Materialities of belonging in infant-toddler early childhood education and care

Jennifer Sumsion¹, Benjamin S. Bradley¹, Linda J. Harrison¹, Matthew Stapleton²

¹Charles Sturt University, Australia
²Centre Support, Australia

As its official title makes explicit, Australia’s national early childhood curriculum, Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (the EYLF) (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) foregrounds the motif of ‘belonging’. Despite the visibility of belonging, the EYLF provides little guidance, beyond the level of everyday explanations and understandings, about how belonging might or should be conceptualised. The risk that this complex phenomenon could be reduced to simplistic interpretations of, and practices aimed at supporting, young children’s sense of belonging in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings has been the impetus for our Babies and Belonging Study. The study is funded by the Australian Research Council’s Linkage Program (LP 130100067) and partner organisation, Centre Support.

Through case studies undertaken in four diverse ECEC sites across the Australian states of New South Wales and Queensland in contexts often deemed disadvantaged by mainstream socio-economic indicators, we have sought to document and gain a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which babies’ belonging might be understood, fostered and conveyed. We are also interested in how babies themselves might contribute to a creating a climate of belonging. The diverse disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical interests of our research team have enabled us to bring multiple interpretative lenses to the study. In this paper, we discuss work-in-progress towards understanding spacial/material aspects of babies’ belonging in two of the four case study sites: in an Aboriginal community in rural Queensland, and in a Western Sydney suburb with a high concentration of people from Arabic-speaking / Muslim backgrounds. In each of these contrasting sites, a doorway appears to play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging. In endeavouring to understand why this might be so, we are drawing on a range of theoretical resources, including concepts from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Keywords: belonging, early childhood education and care, materialities, babies, Early Years Learning Framework