “detailed events that are naturally occurring in the particular place and time” (Walsh et al., 2007). Rather than focusing on isolated aspects of the child’s experience, e.g., their stress level or the occurrences of interactions, this study used a variety of methods to gather multiple dimensions of infants’ experiences. It aimed to contribute to the richness of understandings by looking more intentionally for factors that might be otherwise overlooked in infants’ encounters with curriculum.

As Brownlee (2004) notes the paradox: “…it is all ordinary and at the same time, it is all extraordinary” (p. 8). I was mindful to turn my attention to capturing the day-to-day ordinariness and expose what is perhaps missed, ignored or overlooked as unimportant.

**Data Gathering Methods**

**Digital recording devices.**

**Video camera.** Video recording was selected as a key data gathering strategy for this study. Erickson (1992) contended that video can reveal unnoticed details of children’s experiences, while Flewitt (2006) saw the possibilities for “multimodal dynamism” (p. 29)—where data from a range
of communication methods could be gathered with convenience. In working with very young infants with little spoken language, a data gathering device that effectively captured other modes of language and behaviour was crucial. In capturing everyday moments, I found video to be more reliable than observation alone, enabling the effective collection and ready storage of important information about the infants’ experiences. Walsh et al. (2007) note that video provides the opportunity to record fine-grained details of everyday life, view events repeatedly and in slow motion. In an environment as busy as that of the childcare setting, video provided the capacity to observe events that may have otherwise escaped my attention. It also provided the possibility of revisiting the data repeatedly in order to clarify events and be reminded of the events leading up to and beyond the immediate moment of the action. Video also offered the ability to review events in real time which is not possible through observation or still photography.

I was, however, mindful of Walsh et al.’s (2007) caution about some potential weaknesses of video footage. In capturing only discrete episodes, video can provide an “exaggerated sense of confidence” (p. 49) in reflecting a singular truth. Video can narrow the researcher’s focus to what the lens can capture and therefore has the potential to misrepresent the complexity of experience and nor can it fully account for the influence of events outside of the frame. Much of the video footage gathered in this study represents somewhat isolated events happening in the room or outdoors. The limitations of the single video camera meant that it was not possible to capture the broader context and other events happening simultaneously. When using aspects of this footage in presentations or as part of a digital
article, it was important to make clear to viewers and readers that the data represented a partial view of a specific situation that cannot readily be generalised. This was also an important consideration for me as I undertook analysis of the video footage.

Another potential weakness comes from the power that I held to decide what events would be captured and what would not. As Pink (2007) contends, “The meanings of photographs are arbitrary and subjective, they depend on who is looking” (p. 67). Throughout the data gathering I was intent on capturing random episodes at different times throughout the day with a focus on continuous recording rather than capturing selected events, time periods or routines. I intentionally avoided capturing moments when I felt the infant might not welcome the intrusion of the camera. I did not attempt to record any nappy change routine or times when the infant was upset for a long period of time. As such, I must acknowledge that the data does not reflect the full complexity or range of infants’ experiences. While White (2011) suggests this filtering of data denies the infant a fuller representation of their experience, as a researcher I felt torn between my responsibilities to capture complete and comprehensive data and my commitment to work respectfully alongside infants.

Still photography. A lightweight compact digital camera was used to take photographs to complement the video data. This device was useful in a number of ways. Firstly, still images were used to supplement field notes and provide contextual prompts to remind me about environmental influences such as the room arrangement, materials available to children, and significant events of the day not captured by video. Secondly, the still camera provided insights from another perspective to that of the video
camera. Taking still images from another angle of the room or outdoors, enabled a sharper focus on particular events and action. What may have been concealed from the lens of the video camera could be viewed from another angle. The still camera was also used to record events when the video was not available (for example when the battery was re-charging) or in the first days when I wanted to be less obtrusive and gain the confidence of the children and educators. This was the case in the narrative of *Clare and the Waffle Blocks* (Chapter 6) when I tended to use the still camera more than the video—a device the infants were more familiar with.

In addition to the still camera, snapshots were sourced from the video footage. These still shots helped to capture significant moments and actions of the infants which could often be overlooked by the naked eye or even in watching the continuous movement of the video. The ability to slow down the video and work frame by frame with action was enlightening. This is particularly the case in the narrative of *Hugh and the Castle* (Chapter 7). The continuous action of the video was useful in seeing how Hugh negotiated this challenging space. A frame-by-frame focus enabled me to attend more closely to Hugh’s actions and be more alert to his possible thought processes. This was not as clearly evident in the continuous footage. This data forms an important record of events in the production of narratives. Still images were used to supplement text and bring to life stories of children’s experiences.

*Digital sound recording.* A small digital sound-recording device—a Sony Handycam Wireless Microphone—was used on some occasions to capture individual voices throughout some of the video footage. This was necessary due to the nature of the setting where many adults and children
were often found in a relatively small space. Capturing the voice of the individual child among the group of voices and background noise was essential in gaining a clear account of the infants’ contributions. The voice recorder also offered the opportunity to capture the emerging language of the infants and to consider the role that verbal language acquisition plays in the experiences of infants in childcare settings. This is evident in the narrative *Hugh and the Bird* (Chapter 8) where Hugh’s sophisticated use of language might have otherwise gone unnoticed.

**Field texts.** A range of field texts were created to add additional contextual richness that was not possible with visual data alone. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) define field texts as “texts created by participants and researchers to represent aspects of field experience” (p. 419). These texts acted as memory for me, linking and revisiting events over the period of data gathering as well as recording insights and alternative perspectives to my own observations. In this study the field texts comprised:

- Contextualising notes—notes taken on each visit to the setting to record contextually relevant information such as children and staff present, the time of day of the visit, and any significant events or circumstances that may be important in understanding the data collected (see Appendix 2).
- Researcher journal entries—reflective diary entries that recorded my experience of the project as it evolved. These entries noted, for example, ethical complexities and other challenges in the research process; incidental conversations with staff and families that took place; conversations and feedback from members of the ILC study team about aspects of the study; feedback from conference
participants; and personal reflections on the research process (see Appendix 3).

- Conversations—these involved the informal conversations with staff and families when viewing snippets of video footage. Notes were taken of these conversations to record salient points or important data that fairly represented the focus of the study (Hatch, 2002). Conducted as informal conversations, these exchanges aimed to bring together the range of perceptions and insider knowledge of the infant held by those closest to them—their families and the educators who work most closely with them. In contrast to formal interviews, Mishler (1986, cited in Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) suggests that these conversations can be viewed more as an “interactional accomplishment” (p. 34) rather than a “stimulus response” (p. 34) exchange. Together with my perceptions as a researcher, the aim of these informal conversations was to create a coalition of understandings that would inform the development of narratives (see Appendix 4).

Managing the Data

Studiocode™. Studiocode™ is a commercial software package that enables the efficient storage and analysis of video footage. Use of Studiocode™ in my study enabled video footage to be stored and coded for ready retrieval. Studiocode™ also became the primary facility for viewing video data during the coding process. The flexibility of Studiocode™ enabled both broad coding to be applied initially and later more fine-grained sub-codes to be developed within those broad codes. This is discussed in

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3 Studiocode™ see http://www.dtsvideo.com/#!studiocode/cwnx
further detail in the data analysis section of this chapter. The software also enabled the development of snippets (brief excerpts of footage), short movies and sequences of still images that were used as visual examples in presentations and published articles.

Field notes, journal entries and still photographs. As data were generated, they were stored and consolidated according to the date gathered. A digital file for each visit was created and tagged with the date, setting code, and visit number. Studiocode™ files were copied and tagged accordingly. Corresponding field notes were either typed or digitally scanned and tagged in the same way as were my reflective notes or conversations with families or educators. Still photographic images were also stored digitally in the corresponding file to the date of the visit.

The chronological ordering of data was important in noting the age of each infant at each point of data gathering. Significant development took place for each of these infants over the 9-month period of data gathering. As such, it was important to be able to readily identify the sequence and date of each infant’s experience.

Analysing the Data

Coding. The first layer of coding, using the Studiocode™ software as described above, were those codes identified as relevant to the larger ILC study. These codes included arrivals and departures, indoor play, outdoor play, and routine times, e.g., meals, nappy changing and sleep time.

These codes represented typical activities that occurred across all settings within the broader ILC study. The team later developed a further layer of coding to capture interactions between infants and adults and sustained
interactions with peers. The act of applying these broad codes proved useful to me in familiarising myself with the context of each data item and signalling possible themes and events for deeper analysis.

For the purposes of my study, thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. They suggest thematic analysis as a “…method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). This method was relevant to my study because it offered flexibility to initially approach the data without the constraints of a specified theoretical position. This method also had the potential to provide a “rich and detailed, yet complex account of the data” (p. 78). For this study, thematic analysis was a way of looking at the complexity of the Mosaic in a systematic yet unrestrained way. Initial inductive analysis of the full data corpus was guided by my three research questions.

1) How do infants encounter curriculum in childcare settings?

2) How can these encounters be understood in relation to the dominant discourses and grand narratives that currently frame curriculum understandings?

3) How can the practice of intentional teaching - a key practice requirement of the EYLF - be understood in relation to infants’ encounters with curriculum?

Using these questions as a guide, the data were examined more closely to identify a data set for more intensive analysis. Data were selected for inclusion in the data set if they seemed to have considerable potential to generate insight into the research questions. Selection of this first level of data was informed by the following criteria which included items that:
showed a range of encounters—attempting to reflect the notion of curriculum in its broadest sense;

reflected episodes of intentional teaching—where educator decisions influenced the experience of the infant; and

included evidence of curriculum decisions—both planned and unplanned—that reflected understandings of the grand narratives of early childhood education.

Over a period of some months, I revisited the large data corpus several times, generally in response to a new insight or following discussions between the broader research team. On each occasion that I presented the study at a conference or more informal professional meeting, I would return to the large data-corpus to search for further data that were reflective of the analytic codes. It was after many occasions of engaging and re-engaging with the data that the final data set from the video footage were determined.

Using this approach, 18 data items from the video footage were selected from the data corpus that then became the data set from which further analysis was undertaken. The 18 data items represented approximately 2 hours of the total 24 hours of video footage. While the other 22 hours of footage were carefully considered, the 2 hours selected provided a workable data set to manage in the context of this study.

I examined these data items closely and viewed them repeatedly, drawing on key theoretical constructs encountered through my reading. This focussed approach assisted me to identify a data set that reflected the diversity of children’s experiences. Time and patience was needed to sift through the 18 data items and decide which particular pieces spoke powerfully to me in their potential to illuminate aspects of the key research
questions. I do not claim that the final data set settled on were the only examples that might meet these criteria, but they were rich in meaning and reflected well, the experiences of these infants. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, this was a recursive process as I moved back and forth through the data set, looking in a more focused way for Levinasian concepts of encounter and benediction. Subsequently, and as I moved increasingly from inductive, thematic coding, to deductive, theory-driven processes, I looked intently for episodes of ‘response-ableness’ of the educators and examples of infants’ ‘sayings’ of curriculum. In also referring to associated field notes and informal conversation notes, the following theoretical codes were identified.

- Infants’ ‘benedictions’—episodes where infants indicated an interest, desire or ambition to ‘encounter’ with materials or others.
- Infants’ ‘sayings’ of curriculum—episodes where the infants initiated an encounter or adapted a planned experience to suit their own intents.
- Educators’ responses to infants’ benedictions—these responses were further coded into three categories:
  - episodes that were overlooked;
  - episodes that were responded to actively; and
  - episodes that were responded to passively.

In this process of thematic and theory-driven analysis I was guided by MacLure’s (2006) suggestion to approach the selection of data to be analysed in a “baroque space” (p. 731). Such an approach encourages the selection of data for analysis to be carefully considered and to be cognisant of the biases and assumptions of those with the power to select which data
will be included and which will be overlooked. In this way, I was attempting to avoid what Bryson (1990, cited in Jones et al., 2010) describes as “the enemy”, which is a mode of seeing “…which thinks it knows in advance what is worth looking at and what is not” (p. 488). This was an important consideration for me given my background as a teacher of young children and thus the potential for me to base data selection on personal interests or experiences. The opportunity to share my data items and discuss themes with the larger study team, along with feedback gained from my supervisors and from participants in conference presentations, was integral to supporting a reflexive stance on my decisions relating to the selection of data items.

Following selection of the data set that was particularly pertinent to addressing the research questions, a second series of analytic questions relating to narrative analysis and representation of the data were considered.

- How might minor (small) narratives give primacy to the infants’ perspectives?
- How might the narratives bring the data alive and contribute to enhanced understandings of infants’ experiences?

The consolidation of the data corpus to a data set was finalised based on these two key questions. This resulted in a data set that was a workable size for this project and were rich in potential for the development of narratives.

**The Development of Narratives**

Mindful of the limitations of participatory approaches to research with infants, and alert to the dangers of both listening and Mosaic representations of others’ views, I turned to narratives as one way of attempting to illuminate the complexity of infants’ lives as they encounter learning. As
Needham (2016) attests, we still have much to learn about how infants learn. In seeking to gain a closer proximity to infants’ experience, I have explored the potential of narratives as a way to gain a closer insight to infants’ encounters with curriculum. The method of gathering multiple pieces of data from a range of sources and perspectives was a way to build a narrative representation of the infants’ experiences as they encountered learning through curriculum.

I chose to use narratives as way to foreground the perspectives of infants and draw attention to events in their lives that might otherwise be overlooked. Narrative in this sense was as a way of looking beyond normative assumptions about infants (as identified in Chapters 2 and 3), to that which is as yet unknown, not well understood, or indeed may be unexpected. van Manen (1990) suggests that narratives can make us more alert to another’s life experience. I used narratives as an opportunity to slow down the pace of the action and illuminate that which can be easily missed or overlooked. In this way I was able to focus my attention and become more alert to the minute action within the curriculum encounter and explore possibilities for better understanding infants’ motives and intents in each encounter.

In seeking to explore the potential of narratives as a way to better understand infants, I initially drew on the work of Lyotard (1979) and his defence of “little narrative” (p. 60) as an essential means of informing my understanding of the experience of another. In speaking of the little narrative, Lyotard was contesting the broad acceptance of the ‘grand narratives’ that tended to create hegemonies and generalise thinking. I was inspired by this thinking to look beyond what is generally understood about
infants as a sub-group of a population, to seek the individual experience and explore the possibility of using Lyotard’s ideas of little narratives as a way of understanding the perspectives of individuals.

In presenting his ideas about little narrative, Lyotard (1979) questioned the dominance of the scientific evidence base: “Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables” (p. xxiii). Lyotard contended that contemporary society, and in particular government, tend toward an ‘evidence base’ that is positioned within the reliability of a scientific discourse. Bruner (1985), however, offers an alternative to the binary established by Lyotard who viewed scientific knowledge in opposition to storied knowledge. He suggested possibilities for seeing many types of knowledge as legitimate and valuable in contributing to deeper understandings of experience. Bruner argued that narrative knowledge is more than the expression of emotions; instead, he contended that narrative can be a legitimate form of reasoned knowing.

Similarly, Polkinghorne (1995) identified multiple ways of knowing, including what he termed “paradigmatic cognition” (p. 8)—the logical and scientific, and “narrative cognition” (p. 11) or storied knowing. While paradigmatic knowledge focuses on generalisations and commonalities among people and actions, storied knowledge focuses on the particular or unique characteristics of people and actions (Polkinghorne, 1995). The work of Bruner and Polkinghorne was helpful in establishing the place of narratives in my study, justifying narratives as making worthy and significant contributions to understanding an individual’s lived experience.
I was also mindful of Aristotle’s insights into the contribution of narratives. He described them as “... moral tales, depicting a rupture from the expected-interpretive because they mirror the world, rather than copying it exactly” (cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 4). In this study, I attempted to create such a ‘rupture’ by looking for moments that might ordinarily be overlooked, as the everyday and insignificant moments in these infants’ experiences. In this way, building Mosaics, by gathering pieces of data from a range of sources, offered different insights into the infants’ encounters and was a way to reflect the complexity of their experiences.

The notion of ‘impression’ therefore became integral to this narrative approach. Rather than aiming for a direct representation that took over from the infant and claimed to be the perspective of the infant, my aim was to create a possible impression, rather like that which an artist produces in the presentation of a work of music, literature, painting or sculpture. The final product cannot be considered to be an exact replica or direct representation of the event or item represented, but is seen as an impression of the artist, always filtered through the artist’s senses and understandings (Bernstein, 1991).

I acknowledge that the little narratives created through this study are filtered through my own senses and concede that it is not possible to exactly articulate or replicate the experiences of another. Bernstein’s (1991) warning that understanding humans is always a series of interpretations was a reminder to me that such impressions, presented as little narratives, suffer the same weakness of interpretation as do representations drawn from the grand narratives. Lyotard, among others (see for example Bernstein, 1991; Wood, 1991), has noted this tension. What is perhaps unique to the little
narrative according to Lyotard is the absence of ‘excess’. Little narrative
does not claim to make all humanity intelligible or give itself a history in the
way that Lyotard condemns the excesses of the grand narrative (Bernstein,

Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) also claim an important space for little
narratives in deconstructing the binary opposition between the scientific and
unscientific knowledge that often separates educators and parents. In a
similar way, I attempted in this study to find compatibilities between
accepted scientific truths about infants and alternative ways of
understanding the complexity of individual experiences. Never claiming to
be an accurate representation of the infants’ experience or thinking, the
narratives in my study provided one possibility for gaining a closer
proximity to the infant’s experience and illuminating actions and intents that
may otherwise have gone unnoticed or unrecognised as significant in the
infant’s life. As Cole and Knowles (2001) suggest:

In research as in life as in art, there is no possibility of
completeness, certainty, or closure. Representations of life, in
research and in art, can only be partial. For contemporary artist
Martha Rosler, the task of the artist is not to strive to, and
perhaps make claims of, exact representations but rather to draw
attention to the inadequacies of all forms of representation. As
social science researchers, inquiring into elements of the human
condition, we need to adopt a similar stance. As we imagine
possibilities for representational forms, we allow ourselves to
think differently about analysis and representation activities than
if we were to strive for one-to-one correspondence between lives
lived and lives represented. (p. 212)

In this study, I used narrative inquiry in an endeavour to illuminate the
perspectives of infants where they were not able to verbally communicate
their own.
**Constructing narratives.** The development of narratives for this study was a departure from more customary forms of child observation that have become commonplace in ECEC contexts. As such, I needed to investigate how narratives had been used in other arenas of research and determine a way to ensure there was a consistent and trustworthy approach to their development. Hinchman and Hinchman (2001, p. xv) describe narratives as placing “…events in a sequential order with a clear beginning, middle and end … the sequence must add up to something … and have an intrinsic, meaningful connection”.

Riessman (2008) explains that narrative is used across many disciplines and is often understood to be synonymous with storytelling. She cautions that there is no clear definition of narrative but suggests that in both narrative and storytelling:

> …a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away … Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience. (Riessman, 2008, p. 3)

Such a definition suggests that the protagonist or storyteller is verbally able to communicate clearly the events and sequence, and able to select, organise and evaluate the events. The following examples from other research disciplines demonstrate how narratives have been developed in an attempt to reflect the experiences of those who voices were not easily heard. I was motivated by these examples to find ways to tell the stories of infants in a similar way to that taken by others attempting to give prominence to those who were not easily able to tell their story themselves.
Gray (2004) used storied narratives to share the complex lived experience of a cancer patient. He asserts that “…using stories to represent research can … resist premature closure on understanding, conveying complexity and ambiguity and mak[e] space for alternative interpretations” (p. 45). In a similar way, Dumenden (2009) shared stories of migrants who had limited capacity to communicate in the dominant language of their new country. These studies provided an incentive for me to explore the potential of narratives to reflect the experiences of infants. With the exception of the work of Engdahl (2008), and as a relatively unchartered area of infant research, narratives provided a way to uncover the complexity of infants’ encounters with curriculum, revealing perhaps new ways to consider and interpret what was observed. As Frank (2000) contends, the use of narratives can be useful for researchers entering into unchartered territory. The process of developing narratives assisted me to consider the data in new and otherwise unexamined ways.

As explained earlier, the narratives in this study represent a departure from broadly accepted ways of observing and analysing children’s behaviours. These more customary forms of child observation, often presented as a largely objective task undertaken by a trained adult (see for example Gerke, 2004), and based on specified expectations for development, do not typically encourage multiple possibilities, or consider diverse analytic lenses. Chase (2005), however, suggests that:

Contemporary narrative inquiry can be characterised as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them. (p. 651)
With this in mind, the challenge for me was to create an impression of the ‘voice’ of “the one who lives them”. In the absence of voice, the infants’ stories can remain untold. It was therefore important to determine a pathway to constructing narratives that did not claim to ‘be’ the voice of infants or in any way claim to ‘speak’ for infants. I needed to be visible and acknowledge that these narratives would be creations of my own doing (Cannella, 2010), but that were thoughtfully constructed to reflect what infants might like others to notice.

Riessman (2008) contends that it is generally acknowledged in the human sciences that “the researcher does not find narratives but instead participates in their creation” (p. 21). According to Riessman, a:

…“fully formed” narrative includes six elements: an abstract (summary and/or “point of the story”); orientation (to time and place, characters, situation); complicating action (the event sequence, or plot, usually with a crisis or turning point); evaluation (where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotions—the “soul” of the narrative); resolution (the outcome of the plot); and coda (ending the story and bringing action back to the present). Not all stories contain all elements and they occur in varying sequences. (p. 84)

As I go on to explain later in this chapter, I used Riessman’s (2008) structure, initially to provide a sense of organisation and cohesion for the construction of narratives. As I worked further with the data and gained greater knowledge of the theoretical perspectives, my approach to the narratives was refined and a less formal structure was used. I was drawn to the work of Outhwaite (1985, p. 24), who contends that understanding narrative text is “…not a matter of trained, methodological, unprejudiced technique, but an encounter with the existentialist sense, a confrontation with something radically different from ourselves”. While Reissman’s
(2008) structure provided a useful framework to ensure that the narratives were coherent and meaningful, Outhwaite’s caution was important to my deliberations in recognising that the construction of narratives to reflect the lives of others is always full of complexity that cannot be easily formulised.

I was also mindful of MacLure’s (2009) warning of the many ways in which voice in qualitative research can “falter or fail” (p. 97). Her work speaks of the weaknesses of voice in presenting the child’s voice as innocent and idealised. Fuller (2000), also suggests that representations of voice can fall into the “textual politics of good intentions” (p. 102). The purpose, then, was to use narrative as a way of creating impressions, reflecting perspectives that are often hidden in more controlled studies that are looking for certain traits, behaviours and other evidence to support or refute a hypothesis. To this end, the narratives in my study needed to be sufficiently robust to be considered as equal in value to scientific evidence, but retain the personality and nuance of the individual’s experience.

**Narrative analysis.** In this study, I have used ‘narrative analysis’ (Polkinghorne, 1995) as the primary approach to interpreting the data. In narrative analysis, “…researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesise or configure them by means of a plot or story…” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). Narrative analysis involves the development of narratives derived from the data. This is in contrast to ‘analysis of narrative’ whereby the researcher takes already produced narrative for analysis. In my study, episodes of the infants’ encounters with curriculum captured as video footage became a key source of the ‘description’ and ‘events’ that would inform the narrative (see Appendix 4). This video data was then combined
with my observations, field notes, and conversations with parents and educators, and then synthesised into five narratives. These narratives are presented in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

In synthesising the data into narratives, I was mindful of Polkinghorne’s (1995) advice that “… the researcher’s task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data as contributors to a goal or purpose” (p. 13). Using Riessman’s (2008) suggested structure for the creation of narratives, I used the following questions to guide me in the development of the narratives.

- What body language, facial expressions and gestures does the infant use and what possible meaning might these hold?
- What was happening immediately before and after the event that might inform the experience of the infant?
- What contextual factors might influence the encounter and open up possibilities for the experience, i.e., time of day or recent developmental achievement; the environmental conditions?
- What is the influence of others, such as peers/adults?
- How does this infant attempt to influence others?

Being mindful of such questions was a way for me to value the complexity of the impression I was creating in seeking to highlight the possible perspectives and viewpoints of the child in relation to this encounter.

A further layer of micro-analysis was then applied, as those closest to the infant (i.e., parents and educators), were asked to comment on the video footage. Their analysis, from a different standpoint, contributed a further perspective to inform my thinking about the experience of the infants in
these encounters. This served as a triangulation strategy (Hatch, 2002), whereby the various insights of the people involved were compared and considered in light of the differing perspectives they offered.

Crystallisation methods (Moustakis, 1990, cited in Miller & Crabtree, 1994) were used to pause after a period of immersion in the data. Stepping away from the data and reflecting on the perspectives of others was an important step in avoiding a narrow or blinkered view of what I was observing. Following repeated viewing of the video data, I referred to other data sources, and reflected on discussion with educators and/or families and often other research team members including my supervisors. I worked thoughtfully to consolidate the multiple perspectives, and as far as possible, to reflect the complexity of what was observed. Adopting a hesitant or speculative stance was important to this level of analysis. It was essential that I be transparent in acknowledging that I could never be certain of achieving an absolute representation of the infants’ thinking.

Data were closely examined, consistent with my intent of seeking to expose any assumptions on my part and to acknowledge difficult-to-discern aspects of the infants’ experiences. Repeated viewings of the video and photographic footage assisted in illuminating aspects of the infants’ experience that might have otherwise been overlooked or missed in real-time observation. A critical analysis of the data aimed to uncover the “the taken-for-granted assumptions and blind spots in [my] own social culture, research community and language” (Alverson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 9).
Trustworthiness

I acknowledge from the outset that the researcher-created narratives would represent only partial possibilities for what might be considered a dependable truth. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), “trustworthiness consists of four components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (p. 508). In order to ensure the highest level of trustworthiness in this study and address these four components in each of the narratives, Dollard’s (1935) seven criteria for judging a life history were used as a guide. While these criteria were established specifically to judge the worthiness of life history narratives, the same principles appear to be relevant to this study dealing with shorter episodes in an infant’s life.

The criteria called for:

1) Inclusion of the cultural context—the time, place and cultural influences—in this case the nature of the early childhood setting.

2) Attention to the embodied nature of the protagonists—including their age, physical abilities and communication capacities.

3) Attention to significant others in the episode—educators, families, and other children.

4) Concentration on the choices and actions of the protagonist—a focus on not only the physical activity but also on the less visible intents and thinking of the infant.

5) Consideration of the protagonists’ exposure to social and historical events that impact on their experience—in this case the introduction of the reform agenda and the Early Years Learning Framework.
Identification of the bounded temporal period—the beginning, middle and end of the episode—in order that the story is coherent and ordered according to actual events.

7) The story is plausible and understandable—it is accepted by the early childhood field and the academy.

Further to these criteria, Polkinghorne (1995, p. 19) urges attention to the constructive processes of narrative. He states: “The storied finding of a narrative analytic inquiry is not a third-person ‘objective’ representation or mirrored reflection of a protagonist’s or subjects life as it ‘actually’ occurred; rather, the finding is the outcome of a series of constructions”.

This was a reminder to me to be attuned to my own views and experiences in the constructions of narratives and to acknowledge these in the write-up of the research.

I acknowledge the potential for personal and professional bias, but also for unique insights gained over many years as an early childhood teacher to influence many aspects of my involvement in the study. My background made it possible for me to readily feel comfortable within the setting, to be sensitive to the nuances of practices and the responses of educators, and to understand the context of the setting. On the other hand, this prior experience had the potential to create certain assumptions based on my own professional beliefs. As Engdahl (2011, citing Eriksen-Ødegaard, 2007) noted: “An experienced preschool teacher, who turns to research, may at the same time strive for improvements of the practices and to challenge the field” (p. 52). The selection of a setting that was previously unknown to me,
along with the opportunity to reflect on field notes with research team members, encouraged me to be constantly vigilant and cognisant of the particular perspectives that I might bring to this study.

Other factors also needed to be considered. I needed to acknowledge that as a former parent user of infant childcare, I carry both emotional and professional biases about centre-based childcare. My involvement in the development of the EYLF also contributed both to my knowledge of the intent of the document and to my current interest in examining further understandings about infant curriculum. In addition, my decision to join the Infants’ Lives in Childcare study as a PhD candidate was also influential in shaping my thinking about this research. I acknowledge that these experiences, attitudes and beliefs have influenced decisions that I have made in gathering data and possibly in determining which episodes in a child’s day to capture on video.

These influences may also have contributed to decisions about which data were selected for more intensive analysis. In the construction of narrative, I must acknowledge the power that I held to select and frame episodes according to my own interpretations. As Vanhoozer (1991, p. 37) concluded, “…just as painting is a visual representation which shapes or configures space, so narrative is a verbal representation of reality which shapes or configures time”. Throughout the reporting of this study, I have been mindful (as far as possible) to acknowledge these influences in how I shaped and configured the narratives. As far as possible, I have been attentive to always presenting the narratives as impressions rather than valid truths.
Fidelity

Within the critical paradigm of this study, I used the concept of ‘fidelity’, rather than aiming to represent a valid truth. In speaking about autobiographical research, “Fidelity rather than truth is the measure of these tales” (Grumet, 1988, p.66, cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p.26). Grumet explains that truth can be seen as the retelling of what happened, whereas fidelity is “what it means to the teller of the tale” (cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p. 26). Fidelity has been an important concept in this study as I sought to go beyond simply retelling actions. In order to attempt to illuminate motivations, intents and thinking, some subjective analysis was necessary. In this study then, fidelity was taken to mean the faithfulness of the retelling—that as far as possible, I as the researcher was faithful to the actions, while making my best attempt to understand and reflect the less visible aspects of the protagonist’s experiences.

Ethics

Ethics approvals for this study were covered by the ethics application of the larger ARC Linkage project which were submitted and approved by Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 2009/19). As this study involved direct contact with and representation of very young children, considerable attention had to be given to ethical conduct of the research. There were a number of dimensions to these considerations and these are described below.

Being present in the company of the infants for extended periods.

In attempting to better understand the lived experience of young children, the approach of this study made it necessary for me to be in close proximity
to the infants and to remain present and close to them over extended periods of time. I needed to be mindful of the impact of this presence on the infants and their propensity to engage with and involve me in their experiences.

This proximity had the potential to influence the experiences of the infants and needed to be taken into account when interpreting their actions and responses. Given the 9-month period of data gathering, my relationship with the infants became more familiar and I became part of the environment. This inevitably had an impact on the events being observed and I needed to be mindful of my influence when analysing the data.

Further, I was aware of the impact of my presence in the midst of the day-to-day events at the centre. The infants were interested in my presence and the associated research equipment, for example, the video camera, microphone, camera tripod and even my research notebook. They often expressed their desire for me to engage in their play or show interest when they approached me—as this is what can reasonably be expected by children in childcare settings (White, 2011). I also needed to acknowledge that my background as an early childhood teacher and my predisposition to fall naturally into interacting with infants was not easy to overcome. In addition, there was the ethical consideration of what role I should play when an infant was upset or at risk of some harm and there was no staff member immediately available to assist them. While this did not occur frequently, it did not seem ethical to ignore an infant in such a situation. In accepting that I was a known presence in the environment, I needed to be conscious of the impact of my presence at both the data gathering and analysis stages.

This familiarity with the setting worked both for and against the gathering of data. While there was a need to be mindful of intrusion in the space and
the possibility of swaying the data, familiarity with the staff and children provided the best opportunity to capture behaviours as they naturally occurred (Graue & Walsh, 1995). As Degotardi (2008) found, her attempts to act as a non-participant observer in an infant room were “…not only impractical, but, in this context, it was neither expected nor accepted by the children and staff” (p. 16). As time went on over the data gathering period, I became more aware of how the staff and children had accommodated me into their daily routine. I was not able to operate purely as an independent observer, and so I made conscious decisions, moment by moment, about when and how I should be involved. Guiding my decisions was a respect for both educators and children, to be as unobtrusive but also as supportive as I could, without making a significant contribution to daily events.

**Infants’ capacity to provide consent to participate.** As discussed previously in this chapter, consent was sought from parents of all children likely to be involved in any way, including all children in the infant room. As the infants were not able to provide informed consent, I needed to judge their ‘assent’ or apparent willingness to participate. This was gauged through close observation of children’s body language, gestures and verbal communication for any signs of distress or reluctance to be involved. Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley (2000) speak of ‘reflexivity’ in ethnographic research. They describe this reflexivity as being open to “…a deeper consciousness of the researcher self as a mode of self-analysis … achieved through detachment, internal dialogue and daily scrutiny or the research processes…” (p. 28). For me, this deeper consciousness involved adopting an ‘ethical hesitation’ (Edgoose, 2001). Drawn from the thinking of Derrida (1990), Edgoose explains “…hesitation of understanding is well
known to the sensitive researcher who, with patience and uncertainty, observes the phenomena to be studied and makes only cautious steps toward understanding” (p. 130). These cautious steps involved constant questioning of, and reflecting on, my actions. For instance, I continually asked myself:

- “Is the child comfortable with my presence and the filming?
- Am I invading the infant’s privacy?
- Would I be happy to be observed in this way?
- Is my behaviour respectful of the child’s wishes?
- Am I respecting the child’s right to not participate?”

Ethical hesitation during this study was a particularly important concept in the data analysis stage and during the production of narratives. My aim was to acknowledge my cautious steps to understanding what life is really like for infants in childcare settings.

**Infants’ understanding of the implications of their involvement—privacy and confidentiality.** A major consideration in this study involving such young children was their ability to understand the implications of the revelation of themselves (J.Formosinho, personal communication, September 6, 2010). Capturing what might be viewed as intimate moments for a child and deciding whether to publish or exhibit those moments required constant vigilance. I needed to make sensitive judgements about whether a child would want those moments recorded, exhibited and furthermore analysed by a researcher. It was necessary to consider how such filtering of raw data might in some way sanitise the data or present a less complete picture of real events. I was therefore constantly aware of the fragile nature of my ethical position and needing to be, throughout the entire
research process, self-aware, self-vigilant and alert to the rights of the infants.

Confidentiality was managed through careful and secure handling of all data, ensuring that video footage, notes and photographs were held and stored securely at all times. All computers were password protected and cameras were not left unattended. Data storage devices from cameras were removed immediately after capture and stored securely. Pseudonyms were assigned to each child and educator in the write-up of the narratives and in the analysis of the data. There was, however, no way to completely de-identify the children through video footage and still photography, so careful attention was given to ensuring that parent permission was gained for any footage used in presentations or for viewing beyond the immediate research team. Educators and parents were advised of their right to ask for video and still photography to cease at any time and their right to request that any section of footage in which they appear be deleted. Throughout the period of data gathering or in conversations when viewing or reflecting on footage, no parent or educator requested that recording be stopped nor did they request any footage be deleted.

While confidentiality of information about children, families and educators was at the forefront of my considerations during data gathering, I was also aware of my legal obligations as a mandatory reporter under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (NSW Government, 1998), whereby I am legally bound to report any incident that poses “risk of significant harm” to a child. There were no concerning issues for me throughout the data gathering process.
Consideration of the ethical position in relation to educators and parents.

I was mindful throughout data gathering and sensitive to the feelings of educators and parents as they were being observed, videoed and photographed. All educators consenting to be involved in this project were advised of their right to withdraw from the study, or to request that the video or camera be turned off at any time. In addition, I often consulted with educators to ensure that they did not want any footage deleted. I had no such requests to stop the video or to delete footage from educators throughout the data gathering process. Before including any data in publications or presentations, I showed the relevant snippets to those included in the footage and checked that they were happy with the inclusion of images and the analysis I was contributing. In selecting video footage or still photographs for publication or presentation I was sensitive to ensuring that educators were not portrayed in ways that would make them feel uncomfortable – while aiming to be honest to the actual events taking place. There were only a few occasions when this presented an ethical dilemma, however the trusting relationship that grew between myself and the educators was such that we comfortably engaged in discussions about any footage that might cause them to feel compromised. Through sharing of footage each day, I sought to understand their level of discomfort with what was captured. The educators involved in the study did not express concerns about any of the images or footage that I recommended for broader publication.

In relation to parents, I was mindful to introduce myself and wear a name badge whilst present at the setting. In the same way as educators, parents were made aware of their right to withdraw participation or request that the
video or camera be turned off. I did not attempt to hide the video camera and parents were aware on each occasion that I was present that they might be recorded. No parents expressed concerns, nor did they request that the video or camera be turned off at any time. Parents of the children included in publications or presentations signed an additional consent form giving permission for the images to be used in this way.

In summary, the methodological approach taken in this study aimed to expose the rich complexity of infants’ encounters with curriculum. It drew on the Mosaic approach to gather a range of perspectives and data sources in an attempt to gain a closer proximity to the lived experiences of infants. The data management and selection of key data items were initially analysed thematically, whereby the research questions formed a basis for interrogating the full data corpus. A more deductive, theory-driven process was later employed, using Levinas’ ideas of encounter and benediction. A selection of key data items then informed the narrative analysis. This approach to analysis sought to foreground the infants as the protagonists and illuminate their capacities as agents and decision makers in their own learning.

References


Introduction to Chapters 6, 7 and 8
Introduction to Chapters 6, 7 and 8

In the three chapters that follow, I present the data from the study. As noted in Chapter 5, I moved from thematic coding of the data set to a more in-depth consideration of the data using the theorising of Levinas (1999). In particular, Levinas’ ideas about the concept of ‘encounter’ illuminated for me the possibilities for infants to be imagined as ‘rights-holders’ or ‘agents’ of their learning. Teasing out the notion of encounter, as it might be understood in relation to infants and curriculum, led me to the concept of ‘benediction’. Noting Levinas’ contention that all encounters begin with a benediction drew my eye to moments in the data when the three infants, who were central to the case study, expressed a benediction, or invitation, to share in their curriculum encounters.

Chapter 6: Presenting the Data Part 1

The article presented in Chapter 6 (‘Narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum: The benediction as invitation to participate’), describes how Levinas’ notion of benediction became central to my theorising of the infants’ encounters with curriculum. Conscious of the intent of curriculum frameworks to promote images of infants as capable, and having rights to a say in their learning, I was prompted to look at the data closely for evidence of these infants’ attempts to suggest or communicate their curriculum intent. This article was my first attempt to create a narrative to reflect the infant’s experiences. The construction of the narratives based on Riessman’s (2008) model proved a useful way to reflect the story of Clare; in particular, privileging her choices, actions and decisions over my assumptions of her capabilities.
Chapter 7: Presenting the Data Part 2

In Chapter 7 (‘Narratives of infants’ encounter with curriculum: Beyond the curriculum of care’), I draw on the text of Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15) for educators to be “responsive to children’s ideas and play”. This article followed on from the previous article in Chapter 6 and was an attempt to interrogate the notion of ‘responsiveness’ and what this might mean for educators as they make decisions about how they respond to infants’ benedictions. This article used Levinas’ notion of ‘responsibility’ and applied Chinnery’s (2003) notion of the ‘response-able’ educator to theorise a narrative of Hugh and the Castle.

It was this article that drew my attention to the inevitable links between the experiences of infants and the responses of their educators. Wishing to contest popular views of infant educators as mostly caring and emotionally responsive, in this article I consider the multiple ways that educators might choose to respond to infants’ suggestions and agency, including both active and passive responses. This article opened possibilities to consider a new role for infant educators, beyond the notions of sensitivity and attunement, which often presume a passive role for the infant.

Chapter 8: Presenting the Data Part 3

Chapter 8 is presented as a traditional thesis chapter and offers further narratives using Levinas’ ideas about benediction as the conceptual frame for considering infants’ encounters with curriculum. This chapter further explores the encounter between infants and educators and asks how genuine participatory rights in curriculum might be achieved for infants. The
influence of educators’ actions and inactions are central to what these infants experience as curriculum in their early childhood settings.

References


Chapter 6: Presenting the Data Part 1. Narratives of Infants’ Encounters with Curriculum: The Benediction as Invitation to Participate
Narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum: The benediction as invitation to participate

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Abstract
Images of children as strong and capable rights-holders have nestled comfortably into the vernacular of early childhood education and care discourses. Promoting a view of children as entitled to contribute to decisions that affect them, these images are now framing themes of many curricular guides and learning frameworks. The inclusion of infants in these curricular guides suggests that they too are entitled to have a say in their learning, and yet little is understood about how we might get to the heart of what an infant thinks, intends and experiences. This article explores possibilities for visual narratives to enable a closer proximity to infants’ perspectives in relation to their learning. Drawing on Levinas's ideas about ethical encounter and benediction, the authors seek ways to make visible the thinking, theorising and intent of one infant as she reveals her interests in learning.

Keywords
Agency, children’s perspectives, curriculum, ethical encounter, infants, Levinas

Since we can never crawl inside an infant’s mind, it may seem pointless to imagine what an infant may experience. Yet that is at the heart of what we really want and need to know. (Stern, 1985: 4)

Introduction
Contemporary approaches to early childhood curriculum urge educators to take a child’s perspective – to view them as capable and competent learners, and enable them to ‘have a voice’ in matters that affect them, including their learning (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Premised on a commitment to a child’s right perspective and an obligation to the

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United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) – in particular the right for children to be active participants in matters that affect them – many early childhood curricular guides specify pedagogical practices that support a child’s right to contribute to decisions about their learning (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Often emphasising the child’s natural disposition for curiosity, their right to play, and the significance of learning through reciprocal and responsive relationships, child agency is increasingly acknowledged as not only a right in their learning and education, but also a key strategy for engaging children in rich and contextually relevant learning (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Acknowledging the perspectives of young children in ways that enable them to meaningfully contribute to matters that affect them presents significant complexity, but seeking the perspectives of the youngest children – pre-verbal infants – is, as Stern (1985) suggests, fraught with challenges.

As Woodhead (2006) suggests, enabling infants’ capacity to have a say in their learning and contribute meaningfully to decisions about their early childhood experience will perhaps require a shift in adult perspectives about infants and a re-visioning of long-held assumptions about their capacities. It is necessary to move beyond assumptions and attempt to get closer to infants’ perspectives if we are to take seriously their right to be heard. How to get closer to the infant’s perspective and better understand concepts such as rights and agency as they relate to infants has been the focus of relatively little discussion. There is a similar silence in much of the children’s rights discourse about how effectively educators recognise and meaningfully respond to infants’ interests, and their right to initiate and lead their own and others’ learning. Accordingly, and as a contribution to redressing these lacunae, the purpose of this article is to report and reflect on an attempt to get closer to one infant’s perspective and her experience of learning in an early childhood setting. We draw on Levinas’s (1985) ideas of ethical encounter as a way of viewing the curriculum experience of this infant and, in particular, his idea of the ‘benediction’ as a frame to better understand how the infant, without verbal expressive language, might be communicating a desire to influence her own learning. Creating a visual narrative drawn from video footage of the infant (Clare) engaging in play, this article illuminates the potentialities of the notion of an infant’s benediction, or their invitation to others to join them in their learning encounter. It also invites discussion about whether such narratives can be useful in seeing beyond narrow notions of infants as learners, and in better appreciating their agency and capacity to express their learning interests.

This article has emerged in part from a fundamental question that arose for us as part of the 30-member consortium contracted to develop Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework in 2009 (see Sumption et al., 2009). The consortium was challenged by how to structurally organise the Framework – first and foremost to reflect the entitlements of all children (from birth to five years) equitably, but also to acknowledge and rejoice in the vast differences in development and learning that happen over this significant span of five years. It sought to resist more traditional forms of curriculum that emphasised developmental assumptions and defined learning outcomes, or were limited by narrow curriculum disciplines. The consortium was seeking a critical and reflective approach to curriculum that heralded the learning potential of children from birth to five years. In order to further this thinking, this article attempts to tease out assumptions about infants and explore possibilities for finding new lenses through which to view infants’ capacities and entitlements as learners. We begin with a discussion of images of infants reflected in the early childhood literature and consider to what extent they might currently be viewed as agents of their own learning. Next, we examine the dominant discourses surrounding infants in childcare and how these might impact on the way that educators respond to infants as learners. We then consider Levinas’s (1985) ideas of ethical encounter and his notions of the ‘benediction’ as a way of viewing the infant’s learning experience. Creating a visual narrative drawn from video data of Clare, we explore her benediction, or invitation to learning, along with possibilities for educators to respond to the
infant’s expression of interest. We conclude with a reflection on how the idea of ‘benediction’ might be useful in considering possibilities for infants as agents of their own and others’ learning.

**Infants as agents of their learning**

The image of a capable and competent child, as a learner from birth, has nestled comfortably into the vernacular of much of the early childhood education and care literature. Stemming in part from a commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), contemporary approaches to early childhood curriculum reflect a broader policy commitment to enable children to be heard and have a say in matters that affect them. Marking a shift in understandings about children from one in which children are seen as having many needs, the Convention is widely lauded as projecting a more complex image of a child, with rights as well as needs. According to Doek et al. (2006, quoted in Woodhead, 2006: 27), a fundamental goal of the Convention, introduced in General Comment 7, was ‘to emphasize that the young child is not merely a fit object of benevolence, but, rather, that the young child is a right-holder’. Rousing educators to view children as rich in potential, strong, autonomously capable and endowed with rights (Malaguzzi, 1994, cited in Edwards et al., 1994: 72), and as ‘active participants and decision makers’ (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009: 9), contemporary approaches to curriculum and learning are largely premised on a strong image of a child with rights, potentials and capabilities.

There is little argument that images of children reflecting ideas of citizenry, agency and capability are socially constructed, and that there is significant variation in interpretation of these notions across cultures (Rogoff, 2003). The extent to which children will be projected as agentic and influential is reflected in the diversity of cultural norms and expectations, along with the imperatives of lives lived under diverse circumstances. James and James (2004) note that images of children shape and are shaped by the contexts, beliefs, laws and social aspirations of the communities in which they are raised. Despite the significance of cultural and situational diversity on understandings of child agency, Bandura (2001: 4) argues that ‘people are agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experience’. Rather than viewing children as completely shaped by their immediate experiences, Bandura draws attention to the significance of the self as initiator and influencer of experience. Perhaps more easily understood in relation to older children, Bandura’s thinking invites the possibility for the child of any age to be an active participant and constructor of their own experience.

Such notions of child agency and rights in relation to their learning are increasingly visible in the curricular or pedagogical frameworks developed in a number of countries over recent years. Largely designed to specify the intent and outcomes expected of children’s participation in early childhood education, these documents reflect contemporary images of a strong and capable child who actively contributes to their learning experience. For example, the Irish national early childhood curriculum describes children as ‘citizens with rights and responsibilities. They have opinions that are worth listening to, and have the right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them’ (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009: 8). Canada’s British Columbia early learning framework views young children as ‘capable and full of potential; as persons with complex identities, grounded in their individual strengths and capacities, and their unique social, linguistic, and cultural heritage’ (Early Learning Advisory Group, 2008: 4) and the Swedish curriculum calls on the preschool to develop in children ‘the ability to express their thoughts and views and thus have the opportunity of influencing their own situation’ (quoted in Sommer et al., 2010: 16). Perhaps less strident, but nonetheless reflecting a capable child, the United Kingdom’s Early Years Foundation Stage guide states that ‘every child is a unique child, who is constantly
learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured’ (Department for Education, 2014: 6). Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework is premised on images of children who ‘actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others’ learning. They recognise their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their learning’ (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009: 9).

While a strong and powerful image of the child is evident in many curricular documents worldwide, the image translated often reflects that of the older preschool-aged child, who is articulate, expressive and readily able to communicate their ideas, theories and questions. Notions of how these images relate to children under two years – many of whom do not yet express themselves verbally – are less well represented. While often included in this broader image of all children, images of infants reflected in the early childhood literature often project a somewhat different tone and, rather than promoting the potentials and possibilities of infants, the images are often tinged with cautions and concerns. Elfer (2014) has noted that persuasive discourses stemming from attachment theory have underpinned emotional well-being and early childhood practice in the United Kingdom, Europe, the USA, New Zealand and Australia for at least the last 20 years. Infants are perhaps more likely to be viewed as vulnerable and fragile, with policies concerning them expressed in terms of their physical and emotional needs with scant if any attention given to their rights or other aspects of the learning and development. Perhaps an unintended consequence of a genuine concern for the vulnerability of infants in non-familial childcare, researchers and commentators have unknowingly contributed to constructions of infants as fragile, vulnerable and needy. For example, while the important work of Bowlby (1953), Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991), Sims and Hutchins (2011) and Elfer et al. (2012) has contributed to better understandings of infants, it has at the same time focused primarily on their vulnerabilities, projecting images of their fragility with limited attention given to their capabilities and strengths. As Doek et al. (2006, quoted in Woodhead, 2006: 27) observed in relation to country reports submitted to the United Nations as part of the monitoring of each of the participating countries’ achievements against the Convention’s articles, for very young children ‘the reports cover only certain aspects of health care, mainly infant mortality, immunisation and malnutrition, and selected issues in education chiefly related to kindergarten and preschool. Other important issues are rarely addressed’.

Thus there is a complex contradiction. On the one hand, infants’ physical and emotional vulnerability is unquestioned. On the other hand, there is an increasing call to acknowledge infants’ rights and complex capacities for learning and social engagement (see Bradley, 1989; Page et al., 2013; Sommer et al., 2010; Trevathan, 2011). The risks of overstating the capabilities of infants in an attempt to acknowledge their rights may be that they are viewed as capable in ways that might disadvantage them. Concern for what is often described as the hothealing of infants (e.g. see Kenny, 2011) or the push-down phenomenon of curriculum, where structured learning is viewed as providing children with a long-term academic advantage (see Page et al., 2013), is understandable and salient, and prevalent in much of the literature concerning infants’ involvement in education and care settings. Further to this, Cheeseman et al. (2014) argue that no matter how well intentioned curriculum policy might be, policy which gives primacy to human capital ambitions in order to improve national productivity raises many ethical complexities for working with infants. Despite strong claims of child-centeredness in the aforementioned curricular documents, they remain tinged with adult expressions of expectation and learning goals that fit with a global education imperative (Sommer et al., 2010). But as Woodhead (2006: 31) states: ‘Respecting children’s competencies is not an alternative to protecting their vulnerabilities, especially for the youngest children’. He stresses that the notion of ‘evolving capacities’ within
the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child gives direction to those working with very young children to be mindful of ‘young children’s developing social and moral awareness and especially their capacities for decision-making, or need for protection “in their best interests”’ (32). Conscious of an infant’s need for care and protection, the notion of ‘evolving capacities’ provides possibilities to look beyond traditional notions of developmentally bound, instructional curricula to also consider infants’ capabilities and capacity to contribute to their learning experience.  

Learning as ethical encounter

The work of the Lithuanian/French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) is helpful in thinking about a child-rights perspective of curriculum for infants. His philosophy of the Other (Levinas, 1987) and, in particular, his thinking in relation to the ethics of encounter offer a way to consider curriculum for infants as a response to the rights of the child to have a say in matters that affect them, including their learning — thereby averting the risk of learning frameworks being interpreted as what Dahlberg and Moss (2005: 77) describe as ‘highly instrumental … [putting] technical practice first’. Levinas’s thinking opens possibilities to move beyond technicist generalisations of curriculum driven by outcomes and expectations, to seek opportunities within learning frameworks to work as collaborative projects framed by an ethical responsiveness unique to each encounter. Levinas’s (1985) ideas about ethical encounter enable possibilities for infants to be protagonists in their learning encounter, rather than solely responding to the adult’s assumptions about their learning needs. For Levinas, each encounter is not born of an assumption about the Other, but is unique for each child and each encounter. Levinas (1985) calls this the ‘face-to-face encounter’. Rather than the educator approaching the curriculum encounter as an expert in knowing the infant and what they need to learn, the face-to-face encounter is premised on an unknowing—a susceptibility (Levinas, 1999). Each face is approached as unique—something to be better understood within the encounter. Positioning the educator as both knowledgeable and susceptible requires the educator to watch and listen closely, keeping assumptions or expectations in check and viewing the encounter as an invitation on behalf of the infant to enter into their learning agenda.

As Levinas (1999: 98) explains: ‘All encounters begin with a benediction, contained in the word “hello”’. For Levinas, the benediction is the invitation to encounter. Drawing on the Jewish/Christian tradition of benediction—‘The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace’ (Numbers 6:24–26) — Levinas highlights the power of the benediction and the significance of the face as the invitation to parishioners to go out and encounter the world following the blessing. He uses the idea of benediction as a prompt to be open to the invitation to encounter. Drawing from this thinking, early childhood educators might use the idea of benediction as the prompt to be open and alert to the infant’s sometimes subtle invitation to their learning. Principled on an ethic of responsibility for the Other as an absolute obligation, the encounter takes place with no expectation about how the Other might or should respond. It does not suggest an empirical knowledge of the Other, but is based on a response to the immediate and unique awareness of the Other. Perhaps in contrast to images of educators as knowledgeable about infants’ needs and confident in prescribed ways of responding to them, the ethical encounter enables the infant to be seen as knowledgeable about themselves, their motivations, interests and desires. Brocker (2010: 184) notes that ‘these fundamentally ethical re-definitions of care and caring may sit awkwardly with traditional models of childcare in which a more competent and able individual (an adult) “cares for” a weaker and less competent individual (a child)’. This thinking invites a
re-examination of the capability of infants, but also suggests a rethinking of the role of educators who work with them.

Acknowledging the infant as capable of an invitation to encounter, and being open to the possibilities that might emerge from that invitation, requires an educator who can go beyond the limitations of defined expectations and be susceptible in their assumptions of the Other. As Sommer et al. (2010: 18) observe, to work in this way, respecting the rights of infants to have influence over their learning, requires an educator who can ‘work with the interpretations of the text in the curriculum’. Rather than assuming that the experiences of all infants should reflect a narrow interpretation of their capacities, defined by developmental norms, the invitation to watch and listen closely to each infant and respond to their unique benedictions requires an educator who can be open to the possibilities within each encounter. We now consider how educators might be attentive to an infant’s benediction by using a visual narrative to illuminate the subtle and yet meaningful attempts of an infant to invite an adult to her learning encounter.

Using narrative texts to get closer to the infant’s experience

Bruner (1991: 4) contends that, since the Enlightenment, researchers have sought to discover true knowledge – to get a reliable fix on the world. Acknowledging the impossibility of reliably fixing understandings of the human mind, Bruner turns to narratives as ‘versions of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and “narrative necessity” rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness’ (Bruner, 1991: 4). While narratives in this sense do not claim to represent a singular, scientific truth, they nonetheless enable insight into possibilities and provide a springboard for contemplating another’s perspective.

van Manen (1990) suggests that narratives can encourage close observation and a reflexive interpretation of meaning. Using what he terms ‘hermeneutic alertness’ to describe this close observation and reflexivity in interpretations, he suggests that we can become more alert to another’s life experience. As Baron (1991, cited in Booth and Booth, 2010) observed, those who most need to have their stories heard may be least able to tell them. He suggests that it is possible to use narrative methods to give a voice to people who lack words, and to gain a closer understanding of their experience. While mindful that Baron’s claim is contentious (e.g. see Jackson and Mazzei, 2009), creating narrative texts (Keats, 2009) reflecting infants’ experiences might be a way to get closer to the infant’s perspective and to become more attuned to their subtle cues and suggestions. Attempting to look beyond generalised assumptions about infants’ experiences of learning to their individual encounters may shed light on perhaps overlooked possibilities and afford glimpses into the more hidden possibilities of their motivations, interests and intents.

Riessman (2008) considers a fully formed narrative to include six elements that create a coherent representation. She suggests the elements of an abstract to indicate the point of the story; an orientation to time, place and characters; a complicating action with a significant turning point; an evaluation where the narrator steps back to comment on the action; a resolution and a coda to bring the action back to the present. She emphasises that not all stories contain all elements and, indeed, some stories may follow a varying sequence. Acknowledging the modernist tones of such a formula for narrative, we nonetheless see the value in ensuring that the narratives developed about the experiences of infants present a coherency and enable each story to be understood in relation to the particular context, time and place of its origin.

Mindful of Riessman’s suggestion for a fully formed narrative to reflect a coherent experience, importantly for this study we are also alert to Outhwaite’s (1995, quoted in Elliott, 2005: 37) caution that narrative is not a formalised ‘unprejudiced technique, but an encounter …
a confrontation with something radically different from ourselves'. While Riessman's (2008) structure provides a useful framework to ensure that the narratives are coherent and meaningful, Outhwaite's warning is important to this study in recognising that the construction of narratives to reflect the lives of others is always prejudiced and reflective of the biases of those constructing the narrative. We are also mindful of MacLure's (2009: 97) warning of the many ways in which voice in qualitative research can 'falter or fail'. She speaks of the dangers of becoming entrapped in the 'textual politics of good intentions' (102), for example, by presenting the child's voice as innocent or idealised. Our intent, then, is to use narrative as a way of creating impressions that provide additional information and perspectives that are often hidden. We are mindful of the partiality that is inevitable in creating narratives about infants' experiences, but recognise the potential that they afford us in taking a reflexive and susceptible stance in seeking to get closer to the infant's perspective.

Clare's benediction

The following narrative was constructed from data generated as part of the Australian Research Council-funded Infants' Lives in Childcare project (Sumption et al., 2011). The data used in constructing the narrative consisted of video footage, still photographs and researcher field notes, which were gathered over a period of nine months during 2010 in the baby room of a Sydney early childhood setting. In drawing on multiple sources of data and taking a reflexive stance, this approach to narrative moves beyond a traditional form of observation, as it invites transparency in the reflective process of wondering about children's learning. Rather than situating the observer as the knowledgeable authority on the subject of the observation and giving primacy to the voice of the observer, the narrative form positions the child as protagonist, with the narrator acknowledging their partiality through a tentative, speculative voice. As van Manen (1990: 36) explains, the narrator transforms the lived experience 'into a text that expresses something essential in re-living a reflective appropriation of something meaningful'. Unlike a traditional observation or even a learning story (Carr, 2001), the narrative does not aim to explain or classify what is seen; rather, it speculates and wonders about the child's experience, weaving together the voices of the child and narrator. As Felstiner et al. (2006) explain, this type of narrative invites the reader into the reflective process. This narrative, then, is an attempt to bring together the multiple sources of data to retell a significant moment in one child's learning.

Clare (a girl of 19 months) is playing with friends in the outdoors. They are near the sandpit and are stepping on a set of large outdoor waffle blocks that are scattered around the ground. The intent of the play is not clear, but the first author (as a visiting researcher) is invited by Clare to play with the blocks. We begin by connecting a few blocks and I (the first author) demonstrate the way the blocks attach. Counting the three prongs on one side then the two prongs on another block. I show the small group of infants how they fit together. We talk about this as we work together – Clare in particular shows an interest in the way the blocks join and shows me each time she successfully connects two blocks (see Figure 1). I suggest that we make some chairs from the blocks and, after considerable time working with the complex material, the two girls are sitting in, swapping seats and attempting to construct more chairs for friends. The play goes on for some time (see Figure 2). Inviting more friends to join them in chairs, Clare, now having more success in connecting the blocks, begins to experiment by using more blocks to make a bigger chair. She soon realises that she can lie down on the bigger chair and proclaims 'bed'. There is much enjoyment and a number of children join in the bed play (see Figure 3). The play concludes when it is time to pack away, as it is late in the afternoon and children are moving inside.
Figures 1–3. Outdoor play with the large waffle blocks.

Figure 1. Clare plays with the large waffle blocks.

Figure 2. Persisting with the challenge of the waffle blocks.

Figure 3. Chairs turn to beds – the play shifts to role play.
A week later, I return to the setting. The group of children are inside and playing with toys and construction materials on a mat. Clare notices my arrival and, while she does not particularly acknowledge me, she often looks over toward me. I am busy setting up a video camera, which is to be used in the research. It is located on a bench partition and, as it begins to capture the children’s play, I begin to make some notes while leaning on the partition. Clare is sharing a book on the lounge with an educator. She soon moves to the floor, where there is a scattering of indoor waffle blocks – a much smaller version of the waffle blocks I had previously seen her using outdoors. She manipulates the blocks and seems to struggle a little with the connection method, although, in a way, that indicates that she is familiar with the strategy of putting them together (see Figure 4). With no assistance, she manages to connect four blocks in what resembles the box shape she used to make the larger version of the chairs last week. After a short time of struggling with the blocks, she seems satisfied and stands up. She places the box on the floor and proceeds to turn her body to sit in the small replica block chair. She rolls onto her back – not fitting in the chair – and it breaks (see Figure 5). She looks toward me – I suspect recalling our game from last week.

Figures 4 and 5. One week later Clare recalls her previous play with me.

Figure 4. Constructing a small box with waffle blocks – Clare checking that I am watching.

Figure 5. It's a chair.
Clare’s benediction comes in the form of a very subtle and easily overlooked gesture. There is no verbal or physical contact – her invitation is indirect, yet suggests her confidence in me to understand her actions as an encounter that connects us. Her recall of the game from the previous week indicates a considerable capacity to make meaning and transfer her knowledge of a game in the outdoors to a similar game in the indoors one week later. Significant here, though, is her ability to demonstrate her memory of the game and use sophisticated body language and eye contact as an invitation to me to notice her recall. In the second encounter, her strong use of eye contact drew me into her intent. It required of me attentiveness and attentment. Attentment in this sense is understood as a sensitivity to the infant’s invitation – the willingness to stand back and enable the child to lead the encounter, tentatively seeking possible meaning from the infant’s actions. It is perhaps in contrast to more traditional notions of attentment that imply the emotional bond between adult and child where the responsibility is on the adult to accurately interpret the infant’s action and respond in an appropriate way (see Ainsworth, 1967, cited in Rolfe, 2004). I was unsure if she was suggesting we replay the game from last week or simply attempting to connect with me over the encounter that we had shared. I tried not to draw too many conclusions about her intent, but rather used the invitation to observe more, respond to her invitation with smiles and encouragement, and wait for her further gesture. As she fell to the floor, rolled back and looked toward me, she held her gaze for several seconds – it was a strong and powerful message to me to engage in her invitation.

Figures 6 and 7. Clare’s extended gaze – is this her benediction?

Figure 6. Clare gazes at me as she sits on the box and rolls to the ground.
Rather than focusing on her developmental stage or her skill in manipulating the blocks, a focus on her benediction invites a broader perspective on her experience. While it is tempting to think about what I might do next to extend her learning or build on her apparent interest in blocks, responding in this way represents assumptions on my behalf about her interests, her development and her understandings. I then become the protagonist of her learning. A focus on her benediction, however, shifts my gaze from what I might assume she needs based on ‘normative developmental assumptions’ (Berthelsen and Brownlee, 2005: 53) to what she is expressing as her unique interests, motives and intents in relation to the blocks. In pausing to seek her intent, I create a space in which she shows me capability beyond my ‘normative developmental assumptions’ of a 19-month-old. I feel encouraged to approach her with susceptibility and wait for further cues. She then leads me to the game of making chairs and beds for small soft toys that fit snugly into the proportions of the small waffle blocks.

**Benediction as an invitation to encounter curriculum**

The notion of benediction, in this way, foregrounds Clare’s desire and intent to show her interest and engagement in play and learning. While it is tempting, perhaps, to draw on assumptions about her level of motor skill, her interest in blocks as tools and her capacity for memory recall, such assumptions may prompt the educator to take the lead and determine the direction of Clare’s next experience. Certainly, traditional notions of planning for learning based on observation expect that the educator will observe the child’s interest and devise a series of activities and strategies to extend or scaffold the child to achieve the identified objectives (e.g. see Sims and Hutchins, 2011). Being alert to the infant’s own expressions of intent and interest provides other possibilities, beyond a potentially narrow list of possibilities based on a limited range of assumptions. In looking beyond these assumptions, we are made aware of Clare’s level of sophistication in inviting me into her intent; we are forced to notice her considerable interest in the patterning, physics and representational qualities of the materials; and we are encouraged to think more broadly about what she might be expressing an interest in exploring further. Enabling her to take the lead, and seeking to find her expressions of possibility through my susceptible stance, demonstrates a deeper respect for the encounter as collaborative.
Generating a narrative of this encounter has illuminated action and intent that may well have been overlooked or missed. Drawing together the data from still photographs of the week earlier, along with video footage the following week and brief field notes, facilitated a narrative reflection of this infant’s meaningful engagement with learning. Clare made no overt actions to acknowledge my presence or to make physical contact with me. Her benediction was very much a tentative invitation, requiring attunement on my behalf. Likely to have passed without notice, the narrative was a way of making visible that which might be lost or overlooked. It created the possibility to look at an everyday action with greater depth – to be made more aware of this infant’s invitation and strong message about her desire and intent.

This narrative alone sparked further questions for us as researchers about infants’ encounters with curriculum. Might this not be a one-off extraordinary response by Clare? Were other infants making such benedications? On looking carefully at further data, it became clear that the infants participating in this research demonstrated many examples of what might be considered benedications. In often subtle and frequently overlooked ways, these infants demonstrated significant desire to communicate their interests and intents, and they employed a wide range of strategies for extending their invitation to others.

Conclusion

The Early Years Learning Framework encourages educators to draw on children’s interests as an ‘important basis for their curriculum decision-making’ (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009: 15). Yet how to do so effectively with infants has not been well examined. As Woodhead (2006: 25) observes: ‘Realizing rights ... entails a fundamental shift in the image of the child within society’. Simply stating the rights of infants in a curricular document does not ensure those rights will be realised. Societal beliefs, views and attitudes about infants in childcare remain a significant and powerful influence over how infants will be respected and responded to in relation to their learning. The persistent images of infants as vulnerable, fragile and completely dependent on adults to shape their future life trajectories perhaps inhibit the possibilities for them to experience more collaboratively possibilities which view the infant as an influential co-constructor of knowledge and ideas.

The use of narratives to reflect the stories and experiences of infants may be one way of getting closer to their perspectives – their thinking, motivations and intents. Focusing the narrative on infants’ benedications, rather than the traditional form of observation that gives priority to developmental behaviour, is perhaps a way of illuminating infants’ interests, thus affording the opportunity to respond to their benedications as the basis for building a participatory curriculum. Levinas’s thinking suggests that these invitations require a sensitive and responsive educator who is ‘susceptible’ rather than ‘knowing’, demonstrating a trust in each infant’s capacity to show their interests. This thinking perhaps opens up possibilities to consider the role of agency in the experience of very young children in their early encounters with learning. A more susceptible stance may lead educators to watch more closely, pause longer or listen more intently in an attempt to better understand each infant’s desire to have a say in their learning. Seeking to understand more effectively the infant’s perspective invites possibilities to consider infants as agents in their own learning and to move toward new forms of critical practice with infants.

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Notes

1. While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is widely viewed as a catalyst for acknowledging children’s right to have a say in matters that affect them and shifting societal images of children’s capacities, we concur with the comments from the anonymous reviewer, who pointed out the significant influence of feminist and post-structuralist perspectives, which may have proved more influential in shifting views about children than the Convention. We are appreciative of the reviewer’s insight and contribution to our thinking.

2. In this instance, the intent of the project was to focus on the infants’ perspectives rather than the educator perspective. For this reason, the narrative constructed includes the voices of children and the researcher/narrator. We acknowledge that educators might offer alternative perspectives, but these have not been included in these narratives in an attempt to give primary focus to the experience of the infant. We acknowledge that such narratives will always be partial and speculative.

References


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Chapter 7: Presenting the Data Part 2. Narratives of Infants’ Encounters with Curriculum: Beyond the Curriculum of Care
Narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum: Beyond the curriculum of care

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Abstract
Australia’s National Quality Framework identifies responsibilities for early childhood educators who work with infants to plan for and assess their learning. Educators are urged to be ‘responsive to children’s ideas and play’ and to ‘assess, anticipate and extend children’s learning’. Responsiveness in relation to infants is often couched in terms of emotional support and attention to the attachment relationship, or in detailed guidance about supporting the infant in care routines. Drawing on Levinas’s ideas of ethical encounter to frame a consideration of infants’ learning more broadly, this article suggests the possibility to see beyond traditional perceptions of infants as objects of the attachment relationship, and identifies the potential for infants to be viewed as ‘initiators’ who guide educators’ responses. Working with Levinas’s ideas of absolute responsibility in the face-to-face encounter, the notion of ‘response-ability’ is used to examine educators’ decisions and actions as they share in learning encounters with infants. Using video footage captured during an infant’s encounter with learning, the decisions of the educator prove influential. Creating a narrative of this experience illuminates the educator’s response-ability, and shows how an infant’s ideas and investigations might form the basis of the learning encounter. Close examination of educator response-ability may lead to richer possibilities for infants’ encounters with learning, beyond the curriculum of care.

Keywords
Agency, curriculum, ethical encounter, infants, Levinas, mind-minded

I think the thing that struck me the most was how active babies are and how much it is ‘they’ take the initiative. They are not passive little things to whom you do things; in fact, in many ways they are the initiators of what happens to them. (Ainsworth, 1995: 5)
Introduction

The roles of educators who work with infants participating in early childhood education and care programs have often been framed within discourses of maternalism (Ailwood, 2007; Bown et al., 2010) and associated notions of care and protection (Page et al., 2013; Rockel, 2009; Trevarthen, 2011). Perhaps unintentionally, these powerful ideas have situated infants as passive and the object of adults’ decisions and actions. Largely shaped by the influential ideas emerging from attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1969), caregiving adults have been encouraged to be responsive to infants’ cues and attentive to their care needs. Translating this guidance to those who work with infants in early childhood settings, learning relationships have often emphasised the importance of care routines, attention to emotional attachments and the provision of a safe environment (e.g. see Goldstein, 1998; Gooch and Powell, 2013; Rockel, 2009; Sims and Hutchins, 2011). In recent years, the notion of ‘care as curriculum’ (Gerber, 2005) has been heralded as a key point of difference between approaches to curriculum for children over three years and for infants and toddlers under three years (Bussey, 2013). The purpose of this article is to extend these readings of care and protection as the foundations of curriculum for infants, and seek more expansive understandings of infants as complex learners who bring agency and intent to the learning encounter.

This article reports on a small sample within a large data source gathered as part of the Australian Research Council-funded Infants’ Lives in Childcare project (Sumption et al., 2011). In this study, Mosaic methodology (Clark and Moss, 2001) was used as a way of listening to children, and was underpinned by a commitment to engage in participatory research methods – to capture lived experience, respectfully include infants’ perspectives and reflect their stories. Multiple data sources were gathered to build a more complex understanding of the lived experience of infants than a single data source alone might provide. To this end, a range of digital recording strategies was used, including video footage and still camera images, along with field notes, researcher journal entries, and notes taken from incidental comments and discussions with parents and educators at the setting. The data sources were combined and analysed to build narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum as a way of reflecting the complexity of infants’ learning experiences.

In an earlier article titled ‘Narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum: The benediction as invitation to participate’, also drawing on this larger data source (see Cheeseman and Sumption, 2016), Levinas’s idea of ‘benediction’ was introduced as a way to see infants’ invitations to their learning agendas. Looking beyond expectations for infants’ learning drawn primarily from developmental norms and the dominance of literature about infants’ emotional states, the article suggested that infants bring their own learning agendas and interests, which may be outside what educators have learned to expect. Included was a narrative of Clare, an infant of 19 months, who showed her interest in pursuing a playful learning experience using somewhat sophisticated recall, gesture and eye contact. Her ‘benediction’ (see Levinas, 1999) or invitation was powerful, as was her interest in playing with a material that developmental norms might consider beyond her physical and intellectual capabilities. In the earlier article, the focus was on noticing the motivations and behaviours of the infant, and concluded that educators may be overlooking infants’ benedictions as indicators of their agency, intents and desires for learning.

In this article, I look closely at a further example of an infant’s benediction taken from video footage, but on this occasion I examine closely the response of the educator to this benediction. While much of the early childhood literature exhorts educators to be ‘responsible’ for infants, I now work with ideas developed by Chinnery (2003), who suggests that educators seeking to engage with children’s ideas and intents might also be ‘response-able’. This article begins with an examination of Levinas’s ideas of ethical encounter as a way to consider the role of educators in the learning experiences of infants. It then reflects what contemporary discourses suggest about
‘responsiveness’, and considers this alongside thinking that educators might also be response-able. In the second part, an example of an infant’s learning encounter, identified from video footage, is examined with a focus on the educator’s ‘inaction’ as a response-able act. The article concludes by suggesting that response-able educators, who are alert to children’s learning agendas, consciously choose their responses, enabling infants to have greater agency in their own and others’ learning.

Learning encounters

Levinas’s thinking about the face-to-face encounter is helpful in considering the roles that educators can take in the experiences of young children participating in early childhood education and care settings. Principled on an ethic and responsibility for the ‘Other’ (Levinas, 1987), the face-to-face encounter promotes the importance of the individual and a sensitive reading of ‘responsibility’. Discouraging oversimplified, formulaic or technicist approaches to the notion of responsibility, Blanchot (1995, cited in Chinnery, 2003: 9) explains that “‘responsible’ is a term which is typically reserved for the ‘mature, lucid, conscientious man [sic], who acts with circumspection, who takes into account all elements of a given situation, calculates and decides . . . the successful man [sic] of action’”. Responsibility in this sense is understood in relation to an absolute knowledge of the Other, where those who are responsible know with some certainty how to respond.

Much of the infant/toddler literature exhorts educators to be the responsible adult who is guided by accepted wisdom and doctrine to know with some certainty the right way to respond. The emphasis is most often on the action of the educator – inaction is rarely discussed. Levinas, however, introduces the notion of passivity or, as Blanchot (1995, cited in Chinnery, 2003: 9) describes: ‘what I make happen by my actions and what I allow to happen by inaction’. An awareness that both action and inaction on the part of the educator are influential in the infant’s experiences calls for a more critical reading of responsibility and a challenge to the privileging of action over inaction.

Levinas’s (1987) notion of ethical encounter promotes an alternative view of responsibility, introducing the notion of susceptibility and a willingness to look and listen with less certainty. Levinas’s thinking urges wariness about the knowable and strives for deeper understandings – for more ethical and responsive encounters. In relation to working with infants, such thinking not only encourages a view of infants’ encounters with learning beyond methods grounded in observing anticipated development, but also promotes a deeper engagement with infants’ individual interests, theories and intents. By viewing attachment theory or child development as only part of the repertoire for thinking about possibilities for infants’ learning, educators working with infants must be comfortable not only with predictable knowledge, but also with that which is less certain and often unexpected. Such an approach is rarely presented in contemporary infant/toddler literature and contests the accepted wisdom that surrounds guidance for infant educators.

In contesting such notions as the known and the unknown, certainty and uncertainty, Levinas (1985) identified that texts or accepted wisdom contain both a ‘said’ and a ‘saying’. The ‘said’, representing the written form or accepted doctrine that attempts to define action, establishes expectations and provides a predictable interpretation of behaviours. The ‘saying’, on the other hand, is seen in the individual interpretation – seeking the view beyond predictability, expectations and containing definitions – to the distinct enactment of the ‘said’ (Levinas, 1985). The ‘said’ makes way for that which cannot be grasped as certain knowledge and encourages a speculative stance.

Acknowledging these dual possibilities, the ethical encounter encourages the knowledge contained in the accepted wisdom to work alongside the face-to-face individual encounter. Applying this thinking to working with infants, the educator draws on the knowledge of the ‘said’ – for example, the curriculum guidance document or the accepted doctrine of developmental theories – but, taking a susceptible stance, is open to the benediction of the ‘Other’ – the infant. The ‘saying’
does not presume to know the ‘Other’, but accepts that each encounter with the infant contains desires, intents and motives that should be sought and honoured. As Todd (2001: 69) explains, this way of working ‘compels us to reconsider … our taken for granted definitions about the Other and … review the significance of susceptibility in learning’. The notion of ‘susceptibility’, then, is pivotal to the relational pedagogies that underpin curriculum as encounter.

Close attention to infants’ expressions of interest and intent enables the infant educator not only to be responsible for the care, safety and welfare of the infant, but also to be ‘response-able’. Such an approach encourages reciprocity, where both the educator’s knowledge and the infant’s knowledge share the space for decision-making about curriculum. Such a disposition affirms the guidance of Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework, which calls for learning to promote children’s agency and the opportunity for children (including infants) to contribute to matters that affect them, including their learning (Australian Government, 2009).

Response-ability

Response-ability within the ethical encounter of an infant and educator is not well examined. A complex notion which cannot be easily explained or quantified, response-ability, according to Säfström (2003), requires an educator to adopt a stance of vulnerability, passivity and uncertainty. This is a significant shift away from the certainty of responses based on accepted wisdom, which tend to promote a more formulaic ‘I know what you need from me’ approach. Such a departure from the unquestioned reasonableness of the notion of responsibility demands an interrogation of the theoretical and moral underpinnings of the accepted doctrine, for who would question the need for educators working with infants to be responsible? An uncovering of the origins of responsibility can, however, reveal the potential for silenced and taken-for-granted traditions to limit the way in which infants are viewed and, indeed, limit the capacity to identify and enable infant agency.

Arguably, the most prominent theoretical influence in relation to working with infants is that of attachment theory and, in particular, reference to the need within the attachment relationship for adult ‘responsiveness’. Often found in the attachment literature, responsiveness has been variously described and often linked to the terms ‘sensitivity’ (Ainsworth, 1967) and ‘attunement’ (Stern, 1985). Sensitivity, as explained by Ainsworth, describes the action of the mother in response to her infant’s cues. Ainsworth (1967: 397) explains that: ‘Sensitivity of response to signals implies that signals are perceived and correctly interpreted and that the response is prompt and appropriate’. Ainsworth’s explanation emphasises the mother’s ability to interpret the infant’s cues correctly. This emphasis on the response as ‘prompt and appropriate’ highlights the importance of an accurate reading of the infant’s cues, and at least implies that the response is one that fits within the scope of attachment theory. It also implies an action on behalf of the mother.

Similarly, attunement is described as ‘the sharing of affect in mutually enjoyable ways’, where the mother’s response ‘closely matches the intensity, duration and shape of her infant’s behavioural expressions’ (Rolfe, 2004: 40). This focus on imitation – or, as Stern (1985: 141) describes it, ‘a faithful rendering of the infant’s overt behaviour’ – again proposes a close match or reproduction of the infant’s initiation. The emphasis on the ‘faithful rendering’ and ‘match[ing]’ of expressions promotes a reading of the infant’s individuality and recognises the infant’s capacity to initiate the encounter. However, in much the same way as sensitivity, the responsibility for attunement sits with the mother to accurately read and faithfully match back the infant’s cues. This guidance, in its emphasis on the matched response, somewhat discounts a more complex reading of the infant’s intent and once again privileges action over inaction.

Both sensitivity and attunement situate the adult as the knowledgeable one who is responsible for acting in an appropriate way. There is limited acknowledgement of the infant as a protagonist
Seeking the infant’s agency

Attempting to come closer to an understanding of responsivity in an infant early childhood setting, I draw on more recent work in the area of attachment – seeking a view beyond the limitations of sensitivity and attunement. Meins (1997) has investigated how mothers’ attitudes about the capabilities of their infants, or what she terms a mother’s ‘mind-mindedness’, can influence how their infants approach learning. She defines mind-mindedness as a mother’s propensity to treat her children as ‘mental agents’ (Meins, 1997: 108), and her proclivity to pitch interactions with her children in a way that recognises both their current level of ability and their potential. Rather than viewing their infants in terms of their behaviour or physical attributes, Meins et al. (1998) noted that mind-minded mothers were ‘more likely to describe their children in terms of their mental characteristics’ (8) and had a propensity to treat their children as ‘individuals with minds’ (20).

Aligning closely with Vygotsky’s (1978) work, in particular his theory of the zone of proximal development, mind-minded mothers were found to pitch their interventions based on their understanding of their child’s areas of competence and an awareness of the challenges they faced. The children of mind-minded mothers were found at later stages of childhood to demonstrate higher levels of symbolic and mentalising abilities (Meins et al., 1998). This influence of the mother’s attitude towards her infant on the child’s later learning prompts a deeper analysis of the assumptions of sensitivity and attunement. Rather than viewing the action of the adult as the pivotal characteristic of the attachment relationship, there is perhaps a need to focus more intentionally on the more hidden and less visible role of attitudes towards infants’ capabilities, and, indeed, on what infants bring to the attachment relationship. Rather than viewing infants as the passive recipients of their mother’s responses, infants might be viewed as agents with influence over how the adult might respond.

Despite the current limitations of mind-minded research, which focuses almost exclusively on the infant–mother dyad and is silent in regard to the role of fathers, the broader notion of mind-mindedness may be helpful in focusing the attention of infant educators on the capabilities of infants, rather than exclusively on their perceived needs. Degotardi (2015) contends that the same principles of mind-mindedness apply to educators as they attempt to understand the perspectives of the infants they work with. Awareness of mind-mindedness may encourage infant educators to look with less certainty and be open to the surprising capabilities of infants – taking their lead from the infants, rather than feeling compelled to act within the boundaries of current readings of sensitivity and attunement.

Mind-mindedness situates the infant within the adult–infant relationship quite differently. Whereas sensitivity and attunement situate the adult as an expert, responsible to interpret the needs of the infant accurately, mind-mindedness positions the infant as having expertise about themselves – being capable of expressing ‘wants, feelings, interests, perceptions, knowledge and thoughts’ (Degotardi, 2015: 181). Mind-mindedness situates the educator as a partner rather than an expert, viewing the infant as having capabilities that can be acknowledged and privileged within the learning encounter. Importantly, mind-mindedness supports contemporary images of infants as holding agency, where the infant is considered capable of decision-making or, as the Early Years Learning Framework expresses, ‘able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and have
an impact on one’s world’ (Australian Government, 2009: 45). Such ideas are reflective of Levinas’s thinking of learning as an ethical encounter. Rather than the knowledgeable adult providing the appropriate learning environment based on generalised assumptions about infants’ developmental needs, notions of mind-mindedness offer infants the possibility to be leaders, collaborators and partners in learning.

Viewing infants as agents with minds requires new ways to observe and acknowledge infants’ potentials that extend beyond a confidence in developmental norms or prescribed ways of responding to anticipated needs. Seeking infants’ ideas, agendas and interests, and positioning educators as response-able, means being open to infants as protagonists – premised on a perception of them as having a point of view worth listening to. This thinking prompts questions about the possibilities of engaging in observation of infants that provides greater insight into their ideas, agendas and interests, and that better enables educators’ response-ability.

Narratives as observation

As previously mentioned, this article is part of a study situated within a larger Australian Research Council-funded project that sought to better understand the lived experience of infants in Australian early childhood settings. Using a criticalist (Kinloch and McLaren, 2005) theoretical frame, this study sought to expose hidden, silenced and taken-for-granted assumptions about infants’ childcare experiences. Levinas’s thinking about the nature of ethical encounter has offered a critical challenge to normative developmental practices and the dominance of attachment theory as a way to construct infants’ learning experiences. In seeking to get as close as possible to the perspectives of the infants themselves, this study has also drawn loosely on humanist traditions in order to consider the lived experience of infants. According to Taylor (1995), humanistic research promotes the advance of practical reason with a focus on a deeper understanding of what it is to live a human life. In seeking to gain a closer proximity to infants’ experience, I have explored the potential of narratives as a way to reflect the actions of infants while seeking to gain insight into their intents and interests. In attempting to do this, I acknowledge the theoretical and philosophical tensions between the two approaches of critical theory and humanist traditions. Inspired, however, by the thinking of Kinsella (2006), I attempt here to reflect the complexity of infants’ lived experience using both the criticalist perspectives of Levinas and the humanist potentials of narratives. Kinsella (2006: 1) suggests that qualitative inquiry and our understanding of others can be enriched through a ‘critical hermeneutics’. Such an approach considers both the lived experience that is witnessed and a critical interpretive stance which can expose otherwise neglected or overlooked events.

Here, narratives are presented as a way of better understanding infants’ benedictions. The narratives aim to foreground the perspectives of infants and draw attention to perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked or discounted. In this way, narrative is suggested as a way of seeking to look beyond that which is already known, understood or expected. Van Manen (1990) suggests that narratives can make us more alert to another’s life experience. Generated based on close observation and reflexivity, the narrator does not claim to represent a singular truth or accurate representation of another’s perspective. Rather, narrative methods offer the possibility to give voice to people who lack words by reflecting as closely as possible the events of another’s life experience (Baron, 1991, cited in Booth and Booth, 2010: 59). While mindful that Baron’s claim is contested (e.g. see Jackson and Mazzei, 2009), and acknowledging that one can never claim to accurately reflect another’s life experience, narratives are perhaps one way to attempt to gain a closer proximity to the infant’s perspective and to become more alert to the infant’s agency.

With this in mind and seeking to gain closer proximity to the experience of the infant, I propose that narratives may be a way to move beyond more traditional forms of child observation, as a
largely subjective task undertaken from the trained adult’s perspective (e.g., see Gerke, 2004), to a more collaborative endeavour where the infant’s perspective, agenda and intent are actively sought. This approach to narrative differs from more traditional forms of observation such as anecdotal records or learning stories (see Arthur et al., 2015) as it does not attempt to analyse or categorise the behaviours of the infant based on an assumption of expected development. Rather, this form of narrative aims to reflect the action while seeking to wonder about the infant’s agenda. It is premised on being curious about the infant’s mind and attempting to illuminate not only what we can know about the infant, but also what is unknown. As such, the educator is present in the narrative and his/her decision-making or response-abilities is embedded in the action. In this way, narratives provide a way of simultaneously seeking the child’s perspective while acknowledging that the response of the adult is both influential and influenced. Narratives, in this sense, are generated as a way of drawing attention to the infant’s perspective — to alert educators to the possibility of being tentative and susceptible in their knowledge of how to respond.

**Narrative of Hugh’s encounter with the castle**

Hugh is an infant of 15 months. He attends a long-day early childhood setting with his older sister. Hugh has been walking for some weeks now and making the most of his ability to access more areas of the setting. Late one afternoon, he comes upon a plastic climbing structure that is referred to by educators and children at the setting as ‘the castle’. Hugh approaches the steps of the castle and, with no hesitation, begins to climb the six steps, crawling on his knees and using his arms to pull himself up each step [Figure 1]. He pauses for several seconds near the top, appearing to think through how he will negotiate the top step given that there is no further step to hold on to [Figure 2]. He looks around before finding a handhold on the side, and pulls himself to a standing position. He takes a few moments to negotiate the top step but soon pulls himself over onto a narrow platform in the centre of the castle. He bounces his body a few times, perhaps expecting the platform to have the jouncing qualities of other boards he has previously played on [Figure 3]. It has no give, so he stops bouncing. He removes his hands from the castle walls and balances himself confidently, then regrasps the walls and attempts to step to the other side of the castle — perhaps assuming that the platform at the top of castle extends to the other side.

He soon notices by looking and feeling with his leg that there is a deep gap and no way for him to reach the other side of the castle. He looks over to his educator, who is in sight and watching him closely, but not physically close enough to assist him. She feels confident that he is safe and is interested to see what he does on the castle. He makes no gesture that indicates he is wanting assistance and does not suggest that he is in any way afraid or wanting to be removed. Over the next few minutes, he looks around from this new perspective and uses his body to test out the castle and how he fits within this new space. He appears to theorise about how to move to the other side of the castle and repeatedly looks beneath him [Figure 4] and then dips his leg over the edge of the platform, seemingly testing the depth. At one point during this testing, both legs slip off the platform, and he shows exceptional upper-body strength and coordination in preventing a fall [Figures 5 and 6]. His exploration of the castle continues for approximately six minutes. Other children approach him, and they appear to have brief verbal and non-verbal interactions. It is not clear the nature of these interactions, but Hugh engages with each child happily, at times pointing and gesturing as he looks from this new height beyond the immediate playground.

This narrative provides an insight into Hugh’s thinking and theorising. Rather than focusing on his physical capabilities, the narrative focuses on his embodied negotiation of the space and his testing of theories about the nature of the castle. Significant to this narrative is Hugh’s initiation of the encounter with the castle. He alone approached and negotiated the steps, the narrative noting his confidence, persistence and theories about the jouncing board and the gap preventing him from moving to the other side. Showing judgement, problem-solving and tenacity, Hugh negotiates the
castle with physical skill and intellectual judgement. Choosing to look at these particular aspects of Hugh’s experience is an intentional act, and it is acknowledged that other possibilities may be overlooked. Seeking to understand Hugh’s intent and watching closely for his agenda provides an insight that may not be captured in an observation focusing solely on his development.

The educator becomes a part of the narrative as her role in watching and waiting is integral to the action. In this narrative, the educator demonstrates dispositions that support the notion of mind-mindedness. Tentative and susceptible, she enables Hugh to climb a piece of outdoor equipment that might traditionally be considered to be beyond his development level. The educator’s trust in his ability to make judgements and decisions about what interests him, while watching closely his facial expressions and body language for signs of distress, is evidence of her willingness to view
Figure 3. Exploring the castle – jouncing.

Figure 4. Looking to understand the gap.

Figure 5. Slipping but preventing a fall.
Hugh as a mental agent with the ability to make decisions and judgements about his learning interests and abilities. She employs a pause, wait and listen approach – she is alert to his situation and observing him closely for signs of distress or any indication that he might want assistance, but allows him to explore and investigate, on his own, his body’s response to this equipment. The educator’s decisions enable a level of investigation and learning that respects his judgement and desire to explore on his terms. In this narrative, the intentional action of the educator might be seen as a listening-to, enabling the infant to express his desire to investigate the castle in his own way, to not be interrupted or stopped based on a generalised assumption about the appropriateness of the equipment, and rather to share power and decision-making, and have confidence in his ability as a mental agent.

**Conclusion**

As Rolle (2004) declares, it is not simply the presence of a caring adult, but the nature of the interaction that influences what infants’ experience. While notions of sensitivity and attunement, and a focus on caregiving as curriculum, have dominated much of the guidance directed at educators working with infants in early childhood settings (as noted by Degotardi and Pearson, 2014; Page et al., 2013; Sims and Hutchins, 2011; Teverthen, 2011), Levinas’s ideas about ethical encounter invite educators to think beyond these boundaries. Inviting a shift from images of infants as having needs to images of infants as initiators and agents of their own learning suggests a broader range of pedagogies and a more expansive view of infants as learners. Emphasising a susceptible stance and acknowledging the wisdom and expertise of the infant, educators who adopt a mind-minded attitude trust infants to share their benedictions and to demonstrate their agency, desires and intents for learning.

The narrative presented in this article serves to illuminate both how this infant ably communicated his benediction – or interests, intents and learning agendas – and how the educator, in tuning into the infant’s benediction, responded in ways that afforded the infant agency. In this event, the educator’s response-ability is prompted not solely by assumed doctrine or generalised assumptions, nor is it driven by an imperative to act. Her reading of the infant as a mental agent who is
knowledgeable about himself as a learner invites her inaction – to pause, wait and listen, trusting his agency and capacity to lead the learning.

As Ainsworth (1995: 5) states: ‘They are not passive little things to whom you do things; in fact, in many ways they are the initiators of what happens to them’. A more conscious acknowledgement of enabling that views infants as thinkers and theorisers, that describes them in terms of their abilities and affords them the opportunity to take the lead, may broaden the epistemological foundations of the work of infant educators. It may require a different approach to that which much of the existing guidance for infant educators promote. A response-able educator may be knowledgeable, drawing on evidence and theory, but all the while comfortable with the as yet unknown and open to learning from the infant. Might a more susceptible and response-able stance provide possibilities for rich and contextually relevant learning, and the foundations for a more expansive curriculum for infants?

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Sandra Cheesman is an academic at Macquarie University and is undertaking doctoral study at Charles Sturt University. Her research currently focuses on the experiences of infants as they encounter formalised curricular documents and associated expectations for their learning.
Chapter 8: Presenting the Data Part 3: Further Narratives
Chapter 8: Presenting the Data Part 3: Further Narratives

In the preceding two chapters, I presented two published articles that reported on some of the data and findings from the narrative analysis. This chapter presents three further narratives. The data from which these narratives were developed were selected for inclusion in the thesis because they represent fleeting but significant moments in the experiences of these infants. They highlight the nature of these infants’ encounters with curriculum as many small moments that are easily overlooked or dismissed as unimportant. Lasting less than two minutes, the encounters represented in these narratives may appear on the surface to be inconsequential. Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (2011) attribute such oversights to commonly held views of infants, such as the view that they have short attention spans, perhaps implying that these moments are not so important. These narratives, however, illuminate how such fleeting encounters are rich in insight about how these infants influence and contribute to their learning. Rather than viewing these episodes as evidence of a short attention span, they can be considered, as Bae (2009) suggests, as “democratic moments”, where there is space for infants’ “participation and freedom of expression” (p. 395).

The encounters represented in this chapter sparked further questions for me about how learning and curriculum are conceptualised when working with infants. In particular, these narratives expose the nature of ‘encounter’ for infants—how they both respond to and influence others and share their ideas for play. Drawing on the video footage, still-frame photographs taken from the video footage, and field notes, a description of the context and events is
presented along with a selection of the still-frame photographs which reflect the action. The narrative analysis presented in this chapter focuses on how the infants’ ‘benedictions’ are indications of their capacity to participate and contribute to curriculum decisions, and to suggest, alter and set the direction of their own and other’s learning. Drawing on Shier’s (2001) principles of child participation, I examine how the small moments and subtle suggestions of these infants might be clues to honouring the agency, capabilities and participation rights of very young children.

**Participatory Learning**

As argued in Chapter 6, constructions of infants drawn from the prominent theoretical perspectives of attachment theory have often framed infants as the passive recipients of adults’ intents or responses (Elfer, 2014; Trevarthen, 2011). The data presented in this thesis challenge assumptions of the passive infant who is reliant on the appropriate actions of the adult to influence and enhance their learning. Instead, the data show multiple and diverse ways that these infants establish that they were not merely the objects of adults’ plans for their learning (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Indeed, these infants were agentic, opportunistic and sophisticated in suggesting and asserting their capacities as mediators of their learning. While much has been written about affording young children (including infants) rights to participate in matters that affect them (see Chapter 6), the narratives presented in this chapter highlight that images of infants as passive and subject to the actions and decisions of their educators may be interrupting the realisation of genuine participatory rights for very young children. As Sumption et al. (2011) suggest, critical examination of taken-for-granted approaches is an attempt to “…dislodge us from the certainties
of our habitual reference points and enable greater analytic richness…” (p. 117). This criticalist standpoint promotes a deeper understanding of how infants’ capacities for participation might become central to the practices of educators working with the youngest children.

Originating from the traditions of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1979), and more recently social constructivist thinking (Rogoff, 2003), participatory learning in the early childhood context, highlights the importance of learning that occurs as a shared social process (Edwards, 2009). Moving beyond notions of social learning through observation of a more skilled or experienced other, or the opportunity to actively engage in an adult directed activity, participatory learning emphasises the child’s agency and autonomy—one who is listened to, acknowledged, and can lead the learning process. Tomanovic (2003) suggests that participatory learning is characterised by openness and opportunities to express opinions freely, and that a sense of meaning is established through interdependence and reciprocity. Such notions—of openness, opportunity to express opinions, interdependence and reciprocity—may appear cogent and reasonable in the context of contemporary approaches to early childhood curriculum. When considered from the standpoint of infants, however, such notions, premised on a shared and equitable contribution, cannot be taken for granted. If ideals such as reciprocity, openness and interdependence are to be realised for infants, their contributions must be understood, identified and honoured.

In considering the place for participatory learning in the experience of infants and toddlers, Berthelson and Brownlee (2005) drew on the work of Shier (2001) who notes five hierarchical principles for genuine participation. Shier’s principles begin from a premise of genuine child-led
participation where the child’s capacity and competence to contribute is unquestioned. In the case of infants, the premise of unquestioned competence cannot be taken for granted. Although much of the early childhood literature today espouses a capable and resourceful child, one with rights and agency, the discourses that surround images of infants in early childhood settings often present them as vulnerable, with many needs and subject to the decisions and actions of the adults who care for them. The first challenge to participatory curriculum with infants is to see beyond the images of infants that often form the basis for working with them. Beyond this starting point, Shier (2001) suggests that the core principles for participatory approaches are:

1) “Children are listened to.
2) Children are supported to express their views.
3) Children’s views are taken into account.
4) Children are involved in decision-making processes.
5) Children share power.” (Shier, 2001, p. 110)

Expressed as responsibilities of the adults, these principles are premised on an assumption of a child who is verbal, capable of coherently communicating their views and somewhat adept at negotiating both power and decision making. They equally place responsibility on the adult to ‘enable’ the participation through their actions. Bae (2009) however, suggests terms such as “enhance” or “inhibit” (p. 394) rather than enable. Bae’s terms may lend themselves more respectfully to fostering participation for very young children and also take the emphasis away from what the adult does to place more emphasis on what the adult notices. Bae (2009) asserts that an essential premise of participation is the creation of
conditions for mutual actions and relational processes. As Woodhead (2005) argues, fostering children’s participatory rights “...challenges familiar ways of thinking about adult-child relationships and demands new role expectations for adults who take care of children” (p. 394). This is particularly pertinent in working with pre-verbal infants where much emphasis has traditionally been placed on the adult to take the lead.

In considering Shier’s five principles in relation to infants and in keeping with my desire to consider participation from the perspectives of the infants, I have reconceptualised Shier’s principles and considered them, not from the perspective of what the adult might do, but what the infant might say if they were to communicate verbally. Once again Levinas’ ideas about the face-to-face encounter (Levinas, 1987) have been useful in reconsidering these principles with infants in mind. Rather than approaching these principles full of notions of the adult as expert who enables and allows the child’s contribution, a Levinasian shift requires the adult to be hesitant, cautious and watch closely for the individual and unexpected ways in which the infant might express their desires. From the perspective of infants, the principles might read more like the following:

1) I can communicate in many ways—you have to know how to listen.
2) I have views and opinions—I show them in many different ways.
3) My views are worth taking into account—if you wait and let me show you.
4) I can make decisions about my own capabilities—give me a chance and watch carefully what I choose.
5) I want to have a say—you may need to wait and watch carefully.
Understood in the context of what Clark, Kjorholt, and Moss (2005) suggest are democratic and respectful relationships, characterised by an ethic and culture of listening, these five adapted principles offer a way for educators to consider infant participatory learning. As Rinaldi (2001) suggests, listening is “a metaphor for having openness and sensitivity to listen and be listened to—listening not only with our ears, but with all our senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, orientation)” (p. 19). This notion of listening with all the senses is a way of interpreting Shier’s principles in relation to infants and honouring the many and diverse ways that they communicate and express their intents.

I acknowledge that choosing to analyse the data using these principles is but one way of interpreting and reading these narratives and that there are many other possible interpretations and readings. In constructing the narratives, the intent was not to disregard other possibilities, but to sharpen the focus on the infants’ participation.

**Narrative 1: ‘The Wheels on the Bus’**

[William: 8 months; Clare: 21 months; Helen: 27 months]

It is after lunch and a number of infants and toddlers are preparing for a sleep. Two of the older toddlers, Clare and Helen, are reading a book with their educator. Another educator and two toddlers are close by, but they are not directly involved in what unfolds. The book being read to Clare and Helen is a large picture book: *The Wheels on the Bus*. This book reading soon turns to singing of the familiar song of the same title, along with the actions that these children appear to know well. As the children and educator turn the pages, they sing a new verse with different actions.
William (far left in Figure 3) is not directly involved in this game. He is sitting about two metres away and has been given some toys on the mat. He is not yet crawling and so his ability to move around the room is quite limited. It is not long into this singing game that William appears to join in (see Figure 3). He turns his attention to the singers and seems familiar with the song. He begins the actions of raising his arms above his head and lowering them in a rhythmic way as the educator sings “up and down, up and down”.

Figure 3. William turns his attention to the singers and raises his arms “up and down”.

William’s gaze indicates that he is focused on the singing game and while his actions are often slightly behind that of the toddlers, his rhythm and beat is consistent with that of the singing. The singing goes on for over two minutes, and although William dips in and out of paying attention to this game—often turning his attention to the other educator or to toys on the floor—he consistently comes back to the singing every time the toddlers sing the chorus, “up and down, up and down” (see Figures 4 & 5).
Figure 4. Sustained concentration to repeat the actions “up and down”.

Figure 5. William returns to the actions during the chorus.

**Reflections on Narrative 1.** This narrative provides an insight into hidden or perhaps taken-for-granted aspects of William’s encounter. The actions and reactions of William during this sequence go completely unnoticed by either of the educators who are close by and focused on the other children in the group. This could suggest that William has learning desires and intents that might be obscured from or overlooked by his educators. He demonstrates quite extraordinary memory recall and musicality in matching his actions with the rhythms of the singing, and yet it became clear from discussion with educators after viewing this video that none of them have previously noticed William’s interest in singing.
William’s benediction is clear—if noticed. He is interested in the song and has the capacity to join in. Despite his invitation being overlooked, William shows a capacity to select what he might involve himself in. His learning is not bound by what was intended for him nor is his participation limited because he could not yet crawl over to the singers. Somewhat opportunistically, he takes advantage of the goings-on that are of interest to him.

In this sense, William’s face-to-face encounter is supported by the actions of the educator who is singing, but not reliant on the educator to provide a direct response to him. William establishes his own learning agenda. The toys on the floor were the intended experience for William, but his engagement in the singing activity is vastly different to what was intended for him. While I cannot be certain, he appears unconcerned at the lack of adult attention towards him personally and content to set his own direction for learning and involvement.

**Narrative 2: Hugh and William—Cubby Play**

[Hugh: 12 months; William: 9 months]

Hugh has been crawling for some time, however William has started crawling just a few weeks earlier. Both infants have been attending this setting for 6 months, so they are familiar with each other. It is rest time for most of the other children and Hugh and William have the playroom to themselves. There are two educators in the room but they are picking up and tidying the environment. Hugh crawls under the home corner table which has a colourful table cloth that almost reaches the floor. He crawls under
and immediately comes out on the other side of the incidental cubby (see Figure 6). He pauses for a moment, sits and turns his body to go back under.

Figure 6. Hugh initiates a game under the table.

William has noticed this as he is sitting near to where Hugh first entered the table. As Hugh reappears from under the table, William moves towards him and squeals. They almost bump heads as William nudges his face towards Hugh, almost like a kiss (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. William joins in and bumps Hugh.

Once Hugh is outside the cubby, he sits. Hugh looks to the educator, who says from across the room, “Where’s Hugh?” He grins widely and
continues to engage her (see Figure 8). William also looks to the educator and squeals, even more loudly than Hugh.

William reaches out to touch Hugh but misses. He crawls off away from the table while Hugh re-enters the cubby for the second time, taking exactly the same path as before. Each time he emerges, he looks to the educator, waves, smiles and vocalises. William meets him again as he emerges, gently bumping him, also squealing (see Figure 9). William follows many of the actions of Hugh but never goes under the table. I am unsure if this is because he is newer to crawling and this is an unknown space for him, or whether he is enjoying the anticipation of waiting for the moment when Hugh emerges.
Figure 9. William seeks to physically connect with Hugh each time he emerges from under the table.

William follows Hugh across the room, away from the cubby and they set up a high pitched squealing that almost sounds like a song (see Figure 10). They continue to crawl away, then turn to face each other, squeal their song and move on.

Figure 10. The infants engage in a squealing exchange, looking towards each other as they take turns.

The episode ends when William seeks out an educator who is standing nearby. He holds her shoes until she picks him up. Hugh soon follows and the educator sits on the floor with an infant on each knee (see Figure 11).
Reflections on Narrative 2. This narrative reveals these young infants’ capacity to encounter each other in a shared game, with very little adult involvement. The infants include the educators only as reference points, from time to time seeking their attention through smiles, glances and vocalisations. Their benedictions in this case are directed to each other as they share subtle physical and verbal gestures that suggest they are playing the same game. Both infants show a desire to involve each other and regularly turn to check that the other is still engaged. Their synchronised vocalisations show a reciprocity and ‘serve and return’ verbal pattern that is often attributed to adult-child interactions, yet these infants initiate and briefly sustain this pattern, without the involvement of an educator.

The sophistication of the collaboration, mimicry, anticipation, reciprocity, sensitivity, shared enjoyment and theorising is striking, but because the action moves so quickly it is easily overlooked. The gentle physical banter that is intentionally initiated by William shows considerable self-regulation, awareness of and sensitivity towards Hugh. In response, Hugh repeats William’s actions, possibly encouraging the shared banter. This face-to-face
encounter does not rely on an educator’s active involvement. These infants show their capacity to initiate, sustain and change the direction of play, with only a little moral support from an adult. The educator’s proximal interest and engagement allows the infants to establish their own ideas, suggestions and limits. Her role is important in enabling their agency to set the direction and tone of the encounter. They were clear when they wanted the physical closeness to the educator and signalled their desire to be held by her.

**Narrative 3: Hugh’s Encounter with the Microphone**

[Hugh: 14 months; Clare 24 months]

Hugh is outdoors, sitting on the lap of his educator. They are under the canopy of the sandpit and the educator is singing the song, *There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*, to Hugh and Clare. Hugh is listening and smiling at his educator, and while not singing or vocalising, he seems happy to be involved. He is soon distracted by a bird hopping on the canopy above and points and vocalises. The educator stops singing and immediately follows his lead (see Figure 12).

![Figure 12. “Look a bird”](image-url)
She leans backwards to better see the bird above her and follows Hugh’s pointing with her own. She talks with Hugh about the bird and as it flies away she moves her body, pointing to and showing Hugh, where the bird has gone as its shadow has disappeared from the canopy (see Figure 13). Hugh begins to vocalise more, and while his language is not always understood by the educator, she stays engaged and continues to follow his lead. He talks and points to other children playing, he notices the bird again and the educator again picks up on his lead. Once the bird has flown away she looks for other prompts to engage him in conversation.

Figure 13. The educator follows Hugh’s lead.

The educator invites Hugh to wear a small Bluetooth microphone which is wrapped around his upper arm (see Figure 14). He is taking part in data gathering (as part of this study) and the microphone helps to capture more clearly his vocalisations. The microphone is Bluetooth linked to a video camera that is capturing this episode.
The educator attempts to introduce new topics such as the images on Hugh’s t-shirt. He does not respond to her prompts, but rather becomes interested in the microphone. He touches it and vocalises but the word is not recognisable. To this point his vocalisations have been mostly single syllables—such as “bird”, “fish”, and “car”. The educator explains that it is a microphone and talks about it being on his arm—he repeats “arm” and after a minute of looking and talking about other things in the playground he touches the microphone again and the educator asks him, “What’s this?”. He vocalises, “bub-in-nar”. She is confident that his three-syllable utterance is “microphone” and repeats the word back to him (see Figure 15). He looks around the playground saying the three-syllable utterance a further two times but is seemingly distracted by other things going on. Perhaps he is re-visiting the sounds and enjoying what he can now say.
After a few minutes, he returns to look more closely at the microphone and the educator removes it from his arm suggesting he has had enough. Having now removed it from his arm, the educator shows it to him. She turns it over and together they notice that it has a flashing light. The educator says, “Oh what’s this? It has a blue flashing light” (see Figure 16). Immediately, Hugh looks over to the video camera indicating that he realises the microphone and the camera are somehow connected. The educator continues to talk about the camera and the microphone explaining to him that another child is helping to operate the camera.
Reflections on Narrative 3. This narrative, in contrast to the earlier narratives, reports on a series of events that are initiated by the educator. What appears as randomly connected events highlights a relationship where the educator is actively responsive and seeking to follow the lead of the infant. Hugh dips in and out of interest in the many things going on in the playground. The outdoors is busy and the educator shifts her plan for singing to respond to his initial benediction or interest in talking about the bird. The educator not only ceases singing but moves her body in sync with Hugh as he attempts to draw her into his discovery of the bird shadow on the canopy. She physically and intellectually shifts with the infant—abandoning her agenda to enable him to take the lead. The interaction is sustained, and despite a shift in focus, Hugh goes on to offer further benedictions. Demonstrating an awareness of and interest in the video camera and microphone, he shifts the conversation. His interest is such that he vocalises three syllables that reflect the word ‘microphone’ as a
demonstration perhaps of his interest in the technology; a topic that might be considered to be beyond the interest of a child of such a young age. As the educator spoke about the camera and the microphone, her language was authentic and sophisticated—words that would perhaps be considered beyond the mentalising capacity of Hugh, yet clearly engaging him to the point that he attempts to repeat those words.

Discussion

The three narratives presented in this chapter have focused on the ways in which these infants express their desires and intents to participate in their learning. Far from being bound by what educators have in mind for them, these infants show that they initiate, extend and sustain encounters for learning. Such a fine-grained consideration of the actions of these infants prompts further questions for me about infants’ benedictions. How might these benedictions contribute to understandings of infants’ capacity for participation in curriculum decisions? How might educators make space for ‘democratic moments’ (Bae, 2009) based on the benedictions offered by the infants?

Reading across each of the narratives in this chapter and in light of Shier’s adapted principles of participation, there is evidence that these infants have both the capacity and propensity to work in participatory ways. Far from being passive and waiting for the initiations of the educators, the infants communicate their ideas, express views and opinions, make judgements about their capacities, and when possible take opportunities to lead their educators in a sharing of power.
Communicating. Each of these infants demonstrates effective and diverse ways of communicating with their educators and with others. Hugh and William use high pitched vocalisation during a game with the cubby. This vocalising connects them to each other and within the shared game. It is perhaps a way of saying “we are playing this together”. Using no verbal cues, William is clearly showing his interest in the song, *The Wheels on the Bus*. His ongoing engagement, physical connection through the actions, and acknowledgement of the recurrence of the chorus, is an insightful message about his interests and intent to involve himself in this game. Hugh takes the lead in communicating his interests as he shifts his body, eye gaze and focus from a song, to the bird, to the microphone. Across the three narratives, it is the reading of body movements, gesture and vocalisations that form the basis for ‘listening’ to these infants. The communications are brief and the infants rarely repeat their requests, so this listening is very different to the way that listening might be understood in relation to older children.

Having views and opinions that can be taken into account. In much the same way, each of these infants shows that they have views and opinions that can be taken into account. William expresses considerable indifference to the toys placed near him. He expresses a view that he would prefer to be involved in the toddler singing game. The toys meant for him are little more than an occasional distraction; his focus and body actions keep returning to his preferred interest. In the cubby play, William and Hugh show a preference for playing together. They may well have played independently of each other but in this episode they each express a view about a shared play experience. In the conversation that begins about the birds, Hugh shows a capacity to set the direction and lead his educator to
understanding his interests and the topics he wishes to share with her. Hugh’s interest in the technology and his attempts to copy the language models provided by his educator are an indication that he is capable of expressing views and opinions about his interests. The educator, with careful listening, moves in sync with his suggestions. Once again, I see the listening to these infants as a thoughtful reading of a range of complex and often subtle cues.

A capacity to make judgements about their capabilities and lead learning. In each of the episodes, these infants show considerable evidence of their capacity to make judgements about their capabilities. In each case, their behaviours show evidence of moving beyond expected development norms for children of that age. William’s recall of the song, The Wheels on the Bus, along with his capacity to demonstrate the actions and rhythms of the song, are surprising, against what developmental theory might suggest about the capacities of an 8-month-old infant. A singing game with actions had not been planned for William as it had been for the older children. He nonetheless signals that he has this capability and intent to join in. William and Hugh’s cubby adventure again shows a partnering in play that developmental theory might suggest is beyond the age/stage of these two infants. The initiation of the game, the elaboration of the action and the shared vocalisations demonstrate sophisticated strategies to connect and collaborate. William’s gently nudging of Hugh is also suggestive of a measured approach to the play and evidence of William’s capacity for intersubjective reasoning. William’s hesitation about going under the table is perhaps recognition on his behalf that he is not quite ready for that step. He himself determines the extent to which he will involve himself. These
infants clearly communicate when they want to make close physical contact with the adult. They play happily without the intervention of the adult and seem able to connect when they choose. Hugh’s expression and vocalisation of the word ‘microphone’, after hearing it stated just once, surprised me. He shows that he is ready and capable of working with more complex words than the educator initially offers him.

**Concluding Thoughts**

What emerges from these fleeting moments is a series of actions and behaviours that can be easily overlooked by these infants’ educators. These infants have challenged normative assumptions about infants of their age through expressions of ideas, views and capabilities that were unexpected. The narratives suggest that considerable engagement with learning is happening outside of what these educators planned for or noticed. In each of these episodes, the infants initiated the experiences, and while conscious of the adults around them, accessed the educators in very different ways. From simply following the actions of an educator, to seeking only eye contact and verbal encouragement, through to engaging the educator in a conversation agenda, these infants have demonstrated an understanding of themselves in relation to their educators. They seemed to accept an educator who sometimes does not notice, and they showed that when they do want a closer proximity to the educator they had strategies to gain that attention.

These narratives contribute to my broadening awareness of infants’ capacities to engage in participatory learning. The narratives provide evidence that these infants’ encounters with learning were individual, unique and cannot easily be generalised. They were often fleeting and did
not have the sustained engagement that might be seen in the play of older children. Their actions may seem to the uninformed eye as inconsequential—and yet closer examination suggests that these were powerful moments in their learning encounters.

These encounters also remind me that learning for an infant is not necessarily linear nor does it always fit neatly within an adult logic. The infant’s interest and attention can quickly switch from one topic to another. Seeking an infant’s interests, views, opinions and judgement is not a verbal/auditory experience that follows the logical sequence of the educator’s expectations. As Rinaldi (2001) suggests, it is an embodied experience that requires educators to look and listen with all of their senses. Participation in this sense might involve stepping back, observing a little longer and pausing to see how the play might develop.

Importantly, this reading of the infants’ cues does not prescribe either a passive or active role for the educator. As discussed in Chapter 7, the notion of a ‘response-able’ educator is one who adopts a stance of uncertainty (Säfström, 2003). In each of these episodes, the educators were integral to the resourcing of the environment, the provision of singing and language models, and the acknowledgement of the children’s play. While the participation of the educator varies among each of the narratives, it is the moments of hesitation and the tentative nature of the adults’ involvement that sensitively responds to the infants’ cues and allows them to demonstrate their agency and intent. It is a reminder of the importance of slowing down, of being a conscious observer and looking for the surprising and unexpected.
The question of what remains overlooked, however, provides a dilemma. It must be acknowledged that analysis of these narratives at this level is not possible in the everyday lives of educators as they work alongside infants. The video affords the opportunity to see what the naked eye misses and the possibility of revisiting the episode over several viewings and picking up on what has been previously missed. The narratives do, however, illuminate the overlooked or seemingly inconsequential events that infants are encountering.

This raises questions about the focus of the educators’ attention. Is the eye of these educators too tightly fixed on what they expect to see? Do these infants need their educators to notice everything? Are these educators missing important cues that might give rise to more participatory possibilities for infants within their learning encounters?

If the participation of infants is to be given credence, there is a need to better understand how infants communicate their desires and how the adults around them can be alert to their subtle capabilities and expressions of agency. This may require a shift in the disposition and attitude of educators to view the fleeting ‘democratic moments’ as important in informing their curriculum decisions. Might such a reconsideration of the principles of participation reframe the focus of infant educators and open up possibilities for infants to have a say and influence their own and others’ learning?

References


Chapter 9: Considering the Findings
Chapter 9: Considering the Findings

In the previous chapters, I discussed the context, literature and data that have informed this thesis. In these final two chapters (Chapters 9 and 10), I conclude the thesis with an overview of the findings and a discussion of the contribution that this doctoral study might make to the broader arena of early childhood education and care (ECEC), both within Australia and internationally. This chapter reports on and synthesises the findings drawn from the data in relation to the research questions posed in Chapter 1.

1) How do infants encounter curriculum in childcare settings?

2) How can these encounters be understood in relation to the dominant discourses and grand narratives that currently frame curriculum understandings?

3) How can the practice of intentional teaching - a key practice requirement of the EYLF - be understood in relation to infants’ encounters with curriculum?

As noted in Chapter 1, the aim of this study was to learn more about infants’ encounters with curriculum. Commenced shortly after the launch of *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), this study examined how a small group of infants encountered curriculum in their early childhood setting. The study began with a critical review of the literature relating to both infants in early childhood settings and the growing phenomenon of curriculum frameworks developed for young children. In Chapters 2 and 3, I presented two articles that examined the context for infant ECEC, both
nationally and internationally, and outlined some of the key discourses that were found to be prominent in the infant early childhood literature. I found that these discourses variously guided the practices of the infant educators in this study and ultimately influenced the experiences of the infants as they encountered curriculum.

Examined through the critical lens of Levinas, Chapter 4 examined how the written texts of curriculum contain both ‘saids’ and ‘sayings’. Laden with the intents and purposes of the ‘saids’, I found that the infants’ experiences as they encountered curriculum was influenced not only by the written texts and intents of curriculum (the ‘saids’). The infants themselves were powerful contributors to their experience and created many ‘sayings’ of curriculum. Levinas’ ideas about ‘saids’ and ‘sayings’ have not only been useful in better understanding the power of written texts, but also in how they are experienced at the individual level.

The data gathered, following the methods of the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001), was an assembling of numerous fragments which aimed to represent the perspectives of the infants themselves, the educators who worked closely with them, and of myself as researcher. These ‘assemblings’ generated insights into the multiple and diverse ways that infants encounter curriculum. I now turn to the three research questions that underpinned this study and briefly discuss the key findings drawn from the data presented in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, as they relate to each question.
Research Question 1: How do Infants Encounter Curriculum in Childcare Settings?

The initial question framing this study aimed to gain a close proximity to infants and better understand how they encountered curriculum in their early childhood setting. When considered through the theoretical lens of Levinas, the data revealed four main ways that these infants encountered curriculum.

**Planned learning.** These infants encountered what their educators planned for and provided for them. These plans included both the material provisions within the environment, the planned human interactions and the organisation of both individual and group care routines. The data revealed planned attention to the intentional arrangement of materials in the environment, the positioning of the infants to enable them to access materials, and many human interactions that educators both initiated and responded to.

In many cases, the infants’ experiences were somewhat bound by what the educators chose to make available. As Rutanen (2007) suggests, the choices of the educators have a significant influence on what infants are likely to encounter. These choices include provisions of what might be considered the ‘trappings’ or symbols of infant early childhood programs and represent the commonly found artefacts that made this an infant room. These trappings included both regular provisions that were available almost continuously and ‘special’ provisions that were brought out on an irregular basis. The books, toys, climbing equipment, construction materials and home corner furniture were central to the action in much of the data and clearly influenced what these infants encountered. These infants were not of
an age where they could clearly request resources that were out of sight or reach, and indeed there was no evidence of any such requests in the data.

The provision of materials for play and the educators’ decisions and plans were found to be key influences in what these infants might encounter. Toys, rattles, board books and construction equipment such as Duplo were evident in almost all of the video footage and still camera images. These artefacts, prominent as recommended resources in the child development and developmentally appropriate literature (see for example, Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Sims & Hutchins, 2011) formed part of the planned learning environment for these infants. Arranged on low shelving or placed on the floor, these materials were most often freely available, providing some choice for the infants who were mobile enough to move about the spaces. Had the small waffle blocks not been available on that second occasion for Clare (Chapter 6), there would be no possibility for her to experience the tricky construction of a chair with the smaller version of the blocks. The ‘saids’ of curriculum were evident here in the discourses that promote and recommend particular resources for infants. The prominence of developmentally appropriate resources as ‘saids’ of infant curriculum can be seen in the selection of materials available for these infants and the way they had been arranged in the environment.

In addition to the planned learning environment and provision of materials, the planned human interactions—including story reading, sharing in play with toys and building equipment, art/craft experiences, care routines, settling to rest time, individual lap time, and singing—were frequent and noticeable occasions for learning and play. The data revealed that there were many human interactions. The narratives showed the many different ways
that the infants engaged with their educators in pleasant and meaningful encounters. The ‘sai ds’ drawn from attachment theory, with an emphasis on sensitive and attuned relationships, are often seen throughout the data. As Hugh’s educator approached him on the castle (Chapter 7), she gestured to him, held out her hands and asked if he had had enough. Having trusted him to climb the equipment she sensitively offered him the opportunity to tell her what he would then like to do. Likewise, as William and Hugh played around the home corner cubby (Chapter 8), their educator provided the ‘secure base’ for them to return to when they chose.

The data from this study has raised questions for me about the place for planned learning in the lives of infants. What guidance or theories of learning underpinned the educators’ decisions about provisions for the planned learning environment? What timeframe did they use for planning for these infants and was this timeframe consistent with the way that these infants learned? The data from this study revealed that the provisioning of the environment and the planned experiences for these infants both enabled and constrained the encounters with learning that these infants were likely to experience.

**Unintended learning.** These infants encountered many unintended experiences—some that they initiated and sought out themselves and others that appeared to be serendipitously experienced as a result of a passing or chance encounter. Williams’ involvement in the singing of *The Wheels on the Bus* (Chapter 8) was not intended for him, but he took advantage of an opportunity to engage in something that seemed to be familiar and of interest. The home corner table was not intended to be a cubby, but Hugh sought the opportunity to create a new play arena (Chapter 8). The bird,
camera and microphone were chance encounters for Hugh. The bird, as a familiar but fleeting visitor, and the camera and microphone, as inconsequential research paraphernalia, became the focus of an engaging conversation and extension of Hugh’s vocabulary (Chapter 8).

It is noticeable within the data that these infants often encountered learning beyond what was planned or intended for them. In this sense, the infants themselves were somewhat circumventing the ‘saids’ of curriculum. Seemingly unaware of what was intended for them, they were found to create an experience, follow their own line of inquiry or to join in an experience planned for others. What is also significant is that these unintended learnings often went unnoticed by the educators.

Chance appeared to be a significant avenue for learning for these infants, yet chance is not an approach to learning that is commonly discussed in the early childhood literature. The emphasis within the literature is most often on educators’ plans for infants’ learning, with learning goals in mind. While the EYLF defines curriculum as encompassing “…all the interactions, experiences, routines and events, planned and unplanned…”, it also suggests that the emphasis of the framework is on “the planned or intentional aspects of the curriculum” (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 9).

The data from this study raised questions for me about the place of unintended learning in the lives of these infants and the perhaps silenced role of the infants in this study as chance ‘encounterers’ and opportunists of learning. The data reveals that rich unintended learning was a feature of these encounters and suggests that the infants created many ‘sayings’ of curriculum through chance and opportunism. Is the focus of curriculum
frameworks on planned or intended learning interrupting or silencing an important avenue for learning that these infants displayed?

Creating learning. These infants appeared to intentionally create their own opportunities for learning and play. More than mere chance, what was remarkable throughout much of the data was the high order thinking of these infants as they adapted and altered the play environments that were provided for them. Clare’s quick learning of the waffle block technology and her capacity to recall the play and transfer her knowledge a week later to another version of these materials showed that she was not confining her learning to that which was expected of her (Chapter 6). Hugh took advantage of the technology of the video camera and microphone to create a space for a new understanding and an expanded vocabulary (Chapter 8). He also approached the castle in the playground as a new adventure, persisting and problem solving as he negotiated the tricky space (Chapter 7). Hugh and William initiated a shared game around the table with minimal adult involvement. Their capacity to reciprocate, sustain, follow and lead, contests developmental norms and expectations of children of this age (Chapter 8). Each of these episodes gave insight into these infants’ capacities to be agentic and protagonists in play and learning. They showed that they were not bound by their educators’ plans or expectations for them and were able to effectively act on their own initiative.

Once again the narratives have illuminated the infants’ capacities to create their own ‘sayings’ of curriculum. Seemingly unaware that the ‘saids’ of curriculum might imply a limited range of interests and capacities for them, these infants worked outside and beyond the expectations of the ‘saids’ and offered their own ‘sayings’ of curriculum. The narratives also highlighted
the number of occasions that the infants’ capabilities were overlooked. This raises questions for me about disjunctions between what educators might expect as learning opportunities and what the infants themselves might experience. The role of observation and what educators ‘see’ becomes an important question in considering this disjunction.

**Social learning.** These infants used sophisticated social cues to initiate and involve themselves in learning encounters. Clare’s piercing eye-gaze as she invited me into her play with the small waffle blocks was powerful and effective. She used no vocalisation and no physical contact, yet was able to effectively communicate intent to draw me into her benediction (Chapter 6). Hugh and William showed remarkable glimpses of theory of mind (Berk, 2006) for infants of just 12 months and 9 months in their encounter around the cubby (Chapter 8). Their pursuit of each other, the ‘serve and return’ high pitched vocalisations and my interpretation of William’s intersubjective reading of Hugh’s responses, showed quite extraordinary social engagement for such young children, without the direct involvement of an adult. Their benediction was to each other and they seemed to competently read and respond to each other’s suggestions.

Hugh’s conversation showed how the model of language provided by the educator was quickly picked up by Hugh, his vocalisation a close attempt to repeat the word ‘microphone’ (Chapter 8). These infants showed that they were picking up on behaviours and models of educators and other children within the environment, reinforcing the importance of the social environment as a key platform for their learning.

In summary, these infants’ encountered curriculum in many ways and far beyond what was planned or intentionally provided for them. Lally (2013)
has long claimed that infants possess a “genetically-wired learning agenda that drives them to seek and make meaning from their environment, initiate communication, make social contact, and learn language” (p. 21). Evidence from this study supports Lally’s claim, but for these infants, their learning agendas often went unnoticed. These oversights did not appear to deter them and they showed considerable determination, persistence and ingenuity in encountering learning beyond the planned and intended experiences.

The data reflected that important learning happened for these infants through chance encounter and through their own pursuit of things that were of interest to them. They frequently persisted in exploring, testing and creating their own learning opportunities, somewhat despite the planned learning environment or the responses of their educators. The data also showed that these infants used sophisticated communication strategies including verbal, vocal, eye-gaze, gesture and body contact to suggest their intent. Some of these attempts were responded to, but many were overlooked.

The capacity for infants to be initiators and protagonists of curriculum encounters is promoted in the literature relating to child rights discourses. Most of the examples drawn from the data of these infants acting as initiators and protagonists, however, did not appear to be because of the intentional acts of their educators. Rather, they were chance encounters or infant initiated encounters, where the infants themselves asserted their rights and created opportunities beyond what the educators had intended. Often subtle and frequently overlooked by their educators, this study has found these infants to be nonetheless influential protagonists in what they encountered and how and what they learned.
Research Question 2: How can these Encounters be
Understood in Relation to the Dominant Discourses and
Grand Narratives that Currently Frame Curriculum?

This study focused on the experiences of the infants, and as such, the findings relating to this research question have been sought, as far as possible, through the infants’ experiences. Inevitably, it has been difficult to separate the experience of the infants from the actions and practices of their educators and the data support this, showing that educators’ practices are highly influential in the experiences of infants. As Kalliala (2014) and Salamon and Harrison (2015) have suggested, infants encounter curriculum within the constructed understandings of the adults who work with them. These authors suggest that these constructed understandings include the images that educators hold of infants and how influenced the educators are by the prominent discourses of early childhood. To address this research question, I have therefore referred back to the prominent discourses identified in Chapters 4, 6 and 7 as being influential in the work of infant educators. I have carefully considered how each of these prominent discourses can be seen in the data as being influential to what these infants experience.

Attachment discourses. As is evident from the literature reviewed in Chapters 6 and 7, attachment theories (see for example Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995; Bowlby, 1969) promote a certainty of knowledge or a ‘knowing’ of the infant (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Trevarthen, 2011). Stemming from this ‘knowing’, attachment discourses promote recommended ways for adults to respond to infants’ perceived needs. In
Chapter 7, I argued that these recommendations can be seen in Ainsworth and Bowlby’s (1991) notion of ‘sensitivity’ and their guidance that the response be prompt and appropriate. Similarly, I noted that Stern’s (1985) notion of ‘attunement’ recommends a response that is a faithful rendering of the infants’ initiation which closely matches the “intensity, shape and duration” (p. 141) of the infants’ cues. There has been considerable critique of this guidance. Elfer (2014) and Trevarthen (2011) have argued that such guidance situates infants as passive, leaving little room to imagine agentic infants who are themselves influential and protagonists in their own and other’s learning.

The narratives presented in this study show that these infants’ encounters with curriculum extend beyond the bounds that the prominent discourses of attachment theory generate. Far from passively waiting for adults to initiate or appropriately respond to their cues, these infants make suggestions, carry on despite their invitations going unnoticed, seek out their own challenges and change the direction of their educators’ plans. These infants were not always the recipients of educators’ actions; rather, they were initiators and actors in their own right.

Each of the narratives presented indicate that these infants established their own intents and pursued their own interests. These episodes raised questions for me about the limitations of having confidence in the sanctity of attachment theory as the single most important theory to be understood in working with infants. Does attachment theory, as it is understood and enacted in this ECEC setting, provide sufficient space for infants to express their interests and intents for learning? Do these educators miss or overlook what is not expected within the bounds of attachment discourses?
Development discourses. According to Ryan and Grieshaber (2005), discourses surrounding developmental theories contribute to assumptions that “…a high-quality early education is one in which curriculum and teaching practices are developmentally appropriate” (p. 34) and are based on a study of child development theory and the teaching practices that are informed by this knowledge. Hatch (2010), Lee and Johnson (2007), and Lenz Taguchi (2008) claim that developmental theories have also generated normalising tendencies that generalise learning and development across children and populations. They claim that in creating certainty and a further ‘knowing’ of the infant, educators whose knowledge about young children is dominated by the norms of developmental theory, may be discouraged from thinking beyond the bounds of what is considered to be developmentally appropriate. Hatch (2010) claims that these limiting images of infants directly influence what educators provide for and expect of them, often underestimating their cognitive capacities.

In each of the narratives, the infants in this study showed their capacity to operate cognitively, socially and linguistically beyond what might be considered the assumptions and expectations of developmental norms. Hugh’s three-syllable utterance of “bub-in-narr” (microphone) was a surprise to his educator (Chapter 8). Considered to be in the age/stage of using only ‘protolanguage’—“little words … that are more like random babbling” (Talay-Ongan & Ap, 2005, p. 83)—or the tuneful babbling as described by Martin and Berk (2007), Hugh’s vocalisation was directed at his educator in response to her modelling of the word; a word that he may not have heard before. Hugh’s intellectual interest in the camera equipment prompted him to engage his educator in his conversation agenda that could
be considered to be beyond his developmental interests or capabilities to understand. His looking, which shifted from the microphone to the camera several times, was an indication to me that he had observed a connection between these two instruments—again, an interest in Bluetooth technology seems surprising for an infant of this age.

My reading of Hugh’s vocalisation was that it went far beyond random or tuneful babbling. Rather, it seemed to be an intellectual act of copying his educator’s language model and an intentional invitation to her to join him in conversation. While the data often show infants reaching beyond the bounds of developmental expectations, there was less evidence that the educators were aware of or responding to the strengths and capacities of these infants. These infants often operated beyond what was expected of them according to developmental norms, and in the absence of suitably challenging experiences they often created or invented an experience of their own.

Once again I was challenged by the clear need for infant educators to have sound knowledge of child development as a foundation, but also a need to balance that knowledge with a willingness to pause and wait—to be surprised by these infants’ capabilities. Does a reliance on child development theory limit what the educator sees as significant to each infant? Do the assumptions of child development theory generalise infants and limit what educators might look for as signs of infants’ interests, intents and agendas for learning?

**Child rights discourses.** The child rights discourse as it applies to infants is a relatively recent discourse to enter the early childhood literature. I discussed in Chapter 6 that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (United Nations International Children’s
Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 1989, p.2) and its commitment to the “best interests of the child” was a significant catalyst for a focus on young children and their rights to be heard. As noted also in Chapter 6, most early childhood curriculum frameworks today promote a child rights position and advocate for children to have a say in their learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Listening to children is another common theme of these curriculum frameworks, as is using children’s interests as a foundation for the development of curriculum (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009; Early Learning Advisory Group, 2008; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010). While a prominent discourse and a widely supported commitment to children’s rights is now evident in both contemporary early childhood literature and curriculum frameworks, the data from this study suggests that evidence of a commitment to the concept of child rights in relation to infants and their curriculum was not always easy to identify in the everyday experiences of the infant participants in this study.

As discussed earlier, these infants experienced curriculum as series of encounters with planned, unplanned and self-initiated activities. Many of the planned activities stemmed from educators’ observations of the infants and the provision of materials in the environment. These provisions were enhanced by the ways the educators engaged with the materials and the expectations they had for what children might experience. As Rutanen (2007) found in her study, “The adults’ expectations and intentions were materialised in the initiations and in the arrangements of the setting and canalised the children’s possibilities for actions” (p. 59).
I have focused this discussion on evidence within the data of how these infants experienced rights to have say in their learning. There is considerable evidence within the data that the environment offered choice for these infants. Mobile infants were free to move around either the indoor or outdoor environment relatively freely. They were free to select from the range of materials made available to them. This was, however, within a limited range of choices, for example, the educators made decisions about what play materials would be available during each session, and the day was organised so that all infants who were not sleeping or involved in an individual care routine, played either indoors or outdoors as a group. While individual needs were taken into account in relation to most care routines, the majority of children in this room ate at the same time. Choice in this sense was mediated, as Rutanen (2007) suggests, by the adults’ expectations and intentions.

Beyond choice, it was more difficult to discern how these infants experienced more complex rights, for example, how they shared in power, or how their views were taken into account. While there is considerable evidence of these infants’ benedictions, or invitations, in suggesting, initiating or extending play, it is not clear in the data how the educators’ responses to these invitations impacted on the experiences of the infants.

Throughout the narratives, there were moments where infants were listened to and had their points of view taken into account. For example, Hugh had the full attention of his educator who shifted physically and intellectually to follow his interests (Chapter 8). The educator working with Hugh during his exploration of the castle quietly read his body language and interpreted his confidence in this exploration as his desire to explore the castle.
uninterrupted. There were a number of these moments where these infants made independent choices and engaged in learning that they had initiated. These moments were rarely prevented by the educators, suggesting that these children had freedom to make choices and exercise rights within the limits of what was available to them. What is striking, however, as the narratives show, was that much of the children’s choice or expression of a viewpoint or opinion went unnoticed. These oversights had a limiting effect on how these infants might have experienced rights, beyond the most obvious right of choice.

In summary, in relation to the influence of prominent discourses on the infants in this study, the data showed that while the discourses have been found to be influential in shaping the practices of infant educators, the infants themselves often operated outside of the expectations and generalisations generated by these discourses. Educators’ ‘knowing’ of the infant was suggested in the provisions for play and strongly reflected developmentally appropriate norms for infants. This ‘knowing’ was further evidenced in the oversight of critical moments when these infants gave signs of working beyond generalised developmental expectations. These infants showed that they were skilled at seeking out preferred materials, adapting their play situation and engaging the educators in their own learning agendas.

The data also showed that these infants were not always the passive recipients of their educators’ plans for learning as suggested by attachment theories. While attachment approaches may suggest a passive role for the infant and a prescribed role for the educator, these infants were active protagonists who set their own learning agendas, to some extent despite
what the educators did or did not do. Notwithstanding prominent messages within the EYLF that promote images of infants as rights holders who require a commitment from educators to listen to them, there was evidence that many of the attempts of these infants to express a view or opinion may have been overlooked. While there is substantial evidence of child choice in the provisioning of the environment, there is less direct evidence of Shier’s (2001) five principles of participation (see Chapter 8) being actively experienced by these infants. These infants showed that they were capable of communicating interests and intents, but as many of their suggestions were overlooked, they had limited capacity to more fully participate in matters that affected them. Analysis of the data indicated that honouring child rights appeared to be more incidental than intentional.

**Research Question 3:** How can the practice of intentional teaching - a key practice requirement of the EYLF - be understood in relation to infants’ encounters with curriculum?

Intentional teaching is defined in the EYLF as educators being “…deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions. Intentional teaching is the opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have ‘always’ been that way” (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15). As one of the eight pedagogical practices of the EYLF, all educators working with young children in Australian early childhood settings are required to demonstrate intentional teaching (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011).
Educators are encouraged to “…actively promote children’s learning through worthwhile and challenging experiences and interactions that foster high-level thinking skills” (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15). The infants in this study encountered intentional teaching in diverse ways. The data showed that these infants experienced both adult-guided and child-guided learning. There is evidence in the data that the infants may not have always understood the intent of their educators’ provision and would ably adapt or extend resources according to their own intents.

In this study, adult-guided learning is most clearly seen in the intentional provisioning of the environment. As discussed in relation to Research Question 1, the educators’ access to and choice of materials was central to what the infants might experience. The provision of materials such as the waffle blocks, the castle and the table/cubby were expressions of educators’ intents for learning. The intent of these provisions may not always have been clear to these infants, and as such, they were often found to use the materials in novel ways, or to access materials that were not intended for them.

The provisioning of certain songs, books, shared experiences and language used were also expressions of educators’ intents. As discussed earlier in this chapter, these provisions can be seen as largely influenced by developmentally appropriate discourses and did not always respond directly to the capacities and interests that these infants were demonstrating. Many of the experiences captured in the data show the infants themselves initiating and extending on the provisions offered by the educators. Hugh and William’s use of the table as a cubby was a creative and alternative use
of the material that was intended for another purpose (Chapter 8). William’s involvement in singing the song *The Wheels on the Bus* was intended for others, yet he took the opportunity to extend his recall of this song (Chapter 8). Clare’s encounter with the waffle blocks was an intentional provision; however, her representational use of the materials went unnoticed by her educators (Chapter 6).

While the educators’ intentional provisioning of the environment and language models in many of the experiences served to engage these infants, my reading of the data suggests that these infants’ encounters with intentional teaching were more serendipitous than intentional. Many of the “…worthwhile and challenging experiences and interactions that foster high-level thinking skills” (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15) were initiated by the infants themselves. Semann (2013) suggests that the notion of intentional teaching has been ‘puzzling’ for educators since its introduction to the EYLF. The data from this study suggests that it is not clear how these infants experienced intentional teaching beyond intentional provisions. It is clearer, however, that the infants’ own intents for learning were prominent and influential in shaping what they might encounter. Intentional teaching, understood as being the responsibility of the educators, may be a limited way of understanding the potential of curriculum as encounter for infants.

In summary, the findings of this study reveal that for these infants, Levinas’ ‘saids’ and ‘sayings’ of curriculum were equally influential. Far from being bound by the limitations of particular discourses or expectations, these infants showed considerable capacity to adapt, change and invent their own
learning encounters. Importantly though, many of these opportunities were encountered by chance and serendipity, and many opportunities to further the play ideas initiated by the infants went unnoticed or overlooked. The opportunities for infants to be participants in their curriculum encounters certainly existed, yet the intentional provisioning of such opportunities seemed limited. Further exploration of how prominent discourses circulating ECEC and understandings of the role of intentional teaching in work with infants are needed to better understand how relational pedagogies with infants might better support opportunities for infants to fully participate in decisions that affect them. The final chapter of this thesis will pick up on these thoughts and further discuss opportunities to reconceptualise infants’ encounters with curriculum.

References


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Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusion
Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to understand more about how a small group of infants encountered curriculum in an Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting. In the previous chapter, I discussed the findings of this study in relation to my three research questions:

1) How do infants encounter curriculum in childcare settings?

2) How can these encounters be understood in relation to the dominant discourses and grand narratives that currently frame curriculum understandings?

3) How can the practice of intentional teaching - a key practice requirement of the EYLF - be understood in relation to infants’ encounters with curriculum?

In this final chapter, I discuss the findings of the study in relation to the theoretical frame of Levinas (1961, 1987, 1999). Drawing on Levinas’ thinking, I conceptualise curriculum for infants as ‘encounter’, enabling opportunities for infants to be partners, participants and agents of their learning experiences. In addition, I outline the possible implications of this study for a range of stakeholders including practitioners, professional learning providers and policy makers. I conclude this chapter with an acknowledgment of the limitations of this study and make some recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The findings presented in Chapter 9 brought to light potential hidden, silenced and taken-for-granted assumptions about infants and their
relationships with curriculum. The critical hermeneutics stance (Kinsella, 2006) taken by engaging with Levinas’ theorising of the face-to-face encounter, along with Lyotard’s (1979) vision for ‘little narratives’, have enabled me to gain a closer proximity to, and insight into, the experiences of these infants. This has led to a deeper understanding of the ways that these infants encountered curriculum. In particular, this approach has provided new ways for me to conceptualise relational pedagogies with infants and consider how participatory curriculum with infants might be fostered.

**The ‘benediction’ as catalyst to participation.** Levinas (1999) contends that “all encounters begin with a benediction…” (p. 98). Giving weight to the ‘benediction’ as a catalyst for encounter has focused my attention on the ways that infants might express their benedictions and invite others into their learning agendas. The benediction was found to be a powerful way in which these infants communicated their ideas, interests and intents for learning. The findings revealed that while the infants in this study were effective communicators of their benedictions, their invitations were often overlooked.

Noticing how infants suggest their learning agendas through benedictions presented a new way to understand how texts of curriculum might work for infants. Curriculum is often understood to shape learning. I argue that curriculum also has the potential to enable learning to be shaped by very young children. An examination of the dual intents of texts of curriculum as they relate to infants—to articulate both expectations for infants’ learning and to foster their agency and participation—has uncovered a complex web of competing theoretical agendas and, at times, conflicting guidance for infant educators. Levinas’ concept of ‘benediction’ has been one way to
reconceptualise the infant’s relationship with texts of curriculum and recognise the participatory rights of infants as they encounter more formalised approaches to their learning experiences.

An exploration of Levinas’ notion of the ‘said’ and ‘sayings’ of curriculum provided possibilities to conceptualise how the dual intents of curriculum (noted above) might coalesce more effectively for infants. Recognising not only the power of the written text of curriculum (‘the saids’), but also the potentials for the infants’ ‘sayings’ of curriculum, invites new ways to consider infants as curriculum consumers and curriculum influencers. As governments increasingly involve themselves in matters that affect infants, it is important to consider how infants might be safeguarded from the potential reductionism of texts of curriculum and instead be recognised for their capacities to contribute to their curriculum encounters. I now discuss, in turn, what the findings of this study revealed in relation to the ‘said’ and ‘sayings’ and the significance of the benediction for infants. I argue that, together, these ideas offer potent ideas for reconceptualising curriculum for infants.

**The ‘said’ of curriculum.** The ‘said’ of curriculum represent the broader ambition of curriculum frameworks to provide for equity and quality. The ‘said’ hold to account those with responsibility for the curriculum to deliver the desired learning outcomes (Osberg & Biesta, 2008). Including the prominent discourses and theoretical positions that are both explicitly and implicitly expressed within the curriculum frameworks, the ‘said’ offer the infant some assurance of a commitment to agreed values, ideals and standards. This study has focused on three such
discourses that create ‘said’s’ within the EYLF: attachment theory, child development theories and child rights discourses.

In their own way, all three discourses emphasise a ‘knowing’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) of the infant, or a confidence in the evidence that formularises and generalises notions of infancy. Representing certainty, these generalised notions can act to limit the opportunities and contain possibilities for learning (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Olsson, 2009; Todd, 2001; Trevarthen, 2011). The findings of this study have raised questions about how the prominent discourses of child development, attachment and child rights might influence what these infants experienced as curriculum.

Child development discourses were evident in the provisioning of the environment and the planned experiences offered to these infants. Representing a ‘knowing’ of what these infants should be interested in and able to engage with, the planned learning environment often reflected developmental assumptions about infants as learners. Attachment theory was prominent in attuned and sensitive interactions between the educators and the infants, and the ways in which the infants’ benedictions were either responded to or overlooked. In particular, I have drawn attention to a number of occasions when the infants’ benedictions were overlooked and asked if this might be a result of the educators’ ‘blindness’ to the infants’ benedictions. Did the ‘knowings’ of child development and attachment theories limit what these educators looked for or acknowledged as important contributions of these infants?

The third prominent discourse examined in this study was that of children’s rights. While the child rights discourse is constructed around three framing principles of provision, protection and participation, I have chosen in this
study to focus on infants’ opportunities for participatory rights: the right to be listened to and have a say in matters that affect them (Woodhead, 2006).

I have acknowledged that the capable infant is only one image of a child with rights, who is viewed as able to participate in decisions that affect them. Yet Kalliala (2014) suggests that the tendency for an over-generalised notion of the capable child is just as limiting as the notion of a vulnerable and needy child. The capable infant can be constructed as yet another ‘said’ of curriculum, creating an alternative but equally totalising image of an infant.

In my study, child rights were most evident in the choices that these infants were afforded through the provisions for play and their access to various play spaces. The findings, however, revealed that the notion of a capable rights holder may have been in some ways limited by the subtle contradictions that exist between child rights discourses and the expectations of developmental norms and attachment practices. The complexities of working across multiple theoretical perspectives was brought to light when seeking to understand the infant as a rights holder within the context of expectations generated by child development and attachment theoretical frames.

Interestingly, curriculum frameworks were often found to promote the use of multiple theoretical perspectives. For example, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) does not promote any single theoretical positon and it explicitly encourages educators to “…draw upon a range of perspectives in their work…” (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 11). While this feature of the EYLF has been variously appraised (Fleer, 2013; Grieshaber, 2010;
Sumsion et al., 2009), the premise that it is desirable for educators to use multiple theoretical perspectives may create hidden tensions for infant educators. The nature of the EYLF, as providing “…broad direction … and underpin[ning] the implementation of more specific curriculum” (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 8), implies that educators will draw on theoretical understandings to inform their specific curriculum decisions. In this study, interrogation of the three discourses associated with attachment theory, child development theories and a child rights perspective has revealed that the multiple theoretical positions have the potential to set up complex, and at times contradictory, guidance for infant educators.

Dalli, Rockel, Duhn, Craw, and Doyle (2011) have similarly identified that the coexistence of contradictory views about appropriate pedagogies for infants creates tensions for educators, adding support to my argument that the ‘said’s represented in curriculum frameworks and prominent approaches to infant ECEC are complex, and at times, ambiguous. My study found that the ‘said’s’ of curriculum were potentially influential in what the infants were likely to encounter as planned curriculum in their early childhood setting. The infants’ experiences of curriculum were often powerfully bound by what their educators knew of the ‘said’s’. If educators view the ‘said’s’ without critical reflection, infants’ experiences of curriculum can be limited, lacking the potentials and possibilities available when infant educators work beyond the limitations of the ‘said’s’. It has not been my intent to undermine the importance of the ‘said’s’ in any curriculum framework for infants, but rather to consider the extent to which the ‘said’s’ might act to contain or
restrict practice if used without critical reflection and attention to the possibilities of the ‘sayings’.

**Infants’ ‘sayings’ of curriculum.** For me, Levinas’ ‘sayings’ invited a new reading of curriculum for infants. ‘Sayings’ for infants represent that which cannot be generalised or ‘known’ about them. ‘Sayings’ seek to uncover the individual infant and seek their unique contribution to each encounter. The study reported in this thesis has highlighted how ‘sayings’ of infant curriculum can illuminate the agency and capabilities of infants as protagonists in their own and other’s learning. Giving weight to ‘sayings’ of curriculum has exposed the partiality of the ‘saids’ and the need to look beyond the implicit intent of any curriculum framework.

In this study, the infants revealed many ‘sayings’ of curriculum. ‘Sayings’ can be seen in the unknown, uncertain and surprising perspectives that the infants themselves brought to the curriculum encounter, in the form of benedictions. These infants created opportunities to utilise materials and resources that were not intended for them. They had chance encounters with provisions that they exploited and adapted, and they extended the provisions made for them, to create new opportunities for their learning. Operating beyond the bounds of developmental expectations, these infants engaged in topics and agendas for learning that, read against normative expectations drawn from child development theory, were surprising for infants of their age. While fleeting, there were many examples of these infants as sophisticated thinkers, theorisers and communicators.

By paying attention to the ‘sayings’ of these infants, I was encouraged to consider the ways that prominent discourses circulating infant education and care might act as both enablers and disablers for their benedictions. Levinas
warned of the ‘violence’ of ‘totalised knowledge’ (Levinas, 1999) which he claimed creates a generalised ‘knowing’ and certainty about people. The infants in my study had capacities to be participants in their learning beyond the scope of what was expected of them. Having their benedictions overlooked may have limited the extent to which they experienced participation in expressing their capabilities and having their ideas included in curriculum decisions. This finding has led me to a deeper consideration of the role that infant educators play in noticing and responding to infants’ benedictions. Levinas’ ideas of the ‘susceptible stance’ were identified as a key premise to enabling infants to show their unique capabilities and avoid the containments of their educators ‘knowing’.

**The susceptible stance—‘response-able’ educators.** Taking a susceptible stance might encourage infant educators to seek infants’ benedictions rather than overlook them. In this way, infant educators might be more likely to see the agentic infant—one who has a say in matters that affect them and who demonstrates their capacity to contribute to and influence their learning encounters. As highlighted in Chapter 7, educators working with infants might be mindful of themselves as being not only ‘responsible’ for infants’ learning, but also ‘response-able’ (Chinnery, 2003; Säfström, 2003).

Taking a susceptible stance means not claiming to know what the infant wants or needs, but instead watching intently to elicit a closer understanding of the infant’s thinking, theorising and intent. Such an approach may represent a questioning of the prominent guidance of attachment and developmental theories, but it may be a way of meaningfully incorporating child rights perspectives and drawing the eye and attention of infant
educators to the contributions that infants are making to their learning encounters. As Bath and Karlsson (2016) suggest, it may also be possible to see the infant as ‘response-able’, with the potential to bring their own ideas and suggestions to their learning. This is perhaps one way of realising greater participation rights for infants and a reconfiguring of pedagogical relationships that are premised on the wise adult who is teaching the infant.

Shier’s (2001) five principles of participation, when considered through the perspectives of infants, promote the idea that the infant has expertise and the educator has the ability to listen and follow their lead. Participatory approaches to curriculum introduce the notion that each infant might be expressing a unique interest or intent that, with careful listening, enables the infant’s ideas to be more prominent in the learning encounter. In such an approach, the Levinasian ideal of benediction is front and centre as educators seek to listen to infants in the many ways that they communicate their ideas. Encounter, as Levinas understood it, is also realised as adults view infants as having expertise about themselves that will inform the adults’ responses and their curriculum decisions.

I acknowledge the complexities of working simultaneously with ideas of ‘said’s and ‘sayings’, and the fact that adults’ interpretations of infants’ sayings of curriculum are fraught with the limitations of attempting to understand the perspectives of the other. Interpretation can only ever be partial. Yet having witnessed the expressions of intent from the infants participating in this study, I contend that partial understanding can hold meaning for educators and should not prevent attempts to get as close as possible to deeper understandings of how infants influence, and are influenced, by curriculum frameworks. I am mindful, though, of the limits
to what can be claimed on the basis of a small case study. In the next section I discuss some of the limitations of the research design and the methodology used.

A Note about the Limitations of the Study

This study has aimed to present a fine-grained view of the experiences of three infants as they encountered curriculum. As a single case study, it can offer insights and raise questions about a particular context in place and time. It cannot claim to have broad generalisability, but as Puroila and Estola (2014, p. 200) suggest “…may awake and provoke questions and viewpoints that are relevant more broadly…”. I contend that the questions this study has raised provide important provocations about curriculum for infants and for the ECEC sector more broadly.

I acknowledge that the selection of Mosaic methodology (Clark, 2005), and the decision to experiment with narratives, would always produce only partial possibilities for getting closer to the infants’ perspectives. These methods were always filtered through my researcher viewpoint and experiences, and as such, provide only one possible way of interpreting what is happening. I have been thoughtful in attempting to create impressions of the perspective of these infants, and I accept the inevitable impossibility of claiming that they are accurate representations of the infants’ thoughts and feelings. While truth and accuracy were not possible, I did aim for fidelity (Grumet, 1988 cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995) in reflecting faithfully what was observed.

The choice of technology, and in particular the use of the video camera, represented an efficient and effective way of gaining fine-grained insight
into the experiences of these infants. Technology is not, however, without its limitations. As Walsh et al. (2007) caution, video captures only discrete information and the operator of the camera makes choices and decisions about where the lens is focused. While a powerful research tool, the images produced may misrepresent the complexity of what is happening beyond the frame of the camera (Pink, 2007). I have been as thoughtful as possible in interpreting the footage and checked with others (particularly the educators) that my reading of these episodes was trustworthy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The generation of analysis codes, selection of data items to be developed into narratives, and the interpretation contained in the narratives, were all subject to my own inescapable background and biases. I undertook to regularly challenge my decisions in order to be mindful and contest my biases. Conversations with educators, my supervisors and the broader research team, as well as feedback from conference presentations, were important touchpoints, but it must be conceded that this study is not free from researcher bias.

The infants in this study were aged from 6 months to 28 months over the period of data collection. At the time of beginning the data collection, all three children were aged under 2 years. The data in this study is limited by the fact that no infants aged under 6 months are represented. The implications drawn from the study cannot be assumed to be of significance for infants in general, and particularly not for infants under 6 months of age who likely encounter curriculum very differently to older infants. In addition, the case specific site of a single setting in a relatively high socio-economic area of Sydney limits any generalisations about how infants in
different circumstances might encounter curriculum. There has been no attempt to underplay the significance of many influential factors in the lives of these infants that were outside of the researcher’s gaze. The study must be understood within the bounds of the case study situation and the individual experiences of these infants.

The focus has been on infants’ benedictions and theorising in play-based experiences. The data used to develop the narratives were drawn from episodes when the infants were engaged, settled and content. It did not examine how infants encountered curriculum when they were unsettled or discontent. This was not necessarily intentional on my part, but given the focus of benedictions in play, the predominant episodes featured infants in settled and content states. In much the same way, these narratives do not include infants engaged in care routines. While I acknowledge that care routines are a significant part of each infant’s day in an ECEC setting, the data that was captured during care routines revealed fewer occasions where the infants’ benedictions were prominent.

The use of narratives can be fraught in creating an idealised image of infants. Capturing isolated examples of these infants’ experiences runs the risk of presenting the incidents as typical or expected behaviour of infants of a similar age. The narratives must be understood and interpreted as only ever partial understandings of an individual’s experience. I acknowledge that the images of infants reflected in these narratives might give the impression of an always competent, agentic infant. If adopted as a general assumption, Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie (2006), warn that such a taken-for-granted paradigm is at risk of silencing children who do not match the images of the competent child. It is essential to recognise the power of
the narratives to not only capture insights that might inform practice but also to convey dangerous images that misrepresent the complexity of infants’ lives.

A further limitation to this study is that while focusing attention on the infants’ encounters and the relationship based pedagogies with educators, I may have inadvertently overlooked the significance and complexity of the network of relations, powers and social and material resources that the infants encountered. While it was not my intent to exclude any possibility of influence for the infants, I acknowledge that to focus attention too closely on any one aspect of the encounter, can act to reduce attention to other important factors. I must also acknowledge that in choosing to use a Levinasian lens and taking a critical hermeneutics approach to this study, I may have inadvertently set up an artificial opposition - offering the infant as an agent and protagonist, against developmental and attachment theories that tend to situate the infant as passive and subject to the actions of adults. While I have been mindful throughout the study to avoid a direct contest of these ideas, I acknowledge that in projecting the capabilities of infants, I run the risk of overlooking a more complex understanding of infants’ limitations and interdependence.

Further to this, and taking a reflexive stance toward the entire thesis, I am aware that my unintended polarising of normative developmental discourses against a broader view of the child, could have been framed more as a questioning of the complexities of these ideas rather than a contest to each other. There remain opportunities for me to further interrogate the nuances of the many discourses that frame early childhood education and care.
practices, in order to better understand the complexity of infants’ encounters with curriculum.

**Implications of the Study**

Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, I believe there are messages from the study that have the potential to trigger further conversations, between the many stakeholders who have a say in the lives and experiences of infants in ECEC settings. From the educators who work with infants, to the providers and educational leaders who have an impact on the settings where infants are found, to the teacher education and vocational education and training providers who deliver initial education courses and in-service professional development providers, and through to policy makers and bureaucrats, the experiences of these infants provides food for thought about the future directions of infant care and education in Australia and also internationally.

**Implications for Infant educators, educational leaders and early childhood providers.** It is well established and widely agreed that the infant is a rights holder and as such has a right to be consulted and participate in matters that affect them (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006; Woodhead, 2006). Although these rights are explicit within most curriculum frameworks, including the EYLF, in order for the right to participation to be honoured, it requires the educator to acknowledge and act on those rights as expressed by the infant. A number of implications for those with responsibility for infant programs emerged from this study.
Firstly, this study suggests that these infants’ attempts to communicate rights to have a say in their curriculum experience were often overlooked. It may be that this relatively new notion of infants as rights holders is not well understood in relation to the practices of infant educators, and may even pose certain contradictions alongside other prominent discourses that guide infant educators’ practice. This study has raised questions about how well infants are understood as agents of their learning, and indeed how the prominent discourses of attachment and development theories might be limiting the ways that infant educators seek to understand infants as agentic. I suggest that there is space to accommodate more expansive conceptualisations of infant agency in the pedagogic practices of infant educators.

Secondly, the notion of educators as ‘response-able’ (Säfström, 2003) has been raised in this study as a possible contest to the idea of infant educators as being ‘responsible’ to be sensitive and attuned. The study has questioned what it means to be a relational pedagogue with an infant. As argued in Chapter 7, much of the current guidance for infant educators promotes adult-directed responsibilities to act and respond in certain ways. The notion of a susceptible educator, one who does not necessarily ‘know’ how to act but who carefully reads the invitation of the infant, is not prominent in contemporary guidance for infant educators. This notion of susceptibility does not infer that infant educators should be knowledge-free; rather, it suggests that knowledge can work alongside susceptibility when deciding how to act. The educator’s openness to the surprising and unique contributions of infants might also inform their actions and decisions.
To approach work with infants from a susceptible stance may require educators to take a different approach to their work than is currently promoted through widely accepted ECEC practice discourses. Pausing, waiting and listening may become central pedagogies for infant educators who are intentionally fostering the infant’s capacity to take the lead and be the protagonist in their learning. Working with ‘sayings’ of curriculum may require a reconfiguring of the place of ‘knowing’ about infants. This does not imply there is no place for knowledge, but rather promotes the value of not privileging ‘knowing’ over that which is not yet known. My study suggests that a willingness to work with a susceptible stance will be crucial to working towards truly participatory approaches to curriculum with infants.

A third implication of this study relates to the role of observation with infants. Currently accepted approaches to child observation, based on generic models of observation for older children, remain firmly focused on noticing and interpreting child development (see for example Sims & Hutchins, 2011). There have been some recent movements to expand observation of infants beyond developmental needs, strengths and interests. The Tavistock method (Miller, 2002 cited in Page, Clare, & Nutbrown, 2013, p. 149), for example, draws the observer’s attention to the emotional experiences of the infant. As Elfer (2005) advises though, this method requires considerable adaptation to make it possible and appropriate in early childhood settings for infants. Seland, Sandseter, and Bratterud (2015) suggest that, to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective well-being of the youngest children, “…we must dare to adopt different methods and approaches, and not rely on predefined indicators and quantifiable
observations” (p. 80). My study will, I hope, contribute to this shift in thinking about the role of observation with infants. I have highlighted the possibilities that current approaches to observation may not foster participatory roles for infants. Supplementing broadly accepted forms of child development observation that seek to find what is already known and expected, may open opportunities for infant observation to look for the yet unknown, the surprising and the unexpected. In this way, infants’ benedictions may be brought to the fore of educators’ thinking when they are planning learning environments and experiences for infants.

To this end, the narratives developed for this study were a departure from broadly accepted ways of observing infants. Rather than taking an objective and clinical approach and recording only what was seen, the narratives included my own perceptions and speculations about what the infants might be thinking. I also included the perceptions of educators and other children to create a complex narrative of what was happening—in an endeavour to, as far as possible, reflect the infant’s perspective. For me, narrative was a way to give prominence to the experiences of infants that are often overlooked or considered peripheral in more broadly accepted forms of observation. In light of the findings of the study, I consider that the current approaches to observation used by many infant educators may be limiting the way that educators think about infants as agents in the learning encounter. Sumption et al. (2011, p. 120), citing Warming (2003, p.64), suggest that, ”Observation is not for diagnostic purposes, but rather to develop an understanding of children's perspectives on ‘the conditions for their endeavours’”. A re-visioning of observation with infants might shift
the educators’ focus to notice the benediction as the basis for building a participatory curriculum.

A fourth implication from this study suggests a need to question the place for observation and planning for learning in relation to infants. The traditional cycle of planning, which involves observation, planning and implementation as first principles, might be reconsidered in light of the experiences of these infants. While I am not suggesting a radical departure from a cyclic model of curriculum decision making (see for example Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), the experiences of the infants who participated in the study indicate that a formal cycle of observation that then leads to planning, might be too slow and not sufficiently responsive to capture the contributions and benedictions of these infants.

The many short bursts of learning lasting only minutes that were evident in the data generated in the study would not have lent themselves easily to traditional forms of the planning cycle. The notion inherent in the planning cycle of connecting observations of such short bursts of learning to future planning over the next day or week may present incongruities for these infants who seemed to generate curriculum ideas by chance and opportunity. For me, questions about the relevance of traditional approaches to the early childhood planning cycle in relation to infants remain. Do widely accepted approaches to the curriculum planning cycle inhibit the participation of infants in their learning? Do these approaches overly emphasise the responsibilities of educators rather than their response-ableness?

Further to this suggestion to re-vision the role of observation and planning for infants’ learning, were the inherent tensions and contradictions that were
found to exist between the prominent discourses of attachment, child development and child rights discourses. As Horm, Goble, and Branscomb (2012) suggest, infant curriculum has largely reflected the theoretical perspectives current at their time of development. As such, there has been a proliferation of infant curricula approaches, each drawing on different theoretical positions.

The tensions in guidance for infant educators may present a challenge for them to truly embrace participatory approaches to curriculum with infants. These tensions perhaps require critical and reflective conversations among infant educator teams. Woodhead’s (2006) notion of ‘evolving capacities’ may be useful to infant educators in confronting the tensions between images of infants as vulnerable and images of infants as capable learners from birth. The EYLF encourages a view of infants as simultaneously competent and vulnerable (DEEWR, 2009), and Kalliala (2014) speaks of infants as being “both more and less competent” (p. 4). These complex images invite new ways forward for infant educators who might move from generalised labels of infants, attached to particular theoretical positions, to appreciating infants’ complexities and celebrating their inherent contradictions through a thoughtful reading of their benedictions.

I have learned from the ‘mind-minded’ research (Meins, Fernyhough, & Russell, 1998) discussed in Chapter 7, that attitudes and images of infants matter. The views that educators hold of infants will, as Kalliala (2014) suggests, influence what they will likely experience. The full participation of infants in matters that affect them will depend on educators who are alert to and aware of the capabilities of infants to express their views. It seems worthwhile to tease out the inherent complexities of competing theoretical
positions and promote realistic and workable images of infants that enable rather than constrain their participation. As Hatch (2010) suggests, educators tend to assume that a ‘both/and’ approach can apply to competing theories. He warns that it is not necessarily easy to work compatibly with competing theoretical approaches that are premised on fundamentally different thinking. It is perhaps timely to unpick the prominent theoretical influences that contribute to constructions of images of infants and provoke critical conversations that invite thoughtful reflection on the assumptions underpinning infant education and care.

Finally, the significant influence of the environment and the ‘trappings’ for play and learning (discussed in Chapter 9) might also be an area for thoughtful re-visioning. Given that these infants sought out materials that were not intended for them, adapted the materials to suit their intents, and showed intellectual capabilities to use resources beyond developmental expectations of their age, the provisioning of infant rooms might be reconceptualised to better respond to the suggestions and invitations that these infants were expressing. Careful observation of infants that includes noticing their benedictions and capacities to act on their environment may lead to engaging environments that better respond to individual interests and agendas, rather than predominantly reflecting the strongly developmentally appropriate trappings that were found in this setting.

**Implications for early childhood teacher education, vocational education and training (VET) and professional learning providers.** This study has examined the ways that infants have shown their capacities to contribute to curriculum decisions and suggested that discourses that promote infant agency may not be prominent in the literature and guidance
that supports the initial education of infant educators. The findings from this study suggest that these infants may not have been afforded opportunities to be as full a participant in their learning as they might have been. I argue that their full participation might be constrained by the widely accepted guidance and prominence of both attachment and developmental theories and speculated that there may be confusion about how these discourses fit with images of infants as participatory rights holders.

Several implications arise for early childhood teacher education, vocational education and training (VET) and professional learning providers. Firstly, my study highlights a need for a critical review of the underpinning discourses that currently inform programs of study for infant educators. Giving greater prominence to child rights discourses (Bae, 2009; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010; Woodhead, 2006) may lead to more expansive ways of understanding and responding to infants’ benedictions.

Secondly, given the increased involvement of infants in ECEC settings (Baxter, 2013), it seems timely to re-vision how infant educators are encouraged to use accepted models of observation and planning that are premised on methods used for older children. Critical questions about the assumptions of methods designed for children that rely on verbal cues must be asked in relation to infants who use many different communication strategies. Is there space to include notions of encounter, benediction, susceptibility, narrative observation and infant agency into preparation programs for infant educators?

Thirdly, my study suggests that greater attention might be given to understanding the specific pedagogical practices that facilitate learning and
development in infants. Levinas’ ideas of encounter offer a way to perhaps re-theorise relational pedagogies as they apply to infants, with a sharper focus on participation of infants than is suggested in attachment and developmental discourses. This may require a re-think of taken-for-granted assumptions about the role of the infant educator, with greater prominence given to pedagogies such as pausing, waiting and listening to enable infants’ benedictions to be noticed.

**Implications for policy.** The experiences of these infants, alongside an analysis of contemporary policy discourses surrounding infants as curriculum consumers, highlight a number of complex issues. The infants in this study demonstrated surprising capacities and sophisticated ways of attempting to influence their own learning. Their benedictions often went unnoticed and the extent of their capabilities was not always acknowledged. A number of policy implications arise from this study.

Firstly, the work of infant educators, as highlighted in this study, is complex, unpredictable and requires highly-informed educators who can be intellectually nimble in responding to an infant’s invitations and suggestions for learning. My study contests the Productivity Commission’s (2014) recommendation that infant educators need only be minimally qualified (Chapter 3). My study supports calls for infant educators to be more highly qualified than entry level vocational training (Certificate III). I suggest that policy revision is required, to consider the complexity of the work of infant educators and the level of qualification that might best equip them to foster infants’ participatory learning.

Secondly, my study found that the infants’ subtle and complex ways of communicating required a tuned-in and response-able educator. I suggest
that there is scope to look beyond the theoretical frames that have been prominent in much of the literature guiding educators’ practices. The inclusion of a broad range of contemporary understandings of infants as rights holders might be more prominent in policy and counter persistent images of infants that often portray them as primarily weak, vulnerable and in need of protection. Close attention to children’s rights discourses as they relate to infants in policy will need to be promoted, if the intent of curriculum frameworks to afford infants’ rights to have a say in matters that affect them, are to be realised in practice.

Furthermore, the role of educational leader, as defined in the National Quality Framework (NQF) (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011), has the potential to make a significant contribution to the oversight of the learning program for infants. My study suggests that there is space for greater awareness of the relational pedagogies that will foster participatory curriculum for infants. To be enacted effectively, nominated educational leaders must have considerable understanding of infants as learners and the relational pedagogies that will best foster this learning. A re-visioning of the way that the role of educational leader is defined within policy, with a stronger focus on the qualification requirements and expectations of the role in relation to infants, is needed to ensure the role is relevant in infant programs.

**Contributions of the Study**

The study reported in this thesis has sought to extend thinking about the experiences of infants and to illuminate their capacities to be contributing participants in their encounters with curriculum. This study has raised
questions about how well child participation rights might be understood and enacted in relation to infants. While inclusion of child rights discourses within the texts of contemporary curriculum frameworks promote the agentic child and one who has a right to have a say in matters that affect them, how this is understood in relation to infants may not be straightforward. Drawing on Levinas’ ideas about ‘saids’ and ‘sayings’ (Levinas, 1999), this study contributes to critical conversations about the proliferation of curriculum frameworks for ever younger children, and the ways that texts and the translation of those texts to actions, might shape the experiences of infants in ECEC settings (see Millei & Jones, 2014; Sumsion, Harrison, & Bradley, 2016).

This study contributes to a growing body of research that works alongside infants to better understand their experiences. The past decade has seen a steadily growing interest in infant-toddler research using a range of different theoretical orientations to better understand how infants’ experiences in ECEC might be enriched (Elwick, 2014; Salamon & Harrison, 2015; Stratigos, 2015). In particular, my study contributes to establishing the value of drawing on Levinas in theorising the experiences of infants as they encounter learning in very different parts of the world. For instance, in a similar way to, and in parallel with my study, Johannesen (2013) has also used Levinas’ thinking to re-position infants as ‘educators of their educators’. Her study, like mine, has sought to explore how Levinas’ ideas about ‘saids’ and ‘sayings’ can be understood to influence the expectations of infants as learners. Together, our studies highlight the value of drawing on Levinas’ concepts of ‘saids’ and ‘sayings’ to deepen understandings of infants as partners and participants in curriculum.
My study also highlights the value of working with Levinas’ ideas of encounter to show the agency of infants. Similar to the recent work of Bath and Karlsson (2016), who investigated how young children across the UK and Sweden can be seen to act as citizens in play, my study reinforces the importance of considering the overlooked nature of infants’ contributions. Both studies identified that educators missed or ignored key expressions of child agency. These missed opportunities prevented educators from allowing infants into the ‘relational pedagogical moment’ and persisted to keep the flow of knowledge one-directional. Together, our studies highlight the importance of how constructions of infants can influence their capacity to express agency and have their ideas heard or noticed.

My study also contributes to furthering thinking about infants as having complex capabilities. It aligns with findings reported by Salamon and Harrison (2015) who investigated educators’ conceptions of infants’ capabilities and how these conceptions impact on their practices. Like their work, my study suggests that taken-for-granted practices stemming from attachment theory may underestimate the emotional capacities and resilience of infants. My study suggests that prominent discourses circulating in ECEC may be constraining possibilities for infants to demonstrate their capacities to be influential in their own learning.

As the body of work that seeks to discover more about the experience of infants as learners increases, new conversations will be started and hopefully lead to better understandings of the relational pedagogies that will best foster infant agency and participatory approaches to curriculum. I hope that my study will assist in moving the conversation on from what Goodfellow (2008) termed the “warm and responsive” (p. 17) approach to
infant care, to recognise the rights and capabilities of infants to be agents of their own learning. Levinas’ inclusion into theorising about infants as learners and their encounters with curriculum has opened up possibilities to see beyond a passive role for the infant as learner and shone a light on their extraordinary capacities and intents. My study has highlighted the need for a departure from some of the long held views of infants as the passive recipients of adults’ agendas and encouraged thoughtful reflection on the possibilities for curriculum for infants to be understood as ‘encounter’. It has shown that introducing the notion of ‘benediction’ is a way to re-image infants’ relationship with curriculum and move towards new forms of critical practice with infants.

Future Research

The participation of infants in ECEC settings in Australia is steadily increasing, yet their encounters with learning remain relatively under-investigated. As the role of government in resourcing ECEC settings through curriculum frameworks and regulation of quality standards expands, there is a need to better understand how these documents influence the lives of infants and to what extent they achieve their intended purposes. This study has contributed to a conversation about the experiences of infants as they encounter curriculum, but much remains unknown. This study has generated many further questions that provide opportunities for expanding understandings about infants as curriculum consumers.

One such question concerns the role of infant educators as they encounter complex and at times competing discourses of education and care. A broader study of the knowledge and skills that infant educators currently
rely on and the complexities and tensions that these create is needed to better understand the work of infant educators. Such a study could contribute to a re-visioning of the pedagogies that support infants as complex learners and open up space for new thinking to inform the specialist nature of working with infants.

A further area for investigation could involve opportunities for more multi-disciplinary research with infants. This would involve critical examination of the role that narratives could potentially play in informing infant educators’ practices. As a way of drawing attention to the ‘sayings’ of curriculum, the lens of others with expertise from diverse disciplines can provide valuable insights into how multi-vocal narratives might inform practice and challenge assumptions drawn from narrow discipline areas. Critical conversations about the multiple interpretations of narratives will be needed if narratives are to play a useful role in better understanding infants—from a closer proximity to their experiences.

My study has also raised questions about the role of observation and record-keeping under state-instituted guidelines for practice with infants in early childhood settings. Important questions are raised in this study about the appropriateness of current requirements that may be premised on systems devised for older children. How the planning cycle contributes to the experiences of infants is an area for deeper investigation.

There is also a need for further consideration of the interconnections between prominent theoretical approaches to infant ECEC and how these support infants as learners. As Hatch (2010) asserts, we should be cautious in assuming that readily accepted theoretical positions stemming from contrasting principles can be easily coalesced. I began this study somewhat
critical of the prominence of attachment theory and the way that interpretations of attachment theory posit infants as passive. Extensive reading in this area and observation of infants has shifted my view to see infants as enormously complex and as Kalliala (2014) attests, “both more and less able” (p. 4). Relationships are clearly central to infants’ experiences; however, the complexities of the roles of infants and educators in those relationships cannot be easily reduced to generalised principles of attachment. I am convinced of the importance of attachment relationships in the lives and experiences of infants but now acknowledge that there is much room to better understand how the inherent tensions between attachment theory and infant agency might be better understood in favour of the infant. This is most definitely an area for deeper thought and critical investigation.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Each of the encounters presented in this thesis show infants’ engagement with people, things and themselves as happening very quickly and often missed by their educators. Levinas’ idea that all encounters begin with the benediction has provided a new lens through which to observe these infants. Rather than looking for what the infants’ responses to the planned experience were, benediction encourages a search for the infants’ invitations—their expressions of their interests and learning agendas.

My hope is that the small insights about the experiences of Clare, William and Hugh, as reported in this thesis, might go some way to contributing to thinking more broadly about infants’ lives and how they experience early childhood education and care. Seeking to gain a closer proximity to their perspectives has shifted my understandings of the complexity of lives that
cannot be easily quantified by texts of curriculum or quality standards.

While these texts make an important contribution to the lives of infants, it is the capacities and actions of the infants’ educators, and their willingness to embrace complexity and seek the infants’ perspectives, that will likely make the biggest difference to infants’ curriculum experiences.

Ontologically, this study invites discussion about what cannot be completely known or understood about the ‘Other’. It accepts that errors might be made in assumptions about infants’ internal drives and motivations but presents a case for remaining inquiring about what we cannot yet know about infants.

Is there more to be gained through an inquiring stance, than lost to a devotion of what we can know?

References


Kalliala, M. (2014). Toddlers as both more and less competent social actors in Finnish day care centres. Early Years, 34(1), 4-17.


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Appendices
Appendix 1: Information Sheets and Consent Forms

The following information sheets and consent forms were used with participants in this study. Copies of each form are included in Appendix 1.

- Educator Information Sheet
- Educator Consent Form
- Parent Information Sheet
- Parent Consent Form
- Parent Information Sheet—Older Child
- Parent Information Sheet—Older Child
- Parent Consent Form—Images
- Educator Consent Form—Images
Educator Information Sheet

Research project: What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the 'lived experience' of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

Researchers from Charles Sturt University are conducting a study of the experiences of babies and toddlers in childcare. The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by our Industry Partners KU Children's Services and Family Day Care Australia. You are warmly invited to participate.

The aim of the study is to investigate how babies and toddlers experience childcare. The study involves researchers, educators, parents, and older children in the childcare setting working together to try to understand the experiences of babies and toddlers in long day care and family day care environments. The study will try to capture the perspectives of the babies and toddlers themselves.

If you are working in long day care, a member of our research team would like to visit your setting for two half days per week for up to 6 months. If you are working in family day care, a researcher would like to visit for two half days per week for up to two months.

As a, if you decide to participate in the study, your participation would involve:

- Making available (with parents' permission) to the researcher contextual information relating to the infant (such as portfolios and developmental records).
- Providing a list of gestures and words produced by the infant in the care setting.
- Allowing the researcher to observe, make field notes and, on some occasions, video in your setting. Decisions about when and what to video will be made in consultation with you. More information about videoing is provided on the next page.
- Viewing edited video segments (as many or as few as you would like) and discussing your interpretation of infants’ experiences with the researcher.
- Meeting with the researcher, and where possible, with the infants’ families to share interpretations of a small number of video segments in an attempt to understand the messages the infant is communicating about what they are experiencing. Older children who are familiar with the infant and the setting might also be involved in the meeting. This meeting would be videotaped to enable a full record of the discussion.

The information on the next page outlines how infants, parents and older children would be involved.
Infants:
Infants will be observed in their care setting and field notes, photographs, and video footage will be collected focusing on, for example, movements, interests, routines, and interactions. Footage capturing the infants’ perspective will be collected by infants wearing a babycam (a small video camera that infant wears on a hat or headband) for short periods of time (no longer than 15 minutes). If an infant shows any sign of discomfort, the babycam will be removed immediately.

Parents:
Parents may be videoed with their infants. This will most commonly be at drop-off or pick-up times but may also occur at other times when the parent is at the service. Parents will be invited to view edited video segments of their infant in your childcare setting and discuss their interpretation of infants’ experiences. Parents will be asked to provide a list of words produced by the infant in the home setting.

Older children:
Older children who share the setting with the infant may be videoed as they interact with the infant. They will be invited to provide a child’s perspective by using a digital camera to record their ideas about infants’ most/least favourite places/activities/events/interactions. Older children may also be invited to view edited video segments and discuss their interpretation of infants’ experiences.

In relation to video footage, two types of camera will be used, a tripod-mounted handycam and babycam. The focus will be on trying to understand infants’ experiences and may involve footage of you interacting with infants. Videoing will only take place for short periods of time.

Please note that educators will maintain control over when videoing occurs and have the following rights:

1) To ask that the video be turned off at any time,
2) At the end of a filming session, to require that any section in which they appear be deleted,
3) When viewing edited videos, to require that any section in which they appear be deleted,
4) To give or deny permission for snippets of video in which they appear to be shared with others in the workplace or with parents,
5) To give or deny permission for snippets of videos or stills in which they appear to be used for presentations/journal articles, etc.

The legal obligation in relation to mandatory reporting of child abuse would take precedence over these rights.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. Should you agree to participate you are free to withdraw at any point.

The findings of the research will be communicated through a range of publications. Participants will not be identified without their consent. They will be able to access reports of the study through KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. The study will provide improved knowledge of
what life is like in childcare for infants leading to more informed parental choices, improved public policy related to infant care and continuing enhancement of professional practice in childcare.

If you agree to participate in the research project, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Please retain this information sheet as your own record. If you have any questions about the project or any other issues relating to your involvement in the project please do not hesitate to contact one of the researchers.

This project will be conducted by the following Research Team:

Prof Jennifer Sumison  Assoc Prof Linda Harrison  Ms Fran Press
Prof Sharynne McLeod  Prof Ben Bradley  Dr Joy Goodfellow
Ms Sheena Elwick  Ms Anne Stonehouse  Ms Tina Stratigos
Ms Sandra Cheeseeman  Ms Belinda Davis

School of Teacher Education, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst
jsumison@csu.edu.au
Ph: 02 6338 4423 (Jennifer Sumison)

Charles Sturt University's Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or concerns about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact:

Executive Officer,
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795
Educator Consent Form

Research project: What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare?
Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

I, ____________________________ consent/do not consent to participating in the research project titled, What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers.

I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about me and the children in my care are confidential. No identifying information will be published without my written permission.

I have read and understood the information provided about the ways in which video-taping and digital photography will be used for the purposes of the study. I give permission for myself to be filmed as part of the case study.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation in the research at any time, and that if I do I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment.

The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by our Industry Partners, KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. The study has been approved by the Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Executive Officer,
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795

Participant ____________________________  Researcher ____________________________

Signature ____________________________  Signature ____________________________

Date ____________________________  Date ____________________________
Parent Information Sheet

Research project: What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the 'lived experience' of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

Researchers from Charles Sturt University are conducting a study of the experiences of babies and toddlers in childcare. The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by our Industry Partners - KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. You are warmly invited to participate.

The aim of the study is to investigate how babies and toddlers experience childcare. The study involves researchers, educators, parents, and older children in the childcare setting working together to try to understand the experiences of babies and toddlers in long day care and family day care environments. The study will try to capture the perspectives of the babies and toddlers themselves.

If your child is in long day care, a member of our research team would like to visit your child’s care setting for two half days per week for up to 6 months. If your child is in family day care, a researcher would like to visit for two half days per week for up to two months.

As a Parent, if you decide to participate in the study, your participation would involve:

- Possibly being videoed with your infant. This will most commonly be at drop-off or pick-up times but may also occur at other times when you are in the care setting.
- Providing a list of gestures and words produced by the infant in the home setting.
- Viewing edited video segments in which your child appears (as many or as few as you would like) and discussing your interpretation of infants’ experiences with the researcher in an attempt to understand the messages the infant is communicating about what they are experiencing. This meeting would be videotaped to enable a full record of the discussion.

If you decide to participate in the study, as an infant participant, your child’s participation would involve:

- Being observed in their care setting with field notes, photographs, and on some occasions, video footage collected focusing on, for example, movements, interests, routines and interactions. Decisions about when and what to video will be made in consultation with your child’s educator. More information about videoing is provided on the next page.
- Collecting video footage from the perspective of the infant by wearing a babycam (a small video camera that infant wears on a hat or headband) for short periods of time (no longer than 15 minutes). If an infant shows any signs of discomfort, the babycam will be removed immediately.

The information on the next page outlines how educators and older children would be involved.
Educator

- Making available (with parents' permission) to the researcher contextual information relating to the infant (such as portfolios and developmental records).
- Providing a list of gestures and words produced by the infant in the care setting.
- Allowing the researcher to observe, make field notes and, on some occasions, video in the care setting. Decisions about when and what to video will be made in consultation with educators.
- Viewing edited video segments and discussing the carer's interpretation of infants' experiences with the researcher.
- Meeting with the researcher, and where possible, with the infants' families to share interpretations of a small number of video segments.

Older children:
Older children who share the setting with the infant may be videoed as they interact with the infant. They will be invited to provide a child's perspective by using a digital camera to record their ideas about infants' most/least favourite places/activities/events/interactions. Older children may also be invited to view edited video segments and discuss their interpretation of infants' experiences.

In relation to video footage, two types of camera will be used, a tripod mounted handycam and babycam. The focus will be on trying to understand infants' experiences and may involve footage of you interacting with your child. Videoing will only take place for short periods of time.

Please note that parents will have the following rights:

1) To ask that the video be turned off at any time,
2) At the end of a filming session, to require that any section in which they/their child appear be deleted,
3) When viewing edited videos, to require that any section in which they/their child appear be deleted,
4) To give or deny permission for snippets of videos or stills in which they/their child appear to be used for presentations/journal articles, etc.

The legal obligation in relation to mandatory reporting of child abuse would take precedence over these rights.
In relation to babycam, please note this method of data collection is a small part of a wide range of data collection techniques. It will be used at pre-arranged times and for short periods. Infants will be closely monitored for any signs of reluctance or distress and the use of babycam halted if such signs are evident.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. Should you agree to participate you are free to withdraw at any point.

The findings of the research will be communicated through a range of publications. Participants will not be identified without their consent. They will be able to access reports of the study through KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. The study will provide improved knowledge of what life is like in childcare for infants leading to more informed parental choices, improved public policy related to infant care and continuing enhancement of professional practice in childcare.

If you agree to participate in the research project, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Please retain this information sheet as your own record. If you have any questions about the project or about any other issues relating to your/your child’s involvement in the project please do not hesitate to contact one of the researchers.

This project will be conducted by the following Research Team:

Prof Jennifer Sumison    Assoc Prof Linda Harrison    Ms Fran Press
Prof Sharynne McLeod    Prof Ben Bradley    Dr Joy Goodfellow
Ms Sheena Elwick    Ms Anne Stonehouse    Ms Tina Stratigos
Ms Sandra Cheeseman    Ms Belinda Devio

School of Teacher Education, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst
jsumsion@csu.edu.au
Ph: 02 6338 4423 (Jennifer Sumison)

Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or concerns about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact:

Executive Officer,
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795
Parent Consent Form

Research project: What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

I, ___________________________________________________________ consent/do not consent to myself and my child, ____________________________________________ participating in the research project titled, What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers.

I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about myself and my child are confidential and that neither my name, my child’s name nor any other identifying information will be published without my written permission.

I have read and understood the information provided about the ways in which video-taping and digital photography will be used for the purposes of the study. I give permission for my child and myself to be filmed as part of the case study. I also give permission for my child to wear a babycam for short periods of time to assist in creating a video of his or her experience in childcare. I further give consent for this video and photographs to be shown to the research team and the staff and children at my child’s care setting for the purposes of analysis.

I also give consent for my child to be observed during the normal course of the day and for the researchers to access my child’s developmental and portfolio records.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation in the research at any time, and that if I do I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment.

The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by our Industry Partners, KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. The study has been approved by the Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Executive Officer,
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795

Participant ___________________________ Researcher ___________________________

Signature ___________________________ Signature ___________________________

Date ___________________________ Date ___________________________
Parent Information Sheet – Older Child

Research project: What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

Researchers from Charles Sturt University are conducting a study of the experiences of babies and toddlers in childcare. The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by our Industry Partners - KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. Your child is warmly invited to participate.

The aim of the study is to investigate how babies and toddlers experience childcare. The study involves researchers, educators, parents, and older children in the childcare setting working together to try to understand the experiences of babies and toddlers in long day care and family day care environments. The study will try to capture the perspectives of the babies and toddlers themselves.

A member of our research team will be visiting the setting your child attends for two half days per week for up to 18 months.

As an older child participant in the study, your child may be videoed as they interact with infants in the setting. Your child may be invited to provide a child’s perspective by using a digital camera to record their ideas about infants’ most/least favourite places/activities/events/interactions. Your child may also be invited to view edited video segments and discuss their interpretation of infants’ experiences with the researcher in an attempt to understand the messages the infant is communicating about what they are experiencing. This meeting would be videotaped to enable a full record of the discussion. You have the right to view video or photographs that are used in the study and contain images of your child if you wish. At this time you may request that particular images of your child be deleted. You will also have an opportunity to give or deny permission for snippets of videos or stills in which your child appears to be used for presentations / journal articles, etc.

Your child’s participation is entirely voluntary. Should you agree for your child to participate you are free to withdraw at any point. If you agree for your child to participate in the research project, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Please retain this information sheet as your own record. If you have any questions about the project or about any other issues relating to your child’s involvement in the project please do not hesitate to contact one of the researchers.
This project will be conducted by the following Research Team:

Prof Jennifer Sumson  Assoc Prof Linda Harrison  Ms Fran Press
Prof Sharynne McLeod  Prof Ben Bradley  Dr Joy Goodfellow
Ms Sheena Elwick  Ms Anne Stonehouse  Ms Tina Stratigos
Ms Sandra Cheeseman  Ms Belinda Davis

School of Teacher Education, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst
jsumson@csu.edu.au
Ph: 02 6338 4423 (Jennifer Sumson)

Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or concerns about the ethic conduct of this project, you may contact:

Executive Officer,
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795
Parent Consent Form – Older Child

Research project: What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

I, __________________________________________ consent/do not consent to my child, __________________________________________ participating in the research project titled, What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers.

I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about my child are confidential and that neither my child’s name nor any other identifying information will be published without my written permission.

I have read and understood the information provided about the ways in which video-taping and digital photography will be used for the purposes of the study. I give permission for my child to be filmed as part of the case study. I further give consent for this video and photographs to be shown to the research team and the staff and children at my child’s care setting for the purposes of analysis.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation in the research at any time, and that if I do I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment.

The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by our Industry Partners, KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. The study has been approved by the Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Executive Officer,
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795

Parent __________________________ Researcher __________________________
Signature __________________________ Signature __________________________
Date __________________________ Date __________________________
Parent Consent Form - Images

Research project: What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

I, ___________________________________________ consent/do not consent to images of myself and my child, __________________________________ that were collected as data for the above research project being published in journal articles, reports or conference papers that report the findings of the research.

I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about myself and my child are confidential and that neither my name, nor my child’s name will be used in conjunction with these images.

The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by our Industry Partners, KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. The study has been approved by the Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Executive Officer,
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bathurst NSW 2795

Participant ____________________________  Researcher ____________________________
Signature ______________________________ Signature ______________________________
Date _______________________________ Date _______________________________
Educator Consent Form - Images

Research project: What is life like for babies and toddlers in childcare? Understanding the 'lived experience' of infants through innovative mosaic methodology.

I, ____________________________, consent/do not consent to images of myself that were collected as data for the above research project being published in journal articles, reports or conference papers that report the findings of the research.

I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about myself are confidential and that my name will not be used in conjunction with these images.

The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and supported by our Industry Partners, KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia. The study has been approved by the Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

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Charles Sturt University
Private Mail Bag 29
Bethurst NSW 2795

Participant ____________________________  Researcher ____________________________
Signature ____________________________  Signature ____________________________
Date ____________________________  Date ____________________________
Appendix 2: Sample Contextual Notes

Infants’ Lives in Childcare

Context Notes: LDC 01: 16.04.10

Date: 16 April 2010

Arrival: 9am                  Depart: 3pm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educators present (pseudonyms)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infants present (pseudonyms)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Children were indoors when I arrived—some children having morning tea, Catherine and William were asleep.

William sitting independently—not yet crawling.
Oliver, Catherine, Dan and Hugh—crawling.
All other children walking.

After morning tea all awake, children move outside. Play is in the sandpit, with plastic building blocks, a variety of trikes and push toys.

Nine children have lunch together at 11.30am. Other children asleep or had eaten earlier. Lunch extends over a 45-minute period. Children one-by-one transition to nappy change then bed or have a bottle.

Trish does a small group singing activity with a story for (Clare, Ingrid and Adam).

Afternoon tea is progressive as children wake and extends from 2pm-3.30pm. Lisa stays with the afternoon tea table and talks with children as they snack.

Afternoon play is outdoors—same provision as the morning. The older toddlers (Monkeys) are also in the playground.

Data Captured

Video
1 hr (9.30am–10.30am)—Indoors, morning tea routine.
1 hr (1.45pm–2.45pm)—Transition from sleep to afternoon and some outdoor play.

Still Camera
Continue gathering photos of individual children for records.
Shots of outdoor environment—set up for morning play.

Field Notes
Jottings of schedule of the day and continue to gather information on casual relief staff.
Appendix 3: Sample Reflective Journal Notes

Record of conversation following keynote presentation at ‘Infants and Toddlers: Practice, Pedagogy and Research’ conference

25 September 2015

Participant feedback: From a follow-up workshop to the keynote address

Comments

• Some participants said that they loved the videos and found it amazing to see what the infants do “behind your back”. “How are we supposed to notice these little things?” Discussion centred on how educators’ position themselves in the room and how much time is taken up with doing other things rather than sitting and watching infants. Extensive discussion about how busy the room is and how many tasks there are to do. A feeling that there is no time to just sit and be with the infants.

• Varied views within the group—rich discussion about how some educator teams have re-thought the daily schedule to make time to sit and be.

Reflection: Need to be mindful and acknowledge in presentations the privilege of the researcher as an unencumbered extra within the room. Be clear in articulating that the video affords the opportunity to revisit and see what the eye has missed but this does not imply that an educator should see everything.
One participant noted that she would interpret the video of Clare and the Waffle Blocks differently to me. I had commented that I felt that Clare was unconcerned that none of her educators had noticed her cleverness. I made the comment that she appeared to be happy to carry on. The participant felt that the staff were missing a significant request from Clare and that if her requests were repeatedly ignored, she worried about what long-term impact that would have on Clare. Would she give up on trying to engage with educators?

**Reflection:** I had not thought from this perspective before and acknowledge that the use of the words, “seemed happy”, are loaded with assumptions on my part. This comment prompts me to return to the video footage and look at other requests that Clare is making and how often she is overlooked. I also need to be careful how I represent the infants’ emotional states and avoid being too certain of their reactions.

Controversy about the video: ‘William and the Cups’. Some participants felt that the educator should not have provided material that she knew would roll away and that William could not reach (given that he was not yet crawling). Others felt that this level of frustration was okay and that William did not show any signs of being upset or frustrated that he could not retrieve them. Others felt that William was looking around and seeking assistance but no-one was paying attention.
Reflection: The multiple ways of viewing and analysing the video is very apparent to me here. I can see why each of these participants might see the situation differently. It is perhaps the case that different backgrounds, levels of education and experience with babies might influence such variation of views. This is a reminder that all analysis must be carefully checked for my own biases and assumptions.

- A participant from a psychology background was concerned that Clare’s abilities (in Clare and the Waffle Blocks) were not recognised by the educators. The participant felt that Clare was displaying key messages that she was more capable than her young age might suggest and that her educators should be aware of this and provide more stimulation for her.

Reflection: This is a reminder to me that professionals coming from a range of discipline backgrounds will offer quite specific interpretations. It also highlights the limitations of the video and the assumptions that can be made by viewing snippets out of context. I acknowledge this perspective and it raises issues about the education backgrounds and content of infant educator programs. What is the best discipline knowledge for infant educators to have?
Appendix 4: Sample of Field Notes to Support Narrative Development

Date & Time: 18 June 2010; 12.45pm

Episode: Prior to sleep time for most of the toddlers, Lisa is reading the book The Wheels on the Bus to Clare and Helen. The group are singing the song and doing the actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Images</th>
<th>Field Notes</th>
<th>Educator / Parent responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>As I set up the video camera to capture the girls singing, I notice William in the background – I wonder if he is joining in the song. After watching for only a few seconds, I am sure he is joining in. I shift the camera to focus on William.</td>
<td>When I show Lisa the footage she is surprised. “look at him… how did I miss that?” She calls to Victoria to view the footage. Victoria is also surprised and says that she had not noticed either - “I didn’t even know he knew that song”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>William dips in and out of attention to the singing. He is distracted by the toys around him and Victoria occasionally chats with him – so he looks to her - but his actions and rhythm suggest that he is joining in.</td>
<td>Lisa is quite concerned that she has missed this. She comments that it makes her wonder how many other things she misses throughout the day. She asks me if I think they should video a part of each day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Each time they girls sing the chorus, “up and down, up and down” William seems to re-engage with the song. This might be the familiar refrain.</td>
<td>Lisa feels that she should have brought him over to the group. We discuss if there is any indication on his behalf that this is what he is wanting – we cannot know. Lisa says that she feels a bit guilty about this oversight.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Notes for Narrative:**

- Attention dips in and out – not sustained as we might expect in older child but holds his attention over time.
- Lisa raises the question of whether it is a problem that William is not physically included.
- William gazes at the action when he seems to want to be engaged.
- Episode goes for over 2 minutes before the girls choose another book that does not involve singing.
- Remarkable memory recall and musicality – his actions are slightly delayed from that of the girls but his rhythm is consistent.
- Benediction – is he asking to be invited in? Is his benediction to himself – simply inviting himself to master this song?
- Exploits the opportunity to learning from an experience that was not planned for him.
- The educator provides the model even though she is not aware of his copy. Is this still a face-face-encounter, if one of the faces is not aware of the other?
- Is the lack of adult attention a concern for him – cannot know but he seems content and unconcerned.