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## Contemporary perspectives of the child in action: An investigation into children's connectedness with, and contribution to, the world around them

C. Robinson

*The University of Notre Dame Australia*, [christine.robinson@nd.edu.au](mailto:christine.robinson@nd.edu.au)

D. O'Connor

*The University of Notre Dame Australia*, [dee.oconnor@nd.edu.au](mailto:dee.oconnor@nd.edu.au)

H. Wildy

G. Neylon

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**Title:** Contemporary perspectives of the child *in action*: An investigation into children's connectedness with, and contribution to, the world around them.

**Authors:**

**1. Robinson, Christine.** University of Notre Dame. PO Box 1225, Fremantle WA 6959.

Email: [christine.robinson@nd.edu.au](mailto:christine.robinson@nd.edu.au). Phone: 08 9433 0178. Fax: 08 9433 0160

Dr Christine Robinson coordinates the Early Childhood programs (undergraduate and postgraduate) at the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle campus. Christine's research interests include play in the early years, young children's spirituality and quality in early years' contexts.

**2. O'Connor, Dee.** University of Notre Dame. PO Box 1225, Fremantle WA 6959.

Email: [dee.oconnor@nd.edu.au](mailto:dee.oconnor@nd.edu.au).

Dr Dee O'Connor is Associate the Associate Dean Teaching and Learning at the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle campus. Dee's research interests include play in the early years, creativity and child development and early years' learning environments.

**3. Wildy, Helen.** University of Western Australia. 35 Stirling Highway Crawley, WA, 6009.

Email: [helen.wildy@uwa.edu.au](mailto:helen.wildy@uwa.edu.au).

Professor Helen Wildy is the Dean , Head of School of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Western Australia. Helen's research interests include school leadership, managing change in education and professional standards.

**4. Neylon, Gerardine.** University of Western Australia. 35 Stirling Highway Crawley, WA, 6009.

Email: [gerardine.neylon@uwa.edu.au](mailto:gerardine.neylon@uwa.edu.au).

Dr Gerardine Neylon is the Early Childhood course coordinator at the University of Western Australia. Gerardine's research interests include measuring quality in early years' contexts, play in the early years and early childhood policy.

## **Abstract**

Childcare within Australia has undergone significant reform as a result of the implementation of the nationally mandated *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* [EYLF] (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). The EYLF articulates contemporary perspectives of the child through its principles, practices and learning outcomes. Educators are required to promote these principles, practices and learning outcomes with children aged from birth to 5 years. This paper reports the findings from a research project that sought to investigate how educators applied their understanding of learning outcome two of the EYLF (children are connected with and contribute to their world). The focus of this research was educators working with children aged two to three years within childcare centres operating on school sites, in metropolitan Western Australian. The research design was qualitative and situated within the interpretivist paradigm. Observations were used as the method for gathering data and these were analysed through a process of coding. This paper presents the observational findings of educators' practices within learning outcome two. Composite vignettes from the voice of the child are included to present the observational findings. In centralising the voice of the child, contemporary perspectives are made explicit.

## **Introduction**

Central to contemporary perspectives of the child is the recognition of children's right to both agency and voice (James, Jenks & Prout, 2010; Morrow, 2011). Contemporary perspectives of the child are influenced by sociocultural theory, sociology of childhood and the reconceptualization of childhood that all view children as competent and capable (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett & Farmer, 2015). The mandated Australian framework, *Belonging,*

*Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (Department for Education, Training and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) explicitly advocates for contemporary perspectives of the child. The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) sets out five principles, eight practices and five learning outcomes that all acknowledge the child as competent, capable, and with agency and voice. In particular, learning outcome two, *children are connected with and contribute to their world* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 19), explicitly states the requirement for educators to afford children opportunities that promote their agency through connection and contribution with others and with the environment.

The introduction of learning outcomes within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) that specifically target children in the pre-compulsory school setting (from birth to five years of age) provided the impetus for the research project detailed in this paper. The research project sought to investigate the way in which educators in birth to age five settings promoted each of the five learning outcomes articulated in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Essentially, the concrete manifestation of each of the five outcomes was the driver for this investigation. This paper reports on the findings specifically related to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) learning outcome two, *children are connected to and contribute to their world*. (DEEWR, 2009, p. 19).

## **Background and Context**

International research advocates for high quality early learning experiences for children from birth to eight years (Tayler, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004; McCain, Mustard & Shanke, 2007). In particular, research suggests that children who experience quality

education and care settings prior to compulsory schooling (birth to five years) have improved opportunities for success in later learning (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2006; Tayler, 2012). The Australian Government responded to this international research by enacting a policy ensemble known as The National Quality Framework, in 2009. A key driver in the lead up to the compilation of this policy ensemble, were the findings received by the Australian Government from the international report, Starting Strong II (OECD, 2006). The OECD (2006) report clearly illustrated that when compared with ‘like’ countries, Australia performed poorly in regards to investment in the early years, resulting in financial impact, and poorer outcomes, for future generations (Heckman 2007; Currie 2009). The National Quality Framework (2009) consisted of a number of initiatives, of which the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is one. In constructing the policy ensemble, the Australian Government attempted a shift in practice to explicitly promote contemporary perspectives of the child. To enable this shift in practice and the centre level, a paradigm shift across early childhood education in Australia was also required.

Historically, the responsibility for children’s education within Australia had been held by the school sector, and the childcare sector had held the responsibility for care (Childcare Act, 2007; School Education Amendment Bill, 2012). The National Quality Framework (Council Of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009) instigated the transition to view education and care as an integrated practice rather than as dichotomous constructs. The call to integrate education and care is the cornerstone of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) that states; “when educators establish respectful and caring relationships with children and families, they are able to work together to construct

curriculum and learning experiences relevant to children in their local context” (p. 11). The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) outlines that the practice of educators working with children aged birth to five years must comprise of elements of care and elements of education – the two are inextricably linked. This has implications for educators’ practices, as educators must work towards the five learning outcomes within a play-based approach to learning and development; simultaneously, there are also larger paradigm shifts involved that draw on contemporary perspectives of the child. The emergence of childhood as a time when children have rights – rights to play, to rest, to engage with the world around them, to learn; essentially to ‘belong, to be and to become’ underpin the policy changes led by the Australian Government.

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) proposed a reconceptualization of childhood and does so by drawing on The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Nations General Assembly, 1989) as well as the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). This reconceptualization of childhood involves a shift from the historical developmental perspective, one that held the view of a universal child and was premised on all children passing through stages of development at predetermined ages, to the view that children;

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. Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for educators to move beyond pre-

conceived expectations about what children can do and learn. This requires educators to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and abilities. (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9)

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) outcomes are a result of the Australian Governments initiative to ensure all children, aged birth to 5 years, experience opportunities to become successful learners, and as a result, become adults capable of actively contributing to the betterment of society. The move toward explicating specific outcomes for educators to attend to across the birth to age five setting also fulfilled the Australian Governments initiative to raise quality and consistency within the diverse context of childcare.

### **The Early Years Learning Framework Outcomes**

The five learning outcomes of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) Learning Outcomes.*

| <i>Learning Outcome</i> |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| <i>One</i>              | Children have a strong sense of identity                  |
| <i>Two</i>              | Children are connected with and contribute to their world |
| <i>Three</i>            | Children have a strong sense of wellbeing                 |
| <i>Four</i>             | Children are confident and involved learners              |
| <i>Five</i>             | Children are effective communicators                      |



Educators are tasked with providing opportunities for children to develop these five learning outcomes under the broader themes of the framework: Belonging, being and becoming. Learning outcome two which is the focus of this paper, *children are connected with and contribute to their world* (DEEWR, 2009), consists of two distinct, yet complementary constructs; the ability to feel connected and then the ability to contribute. It is recognised that children need a developed sense of connection to their world if they are to actively contribute to it and it is this ability to contribute that aligns explicitly with contemporary views of the child as having agency and voice. The findings from this investigation relate most specifically to educators' practices for promoting children's right to contribute.

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 26) explicates that outcome two is evidenced when children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation; when they can respond to diversity with respect and become aware of fairness in their journey to becoming socially responsible citizens who show respect for the environment. As an example, outcome two is addressed when children are able to express an opinion; build social experiences; take action to join in with others; cooperate and negotiate; contribute to decision making that affects them; 'read' the behaviours of others; and when they are able to respond positively to others (DEEWR, 2009). Outcome two is broad in its scope and as such, requires educators to be adept in recognising opportunities for children to develop these skills. This requires educators who are informed and who are intentional. Educators must discern moments for value-adding to spontaneous opportunities that arise and know when to construct intentional provocations.

Assisting children to develop outcome two of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is premised on educators understanding what the outcome encompasses as well as having a repertoire of strategies to achieve the outcome that also reflect the play-based practices which are advocated for within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

### **The Local Context**

The paradigm shift within early childhood and the changes to practice in the sector have resulted in rapid reform in childcare in Australia. A significant change within Western Australia has been the implementation of integrated service provision in the way of childcare services operating on existing school sites. These services are a derivative of the Australian policy ensemble to raise quality in the early years by bridging the education-care divide and it is these centres that formed the context for this research investigation. At the time this investigation was undertaken, approximately four centres were in operation within the Western Australian metropolitan area and whilst they operated under a variety of management models, each functioned as a service provider for the long day care of children. That is, these centres provided for children between the ages of birth and five years of age (prior to compulsory schooling settings).

### **Research Design**

The driving question for this research project was: How are the five learning outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) enacted by educators working with toddlers in school based childcare settings? Each outcome was a distinct focus of a five sided polygonian study

where the overarching research question related to five individual but connected elements which united in a holistic interpretation of the experiences of the child. In investigating such a multiplicitious research question, a qualitative research design was employed due to its focus on the views and experiences of participants and, as suggested by Creswell (2005), its suitability for studies that seek deep exploration of a phenomena.

As such, within the qualitative framework, this investigation was situated within the interpretivist paradigm and from a phenomenological perspective. The aim was to understand the lived, and shared, experiences of children with their educators in the context of school based childcare in relation to how educators applied their knowledge of the five EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) learning outcomes to their practice. The focus of the investigation was the concrete manifestation of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) learning outcomes, therefore the researchers observed the practice of the educator in affording children opportunities to develop each of the five learning outcomes.

### **Participants and Ethical Considerations**

An exhaustive sampling technique was used for this research project, whereby all four Western Australian metropolitan childcare centres located on school sites, and that catered for the long day care of children, formed the sample for this research project. At each centre a variety of rooms with differing ages of children existed. To maintain uniformity within the study, toddlers (2-3 year olds) were selected as the age group of focus. The selection of the toddler group was two-fold; firstly, the toddler group was represented at all centres and was clearly differentiated at all centres from the babies room (0-2 year olds) and from the more formal Kindergarten rooms (3 years and older); secondly, toddlers are largely under-represented in existing empirical studies that have

focused on educators' practices in connection with the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Existing literature has explored the inclusion of toddlers, as an age group, within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) document (Davis, Torr & Degotardi, 2015) as well as the contribution the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) makes to understandings of toddlers' social and emotional development (Salamon, 2011). The participant sample in this investigation comprised the educators and toddlers in the room at the time of the observation. Ethical approval was obtained from The University of Notre Dame, The University of Western Australia, Catholic Education Western Australia and the Education Department of Western Australia. Written informed consent was obtained from the centre directors, educators and the parents/guardians of the children involved. All data was de-identified and pseudonyms were assigned for the purpose of reporting the findings.

### **Data Gathering Strategies**

Observations were utilised as the data collection method to determine the practices of the educators in affording children the opportunity to develop across the five EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) learning outcomes. Observations were undertaken at each of the four centres, in each of the toddler rooms, on two occasions. These two separate observations were undertaken over a one month period, on non-consecutive days and included all aspects of the day (open, school hours, close). The research team comprised four investigators and each was allocated one learning outcome to focus their observations. An observational framework was constructed that contained features of the specific learning outcome. The observational framework was utilised as a means to focus the investigators' observation. The researcher observed the interactions and practices of the educator within the frame of the specific learning outcome. The researcher looked for instances where either the child or educator was working within the focussed EYLF (DEEWR, 2009)

learning outcome. The research then followed the interaction and recorded this as an observation on the observational framework.

### **Data Analysis**

The observations taken of the educators interacting with toddlers were thematically coded. The process of thematic coding is widely used as a method for identifying patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding is an iterative process whereby data, such as observational data, is repeatedly read to initially code topics as they arise. Following this initial coding process, topics are reviewed and defined as emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Aspects of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) learning outcome, in this case, aspects of learning outcome two, *children are connected with an contribute to their world*, were used to focus the initial coding process and subsequently assist with the grouping of items into themes. Thematic coding occurred by checking for items as they emerged in the observational data and then cross-checking the items presence in the aspects of learning outcome two. Items that connected to an aspect were then grouped together to comprise the emergent theme. Re-reading to add codes that may have been missed during the initial process, as suggested by Smith (2004), is a key feature of this form of data analysis.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The interpretive focus of this investigation was on the interpreted experience of the child. As such, findings are presented through vignettes, constructed from the observations taken by the researcher. The children's observed actions and words were used to construct the vignettes. Examples of this are provided within the findings. This form of data representation sits within the

narrative tradition and provided a theoretical and analytical tool to aid understanding such a complex issue (Wildy & Clarke, 2008a; Wildy & Louden, 2000). Narrative accounts, or vignettes, are creative reconstructions of observations and contain a title, theme, and some action over time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991). Vignettes can take the form of portraits, snapshots or composites (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Composites involve the construction of a vignette that illustrate a range of examples from the observational data, they are “an eclectic mix of instances...an amalgamation and reported as one fictional representation” (p. 959). Composite vignettes were constructed from the observations taken of the educator and contain the essential elements of the findings. To undertake this process from observation to vignette, raw observational data, once coded, were grouped according to theme. Once grouped, all observations within that particular theme were drawn upon to illustrate the key practices evidencing that theme.

Composite vignettes were subsequently composed from the voice of the child. Employing the voice of the child for the composite vignettes was premised on a view that vignettes “offer an invitation for the reader to step into the space of vicarious experience, to assume a position in the world” (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997, p. 72). In centralising the voice of the child, the essence of the observations, and their illustration of contemporary perspectives made manifest, were overt. Once constructed, vignettes along with the raw observational data were cross-checked by another member of the research team to ensure that each vignette was an authentic representation of the observational findings. The researchers were cognisant of the interpretative nature inherent in illustrating the voice of another. Consequently, it is necessary to acknowledge that the constructed vignettes reflect, to some extent, interpretation by the researcher (Ely et al., 1997). Furthermore, existing research that has utilised composite style vignettes to represent

observational data has suggested that when cross-checking, rather than questioning, ‘*is this a true account?*’ one should ask, ‘*can I trust this?*’ and ‘*does this resonate with me?*’ (Spalding & Phillips, 2007).

Vignettes are an established means of representing the voice of particular populations (Parry, 2007). In this investigation the specific population were educators working with toddlers in childcare. The choice to use the voice of the child in the vignettes represents a positionality of empowerment of young children as holding a central place within early childhood research. All four members of the research team are experienced childhood educators as well as researchers and employing the voice of the child as a means for reporting the findings represents the researchers’ interpretation of their experiences as educators work to implement current educational policy. Vignettes are an accessible form of data representation and can be capacity building (Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier & Pheasant, 2011), in this instance, capacity building for educators. Furthermore, presenting the findings through vignettes composed in the voice of the child was deemed, by the researchers, as a further attempt to advocate for contemporary perspectives of the child.

## **Findings**

In relation to outcome two of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), *children are connected with and contribute to their world*, three key themes emerged from the analysis of the observational data. Each of the themes revealed that educators’ practices aligned with contemporary perspectives of the child, as advocated for within the EYLF (DEEWR, 209). These three themes were; children’s right to agency; children’s right to choose; and children’s right to belong. Each of the themes is

presented below as a vignette, constructed from the observational data and composed from the voice of the child. The vignette seeks to serve as an illustration of the types of interactions that occurred between the educator and the child. The implications of these interactions are then explored following the vignette.

### **Children's Right to Agency**

The historical view of the 'universal child', one that develops according to set stages of developmental theory, is replaced with the contemporary notion of the child as capable and the view of childhood as a time in its own right. The capable child is described in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) as characterised by the right to agency, in stating that "children actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others' learning. They recognize their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their learning" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). The notion of agency aligns with the concepts of autonomy, identity development and self-efficacy (Duff, 2012; Gyogi, 2015). Agency is recognized as an internal construct concerned with an individual's ability to steer their own life (Caiman & Lundegård, 2014). The EYLF terms agency as, "being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one's world" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 45). At its core, agency is the ability to be active, to participate, to be in control, to initiate change and to make meaning in relation to one's own life. Literature suggests that the development of agency occurs as an internal capacity impacted by sociocultural contextual factors, such as the practices within a particular early childhood setting, as well as through spontaneous, everyday interactions (Gyogi, 2015). When children develop agency, it can make learning more meaningful and successful (Gyogi, 2015).



The vignette below illustrates the voice of a toddler engaged in the everyday routines of his room, led by the educator. The vignette is constructed from the children's observed actions and words. For example, observational findings included the action of a child holding up their bowl to the educator which was met with a response from the educator giving the child more food and the exchange of positive body language. This form of observational finding appears in the vignette to interpret the voice of the child. As an active contributor in his own environment, the vignette illustrates that he is developing his own sense of agency by communicating his needs.

### **The Right to Agency: Raul**

I am two years old and I am waiting for my lunch. I wait patiently. There are many children but they don't all wait quietly. I am hungry. We have sausages, mash and peas for lunch and I think it's yummy. I am very good at feeding myself with a spoon. I eat it all. Other children are making a mess and using their hands to eat, but that is okay because the educator and the help feed some children. Everyone is busily eating and there is not much talk. The educator asks "Who wants more food?" Because I think it's very yummy I let her know I want more by holding up my bowl. I have a few spoonfuls but I start to feel full, I can't finish it. I say "I'm full", but it's noisy and no-one hears me. I wait quietly. Suddenly I feel tired; I know we have nap time next. But I am ready now. We have to wash our hands after we eat before we go to sleep. So I move away from the table towards the hand-washing station. The educator says "Not yet" and I look at the floor and start to cry. I am ready to sleep. The educator understands me, and sees that I am ready now - she changes her mind; she lets me make my own choice to go to bed now. She bends down to me and says "It's okay" and then she wipes my hands. I take myself to my bed, I find my blanket there. It makes me feel happy. There is quiet music playing and I feel ready to sleep. I like it when I can express my needs and I am listened to.

Outcome two of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) requires educators to afford children opportunities to develop their sense of agency, and this is necessary if children are to be able to actively engage and participate in their world. In facilitating children to be active contributors, they must first be assisted to develop ownership over their own self, to feel empowered to use their ‘voice’ and to enact change. In the vignette, Raul exhibits the actions of a child developing both autonomy and agency. His agency is illustrated through his ability to communicate his needs, despite the actions of those that surround him. When not heard, Raul is able to find another means to communicate his needs in the absence of language, and so perseveres in requesting sleep time.

The example of Raul highlights that children are *agents of change* when educators are flexible and are working within a philosophy that *hears* the voice of the child. The vignette of Raul is an effective example of an educator promoting children’s active contribution to their world and for the developing toddler, this provides an environment that allows for belonging, being and becoming, as articulated in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). The example of Raul, in highlighting the flexibility of the educator, also draws attention to the use of routines and transitions. Routines and transitions provide signposts for what is to come and create a sense of security for the child. The educator in this vignette has clearly established routines and transitions that allow Raul to not only predict what is to come, but to then voice an opinion based on his needs and understandings of the routine – to be an *agent of change*.

### **Children’s Right to Choose**

The role of choice is fundamental in facilitating children's contribution to, and connection with, their world. Creating an early childhood context that promotes children's connection with and contribution to the world around them is premised on children possessing the capacity to make choices within their immediate context. The right to make choices about everyday events that affect them ensures children are visible and "raises their social status, improves outcomes for children and increases the accountability of the organisations effecting them" (King, 2013, p. 54). When children are provided with opportunities to engage in decision making, at any level, they are recognised as *being* capable in the here and now, rather than always *becoming* capable for the future (King, 2013). The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) articulates that children are competent individuals, capable of providing input into day to day decisions that impact upon them. In the early years, children's right to choose is demonstrated when, for example, they provide feedback about routines and transitions; make decisions about where to sit and with whom, what to eat and when to sleep; when children choose to engage with others and decide to join in group discussions. The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) explains that "when children participate collaboratively in everyday routines, events and experiences and have opportunities to contribute to decisions, they learn to live interdependently" (p. 25).

The following vignette expresses a scenario filled with choices. The toddlers in the vignette demonstrate their right to contribute to the world by actively making decisions that impact their immediate circumstance. The opportunity for choice is presented repeatedly by the educator, who encourages their participation. The vignette provides an example from the findings that educators actively practice the contemporary perspectives that are promoted within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). For example, observational findings provided information on children's facial expressions

and body language, along with their words, which were used to construct the vignette. A specific example of this is found in Lilly's vignette which describe the 'mean girl'. The body language and facial expressions of the child indicated their feelings of rejection which are portrayed in the vignette by referring to the 'mean girl'.

### **Children's Right to Choose: Lilly**

At fruit time I get to choose where I would like to sit. There are four tables to choose from and each has a big platter of fruit in the middle. On the platter there are; pears, oranges, strawberries, apples and pineapple. I go to sit at a table and the mean girl says I can't sit on that chair. For a minute I stand thinking, I'm not sure what to do. What the mean girl has said has made me feel sad and I might cry. Miss Mary sees me and she tells the mean girl that I am allowed to sit wherever I would like, and I decide that I will sit there anyway.

We use tongs to pick the fruit up from the platter and it takes a lot of concentration. I have to be so careful so as not to drop the fruit until it reaches my plate. I love pineapple. I have already eaten three pieces and can have another if I want. I watch the other children. Not everyone is eating; you don't have to eat now it's up to you. A couple of children are still playing with blocks. My attention is taken by Miss Mary - she says we have a mystery to solve. I like solving problems. Miss Mary holds up a pair of blue thongs "We have lost the owner of the thongs – who do these belong to?" I have a good look, but I don't know who they belong to. I know they are not mine. Tom calls out "they are Luke's" but Luke says "no" they are not his. Sally calls out "who doesn't have shoes on?" Miss Mary says "this is an excellent clue". "Aha! Sam has no shoes on" – they must be his. He has been so busy eating his fruit he has not even noticed the mystery unfolding. Problem solved – back to my pineapple.

The educator, Miss Mary, in the vignette is central to promoting outcome two of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). The scenario details a typical routine in a centre with toddlers. Rather than being an educator-directed routine, Miss Mary provides multiple opportunities for the children to participate in making choices. The children are active participants in the events of this meal time, rather than passive bystanders. The invitation to participate is central to engaging children in their right to make choices and is described by Lansdown (2011) as:

An ongoing process of children's expression and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them. It requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and requires that full consideration of their views be given, taking into account the child's age and maturity. (p. 3).

When educators construct opportunities for children to make choices, and when they are open to the change in routine that this may bring, then they are actually “putting the child at the heart of the educative process... [and this is]...the beginning of the child's right to voice their inherent potential and, in the process... become adults with an awareness that they have an equally progressive capacity as active citizens” (Ndofirepi & Cross, 2015, p. 236). The notion that agency and voice in childhood can lead to adults who become active citizens is central to contemporary perspectives of the child.

### **Children's Right to Belong**

Children's right to belong is a key theme in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and is described as follows, “belonging acknowledges children's interdependence with others on the basis of relationships defining identities. In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging” (p. 7). Concepts of relationship and attachment are closely linked to the

feeling of belonging. Literature explains that when children feel that they belong, that is, they have developed strong attachments to the carers in their lives, there are great educational advantages “because the safer and more comfortable children feel to come in to their educators, the more effective learners they will be when they go out to explore. The feeling that the educator is gladly being there’, to come back to, is what makes it possible for children to go out and learn” (Dolby, 2012, p. 26). Relationships are central to the notion of belonging and when “educators give priority to nurturing relationships and providing children with constant emotional support [they] can assist children to develop the skills and understandings they need to interact positively with others” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12).

Belonging aligns with outcome two of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) as the nature of children’s relationships and security underlie the ability to contribute, to being an active member of a community and to create and sustain friendships. For the developing toddler, belonging is demonstrated in the way they connect with each other, for example; in the way they join in or invite others to play; and through understanding the effect their actions have on others. The child who feels that they belong becomes competent in the nuances of interaction and readily explores and engages with their world (Dolby, 2012). When educators attend to children’s sense of belonging, they are providing a foundation for connection and for the developing ability to contribute. The following vignette encapsulates observational findings that illustrated educators facilitating children’s right to belong.

### **Children’s Right to Belong: Charlie**

There is a ball! It is big and red and bouncy. Miss Mary gestures that she is going to roll the ball to me and I smile back to let her know I am ready. The ball lands at my feet and I pick it

up and run away with it. It's my ball now. I do a full lap of the playground and then head back to the grass. It is nice and shady here for me to play with the ball. As I am playing, the ball rolls away from me and Tom kicks it back to me – I know he wants to play, we get into a game of 'to and fro', we kick and throw and bounce the ball to each other. We laugh and scream when we kick it too far, and it rolls into the sandpit on the other side of the playground. Tom and I are now friends, we look different but we like to do the same things. We decide to stay in the sandpit and play together. Here we find buckets and trucks, but the most exciting thing was a sand wheel, we could funnel the sand onto the wheel and it went around and around. We took turns tipping the sand in and spinning the wheel. Miss Mary always says "sharing is what friends do" and we are friends. We are having fun in the sand pit, and best of all – we still have the ball.

In order to contribute to their world, toddlers, like Charlie, need to feel that they do belong. In the vignette, Charlie is assisted by the educator to be an active participant in the play environment. Charlie is able to read the social cues of the educator, a person of familiarity, attachment and security. Furthermore, Charlie is able to move away from the educator to entice others into play – to explore, investigate and cooperate with others. Outcome two of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) proposes that educators can assist children's capacity to contribute by encouraging opportunities for child-initiated play and through the creation of environments that promote respectful relationships (DEEWR, 2009).

As with the previously discussed themes, the educator is fundamental to children's right to belong. The educator in this vignette is intentional in being barely present, knowing when to engage and when to allow the children their own opportunities for engaging in relationships and

play scenarios. The educator in this vignette is attuned to the needs of the children and illustrates the restraint required to truly hear the voice of the child. In essence, this vignette illustrates contemporary perspectives in action.

## **Conclusion**

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) makes a critical contribution to both a paradigm shift and a change in educators' practices within the childcare sector in Australia. In an attempt to raise both quality and consistency across birth to five years' settings, the Australian Government has articulated, within the framework, a philosophy and pedagogy for educators working with our youngest citizens. Clearly stated within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is the perspective that children are capable, confident and whom possess a right to agency and voice, all of which aligns with contemporary perspectives of the child. The research project described in this paper sought to understand the practices of educators working with toddlers in childcare centres located on school sites in metropolitan Western Australia. In particular, this paper reported findings from the concrete manifestations of outcome two, *children are connected with and contribute to their world* (DEEWR, 2009). The examples of the interactions observed between the educators and toddlers were illustrated within the constructed vignettes and these vignettes forecast a positive outlook for early years' education and care. The vignettes clearly draw attention to the pivotal role of the educator in empowering children's agency and voice, through developing their capacity to be active contributors. Educators were observed putting into practice the contemporary views of the child advocated for within the mandated EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). As a result of educators' informed and intentional practice, the toddlers observed were ambassadors of agency, choice and belonging.



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