



**MONASH** University

# **Troubling the Agentic Teacher: An Early Childhood Critical Autoethnography**

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## Abstract

This autoethnography is a critical examination of agency in early childhood education in Australia. Agency in early childhood education is framed as a humanist concept within the national curriculum *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* and positioned as something that is teachable and learnable through my teaching of children. Coming to this study, I thought I was an expert early childhood teacher who understood the importance of agency in my teaching and learning in my classroom: until I wasn't. Through my autoethnographic journey of critically examining my practices I came to question, disrupt, and inquire outside of educational agency's dominant humanist framing in early childhood education. But to do this I had to re-evaluate my own subjectivity as the teacher and also as a researcher.

Commencing this as an autoethnography that would critically engage with the cultural, social, and political positioning of agency within my practices, I was committed to making visible how my practices were able to make agency something that is teachable and learnable. One aspect of this critical engagement included undertaking a historical tracing of my own early childhood centre's early beginnings to better understand how and why a European tree had been planted as a central feature that was just known by all as The Kinder Tree. Through this tracing I became entangled with the social, cultural, and political configurations of early childhood education and its desire for agency when educating young children. This included examining the influence of current neoliberal policy agendas in early childhood education and their implications for agency for children but also for myself as an early childhood teacher. It also included an examination of the humanist practices that had become sedimented in my understanding and teaching of agency. Becoming entangled with the Kinder Tree, I engaged with autoethnographic practices of reading-writing-thinking to describe and analyse my personal-professional-social-political experiences as an early childhood teacher who thought she taught with agency. The result was an entanglement of forces that had me needing to re-learn, re-tell and re-search how agency in early childhood education had become something that children were able to possess.

Becoming entangled, I turned to post-qualitative and post-humanist theories as a theoretical framework to inform my ongoing autoethnographic writings. Methodology and method becoming entangled as I attend to the auto subject of this autoethnography as an *already-in relation* subject. Coming down from the branches of the Kinder Tree in an attempt to re-construct myself differently from the subject who thought she knew what agency was. This became a method of entering into complex, knotted and relational relationship with agency in early childhood education. It was a

process that brought to the forefront my entanglement with agency and the complexities as an early childhood teacher who thought she knew what it meant to teach with agency. Drawing on the Kinder Tree, the dissertation became a conceptual framework of three acts, In the Kinder Tree, Under the Kinder Tree and Below the Kinder Tree. This framework supported the telling of this autoethnographic journey of transformation. It brings to the fore my own tethering to the tree as well as the casting out through the Kinder Tree's agentic forces. By the third act it becomes an autoethnographic journey of transformation that permits an engagement with more generative conceptualisations of agency.

Surfacing agency as transformable from a fixed and outcome focused conceptualisation to a generative one when it is understood as inclusive of both human and non-human and affected by the material forces present within an early childhood classroom. In bringing agency into a new relationship with human-non-human relationalities I surface my uncomfortable entanglements with agency in early childhood education and then complexify agency through speculation and Worlding in my storying. The intent being to make space to imagine a more empowered future that can challenge humanist centred notions of agency with the hope that my becoming aware of agency's relational forces it might be possible to bring about change in how agency is positioned in early childhood education as purely humanist concept.

## Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

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Date: September 2024

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation has been a long game project; started in 2019 under the incredible support of Dr. Prasanna Srinivasan who rang me an hour after I wrote her an email saying I was a kindergarten teacher interested in furthering my studies. I would never have started let alone completed my thesis without her enthusiastic encouragement and her research and care greatly affected my dissertation journey. Prasanna introduced me to Dr. Linda Henderson and then when Prasanna retired, Dr. Damien Lyons who became my supervisory team. We formed a really engaged and dynamic trio that helped keep my upright and treading in the right direction! I always looked forward to my supervisor meetings; it was a safe space where we all shared ideas and thinking that challenged and engaged my work in new directions. Linda's ethical and critical engagement of my work was always challenging and resulted in pushing me to really think about what I was trying to say. Her respectful approach to keep me being critical and creative in my work made me work hard and made my writing better. Damien encouraged and asked curious questions that made me feel supported and understood as a new researcher. He championed my writing and made it feel like important research. Thank you for being part of my dissertation journey.

I had two supportive children at home that were excited to see me learning alongside them. We shared computer tips and had ripper discussions about ethics, research and my dissertation topic and they shared stories about their experiences as kinder kids. It has been a long slow road and they have been keen and encouraging supporters for over five years! Thanks Gaston and Esme!

Teaching in a kindergarten doesn't happen in isolation, I worked alongside a co-educator and major advocate of my dissertation. Thank you Zareen for the most incredible years of teaching in my career. Zareen, our classroom, and our ethical approach to teaching became an entanglement of exciting and innovating teaching that could never be replicated.

Working on a dissertation can feel like a lonely endeavour, I was less than a year in when COVID hit and my monthly trips across town to catch up in person at the university now moved online. Living in a small apartment with two children and in and out of isolation during COVID changed the nature of my research practices. It resulted in researching from home, searching for a quiet space to think and work but an isolated existence. However, I was never alone as I had the best study buddy in the form of my small pug Mona. Curled up under my feet or next to me as I worked on my laptop in corners of the apartment. She made it feel like a joint venture thanks to her comfort and presence. She chewed on corners of my research journal and tried to get in between me and the laptop for the best warm

spot to curl up. She did not mind the hours of work, just content to be by my side. Mona died six months before I finished my dissertation, and her presence was sorely missed and still is. Writing up my dissertation without her at my feet was extremely hard. Her contribution to my time spent throughout my PhD candidature could never be measured and I had to really feel it after her death.

Last of all, I acknowledge and give thanks to the Kinder Tree. The Kinder Tree's affect on my work is undeniable. A source of comfort and a challenge to my very being, the Kinder Tree made my dissertation something that I was proud to hand in.



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## Table of Contents

Copyright Notice .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Declaration .....	v
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Table of Contents .....	viii
List of Figures .....	xi
Preface.....	1
The Kinder Tree Collage .....	5
The Kinder Tree .....	6
Changing Conditions.....	9
The Kinder Tree’s Branches.....	10
Children of the Kinder Tree .....	11
The Kinder Tree as Community .....	12
Leaping from the Kinder Tree’s Branches .....	12
Program: The Agentic Early Childhood Teacher’s Dissertation .....	14
Act One: In the Kinder Tree .....	15
Act Two: Under the Kinder Tree.....	17
Act Three: Below the Kinder Tree .....	18
The Principal Actor and Background Information .....	19
The Agentic Kindergarten Teacher and Researcher Sitting in the Kinder Tree .....	22
Understanding Curriculum Agency Through Historical Philosophies .....	30
Setting the Scene.....	30
Curriculum and Policy as Influence on Practice .....	31
The Historical Forming of Childhood and Education Through Philosophy and Institutes of Education.....	34
<i>Historical Forming of Concepts of Education .....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Infant Schools and Free Kindergartens .....</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Twentieth Century Education and Beyond.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Posthumanism and New Materialism.....</i>	<i>46</i>
Agency Positioned as Truths Through Curriculum .....	47
My Agency Truth .....	49



Critical Engagement with the EYLF .....	50
Convention on the Rights of the Child. ....	51
The Agentic Teacher Surfacing a Troubled Agency .....	53
The Agency Researcher Surfacing a Troubled Agency .....	55
<b>The Early Childhood Teacher and Researcher who Knew Agency .....</b>	<b>57</b>
An Interval .....	57
<b>Critically Understanding Agency Through Literature and Acts of Agency.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Setting the Scene.....	60
Critically Questioning my Teacher/Researcher Self .....	60
Theoretical Habitus in Researching Agency .....	63
Teaching and Researching as Performance in Classrooms .....	64
Capturing Agency in my Classroom .....	66
Acts of Agency .....	67
<i>Observation</i> .....	67
<i>Analysis</i> .....	67
<i>Thinking</i> .....	68
<i>Observation</i> .....	69
<i>Analysis</i> .....	69
<i>Thinking</i> .....	70
<i>Observation</i> .....	71
<i>Analysis</i> .....	71
<i>Thinking</i> .....	72
<i>Observation</i> .....	74
<i>Analysis</i> .....	74
<i>Thinking</i> .....	74
Questioning Acts of Agency as Agentic .....	75
An Agentic Change in Direction.....	76
Researching Children’s Agency.....	77
Agency Researcher Questioning Research .....	81
<b>An Autoethnography of an Agentic Teaching Life Lived .....</b>	<b>84</b>
Setting the Scene.....	84
Emerging Methodology From Within the Inquiry .....	85
How did Autoethnography Emerge?.....	88
What Autoethnography Offered my Inquiry .....	90

Genres of Autoethnography.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Critical Autoethnography .....	91
Critiques and Ethical Concerns .....	91
Identity, Autoethnography and the More Than Human ‘I’ .....	94
Post Qualitative Inquiry .....	96
Storying, Speculation and Making as Method .....	98
Conclusion .....	100
<b>A Kindergarten Teacher and Researcher Sitting Under the Kinder Tree.....</b>	<b>102</b>
An Interval .....	102
<b>Emerging Understandings of Relational Agency Through Lively Stories.....</b>	<b>107</b>
Setting the Scene.....	107
Lively Stories as Unguarded Writing from the Classroom.....	108
<i>Lively Story One</i> .....	111
Children and Risks of Romantic Fall Recovery Narratives in Complex Histories.....	115
The Kinder Tree as a Silent Colonised Resource .....	118
<i>Lively Story Two</i> .....	122
Thick Descriptive Writing .....	124
<i>Lively Story Three</i> .....	126
The Kinder Tree as an Educational Resource .....	128
<i>Lively Story Four</i> .....	131
Lively Stories as Emerging Notions of Relational and Entangled Agency .....	132
<b>Relational Ontologies and New Materialist Methodologies .....</b>	<b>138</b>
Setting the Scene.....	138
Relational Ontologies .....	139
New Materialism .....	139
<i>New Materialism in Childhood Studies</i> .....	143
<b>Remnants of Play as Affective Speculations of Agency .....</b>	<b>148</b>
Setting the Scene.....	148
Materialities Post-Play.....	149
Photographs of Remnants of Play as Evidence of Learning .....	149
Documentation and Assessments as Boundary Making Practices.....	150
Remnants of Play as Speculative Fabulations and Analysis .....	153
Figured Worlds Within Early Childhood Education and Care.....	155
Speculative Fabulations as Method and Analysis .....	159

Affect .....	163
Material Figurations as Analysis and Discussion .....	164
<i>Dolls-Figured Fragile-Potential as Strong Babies</i> .....	164
<i>Wheelbarrow-Sustainability—The Anthropocene Child</i> .....	167
<i>Inter-Action as a Dog on a Toilet</i> .....	169
<i>Flower Soup as Affirmative Speculations</i> .....	172
Speculation and Storying Changing Practice .....	174
<b>Kindergarten Teacher as Researcher Digging Below the Kinder Tree .....</b>	<b>176</b>
An Interval .....	176
<b>Posthuman Agency as Speculative and Worlding .....</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>Conclusion: The Dangers of Teaching Outside the Curriculum .....</b>	<b>185</b>
Researching Agency in the Australian Early Childhood Sector .....	185
<i>Troubled Agency</i> .....	186
Emerging a Post-Qualitative Kinder Tree Framework.....	187
Inquiring with Post-Qualitative Methods.....	189
The Dangers of Teaching Inside but Desiring to Teach Outside of Curriculum.....	191
Curriculum Glimmers .....	192
Posthuman Research Impacting Affective Teaching Outside of Curriculum.....	193
Limitations of Agency Inquiring.....	194
Agency in Early Childhood Education: A Rallying Cry for Change .....	196
<b>References .....</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>223</b>
Appendix A—Children—Explanatory Statement & Consent Form .....	224
Appendix B—Families—Explanatory Statement & Consent Form.....	227
Appendix C—Colleagues—Explanatory Statement & Consent Form.....	230
Appendix D—The Service—Explanatory Statement & Consent Form .....	234

## List of Figures

Figure 1 The Kinder Tree .....	14
Figure 2 Glew Street Pit .....	117
Figure 3 Cornwell Pottery Brunswick Vase .....	119
Figure 4 The Wheelbarrow Babies.....	153
Figure 5 The Tiny Toilet.....	157

Figure 6 Flower Soup .....	161
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## Preface

I commenced my doctoral studies writing a critical autoethnography so I could surface my personal experiences of teaching and understanding agency within the wider socio-political context of the early childhood sector in Australia. The intent being to write a dissertation that would critically develop an understanding of the beliefs, values, practices, and identities that had constructed and formed agency within my own practices as an early childhood teacher (Adams et al., 2022). It was designed as an inquiry that would be a personal and liberatory work to challenge and question the intersecting power dynamics, inclusive of theoretical and critical perspectives and be presented alongside my individual lived experiences as a classroom teacher (Iosefo et al., 2021; Reed-Danahay, 2020). A qualitative critical autoethnography to capture and understand agency within my teaching and understanding of the early childhood sector from within my classroom.

As I developed this criticality into how I understood agency, I began questioning the notions of the nature of *knowing agency* and then *learning with agency* within my own teaching. What this meant was I took a critical turn in my research. I found myself being pulled into something other as the concept of agency cannot be closed off and contained in language as I felt that the meaning always escapes (St. Pierre, 2018). Agency was emerging as something unknowable and out of my control. This revelation pulled me to stop researching it as if it was containable or knowable. I found myself questioning the conceptualisation of agency as a human centric concept that my curriculum teaching and early research had led me to believe.

Therefore, I started questioning how I had formed myself and my relationship with agency both as a teacher and as a researcher. I started asking myself: how had I become a humanist subject, self-contained, autonomous, and agentic subject in a liberalist construction? I had a deep sense of my teacher-self that contributed to a subject formation of separation from my students. It came with a sense of grandiose and posturing (Braidotti, 2013), a separation of mind and body arising from a need to control and perform like I believed I would be rewarded with the carrot dangled in front of me if I was such an exemplary teacher. to be. My agency practices felt so like conceptualisation of agency performances that I was beginning to question my research. I was also feeling this way within my research methodology. The need for a preconceived linear methodology risked positioning me as a researcher with a sense of posturing to generate what was already known, resulting in predetermined methodology and the predetermined agency teacher beginning to dissolve. My classroom curriculum performing observations of agency confirmed and performed

the humanist, self-contained and autonomous subject positioning of agency however I believed that there was *other* agency felt in my classroom.

This revelation troubled my (so called) critical autoethnography and made me rethink not only my relationship with agency in my teaching but in this very act of doing a critical autoethnography that was about my relationship with agency and my teaching and researching self. Reading St Pierre helped me imagine that there might be worlds other than the one described by liberal humanism and the opportunities to investigate those worlds with post-qualitative inquiry took my inquiry in a different direction (St. Pierre, 1997b). The more I probed my encounters in the classroom and the intricate fabric of the everyday, the more I began to question agency as meaning-making entities in my teaching and research. Emerging the desire to inquire into other agency worlds in my classroom, ones that permitted a reposition of agency away from its humancentric conceptualisation in early childhood education. This pushed my inquiry further away from a qualitative paradigm.

Within an education system that positioned my teaching role as to deliver an educational program and measure its success, the lack of regard for the day-to-day experiences left me feeling excluded from my own teaching practice (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Langford & Richardson, 2023). I began to fear that I was being told how I must see and how I must do in my practice and research into agency and contribute to research to be *scientific* and add to *what works* through qualitative research methods (St. Pierre, 2014). I became concerned that I risked understand my doctoral journey like I had understood teaching, a journey of skill acquisition and one where the value of research skills to stakeholders is promoted as the most important outcome (Gravett, 2021; Taylor, 2020). Agency as purely skill acquisition aligned with neoliberal discourse that also promoted liberal thoughts of the agentic individual who could get ahead of others with the right agentic actions, concepts that I was actively resisting. It felt like my experiences; my values, encounters, knowledges, and motivations were not important and did not really matter in teaching and learning in my early childhood classroom. My critical autoethnography kept shifting and changing and it no longer met the questions I was asking myself. My dissertation dissolved and emerged as something else.

A post-qualitative autoethnography that also questions the nature of knowing and learning emerged from within my inquiry. I now understood that I was not detached, all-knowing nor purely objective as I was a non-unitary and non-universal subject (Adams et al., 2022; Anderson & Harrison, 2010). I could assume multiple subject positions that were both recognisable, foreign, and new (Andersson, 2020) and I moved outside of qualitative methodologies. Post qualitative offered a different and generative space in my inquiry, permitting the compelling and insightful accounts from

within my classroom to be thought about as more than just skill acquisition or refining teaching practices.

I stepped away from my teacher interpretation of agency as narrow actions that fit or did not fit the definition of agency in curriculum and instead, I went broader. I inquired historically into my nearly one hundred-year-old service alongside the conceptualisation of agency used in curriculum today. I brought in the political realms that influence teaching and learning such as neoliberalism and political sway in developing curriculum. Furthermore, I brought in my own social experiences from within my classroom that I would not have previously thought were ‘research data’ and used them to entangle my inquiry. This opened up my “writing *[as]* thinking, writing *[as]* analysis, [and] writing *[as]* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967) and encouraged experimentation with agency over trying to define it. My classroom research emerged differently as method and methodology became entangled as the already in relation to the construction of different subjects of knowledge (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). I moved further away from a linear and predetermined research methodology and into a post qualitative methodology; I had no explicit instructions, and this liberty became a tool to navigate and could turn into anything. Yet, having such an experimentative methodology implied hope and was therefore everything “no-thing, any-thing, every-thing” (Bodén & Gunnarsson, 2020, p. 5). My classroom research as experimentative motivated and excited me in ways that I could not know or predict and led to generating different knowledge and thinking about agency in my early childhood classroom.

Without explicit instructions I could begin to shake off the sensation of having become a humanistic subject who taught agency from a distance, I began to imagine an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013)— *new materialist* inquiry acknowledging all manner of bodies, objects and things surfaced the connectivity of meaning-making with matter as lively (Taylor & Iverson, 2013). As I questioned my learning, formation, and performance as an early childhood teacher my dissertation emerged differently. I inquired outside of the sensations of how I must see and do as an agentic early childhood teacher, I emerged a desire to interfere with the norms of dissertation writing and wanted to interrupt widely accepted notions of learning as linear pathways to both teaching and researching which resulted in a fixed end-point (Gravett, 2021). I wrote a dissertation that reflects and acknowledges the irregular, fluid and messy experiences of my doctoral journey (Gravett, 2021). I lean into the opportunity to write a dissertation that emerged as creative, generative, and outside of the rules and expectations that I began to question as bounding agency. Traditionally, doctoral studies are defined by the

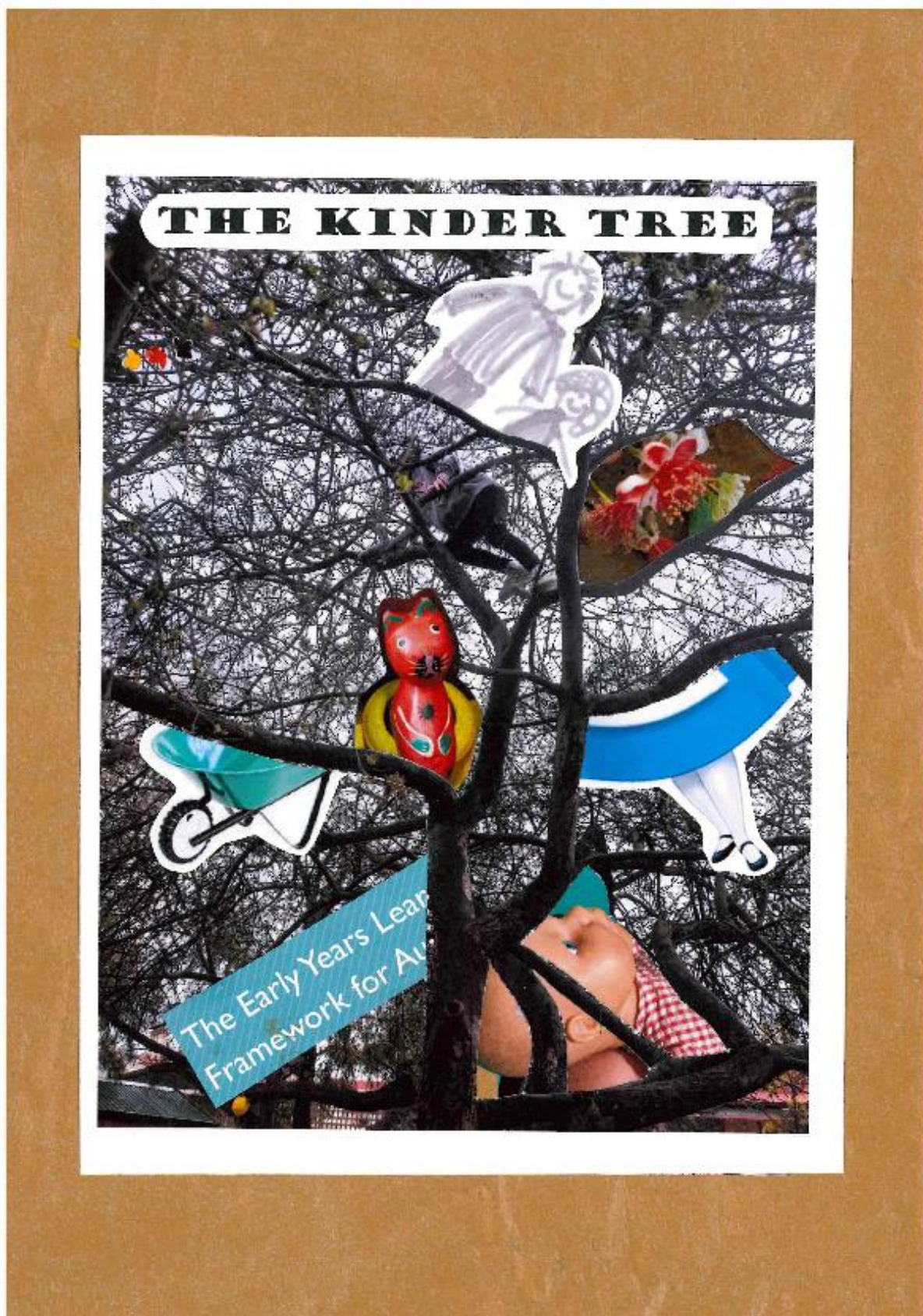
application of the pre-existing, a compact process characterised by aims, rules and expectations (Honan & Bright, 2016), however my inquiry emerged as I questioned conceptualisations of agency as already thought of and as part of shaking up my own thinking. This led me to eschew traditional styles and structures and my dissertation became a body of work that goes against preconceived notions of dissertation writing.

My inquiry, recounts the experiences from within my classroom as performances and performances permit something new always coming into sight and displaces what was previously certain and seen (Denzin, 2014). I have divided my dissertation stories into three acts, where each act subdivides sections of a performance. Drawn from a conceptual framework that emerged from my time spent under a Crab Apple tree in the centre of my workplace, these three acts represent different positions of teaching. Throughout my dissertation I affectionately refer to this tree as the *Kinder Tree*. I spent hundreds of hours in, under and below this tree and these three positionings of In the Kinder Tree, Under the Kinder Tree and Below the Kinder Tree reflect the developments of my thinking, teaching, and researching throughout this dissertation process. Within each act, I further subdivide with a setting and closing of the scene within each section to provide signposting. These three distinct acts reflect the messy, irregular, and fluid transformation that I went through. First as an In the Kinder Tree, the confirmed and all-knowing agentic teacher who thought she thrived in the early childhood sector. Secondly as an Under the Kinder Tree, emerged the troubled and questioning inquirer of the normative and dominant configuration of agency teaching in my classroom. Thirdly as an Under the Kinder Tree, the dissolved and reconstituted posthuman teacher who now felt in relation and not needing a sense of in control of agency.

Throughout the performance, I take regular intervals breaks where I share what it is like as an early childhood teacher and researcher sitting in the various positionings within the Kinder Tree, the intermissions were a space and time to self-reflect on the teacher and/or researcher as our thinking changed. They became part of the work my make myself visible through performance, performance writing and through my presence in the world of early childhood teaching (Denzin, 2021). The three acts of storying reflect the doing, affirmation, and my capacity to transform my conditions that generated a new place to shake up my limiting and fixed notions of agency that I practiced. I start my dissertation by introducing the reader to the Kinder Tree.



## The Kinder Tree Collage



## The Kinder Tree

When you step outside of any of the thresholds that bring you out into the kindergarten yard, the Kinder Tree draws you to it. Its presence in the centre of the yard lures your eyes toward it. In the busyness of an early childhood outdoor play space—all in-movement and, noise pummeling your senses—the Kinder Tree embodies a sense of effortless calm cocooning the outdoor space. Part of the living ecology of the kindergarten's back garden The Kinder Tree is integral to my early childhood service—entangled in the children's play, imbedded as an essential outdoor resource used by the educators to teach. The Kinder Tree became the conceptual framework for my dissertation into agency in this urban Australian early childhood service and over the last five years a place where I sat and thought about my relationship with agency.

The Kinder Tree, an ornamental crab-apple tree, sits in the middle of the kindergarten yard and covers a vast amount of the space with its outstretched branches. A *settler* tree so to speak but not a *native*. The Kinder Tree displays deep purple leaves and a mass of white-pink flowers when in full bloom which attracts all the local bee colonies. It blooms in early spring and is a deciduous tree planted in the 80s as the kindergarten yard had a large refurbishment. Crab-apple trees can grow to up to 10 meters in height, however, the Kinder Tree reaches up about 4 meters towards the sun. It was fast to establish, upright even when young but has filled out to become more rounded with age.

The Kinder Tree draws you up into it, inviting you to explore sensations from within its heights and look out through its branches. When up off the ground and perched in the tree looking down on the surrounds, perspectives differ. When sat in its branches, observing below people and objects seem squashed, smaller, and differently shaped. You feel apart from them as you observe, looking out over spaces into the distance that you cannot see from the ground. You feel aloof and almighty from new heights and experience flighty sensations of danger.

The Kinder Tree also encourages you to sit under it at ground level and be part of the activities happening around the yard. You feel enveloped, embraced by its branches that cast out above your head. It is offering a protected place to experience the goings-on in the busy, bustling, and noisy yard when kindergarten is in session. While resting under the Kinder Tree's branches, your back pressed to its trunk you feel a part of the energy of the yard. You can observe play, action, and interaction at eye level from this central position, supervising the yard and providing opportunity to dart off and be a part of the action at any moment.

Furthermore, if you scratch around at the Kinder Tree's base there are different life forms, remnants, and tracks that prompt you to wonder about what is under the Kinder Tree. Animal tracks, snaking roots, diggings, and hole like burrows draw you to ponder the *Under the Kinder Tree* systems. Cool, dark, and often less explored, a hidden network of lifeforces, symbioses and entangled root systems rich with nutrients yet, often undervalued for their contribution.

My meandering dissertation emerged from contemplating these three layers of above, on the ground and below the Kinder Tree. They became a framework for understanding my transformational journey as a kindergarten teacher inquiring into my understandings and practice of the concept of agency in this complex sector of Australian early childhood education. Originally, I believed this dissertation would be straight forward and linear, however, the more I uncovered about agency the more it challenged my beliefs and required me to stay with the trouble to see what else I might uncover about agency in early childhood education.

At the beginning of this research journey, the Kinder Tree came with a sense of being up in its branches; an early childhood teacher perched above on a branch, legs dangling down toward the children that I taught. A teacher who taught agency from above; I sat up in the Kinder Tree, looking down, separate and distant from the children as I taught an agency which I understood as defined and hooked up to silos of learning through curriculum and policy. A good girl teacher I knew what agency was, how to teach it and follow the path constructed for and with me to teach an agency that I perceived as defined as straightforward and teachable. There were linear processes of right or wrong to my agency interpretation and as the teacher I was responsible for dishing out the rewards or punishments to hold the line of this agency's conceptualisation. I sat apart up in my tree, personifying a disconnected power filled permission giver and observer of the classroom. As I became aware of this positioning it became a lonely, repetitive, and unimaginative place. Therein began an entangled process of reading, thinking, and writing as I questioned this agency's conceptualisation, how it was practiced in my classroom and what else it might be.

As I delved into notions of agency, my research urged me to look deeper into my own practices living in my classroom experiences. I had to confront my emerging sense of apart-from-children resulting from my interpretation of curriculum led teaching of agency. I felt a sense of deflation as I came to understand that my performance of curriculum agency conformed my agency practices in certain ways and did not reflect how I experienced agency in my classroom. This confrontation with myself as the teacher who performed an interpretation of curriculum agency but no longer wanted to, led to the affective urge to vigorously shake the Kinder Tree I occupied. Shaking out of the ways of teaching and understanding agency I had held onto so tightly I observed



them fall to the ground alongside agency complexities surfaced in the process. Configurations of educational agency emerged as more complex than just fixed definitions and rewarded agentic practice while other more complex notions such as colonisation, neoliberalism, and government agendas surfaced as affecting agency's development.

Layers of agency all intertwined, without hierarchy, a pile of agency leaf litter rich with complexity that I could not ignore as an agentic early childhood teacher and researcher now littered the ground under the Kinder Tree. Ultimately, it resulted in my fall from the Kinder Tree. I fell with a giant plop onto my bum, legs outstretched in front of me. I felt bruised and confused not knowing who I was as an agentic teacher anymore. I sat within this pile of agency leaf litter, and I began to look out from a new variable and unpredictable perspective reimagining agency as I knew it. Now on the ground under the Kinder Tree became a space to rethink agency at eye level and in relation to the children that I teach. What emerged is an agency that is complex and entangled and a changed understanding of myself in relation to that agency. Stripping back notions of teaching and learning agency in linear ways and stepping back from the idea of teachers teaching agency to some or that it can be taught at all, I was still understanding agency as it related to the children and myself. as shifting networks of connections to human though the beginnings of thoughts of agency existing outside human agency troubled in the background. This thinking felt generative and explorative pulling me further away from focusing on human agency.

Thirdly, as I sat there on the ground I began the unsettling and unhinging process of rethinking my own positioning as an agentic teacher. I had my back pressed up against the Kinder Tree to tether me to it as my fingers explored the ground under my body. My fingers felt and scratched at it; it got under my fingernails, emerging new sensations, textures, and smells resulting in a deep sense of letting go along with a desire to want to dig even deeper. Exploring under the Kinder Tree meant confronting the unknown and possibly the unknowable things agency might encompass. I confronted my teacher-self and an agency conceptualisation founded in humanist creation and thinking where the human sat up in that tree and provided defined conditional agency. Here, down under the Kinder Tree's ground, agency emerged as networks, with human and non-human affected by its pulses and forces. An entanglement rather than a hierarchy agency related to and affected by not only the human but the non-human and the more than human as well. This was hard, the Kinder Tree was challenging me to move past conventional modes of research and teaching to dig into the root systems, following different lines of thinking and practices with agency not bound by humanism, or my deeply ingrained definition of agency based on outcomes.

Over five years, the Kinder Tree became an all-consuming focus of my thinking, reading, and writing and a living presence throughout my dissertation. The Kinder Tree provided a rich layering to my dissertation practices and became a locus to question my teaching and research practices. It also became like a tether as I experimented and inquired far from agency. The framework helped me focus on the inquiry at hand while allowing exploration of meanderings and curiosities further afield. Together, the framework and the Kinder Tree afforded opportunities to understand agency differently.

## Changing Conditions

On scorching hot summer days, we spend hours under the Kinder Tree's branches, often on a rug surrounded by books that we read to each other and all that surrounds us. I spend the morning before the children arrive hosing down the yard and spraying the Kinder Tree to try to hold the cool in its shade for the long day ahead. The tree often displays barefoot feet dangling down from its branches as the children enjoy stories from the sanctuary of two meters in the air. Those who choose to climb it get to experience being part of its eco-system; including but only scratching at its surface, together with the different animals that live in it. The bees come and go at various times of the year, along with the shouts of *"you might want your shoes on, the bees are here and are thirsty!"*

We previously had an Australian ringtail possum make a nest in the Kinder Tree, and it lived there for some time. We occasionally see the local community of possums first thing in the morning as we ready the yard and clean up their droppings each day. There can be one or two staring down at us as they return to their nests, questioning why we are in their home. They certainly love the variety of foods that they discover in the yard each night when they wake to explore under the cover of darkness. In the Kinder Tree, the children constantly climb up to be closer to the old yet now abandoned possum nest trying to peer into it. They often ask questions about it while their feet are on tiptoes yet firmly planted on the Kinder Tree's branches. The previous possum cleverly made the nest out of reach of curious fingers. The Kinder Tree is its own ecological system that has become entangled with children and education due to its placement within an early learning service.

The yard under the Kinder Tree holds layer upon layer of bodily materials, including several skeletons of dead possums that we buried in the yard. They nourish the tree from under the soil. A worldly ecosystem out of reach, like a dark earthy undertow, churning, decomposing, and recomposing rich nutrients that often thrive best when undisturbed by human intervention. This network of different happenings, became a worldly place of imaginative wonderings to my reading,

thinking, and writing. A space of agency configurations yet to be or not always knowable but appealing as I questioned my teacher-self, alongside my teaching practices.

The Kinder Tree provides both light and shade over the year. It protects our eyes in the summer glare, providing dappled shade, then drops all its leaves in winter allowing winter sun to creep across the yard during those shorter days. It affects the rhythms and rituals that punctuate the year within the service's outdoor activities. It affects my practices and the learning I offer; practices touted as agentic learning, yet often ignoring the Kinder Tree's contribution to agency understandings. In the cooler months that extra sunshine is always welcome especially after sitting in the sandpit's cold wet sand with bare feet for three hours straight or with a group of children or as we sit around a small winter campfire cooking soup. I understood the Kinder Tree as a provider— a learning tool for education, a resource much like a doll, block, or paintbrush. An instrument for learning. I used the Tree and its seasonal changes to teach European seasons as the year passed. I positioned it as a resource for practicing *risky play*, a learning outcome where children engaged in more dangerous physical activity regulated with safe practices. The Kinder Tree offered an example for learning about the natural world and for categorising inhabitants, understood as outside of humans. These examples highlight a certain scope of learning and teaching that I subscribed to and understood as contemporary practice—a European tree, and European seasons in a European education system. Such teaching and learning meant knowing (or not knowing) explicit outcomes that demonstrated progress and growth. I practiced approaches to teaching and learning that fulfilled policy and curriculum, adhered to teachings that separated learning into individual outcome focused silos which resulted in overlooking connections between human and non-human entangled relationships as forces of agency.

## The Kinder Tree's Branches

Another Kinder Tree focal point is its branches. They provide an abundance of interest. The opportunity to hang various climbing equipment, ropes, swings, hammocks, or craft creations made by the children. Often, I come across two children folded like kangaroo joeys in a pouch of a homemade lycra hammock hanging from the Kinder Tree with the children not really sure how to extract themselves! Moreover, I love observing the thrill on the children's faces as they launch out swinging on a rope tied to the Kinder Tree's branches, swinging under and with the support of the tree. I have to constantly remind the children to be careful as they love flinging the empty rope around and more often than not this entangled child- tree-rope spun the rope back around directly at the children! This paradox of complex and entangled relationships with the Kinder Tree emerge in my storying, yet this is not the learning expected to be documented and presented as evidence of

agency learning. These lively and dynamic stories filtered through curriculum and policy are reduced, redacted, and ticked or crossed to fit into the learning silos required to produce the best practice early childhood agency teaching as defined by the sector. I was the tree's oxygen filter, required to reduce the Kinder Tree to a learning apparatus, to reducing relationships and children's dynamic doings to how they link to learning and development outcomes filtering out the impurities and differences to produce a certain type of child and a certain type of teacher in a certain type of education system.

## Children of the Kinder Tree

Children did not know or care about curriculum and outcomes, although some understood that systems of permission and reward; reward for those who understand the systems more. Children make their own configurations of tree-child-education that constantly challenge my desire to be the best practice curriculum agency teacher. I elaborate with an example. The children have learnt where we keep the long-handled brooms used to sweep up the yard, brooms meant to move around all that sand, tanbark, leaves and human litter that make the yard too messy for a learning environment. Everything in its place for the perfect presentation of an expected early childhood service's outdoor yard. Tools of the early childhood trade, the children use them differently, such as when they have their kite or paper plane stuck in the Kinder Tree's leafy branches. Brooms become impromptu ladders, as the system considers real ladders too dangerous for children. The children learnt that with these top-heavy brooms the brush end needs to be held downwards and only the pointy bit should be sent up to poke at their lost item or they risk the brush end plopping down on their heads due to the brush's heavy weight. The children poke at their trapped object, and it quickly draws a crowd of followers who have their own ideas on how to get it down or just want turns at waving the broom in the tree. Frowning and worried teacher faces define these practices. Therefore, they often become practices hidden from teacher prying eyes, when adult backs are turned. Finally, the plane floats down and we go back to what we were doing before but being entangled a little more in a materiality-tool-tension with the tree and what it means to feel agency.

How am I to manage and control my practices when the children do not want to be part of curriculum and outcomes that they have no part in designing or desiring in the first place? It was becoming clear that the agentic practices and understandings I had developed had been hooked up to systems I had not really understood defining notions of agency that promoted certain types of practices and then shunned others, even when they were child led, defined notions of agency that were explicit to what sort of human I was to produce in my teaching and for what world. I question if *this child* present in my classroom was there in my teacher training at university. Had curriculum

defined agency become so imbedded in the systems of education that agency practices had reduced to only what fitted into the definition of agency used in education? I began to question the very notion of how agency is positioned, understood, and taught in my contemporary world of trying to be the best teacher I could be.

## **The Kinder Tree as Community**

The Kinder Tree not only sits in a bubble of children's entanglements it has to contend with the broader kindergarten community events. The annual kindergarten fete pits the Kinder Tree up against a rubbing bouncy castle for eight hours straight as it only just fits squished up against the Kinder Tree. The smells envelop it and scraps of sausage sizzles, cake stalls, and falafel burgers fall onto its soil. During musical concerts parents stand often stooped under its lantern filled branches watching the stage. Children and families perch on child sized furniture throughout numerous community events held each year. Many children spend these events up the tree with their parent fretting if that is ok without the safety of a gym mat underneath. As technically the Kinder Tree is outside the kindergarten walls risk assessments permit children to climb the tree satisfying safety and regulation. Curriculums need to teach children about the natural world as contemporary perspectives on childhood are now pondering technology and urban lifestyles as lost childhoods thereby emerging concepts such as the nature-child and the need for nature programs to rectify these human constructed problems. This proposition feels hooked up to political positionings of children as not fully formed and in need of development to become what is desired on their behalf intimating that curriculum knows what is best for children. A form of outside of the walls of early childhood services also emerges as an outside-of rather than alongside with the children whose lives are being affected by these decisions.

## **Leaping from the Kinder Tree's Branches**

The children launch themselves from the thicker connecting branches of the Kinder Tree, jumping down with a moment of complete air-born exhilaration onto a big red gym mat. This is an absolutely thrilling act performed over and over again in the Kinder Tree. Each year the children think that they have discovered it for the first time, forgetting seeing it at the fetes and family events in previous years. The sensation of being hidden up high in its branches, the tree's leaves keeping bodies out of adult view together with the rush of having children and adults walk under you, while you occupy your perch experiencing a first-hand bird's eye view. Eye to eye with the ecosystem that lives within the Kinder Tree, the buzz of the bees, the trace of the possum, the warmth of the tree branch under curled hand and foot offering a different perspective and often a safe and quieter



place for some children in the busyness of the yard. Children sit there for hours on end, engrossed in their own thing, arms and legs wrapped around the branches, giving, and taking as intra-action with the Kinder Tree, entangled and embodied. The multiplicity of learnings; existing's made possible through more than human connection offering more than any learning rubric could possibly prescribe. I want to be a part of it too. I no longer want to subscribe to being that teacher in that form. I want to launch myself from the branches of the Kinder Tree exhilarated, free as a bird, leaping into the unknown. However, I did not jump, I fell. I felt like education systems bound my feet to them making it dangerous to leap from the Kinder Tree, I felt restricted in my movements and the risks involved made me falter and fall rather than feel in a position to jump. I still had much to understand about agency, and it needed to be learned as an entangled with, rather than a cut free from. I was part of and complicit in the forming of understandings and practices of agency teaching and I needed to understand them better to be part of a resistance revealing other ways of practicing agency as an early childhood teacher.

I ask myself "How do I understand and practice agency in my early childhood classroom?"

## Program: The Agentic Early Childhood Teacher's Dissertation

**Figure 1**

***The Kinder Tree***



My dissertation into how I practice and understand agency as an early childhood teacher is presented through three very different Acts with the Kinder Tree as an overarching methodological framework. Writing a dissertation that troubles the normative and strives to produce different knowledge differently requires a program to guide the audience through this journey, a program designed to outline the various parts of the event scheduled to take place, including the principal performers and background information. It provides an opportunity to set the scene and hold the performer accountable to present the audience with what is promised. I feel like the Kinder Tree became my guiding program, it provided me with three distinct positions that represented how I was understanding teaching and researching along the way; In the Kinder Tree, Under the Kinder

Tree and Below the Kinder Tree became the acts that demonstrate the transformation that I went through.

I began with a defined methodological framework of a critical autoethnography to show how I demonstrated my understanding of curriculum agency in my classroom, however, by the end of the first act I had become troubled in my inquiry and began moving it into a post qualitative inquiry. The unexpected sensation of becoming troubled, the need to question my teaching-self alongside working in the post qualitative space brought concerns that I might be taken away from answering how I practice agency, however, The Kinder Tree became a tether to which I could attach myself as I took off in different directions exploring such an expansive and complex notion such as agency.

I will now give an overview of each of the three acts that make up my dissertation:

## Act One: In the Kinder Tree

*In the Kinder Tree* covers how I started out my research journey; what I knew or thought I knew about agency and how I was well positioned as the researcher to capture agency in my research practices. On one hand, I taught agency daily in my classroom as a practicing early childhood teacher; I knew agency and I could demonstrate and capture this agency through my teaching practices to confirm my teaching of agency to other practitioners wanting to develop their practices. On the other hand, I was quick to discover that trying to capture something that was complex and constantly in flux was not straight forward nor generative of new knowledge when I remained in bounded research practices.

I started my research by developing a historically informed understanding of how agency had developed philosophically. Forming a timeline in philosophy and early education to better understand the ideas and thinking that formed the definition of agency I used daily through mandated curriculum. I believed if I could show the lineage of this agency definition, then demonstrate it through observations of my classroom practices, I would have captured contemporary curriculum agency practice in my classroom to further excellent teaching. In Act 1: In the Kinder Tree, I qualitatively capture agency in my classroom and analyse it as aligned to the historically dominant formation present in curriculum and policy. I found that my inquiry was simply adhering to the educational stance on how agency had become defined and did not reflect my feelings, sensations nor the complexities of teaching and working under the current social, political, and colonial forms of early childhood education.

Researching this act from In the branches of the Kinder Tree uncovered my teaching-performing-self as the early childhood teacher who taught from a distance, from above, from a height that kept me apart from the children that I teach, a discovery that became a catalyst for a troubling from within my inquiry. Researching my teaching, revealed that the current definition of agency contributed to the forming of a future focused conceptualisation of a child and I as the early childhood teacher was teaching this positioning through patterns of control, reward, and punishment. This teaching and learning of a defined notion of agency meant those who understood and performed to this definition got more and got ahead in my classroom. This emerged sensations that I was teaching a child on a linear agency path under the guise of transforming them to their best future-self determined by the adults that taught and defined this positioning of agency. It felt very un-agentic!

I had hoped my research into my own practices and understandings of agency would highlight my contemporary agency teachings for their contribution to advancing agency teaching and learning and generate affirmations of what good agency practice looked like day-to-day in an early childhood classroom. However, my research emerged practices that only reaffirmed the dominant educational perspectives on agency. This included the everyday actions and moments from within the everyday mundane that inadvertently upheld dominant concepts of agency in the participant observation fieldwork I analysed to inform my research.

My observations emerged forms of capturing agency in early childhood education that would in fact potentially lead to a continuation of upholding established patterns of recognised and embraced by children familiar with the benefits of this predominant positioning and far from accessible to all children. Upholding notions of right or wrong agency in my teaching practices that only benefit some children felt like an electric shock to my sense of teaching-self and resulted in a troubling from within my research direction. I could no longer hold on to notions that my exemplary teaching practices were performing an agency that I did not want to subscribe to.

The results of the In the Kinder Tree act, led me to want to shake up my research as I aspired to delve more profoundly into my teaching practices within the classroom. My new aim was to cultivate a more comprehensive, critical, and reflective understanding of how the conceptualisation of agency had developed. I wanted to shift how I approached and engaged with the notion of agency. This included a desire to develop a critical understanding that served as a proactive response to critical issues that were also present in agency, including globalisation, neoliberalism, settler colonialism and environmental concerns. I felt like the definition that I had held so close to my heart and that was present in my practice excluded these complexities. My first act unsettled

agency complexities that needed to be surfaced rather than excluded or buried in the background. With this knowledge I could better reflect on agency practices in the classroom as generative over purely adhering to the mandates of curriculum and policy.

## **Act Two: Under the Kinder Tree**

I open my second act with a methodology chapter that delves into autoethnography. Developing the literature on the emergence, genres, and critiques of autoethnography. This foundational work helps illustrate how my critical autoethnography emerged from my sensemaking processes as I began to question the agency. Autoethnography emerged within my inquiry as I placed myself as teacher within the social and cultural context that I was questioning and began to desire to understand it differently.

In questioning the formation and boundary making practice that emerge through the dominant configurations of agency, my critical autoethnography also inquired into how post-qualitative inquiry opens up potential through its non-linear methodology, an emerging inquiry open to the unexpected and thus generative over requiring it to fit into the normative and previously trodden paths. In my inquiry, autoethnography emerged as I began questioning my auto-self through my teaching practices. It permitted me opportunities to inquire into and be inclusive of complexification over a linear and mandated performance in my shifting understanding of agency in early childhood education. I wanted a more comprehensive understanding of agency within the social and cultural context that I taught and to emerge a more complex teacher-self through my personal experience within the broader social-political context that is early childhood education (Reed-Danahay, 2020). I experienced my inquiry moving away from sensations of agency as performative, hierarchal, teaching from a distance in predetermined ways. My classroom was also full of sensations of relationality and connection, and I wanted my practices and understandings of agency to include this. This meant inquiring with a different lens, an emerging post-qualitative one that generates a more open and unknowable in advance inquiry.

From my repositioning of Under the Kinder Tree, I sought avenues to conceptualise agency and education as interwoven and interconnected. Employing a lively storytelling method, I crafted narratives as a sitting Under the Kinder Tree, an at eye level and on the ground and entangled with the children. Through this method of lively storytelling, I aimed to reshape my conventional views of agency, moving away from predetermined ideas about teaching and learning. These narratives embraced openness and attunement to more-than-human ecologies, fostering a perspective that acknowledged the complex relationships within the educational landscape.



Lively stories emerged as a composition of shared moments which distributed attention more evenly among people and things through brief everyday moments brought together through storytelling. These narratives involved the retelling of familiar stories in a fresh, vibrant, and energetic manner (Blaise et al., 2017). Lively story writing and analysis recounted a sequence of events while also indicating a fundamentally different approach to observing and thinking within early childhood spaces (Blaise et al., 2017).

This resituating of agency as complex, lively, and relational meant that I also had to rethink my understandings of autoethnography as post-qualitative. I had to re-evaluate my understandings of my teacher-self as I moved away from notions of the self-contained, liberal, humanist subject and began to think of myself as a posthuman. An I that could assume multiple subject positions—recognisable, foreign and new (Andersson, 2020). I was going through a process of questioning the undue privilege that comes with centring of the human and wanted to further develop my inquiry as a move away from this human agency.

### Act Three: Below the Kinder Tree

In *Below the Kinder Tree*, I inquire through a more posthuman autoethnography as I investigate the material of the classroom employing *new materialism*. I present, inquire through, and discuss a series of photographs capturing remnants of play within my early childhood classroom. I begin this act by developing the theoretical lens that I was now using to understand my practices with agency differently. I start by developing notions of a relational ontology that understands agency as relational, entangled, and lively. Relational ontologies helped me move away from liberal and humanist positionings of agency and furthermore, new materialism offered me new ways to understand my agency practices within my classroom.

These remnants of play images served as a unique opportunity to engage with non-human agency, pushing beyond conventional educational frameworks. I deliberately challenged my human centric perspectives on agency in education and my own teacher agency. This exploration provided a space to deconstruct and speculate on the re-configuration of dominant concepts surrounding agency, encompassing the relationships among child, teacher, and education. This process involved examining how these notions evolved through the interplay of political, social, and discursive configurations as emerging from within images of children's play materials.

As I contemplated this series of photographs capturing the remnants of play, I found myself confronted by numerous uncertainties surrounding the usual questions of who, what, and why that I

would typically pose when assessing children's play for the purpose of interpreting and providing curriculum-driven assessments of agency learning. In response, I began to engage in speculation, wonder, and imagination regarding the agency inherent in the materialities and the constructed worlds they represented within the context of early childhood spaces. Embracing speculative fabulation (Haraway, 2016) as an experimental method, I discovered a tool that allowed me to intentionally blur the sharpness of existing meanings and interpretations. This approach facilitated my departure from defaulting to interpretations influenced by dominant policy texts and curriculum frameworks.

## The Principal Actor and Background Information

At the beginning of my six-year research journey, I was focused on how my exemplary teaching practices could be transformed into capturable data replicable in performing agency teaching. I understood myself as an exemplary teacher who had climbed the Kinder Tree to the very top and wanted to share what one needed to do to perform there. However, my research into the development and construction of curriculum agency alongside demonstrating how this agency positioning presented in my own practices had me slipping from the Kinder Tree. I began to understand myself as a formed and performing teacher of an agency I no longer believed in, and this shattered my sense of teaching-self. Act Two and three; *Under the Kinder Tree* and *Below the Kinder Tree* mark my turn away from understanding my practice through curriculum agency, furthering my inquiring away from the dominant and defined and challenging how I was understanding myself as a teacher and researcher as I developed my dissertation into something other.

Each act has chapters that account for the literature and research that wrap around the emerging thinking; In the Kinder Tree includes the history and development of notions of agency and early childhood education. Under the Kinder Tree develops the autoethnography literature that provided a reassuring tether to the Kinder Tree while offering a sense of curiosity to push further afield. This includes a personal journey into my history and connections to the very land that the kindergarten resides on. An early childhood service with a rich 100-year-old history entwined with a 60,000-year-old history also present and needing to be surfaced in my research. In *Under the Kinder Tree*, I also inquire into notions of relational agency and introduce post-qualitative autoethnography literature, writing and thinking.

Then in *Below the Kinder Tree*, I present more posthuman conceptualisations of agency while developing notions of relational ontologies and new materialist methodologies that help scaffold my new thinking and inquiring. I also acknowledge that inquiring outside of mandated

curriculum in Government education carries risks. I explore the dangers that come with challenging the dominant from within the very systems in controls. My dissertation closes with concepts of *Worlding* as generative, where inquiry into human and non-human bodies that are intra-actively entangled form agentic phenomena opening me up to other-wise ways of (re)telling, (re)seeing my lived experiences with agency within my classroom.

My dissertation is no longer a project to define and recount exemplary practices of curriculum agency in an early childhood classroom. It transformed into an open-ended exploration into the complexities of the phenomenon of agency and how post-qualitative thinking permits teachers to be open to experimenting in ways that generate possibility and critical thinking in early childhood education.



## **Act One—In the Kinder Tree**



## The Agentic Kindergarten Teacher and Researcher Sitting in the Kinder Tree

I became a kindergarten teacher as a mature aged student of 33. I started my PhD after seven years of classroom teaching. Through the systems of teacher accreditation and classification I was positioned in their third tier, an exemplary leading early childhood teacher. I had moved through the ranks of a provisional graduate teacher, had worked my way through being a fully registered mid-career teacher and then completed what was now known as the Capability Assessment where my teaching practices were held up to the Australian Teaching Standards (ATS) so that I could move up in my pay grade and be positioned as a leading teacher. A process not unlike a doctoral milestone, where I could be passed or failed through my practices which were assessed as being of the exemplary standard and held up to what that meant as per the ATS. A process of permission to be positioned and judged on my practices as adhering to or not as a leading teacher. Not succeeding at this intensive assessment project resulted in being held back from moving up the Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement (VECTEA) salary grades and remaining in a stagnant wage level without potential to be paid more or be allocated more responsibility.

I had climbed that ladder that had been lent up against the Kinder Tree and I had reached the top of the tree. I had made it. I was an exemplary teacher who had permission to *“lead processes to improve performances through evaluating, revising, analysing data, communicating with stakeholders and drawing from current research of effective teaching and learning* and I had been trained to do so through the Australian Professional Teaching Standards” (NSW Education Standards

Authority, 2018, p. 7). I was an expert teacher. I wish I could say climbing this ladder was a result of all the digging and sitting under the Kinder Tree, but it was not the case. “Expert teaching should be by design, not chance,” States Laureate Professor John Hattie, AITSL Chair in the Capability Assessment Guide (Hydon, 2022, p. 3). I had followed to a tee the set-out design path, climbed the linear ladder, and received the rewards of better pay and a more senior positioning within my teaching status through my curriculum led teaching practices. (Or was this streamline progression more like a snakes and ladder game, where one could climb faster and higher if you got on the correct ladder?) A straight to the top approach that ignored complexity and weeded out anything thing that did not fit within curriculum definitions that now put me up in the branches of the Kinder Tree. It did not matter as I had been rewarded in my performing efforts and I wanted to sit at the top in the branches of the Kinder Tree, looking down at those who were now positioned as below me.

My developed relationship with teaching agency was not different. I knew agency, I was known as an expert teacher, and I positioned my teaching of agency as exceptional. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Year’s Learning Framework* (EYLF), the mandated curriculum framework that underpinned all Australian early childhood service’s delivery of “quality teaching and learning” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 5) defines agency in its glossary of terms as “being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one’s world” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 45). The EYLF is the bible of early childhood services, it shows the education team how to teach and understand children’s learning. Everything I did as a teacher I drew from this document, and I used it to support my understanding of early childhood education and inform my teaching practices. The explicit definition of agency in the EYLF confirms notions of what agency is and is not and is there to shape my practices with children as I provided activities and an environment of education that supported this definition.

As a teacher and researcher, I had assessed my topic and established that agency was a research concept important to the early childhood education sector. I knew agency as an exemplary teacher, and I was confident in my skills that I could become an agency researcher. I had locked in my research question:

1. How did I understand and practice agency as an early childhood teacher?

The EYLF is a mandated curriculum that has been designed as a framework to guide educators. It differs from other curriculums even in being called a ‘framework’ as that suggests keeping it open to educator understandings. However, the successful implementation relies on

educators interpretation, knowledge and understanding alongside their ability to apply it to pedagogical practices (Knaus, 2015). The Australian curriculum is positioned as having an emphasis on children's interests, quality interactions, and the broad areas of emotional well-being, communication, and general knowledge. It is positioned as an open curriculum that is play based rather than subject based (Knaus, 2015). Understanding and practicing with the definition of agency defined in the EYLF means interpreting notions of choice, voice, and contribution. I had to create learning environments and practices that permitted children having choices while meeting the principles, practices, and learning outcomes that shaped the EYLF, I had to support their decisions and find opportunities to use their ideas and voices to contribute to the way they navigated and influenced their world. This was the agency that I provided in my classroom as I revealed to myself in my research journal:

*In my practice this concept of child-led, agentic play is visible. Children are free to choose where and what they do; at no point are they forced to sit down and all work on the same activity, there are no 22 identically crafted paper plate ducks displayed on the wall! The children are free to move within the indoor or outdoor space as they want, choosing their activities, choosing to get messy, choosing if they want to spend the day with no shoes on or wear dress ups for the entire session. They have full access to their lunchboxes and can eat what, when and where they want. It is common to see them sitting next to the sand pit or even up the trees with a snack in their hand.*

I was responsible in setting up learning environments that supported children's agentic choices. Concepts of choice came under the EYLF's notion of forming self-identity in its five-step outcome approach to teaching and learning; Outcome 1: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). My role as the teacher was to "provide children with strategies to make informed choices about their behaviours" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 26). I was to decide and provide these choice opportunities as the expert teacher to help them form their sense of identity. I sat up there in the Kinder Tree and I decided what strategies to provide children, I decided what their behaviour meant and how my practices could control it. Giving children the choices that I decided was about helping them choose the right ones and this was me teaching them the right agency. I was to decide what choices were on offer; if children got to choose between an apple or a banana meant I was offering choice, good choices, healthy choices and controlling what those choices could be. I decided that they all did not need to make the same craft project, wear shoes, or always sit at the designated snack table when they were eating. My feet dangled gleefully, swinging the breeze as I made these executive decisions for the children to have choice, choices that I permitted them to have.

*The activities that are laid out in the room have no one fixed learning objective, they are all open ended meaning each child can engage with the materials in a way that is meaningful to them. The children need not ask what they are supposed to do for the activity, instead they explore in ways that make sense to them. (Personal Journal)*

EYLF Outcome 3: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). To meet this outcome, I had to design a curriculum that engaged and supported children's wellbeing as it would result in "providing children with a confidence and optimism which maximises their learning potential" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 33). I wanted to develop confident and optimistic children and thus harness this maximum learning potential. The EYLF elaborates that this is done through developing children's "innate exploratory drive" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 33) thus in exploring the environments that I designed, it would teach them a sense of agency. Therefore, I had to provide environments that they would want to explore, I had to set up learning spaces and environments that would draw them in, make them engage with them and thus they would become better learners through my environmental designs. I looked down from my tree over the environments that I set up, I kept my arm outstretched and at a distance from the children, I pushed my legs and feet down from the tree to keep the children down and spending longer at the learning stations. I kept them busy, engaged and away from myself as I knew this would make them agentic if they were always happily engaged in the learning, their wellbeing depended on it.

*This free flowing and what can appear to visitors as a free for all can be very confronting. The children can do whatever they want? Well yes, but within reason. There is a sense of order and structure for myself and others that work in the room. We might come together as a group for some stories, music, yoga, theatre, or a different teacher led activity. These activities are all built on and based on what the children like to do and even then, they are not forced to join in the activities chosen specifically to meet certain outcomes in their learning. (Personal Journal)*

The teacher defined and established the sense of order and structure; I was the expert remember. I knew when the children were not engaged at their learning stations and thus had to intervene and provided a structured distraction to bring them back into the learning. I would lead the activity that the children needed to refocus their engagement; I would make them move their bodies to regulate them or I would decide that they needed to sit on the mat while I sat up on the chair, reading to them below me. "Shh, it is story time and you had to be quiet." I must not force them to engage in the activities so I must be very strategic in what I would provide so that they felt

the need to join in as I created a sense of missing out. Just the right amount of high or low impact activity, the right amount of generative interest to make them come, it was important that they came, there was learning to provide. OUTCOME 4: CHILDREN ARE CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LEARNERS (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). This outcome was about teaching children positive learning dispositions. I had the responsibility to recognise and value children's involvement in learning and reward them so. I had to make them want to join in or they would not feel recognised or valued. I needed to always be one step ahead of the children or I would not be an expert, I would fail at teaching agency, and they would not learn the positive learning dispositions I was required to teach.

Furthermore, as the expert, I knew and followed children's interests. The EYLF tells me that when I was responsive to their interests, it would ensure their "motivation and engagement in learning" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 16). I made sure to have all the pedagogical documentation that demonstrated the children's interests and thus was compliant with curriculum policy and could justify how I made children engage with the activities I chose the set up (Giamminuti et al., 2022). I knew how to put the children at the centre of the work I did, I used their interest to rotate around them like hierarchical levels of importance (Giamminuti et al., 2022) to maintain their focus on my teachings. I observed them from within those tree branches, kept watch over all their learning and when they were not demonstrating motivation and engagement, I would draw from my documentation data about their interests to bring them back into line with my teachings.

*Children are not expected to share instantly, be friends with all the children or never have a bad day. I take them as they are, meet their learning at their individual needs and participate in our time together. I too feel agentic in my role as an early childhood Teacher, I have control over what we do, how we do it and when we do it. I don't have someone telling me what is pedagogically appropriate or evaluating my assessments of the children's learning on a day-to-day basis, I feel respected to be professional enough to know what my role and responsibilities are. (Personal Journal)*

I was the expert teacher and I had control and made the pedagogical decision that led the program that I taught. I created and documented the learning through observations and assessments to support the decisions that I made and as evidence of the quality of my teaching. I was exceptional and I managed to do all this, three meters up in the Kinder Tree. A positioning from above that provided the conditions of supervisor, decider, and leader of the children, space, and pedagogical design. It was straight forward and linear; rinse and repeat each year.

I was now ready to think about setting out my research framework; including what I would need to research further to establish a sound literature review and choose a methodology and method to confirm my own agency practices to myself as the researcher of agency. As the kindergarten teacher sitting up in the branches of the tree who thought she knew what agency was and thus as an expert teacher, my researcher self, sat alongside that teacher.

I understood that my question could be understood as a social or potentially human problem and required a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2005). I would first need to establish what agency was through a literature review; further developing my understanding of how agency had emerged in the early childhood sector and its importance in teaching. This literature review would show how agency had become important and thus support how my agency teaching was important to inform other teachers. The agency literature review would be used to support and uphold my teaching practices as the right ones. It would then lead into the data that I would collect and together they would create an assessment of agency from within an early childhood classroom that would clarify its importance in practice to the sector.

I was sitting in that tree as the researcher and teacher and this research was in the field of a natural environment, being my classroom. I could draw the data and the examples I needed from the field of my classroom and my very own practices to better understand the meaning and concepts of agency through descriptive analysis. I practiced agency teaching on a daily basis; I could draw from participant observations to capture agency teaching in action. I wrote observations and assessed agency teaching and learning practices as part of assessment and documentation on a daily basis, fulfilling my exemplary teaching practices.

I had the key ingredients, observations, documentation and direct contact with the participants, the children and myself! I could generate a variety of sources of information as my teaching work was rich with documentation and materialities that supported my use of agency. I could draw from multiple sources of data to emerge the categories, patterns, and themes that were present in my teaching thus forming a complete conclusion about my agency practices. The meaning of my research would be drawn from the classroom and teaching practices, and it would be my original work, my contribution to the sector demonstrating best agency practices.

The definition of agency presented in the EYLF is not just for the children, it also reflects how I understood agency, my agency, as the teacher. In the definition, agency is understood as being something that the individual possesses. It is something I had and could exercise in making choices and decisions. I also had the agency to influence and have an impact on my world if I chose to or not.

This meant that I had the power to make choices and decision and those choices and decisions would influence the lives of the children I worked with as an early childhood teacher. It gave me ‘power’ to influence. I could choose who could have or not have my agency for it was something I possessed. Hence, it was something that could also be taken away from me. This was in keeping with a positivist worldview of this concept of agency. For example, Paulo Freire used a banking metaphor that described how teachers were experts and depositors of information, which was considered the currency, and they deposited the facts they knew to students (Hinchey, 2010).

As an early childhood teacher, I embraced the EYLF’s definition of agency, and I actively sought to teach children agency. I taught from a strengths-based paradigm; a place of identifying strengths, valuing knowledge, and drawing from interest to create learning opportunities. I understood that children’s play behaviours reflected orientated interests as agentic and my role was to think and teach through these interests, to tap into this as a pedagogic tool (Neitzel & Rowe, 2010). I understood myself as an agentic agent and drew from Giddens work on understanding agents as being intentional, purposive, and rational in the way one behaves according to what one might know or believe will be the outcome of their action (Giddens, 1984). I was intentional, purposeful, and rational in my teaching and practicing of agency as the teacher and the decisions that I made were made to achieve the desired outcomes that I drew from within the EYLF.

My inquiry would be evolving and dynamic; I would adapt along the way as I already knew what agency was and I just needed the research to confirm it. Changes might occur in my research practices, it was to be expected even though my objectives would remain the same, confirm my agency practices as important to the sector. I would need to generate a theoretical lens and as my research was within my educational setting it was already emerging as ethnographic. As the researcher, I would need to interpret what I saw, heard, and understood of agency and I would develop a complex picture of how agency was practiced in early childhood education and that would reflect on agency as a whole in the sector.

Now my researcher legs were also shooting the breeze, swinging confidently up there in the branches of the Kinder Tree. As an ethnographic endeavour I could take my time to collect data from within my classroom over a year of teaching. Ethnography was about studying the people of the setting, this involved myself as the teacher and the children as the results of my teaching. I was also of this culture being studied and I knew the community, language, behaviours, and interactions of an early childhood classroom, therefore I was well positioned to find the meaning of agency within my teaching tool box. I could even use autoethnography to reveal my own teaching practices. From up



in the branches of the Kinder Tree, I was confident that I knew agency and I knew my expert teaching reflected the definition of agency in the EYLF so now I needed to confirm in my research.

This was the agency that I wielded from the heights of the Kinder Tree, and I felt very safe and secure in my understanding of the defined notion of what agency was and was not. This made it teachable and learnable, and I knew when it was being practiced and how to implement interventions if I felt I was not observing the right agency within the classroom. All from above and in the branches of the Kinder Teacher, the decider and controller of the right kind of agency as required by the right kind of teacher to meet the required outcomes in curriculum. Again, I swung my legs as I sat in the tree, confirmed in my knowledge of agency and performative in my implementing of agency with the children that I taught.

This was agency as I understood it in the early childhood sector in Australia.

# Understanding Curriculum Agency Through Historical Philosophies

## Setting the Scene

Before any good research is carried out, one must develop a critical understanding of research on the topic. I knew that before I could start to research from within my own classroom, it was important to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conceptualisation of agency that had developed in the early childhood education sector. In my one-year graduate diploma of early childhood teacher training I was not trained to understand how the current positioning of childhood and early childhood education was produced, I was trained to teach it. Any referencing to theoretical ideas or philosophers whose work influenced the development of notions of teaching and learning in the early years were often positioned through a positive lens for their influential impact on the development of current understanding of childhood and early education used in curriculum. I wanted to develop my own understanding of the development of agency through previous research and philosophical thought, one that was not automatically geared towards informing and forming my teaching performance to heedlessly support the curriculum and policy used today. I wanted to develop a critical understanding of the development of the concepts of child, childhood, and agency as emerged through historical research and thought.

This chapter works like a part A to the next chapter. Firstly, developing my critical understanding of the historical developments that impacted the positioning of children and childhood alongside how philosophical thought led to the development of the concept of agency within current curriculum and understandings of early childhood education. Secondly, I could then use this robust understanding of agency within the sector to hold it up against my own practices in the next chapter. This would confirm that the concept of agency developed over time and woven throughout curriculum was present in my teaching and demonstrated quality agency teaching in contemporary early childhood classrooms. This would present how I understood and taught agency in my classroom as an important and impactful practice of agency teaching.

I felt like I needed my own critical understanding of how current curriculum such as the EYLF had emerged notions of agency alongside childhood and education, understand how the past had influenced their development. I understood that once I had a better grasp; a more critical understanding through history I could then look deeper at my own practices to understand if my teaching of agency was upholding this historical unfolding or if it was doing something else. I wanted

to understand just how much my teaching mirrored agency as per curriculum and policy and if I also upheld curriculum's positioning of children and early childhood education in relation to that agency. I take what I learnt from this chapter and hold it up against observations and autoethnographic analysis from within my classroom in the next chapter to further develop my understanding of agency and how it presents in my practice.

Before presenting how agency has developed historically and theoretically over time, it is important to start with how agency is present in contemporary curriculum and policy and impacts teaching practices. Agency woven throughout curriculum and policy impacts my understanding and practice of agency daily. I present how agency is understood in contemporary curriculum and policy and how that impacts my teaching, I then go further into the past to understand how this positioning emerged within curriculum and policy.

## Curriculum and Policy as Influence on Practice

In early childhood education systems in Australia, both policy and curriculum frameworks shaped how I was taught to teach children's learning and support their development. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Year's Learning Framework* (EYLF) (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022) is the mandated national curriculum framework used in all early childhood settings and, I would argue the biggest influence on my understanding of the expectations of my work as an early childhood teacher. The EYLF asks me to view children as active participants and decision makers through its title notions of belonging, being and becoming (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). I believed the children that I taught were agentic and my practices included offering lots of choice, listening to children and creating an environment that permitted active contribution through my teaching practices. These practices of teaching agency were drawn from my interpretation of the definition of agency and the agency related outcomes present in the framework. As an early childhood teacher, I thought teaching agency in my early childhood classroom was an essential practice for children's learning and development. I began developing my inquiry with a critical understanding of the agency I taught in my classroom within its historical emergence in the Australian early childhood education system.

The EYLF states its objective is "to extend and enrich children's learning from birth to five and through the transition to school" which positioned my teaching role as responsible for providing this extension of learning and rich pedagogy to support this goal in the two years before children started school (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 5). The EYLF was on a poster on the wall in my classroom, it was evidenced in every piece of educational documentation

that I produced, referenced in every professional development that I attended and adorned my correspondence with families about their children's learning and development. It underpinned all pedagogical decisions, assessments, learning observations, professional conversations with families, everyday chats with colleagues and any professional decision that I made in my teaching role. The document was within arm's reach at my office desk or in the classroom ready to check when I was in doubt, and I used it to confirm that I was teaching to its requirements.

It was here in this mandated framework that I was able to confirm the definition of agency. The EYLF defines agency as "being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one's world" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 48). From this definition I understood that as the teacher, I needed to create an environment and practices that permitted choice, promoted children's ideas, and surfaced opportunities for children to contribute to the classroom community. The EYLF defines children's contribution to their own learning by stating that children "recognise their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their learning" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 11). This positioning of children helped me understand my role as the agency teaching teacher. I needed to teach children to know what agency was and when children used agency, reward their agency practices in ways that highlighted their sense of control and leadership of their own learning.

Every day in my classroom the EYLF guided how and what children participate in through my teaching. I believed this framework developed the right practices with children. It was written by experts with input from the sector and early childhood academics across Australia, therefore it defines what is best for children as children are at the heart of each decision made. Using the EYLF contributes to giving children rights to their own learning (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). The EYLF produces teaching practices where children have capacity for agency through choice, voice, and contribution and it develops my teachings and understandings of this as agency.

The Australian early childhood education sector mandated the use of the EYLF in every early childhood service in 2009 and it went on to become one element of the National Quality Framework (NQF) that took effect in 2012. The NQF is Australia's system for regulating and monitoring service providers in early childhood education, it oversees the legislation, National Quality Standards (NQS), the sector profiles, data, and legislated learning frameworks (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2024a; The Front Project, 2022). The NQF aims are to ensure safety and wellbeing while improving developmental outcomes for children and ensuring trust in the sector (The Front

Project, 2022). Another important element of the NQF is the NQS which sets a national benchmark for early childhood education and requires services to be assessed against seven areas as part of the rating and assessment system (The Front Project, 2022). These ratings are published on the ACECQA website for families to access (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2024b). The NQS reference agency; it states in Element 1.2.3 under *Child Directed Learning*, that “Each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions that influence events and their world” (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018, p. 1). These extracts demonstrate that the definition of agency used in early childhood education was enshrined in curriculum documents and the policies that developed curriculum.

Agency was also written into understandings of the role of an early childhood teacher. In participating and successfully completing my Capability Assessment process to be become positioned and paid as an Exemplary lead teacher, I agreed to play a significant role in leading programs determined by state and federal authorities (Hydon, 2022). I am to demonstrate pedagogical excellence and expert teaching as per the role and responsibility of the professional standards of a Level three teacher as enshrined in the industrial Agreements (Hydon, 2022). Under the NQS Quality Area One: *Educational Program and Practice* it is explicit about my role in promoting children's agency, (see Element 1.2.3) (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018). The NQS amplifies the role of agency in teaching by stating that it “recognises children as competent and capable. Supporting children's agency and involving them in decisions cuts across all seven quality areas of the NQS” (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018, p. 1). In my service policy titled *role description* that I received and agreed to when starting kindergarten teaching, it requires that as the teacher I am responsible for providing innovative and quality programs in line with the NQF. This signifies that policy also defines notions of agency in education; providing another example of agency that is positioned as teachable and learnable content. Curriculum's fixed definition of agency is imbedded throughout the curriculum and policy that I am mandated to follow and to teach outside of it can be considered as not adhering to Australian policy and curriculum.

I had never questioned how the conceptualisation of agency used in Australian curriculum and policy had formed. Agency has always been woven throughout the EYLF's five outcomes, it is present in the teaching standards I adhere to, and a teaching requirement mandated through curriculum and policy to be considered a competent teacher. It has been defined and absorbed into the sector, generated by the sector and I was now the teacher of this agency in my classroom.

It was important to my dissertation to develop a critical understanding and trace the historical development of how this definition emerged. I believed that provided I could demonstrate agency's impact through its historical formation, it would support the importance of my teaching and researching it. In addition, it would confirm my positioning and practices of agency. I understood children as agentic; children were "capable and competent learners who have rights and agency" as the EYLF highlights. I valued their childhoods and wanted the best outcomes for the children that I taught (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 4). I believed and valued this conceptualisation of agency as right and normal, however, I wanted to trace how childhoods and notions of the child had produced this positioning of the agentic child that I taught.

## **The Historical Forming of Childhood and Education Through Philosophy and Institutes of Education**

The belief that children possessed agency had mirrored the changing status of children over the past two centuries and even more so in the past few decades (Kilderry et al., 2017). It resulted in having a complex notion such as agency become defined and enshrined in curriculum to confirm what it meant yet I was to discover that its historical development was not straightforward in. Agency as a concept would have remained with a sense of elusiveness and vagueness if it had not been locked down into a defined concept in early childhood education (James, 2012). Therefore, I needed to understand the underlying ideas that various philosophical concepts contributed to its development into a defined notion in curriculum taught and learnt in early childhood education services. I wanted to understand how historical times alongside philosophical thinking had changed perceptions of children and childhoods to impact current early childhood education.

This section of my dissertation unpacks the conceptualisations of children and childhood that emerged in Australian early childhood education curriculum and policy through historical philosophical developments in notions of children's education. I wanted to develop an understanding of educational philosophy and examine how theoretical notions connected education to society in practical terms (Norefalk & Papastephanou, 2023) as a bridging of philosophical informed theory and practice for the everyday classroom. I began the process of understanding education's historical development from the nineteenth century, thinking that was when it really emerged as child labour was abolished and educational experiences for children were becoming considered important and politically influenced (Malone et al., 2020d). However, before the nineteenth century, classical and early modern philosophies also shaped contemporary understandings of childhoods and perspectives of children. After learning about these perspectives, I

came to understand that many of their philosophical ideas were still present in contemporary education pedagogy. While looking back, I could not help but make connections to the present, as I inquired into how concepts of education from Western worlds developed and impacted notions of education in my Australian early childhood classroom, I was also drawn to thinking about the impact of globalisation on curriculum and teaching as I stepped further out of my urban classroom to understand how I had become the teacher that I thought I was and who I wanted to be going forward.

I cannot account for all contributions by all classical contributors to the development of education, childhood and as influencers on understandings of agency. I can only provide a select sample to begin to unpack the interpretations of child and childhood in the history of the philosophy. In the following section, I combine historical positionings of children and childhoods with the emerging early childhood sector as it developed from early Infant Schools in Britain to become kindergartens and part of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) of present day.

### ***Historical Forming of Concepts of Education***

Notions of education have been traced back to pre-nineteen hundred in Antiquity. Where education was aimed at shaping good citizens through teaching that guided students towards knowledge within their abilities (Brooke et al., 2013). Plato's model of education assumed that the highest forms of knowledge were not achievable by most people and that meant they could not be responsible for leading political power (Malone et al., 2020d; Plato, 2020). He believed that a just society tries to give the best education to all, however, within their ability, therefore, in education it was the teacher's responsibility to grasp what students think they desired to know and connect it to teaching; a form of leading students to want to learn (Brooke et al., 2013). This notion of who could have knowledge was also conceptualised in early childhood as the teacher's role and responsibility. In relation to contemporary perspectives of education it traces back questions of who has access to knowledge and what is considered appropriate to teach children with adult teachers responsible for making those choices. In my contemporary classroom, while acknowledging the historical forming of educational concepts such as for who and what knowledge, these concepts have become increasingly diverse and increasingly globally connected. This means new understandings of communication and collaboration are needed in creating global learning experiences. Global understandings, accessibility to knowledge that is relevant become contemporary curriculum, however, remain determined by the teacher and curriculum.



During the Enlightenment other philosophers also focused on childhood and figurations of the child, some examples being Locke, Hobbs, Kant, and Rousseau who expressed varied views. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that questioned religious dogma and instead used reason, it was thought of as a celebration of human powers to understand the universe and improve human conditions (Braidotti, 2013). This movement gained wide assent in the West and it positioned the goals of rational humanity to be knowledge, freedom, and happiness (Love, 2008). In brief, Locke advocated for rational decision-making and practical, experience-based learning (Brooke et al., 2013; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Mack & Meadowcroft, 2013). Rousseau promoted child-led, sensory focused teaching, an education that preserved innocence while fostering natural morality and independence (Brooke et al., 2013; Darling, 1995; Malone et al., 2020d). Kant stressed a child-centred curriculum that respected the differences between adults and children (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Malone et al., 2020c) and Hobbs views children as unruly, requiring control and regulation through structured education (Brooke et al., 2013; Eggers, 2011).

Many of the tensions in conceptualisations of agency can be traced back to the Enlightenment debate, where human freedom was understood as either an instrument of reality or more a moral and norm-based action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Locke wanted education to produce individuals who had capacity to make their own rational decisions (Mack & Meadowcroft, 2013). He believed that education was about learning the correct habits and teaching was about helping people to overcome the temptations of short sighted behaviour (Brooke et al., 2013). This influenced perspectives on agency, validating the ability of individuals to influence their living conditions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Locke emerged agency as an individualistic and strategic concept of behaviour which significantly impacted future Western ideas of freedom and advancement (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Teleological and instrumentalist conceptions of actions contributed to notions of philosophical individualism in the early Enlightenment alongside the religious morality of the times. This generated the idea of a free agent who was able to make individual rational choices that affected society (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The idea of developing rational individuals could be understood as opportunities of choice and voice that are fore fronted in the EYLF's definition of agency while also reflecting the role of guiding children into becoming *rational individuals* through the defined notion of agency.

French philosopher Rousseau believed in radical transformative education that made students "what they ought to be" (Brooke et al., 2013, p. 115). In his understanding of what education could provide; children needed to develop their own individuality and this could be taught through following children's interests (Brooke et al., 2013). This is mirrored in contemporary thought

where early childhood education is positioned as child-led, and interest based. The EYLF supports child-led play as long as it is balanced between adult initiated and guided play (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). Child-led play is a way to engage children in learning through their own interests without corrupting morality as this play had adult guidance throughout. As the adult teacher I was not sure if I could really follow children's interests if the curriculum determines I am also to control and monitor its notions of child-led play.

Rousseau's ideas brought complexity to notions of education and developing agency in questioning what and how much should children be taught about the realities of the world versus notions of childhood innocence. Curriculum tells me that children need to contribute to their community to feel and demonstrate agency, however, I feel there is conflict between global realities and innocence which questions and brings complexities to children's rights to know about that world they occupy. The balance between children's rights in being able to contribute to their world while constantly being protected seems very controlled by external factors, mostly myself as the teacher teaching through curriculum. It brings into question the ongoing effects of globalisation as contemporary education emerged from this historically formed common culture of education that was built on mediated ideas, information and differentiated values and tastes (Carey, 2022). The homogenising of western culture is evident in the context of early childhood education, where globalisation of education is encouraged through notions of individualistic Euro-American ideologies of child centred child development (Sumsion & Grieshaber, 2012). Notions of innocence and realities of the world through early childhood education is also felt through notions of Government's investment in children in hopes that society can be "produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (Carey, 2022, p. 23). I felt conflicted in its notions of producing children for society if children's innocence and needing protection means I have to control the content of my teaching even if children's interests were leading them to question big issues. Fortunately, today in my teaching, I had contemporary curriculum in the EYLF to help guide my practice in what is appropriate or potentially too much for children to know. The EYLF tells me about forming children's identity:

The concept of being reminds educators to focus on children in the here and now, and of the importance of children's right to be a child and experience the joy of childhood. Being involves children developing an awareness of their social and cultural heritage, of gender and their significance in their world. (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 23)

After starting to feel conflicted by notions of innocence and control of knowledge, in a sense this statement from the EYLF also positions children as innocent and in need of protection in their

knowledge access in childhood. Their right *to be a child* and the *joys of childhood* can be understood as quite sheltering of notions of innocence. I also critically reflect on the language of *their* world, positioning knowledge sharing as only in-relation to them in their world and not so much as *of the world*. This feels part of the debate in cultural globalisation, questioning whether it leads to homogeneity or encourage diversity (Rana, 2012). I was not so sure this positioning of children's identity was far more contemporary and removed from Rousseau understanding of innocence. My teacher-self must protect children's innocence and contain their exposure to the world keeping it in-relation to *their* world, but I feel like a gatekeeper to their exposure to being part of that world.

I was emerging complexities around global formal approaches to learning through teacher led curriculum decisions and how children's interests had become absorbed into ways to bring children into teacher led learning geared towards achieving the learning outcomes in the EYLF and furthermore, Government agendas. Child led learning was positioned as a contemporary practice, yet I felt it here at the beginning of the eighteenth century. If agency was choice, voice, and contribution; I must blend this with a very teacher-led curriculum. I had to bring the children with me to learn the desired outcomes through their interests. However, I began to question whose interests were at the heart of this hands-on learning.

Taking Rousseau's idea of freedom as conscience and moral will, Kant conceptualised freedom as the normatively anchored will of the individual, guided by the categorical imperative rather than necessity or self-interest. He delineated reality into two contrasting realms, the conditional and the normative, or necessity and freedom (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). He believed it was important to acknowledge the difference between adults and children and to avoid imposing adult qualities on children through education (Malone et al., 2020d). This emerged through concepts such as child-centred curriculum which are also present today in the EYLF, where child-centred means prioritising the needs and interests of the child. As the teacher, I am responsible for building an engaging child-centred curriculum when planning, analysing, and assessing children's learning (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). Therefore, in designing my pedagogy, meeting the needs and interests of the children while maintaining children's childlike characteristics is the priority when teaching agency. My pedagogy and practice had been built off these ideas with children's interests the base of the program and activities that I designed. Every decision put the child at the centre and then planning and pedagogy swirled out around the children.

Historically, philosophers all recognised the importance of education in achieving their own societal and theoretical aims, they believed that education was the site to develop them and their work significantly shaped philosophy of childhood. This connection between childhood philosophy

and education often focused on the treatment of the child as a problem to be solved, emerging education as a place to shape, change, mould children (Malone et al., 2020d). However, this was dependent on one's positioning of understanding child and childhood. The early philosophical work was the beginning of notions such as child-centred and approaches to protect and educate children as defined by the more rational, formed, and knowledgeable adult. Paralleling the way developing educational concepts and policy contribute to mould and shape childhoods in certain ways. Hultqvist and Dahlberg complexified the evolution of child or childhood in how these concepts were produced through historical discourses and power relations and that they positioned the child as an "object and subject of knowledge, practice and political intervention" (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2013, p. 2; Taylor, 2011). Children were both studied and positioned according to the adults of these times who were influenced by current philosophical practices and the political landscape at that time. I was only just scratching at the surface and feeling the complexities of balancing historical philosophies, modern globalised forms of curriculum demands and children's development in early childhood education.

Children were understood to follow the evolutionary history of the entire human species and that meant systems of education could be picked up from Britain and transported to foreign lands. Though children were everywhere, scientists did not understand their minds but thought they unfolded in a particular fashion. Childhood development repeated and the evolution of the human race and education should take this into account (Prochner, 2009). Post Nineteen Hundreds, education was influenced through a race experience with the European experience considered the apex of civilisation (Prochner, 2009). Therefore, the teacher was seen to represent this through "knowledge, skill, appreciation, wisdom and moral standards which would lift the students to higher levels of consciousness and give them ever increasing power" (Prochner, 2009, p. 5). On frontiers, such as Australia, this meant recreating civilisation and early forms of early childhood education in Infant Schools, as they had a special role in teaching what this meant through focusing on respect for teachers and work skills (Prochner, 2009). An opportunity to civilise the children who were often far from their real home and this idea was captured in Australian folklore as *children lost to the bush* (Pierce, 1999) where allegiance to the king and colony was reinforced to children through early kindergarten education (Prochner, 2009).

Philosophically and far from the classrooms of Australian Infant Schools, notions of the child and childhood were changing. Dewey, a pragmatic philosopher and educational reformer impacted notions of education and learning (Dewey, 2007, 2011). He did not want action to be positioned as the pursuits of preestablished ends or become abstracted from concrete situations. He wanted ends

and means to develop together and within contexts while observing their change to develop reflective intelligence (Dewey, 2011; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). He believed learning was participatory and democratic which positioned childhood in a more favourable light than previous conceptualisations of the child (Malone et al., 2020d). Dewey's participatory forms of democracy and cooperative egalitarian forms of learning in the classroom were considered quite radical. Dewey believed education and learning were social and interactive processes and he understood education's settings as social sites and thus children should have a role in their own learning to realise their own potential (Brooke et al., 2013; Dewey, 2007; Malone et al., 2020d). He introduced notions of teaching through project approaches where rather than a teacher imparting knowledge on children, he wanted a curriculum that was built around the active pursuit of practical and interdisciplinary projects led by children (Brooke et al., 2013).

Children being involved in their own learning, education services as sites of democratic social learning, and learning through active and individual pursuits. This idea is reflected in the EYLF:

In a supportive active learning environment, children who are confident and involved learners are increasingly able to take responsibility for their own learning, personal regulation and contribution to the social environment. (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 36)

These are all ideas presented in the curriculum that I used in my very own classroom. However, notions of action learning are still positioned under desired outcomes for children and curriculum positions learning as meeting or not meeting these learning outcomes. Dewey's action learning is also reflected in the current definition of agency where choice, voice, and contribution could be understood as democratic notions of children being seen and heard in their education. However, he rejected notions of child-centred learning as he believed it followed children's uninformed interests and impulses uncritically (Brooke et al., 2013), re-emerging the notion of children as developing and immature even through more democratic notions of education. He believed education should develop children as they required intervention by adults to form cultivated, critically reflective, and socially engaged individuals (Brooke et al., 2013). I could not help but reflect that this idea meant teachers needed to be cultivated, critical, and socially engaged to achieve this.

### ***Infant Schools and Free Kindergartens***

Early in the eighteen hundreds, schools for infants were already in existence with a scattering of schools across Britain. Their benefits were touted as preventing crime and increasing

human potential. The Infant School Society claimed reaching children early was an urgent matter and children's participation would improve their abilities, temperament, and morals (Prochner, 2009). Children were positioned as removed from the streets (and not their families) and provided with a sound moral education which was considered a remarkable innovation at that time. The children participated in learning by amusements, singing and through marching or performing exercises as a group (Prochner, 2009). By 1835, in a span of 10 years, there were now several hundred schools and missionary infant schools. Education was beginning to be positioned as useful to children, childhoods, and society (Bessant, 2014). Infant schools began appearing overseas in Canada, Australia and New Zealand for poor European children and Indigenous children. Early models of Infant Schools were reproduced faithfully across the oceans and even the classrooms had similar appearances across the diverse settings (Prochner, 2009). This meant the application of Western ideas to new populations of children including slaves, British and European settlers, Indigenous, and mixed ethnic families. My own service was entangled in this emerging early childhood education, it was one of the first established in Victoria but not until the early Nineteens hundreds. I found it enlightening to think about how the historical developments in thinking around childhood and education were not as far removed from my experience as I thought. The very service where I taught was part of this emerging early childhood education, it was not apart from or developed years later, it emerged from within it. This brought a sense of connection to the histories that I had not felt before but was now putting them together like pieces of a puzzle. I further inquire into the history of my service and my personal connections to its development in a later chapter of my dissertation.

Early forms of early childhood schooling had dual orientations of providing social welfare and education. The missionaries sought to civilise, rescue, and convert young children from the dangers of the streets. Places of education were sites of redemption with the child as the object of redemption (Prochner, 2009). This could also be reflected in philosophical positioning of children needing a moral education. Infant Schools and private charity kindergartens called *Free Kindergartens* were founded in these missionary traditions. Education was positioned as an a charitable endeavour, an opportunity for the middle-class to improve poor children's standards of sanitation, cultural, and social life. (Prochner, 2009). The service where I taught and researched was one of these free kindergartens and still bears this logo on the front of the service. Opened in 1924, with 55 children enrolled an average of 29 attended most days. The service's annual report of 1935 covered medical inspections of all children, with mal nourishment and teeth decay among the concerns. While in the same year they were able to fundraise for a service piano and the council provided extra milk. The tone was remarkably optimistic.

The parents have again shown a good co-operative spirit and are always willing to help in any way. The mothers still take it in turns to spend the morning in the kitchen doing various domestic duties, and the entire laundry is done weekly by different mothers, all taking their turn. (Annual Report 1935-6)

It was a post-World War II era where notions of education shifted to providing experiences and more child-centred approaches and drew a more centralised philosophical thought than before (Malone et al., 2020d). There was a new emphasis on child development and its role in how to educate young children in the second half of the century. This new approach placed child development knowledge as a core driver for kindergarten and there was an assertion that Australia shift towards this in the curriculum (Prochner, 2009). Child development extended on notions of a universal child who developed through fixed stages in human evolution. The EYLF continues to encourage teachers and educators to draw from developmental theories that “focus on describing and understanding the processes of change in children’s learning and development over time” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 12) alongside other theoretical positionings.

The times and positioning of children and childhoods was present in my service’s 1943 annual report:

The Kindergarten is now open from 8.30 am until 6 pm for children of working mothers. The insecurity felt in many homes today, and the lack of sufficient rest, the noise and bustle of modern life, tend to produce nervous, irritable, and unhappy children. The kindergarten provides for these a happy and secure atmosphere where they can become independent, make new friends, enjoy music and stories, and the beauty around them. These rich experiences with sympathetic human relationships give a good foundation for healthy growth. These are opportunities they were missing while the mother was at her war job. (1943 Kindergarten Annual Report)

This report captures both the sentiment of the missionary goals with a focus on providing the *right* conditions for healthy development that was positioned as not happening at home alongside the developmental focus on foundational growth in an educational environment. I also note the focus on the absent mother being made to feel guilty for working with no mention of the father! A guilt that has been built upon and carried into current times.

## Twentieth Century Education and Beyond

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, analytic philosophy became the dominant focus in the Western world, particularly in the Anglosphere. It believed in an education that involved promoting rational autonomy through a broad initiation into knowledge (Malone et al., 2020d). It was linked to the linguistic turn and had a focus on clarity, rigor and logic in language and philosophy through focusing on the way truth could be verified. It aimed to clarify concepts central to educational terms through language (Malone et al., 2020d; Norefalk & Papastephanou, 2023). Hirst and Peters were two prominent analytic philosophers who claimed that they examined the use of words to better understand the principles that govern their use (Norefalk & Papastephanou, 2023). This approach to education is reflected within the EYLF through its outcome approach, a categorising of learning and development into five areas through distinct language terms: *identity, belonging, wellbeing, learning* and *communication*. Each outcome gives examples of what they look like in practices of teaching and learning by children and are described as “broad and observable” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 22). I looked at learning from within my classroom systematically under these five headings, documentation from the classroom that went home to families were positioned under these headings and I spoke to children of their learning as in-relation to these five words used thousands of time across the years in the classroom. Each of these five words defining outcomes were intended to provide clarity, rigour, and logic to represent children’s learning and development—Five words.

Critics of analytic philosophy were concerned that in its aim to be practical, it had problems of being prescriptive and instrument heavy in its approaches which often led to more conservative and traditional values being foregrounded (Norefalk & Papastephanou, 2023). Analytic philosophy resulted in a revival of the traditions of liberal education that influenced notions of childhood in the twentieth century (Malone et al., 2020d). A liberal education meant the cultivation of a free human being through a broad induction to knowledge and transferable skills and came with a focus of strong values, ethics, and engagement.

In the second half of the twentieth century Paolo Freire a Brazilian educator and philosopher emerged as a major radical influence on education. He was responsible for early work that led to developing the idea of critical pedagogy through his humanist existential Marxism (Malone et al., 2020d). He was quite scathing in his critique of traditional models of education, yet he believed in the transformative potential of education, including state involvement. He extended on the work of Dewey and believed that education could be a site of social change and that education could lift the oppressed to regain their sense of humanity through notions of praxis which involved both action



and reflection by the students to better themselves (Vandenbroeck, 2021). This was part of the foundational work that would be termed critical pedagogy. His work contributed to epistemological and ontological viewpoints inquiring into the nature of knowledge and how it related to praxis (Vandenbroeck, 2021). The work of Freire influenced future policy and practice development as he opened up dialogue of the importance of liberatory practices. I thought that I did not position children as passive learners; I understood that they were capable and competent, however, I was not sure that through my use of curriculum I created a space that promoted critical pedagogy, one where children were aware of the politics of education. I did not feel that curriculum provided space to do that without risking working outside of it which contradicts its mandated positioning.

Now I was seeing children as both political and active in knowing and understanding how they were being positioned in education and their rights to have that knowledge shared with them. It was not just about providing them defined opportunities to practice agency, it also involved understanding the formation of the agency concept that was being taught, something a lot more complex. It involved a more political and critical awareness of the discourses of education to reduce the traditional positioning of children as passive learners who needed to be taught what agency was by a teacher who wielded all the agency knowledge power in what children should know about agency. This positioned agency as a given, regarded as an innate ability inherent in human beings, allowing them to defy the persistent influence of natural circumstances and structural pressures. Instead of being ambiguous or undefined, agency was now portrayed as an established capability within individuals (Passoth et al., 2012). I understood children as agentic which aligns with this concept of an established capability, however, under mandated curriculum, I was taught how to teach it as a capability that needed to be controlled and regulated. This conceptualization of agency, emphasizing innate capacity, predominate in sociological theory, offered an alternative perspective to address traditional issues in political and moral philosophy.

I felt a shifting in my self-positioning of the children that I taught. The definition of agency spoke of children's rights "to influence events and to have an impact on one's world" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 48), however I did not get a sense of children's rights to know about the educational discourses that they were being taught under. I caught myself using the idea that the children were being *taught under* and my responsibility as the above teacher was to critically reflect on how I taught. I wondered if I taught the children as political and critical thinkers with an open awareness of the education system that they were a part of. I found myself questioning my own critical thinking of the educational discourses that had been produced through

its historical development and my very understandings of how the definition of agency was positioning children.

My self-questioning started to mirror the postmodern and post structural thinkers of the nineteen-eighties. I premise this section by acknowledging that trying to define or simplify postmodern and post-structuralist theory could be understood as counter to their desires to complexify the very idea defining or fixing standpoints. Many writers caution that the term *postmodern* defies definition or simplistic explanation. Indeed, they argue that trying to define postmodern subjects in a modernist or scientific way of thinking was incompatible with postmodern understandings. Postmodern and post structural thinkers were committed to questing the certainty of truths that had underpinned modernist thinking and problematising and challenging existing concepts, structures and hierarchies of knowledge (Sumsion, 2005), including a philosophy of childhood that questioned the condition of knowledge in modern contexts and the extent of claims to legitimisation in educational realms of truth and systems of education. They also desired notions of authority being held up to robust scrutiny for children and childhoods (Malone et al., 2020d). These schools of thought drew from Continental philosophy and modern French philosophy in the aftermath of existentialism, phenomenology, and structuralism (Malone et al., 2020d).

Postmodern thinkers brought a critical questioning of notions of universality and generality in knowledge production and explored legitimisation when analysing the purpose, aims, and processes of education systems alongside the flow on effects on children and childhoods. Language was a key area of interest, where language was understood to construct meaning over reflecting reality (Sumsion, 2005). This was part of their understanding that language and meaning were not fixed or stable but were produced through social, cultural, and philosophical contexts (St. Pierre, 2000; Sumsion, 2005). This had implications in how I could think about the mandated definition of agency in the EYLF; the meaning, use, and understanding that I had developed around agency could be a result of the choice of words and language used in the definition. Notions of choice, voice, and contribution came with social and cultural understandings that contributed to dominant notions of what this meant in early childhood education. Children must have opportunities to choose, however when I as the teacher only provide two choices this affects understandings of the word choice and creates parameters and boundaries around the notion of choice. I need to inquire further into my own practice to surface if the defined words and notions present in the definition of agency in relation to its historical and philosophical development reflects what I observe in my classroom.

The work of Foucault, a French philosopher, looked at and analysed connections between power and knowledge and emerged as influential to the work of the early posts. He began a

questioning of the disciplinary functions that were entangled in liberal models, including education (Malone et al., 2020d). He emerged notions of man with sovereign authority with the new liberal constraints on the exercise of power, as power transformed into restrictions about knowledge and the role of state in wellbeing and health of societies (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2013). He believed the early formulation of Kant's ideas around self-governance for autonomy and freedom were part of a shift in the exercise of power. He thought the birth of man led to constructions of the modern child in the discourses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, emerging the new institutionalised child (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2013). Having begun to question language, access to knowledge and boundary practices that control notions of agency in early childhood education, I could not help but feel my role in developing the children I teach as institutionalised children. I felt this was a heavy burden to carry now that it was affecting my own understandings of childhood and early childhood education through this new knowledge that I was revealing to myself.

The post schools of thought questioned the way knowledge and truth had been researched, unsettling the dominant focused value of rational and scientific thinking and the politics of truth as intertwined in education systems (MacNaughton, 2005; Malone et al., 2020d). Furthermore, they brought into focus the idea that all knowledge came with biases, was incomplete and was linked to the interests of specific groups of people (MacNaughton, 2005). This highlighted the contradictions, unanswered questions and cultural prejudices that were contained in concepts of knowledge which acknowledged the complexities of impacts of globalisation. I felt drawn to what the post schools of thought were questioning as I was emerging similar wonderings from within my own teacher-self. Questioning and complexifying notions of who understood the knowledge being fore fronted, government agendas of children developing correctly and surfacing the positioning those who understood agency through the correct habits and behaviours as potentially getting ahead of others through their use of agency. This leads to notions of teaching and learning agency to mould and refine the child for their future adulthood. Therefore, the curriculum determines that I must decide what good and bad agency is in fulfilling my teaching role to define the future adult they must become.

### ***Posthumanism and New Materialism***

Curriculum's positioning of agency as choice, voice and contribution alongside my own teacher's interpretation of agency led me to seek other conceptualisations of agency in early childhood education. Agency as I had come to understand it through my teacher training, guiding curriculum and its historical and global forming had me wanting to seek outside of these boundary making formations. I had positioning agency as something someone has in liberal humanist sense

(Barad, 2007), where education was a means to an end, a result. Posthumanism opens up other ways of configuring notions of agency in early childhood education. For my understandings of agency it opened up agency posited as process, agency as reconceptualised in flows of intensities, entanglements of human and nonhuman elements (Braidotti, 2013; Jackson, 2013). Post humanism emerged as a theoretical paradigm as a response to the anthropocentrism present in 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking (Braidotti, 2013; Ferrando, 2017), it enacts through rereadings of traditional Western ways of making sense of the world that include engagement with the past, present and future projections. I was questioning notions of my own position as a wielder of agency as the Teacher, where agency has emerged historically as a possession of human capital development (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Sumsion & Grieshaber, 2012; Whitehead, 2008). Post humanism permitted me to critically question how this understanding of agency in early childhood education came about, what are the current implications and how that impacts future decision making processes (Herbrechter, 2022)?

Posthumanism opened unknown doors as I became interested in understanding inquiring into other ways of positioning agency in early childhood education. Furthermore, I was looking for opportunities to think about agency more broadly than the teleological and instrumentalist human lens that had emerged as dominant through my delving into historical forming of agency and early childhood education. New materialism that emerged in the 1990s turned away from modern and humanist traditions (Dolphijn, 2012). Working with posthumanism, new materialism seeks to reposition the human among nonhuman actants, providing ways of thinking and inquiring outside of the individual and global liberal subject that I felt formed as an Australian early childhood teacher. New materialism was an opportunity to question the position of human-centred ontology while also questioning the power structures that mark material bodies as subjects of power (Barad, 2007). Posthumanism and new materialism is further explored throughout my dissertation, it is expanded and used in Act III.

## **Agency Positioned as Truths Through Curriculum**

The EYLF's definition of agency used in early childhood education positions it as a concept that children can learn, and this meant the children I taught were knowledge consumers who did not yet know what agency was. Murris expanded on this positioning of children, where a child was understood as "(still) developing, (still) innocent, (still) fragile, (still) immature, (still) irrational and so forth" (2020c, p. 32), which was a positioning that emerged and re-emerged throughout the historical development of children and childhoods. Therefore, this positioned myself as the developed, sinful, robust, mature, and rational person who could transform the children that I taught! A fixed and defined definition of agency also brought into existence the specific roles I

needed as the teacher and I became the “guide, instructor, trainer, discipliner, facilitator, socialiser, protector, diagnoser, or medicator” (Murriss, 2020c, p. 32) of agency. I was to teach children what agency was and was not. These ideas really troubled my sense of teacher-self, however, I felt that my teaching did not lean into Murriss’ ideas around positioning of children, and I hoped to emerge my teaching as different from these historically outdated understandings of children in the next chapter of my inquiry.

This contemporary take on agency critically analysed how the definition positioned and understood agency in relation to children in early childhood education and it did not paint it in a positive light. I believed that I taught agency differently, however, I followed curriculum and contemporary practices though the contradictions of the remnants of historical influences still felt present today and this was emerging a confusion in my thinking. I refer back to how the NQS states that it “recognises children as competent and capable” (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018, p. 1), however I now felt like it also came with a conditioned and categorised meaning through outcomes and defined notions of agency. I had hoped a review of historical notions of child and children through literature and research could help me find clarity in the notion that agency could be learnt and taught. However Murriss (2020c) brought complexity to my understanding when fixed notions of agency positioned children as less than capable and competent through positioning them as fragile and innocent. I began questioning if children could be both capable and competent while positioned as developing and immature in relation to notions of agency teaching.

The definition of agency had become a truth in my thinking yet I had not factored in the authoritative underpinnings that were also present, it had become a definition that I understood as factual and therefore correct and as an institutionally produced truth it governed and regulated my teaching and understanding of agency (MacNaughton, 2005). It was positioned as the normal and desirable way to practice and understand agency and that impacted the way I understood the children I taught alongside the way I taught while remaining sanctioned and systemised by government through its mandated use (MacNaughton, 2005). Notions of power brought this regime and its truth to life through the rules that organised and guided its use through behaviour in both the children and myself (Foucault, 1980). Through the literature and research I was reading, I began to see the result of this power imbalance and how regimes of truth came with equity effects in the form of dominations. In notions of agency one truth had become authoritative and sanctioned positioning it over the potential of others producing truth silences which marginalised and reduced other conceptualisations of truth as abnormal (Foucault, 1980; MacNaughton, 2005). Foucault wrote

about unmasking the regimes of truth through acknowledging my role in holding them in place and contributing to producing them and that I could choose the truths that I privilege as choice implied the possibility of disruption (MacNaughton, 2005). This too was a difficult conundrum as to work outside of the definition could be understood as not meeting the mandated EYLF.

What was my truth agency? I was not sure I even knew as I had not critically questioned but had rather blindly accepted the conceptualisation of children and childhood alongside my developed interpretation of the agency mandated in the curriculum. I had not thought to question the truth silences produced through a mandated definition of agency as it had been positioned as normal and desirable through its forms of behaviour management and had become my norm. I began to understand the power that I wielded in the way that I thought and behaved when working alongside young children. It was a very heavy burden to become aware of as it could not be simply brushed off or quickly repaired and had potentially had lifelong repercussions for the children. If shared knowledge was the basis for education, what was shared or consciously omitted were clear examples of what Foucault describes as *normalising power* (Foucault, 1980) and part of the way dominant ideas and discourse of agency had been developed.

## My Agency Truth

From Plato's elitist notions of who could learn and how those who got it were responsible for shaping what others learnt, very tumultuous development ensued to arrive at the post-modernist turn of questioning the very biases of knowledge defined agency in early childhood education. I felt like I had come off a rollercoaster! I had moved through various time periods and some very challenging thinking bringing to light times where knowledge access and sharing was often gatekept or used to shape children in future orientated ways while having to understand that this remains reflected in current curriculum. Dewey wrote of forming cultivated, critically reflective and socially engaged individuals (Brooke et al., 2013) yet throughout history I saw a pattern of control and design by adults to fit political and societal discourse at that time.

I had thought that the historical positioning of children as innocent, savage, and empty slates that needed adult intervention to guide and control their behaviour to become civilised were concepts that we had left in the past, however these traces still emerging in relation to current curriculum and practices concerned me. The teacher remained positioned as the one to uphold these configurations and their traces could still be present in my practices even though I did not believe so. Over time, questions emerged about children rights to know about the complexities of the world, but overarching ideas of protection always seemed to remain; protecting innocence and

gatekeeping knowledge to shape what adults thought children needed to become. This resulted in outcome-based curriculum, which included broad introductions to knowledge decided and desired by adults. Notions of child-centred and interest-based project approaches both contradicted and supported historical positioning of children. If I as the teacher was led by children as the heart of my teaching and followed children's interest I could support their agency, yet I was also required to provide purposeful teaching and make sure the interests were not *whimsical* and met the learning outcomes. Children needed adult intervention to protect and lead their learning.

With every turn to shake up or approach childhoods and education differently there was countering. This constant back and forth from progressive to tradition muddied the water and further complexified notions of agency, troubling my questioning of my practices. They added complexities to what children should be able to know and learn and emerged fundamental questions of the way we produced knowledge. This complexity revealed a history that was not linear or clear cut and still had ramifications in contemporary early childhood teaching.

## Critical Engagement with the EYLF

As I began to engage with the historical development of education and agency, it meant also thinking of the EYLF critically. I was coming to understand that it is just one facet of curriculum, the shiny final brochure. The EYLF was formed around with politics and power relations as explored in an article aptly titled *Insider Perspectives on Developing Belonging, Being and Becoming* (2009). The article offered insights into the contexts and constraints that shaped the EYLF's development and insider perspectives for working with the framework or undertaking critical policy analysis. Written by people who were part of the consortium that created the framework, they recognised that, in essence, curriculum is about "what matters to politicians, policy makers, the media, academics, educators, communities, families and children" (Sumsion et al., 2009, p. 4). I found their order of involved parties very interesting with those who curriculum most affected being listed last.

The article elaborated on the decision points and dilemmas that also contributed to the construction or omission from the current document; they included issues such as the audience's accessibility and comprehension of the EYLF, trying to create an Australian distinctiveness, its various theoretical underpinnings, and the lack of inclusion of the political dimensions of play. The authors elaborate by outlining a toning down of children's participatory rights as enshrined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and how the drafts were progressively watered down due to media and political pressure to its final form that formed the EYLF's notion that children are connected with and contribute to their world (Sumsion et al., 2009), a reduction to

children as only as in relation to *their* world and not an understanding of children as *of* the world. This meant my teaching needed to be within the concept of children's worlds, placing them firmly at the centre of their world and positioning issues of the bigger picture that were of the world as not appropriate for teaching. The political and societal pressure under the guise of protecting children's childhoods and their innocence reduced the language in the EYLF and hence reduced the scope of my teaching children about the world that they were a part of. The authors shared that their attempt to challenge the myth of the *innocent child* proved highly sensitive politically (Sumsion et al., 2009) and was ultimately overruled in the final production of the EYLF. This really brought into focus how the idea of children's rights was also subjective to those who were involved in its conceptualisation.

I had a personal relationship with how media and political pressure affected notions of teaching and learning in my very own classroom. I had included children and families in a nationwide initiative of Harmony Day which brings awareness to the United Nations Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. I read two popular books with the children—*I'm Australian Too* by Mem Fox and *If I was Prime Minister* by B & R Feiner and together we explored the plight of refugees being and not being permitted in Australia. This resulted in an article on the front page of a nationwide newspaper on a Saturday morning (Urban, 2018). My service received hand written threats and complaints and a DET investigation due to the interest in the story. This was an incredibly scary and confusing event as I had followed curriculum and policy in children's rights to know about their world to bring this day into my classroom along with my families and yet society and politics felt I threatened children's innocence. This traumatic event contributed to my pursuit in learning and studying more.

## Convention on the Rights of the Child

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) is positioned as underpinning the development of the EYLF which explicitly tells me that as the teacher that using the EYLF in my daily practices will reinforce the principles laid out in the convention (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). Article 13 of the Convention states,

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice. (United Nations, 1989, p. 4)



The Convention also underpins how agency is understood and how it influenced the development of the definition used in the EYLF. This was visible in Article 12 around the concept of voice, where the article insists that state parties assure “to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views” (United Nations, 1989, p. 4) and children’s rights to express those views freely when they affect the child. Now, I begin to see concepts of voice, access to world knowledge, and rights of contribution as affecting notions of agency. However, access to knowledge and adults’ interferences under the guise of protecting children’s innocence was a contradiction in the underpinning principle and it was later considered toned down by some of those involved in writing the EYLF (Sumsion et al., 2009).

The idea of protecting children from potential harm had emerged out of the nineteenth hundred’s as explored earlier in my philosophical history review. Philosophically, children were positioned as innocent or even unruly and in need of adult protections. Protecting children was not just a philosophical thought, there were child labour reforms and on the ground organisations such as the Save the Children Movement and the International Peace Union (Ennew, 2010). This was part of the new shifting view and the first identification of children as subjects of rights, rather than objects of concern that aligned with philosophy of the time under Dewey (Brooke et al., 2013; Ennew, 2010). The Save the Children Movement was set up in 1919 and was dedicated to child protection under a Declaration of Child Rights, a global first in child protection (Ennew, 2010). It would go on to be adopted as the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child and then added to by the UN in 1959 (Ennew, 2010).

In 1979 which was the UN International Year of the Child another children’s rights agenda was tabled. This version was considered quite important as it went beyond child protection and considered children as full subjects of human rights including rights to self-determination (Ennew, 2010) although it did not outline the action needed to make this happen. This aligns with the thinking of Freire and his notion of critical pedagogy and praxis. Where teaching and learning needed to be more transparent, where students had rights to shape their own lives and an acknowledgement of education as a political site to prevent passive learning and teaching (Malone et al., 2020d). Over the next ten years an assembly of government representatives met each year and turned the 19-point draft into the 54-Article human rights instrument adopted in 1989 (Ennew, 2010). Overall, this Declaration was accredited to the new approach to children and childhood where children were subjects with rights, and not passive objects of concern and formed part of the demand for better information about children’s lives (Ennew, 2010).

Critics were concerned with the amount of input from Northern nations in the convention's development questioning cultural bias, alongside the fixed construction of childhood being defined by the biological and physiological and whether human rights could be applied universally (Ennew, 2010). In returning to Article 12 which brought to the forefront children's rights to voice we see an article that begins to recognise children as full human beings with the ability to participate in society, however it was considered controversial and its wording contributed to the United States not ratifying the convention due to its potential to undermine adult authority (Lundy, 2007). Ennew concluded their review of the Declaration by stating its historical development was based on what adults did and should do for children and the history of child rights "continues to be the history of adult actions" (2010, p. 6).

I found it interesting that those from the sector who developed the EYLF ended up frustrated with political interference around notions of innocent children and children's rights to know about realities of the world. What does OUTCOME 2: CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD mean if gatekeeping existed around what knowledge was to be shared when children were meant to be allowed to impact their worlds? It brought to light the subtlety in notions of *their* world, with a very child-centred focus rather than an of the world reality.

## The Agentic Teacher Surfacing a Troubled Agency

The idea that there was political influence in how the EYLF was formed and how that impacted notions of agency was important. It made me reflect on the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) statement in the introduction to the EYLF. It describes the framework's role "to assist educators to provide young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop foundation for future success in learning" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 5). I found the need to explicitly state *young children* unusual alongside the focus on their education being reduced to their future success rather than acknowledging children's current learning as important. COAG seemed to double down in their political stance with the addition to the EYLF's introduction that the EYLF would contribute to realising COAG's own vision that "All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 5). This statement portrayed a clear vision of children, of the still developing child, whose role was to succeed for the benefit of the nation, but it could be understood as a vision that benefited those children who understood education and could more easily get ahead but not all children.

My engagement with understanding the historical development of concepts of early childhood education alongside a critical reflection on curriculum was surfacing some uncomfortable truths. My profession was entangled with neoliberal discourses that disequilibrate understandings of agency and the political value of early childhood education. I was sensing correlation between individualistic choice, empowerment that was often focused as self-serving and the positioning of agency as a humanistic possession as parallels to neoliberal agendas of liberal thought. Even though I was yet to understand the full impact of neoliberalism, I began to see its insipid infiltration into education (Duhn, 2015; Hursh, 2007; Valentine, 2011). The role that Government had played in the development and running of the early childhood sector was yet to be unpacked but will occur further into my dissertation.

This section brought to light the EYLF's extensive use across early childhood services in Australia and also how I needed to be informed and conduct my own critical research to deepen my understanding and use of the framework. My own interpretations, understandings and use of this framework shaped my practices but responses to it could vary widely from one educator to another. An educator is defined as "an early childhood practitioner who work[s] directly with children in early childhood settings" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 5). This included different qualifications and levels of studies. Varying comprehensions, understandings and interpretations could create inequalities when educators were expected to use the EYLF to inform their daily work with young children and their families (Grieshaber, 2015; Grieshaber & Graham, 2017). Miriam Giugni (2011) grappled with this in her work as an early childhood teacher and researcher as presented in her article '*Becoming worldly with': An encounter with the Early Year's Learning Framework*'. She shared her critical journey grappling with the complex tensions of using the framework and that at times critical connections resonated with the EYLF while at others these connections act as questions about the limitations of the broad concepts that were presented (Giugni, 2011). She offered up the perspective that sitting in the "complex tensions rather than seeking out pedagogical remedies" should not be undervalued (Giugni, 2011, p. 9).

The early years learning framework was used across early childhood educators' practice and it actively included notions of agency as a pedagogic tool, yet its development and articulation of what agency was and how it should be taught were open to multiple understandings that included bigger issues and interpretations that I had originally thought, political influences and neoliberal agendas, issues of historically emerging and contemporary complexities of globalisation and the complexities of education in the unseeded lands of First Nation's People. This made me question how understandings of agency have shifted and changed. Amongst all the contradictions,

confusions, and emerging troubled feelings I was having I now knew it was time to critically reflect on my own practices from within my classroom. I needed to look at what, how and why my agency teaching stood up against this new knowledge I had gained in my literature review. What did my practice say about my agency teaching in relation to the historical, social, and political effects on early childhood education? This would become the focus of my next chapter.

## **The Agency Researcher Surfacing a Troubled Agency**

I was beginning to acknowledge that teaching and researching agency was not straight forward. It had a long and complex past impacted politically, socially, and historically influencing how the concept of agency had been formed. I was only scratching at the surface of the impacts of globalisation, where Western notions of education has been packed up and delivered into Infant Schools and Free Kindergartens in Australia. The infiltration of neoliberal discourses into education that impacted understandings of what education was for and agendas of liberal thought as influencing Australian curriculum. I was yet to even tackle how both globalisation and neoliberal politics were entangled with the colonial history of Australia. This was complex. As the researcher of agency, I began to wonder if forms and methods of research also came with similar complexities. I needed to research researching more to navigate and decide the best approach to researching my teaching practices to reveal how agency was understood and taught. I felt the impending complexities of research when something that I had understood as straightforward and definable was emerging as more complex.

The conceptualisation of agency as a politically, socially, and historically formed concept made me consider that different forms of research methodologies and approaches would also come with these complexities. I needed my research to reveal these complexities along the way if my dissertation was to acknowledge more broader notions of agency and bring in what sits outside of the defined notions of choice, voice, and contribution. I was beginning to see that to some extent, the complexities of notions of agency had been intentionally excluded. I also needed to consider that developed forms of research could have gone through similar processes.

I needed to start thinking of myself as the researcher in this dissertation if I wanted to understand how I taught and understood agency through my own practices. I needed to think about how I saw myself as a researcher and what methodology would best reveal my own agency teachings while not shutting down or ignoring the historical, social, and political influences that are always present. I also felt a strong pull to start analysing my own stories from within my classroom. I had emerged so many complexities within the histories of childhood and emerging forms of early

childhood education that I need to inquire through my own stories from within my classroom to gain a better understanding of my own practices. As the teacher and researcher, I knew agency teaching and I knew how to demonstrate its impact through curriculum. I wanted to go into my classroom to look at agency in action and with curriculum to surface the results.



## **The Early Childhood Teacher and Researcher who Knew Agency**

### **An Interval**

The prolific importance and representation of the agency presented in the EYLF was embedded in my teaching and notions of pedagogy. I referenced the EYLF in all that I did, and it underpinned all of my work. It had become so normal and expected in my teaching that I was not sure if I could see outside of it even if I wanted to. I was not sure how it had become so entangled in my thinking and teaching, nor if it had become like an automatic response over my time of teaching that had slowly and surely become my reality.

As the teacher and researcher who delved into histories of agency in education, we had become less sure about this confirmed agency as a concept that could be researched easily. This sense of a more nomadic we, felt like it was emerging ways in which otherness prompts and mobilises forces that I had not yet come to understand (Braidotti, 2014a). Otherness was emerging through inquiring into unknowns; histories, discourses, neoliberal agendas, colonial impacts, globalisation and social notions of agency that I had yet to fully explore. Rather than wanting to shy away from them or bury my head in the sand, I wanted more.

Did I, in my role as a teacher, genuinely believe that children were inherently flawed and required the guidance of adults, formal education, and governmental oversight to mould them into the kind of adults deemed necessary for advancing society according to the preconceived notions of

those adults? Where had education become about shaping children into those holes already determined outside of children's involvement? Did I bring in notions of some of the more radical thinkers on education like Dewey and provide a more participatory form of democracy in my agency teaching, where my classroom was understood as a social site and children had roles in their own learning (Brooke et al., 2013; Malone et al., 2020b) Under Freire's praxis my classroom was a site of social change but was it part of my agency teaching and did it provide children opportunities of bettering themselves through shared notions of education (Vandenbroeck, 2021). I was not as sure that I had embedded these practices as much as I thought I had. I had also become complexed by the understanding that my thought to be contemporary practices had been developed elsewhere, far from where I practiced education. Globalisation was not just a contemporary issue of new technology, it was the beginning of the globalisation of educational policies from the west on local policies and practices (Duhn, 2015). The educational direction of Infant Schools and Free Kindergartens would go on to be impacted by neoliberal philosophy of globalisation where education; furthermore, children have become positioned as a valuable resource where intervention and investment are good economic investments.

As the researcher, had the influence of analytic philosophy on education affected my understandings of knowledge production? Could I simply prove agency through observing, capturing, and analysing my observations to reveal how the definition and practice of agency are the same. If my understandings of agency were definable, fixed and performed through acts of right or wrong, I needed to be clear about notions of clarity, rigour, and logic in research and how truth could be verified in how I would approach researching agency in my teaching (Norefalk & Papastephanou, 2023). I positioned myself as being intentional, purposive, and rational in the way I behaved and did so according to what I might know or believe would be the outcome of my action (Giddens, 1984; Loyal, 2003), yet I was forming hesitant questions about notions of epistemological and ontological viewpoints. I understood that the lens I saw agency through was important in how I would research agency in my teaching if I wanted my inquiry to be critical like Freire (Vandenbroeck, 2021). In addition, I needed to consider a more critical consciousness to my researching to understand unequal relations in the culture of education, agency teaching and researching (Vandenbroeck, 2021). Was my teaching and research going to contribute to traditional positioning of children as passive learners, being taught by all knowing experts and not question existing conceptualisations of agency, structures, and hierarchies of knowledge? (Sumsion, 2005). I was starting to include questions of the condition of knowledge in modern contexts and the extent of claims to legitimation in educational realms of truth and systems of education and this needed to be carried into my researcher thinking.

I was in essence asking myself if I could forgo the dogmatic and comfort in my taken for granted stance on agency and as the researcher who thought it could be captured in qualitative ways (St. Pierre, 2021). Were there systemic pressures within education systems that made it hard to practice praxis and drew me into expected and rational ways of teaching and researching? The power and unquestionability of Government mandated curriculum policy was something I needed to be aware of as I researched agency in my classroom or I was at risk of conformity and replication and the “production of students who were happy consumers and unquestioning future workers” (Giamminuti et al., 2022; Giroux, 2013, p. 460).

This risk of dogma was not just in relation to my teaching but had also been felt in method. I had understood that I was on a path to develop a supposedly infallible step-by-step approach method that would both confirm my agency teaching and support existing qualitative methods of research (Giroux, 2013). In essence a positioning and holding up of the image of teaching as governed by technique and education as a practice of management and conformity (Giroux, 2013). A narrowing that would not allow for attempts towards difference in thinking and resisting nor space for anything new (Giamminuti et al., 2022; Valentine, 2011).

I was not sure that I as the teacher and researcher wanted to contribute to liberal philosophy and political traditions that positioned agency as only attained by adults or as requiring rationality, self-awareness, and a sense of futurity (Valentine, 2011) , built on a model of individualism, in which moral agency was paramount and who had it and who did not, counted.

I needed to research into my own practices to illuminate my teacher-self’s ingrained practices. I invoked a bringing to the surface of what had become the everyday teaching of agency and question what this was really doing or providing to the children that I taught. This felt very complex to take on as a researcher who was questioning the very notion that she came in to research in the first place. I was beginning to worry that my research could go in different directions depending on how open I was to different ways of researching agency. I could confirm my current use of agency as per the definition and curriculum that guides my practices as a teacher or not. I could bring the social political and question the underlying influences that guided agency’s purpose in contemporary early childhood education and hold that up to my practices. Yes, my teaching might meet the requirements of a lead teacher who uses the EYLF as intended and an analysis of my practices could confirm this but when I complexify agency with the affective influence of historical, political, and social agendas, I cannot help but question my understanding of myself as a teacher and the researcher who controls how this research is carried out. It was time to head into the classroom and look at my practices.



## Critically Understanding Agency Through Literature and Acts of Agency

### Setting the Scene

In my previous chapter, I reviewed how children and childhoods had been historically positioned. I emerged how there were still traces of those concepts present in the current EYLF curriculum that I used in my understanding of agency, and I now understood how perspectives on children and childhood throughout centuries, including political global and neoliberal politics had impacted current understandings of agency. In this chapter I begin to lean in to my emerging confusion in understanding myself as a teacher of agency. I inquire into this emerging troubled-self, alongside attempts to capture agency from within my classroom in my research. After developing a more critical philosophical understanding of the development of agency in curriculum, I had become curious to see whether my agency teaching practices uphold these historically, politically and globally formed notions of agency.

First, I delve deeper into my emerging troubled sense of self as a teacher and also as the researcher trying to capture agency in the classroom. I inquire into how agency has been previously researched and the use of observations as a method of capturing agency from within my classroom. I question teaching and researching from a performance perspective to highlight the complexities of teaching expectations in today's classroom including the impact of neoliberalism and political influence in early childhood education. Then I analyse *acts of agency* that my teaching and researching-self collected from day-to-day interactions observed from within the classroom. Acts of agency are participant observations of children and myself engaging in agentic moments in the classroom. I use these observations to critically interpret how I understand and practice agency in my classroom as an early childhood teacher.

### Critically Questioning my Teacher/Researcher Self

I positioned myself as an expert teacher who knew agency, however now I was not so sure. I had conflicting understandings of how historically children had been positioned as problems to be rectified, savage children in need of moral corrections and teachings of broad knowledge designed in faraway places to fill them up as they were empty and in need of salvation. Moreover, how this butted up against the contemporary positioning of children as the capable and competent (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018) child that I had been taught to

teach. I was not sure that the capable and competent child had to be taught through explicit outcomes and broad institutions of knowledge determined by adults nor that this met the definition of capable and competent.

I had not critically thought about how my agency practices positioned children and childhoods. I had believed that the capable and competent child was far removed from the historical positioning of children and my contemporary practices and understandings of children as agentic surely meant that I did not understand children as problem to be solved nor that forms of education could be taken and implemented in different locations without generating complexity. Curriculum informed me that “all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 5), therefore, these children had a right to the education I provided as it would create better futures for them. Furthermore, my teaching responsibility to promote children’s agency would meet their rights to education and set them on the right path for the rest of their lives. However, I was now hearing in my very own words that education was still positioned as the pathway to become good future learners for the overall good of society and this did not feel very agentic. A positioning of children as future orientated and a focus on what I needed to do to make them become civilised citizens sat uncomfortably. That meant that my teaching practices in their day to day lives were less about who they were in their current child state and more about what I was responsible for moulding them into for their designated future. I felt like some of the historical notions of developing liberal learners was still present in contemporary curriculum and had become imbedded in my own thinking and practice.

As the researcher, I wanted to show how my classroom practices were upholding the curriculum and how this had made me an expert teacher. A confirmation to the sector that through the use of EYLF, I transformed understandings into practice that supported the definition of agency. The EYLF was a framework that meant it drew on my interpretation, knowledge and understanding of it in my ability to apply it in my classroom (Knaus, 2015). I had the power to decide what choices children had, how I listened to and interpreted their voice within the classroom and which children’s actions were rewarded and understood as them contributing to an understanding of their worlds. This interpretation and practice of choice, voice, and contribution underpinned how I understood the definition of agency as it was presented to me through the EYLF as woven through its principles, practices and learning outcomes that guided my understanding of myself as a teacher; A proving that I provided children with the best opportunity to learn and practice agency. I thought by sharing my exemplary practices I could contribute to the sector as a best practice example of agency teaching, an expert demonstration of my agency teaching that provided children with choice, voice,

and opportunity to impact their world (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). Alongside, how this definition permitted contemporary practices that were far removed from the historical positioning of children as defective, and deficit focused my research would provide clear examples of how I positioned and understood what choice, voice, and opportunity looked like within the classroom and how that would demonstrate contemporary practices and understanding that positioned children as capable and competent in my classroom.

However, I was having niggling feelings that I was no longer certain that my best practice agency teaching was what I thought it was and possibly that it was exactly as it had been designed to be. I needed a more critical understanding of my practices to be able to answer my research question and deduce how I understand and practice agency as an early childhood teacher. I now had concerns that when I adhered to the definition and notions of agency as per curriculum, I was contributing to forming the child along the lines of historical and political configurations that position education for the future orientated child. Furthermore, concerns arose that this conceptualisation of agency was also built into how the sector wanted me to understand children and childhoods in education. I was worried that I had been naïve in my forming teacher-self to the bigger picture of my own agency teachings that actually contributed to something that I had not fully understood.

I had begun to surface embedded realities in notions of child, childhood, and agency as emerged through my historical readings of education and this was beginning to muddy my confirmed thinking about my practices with agency. I needed to see and understand if these historical and political configurations of child and childhood and of agency were present in my own practices, a from within my own classroom. As the researcher, I wanted to see if I was only practicing the agency that I had been taught and if adhering to these teachings, I was contributing to a future orientated education with a focus on moulding the child to fit notions of designed future societies. This felt too close to the historical notions, as future orientated meant I was in fact positioning children as blank slates to be moulded and a forming of a liberal individual learner that positioned them as only productive in society when future orientated over who they were now. I felt like I had begun a process of peeling back the layers, folds, and creases of curriculum which revealed traces of historical developments of notions of child and childhood that I was not sure I agreed with, yet they could have become imbedded in my own teaching. I was beginning to realise I still had a long way to go to conceptually understand how notions of agency had emerged, changed, and affected the Australian early childhood sector.

## **Theoretical Habitus in Researching Agency**

Agency underscored children's capacity to make choices, express their own ideas and emphasises their ability to have some control over their own lives alongside playing a role in changes that take place in society more broadly (James, 2012). This positioning of agency which had formed historically through earlier centuries of philosophy was part of the new paradigm for the study of children that emerged in the social sciences during the 1970s (James, 2012). Social science research aimed to understand the various aspects of human thought and behaviour and this new understanding of agency marked the shift in seeing children as independent social actors in society.

Giddens's (1984) sociological theory of structuration had a significant impact on the understanding of agency. A social theory that analysed both structure and agents to interpret the creation and reproduction of social systems. His theory argued that human agency and social structure were not separate concepts of constructs but produced by social action and interaction together (Giddens, 1984). Giddens believed that the reproduction of social systems was not a mechanical outcome but an active process consisting of and accomplished by the doings of active subjects (Burridge et al., 2010; Loyal, 2003). His theory shifted the focus from children's reliance on institutions to understanding children as independent actors who actively shape and reshape social institutions through their actions and decisions (Bolin, 2016; Valentine, 2011).

This was part of a theorists of practice, which also included Bourdieu, who looked at the role of habitus and routinised practices in agency, an understanding of human agency as habitual, repetitive and taken for granted (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). However, this agency as an acting in social structures and imposing choices on social worlds required a socially competent or socially aware 'I' (Duhn, 2015) which through the historical complexities of developing notions of child and childhood can be paradoxical as children have not been positioned with the same level of agency accorded to them due to their age. I could relate to Duhn's notion of a socially aware 'I' as I was beginning to question my very own sense of teaching self and was in some ways questioning if I as an expert teacher was really as socially competent as I thought I was. I was wondering if my habitual, repetitive, and taken for granted practice was also in part forming a less critical teacher. Overall, Giddens' theory received much criticism, however, remained a pillar of contemporary sociological theory.

## **Agency as Human Centric**

Human agency as theories of habitual, repetitive and presumed, however, only in relation to rational adults. Positioning of children from deficit perspectives, needing to become something of value, to become adult and more than child made me questioning notions of human agency (Malone et al., 2020d). I felt confronted by these understandings of agency as they again positioned agency as a possession, to have agency or not. Human agency as free choice and agency to act upon my own thinking was limited to picking up, using and repeating as a single author (Butler, 2009). There felt something restricting and closing in when thinking of agency as controlled and only understood by notions of rational adults. A knowing subject affirmed a “man-humanity” that could be worked at to free oneself into becoming agentic (Braidotti, 2013, p. 11). I believed children were agentic, that I had agency but needed to further understand that our capacity to exercise actions was bounded and determined by the structures that we operated within (Malone et al., 2020d). This forming of the agentic individual felt like just another category to define and manoeuvre thought and behaviour, however, the philosophical, political, economic and educational systems depend on individuals, the idea that this concept could dissolve was hard to contemplate (Sheldrake, 2021).

## **Teaching and Researching as Performance in Classrooms**

As a teacher and researcher, I positioned myself as an independent social actor in my research. It was my responsibility to design my research methodology and my teacher training and research reading guided my way forward. As a teacher, I had been trained in how to observe, analyse, and document actions as learning which would contribute to capturing my agency practices in my classroom. My observation assessment teacher training and researching of qualitative observation methods had taught me to “gather and analyse information of evidence about what children know, can do and understand” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 19) in relation to acts of agency and I needed to turn these practices onto myself as the teacher.

In Australia, prevailing policy discourses delineate teacher professionalism as primarily a technical achievement. Within this framework, teacher learning predominantly revolves around skill acquisition, while teacher practice focuses on guiding students toward predetermined outcomes (Diamond & Bulfin, 2023). I have the skills to observe and capture agency practices and my teachings guide children in their learning of agency as per the EYLF. Classrooms are understood as contexts that are typically teacher-led settings where children and teachers have asymmetrical rights (Houen et al., 2016). I understood my role as the teacher was overseeing the teaching and learning happening in my classroom and I was responsible for managing the children in my classroom. This

preconceived perception of the educational space made it difficult for myself to permit unfiltered agency without replacing the teacher-led order; I was the teacher and I played a significant role in affording children agency (Houen et al., 2016). I controlled the agency as the professional teacher who knew its importance in early childhood education.

I felt like this positioned my subjectivity in contexts of the neoliberalisation of education, where I was at the head of the classroom in systems of education that located me as a point of application to a political vehicle of technical education (Ball, 2016). I had power and control that had been granted to me through modern forms of Government provided education if I performed them in the right way. Neoliberalism as defined by Ball (2016), advocates for free market capitalism and consumerism over government intervention and spending. It promotes a user-pay approach that encourages competition, reduces state intervention, endorses free market principles and is meant to enhance public sector accountability (Rogers et al., 2020). Previous research into the effects of neoliberalism on early childhood teachers had identified that it had contributed to an erosion of professional identity (Rogers et al., 2020). It offered a paradoxical approach by involving teachers in an active process of self-monitoring that led to new forms of self-exploitation (Ball, 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2014; Rogers et al., 2020). Other forms of managerialism had infiltrated my profession, particularly in the form of micromanagement and accountability (Rogers et al., 2020).

There were increasing protocols in place that vary from different forms of assessments, checklists, risk assessments, meetings, emails, phone calls, department spot checks, ratings procedures and mandated professional development requirements that were just some of the additional demands completed outside of the teaching. These constant checks and balances often made me feel untrustworthy, subordinate, and under constant surveillance creating both sector and self-questioning around my competence as a teacher. This often left me with a sense of not doing enough or not doing it correctly.

This contributed to the dominant discourse in education where it was believed that when teachers were assigned positions/categories and assigned with value/worth that this categorization and comparison through standardised measurements would “reveal and illuminate essential truths about students, teachers and education services” (Ball, 2016, p. 1113). My teaching professional self was only as good as what my teaching could evidence about the children that I taught as filtered through curriculum and policy. I felt the effects as a watering down of education to the culmination and completion of the value of these protocols and how these could become the indicators of a *good teacher* through subordination (Rogers et al., 2020). Even though I was a vehicle for the government’s influence in the role of education in young children’s lives I needed to reflect on

myself as a sight of power who could also enact or resist understandings of the infiltration of neoliberal concepts (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). I had drawn on the work of Foucault in understanding historical forms of power in governing children and now I needed to draw from his conceptualisation of neoliberal government as a particular configuration in my understanding of government forms of education as truth and power in relation to my sense of self and my ethical understandings of early childhood education (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Foucault, 1982).

In early childhood education I was required to practice play-based learning, allowing for play while extending children's learning using intentional teaching strategies. I understood that children acted intentionally and with agency in play and through practices such as "asking questions, explaining, modelling, speculating, inquiring and demonstrating" I would extend children's knowledge (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 22). My teaching and career in teaching was mapped out against professional standards that define what I as the teacher should know and be able to do, this was also reflected in the education reform movement across the world (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Diamond & Bulfin, 2023). Given my role as the teacher, I was the director of classroom interactions and my challenge was to afford children agency while maintaining classroom order (Houen et al., 2016).

## Capturing Agency in my Classroom

To capture agency in my classroom, I employed real-life instances of children demonstrating agency and aligned them with the educational definition to demonstrate my teaching methods as agentic promotions of learning. These observations allow for assessment and alignment with defined criteria of agency and the learning outcomes specified in curriculum and policy. I use my teacher skills as a researcher and pull out moments of agency from within my classroom through modes of observation. I engage in forms of participant observer, where, as the teacher, I am also involved in the activities at the research site, placing me on the inside of the observation while recording information (Creswell, 2005) taking observations as a way of knowing from the inside (Ingold, 2013). My teacher education and experience in the field meant I was an exemplary teacher who could *lead processes to improve performances through evaluating, revising, analysing data, communicating with stakeholders and drawing from current research of effective teaching and learning* as per the Australian Professional Teaching Standards (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2018). I spent my days consistently observing children and transforming these observations into examples of learning, therefore, as the researcher, I was well placed to carry out observations that would capture agency in the everyday of my classroom.

I thought that I knew what the best practices of agency were and that my research could reveal them to other teachers. However, alongside my desire to capture exceptional examples of agency in my teaching I was wondering how I positioned children, childhood, and notions of agency in relation to the way curriculum had been historically influenced and developed through the EYLF. I hoped to emerge how I position children, childhoods, and notions of agency through my teaching practices.

## Acts of Agency

I now present four observations from within my own practice in my classroom to analyse how I teach agency as informed by curriculum, policy and the EYLF, alongside an understanding of how I felt I positioned children and childhoods in these observations. I use a method of observation, followed by an analysis of how the act of agency aligns to curriculum definitions. These observations are meant to capture agency and demonstrate how my practices contribute to exceptional practices of agency teaching from within an early childhood classroom. However, I provide a third section titled *Thinking* to each observation that analyses with further thinking; a more affective critical analysis of my teaching as I hold up my practices to the historical positionings that were also swirling around in my mind. My affective responses to my own research thinking are visceral, prior to intentions and at a more intra-subjective level of my body (Skattebol, 2010), a reflection on the teacher agency practices, a developing thinking with the literature and theoretical positioning of agency that I was emerging as I read, thought, and wrote notions of agency.

## Observation

*Skyla (Pseudonym)—I stopped Skyla as she was heading out into the yard from inside. In her hands she had a tub full of textas and paper. She took them outside and set up her own drawing space. I followed her out to her newly established drawing space and asked her what she was doing, 'I'm drawing' she answered.*

## Analysis

Skyla demonstrated her agency in three ways in this observation. She demonstrated her ability to choose what she wanted to do and even where she wanted to do it by deciding for herself that she wanted to draw outside. She showed considerable initiative, taking it and using it by gathering up the resources that she needed to do what she wanted. She also showed voice as she told me what she was doing. She was actively shaping her world and adapting routines and practices to make them her own. I, as the teacher, encouraged this act of agency by not shutting down; her



removal and moving of learning resources from inside at the designated drawing table to the outdoor yard was not permitted. As I observed her making her own rules, I asked for her voice and acknowledged her contribution, upholding her own sense of agency with my permission as the teacher for her to break the classroom rules.

### *Thinking*

Her actions spoke of agency understandings; knowing that she might be stopped in moving resources around the environment but doing so anyway. However, she also showed knowledge that *these* resources could be considered more appropriate to move while other items were not. Was Skylar a more conscious 'I' than other children and thus had more agency in her actions, a form of thick agency as she understood how to push rule boundaries? She understood what was permitted within the boundaries that I set as the teacher and how I could be flexible under the right conditions. She knew that I thought she would do the right thing and be responsible for these indoor resources and did not hesitate in doing what she wanted.

I felt like I could hear my teacher-self, outside of myself. My own words, actions and thinking was permeated with notions of permission, acknowledgment, individual interest, individual initiative followed by a sensation of dry mouth, my controlling teaching tongue sticking to its walls as I analysed myself in this observation. I was noticing how I was positioning myself as above and over Skyla, needing and giving forms of permission in this banal act of moving pens and paper to the outdoor space. Such a small action yet was bounded by classroom rules and notions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. I had felt the need to confront her, to insist on an acknowledgement of this banal action as a way to demonstrate, reinforce and promote agency, a good agency as the good agency teacher. However, now it felt artificial. It felt bounded by control, permission and shrouded in a sense of hierarchical understanding of systems of the right kind of agency.

I could argue I was contributing to Giddens notion of agency, permitting this active process to encourage Skyla to contribute to her world in her actions that were in fact breaking the social rules of the classroom. Skyla was engaged in an active process, a doing of an active subject that was both human agency and social structure in the making (Giddens, 1984; Loyal, 2003). My role involved permitting and understanding Skyla as independent actor who was reshaping the classroom through her actions and decisions, yet I knew that other children who might try to slip past me at the door with indoor resources, paint from the easel, blocks from the block corner or even scissors from the craft table would be stopped and sent back inside. She understood these unspoken boundaries and knew where and when she could push them and me.

As the researcher I was torn, I knew that the concept of agency had been important to Childhood Studies as it illustrated links of the new interdisciplinary area with wider theoretical debates within the social sciences, alongside, highlighting newer ways of thinking about children as impacting recent research and policy perspectives being developed (James, 2012). Agency remained a key concept in educational discourse through its embedded nature in curriculum and policy and agency as the ability to “act and advocate individually and collectively for self and other is an essential aspect of how early childhood education is conceptualised globally” (Duhn, 2015, p. 922). My role in researching and capturing agency in action could contribute to this global understanding of early childhood education but it was its very nature of becoming benign and embedded that I felt I needed to challenge in my research. Agency was tightly interwoven in the global focus on early childhood education as the site for enhancing the quality of children’s lives and the development of a universal conceptualisation of agency (Duhn, 2015). This global positioning of agency in early childhood education was clearly felt in the curriculum and notions of agency that I had developed over my teaching years. A sense of agency as being universal and transferable from one location to another and as a collective sense of agency for the good of oneself and others. I went back to the classroom to observe this in action.

## Observation

*Isabella (pseudonym)—“I can’t wait to show Penny how I can swing by myself”, she told me. “How did you learn?”, I asked. “I just did it and Kate showed me” she replied. “That’s fantastic Isabella, I’m so proud of you for learning to swing yourself” I responded. “I love it when children teach each other things”, I added.*

## Analysis

Isabella actively sought me out to share her accomplishment with me. I had made an environment in my classroom where children felt they had to tell me what they could do. I was trained that they were capable and competent and loved to highlight and document these moments in front of and including the children, it was part of my teaching and learning to be agentic. Highlight and applaud their accomplishments when they fit into the outcomes of learning. The EYLF taught me to “foster children’s motivation to learn and reinforce their sense of themselves and competent learners” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 14).

Isabella demonstrated choice, voice and acknowledged the contribution that Kate made in her life in helping her to learn to swing on her own. A fantastic milestone in her learning,

demonstrating her attempting challenging activities and learning new skills, OUTCOME 4 in the EYLF. She was advocating for herself and others in her acknowledgment of the teaching of how to swing independently. She was becoming independent and knew it was important to share this development with the teacher. What a great example of learning and observation this would make.

### *Thinking*

In my understanding and positioning of her agency, I was understanding Isabella as a global agentic child in her actions and practices as she strived to be independent and to do things on her own. In her advocacy to be independent and acknowledgment of the other child's assistance, she was acting and advocating for agency. I understood my teaching self as the creator and encourager of this need to act independently and individually as it demonstrated the agency that I taught. However, I heard my teacher voice and my positioning as the teacher wobbling on the inside; children's actions as hooked up to right and wrong forms of agentic practices. Teaching someone to swing independently was good, while the focus on this independence over something more relational in this child-to-child action was pushed to the side. My role in teaching children to be competent learners through acknowledging their independence as correct behaviors seemed to overshadow their relational agency actions in this observation. My stomach lurches and swirls like Isabella on the swing, the kind of nervous butterflies that preludes and alerts to possible danger. A rock in my gut as I observed myself positioning Isabella as outcomes; my immediate need to understand my teaching and her learning through curriculum. Was this really how I wanted to understand the Isabella who was so excited to explain this shared moment with Kate with me?

I felt like my positioning of Isabella was too focused on the sum of her designated achievements and this meant that they were understood as a pathway to her future success. Her actions to become more independent; she was achieving the steps needed to become an independent learner. I wanted to see Isabella as more than just a product of curriculum and as an independent learner pulling away from others to do more and more by herself. I did not want to relate to her as the sum of her learning outcomes, yet curriculum and definitions kept pulling me back to understanding her and positioning her in relation to how they positioned her.

As the researcher, I went back to critically reflect on how agency was positioned in contemporary curriculum. Current understandings of agency concepts have a strong association with liberal thought. Empowerment, choice, and agency are prominent in neoliberal discourse (Duhn, 2015) and agency as the capacity to make choices has arguably intensified under neoliberal reform (Valentine, 2011). Neoliberalism advocates for free market capitalism and consumerism, it highlights

its benefits over government spending and responsibility. A user-pays system, the benefits of competition, reduced state interference, reported efficiencies, the advantages of free market economics, and increased accountability in the public sector are acclaimed as its key merits (Rogers et al., 2020). In early childhood education the neoliberal concept of agency, such as the capacity to make choice has made its way into curriculum, pedagogy, and policy with its strong emphasis on self-directed learning and autonomous learners (Valentine, 2011), along with markers of increased individual efficiency and self-management (Duhn, 2015).

For children; liberal traditions imposed criteria for agency that most children could not meet. Within liberal philosophy and political traditions, moral agency was something attained by adults and requires rationality, self-awareness, and a sense of futurity, again the notion of Murris' 'I' (Murris, 2020c; Valentine, 2011). As liberalism was built on a model of individualism, in which moral agency was paramount, who had it and who did not count. Childhood studies argued that children were excluded from participation because spaces and conventions were adult-centric where children's cognitive and physical particularities were not accounted for under liberal traditions and the agency expectations I observed of my teacher-self in my observations fit this argument. This contributed to children being regarded as defective or deficient (Valentine, 2011). Positioning children within liberal notions of agency that were not accessible for all children contradicted the global agency agenda to enhance children's lives. My observational research was highlighting that these ideas became funnelled through interpretations of actions in the classroom. My first observation of Skyla highlighted how I tended to reward good examples of agency with an added insistence of making that known to that child as a way to promote it further. I was curious to observe what happened when children did not perform this good agency.

## Observation

*John and Felix (Pseudonyms)—are two children who don't like group times such as when we read a book together as a whole group. This knowledge of their refusal to participate drew me in when I observed them come into the book corner together and grab a book. They sat on the couch and as I observed as they shared stories about the book. Felix said "one of my brother's school friends got stung by a jellyfish" pointing to a jellyfish in the book. "I got stung by a jellyfish too" said John.*

## Analysis

Improbable acts of agency from John and Felix, demonstrating their choice to learn and also their rights to choose when they did not want to participate. Sharing stories from home were contributions to their own learning, even though Felix does not have any siblings. My role in creating

engaging environments meant that I provided children space to move around in their own ways to learn and this play-based approach “enables children to make connections between prior experiences and new learning and to transfer learning from one experiences to another” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 8). I observed literacy and imagination outcomes being met in this observation, alongside, the boys trying to outdo each other in their experiences at life; an example of contribution to their world. However, I was not doing the teaching, my expected role in intentional teaching in this instance would not work with these two children as they would have moved away if I had swooped in asking curious questions to further their learning.

The book with the children was doing the teaching. This was learning happening behind my back, out of my view as I hid my observing. The teaching and learning happened anyway but if it was not evidenced and documented through written observations with links to the EYLF, how could I justify the teaching and learning taking place?

### *Thinking*

Saying no and choosing not to participate was also agency, right? Learning when I was not actively teaching was also agentic, right? Power play of who had the scariest experience, or knew someone who had, even if it was not true was also agency, right? Turning choice, voice, and not participating into a power filled competition was also.

This observation made me reflect on notions of power. Earlier I positioned the teacher in the classroom as the wielder of power, this could be also understood as a form of repressive power. I positioned myself as having authority over the children and looked at the children as a sum of their learning parts and through my teachings and interventions I could contribute to forming the right kind of future adult. This now felt dehumanising of the very children that I taught (Caldwell, 2007). Learning was only learning if it could be documented, and I could be held accountable through my documented teaching. I could not be everywhere all the time to keep accounts of all the learning that happened when I was not present, furthermore these children intentionally went out of their way to stay away from my intentional teaching. This was their use of power over their own learning.

I found this idea terrifying; these two children did not want me to be in charge of their learning and went out of their way to learn behind my back. This emerged feelings that I found confronting in my teacher-self. It was present in my frustrations of the children learning behind my back as I would not be able to capture and document this learning, their refusing to participate hindered my teaching and authority and my teaching need that positioned learning as happening at group times which were heavily teacher directed.

Through my research, I was also becoming aware that this perception had occurred through notions of normalising power, subtle rules, and boundaries that had been formed around me as part of the institution of education that made me think this was what I was supposed to be doing to be teaching properly (Foucault, 1980; MacNaughton, 2005). Normalising power determined what I thought was normal in my practices and perceptions of children through society and it had contributed to constructing a view of the teacher and child (Ball, 2013). I was concerned that my observational research was revealing to myself how the concept of normalising power had shaped my decisions and desires as a teacher to make me believe that was what I wanted from the very beginning. A teacher who was directing the students to be able to track and document learning which in turn confirmed my status as the excellent teacher. This was not something that could simply be removed to reveal my true self underneath, nor that of the children, as it would be like pulling the rug out from under society. I and we, were always being normalised and this was not inherently bad (Caldwell, 2007; Foucault, 1980). As the teacher and researcher, Foucault reminded me that I could not radically break away from normalising power but by becoming aware of its influence and impact in notions of myself as a teacher and researcher, it could contribute to us becoming more autonomous or self-aware that this was happening.

This also related to my own notions of researcher too, notions of subject and object and the idea that I could reveal notions of truth in my agency work were not going to be objective (Caldwell, 2007; Foucault, 1982). As the researcher, I could have just stayed with examples of agency as hooked up to curriculum to confirm my agency practices. The rules and boundaries of qualitative research would hold up my research practices as correct. I could just focus in on moments of intentional teaching with children who were attentive to meeting my needs as a teacher and that would be observable, analysable, and neatly fit into supporting my agency teaching as meeting its objectives.

My body felt strange, my embodiment of trying to make these observations fit into the desired outcomes and agentic achievements felt dull and simply conforming. I might have to weed out the bits that do not fit in, just right. This project was about confirming, ticking the boxes, and demonstrating agency as teachable and learnable. My role in teaching agency as per curriculum. Surely, I can spin lying about a book doing the teaching and learning happening behind the teacher's back as educational agency and fit it into the learning outcomes.

I come back to notions of learning through play, there seemed to be an un-comfortability forming within myself when play based learning came up against notions of teaching through play (Hedges, 2010). I understood that children's play behaviours reflected orientated interests as agentic

and my role was to think and teach through these interests; to tap into this as a pedagogic tool (Neitzel & Rowe, 2010). Now it felt like each *type* of play was categorised, demonstrated as learning, and linked to curriculum and policy and these (future) learners must demonstrate them through their play. It was making me question the muddying of the waters with whose goals and interests were the focus in this siloing of learning (Hedges, 2010; Wood, 2014) and what that meant if the interests did not align with societal notions of appropriate.

## Observation

*Thomas (pseudonym)—Together we were making jelly fish on the craft table, an interest that I was following with a hands-on activity. Quickly Thomas got tired of the repetitive multi step snip, stick and collage. He started playing with the pipe cleaners. He rolled up one end like a snail shell. “Look, I made a gun”. “Bang-bang”, he went around the table aiming his gun at each child.*

## Analysis

I falter now, Thomas showed initiative and agency in choosing not to make the required jelly fish as part of the sea creatures’ interest that was being explored through craft. He showed choice and meaning in his world by making a weapon, however I felt conflicted to celebrate it or encourage it like learning to swing or taking the textas outside. He included everyone else in his learning by aiming at them, contributing to his community yet I could not celebrate this either. Clearly, I must decide what use of agency was appropriate or not. I must give permission or shut down play that could potentially scare or be considered inappropriate as learning. I also had choice; voice and I got to decide as the teacher what was an appropriate contribution as per curriculum outcomes.

## Thinking

Then why did he do it? Do I hold up his clear act of agency; his choices, his words and his actions and fit it within the educational framework of *this is agency*. I could not hold up this behavior as a celebration of agency, I could not link it to learning through his developing imagination nor write up an observation to share with his family. I must sort, weed out, and select the appropriate acts of agency, as the teacher, as the adult and as the decider of good education. I felt sick. I felt like this agency was so focused on individuals and who can have and who decides what agency is. This did not feel like agency.

Something did not feel right, I was no longer sure exactly what I was hoping to achieve by confirming acts of agency if I felt the need to include some and not others. There emerged a sense of conditions of power that contribute and constrain children's meaning-making; that gut feeling that choice was not really free as actions were only permitted by the discourses inhabited and permitted within the early learning institution, the processes of normalization and regulation that were considered natural and preferred (Brooker, 2010; MacNaughton, 2005). As the teacher/researcher, curriculum and methodology helped me decide what to do; select, define, and make it fit together to confirm what had already been decided as the right kind of education.

I was pushing for children to demonstrate acts of independence and autonomy in their learning; learn to swing by yourself, make a jelly fish on the craft table, engage in independent drawing and encouraging children to share and celebrate this as agentic. However, it was under my direction, control and decisions as I positioned myself as intentional, purposeful, and rational in my behaviour and I thought I made these decisions based on what I know or believed would be the outcome of my actions (Giddens, 1984), a follower of Giddens' presentation of agency and the one that reflected back at me in the EYLF definition too. However, I was starting to get a sensation that this definition of agency was not the outcome of my own actions but rather actions that had become imbedded in my practice as per external forces' intentions and boundary making.

## **Questioning Acts of Agency as Agentic**

As the researcher and observer of my own practices, I had pages of these examples of acts of agency. However, the more I looked at them the more I felt that they were not capturing what I experienced in the classroom but were rather examples of expected agency practices. They were scripted agency performances. They felt formulated and stagnant and required redacting and control to make them fit into curriculum. Rather than exhilarating and enlightening examples of how expansive agency can feel, they were formulated, bounded, and felt like an act of rinse and repeat. I was familiar with this sensation, the requirements of teaching meant repeated examples of observations and documentations to cover all the children in my classroom. I understood how to write up 22 observations of children as forms of assessment to prove my teaching and as forms of accountability of teaching to families and the sector. This was the teaching role.

I did not start my dissertation to sit in this same feeling. I did not know that to confirm agency in early childhood education would mean feeling uninspired and limited in my self-expression. Agency was defined in curriculum; thus, observations of agency must meet this definition or be positioned as not agency. I felt so confined by this realisation. I could write up



numerous observations and analyse their content in relation to defined notions of agency and make them all fit in the agency holes so that it all slips through easily and confirmatively. However, I had a visceral reaction as this did NOT feel like agency! It felt controlled, bounded, and out of any sense of my hands or heart. It was boring, repetitive, and completely unengaging to work on. I had not come to spend six years studying something that I felt uninspired by, to make agency fit into something that I no longer believed. nor to create a dissertation that performed, conformed, and repeated what had already been decided. Agency was in my classroom, my everyday interactions and needed to be understood for its generative and expansive qualities and not just rinse and repeat what had been decided for it by others.

My observations felt reductive, humancentric and limiting in how they presented notions of agency as only in relation to what children did or said, actions and voice. Agency as an action that must be linked to notions of choice, voice, and contribution. Their actions became about confirming a certain type of agency for a certain type of (future) human through my understandings of curriculum and policy. I had started this line of inquiring thinking that it would be the best example of what agency looked like in my classroom; capturing acts of agency and showing how they are agentic through the mandated use of the definition and curriculum outcomes. Once I had all these examples documented on pages of observations and I analysed them through the definition and outcomes, I started to feel like a technician in my role as both teacher and researcher. A mechanical cog that turned in limited ways, defined and decided by curriculum over an autonomous teacher and researcher. It was about processes and crosschecking that what I observed clearly linked to what they were meant to capture. I started to feel apart from my own research as I was just the machine that demonstrated the connections, I felt disconnected from my own classroom and as the researcher it felt detached and procedural. I had had enough of the tick box approach to teaching and wondered why, what had started as really exciting research and observations of practice in my classroom now felt redundant and stale.

## **An Agentic Change in Direction**

I reminded myself of the curriculum definition “agency is being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one’s world” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 48). In this definition, agency was understood as being something that the individual possessed. It was something I had and could exercise in making choices and decisions. I also had the agency to influence and have an impact on my world if I chose to or not. This meant that I had the power to make choices and decisions and those choices and decisions would influence the lives of the children I worked with as an early childhood teacher. It gave me

power to influence. I could choose who could have or not have my agency for it was something I had possession of. Hence, it was something that could also be taken away from me. Something was happening to my thinking about agency and this slipping was reflected in my journal writing:

*Child led agentic practices are about minimising othering views and their effects on children through respect, trust, and belief in the present child. I am beginning to notice the difference in children's capabilities, especially those with a high grasp of big non-bendable rules and acceptable malleable rules that exist within my practices. There are children who get it and get more and then children who don't understand how to use their agency to their advantage. (Personal Journal, 2018)*

Again, this sensation of some sort of human grasp, or human control over what it meant to be agentic. Defined notions of early childhood education and agency have formed into shared patterns of beliefs that mould and define practices in early childhood education and a reinscribing of a model where privileged children will be accorded more agency than those children who use their agency in unconventional ways (Hursh, 2007; Valentine, 2011). I was finding it difficult to see outside of them. Furthermore, I was struggling with a sense that curriculum was determining what was deemed appropriate, what is thus exclusionary and how education was modifying and maintaining through controlling (Taylor, 2017). It was functioning as “a kind of gatekeeper of knowledge and truth” (Taylor, 2017, p. 98).

As the researcher, I was also beginning to question my confirmed positioning in how I thought I could simply capture agency in my observational approach. I needed to understand how research had approached understanding the complexities of agency in the classroom.

## Researching Children's Agency

Historically, I developed an understanding of how educational philosophy positioned children as in need of intervention. Education was needed to guide and shape these savage, or innocent, or morally immature and education children's learning and development for society's benefit. This configuration of child as part of the concept of agency was not helpful to Childhood Studies yet, it had become so imbedded in how agency was understood that it was difficult to separate out the threads. The complexity of children's agency further emerged when considering children's rights to participate in civil life. Children were to be considered as sovereign individuals, a liberal concept, where a sovereign individual meant having rights due to individual moral agency, yet children were positioned as not yet ready for moral agency as it was only achievable by adults. Liberal notions of moral agency became indispensable to notions of agency, yet it formed an agency

that was positioned as above children, that they needed adults to teach it and only furthering notions of agency as a humanist construction.

This led to more interest in understanding the modern positioning of children's agency as having rights to contribute and participate in civil life. Researchers wanted to better understand how children actively contribute to shaping their social worlds and society and this became the conceptualisation of childhood agency in Childhood Studies (Esser et al., 2016). In the 1980s as researchers began critically questioning previous positionings of children and childhoods as adult centric, the academic study of children flourished (Esser et al., 2016). The study of children's participation and contribution was further developed and emerged the "idea that children can be seen as independent social actors is core to the development of the new paradigm of the study of children and young people" (James, 2012, p. 3). This new paradigm shifted notions of childhood beyond understanding it as a transitory state to adulthood with children's current thinking and acting secondary to their learning and preparation for adulthood (Esser et al., 2016). The shift was seen as the New Sociology of Childhood and a distancing of itself from existing conceptualisations of children and childhood in the social sciences that were too focused on agency as a learnt skill for future adults (Esser, 2016). Rather, it formed a positioning of the child as a social actor with values, norms, and access to the skills development to ensure the subject's agency within a given society.

Childhood Studies discovered children were positioned as a minority group due to their marginalised position and lack of opportunity for contribution to society. This led to a more independent focus of research in the Social Sciences that positioned children as statistical units, where indicators of childhood lives' and standards of living were now being recorded. This placed an increased focus on the child as an actor (Esser et al., 2016; James & James, 2012). Agency was not about how to represent children but how they behaved as actors, and this was a push back to highlight how political processes and agendas had not focused on children as a separate group with their own interests and needs. This positioning is still present today where the complexities of marginalisation of children is attributed to their lack of skills or moral agency for their own protection. However, they are systematically excluded from opportunities and active participation, often under the guise of protection, such as not being able to work, vote and compulsory schooling. This led to more structural and hierarchal debates on the influence of children's lived lives and meant researching children's expressivity, notions of independence, and resistance to structures established by adults (Esser et al., 2016).

Developments of children's agency that considered them as structurally disadvantaged to adult and adult initiated systems emerged Childhood Studies into socio-political research aimed at

improving the positioning of children in society (Esser et al., 2016). This was also about the same time that the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* was ratified and children were accorded the status of subjects having rights (Reynaert et al., 2009). It positioned children as no longer the objects of arbitrary action by adults as they could exercise their rights and adults must observe these rights themselves (Esser et al., 2016). However, this positioning added complexities as categories emerged, such as children being minors under the age of 18 and thus having rights of protection.

Children were being positioned as social actors with research's aim to represent this new understanding of agency in children; at the same time expecting it to help improve children's situation (Esser et al., 2016). We had moved from ontological discussions about the positioning of the child as deficient, empty slate and in a vulnerable development state and countered it with a modernised theory of the child as an actor which was not marked as a modern perspective on children and childhood (Esser et al., 2016). Researching children's agency while trying to respect children's rights brought tension, balancing fundamental actor status and increasing special legal positioning of children's rights and research practices led by adults (Esser et al., 2016). Decisions, conditions, and participation in research still lent heavily on adult preparation and permission in participation. Researching with notions of children's agency was complex. When children were considered an actor, connection to the social conditioning of childhood was lost. The child as actor was based on a "de-historicised, de-socialised, individual-centred" (Esser et al., 2016, p. 6). The actor/action choice of words was a positioning of all the researchers and participants as agentic and this agency would be discovered through the research process or an increased focus on political participation projects (Esser et al., 2016).

In education, the generation of fixed notions of children's agency put an expectation of children to show agency in adherence to the taught definition. This questioned the initiatives and debates relating to children's rights when children's agency ran counter to the adult perspective (Esser et al., 2016). This positioning of adults in education and researching concepts of children's agency was also linked to notions of generational order. As the field of Childhood Studies began to emerge in the late 1980s, the concept of generations was identified as a key concept for new thinking in social sciences. Concepts of children and adults had assumed structural attributes relative to each other and had an interactive relation which positioned childhood as a particular social status (Esser et al., 2016; Qvortrup, 1993). This could also be understood as setting children up in opposition to the adult society; a creating of a dualism of children versus adults when understanding generational order as a form of formal ordering to a structured social system (Esser, 2016; Esser et al., 2016). Denoting relationships between individuals located in different life stages differently,

would become standardised, normalised and institutionalised through legislation and welfare state institutions (Alanen, 2020). Generational order made possible analysis of the discourses and practices of different positions, forms of authority, responsibilities, and access to resources as distributed across the generations (Esser et al., 2016).

This emerged the constructionist path in the sociology of children, focused on living children, situated, and actively participating in their everyday worlds with research generating analytical descriptions of situational logic in children's interactions, contributing to an extensive and theoretical literature of children as agents in the concept of agency. Whereas, structural sociology focused on the social and cultural structures alongside the ways of operating that constrained the conditions of observable events in children's lives (Alanen, 2020). Two different approaches and focuses, an actor-based research from the perspective of children which draws from political positioning and is pedagogically motivated and research on the social production of childhood through adult-dominated society and in which children and childhood are suppressed, marginalised and regulated (Esser et al., 2016).

The theoretical development of agency in Childhood Studies had mostly empirical foundations as an attempt to reconstruct children's agency. A developing of notions of thick or thin agency to form a model of a Western concept of agency that can be transported elsewhere depending on structural boundaries to perform these agency ideals (Esser et al., 2016) together with the concept of an autonomously acting subject that could be transported elsewhere or brought into institutionalised lives. Critically questioning whether the Western liberal thought that children naturally possess agency and have the capacity to act independently was applicable to all children (Esser, 2016). Concepts of thick or thin agency were relevant to where the research was being carried out and to questions of class and privilege, where some children more easily achieve thick agency and others have to make do with thin (Esser, 2016).

Childhood Studies research placed children as future members of society but also viewed them as lives lived as independent subjects of research. This placement understood childhoods where children possessed a pre-social and natural agency that could be destroyed by social force; a positioning of agency as positive whenever social aspects appear weak and when attached to children with opportunity to develop further (Esser, 2016).

## Agency Researcher Questioning Research

My researcher-self felt confounded by all the twists and turns in trying to research agency. My research through observations and analysis of children's actions as agentic could be assessed and separated out, connected to defined definitions of agency, and learning outcomes that teachers were trained to teach to in curriculum and policy. However, the convoluted history of understanding and researching agency had me questioning my own researcher approaches to understanding agency.

A child was not researched or defined by their social incompleteness, a deficit that could only be overcome by developing into an adult through individual maturing, socialisation, and education (Esser, 2016). I felt a growing concern that my current direction in researching agency was in fact, leaning in to this very idea. I could position the observations to hold up this agency that I had pre-scribed, however, my emerging embodied sense of agency evoked a questioning of its purpose. These observations and attempts to analyse them left me restless, and listless. I felt unsettled. I confirmed, I adhered to, and I removed what did not fit to the definition of agency and I felt like a fraud. I felt confused, let down by my inquiry, nothing new was being produced, just more of the same and it was emerging as a future orientated liberal notion of agency. It was the beginning of questioning everything that I thought about in teaching, education, and agency.

This questioning of my very self as a researcher and teacher sent me back to the drawing board. In fact that is not true, as I came to the drawing board with new understandings and troublings of the agency that I thought I knew. I did not want to continue in the same vein, and I returned to reading more and into post-qualitative inquiry as I wanted my inquiry to experiment, sit with theory, refuse to be unsurprised and invite in the "next and next" (Lester, 2020; St. Pierre, 2018, p. 604). It felt like a turning moment, a form of post emerging from and alongside what came before rather than a binary refusal. I felt unsettled as a result of what I had learnt had come before and a desire to seek outside of it (Lester, 2020). It was too early to put labels on my future direction as I did not know what I needed to do next. I had "no recipe, no process" outside of what I knew and I felt this shifting more than I understood it theoretically (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 604). I had concerns with the liberal humanist direction that agency had formed into in my thinking and teaching, and I wanted to understand other ways of inquiring into agency.

These concerns started me on a reading regime. Could I read my way out of strongly held practice habits? "Paranoid reading is fuelled by a state of constant anxiety and alertness focused on detecting and exposing 'the bad'" (Pedwell, 2017, p. 98). I was beginning to understand that I

needed to dig deeper to expose my naivety on the broader implications of agency for education while also acknowledging that generating more knowledge about a particular phenomenon does not resolve it (Pedwell, 2017). I would return to my branch in the tree to think.

## **Act Two—Under the Kinder Tree**



## **An Autoethnography of an Agentic Teaching Life Lived**

### **Setting the Scene**

In early childhood research there is lack of regard for the day-to-day experiences of early childhood education (Langford & Richardson, 2023). It felt like my experiences; my values, encounters, knowledges, and motivations were unimportant and did not really matter as my role was to deliver an educational program and measure its success (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Thus-far, my inquiry into the development of curriculum notions of agency through its historical forming, the political influences that included globalisation and neoliberalism and holding this up to my classroom practices had drawn out how agency had become a fixed teachable and learnable content and how I was beginning to feel formed in how I was expected to deliver this content. My observations of agency in practice from within my classroom worked to show my teaching self how when I performed the agency as per the definition it made my work easier; I could document, confirm, and reward the right agency and thus position myself as an expert agency teacher. However, it also meant that I had to control, punish, and dictate what this right agency was, and I felt troubled by this positioning of myself and agency. It became like a game of whack-a-mole; shape, mould, and whack out what did not fit in the right holes of agency.

It felt like the future results mattered and not how I was involved and felt in relation to the children, families, and colleagues or that my stories mattered. I felt a lack of what this in relation might mean to agency as I had been taught to keep the children at a distance. To shape, mould, and control the futures of the children, I needed them and myself to perform agency as content. My professionalism and ability to deliver the curriculum was what mattered in education. However, the more I tried to confirm agency, the more I felt it slip away. A strict definition meant weeding out, pushing to the side, or working very hard to bring agency back into the right line, a very humanist need to control and master it.

As I inquired into how the definition of agency used in early childhood education came into volution historically, socially, and politically, it affected my thinking about agency. My bodily and affective responses to my own attempts at controlling my observations to lock in agency were received as warnings. There was still more to learn, and I must not back away if I really wanted to create a more critical understanding of agency. Agency was something that I touted myself as an expert in, the agentic early childhood teacher. Nevertheless, I was having doubts about who I thought I was through what I performed as the teacher. I started this dissertation process to learn

more, to be critical of my teaching practices and deeply research this thing called agency. If the children's futures were impacted by understandings and teachings of agency now, when they engaged in early childhood institutions between the age of three to five, then understanding what agency was and how I practiced it would affect children's lives. I sought to understand:

- How do I understand and teach agency as an early childhood teacher?

This chapter unpacks how methodologically autoethnography emerged from within my inquiry to frame the choices and methods undertaken throughout my dissertation. I had not set out with a methodology in mind, but rather it had emerged from within the trouble that I felt as I inquired into the defined notion of agency I used in my practices as an early childhood teacher. I develop how autoethnography emerged, include a brief scope of the history of autoethnography, followed by different autoethnographic genres and how autoethnography fits within my research paradigm alongside the complexities of such a reflexive approach to research.

After the research into autoethnography as a methodology I complexify the auto by inquiring into notions of the 'I' within a post qualitative paradigm and how my 'I' was being troubled by my autoethnographic research into agency. I finish this chapter by presenting the overarching methods used throughout my dissertation—post qualitative thinking with storying, speculation, and Worlding, which informed my emerging thinking and doing together.

## **Emerging Methodology from Within the Inquiry**

My inquiry was revealing agency in early childhood education as more complex than I had originally thought. Agency was characterised by fixed definitions that resulted in notions that it was taught through outcomes of right or wrong and could result in rewards or punishments to confirm it as teachable and learnable. It had me questioning my own practices and wonderings if my research would confirm or trouble notions of agency from within them. A fixed and defined conceptualisation of agency had the potential to overshadow or progressively silence alternative formations of agency, alongside a disregard towards the diverse affective discourses and materialities that were also intertwined in its development. After delving into the historical development of agency, I emerged configurations of agency designed by adults for constructions of children's futures. I began to see conflicting views of what child and childhoods were and what their purpose was in educational institutions.

Within education systems that could be understood as instruments of power, it also meant there were potential points of resistance. I did not need to just conform to what I was told agency

was, I could inquire outside of it. I wanted to understand how I understood and practiced agency as an agentic early childhood teacher and I needed to conceptualise which methodology and methods could help reveal my own agency practices alongside what they meant or could mean. I aspired to an affirmative approach in my critical research; a desire to understand my practices of agency as present in my teaching while not closing off alternative possibilities of agency. My early inquiring started with researching into the historical, political, and philosophical aspects of agency, agency as knowledge production, agency as historically developed and then how that became imbedded in early childhood curriculum. I believed teaching and learning in sites of education were socially productive and involved interactive processes in understanding agency. Therefore, to investigate the social and cultural context of my teaching and its relationship to agency, I recognised the necessity for a methodology capable of probing ordinary encounters and the intricate fabric of the everyday, the meaning-making entities in my teaching and research life.

Autoethnography places the self within a social and cultural context, a methodology that seeks ways to place personal experience within the broader socio-political contexts that I wanted to understand (Reed-Danahay, 2020). As I was questioning my own understandings and practices of agency within my classroom, this would become the auto as I inquired through my personal experiences and reflections in my practices, work place, and my very own subject formation from within my inquiring. Furthermore, I wanted to critique the beliefs, values, practices, and identities that had constructed and formed the agency I was now questioning from within my own practices, drawing ethnographically from these descriptions (Adams et al., 2022). Autoethnography offered a methodology for compelling and insightful accounts from within my classroom to inquire into the conceptualisation of agency for education as I questioned it without wanting to represent myself as detached, all-knowing, or purely objective (Adams et al., 2022), I could bring myself into my inquiry.

I spent over 600 hours a year in the classroom, teaching 22 children between the age of three to five in the two years before these children start formal schooling. I had been teaching in the classroom for nine years at one not-for-profit kindergarten not half an hour from the centre of Melbourne/Naarm<sup>1</sup>. I was positioned as an exemplary teacher as per the *Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement 2020* (VECTEA) and the *Early Education Employees Agreement 2020* (EEEA) which stated that I had pedagogical excellence and expert teaching skills (Hydon, 2022). Many of the stories and observations from this inquiry were taken from my classroom during 2020 and 2021, a very disruptive and complex time of COVID-19; a critical moment in time of re-

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<sup>1</sup> Woiwurrung word and the traditional Aboriginal name for Melbourne

evaluating and questioning all life's facets and a complex knot in the education sector. Permission was sought from children, families, colleagues, and the service to collect and share stories from within the classroom and my research was shared with them along the way (see Appendices A, B, C, D). Forms of deidentification and anonymity were taken to conserve privacy of any person or specific location used, as an ethical response to privacy.

As an autoethnographer and expert teacher, my personal experience was vital and valid in providing particular insights to my inquiry into notions and formations of agency within my classroom (Adams et al., 2022). I aimed to share my deeply lived day-to-day moments as they related to my inquiry into agency and as such this also meant sharing the

complexities, messiness, and serendipity of social life; the personal, often-hidden nuances of challenging, thrilling, traumatic, joyful, and taboo encounters; patterns of experiences that shift and change with time; the ways of past occurrence informs present and future acts; and the emotional, sensory, and material effects of experience that escape observation or even conscious awareness. (Adams et al., 2022, p. 4)

This involved writing stories, participant observations, collecting materialities and making artefacts. Forming new materialities that were explored in my inquiry, emerged from within this uncertain time in my teaching life and moreover the world. I inquired through and embraced these complex times while also remaining open to the fluidity of time when thinking with both historical and speculative concepts of time.

My inquiry involved a lot of collecting, making, and thinking within my classroom practices and the discourses, materialities, and socio-political aspects of my work. Ingold identified that making had a narrative quality, with each action, movement, and line building on the last (Goode et al., 2023; Ingold, 2013). There was not just a sense of reading and then writing and I understood this need to make as an expression of my agentic teacher-self as an in relation to my engagement with the material as I thought and made with them. It was an assemblage through making, collecting, and thinking and one that I took seriously with care, judgement and dexterity (Goode et al., 2023). My methodology became a process of self-discovery as “to know things you have to grow into them, let them grow in you, so that they become a part of who you are” (Ingold, 2013, p. 1). It was my inquiry into agency as a “thinking and making” (Ingold, 2013, p. 6), one that I made through thinking and thinking through making and it was underpinned by autoethnography at each step of the way.

It is about using autoethnography to perform work that leads to social justice, it is about critical discourse that addresses central issues confronting democracy and racism in post-

postmodern, post-truth. It is about global life, narrative, and melodrama under the auspices of late neoliberal capitalism. (Denzin, 2021, p. 291)

This understanding of autoethnography would have flown right over my head at the beginning of my dissertation journey, however, now I had begun to bring in the social, political, and historical influences on agency and I could no longer pretend that they did not impact my understanding of agency. My autoethnographic practices that emerged from within my inquiry led me to want to understand the development of such a reflexive and creative methodology. Autoethnography was a relatively new methodology in the field of research, and it had been used and understood in various ways, yet its desires were big and challenging and I was already drawn to it.

## How did Autoethnography Emerge?

Autoethnography began appearing in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century writing and then has been increasingly used in social sciences and humanities since the 1990s (Reed-Danahay, 2020). It appeared in mainstream qualitative research in the second edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* through the work of Ellis and Bouchner (2000) and since then autoethnography has proliferated (Gannon, 2020). It emerged as a minority research of own culture, a form of research from within and as entangled with the socio-political contexts. For ethnographic researchers it was a shift of researching *with* the subjects over a research *of*, with an auto-ethnographer wanting to be differentiated as of the culture rather than as an outsider. A form of reflexive work in sociology and anthropology in the early 1990s as ethnographic researchers reassessed the need to value and engage with their own subjectivity in their own practices as researchers (Goode et al., 2023). It started as a looking inwards into the rituals, ethos, and social practices within anthropology at a perceived time of crisis in the discipline and externally through the socio-political unrest of the time (Reed-Danahay, 2020). Anthologies and handbooks have been written as both regulation of autoethnography and examples of its diversity (Adams et al., 2022; Brisini & Simmons, 2021; Ellis et al., 2011; Gannon, 2020; Goode et al., 2023; Holman Jones, 2013).

This could also be positioned as the dominant configuration and linear progression of the emergence of autoethnography where the researcher wanted to reflexively research about culture, yet they remained not native to it. However, autoethnography also emerged in non-Western small-scale societies where ethnographers were documenting perspectives of their own cultures. Furthermore, this led to more recent approaches as researchers interrogated their own life

experiences, an originating out of perspectives and portrayals of own cultures by researchers native to those cultures (Reed-Danahay, 2020).

This evokes two emergent fields of autoethnographic research; researchers who were of the culture being researched, a from the inside. The other being ethnographic researchers who questioned their subjectivity within their research of other cultures and who sought ways to research with the peoples and cultures being explored. This brought into question if one could become an autoethnographer by being exposed to the culture for long enough. For my inquiry, autoethnography raised questions about the insider/outsider dichotomy and the construction of myself as an objective observer of agency in the classroom. I wanted to question notions of binaries in my research as I had emerged notions of human centric agency and how that presented in student/teacher relationships. Autoethnography emerged as a potential contributor to trouble binaries, in particular insider or outsider as a researcher, the distance and familiarity of my teacher position within the classroom, an objective observer of agency or a participant in its use and conceptualisation and fundamentally and agency as an individual notion or a more in relation to as expansive and collective (Reed-Danahay, 2020). I was beginning to question the formation of agency as culturally constructed, as socially enacted and autoethnography invited me to do the same around my own notions of self as a researcher/teacher as I inquired into notions of agency.

I began my research into agency as an inquiry into notions agency in curriculum, how it was positioned as a teaching pedagogy and a tool that affected futures of children. I started this analysing through observations of children's agency and what that looked like through the behaviour of the children as my subjects under my direction. My autoethnography was a questioning and wondering of reflections of my teaching and thinking of and with agency as a pedagogy as I experienced it through curriculum, policy and the socio-political within the classroom as an experienced teacher. Agency explored through a writing of the self through my personal stories as political realities. I wanted to understand the power inequalities in this human formed notion of agency from within the classroom and explored the complex cultures of emotions embedded in these unequal relationships. This positioned my inquiry within a feminist paradigm; a challenging of notions of the arrogant eye within this humanist and neoliberally charged positioning of agency and a seeking of a more collective and privileging the loving eye (Ettorre, 2017). It formed a transitional and intermediate space to inquire into notions of agency in education that inhabited the crossroads of embodied emotions alongside an active demonstration of the personal that was political and a critical writing which was performative, thinking with the future of women and raining oppositional

consciousness by exposing the precarity of dominant agency within early childhood education (Ettorre, 2017).

## **What Autoethnography Offered my Inquiry**

Lives and their experiences, the telling and the told are represented in stories which are performances. Stories are like pictures that have been painted over, and, when paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible. What is new is what was previously covered up. A life and the performances about it have the qualities of pentimento. Something new is always coming into sight, displacing what was previously certain and seen. There is no truth in the painting of a life, only multiple images, and traces of what has been, what could have been, and what now is. There is no firm distinction between the texts and performances. (Denzin, 2014, p. 2)

Autoethnography as a research methodology aimed to foreground particular and subjective knowledge (Adams et al., 2022) in my research as a practising early childhood teacher. I hoped it would emerge how I understood and practised agency and, how I grappled with this type of curriculum defined agency and what it meant within its socio-political context. It could not be an objective “view from nowhere” (Adams et al., 2022, p. 1). I recognised and embraced my entanglement with the inquiry and my role in the processes of research and representation. Denzin highlighted that in telling my classroom stories and sharing my teaching experiences I surfaced what was still emerging and how that affected and changed what was previously thought of as the known answer to “What is agency?”.

My autoethnography aimed to illustrate my own sensemaking processes as I inquired into notions and practices of agency when it was positioned as a pedagogical and teachable concept and as an open-ended exploration into other conceptualisations of agency. My own sensemaking involved writing performance forward texts, evocative narratives from my different positionings within the Kinder Tree. They became a vehicle for taking up the hard questions about reading, writing, performing as a teacher and doing critical work that disrupts the flow of life or dominant understanding of agency. My stories catalyse a positive and negative change in identity,, an emerging troubled identity as I performed curriculum agency and permitted my work’s potential to make a difference in my classroom and within my research (Denzin, 2021; Ingold, 2015a). I wanted to blend the meanings of ethnography, being an ethnographer and the auto-performing teacher/researcher, as I am all of those at once and I wanted to surface my (in)visible self to myself through my writing (Denzin, 2021).

As a methodology, autoethnography provided points of resistance where I could seek to challenge the norms of research practices and representations. This questioning and challenging of dominant norms began to emerge in my first research actions, as I questioned the conception and representation of agency in my practices and in early childhood education. I took participant observations from within my classroom, where participant observations were about joining with other people in their speculations about what life might or could be, a way of knowing from the inside (Ingold, 2013). They were observations of curriculum focused acts of agency, and I wrote my visceral reactions to holding them up to fit into curriculum and how this was felt as uninventive. I saw this uninventiveness as possibility rather than a dead end, it opened up a desire to inquire outside of the dominant and to find new possibilities. Affirmatively, I hoped to engage and compel responses from the readers through my research as I inquired into my practices and moments from the other side of the early childhood service fence, from within my classroom.

When I began to confront and question my self-forming as a certain type of agentic teacher through autoethnography it opened me up to how the sensemaking processes would challenge my thinking. As I grappled with my own practices, understandings, and experiences of agency for education it emerged a great discomfort. It did not make sense, feel right, or add up as to the sensations of agency that I experienced in my classroom. Autoethnography was inviting me into “some of the most challenging, confusing, and formative events, relationships, and social and political experiences we encounter throughout life” (Adams et al., 2022, p. 4) and through a time period of great uncertainty as the world grappled with a collective illness. This was the emerging affect of affect, the sensations, forces and my encounters with notions of agency were exerting a pull on me that I could no longer push aside, autoethnography created a space for sensemaking and a space for responses that moved me to “feel, think and relate in new and different ways” (Adams et al., 2022, p. 5).

## **Critical Autoethnography**

I situated my own autoethnography in the field of critical autoethnography (Reed-Danahay, 2017); personal narrative and a liberatory inquiry that challenges and questions intersecting power dynamics and includes more theoretical and critical perspectives in cultural lives and individual experiences (Iosefo et al., 2021; Reed-Danahay, 2020). Terms such as critical, strategic, and analytic emerged from criticisms of autoethnographies that were not sufficiently focused on dimensions of power within society (Reed-Danahay, 2020).



I argue that my inquiry emerged from my very questioning of power dynamics; notions of myself as an agentic teacher teaching within defined notions of agency and the troubling that emerged after tracing how notions of agency had a long history that informed current understandings. I came to see how agency was positioned through curriculum where the teacher was located as over and above the children and I began to question the hierarchal notions of this human conceptualised agency. As I held the history of my own service up to the historical forming of early childhood education, I began to surface themes of power over children and myself as the teacher. I began to feel like I was practicing teaching agency as a concept delivered from the west as a form of globalisation and not as something emerging from within. Furthermore, the concept of globalisation revealed the emergence of education as product driven, where it was investment and future resource focused (Carey, 2022; Osgood, 2006; Rana, 2012). These concepts made me question my professional role at an early childhood teacher.

Furthermore, globalisation had become entangled with neoliberal notions, where developed countries continue to focus on further regulation in early childhood education. This questioned my professionalism as a teacher and when I analysed my professional practices in my chapter Acts of Agency, I revealed to myself sensations of disempowerment and the overt regulatory gaze was meant to promote higher standards, however, rather they positioned me not as a professional but a tool of delivering an education that was neoliberally charged (Osgood, 2006). The globalisation of education as entangled with neoliberal concepts was also impacted by the colonial influence on early childhood education. I refer to the Australian folklore book *children lost to the bush* (Pierce, 1999), where allegiance to the king and colony was reinforced to children through early kindergarten education (Prochner, 2009) and remind myself that my own service was one of these first Free Kindergartens. This embroiled myself in the major debate in cultural globalisation discourse as to whether globalisation leads to homogeneity or new forms of diversity (Edwards, 1995).

The power of curriculum, policy, and Government to form a certain type of teacher was also questioned and I go through an unravelling of this formed teacher to see what could emerge post dominant configuration understanding. I question how this ignorant and performing teacher emerged through power relations developed in fixed and defined notions of agency. I aim to create an inquiry that goes beyond the personal perspective of myself as the teacher/researcher, rather, encompassing a critical examination of power dynamics, broader institutional practices, and the specific fields in which the ethnography was undertaken.

After surfacing my every day practices as being influenced and impacted by critical concepts of globalisation, neoliberalism and colonial histories in Act 1, I go on to inquire deeper into my everyday practices within my classroom as I emerged sensations of wanting to understand and resist forms of domination. I wanted my work to attune to cultural productions of the everyday that would critique my own methods and pay attention to the positioning of self as the researcher as an in relation to broader social-political processes (Reed-Danahay, 2020). As I began to emerge a Western figuration of agency and how the dominant definition had emerged from global notions of agency such as through the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* and liberal humanist concepts (unicef UK, 2019; United Nations, 1989), I observed this filtering down into curriculum and practice and I began to critically question agency's formation and othering of different perspectives.

I have come to see myself as a teacher that performed a certain defined notion of agency that positioned me as apart from and over the children as entangled with globalisation, colonisation and neoliberal politics. Henceforth, my inquiry became a place to explore alternative discourses and modes of representation of what agency might be so that I could engage with them as an affirmative resistance and questioning of the dominant formation of defined agency in early childhood education. Act II began this new and more critical direction in my inquiry; moving away from humancentric notions of agency to inquire into more distributed, interwoven and interconnected agency that felt more in relation to my classroom sensations.

## Critiques and Ethical Concerns

The prevailing criticism of autoethnography is based on the view that it is too focused on the self of the ethnographer, an overemphasis on the subjectivity of the researcher (Reed-Danahay, 2020), a kind of self-indulgence and performative research that does not go far enough into the wider ethnographic view of the socio-political around the topic of research. It has become a divide along philosophical lines with a questioning of the traditional analytical research and the more avant-garde evocative approaches to research (Wall, 2018). Furthermore, autoethnography is criticised as a form of research that does not adequately address systems of inequality and domination in society (Reed-Danahay, 2020). My inquiry is primarily focused on the socio-political development and use of dominant notions of agency as they emerged from curriculum, policy, and society as well as how this troubled me and my notions of being an agentic early childhood teacher.

Ironically, the critiques and dangers of autoethnography can mirror its contributions and potential (Reed-Danahay, 2020), as autoethnography questions the subjectivity/objectivity of traditional research and the potential of insider perspectives of the topic at hand. Furthermore, to

problematise the research method itself, one needs to acknowledge that qualitative inquiry was a situated practice and ethnography “packs a hefty postcolonial punch” (Stanley, 2020, p. 7). Ethnography was born of colonial subjectivity with a Western white male gaze that described, classified, judged, and reduced the exoticized other (Stanley, 2020). This origin highlights and raises doubt about the ethical concerns of autoethnography in relation to representation, power, and exposure (Reed-Danahay, 2020); how to decide what to reveal and about whom when one considers oneself an insider required thought. . Yet, we can all be positioned within a specific paradigm and I have felt like a fish deprived of water as I have exposed and inquired into my complicit use of curriculum agency without really being aware of what that was doing to me; “just as a fish is unaware of water until it is lifted, flapping, and gasping, onto dry land, it is difficult to perceive the arbitrary and constructed nature of the things we regard as right or normal” (Stanley, 2020, p. 9).

Autoethnography is not a vague writing of feeling and soundbites. It requires grounded interpretations and theorised meaning through storied data that is thickly described. It is not autobiography or memoir work, rather, it is situated and engaged with power relations to make the work critical. It draws from surrounding context and literature and resists with postcolonial and intersectional power relations to question and trouble dominant notions. Finally, it has an overt political agenda, a righting of wrongs and an affirmative attempt to make the world a better place (Stanley, 2020). Autoethnography is a process that makes different assumptions about the nature of knowing and learning, it puts myself as the researcher in a very different position as I both tentatively and with a loving eye (Ettorre, 2017) engage with the topic at hand.

Questioning notions of the nature of knowing and learning means I cannot overlook myself in my methodology. I could not position myself as an all knowing subject, as it would only affirm a constructive type of man-humanity and risk contributing to a subject formation through separation creating a sense of grandiose, posturing, and fear through separating mind/body (Braidotti, 2013). I had been questioning the humancentric focus in the conceptualisation of agency for education, as the nodal point within my inquiry into agency (Gannon, 2020). I also needed to critically examine notions of self within my autoethnographic practice. Could I understand myself outside of a transcendental consciousness and see myself as a “relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31) as I troubled my “I” in the auto?

## **Identity, Autoethnography and the More Than Human ‘I’**

Early Childhood Teacher, white single-mother, PhD student were a series of words used to create an identity of me. I was all of those things at that moment, but I was also acutely aware that I

was none of those things as it shifted and changed in every heartbeat. Who I was, who I saw myself as, was not fixed. Identity was not fixed. Identity could be viewed as a resource through which people explained, justified, and made sense of themselves in relation to others and to the world at large. I thought I was a humanist subject; self-contained, autonomous, and agentic until I became troubled. As I surfaced agency as human centric through the homogenisation of globalised education, the neoliberal impact of outcome and product focused education and the ongoing impacts of colonisation on understandings of education, I became troubled. Within posthuman theory, a new understanding of the subject was articulated as non-unitary and non-universal; that was to say it could assume multiple subject positions both recognisable, foreign, and new (Andersson, 2020). The idea of bringing myself, as a teacher and scholar into my own inquiry was an important tenet of reimagining research and what constitutes research and moreover, provided redirection when looking to move away from my dominantly conceptualised understandings of agency as entangled with globalisation, neoliberalism and colonialism (Braidotti, 2014a; Bright, 2018; Malone et al., 2020a). Rather than emerging an effort to debase or deny the human, I was questioning the undue privileging and centring of humans (Brisini & Simmons, 2021). I had found myself really seeing my teacher-self who positioned agency as being in control, monitoring what agency was and rewarding or punishing acts of agency to push the definition used in the EYLF further. I thought that this made me agentic. However, I now question if the teacher that I thought I was, was really what I hoped to be as an agentic teacher. I had emerged sensations of domination, keeping children at a distance and feeling the need to push to the side or not even contemplate bringing in other ideas around agency. The definition told me what agency was and therefore was not, and if I adhered to it, I was an excellent agency teacher. If I taught outside of it, I could be positioned as not doing my job. Did I really think I could control and dish out agency, and that would mean I knew agency?

Having a fixed notion of agency permitted sensations of right or wrong practices, creating narratives of controlling or mastering agency. However, I had not really understood that this had formed in my teaching; that being purposeful, autonomous, and confirmed in what would happen next by my design was a formed notion of agency. I felt confronted with the language of humanism in the definition of agency but I was also becoming aware of hidden realities in the social, political and historical origins that did not serve the sector well (St. Pierre, 1997a). I was beginning to wonder what other language, philosophical, and political positionings might contribute to my inquiring in different, more ethical and useful ways in my teaching and understanding agency (St. Pierre, 1997a).

I was doubting this idea that agency could be controlled and bounded, I was not sure what else it could be but living through COVID and working in a constantly changing and challenging sector of early childhood education, the idea that agency was fixed felt like putting my head in the sand. Trying to control and make everything fine did not represent what it felt like to work in an early childhood classroom. I emerge and trouble notions of humancentric agency throughout my dissertation and this meant needing to question and trouble notions of identity and the very nature of the “I” in autoethnography.

Questioning and troubling the “I” shifted myself as a knowing subject; I began to understand myself as a “relational embodied and embedded, affective, and accountable entity” within my research (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31). This move into the post space meant an unsettling of what came before and was a turning point in my inquiry yet one done with a sense of relationality to the past (Lester, 2020). Rather than a departure from all I knew and thought about agency, my autoethnographic journey and questioning of my subject formation and positioning within my research opened up my research to new configurations and understandings of agency.

Questioning the ‘I’ of an autoethnography became a point of passage in re-thinking how I wanted to proceed with my inquiry. I understood that autoethnography was offering me grounding, but through my theoretical framework I began to find room for experimentation that troubled the ‘I’ who practiced agency in her teaching. So, whilst unravelling agency within the cultural, social, and political realms of early childhood education I also began to see my “writing [as] thinking, writing [as] analysis, [and] writing [as] indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967) to support experimentation with agency. This meant method and methodology were entangled with post qualitative onto-epistemologies and theories that brought my attention to and signalled the always already relation between ontology and epistemology and the construction of different subjects of knowledge (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013), a theoretical framework that brings to the forefront my entanglement with agency and the complexities as a mandated teacher of agency through intimate scholarship from within my early childhood classroom.

## Post Qualitative Inquiry

Scientific progress hinges on human subjectivity because no way exists to distinguish unequivocally between what is in our minds and what’s out there in the world—no rules we can follow, no methods to guarantee validity, rigor, or truth. Scientific method does not make it possible for the mind to transcend the skin. It turns out that science can’t stand

above the contingencies of language and perception or outside the loop of history, culture, and autobiography. (Bochner, 2018, p. 3)

I came to my dissertation wanting to confirm my understandings of agency within my classroom teaching however, I felt like the lens of inquiry was turning more and more towards myself as I questioned how I had come to feel the need to perform this agency unquestioned. I had started to see the agency that I conformed and performed as humancentric; defined, decided, and directed through human concepts that led to focusing in on children as what was desired for them, an agency that directed learning in liberal and individualistic ways and lifted up some but not others in how it was understood as good or bad practices. I had been complicit in my naivety and as the good teacher, performed and conformed to this notion of agency without critical questioning.

I had begun to question the very notion of the I in autoethnography, even though I acknowledged that my inquiry emerged from within my researching and within my early frustrations of capturing agency. Alongside my autoethnographic reflections which were an emerging of a rambling research path along the way I wanted to bring in notions of the non-human and entanglements of the material in my work. My inquiry emerged as post qualitative, one that desired to reconceptualise and experiment with standard agency practices , that moved beyond the current scripted use of agency and an inquiry that did not conventionally codify or plan out the inquiry from the beginning (Lather, 2013). I wanted my inquiry to critique the self-evidence of the meaning made by myself and others in the sector and question notions of the right use of reason (St. Pierre, 1997a). If I was to provide myself with opportunities to think outside of the fixed notion of agency that I had come to worship, I needed to shift my lens and my approach to inquiry.

As a post-qualitative research project, it was located in the material underpinnings of my daily practices as a teacher *teaching with agency*. While looking outside of codification, ownership, or the unalienable right of one species over all others it was a space where agency and education was posited as process, interactive, and open-ended and “living matter—including flesh—was understood as intelligent and self-organising as it was not disconnected from the rest of organic matter” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 60). My inquiry emerged and was shaped by the questions posed as I worked the problem with a concept (Mazzei, 2020) emerging as a processes methodology, as it kept tipping into more questions that I wanted to inquire with over answering them. As a post qualitative methodology, I had no explicit instructions so it became a tool to navigate and could turn into anything. Yet, having such an experimentative methodology implied hope and was therefore every thing “no-thing, any-thing, every-thing” (Bodén & Gunnarsson, 2020, p. 5).

Inquiring into my own practices in my everyday work as an early childhood teacher in my place of work meant considering the human and the non-human, material, and discursive, natural, and cultural as enactments of boundary work, rather than as binary oppositions (Barad, 2007) . Disrupting the discourse of the agentic as an individuated liberal subject, questioning power structures that mark material bodies as subjects of power and turning to matter to critically engage and address material realities for humans and nonhumans alike in early childhood education systems. This work of de-centring humanist practices meant crumbling my infatuation with human agency by desiring to include and inquire through notions of the material that now positioned my work as post-qualitative (Lester, 2020).

A post implies an unsettling of what came before and can lead to a departure from (Lester, 2020); I wanted to complexify how I understood the concept of *agency* and how I practiced *agency*. I wanted to engage with the tensions that lay within dominant concepts of agency by making visible the complex materiality of agency. This want positioned my inquiry as part of a deterritorialising process, to question and disrupt habitual usage of language that sediments thought, to trouble my hegemonic thinking and my formulaic beliefs of humanistic agency as a truth claim (Mazzei, 2020). Agency was not owned by a body but rather came about from the meeting of bodies as they encounter each other allowing for surfacing and making visible the social relationships of power and agency. An inquiry to bring to the forefront in-depth knowledge about contextual, situated concepts of *agency*, and explore the challenges that arise from it within the current climate of early childhood education.

This shifting notion of identity and the I in autoethnography led me into different methods used throughout my thesis. I engaged in processes of storytelling, making, and speculating of figurations of teaching and learning with agency. As I began to acknowledge a more posthuman I, it became an exploration of how storytelling the self “can allow an opportunity for acknowledgement of the entangled and distributed nature of self-as-emergent” (Braidotti, 2014a, p. 165). This meant emerging methods that contributed to expanding relational frameworks to better understand self and otherness in human and more-than-human contexts (Haraway, 2008).

## Storying, Speculation and Making as Method

Stories had the ability to empower or disempower, to replicate the status quo or challenge and expand it (Blyth & Aslanian, 2022). My stories from the classroom explored notions and wielders of power; they surfaced the pull of neo liberalisation and globalisation as it impacted my understanding of agency. I questioned my role in maintaining the status quo when teaching notions

of agency and I sought to question the tensions that this performative agency for education surfaced and to look for different conceptualisations and understandings of agency. My storytelling became a writing as praxis (Wilde, 2022); it was a way of formulating my ideas, my subjectivities and furthermore my own entanglements with educational agency as a practicing teacher. I adopted this process of storytelling as a way of experiencing the world that was performative over representational (Wilde, 2022).

Storytelling my stories from within my classroom as writing, as praxis understood that writing had power too and I was entangled in a process of intra-action with my work, where intra-actions were an event that was performative and emergent (Barad, 2007). This permitted a sense of affirmative, in that my intra-actions with my storytelling could also be channelled into other regimes —“different performances and therefore different aspects of a phenomenon, allowing different subjectivities and considerations of rhizomatic life patterns to emerge” (Wilde, 2022, p. 2). My storytelling was a deeply performative experience and the stories became an opportunity to create places of opportunity, at once real and realised (Foucault, 1980) and provide alternatives to the norm (Blyth & Aslanian, 2022). Furthermore, storytelling shifted the focus on understanding agency differently through local discourses, shifting the focus from the dominant macro-theories to surface the particular and everyday experiences of life from within my classroom. Storytelling offers other ways of thinking about teaching practice, in today’s neoliberal times local storytelling complexifies notions of evidence that demonstrates concepts of effective practice, questioning whose perspective based on different starting points and with different agendas (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017; MacAlpine, 2021).

Storytelling from within both the classroom and the early childhood sector meant my stories were in relation to existing realities but in a way as to also contest, represent, invert the relations designated by them and moreover “concrete and territorial yet a part of the social imaginary specific to certain situations—they are where difference abides and governance, policy, and administration no longer trace lives” (Blyth & Aslanian, 2022, p. 8). Storying about the self was also an opportunity for acknowledging the entangled and distributed nature of self-as-emergent (Wilde, 2022). Storying as a method was not about observed representation from within the classroom but moreover as a form of speculative Worliding. Speculative in the sense that there were so many unknowns I had to open up to possibilities and wonderings of difference; a sense of coming into existence in a material world and the affect of materiality on the world through repetition (Andersson, 2020). This sense of speculation in my method sat alongside my letting go of possessive notions of agency and also knowledge, the knowing and the doing became inextricably connected through a removal of



distinctions and collapsed into each other (Goode et al., 2023). The everyday storytelling practice became a tool for imagining worlds that could be radically different from the ones I knew as I took on active responsibilities through my thinking writing and researching as speculative fabulation became a “mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of Worlding” (Haraway, 2016, p. 230). This methodology creates realities through the practice of storytelling.

I had surfaced and begun to feel the deeply impacted influence of globalisation, neoliberalism and the human centric pull in my teaching, Worlding became a notion that related to how one sets up the world and an opportunity to understand teaching differently. It is a removal of boundaries between subject and environment that affords the opportunity for me to question habitual temporalities and modes of being as I do throughout my thesis. Worlding brings in the affective nature of the world, inclusive of non-human agency allowing a different world to emerge through my engagement with interrelated phenomena (Stewart, 2012). I could not determine how the future would unfold so I focused on increasing understandings in present meanings while remaining open to the unexpected and to change (Pedwell, 2017). I leave further notions of understanding the contribution of Worlding until the end of my dissertation, after I have been through a transformative process with agency.

The storying, Worlding, and thinking while doing throughout my dissertation involved a lot of making—from storytelling my stories, to documenting through photography and understanding classroom artefacts as agentic. The making became part of the processes of processing and growing in my inquiry into agency. Making has narrative quality with a sense and sensation of each new move building on the last (Goode et al., 2023); an acknowledging that “inquiry as thinking and making—It is not that the former only thinks and the latter only makes, but that the one makes through thinking and the other thinks through making” (Ingold, 2013, p. 6).

## Conclusion

As I came into autoethnography and became an autoethnographer, I found I could not only be the author and focus of the story, but rather, I had to go further to see myself as an entangled contributor to my inquiry, emerging as and in relation to an agency that is lively, complex, entangled, and relational. Writing as a methodology and autoethnographic practice supported this proposition as it revealed me to myself and my performances as an ECT who thought she *taught with agency*. Writing helped me to unpack myself as a performing teacher moving me to explore agency with the inclusion of the nonhuman and material; it opened up the centrality of the human, which troubled my inquiry. This permitted an exploration of the relational networks that infused my practices as an

ECT working with children revealing that the *auto* in the autoethnography was embedded in complex and messy networks between the human and non-human making agency no longer something that belonged to the rational individual. In turn, this helped me rethink how I had subscribed to these notions of agency and how I was supporting their ongoing reproduction.

Autoethnography has opened up my inquiry into agency beyond examples of Western agency in practice in an ECE classroom as it profoundly altered my ideas on how my inquiry should move forward post-qualitatively and with posthuman conceptualisations of agency and their entanglement with my practices. It moved me away from thinking of childhoods and education through a homogenised curriculum focused lens, nor seeing children's agency as only what they could become in the future. I have tried to draw lines between my writing, thinking, and being to link my moments together in search of making sense of agency and thus myself. Adopting an autoethnographic framework helped to keep me grounded, asking open-ended questions and helped me unpack and understand this crumbling notion of agency rather than completely dissolving it and me! The transitions I have gone through have pushed notions of a relational understanding of agency, breaking into and breaking down the dominant understandings I had held so close.



## **A Kindergarten Teacher and Researcher Sitting Under the Kinder Tree**

### **An Interval**

I went back to the tree and attempted to climb back into the safety of its branches. To perch up high and resume my looking down and over the children that I teach, but I couldn't. I was not sure if it was with each step up, each pull on the branches to return to my position that my feet and hands slipped or if I had begun questioning if I really wanted to be back up there. The idea of sticking my head back in the leaves would resume my hiding in plain sight and felt very appealing as this critical work was hard.

It was asking me to fundamentally question what I thought education was and who it was for. Concepts that I had taken for granted and been happy to be guided and told how to perform along the way. The idea of returning to the high tree branches felt delusional and hollow in what the Kinder Tree were offering me, I now saw myself as a work horse wearing blinkers that had shaped and guided my practices into conceptualisations of agency through agendas that I had not set. This did not feel like agency, and I no longer felt that my agency was shaping my contribution to the sector in ways that I wanted.

The researcher who sat in the Kinder Tree next to the teacher was also struggling in her positioning on how to research agency. I thought it would be a straight forward process where the actions of the children and the teacher would capture agency in practice and that these actions

could be analysed and synthesised into confirming good agency practice that would further uphold agency as an important practice in teaching and learning in early childhood education.

I thought participant observations and analysing them through curriculum agency would confirm agency practiced correctly. I understood that participant observations were a way of seeing from the inside, a within my classroom and a within my practice that would surface real life examples of agency in practice. They did demonstrate practices of curriculum agency, but I did not like what I saw in my practice as a teacher nor how my researcher-self contributed to this confirmation of a dominant positioning of agency. However, as a researcher, I felt they gave additional insight into the power and pull of curriculum as an influence on practice without sensations of a fuller context. My prior research into historical positionings of children and education had opened my eyes to the power in the design of curriculum agency as shaping a bounded and controlled notion of agency to produce a future orientated child. My researching approach of participant observations and analysis was also contributing to this. I felt a pull, a compulsion to also include and share my *thinking*, a more affective alarm that something felt very wrong in this positioning and confirmation through research of this understanding of agency. I was writing a critical autoethnography and rather than seeing my thinking as outside of the bounds of observational analysis, I drew it in, and it added complexity to my research.

I was falling and hard. I hated the idea of my teaching as being positioned as from above, some sort of all-seeing eye in the sky that dictated behaviours as right or wrong in teaching agency and to conform children into what they needed to become for society. Who decided what this society should be, and could one really do this? I was not so sure. My notions of needing to control, conform and shape children through my agency education felt like a very selective human grasp, a grasp that could pull some but not all up into the tree branches with me. The chosen and select few who got the agency that I was performing and expecting could join me in the Kinder Tree.

Just as I was becoming aware of alarm bells in the dominant positioning of agency in early childhood education, I was sensing a troubling in my positioning as the researcher; a positioning of a researcher that was still up in the tree and keeping the researched subjects at arm's length. The agency teacher was beginning to question how she had been formed into that notion of *expert teacher* and by default the agency researcher was questioning the notion of *expert researching*. Could agency be caught and then used to promote notions of best practices?—a questioning of my researcher-self who was positioning curriculum led practices as expert agency teaching emerged. I was concerned if I continued on this linear research path that my contribution was in fact about confirming and upholding defined notions of agency that I was struggling to believe in. Furthermore,

as the researcher I was troubled that I had embarked on an inquiry that was not generating new knowledge but rather upholding a long held positioning of agency minus all the complexities in how it formed.

I did not want to perform or research this agency anymore but was not sure I could just gently climb down out of its branches. Maybe they were pulling me up and holding me in place? Should I jump down? Jump gives the sensation of intention and freedom. Children jumped from the Kinder Tree, and I loved to observe them:

*The children launch themselves from the thicker connecting branches, jumping down with a moment of complete air-born exhilaration onto a big red gym mat. This is an absolutely thrilling act that gets performed over and over again in the Kinder Tree. The sensation of being hidden up high in its branches, the tree's leaves keeping bodies out of adult view before revealing themselves with an exhilarated shout and leap of faith out of the tree.*

Haraway reminded me to stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016). I was not sure that staying with the complexities that I was emerging about my agency teaching could be compared to the leap of exhilaration that the children expressed as they jumped from the Kinder Tree. This felt more like a fall, a hard landing right on my tailbone that hurt and confronted myself as the agency teacher I thought I was.

Rather than climb back up the Kinder Tree; I sat under it, back to its trunk, an attempt to be a part of and no longer above the surroundings. If I wanted to develop a more relational understanding of agency that was not selective or perpetrated notions of right or wrong to fit political and dominant discourse agendas without really being aware of what they were, I needed to change my positioning. I sat at eye level, looked out on the same plain and stopped thinking of my teaching as at a distance. I felt like I was no longer a teacher of agency when it was a possession that could be given or taken away. I no longer wanted to possess, control, and dictate agency in my classroom.

I had employed research methods that took definitions, curriculum, and dominant positions of agency and hooked them up into each other, drawing from classroom observations, as a participant in the actions taking place while keeping my distance to observe and capture agency. However, rather than emerging a gotcha moment where I really caught what agency was, I was now questioning how agency was distributed to some and not others, questioning knowledge production and access. I was struggling with a sense that curriculum was determining what was deemed appropriate, making it exclusionary and was modifying and maintaining through controlling (Taylor,

2017). It was functioning as “a kind of gatekeeper of knowledge and truth” (Taylor, 2017, p. 98). As the researcher, I could also be a gatekeeper in how these notions are perpetuated or I could desire to research other-wise. I no longer felt like a confident researcher of agency sitting in the Kinder Tree.

As the teacher/researcher, I was becoming aware that the formation and dominant positioning of agency in early childhood education had occurred through notions of normalising power, subtle rules, and boundaries that had been formed around me as part of the institution of education that made me think this was what I was supposed to be doing (Foucault, 1980; MacNaughton, 2005). Normalising power determined what I thought was normal in my practices and perceptions of children through societal influences and it had contributed to constructing a view of the teacher and child (Ball, 2013). Putting analysis and thinking to my observations felt like it surfaced this sensation. It felt like a revelation to my teaching self over simply confirming and seeming to capture agency in my research. Surfacing this normalising power did not mean that it could now be removed from my research to reveal my true self or that of my agency practices with children as we were always entangled with being normalised, and this did not make it inherently bad (Foucault, 1980). However, emerging sensations of observing this in practice meant I could see and feel it and begin to be aware of it happening.

I needed to think about how research could contribute to inquiring into agency in richer ways, revealing the complexities I was feeling, bringing in the affective sensations and developing more descriptive presentations of agency over aligning to what was already thought. Sensations of agency as possibility, reconfiguring material-discursive of bodily productions, not human trait but as a flow of intensities (Barad, 2007; Jackson, 2013) I wanted to become more open to a world of things in motion (Ingold, 2015b), more curious, and feel generative about research that could help diminish the feeling of agency being understood as only achievable by some and as a future focused outcome for children. I wanted to be moving away from contributing to a global notion of agency as the forming of an individual and autonomous learner at the expense of the role of place and the relational and entangled experiences of agency in the classroom and moving away from research that functions as an attempt to reconstruct children’s agency.

I needed to get down from the Kinder Tree and start researching from under its branches. I was not sure how to do this or what it would mean to my understandings of early childhood education nor to myself as the agentic teacher, but I wanted to sit under that Kinder Tree, legs stuck out in front of me with a sore coccyx to remind me of why I was there. A different positioning that

was more aligned with the children and as an in relation to them and no longer the holder of an all-mighty agentic power.

## Emerging Understandings of Relational Agency Through Lively Stories

### Setting the Scene

I felt troubled; the learnt understanding, positioning and definition used in early childhood education to define and bound agency no longer reflected my thinking about researching agency from within my classroom. Through developing a critical understanding of the impact of historical traces present in contemporary curriculum, I emerged concerns about its intentions. I felt in adhering to the EYLF's positioning of agency and performing my role in teaching and assessing this agency, I was performing the agency that it determined while telling me I was agentic. Furthermore, when researching agency by adhering to curriculum's positioning of agency, I was not bringing anything new. Rather, I was reinforcing and holding up a definition of agency that I no longer believe in.

I wanted to move past researching acts of agency in my classroom that felt like they were confirming this defined and fixed conceptualisation of agency; defined acts of voice, choice, and contribution that were to be achieved in certain ways (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022; Valentine, 2011). Acts that were applauded for contributing to achieving the dominant notions of agency, were most often by children who understood this agency performance and how it benefited them. I realised that my research risked contributing to a repeat of what was already thought known and furthering the positioning of agency's role in forming future focused liberal adults over a more critical inquiring into the agentic children that I teach.

I drew from the work of St Pierre and their insight into the work of Deleuze and Guattari, where they moved past concepts of a predetermined method due to risks to shut down thought when trying to capture it and consign it to the dominant and risks to perpetuate what is already known that prohibit experimentation and creation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994; St. Pierre, 2019). This meant pushing my inquiry into more experimentative methods and thinking, taking me away from predetermined notions of agency, teaching and researching. It also meant risking not knowing what would be produced or having a predetermined path in how it would be researched but rather uncovering my way forward along the way.

As the teacher, I was questioning how much I had upheld the curriculum definition of agency in my teaching and what impact that had had on how I understood and positioned children in my



classroom. As a researcher, I was questioning how my research was not generating new knowledge as much as it was upholding defined notions of agency that privilege few, positioned children as to whom they were to become and contributing to a global notion of agency that meant focusing on a forming of an individual and autonomous learner.

I started inquiring from under the Kinder Tree, whether I climbed down or fell, did not matter. I was no longer up in its branches at a distance from the teaching and learning I was entangled with; I was sitting under the Kinder Tree. This felt like a space that permitted a more relational positioning to understand agency differently. It became a place to sit and contemplate agency as distributed, interwoven and interconnected. A space to observe a world of things in motions, each with their own trajectories or tendencies which interfere with the trajectories of the things that they encounter (Ingold, 2013). An eye to eye as I stepped off my performance stage's bird's eye view. It gave new perspective and permission to inquire outside of agency that was focusing on permission, access, and notions of right or wrong to fit political and dominant discourse agendas. What was emerging to matter to my inquiry was how my position and thinking were changing in how I wanted to research and understand agency. I needed a shift in my dissertation to reflect these emerging other-ways, different understandings of agency that were also present in my classroom— a shaking of my own Kinder Teacher Tree.

## **Lively Stories as Unguarded Writing from the Classroom**

I was curious about relational and entangled notions of agency and wanted my inquiry to bring in explorations of these concepts into how I researched. I did not yet know what relational and entangled meant in the classroom, yet they affected me through shifting sensations of possibility and moving away from confirmed language. An affective desire to move away from agency as attributed acts of choice, voice, and contribution that contribute to forming the liberal independent learner to wonderings of what agency could be when positioned as in relation to other, distributed, interwoven and interconnected. Relational and entangled felt like generative concepts as they connected and included other, a bringing in and togetherness which felt more complex than the then educational definition that I had been working with. I wanted to move away from writing about children's agentic actions as only confirmation of what I had been taught agency was and experiment away from my curriculum and policy bounded thinking to bring to the surface notions of agency as relational and entangled into my stories. I started reading about the practice of writing lively stories (Blaise et al., 2017).

Lively stories are a composition of a shared moment where attention is spread more evenly across people and things that are brought together for a brief moment and a telling of all too familiar stories in a new way (Blaise et al., 2017). Lively stories are writings that are vivacious and energetic and tell of a course of events; however, they gesture towards a radically different way of observing in early childhood spaces (Blaise et al., 2017). They resist the urge to place objects, and people into separate categories and have resonances in the context of human agency and the agentic potential of the non-human world. They provide an autoethnographic method to my inquiring with agency, permit a writing of unguardedness and contribute to revealing the interwoven social and political consciousness present in these notions of agency (Holman Jones & Harris, 2019). Lively stories are a method of paying attention in complex and ethical way to matters of concern s to both human and more-than-human encounters (van Dooren, 2014).

My engagement with lively stories was born out of a sitting in my new position, sitting under the Kinder Tree, after my frustrations of trying to capture agentic moments from within my classroom. Lively story writing brought potential for re-situating from understanding agency as only teaching and learning to an opportunity to be open and attentive to agency's entangled ecologies. They created writing and thinking spaces not specifically focused on children, development, or predetermined pathways of learning (Blaise & Hamm, 2022; Blaise et al., 2017; Blaise & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019) and a more inclusive research that considered the implications and significance of place in lived lives (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014).

Lively stories reflected the festering in my thinking as I got down from the Kinder Tree and began writing and thinking from sitting under its branches. As I read and developed my own understandings of what lively stories could be, I wrote in my journal more affective accounts as I attempted to write and think differently with agency through the writing of lively stories.

*Lively stories are a series of observations, embodiments, and folding-ins of everyday moments in an early childhood service. Each one explored, un-folded and completely benign. Yet, they are part of the entanglements of the everyday of the service. An 'I', other, more-than-human entanglement, a posit through storytelling from which further ideas will hopefully come to mind. An attempt to bring meaning to how the everyday says so much about the bigger picture. (Personal Journal)*

This approach felt very different from my previous attempt, which focused on capturing agency. My previous research attempt felt too confirmed and rigid in its positioning of agency, hence the desire to shake my own Kinder Tree. I felt the potential in shaking this teacher and researcher, a

pull and excitement that something was emerging that could be generative and new. A shifting of my writing from an attempt to capture agency; to define it and connect it to the curriculum performance of an expert teacher, towards inquiring alongside and with complex and uncapturable agency. I was no longer wanting to hook agency up to curriculum and defined notions, rather think of it as an accompaniment and emerging with agency, to generate understandings of dynamic agencies within the classroom. This new direction of inquiry would still be a from within of my classroom and involved observations. However, I was now approaching observing differently and I described my new and emerging observation taking process in my journaling:

*I stand and I write, I listen, and I feel, I participate as normal as possible in my classroom, I am interrupted, conversations swirl, and I observe and write. Five minutes seems to be the average maximum before I have to put down my pen and attend to the physicality of the work. My presence is needed elsewhere.*

*My observations are sporadic and random, they don't make much sense as there are too many things happening at the same time. All connecting, overlapping, and playing out on their own timelines, non-linear. Maybe that is entangled agency? (Personal Journal)*

This personal reflection showed the transformation that I was going through as my thinking about agency was shifting. There is a marked move away from agency as curriculum and policy, agency, as defined and outcome based, in this observational approach. It showed an emerging prospect for an agency as potential for lively, relational, entangled understandings through complexifying it. This meant my observational documentation from within the classroom shifted from confirmed notions of agency to a dynamic lively story writing. It was from this in-movement, in connection and surrounded by a sense of overlapping agencies that I began to write lively stories from within my classroom.

I present a series of four lively stories and from my position of under the Kinder Tree and use them as a catalyst for meandering; letting what comes up, come up. They wind and bend down unknowable paths that take me away to personal connections to the kindergarten land as land histories. They wander into territories of colonial histories and my ignorant teacher/researcher-self learning and emerging differently along the way. Entangled relationships with the more than human present and that are also agentic within the classroom, shift notions of agency beyond curriculum and humancentric positionings. Developing new understandings of the 'things' of early childhood environments that are more than just their role in teaching children and how that shifts my understanding of my teacher-self in teaching children. Inviting inquiry away from everything that I had come to hold close to my teaching heart as agency and as the researcher, letting go of the need

to control and pre-plan the direction of the inquiry. I demonstrate how these lively stories opened me to wanting to know and learn more instead of just linking them to curriculum and moving on.

### **Lively Story One**

*I observe two children curled up on the couch giggling, sharing knowledge and stories of dinosaurs, two experts teaching each other. Another child approaches me coming from the playdough table, “It’s a house for the Aboriginal people”, the house is presented to me for comment. It is made out of dough and natural materials, especially spiky gumnuts. After being acknowledged, the house is returned to the playdough table. An educator brings the apple spiral machine to the lunch table as a child has brought a whole apple in their lunch box and has asked for the slinky. The child turns the handle, and the apple is slinky’d with a long strand of apple spaghetti as the skin is peeled away in one long strand. Next to where I stand, children run over to the big mirror to see themselves in dress up, they assess their reflection, adjust accessories before returning to try on other clothes from the dress up basket on the floor. A scraping sound catches my attention; a train made of small, recycled boxes; tea, cereal, and tissue boxes transformed. The boxes are attached together with string and tape, each box cabin is filled with soft toys brought from home, they are being pulled around the classroom off on some unknown journey. The driver makes a quick stop at the snack table to grab a carrot out of a lunch box before continuing on their way. I look towards a voice singing. There is double fist painting happening at the easel, a thick paintbrush in each hand. Dip, dip into the paint pots then with big sweeping swipes across the large format paper. The painter accompanies the movements in song, singing “la, la, la” with each sweeping stroke.*

I reflected and wondered on the myriad of moments presented in the lively story. Each moment felt lively and together, very entangled. They could be broken down, analysed, and interpreted by the EYLF’s outcomes, separated out through the individual children, movements, and actions like I had previously done in my observations. However, I wanted to think of them and my relationship to them as political, ethical full of possibilities in their enactments and my accountability in their intra-actings. I would look deeper at elements of the stories, yet I did not want to separate it out into acts of defined agency, rather reflections with all my thinking intertwined, where my thinking became part of the lively stories rather than separate from them.

Barad helped me to understand that I needed to think about phenomena as enactments of particular conceptual-material configurations. It was important that I started to rethink interactivity, thinking about the interplay between my own agency and nonhuman agencies, their social, material and technical configurations (Barad, 2007). By distinguishing between interaction; understood as an

event taking place between two fixed entities, in contrast to intra-action, which as an event was performative and emergent (Barad, 2007). In intra-actions, the entities interacting should be understood as the effects of their relation.

I felt like I was leaning into notions of Child-ism as generative, I was not positioning my figurations of children's learning as in relation to competent or incompetent or children as developing or acting immature (Murris, 2020a). I was getting to know ways of being and understanding of the world differently from how I had been taught to as I let the flow of the observation take over the need to only document choice, voice, and contribution in relation to learning outcomes. I no longer felt at a distance, I drew knowledge and truth as inspired from the children in their doing and it changed my thinking (Murris, 2020c). I drew from Barad's words that we need to hold the instruments of science "in one's own hand and draw in the rich penetrating aromas of scientific practices" (Barad, 2007, p. 247), I was bringing in the sensations of the busy and dynamic classroom in action and not as separate actions as parts of learning. It was busy, chaotic, noisy, and full of dynamic action, a bringing the background to the foreground as it was relevant to the understanding of new phenomena (Murris & Reynolds, 2023), that helped me see that writing from a place of in-action and in-doing brought new understandings that were not positioning children as passive learners.

I reflected on the two children quietly and privately sharing knowledge of dinosaurs on the couch:

*Children's knowledge expanding outside of teaching directives, children teaching children, children as in relation to other children and children learning outside of teacher's view! Children exhibiting intra-acting agency that has not been taught or learnt in dominant systems. Sharing an entangled moment for their pure enjoyment. Had I not been in this moment of 'research', observing and documenting this encounter, would it really matter that I missed it, it would happen anyway, as a myriad of moments happen every day in early childhood classrooms, away from teaching and learnings prying eyes and ears? Did it really happen if it wasn't documented? Why can't these moments be enough, just as they are, lived and embodied? Why can't our days be filled with these moments (and they do happen regardless), and be lived just as they are, away from the prying eyes of documented teaching and learning? Can I as Teacher spend my days deeply within these entangled moments (when I am also included) and simply state THAT is teaching and learning and THAT is more than enough just as it is? What about the child who made the Aboriginal house?*

As a teacher, I am constantly pulled and pushed in ways to incorporate Australia's First Nations People's perspectives, and rightly so. I see the flow on affect on children as they feel the *importance* of this teaching. Their need conveyed as to pull me aside to show me the *work*, to have it *acknowledged*, to please, and my need to subdue myself as a good teacher and the child as a good learner. I'm excited by the work and the intentional acknowledgment of First Nations' culture but also acutely aware of this dominant discourse of *the ancient and nomadic life of the Australian Aboriginal Peoples* as Colonised understandings and presentations of cultures as in the past. Does this nod towards Australia's First Nations People's only come into volution because there were natural materials, such as gumnuts put out on the table? It made me feel uncomfortable that Australia's First Nations People were learnt much like flora and fauna. Would this child bring me a dough house without the natural materials added, just like other contemporary houses and call it an Aboriginal house or are the understandings built on colonial histories of othering and past notions of Indigenous lives? This is part of complicated pull and push of tokenistic understandings I feel, alongside the deeply different philosophical thinking in my reading and the placement of a white woman wanting to bring them into colonial education systems.

Thinking with the apple slinky, a teaching resource, a technical machine for learning or an extension of humans with machines:

*A bringing in of machines, in this case old mechanically moving technology, physical machinery, to manipulate and see in action and in intra-action. An important entanglement, an extension of the arms turning the handles, strong physical child force needed to compel the blade through the apple, a coming together of body and machine, moving parts and moving bodies, in synchronised motion to spiral and peel a piece of food. Sustenance, health, machine, fun, motion, and apple spaghetti to boot! The resulting spiralled apple could not be done without the machine, an invitation to be involved with the food we eat, an agentic intra-action of human and machine. A daily practice for some children and others only when there is a green apple remembered and packed in lunch boxes.*

Then there was the mirror, a tool for self-reflection, a seeing of physical self within the classroom and reflection in learning:

*Reflections of themselves, curiosity about what they see. No flinches or hesitations about their physical reflections ... yet. Twists and turns to try to see front and back. Mirrors provide much engagement in the space; faces pulled, parallel in sync movements observed and practiced. I love to observe both the child in the mirror and the child who is physically*

*present, two stories, a myriad of multiple perspectives. Wonderings of how their perception of themselves change when they are dressed up. Layers of different clothes pulled on over their regular clothes, these clothes as materialities add differently to the space and the time spent together. Behaviour and sense of self transform with these new forms of identity, all through a scarf or jacket! Transformational non-human artefacts that offer so much more than a teacher led half hour learning experience for the explicit teaching and learning of self-identity. Boxes as entangled learning, a making with a loose part; the recycled rubbish that becomes hours of engagement when offered alongside other stationary such as sticky tape, string, and glue.*

Children's attachment to the things they make at kinder are strong. I am often caught in a scramble at the end of the day to try and help find a crafted project that may have been put in the recycling bin or worse, repurposed by another child and taken home. Deep engagement often emerges during the making process and this is where the attachment grows, with families having to set boundaries at home about the need for new craft work replacing old existing work to make space in homes. Entangled intra-actions in the thinking, making and use of these lived non-human artefacts. The families of soft animals that are carried off in creations on adventures never ceases to amuse and delight me: even after having sore fingers from having had to tie endless strings together, helping find the sticky tape ends, untangling lengths of wool from chair legs, moving abandoned constructions that have become tripping hazards with their long-connected strings and helping negotiate box disputes on a daily basis. These are all important endeavours. What a life and what adventures these boxes are having!

Can it be considered painting a proper picture while holding two paint brushes, one in each fisted hand? Bringing to the surface debates about purpose; the end result or in the action and the doing in that moment.

The easel is a picturesque image in the minds of all early childhoods and education spaces. The innocence of children's wonky paintings become keepsakes and stories in many homes over many years. It is romantic and sweet, but not all the paintings are. The easel can be a place of aggression; stabbing, frenzied back and forth actions covering a large format page with one colour of paint until it is so saturated the paper starts to disintegrate. Double-fisted painting can be this; both hands moving, possibly both sides of the brain firing, romantic stories and cute family portraits can be forgone for entangled processes of entangled moments devoid of intentional storytelling. A moment, in the moment, without need for comment, analysis or even a name on the painting as there is no desire to keep it, just to do it.

This first lively story and accompanied thinking felt different. Choice, voice, and contribution had dissolved into something more, they were there but were not the only focus. The stories had become more lively, relational, entangled, and complex. I felt there was space to share the complexities of the political and ethical accountabilities without having to solve or conclude them, rather explore their challenges.

Lively story writing had invited a new opening for voice in my dialoguing but away from individualistic focuses or defined understanding. An opening of voice as inclusive and responsive (Rose, 2017), dialoguing as embodied, affective, and one that did not set out to *know* from the beginning. It meant opening up to new ways of understanding and acting, alongside being uncomfortable in the unfamiliar and in the familiar (Blaise & Hamm, 2022; Rose, 2017). For example, when I observed this child needing to demonstrate their knowledge of making an Aboriginal house alongside their need to perform it to me as I had required it to demonstrate learning. This element of the lively story made me think about my positioning as a white woman in education and my responsibility to knowledge of the histories of all childhoods and children in Australia.

As the researcher, these Lively Stories challenged me to reflect on how to write analysis of children and childhoods and not turn away from their lives being lived as in relation to past perspectives.

## Children and Risks of Romantic Fall Recovery Narratives in Complex Histories

When writing about young children and time spent with them, it is easy to be swept up in romanticised and passive notions of child and childhood through historically developed positionings (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005; Stonehouse, 1989; Taylor, 2011; Valentine, 2011). I considered children and my relationship with them as more than passive learners and dominant teacher and my dissertation was about the complexities of agency as explored through my classroom teaching. This required writing about children and my time with them in complex ways. I felt this complexity in a child-histories-Kinder-Tree entanglement Lively Story as I observed engagement with First Nations Peoples, non-human entities, and the pull of historical configurations of curriculum expectations.

I was emerging my observations as entanglements and through notions of in relation to and this included non-human concepts being brought into my Lively Stories, this challenged how I was to understand human children as engaged al agency. Braidotti (2013) argued that a humanistic residue remained at the core of anti-humanist thought. She was concerned that when focusing on notions of



human and non-human that questions of how power invests subject formation could disappear. I wanted to understand how I practiced and thought about agency in my position of teacher of young children, this positioning was full of powerful subject formations. Here lay a connection point in my inquiry between the historical positioning of children and its influence on dominant childhood discourse.

Writing with and about children, even if they were not the central focus of the issue at hand came with complexity as they were interwoven with historical configurations. As I developed and researched agency entanglements from my new position of under the kindergarten tree, which was a non-human entity, I began to question its relationship to place and belonging. I had to delve not only into people histories but also land histories as I asked, What was there before? The history of this land where the kindergarten resided did not start in 1924 when the kindergarten was established. If I was not honest about the kindergarten's colonial history, I risked to fall into a trap of thinking and writing fall-recovery narratives, a form of reminiscing where the past was always seen to be good and virtuous and better than current times (Malone et al., 2020c). Fall-recovery narratives were used in the way we could romanticise childhood; childhoods that were considered safer, freer, where children could be *children* and free to explore nature unsupervised (Malone et al., 2020b). Fall-recovery narratives also risked to white wash Australia's colonial history and minimise the complexities of how the education system was formed.

When inquiring into the history of my service, connections were made between owners of clay mines that were prominent to the land area around the kindergarten and early colonial ownership of the kindergarten land. I used a visual prompt as a reminder of the realities of local childhoods of colonial past times. One look at the photo of Glew pit (see Figure 2), a clay pit where they dug to make bricks only streets away from the kindergarten location and stories of children that drowned in these pits (Merri-bek City Libraries, 2020) removed any romantic notions of their childhood especially layered with the realities of erasures of First Nations Peoples from these lands.

**Figure 2**

***Glew Street Pit***



*Note.* Photo by Ron Glew. Exhibition | Open Spatial Workshop: Converging in Time | MUMA—Melbourne Art Network

I felt a paradox, writing with and about children from within an early childhood classroom created stories as colourful assemblages of children's play, however I was learning more about the complexities and realities of childhoods and that needed to be reflected in my writing too. Stories of children's play were more than just delightful, funny, and quirky reflections of play that drew the reader into the work. They were complex entanglements that involved place-histories-children.

Braidotti wrote of moving to a process ontology where subjects were understood in process and connected up to networks of human and non-human yet remained simultaneously situated and accountable (Braidotti, 2018). I felt an accountability to not romanticise the children I was researching and to acknowledge my accountability in my lack of knowledge about histories of education and of the land I taught on. I was writing from a place of autoethnography; a situated, intimate position where I as subject was embedded within educational institutions and the problems that I wanted to understand. An autoethnographic writing that was not focused on my own pain and ego, but rather, one connected up and out, an affirmative becoming-intimate with the world, with otherness and diversity (Braidotti, 2018).

## The Kinder Tree as a Silent Colonised Resource

The Kinder Tree was a central gathering place at the kindergarten for photos, emergency evacuation drills and as a play resource to climb or sit under in its educational environment. The backyard of the service revolved around this tree, and it affected the use of the yard throughout the seasons for its shade, light, and habitat. Yet, this tree was not from Australia and was planted there as other flora and fauna had been removed. I needed to think about this absence and its signification in how it related to agency.

Before writing to the thinking of early education and thus educational agency as a colonised space, I wanted to share how this work had emerged. I wanted to understand more about colonisation, the history of my service, and think with the question of *What was there before?* in relation to the Kinder Tree. I went on a deep dive into the histories of both pre and post colonised inhabitancies of my local area. I spent my time going between different time periods, various forms of material documents, types of histories and engaging with local libraries and historical groups. I also sat with post-qualitative theories that I was beginning to read into and use to inform my thinking with agency as I went back and forth in histories and times. This resulted in the need to explore many different inquiring directions which added to the richness of the layering that I wanted to reveal in my inquiry into agency.

I would like to give an example of how this reading, thinking, and writing was physically shaking my foundations in all that I did not know about my entanglement with my kindergarten service. In my service's annual reports, I found out that the local council bought the kindergarten land from the Allard family in 1926, founding the first kindergarten in my area. James Allard directed the Cornwell Pottery factory, part of a larger network of brick and pottery making businesses local to the area in the years prior to the opening of my service and it was only a street away from where the kindergarten resided. I purchased one of the kiln's vases from eBay and I now keep it as a physical reminder of this history (see Figure 3). I now live in the converted space of one of these large pottery sites and look out over the kilns that fired the bricks that formed the buildings in my surrounds. I felt the embodiment and embeddedness of these histories, in both my entanglement with my physical surrounds but also in my practice with children as they too emerged from these histories.

**Figure 3**

***Cornwell Pottery Brunswick Vase***



“All places in Australia, whether urban or otherwise, are Indigenous places” (Porter, 2018, p. 239), was a statement that I reflected on more and more as I learnt more about the local history. My lack of knowledge about the land before inquiring into the colonising history haunts me. I felt this gap affected my understandings of education, place, and agency. Something had to be removed to make room for the Kinder Tree thereby becoming part of a cycle of felt erasure, often replaced in services with small designated Indigenous gardens, small plots containing edibles, and popular examples of educational connections to First Nations Peoples while not embracing the cycle of effacement. “Everybody knows that there were people here before the establishment of the cities and towns we now live in, yet there is a wilful ignorance of those first peoples and their practices” (Porter, 2018, p. 140). I felt wilfully and woefully ignorant of the intentional shift towards teaching culture and histories as learning outcomes.

For thousands of years before the kindergarten existed, before European settlement, the land around the kindergarten area was a sparsely wooded forest with native grasslands. Fertile soils grew great gum and paperbark trees, bottlebrush, and tea-trees. The area and local creek were an

important source of water and food. The Wurundjeri-Willam line of the White Gum Tree clan regarded the area as hallowed ground (Gargan, 1994). The Wurundjeri Peoples were the custodians of these lands, they were part of the Woi-wurrung language group in the Kulin nation. For more information see the Wurundjeri website (<https://www.wurundjeri.com.au/>) produced by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation. The two neighbouring groups; the Boon wurrung and the Wadawurrung and other groups to the north congregated on the banks of the creek not a fifteen-minute walk from the location of the kindergarten to deal with business between groups (Ellender et al., 2001).

Permanent European settlement marked the beginnings of devastating and irrevocable changes for the Woi-wurrung Peoples (Merri-bek City Council, 2010). The effect of European colonisation was the total loss of long-established ways of life and the almost extinction of a People (Merri-bek City Council, 2010). The grasslands of the area were seen as ideal pastoral lands, the muddy bogs may have become the clay pits that became the factories for the workers and their families and the wooded forests used for fuel and timber until all that was physical evidence of Indigenous habitation became mere traces (Merri-bek City Council, 2010). For myself, this included the planting of the European deciduous tree at the heart of the kindergarten, which could be understood as another form of European erasure of truth telling of Australian history and other ways of childhood that were of this land.

As a white Australian teacher, I knew very little of First Nations People's history and the ongoing erasures. My superficial engagements with Indigenous connections to land and culture made me really see my work to be done in acknowledging the truths of Indigenous histories and the complexities to relearn about the *place* where I lived and worked (Calderon, 2014). I could not purchase something tangible from this time to remind me and connect me to these histories. No photographs or vases to be found as mementos of these times, it was in the erasure and silencing that I had to sit and think. My confrontation with rendering settler colonialism visible and identifying my colonial identity which "manifests itself in myriad ways and involves a complex relationship between peoples, geographies, natural landscapes, settler laws, and the resulting violence of this longstanding globalization project" (Calderon, 2014, p. 25) had been exposed through a playdough house with spiky gumnuts. I think back to this child who handed me their understanding of First Nation's People's in the form of a dough house adorned with natural materials from Australian flora, a child taught through predominantly white education systems and by a teacher who knew so little about the affective realities of the past. I wanted to acknowledge that there were tangible residues

that infiltrated my practices and knowledges of education and affected my changing understandings of agency.

The Australian mandated curriculum focuses on the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of “knowing and being” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 14) as part of respecting diversity, it was also important to note that this was in fact a new addition to the EYLF and had not been part of the curriculum that had been in circulation since 2012. This addition felt like siloing; including cultural inclusivity as an *other* from the norm, possibly to be celebrated once a year though NAIDOC week or controversially woven into celebrations of Australia day. I was expected to be responsive to children’s “cultural traditions and ways of knowing” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 14). However, my deep lack of education and knowledge of Australia’s First Nations Peoples meant I could not lean into such child-centred approaches without recapitulating modernist colonial discourse that also contributed to a separation of what counted as nature or normal through this white settler tree Kinder Tree. I was furthering a continuing the contribution to discourses of a “mute, pure, and separate nature” (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017, p. 100). I could only draw from what I had known and been taught, and I realised that this contributed to notions of First Nation’s Peoples as positioned as past and not present histories, with outdated concepts of nomadic lifestyles and as only in relation to Australian flora and fauna. I could only acknowledge the Aboriginal house presented to me and confirm it as good learning, yet now I see the shocking form of othering and devaluing of their histories, lifestyles, and contributions that my lack of knowledge underwrites.

I felt like I knew so little but by reading and engaging with Indigenous knowledges, writers, and culture as place relations, I could begin to acknowledge the entanglement of the human and the more-than-human in my relationship to this colonised kinder tree. I was beginning to understand how curriculum and policy can other and silo colonial histories in similar ways as it had done so to agency. If an entire Australian population could be erased and then required to be added back specifically in the Australian wide curriculum, I question the intent of this move. The last edition of the EYLF V.2, now includes the need for Aboriginal children to be reflected in classrooms, “to see themselves, their identities and cultures reflected in their environment is important for growing a strong identity” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 16). This made me think just how much First Nation’s Peoples had been erased from notions of education as this idea had to be explicit in the curriculum. The EYLF also states that my teaching philosophy and practice is a key tool to advance Reconciliation and “fulfilling every Australian child’s right to know about Australia’s First Nations’ histories, knowledge systems, cultures and languages” (Australian Government.



Department of Education, 2022, p. 16), however, I felt woefully under educated myself by the very education system that I now worked under. I was now understanding how education had been used as a colonial tool that favours dominant perspectives, much like my new understandings of agency were emerging. In forming notions of the individual, independent, and autonomous learner through an agent being self-determined, who that image was of this learner greatly impacted ongoing forms of colonisation in education spaces.

I continue to work towards forging a more informed knowledge on how “more-than-human bodies, place-specific stories, ontologies, histories, as well as humans are all lively and entangled participants in the shaping of place” (Calderon, 2014; Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017, p. 100; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). I return to my next Lively Story to see what it will emerge in my thinking.

### **Lively Story Two**

*Two heads peek out of the cubby house before they duck back in out of view. A wet dribble sensation slides across my knee, “It’s a wet lemon” continues a discussion next to me. A green bucket filled with collected lemons and water. Wet lemons placed on my leg, the wet seeps through. The sound of the broom swishes across the ground as a tidy up of the yard is underway after the rainy night. Semi wet towels are dragged around the yard as children want to ride the bikes, but they are wet. The bikes are rubbed down theatrically with the heavy towels to remove the dew and the rain. Wet towels are then abandoned on the ground, like on bathroom floors. The kinder tree glistens with dew drops that fall like rain as the children climb, pulling on the branches. “I tipped the water out, but I accidentally tipped out too much.” I’m drawn back into the lemon discussion as the drops of water hit my leg again. A discussion erupts between two adults about complaints that the yard has not been tidied up properly the day before. A wind picks up, rustling through the flags hanging from the pergola. The rainbow flag rustles and vibrates. “Look at this bright lemon”, drip, drip, drip on my leg.*

I went deeper into my thinking with this lively story. The two heads that popped out and ducked back:

*Is this active supervision? I cannot see the children; they are tucked away doing private business. I risked being seen as not doing my job for not supervising them properly. This need to know where the children are, to adhere to all the policies, to be the good teacher, to observe what they are doing/learning at all times is physically impossible. I could remove all the things, just put them all in a big empty room, where they can be seen at all times. I don’t want them to observe me all day; the children that follow me around, that have to sit right*

*up close to me, that have to ask me obvious questions about what I am doing while they are observing me do it frustrates me to no end! I want them to have their own space, to be able to engage in their day without feeling my prying eyes on them at all times, constantly documenting all that they are doing. This is their space; it is supposed to be designed for them while being safe.*

Wet lemons, this job was full of liquids and trying to avoid getting them on you:

*Sensory play, as it is known; water, sand, mud, slime, shaving cream, paint, glue, and bodily fluids abound. I can try and stand back and just be an observer, clean and dry but I can't. Offerings arrive, senses are alive and messy sensations love to be shared! Clothing and appropriate outdoor wear is essential in this job unless you want to constantly push away, stand away and remain a committed observer. Disconnected and apart from the action, teaching only to be done from above, when the children are sitting below on the mat at a grouping time, the real learning after the children have finished the playing. Isn't the playing the learning? The children know which adult to go to; to get the tap turned on when they want water, who will come with them into the sand pit to help dig and who to bring offerings of wet lemons to so they will be appreciated. This is connection, in relation-to and where the most exciting intra-actions take place. In the wet, muck and fluids of teaching.*

The role of wet, soggy, and dirty towels strewn around the kindergarten yard:

*The towels start their day hanging along a window sill in the morning sun, dry and starchy after having been washed by a kinder parent and brought back folded neatly. The excitement of getting the bike that you wanted, the one labelled the number One and not the number Two, as it's faster. Only to find the seat and handlebars wet with dew or rain. That moment of hesitation, what do I do? Do I have to leave the bike at risk of being taken to go ask for adult help? No, get the towel! It's big and heavy in small arms and is often dragged across to the bike, now drying dirty but still dry. This towel offers the ability to get back to riding without needing adult interruptions and assistance, a doing, a sense of satisfaction. A towel available so that there is no need for adult intervention. An ability to get on with the day.*

A sweeping regime of cleaning and tidying:

*This is a profession filled with cleaning and tidying, maybe that's why it's positioned as women's work—caring and cleaning. It's physically exhausting and never ending, then we go home to our own families and do it all again. From opening up in the morning, setting up, cleaning up outside, chairs down, paints opened to the end of the day, packing up, putting*



*away, chairs up, and paint pots washed. It is relentless and is full of tension—Who does what?, Who does more?, Who does a better job? The hierarchy of who is responsible for the menial tasks and who does the teaching. It's demoralising and underpaid. It's where the resentment is formed, the niggly arguments, the frustrated sweepings that are fast and hard in the yard as expressions of these never-ending tasks and exasperations of feeling like you are left to do too much but there is never enough time or that you have done it well enough.*

This was also relational, complex, and entangled. The daily running's, the annoyances and the messy clean-ups after play were also agency. This was not only about the children and the learning; I was there too, and I had emotions too. It is messy and fraught with boundary making and moving, pushing, and pulling, trying to make space for yourself and your understandings of education within your workplace. Who got to make decisions? How those decisions were made? Put those towels away, they were too messy for this early learning space. I will dry the bike for you as it was my job to clean and there was no towel. Finding the yard absent of bikes as the bikes were put away as the children could not share them. This was also the realities of early learning spaces.

I felt like these lively stories were like a pulling at threads, their descriptive prose was making me bring in complexity as opposed to narrowing, refining and the streamlining that I felt happened in my earlier Acts of Agency participant observations. The role of descriptive analysis as emerging complexities caught my attention for what it added to my meandering analysis.

## Thick Descriptive Writing

My early journaling such as my first work “the Kinder Tree” were attention focused on the entanglements of tree-education-more-than-human. Detailed, descriptive writing that contributed to moving my thinking away from outcomes and learning directives before these lively stories from within my classroom. These early descriptive texts were attempts at thick descriptions that went on to affect my lively story writing (Geertz, 1973). An ethnography writing of detailed narratives, more than just describing a situation but looking for signification and complex cultural meaning.

“Description is the art of giving an account of something in words. In interpretive studies, thick descriptions and inscriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic experiences. These accounts often state the intentions and meanings that organize actions” (Denzin, 2001, p. 1).

Thick description involves interpretation for understanding the relevance, meanings, and intentions that underpin social interaction. Yet, I found my early writings clunky and murky and having the potential to lead to romantic fall narratives in my interpretations (Malone et al., 2020c). At the same time, they were my autoethnography pushback from conceptualising my writing in

limited, specified, focused, and contained ways. Concepts to be applied or not depending upon if they worked, or running the risk that they “became, if it was, in truth, a seminal idea in the first place, a permanent and enduring part of my intellectual armory” (Geertz, 1973, p. 4).

Thick descriptors, Geertz reminded me, were written to ask what their importance was and that in their occurrence and through their agency, what was getting said? (Geertz, 1973). This helped my inquiry to focus in on what troubled me; in my first lively story, the historical configurations of the tree in relation to notions of child and childhood, the lack of thick description in agency writing/thinking and a curiosity in understanding how this tree fitted within its educational service as a non-human actant. It offered up potential for revealing the silences through a bringing in of the tree’s agency and how it was managed and positioned by others through its educationally positioned role in the service.

In my second lively story, the thick descriptors surfaced the tensions that reside in the classroom; active supervision, hierarchal roles, women’s work, approaches and understandings to teaching. Each day is a melting pot of push and pull of existing boundaries, blurred boundaries and child/adult boundaries that affect and change interactions and intra-actions throughout each day. These tensions are there every day, yet not considered for their affect on teaching and learning. The idea that an early learning space is all about the children is very erasing off all that is also present every day. It creates a false narrative of the child at the top of the hierarchy pyramid. However, this pyramid makes no sense if the decisions, permissions, and rewards are dished out from the adults that push the child up into the pointy end of the triangle. Approaches to teaching, notions of teaching roles and responsibilities and the very materials of a classroom are also in relation to the child and affect understandings of agency. It is the thick descriptors and the lack of dividing out children’s acts into notions of agency learning that help me experience this complexity in my own writing.

The different lines of thread that I pulled at could have been understood as taking me away from this issue at hand in my inquiry into how I practiced agency, rather they became critical developments in understanding notions of educational developments in conceptualising agency as a supposable teachable thing. I was understanding these lines of thread as lines of flight (Deleuze, 1988) as connecting and as having potential for creative mutations in developing how I understood agency. Where a line of flight “was a path of mutation precipitated through the actualisation of connections among bodies that were previously only implicit (or ‘virtual’) that release new powers in the capacities of those bodies to act and respond” (Tamsin, 2010, p. 147).

Lively stories were a *brief* shared moment; this meant I was not going to focus on long thick descriptors in my observation writing as this would be unachievable when writing as the teacher-researcher within my busy classroom. They were going to be brief and familiar stories told in a new way (Blaise et al., 2017). However, they were emerging lines of flight that needed to be explored as I developed complex lively stories. I enacted a delving deeper into education's colonised past, hierarchical complexities in teaching and learning, the importance of bringing in the materialities, including surfacing affective embodiments from within the classroom and all their impact on notions of agency to affect my writing from within a colonised classroom. These complexities emerged a desire to move past the living, affective, and in relation to the Kinder Tree as only being understood as an educational resource that was only as important as what it provided to children's learning—permitting an opening up to understanding this more-than-human Kinder Tree as part of the agency network (Braidotti, 2013), thus permitting new ways of working with and understanding agency.

### *Lively Story Three*

*A sharp whoosh passes within an inch of my head, I felt it but didn't see it! A group of children have turned a stack of small plastic plates into Frisbees and this game has been developing over weeks. It has become very exciting play and the stack of at least ten plastic plates taken from the crockery trolley inside tells me they are just getting started today. No paper plane or sports equipment has redirected this activity, so plastic plates it is, and the centre roof now carries its remnants. I also carry the remnants of this play having been recently wacked by a flying plate. I suggest moving the game to the large sand pit which is empty, and they agree and wander off having watched the Frisbee fly so close to my head. I feel something hard placed in my hand, a hair clip is laid on my palm. Together we marvel at its star printed exterior. We decide to look for heads that contain hair clips to try and find its owner. This seems to please the gift giver and they leave the clip with me while wandering off to look at others' heads. Frisbees whip across the sandpit and spill out into the main part of the yard, a little bit more contained yet not shut down.*

This lively story made me think of the inanimate object that was a plastic plate and its transformation into more-than-human in relation to child:

*What is the role of the things in learning environments and is there differentiation between toys as educational resources and everyday objects? My previous held notions of agency being choice and voice wants me to permit this use of kitchen plates being used in play as there is learning visible. Speed, velocity, experimentation and trial and error OUTCOME 4*

*(aggh, that pull of curriculum is still there!). The children's return to this action over and over validates my sense that this is important, yet it's harder to justify with the use of plastic plates and constant near misses of getting whacked by the Frisbees. Plates are for the kitchen, there are balls for the children in the sports box, I can hear the (my) appropriate teacher voice on my shoulder, yet I choose not to say it. The worry of judgement from other educators in this inappropriate and somewhat dangerous play. I cannot help but think to myself, what's the worst that can happen, we run out of plates? I can get the big ladder and get them down off the roof. The excitement and wonder that oozes from the children at play keeps me wanting to lean in. I don't encourage but I don't say no. It's like a dance; appropriate, learning, agency, safety policy, aerodynamics, and judgement. As the teacher, I am positioned differently to other educators, and I have more liberty as to say what is appropriate and considered learning and have a more privileged authority space to let this play go on. Others might feel the judgement and safety first and move to quickly shut it down.*

I look for accommodations, ways to make others feel it is safe and educational, without shutting it down. I want to lean in to the pull, the desire, the delight, and the repetitious return from the children to this activity. Yet, I feel watched in my role in permitting this play.

There was not a day that goes by that I did not find an interesting object deep in my pocket by the end of the day. A toy car, rock, folded up pieces of paper or a hair clip. Little objects that passed by with little attention to adults but came back into focus when working with young children:

I feel so trusted that children ask me to look after their things, they trust me to give it back and care for it while they are off doing something else. A custodian of small objects, I often return objects to their person a week or more later. When we come back together, the object is re-remembered and comes back into importance in repeated play or new ways depending on the day. I have learnt to never undermine the importance of these objects and have been scolded if the object has been lost or worse left at my home in a coin bowl! If it is important to the child, it is important that I am a good caretaker. This is different than being the receiver of a drawing or craft project, this is not a gift, it is a custodianship and a responsibility not to be taken lightly. There comes a new sense of respect and trust in relationship when objects are returned with attention. A taking of the more-than-human seriously, not trivialising or frivolling something that is important to someone else.

Looking after a hair clip, wondering who might own it. Observing and delighting in children Frisbee-ing plastic plates across the yard and around the kinder Tree. This was not what I was taught was education. Yet these were the enactments of the everyday in an early childhood space. I felt their possibilities, yet I felt them constantly shut down in how I was *meant* to educate children. Things that become labelled as educational resources, were there for the benefit of children's learning, but I'm not sure a hair clip or flying plastic plate were thought about in the same way. I felt that to ignore or minimise these moments, was a missed opportunity to embrace how lively these practices were, nor did it respect these materialities' agency that entangled in ways much more than just as outcome-focused learning. I felt tired by the constant self-questioning of my accountability and ethical responsibilities in my involvement in these activities, what they provided felt constantly overlooked and pushed aside by the dominant agency that I must adhere to. I wanted to shift my own narrative about the role of materialities in early childhood education.

## The Kinder Tree as an Educational Resource

Materials were considered important to the education of young children, in curriculum they were positioned as learning enhancers to the way children thought (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). With the new materialist turn, I understood materiality as vibrant, entangled and intra-active (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). I needed to start acknowledging the material world within and outside the classroom as a force to shift my work past focusing on the individual agentic child or leaning into developmentalism to understand agency. Of course, the Kinder Tree drew me to it as a launching pad. The Kinder Tree was positioned as an educational resource, touted as beneficial for physical development through climbing, encouraging risky play where children were engaging in dangerous play to combat today's risk adverse obsession with safety, and as a Western seasonal learning resource. I wondered if risky play in the Kinder Tree also involved permitting children to know what was there before and what happened as a result of its erasure. The removal of previous native flora and fauna meant that the local First Nations' seasonal calendar was reduced to a poster inside, on the classroom wall, something to intentionally teach as it was less visible within the natural environment yard which was now full of imported flora. The Kinder Tree was a developmental outcome, connectable and bounded by the importance of curriculum outcomes and educational goals, a teaching resource, not human, not agentic, a thing.

My work and classroom were filled with things—resources, furniture, crockery, equipment, blocks, tools, stationary, trees, water, gumnuts, toys, and stuff. I could not imagine walking into a classroom and it being a blank space, empty of stuff. The children and I spend our days working with these living or non-living objects, manipulating them, transforming them, and engaging with them in

ways that could not be overlooked or undermined as separate from ourselves. I understood them as more than just things, the processes and actions occurring in those moments through encounters of human and non-human were also connected to power and agency (Barad, 2007; Blomgren, 2023). Our days were filled with mutual inter-dependence that could be understood as more than just playing with them, these objects became active and participative contributors, however they were not often positioned as such nor understood as educational resources.

Curriculum positioned environment and resources in relation to what they could offer to children's learning—a range extending from being a novelty to increasing abstract thinking (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). It tied the use and relationship with classroom environments and materialities to children's developmental outcomes, connecting the type of resources provided as developing children's identity, their contribution to the world, and their involvement in learning (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). Curriculum makes them objects of children's development, categorised and passive until they provide learning through children.

"Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 17), is a statement that connects Australian identities as learning within a place-based positioning. "These spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery, and connection with nature. They foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness, and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 17) again, positioning the role of learning environments as hooked up to notions of children's learning. Do these spaces and materialities sit dormant when not providing learning? Are they only useful and in waiting for their opportunity to provide learning, solve global environmental issues and exist only in relation to developmental outcomes.

The focus on the role of the outdoors and outdoor education programs was ever increasing in global education perspectives; forest schools, bush kinder, and an increased sustainability focus (Malone, 2016a; Taylor, 2011; Weldemariam, 2017). However, they could also be complexified for their historical development as rooted in idealised and romanticised notions of nature and childhood. Nature focused programs with their role to bridge the gap of modern urban childhoods alongside their silence in their positioning of and in relation to First Nations Peoples, as it risked rendering settler colonialism visible (Calderon, 2014; Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017). When curriculum positioned its relationship to First Nations People's culture and connections to land as to exposing

children to *diversity* (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022), it contributed to this separating and disconnecting to other ways of being or being in relation to the more-than-human.

Reconceptualisations of place-based education often served to re-enact colonial relations through universalising discourses that reinforced settler emplacement (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). I carried this thinking with me as I began to emerge my lively story writing and thought with this felt silencing in the bringing in of the more-than-human in my configurations of agency. My whiteness and the whiteness encoded within the educational position-ment of the Kinder Tree needed to be acknowledged when developing my lively stories. This tree was not a neutral home or heart of the kindergarten service when it was presented as devoid of historical and political projects of colonial violence, and the children and I were not *native* to a place; we were invaders through curriculum (Smith, 2023).

A Frisbee, a Crab Apple tree, a photo of Glew St mining pit and an ornamental ceramic vase were taking me down this meandering path, questioning their positioning within curriculum and their role in agency teaching. They offered up ways to understand them as more than just contributions to learning outcomes, passive and innate. A beginning to understand their agency as generative and impactful on the lives and materials that they are in relation-to. They provided opportunities to explore notions of creating deeper connections to understanding land and place from within their own land and place, a way to move away from smooth and lean global understandings of agency that believe it can be picked up, transported elsewhere, and taught as if it was part of land and place and not contributing to eroding it. I see how critically reflecting on materialities opened up more expansive thinking in my observational reflections as they brought different understandings of agency through their liveliness and different use in the classroom with children. Transformed from passive, inert teaching materials to lively, affective, and entangled parts of our everyday within the classroom, they opened up new lines of deep thinking and reflecting on my own practice in radically different ways and brought themselves into the mix and context of human agency through their agentic potential from the non-human world.

My engagement with Lively Story writing had the potential to help activate concepts as pedagogy in its intentions, purposeful yet unpredictable, imperfect with room for engaging with the complexities in the everyday moments from my teaching (Blaise & Hamm, 2022). A bringing in of more-than-human agency in place, pedagogy and nature cultures (Haraway, 2008). I return one more time into the classroom.

## Lively Story Four

*Bounce, bounce, bounce to the sounds of “ya, ya, ya” as deep guttural monkey noises catch my attention, bodies jumping on the mini trampoline. All in-movement, trying to warm up skin on a cold morning. Another feeds the monkey bananas from beside the trampoline, deep in monkey rearing play. “You can’t ride your bikes this way today”. An adult blocks the bikes’ path. We have moved the wet gym mats from under the Kinder Tree. Too wet to climb after the rainy night. This reveals a different path to ride the bikes, around and under the Kinder Tree, which is usually covered up so children can climb the tree.*

*Educators trying to change deeply imbedded cycling routes, founded from relentless legs peddling on squeaky trikes felt impossible to myself. Second try to change the direction of bike riding, “You can’t ride your bikes here”. It will have to be said all day to try and change long held behaviour, often falling on deaf ears as their unconscious automatic steering and leg propulsion determines their long-held direction. This change in cycle path has emerged from an educator fall. When you emerge into the yard you are in a direct cycle path, and all unfolds at shin height. You learn to look before you step out or there may be a tandem bike with two children and a pusher, who thrusts the bike forward and mostly shoving while looking at their feet, and not the trajectory in front. “It will take me a while to build up my confidence again around the bikes”, I am told by the educator.*

*When children were playing, they were learning, was what I was taught. Children learn through play. Monkeys and bananas was play.*

I am trained to interpret these imaginative moments, to deduce and reduce them down to bite sized stories to be shared and educate families about the different types of play, schemas of play. What I choose to document can be a question of quotas of observations per child, emerging interests in new types of play that mark new development, new learning and determining which family might like this silly story and not be so focused for its educational value in their child’s educational institution. This constant questioning ... . Are the right resources at hand to document? Quick, grab the camera. It’s constant and relentless and often feels interrupting to the flow of the day. There is always the pull of needing to prove myself as the teacher who understands play, who documents it correctly and who can break it down into curriculum defined understandings of learning.

A monkey and a banana, Why is this never enough?, just as it was experienced outside under the Kinder Tree, monkey bodies engaged, intra-actions of trampoline bouncing machines, and imaginary bananas.



Again, that complex entanglement of trying to control children's play and movements. An adult stepping into children's play on the bikes and getting hit formed a trail of change and safety reviews—the delicate balance of safety protocols that needed to be in place for children and adults.

Trying to change the way the children ride the bikes is a sure pathway to have a grumpy day! The bike paths chosen, have been formed over repetition and wear, obstacles and different surfaces in the outdoor yard form trails and tracks that become embedded in the everyday. Trying to create new ways, new paths while shutting down well-worn ones is an uphill battle. Trying to shape and define children's play is the same, it will bend and adapt and wait till you are not looking to return to the paths needed. Shutting down play, taking away the choosing for children makes everything hard. I have learnt to understand this is like trying to control or manage agency; it has a will of its own. It is not controllable and in trying to do so it becomes a battle field. I want to work with it not against it.

## **Lively Stories as Emerging Notions of Relational and Entangled Agency**

This line of inquiry, this work and moreover this shaking of my own teacher tree surfaced as I began to observe differently the practices and thinking of agency from within my classroom. It involved a conscientious letting go or untangling of my own notions of teacher and learning in relation to agency. Lively Stories empowered this unguarded writing, away from curriculum and dominant educationally focused notions of agency. This involved being attentive to the mundane, a writing with the everyday relationships that thinks with the materials and people in the stories but also begins a more open process of thinking with the what could be that comes out of these Lively Stories (Blyth & Aslanian, 2022). This unscripted and experimentative approach to inquiring into agency from within my classroom resulted in new ways of relating to and positioning agency in understanding my classroom. It was no longer a space as hooked up to predetermined outcomes and desired future focused teaching as determined by adults. My classroom felt like a relational space that was inclusive of all its connective tissue and less human centred. It shifted my understandings of what agency could be; agency as distributed and interwoven. I did not feel a sense of hierarchy or the need to understand agency as only teaching and learning, agency was lived and experienced as a tangled relationship within my classroom where all were included. It felt like a reconfiguring of agency as a flow of intensities and not focused on as a human trait (Jackson, 2013). This shifted the controlling focus of my previous teaching and understanding of what teaching was and I felt connected to my classroom in these new ways.

My Lively Story writing in observing and writing about children differently really surfaced to myself my previous positioning of children. My understanding of teaching and learning in relation to agency made me feel that I taught in transaction with children, they felt positioned more like objects that I had to influence and guide through controlling practices to push them in the direction curriculum desired. I felt that this direction had emerged through philosophical reconfiguring of who and what a child is and counts as in concepts of fully human. My inquiry was emerging a sense of a dominant view that children are a future and current economic resource and I was responsible for an education that was individualising and focused on a teleological humanising (Murriss & Reynolds, 2023). Does this mean I thought that children were a kind of subhuman category? This idea was terrifying, and I needed to do more reading, thinking, and writing to distance myself from the child as object of study in both my research and teaching and further question my sense of teaching and researching self.

Through this act of lively storying I felt like the posthuman 'I' had begun to emerge, one connected up into the lively agency network and not apart from it. Where these Lively Stories as research stories helped challenge how I had been taught to make distinctions that curriculum insisted I make; they made it harder to only link observations to learning outcomes and permitted my personal experiences in the classroom to be visibly entangled with the more than human world, where my self-experience were full of tension and unknowns and that was also agency (Blyth & Aslanian, 2022). Lively storytelling from which ideas/thoughts emerged as I thought with different configurations of agency and what this Kinder Tree might be doing and/or offering me/us in terms of thinking with agency.

I conclude with some more wonky early writing from under the Kinder Tree and about the positioning of the tree as I began to question it:

*For me, this kinder tree provides the perfect provisions for each Melbourne season. That is my colonised understanding of European seasons. The choice to plant this European crab apple tree is a choosing of a colonial 'understood' tree to be grown in a colonial 'understood' system of education. Understood by some, but also a form of erasure of what was there before. A tree chosen after close to 200 years of invasion and subsequent degradation of the culture, history and lifestyles of the Woi wurrung peoples and their ancestors (Merri-bek City Council, 2010) who are the First Nations People of those lands. If I want to find any trace of the Aboriginal histories of the lands on which the kindergarten resides, it has all been cleared away through a process of decimation, removal of the people, farming and then subdivision*

*of the lands. There are only a few remaining stone artefacts scatters or scarred trees found along the nearby Merri creek (Merri-bek City Council, 2010)<sup>2</sup>. (Personal Journal)*

My shifting sense of letting go of fixed and definable notions of agency in early childhood education was also brought to life through my practice of reading, which threaded through my autoethnographic processes of writing. It allowed for the access and emergence of different knowledges about education, such as how ECEC, as a tool in colonial-settler histories, had become entangled with contemporary neoliberal infiltration and its insipid formation of teaching at a distance (Lee, 2020). As the head of the classroom and political vehicle of technical education, I taught from a distance and my lack of knowledge about my kindergarten's colonial history meant I leant into curriculum and policy to guide me in my teaching. This results in a controlled curriculum teaching of First Nation's histories, culture, and lands under outcomes of diversity as disconnected from my own understanding of Australian life and it rewarded me in my status as an exemplary teacher when I performed in this way (Ball, 2016). As I made connections to place through my reading about local lands and histories, I felt that sense of distance in my teaching reduce. Local history, land stories and furthermore my own connections to these stories meant I stopped understanding First Nation's histories and culture as at a distance, in the past and as teaching diversity in outcomes in curriculum. I had emerged sensations of being entangled with it through the very land that the kindergarten resides on and part of the mundane and every day in my local life. This realisation contributed to the eroding of sensations of othering that I felt curriculum develops, othering of children as less than, othering of Peoples and lands as add-on's to curriculum. I felt my agency lens shifting to look for connections and in relation in my classroom, and I was drawn to notions of not what is, but what is not, yet to come (St. Pierre, 2021).

My reading into Posthumanism helped me understand that Posthuman education is a shift from "seeing, observing, and knowing from afar to entanglements and relationalities, focusing instead on making and marking differences from within as part of an entangled state" (Ivinson & Renold, 2016, p. 171). This was reflecting in my inquiry and thinking about agency as I shifted from this In the Kinder Tree, a keeping of children at a distance teaching style to seeing connections, entanglements, and relationships within my agency teaching emerged through Lively Stories. Boundaries are discursive and human-made after all. Space, time, and matter are not threaded like beads on a string, but threaded through one another sympoietically (Murris, 2020c). Human and

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<sup>2</sup> Keeping in mind that the information about the Indigenous history about the area is coming out of a Government institution that doesn't constitutionally recognise the sovereignty of its First Peoples.

nonhuman bodies do not move between points in space and time but are always “on the move” and sympoiesis, Haraway (2016) explains, “is a simple word; it means ‘making-with’” (p. 58). I felt like I had begun to move away from understanding my role as a technical teaching mechanism that looked like a switchboard operator, connecting learning up to the outcomes determined by curriculum. Each action, spoken word or process linked to the right plug; job done. Rather, I was beginning to see how my practices and understandings of learning were connected as an in relation to each other, affecting and being affected by the way they generate and open up to new wonderings and possibilities that do not just end up in the right position. My more post-qualitative writing through Lively storytelling from within my classroom helped shake off fixed notions of agency that included the human as central through making lively connections to all that was in my classroom. It was through this transformational process I was able to emerge more relational thinking about agency.

Writing lively stories while acknowledging my place under The Kinder Tree deepened my sense of the auto-self, I who was entangled with this tree and its history. Authoring lively stories became an ethical responsibility to be more than the observer of *the child*. Rather, I became entangled in the complexity of a tree and its history and the children that entered into a relationship with this tree under the so called *guidance* of myself as teacher. This helped me lean into understandings that slowed down my thinking allowing those almost invasive curricula led thoughts trained to pop into my head to be questioned. Notions of observe, link to curriculum, tick the box, successful child/successful teacher were being challenged! I could not ignore how this new line of inquiry pushed me into new territories; I was now thinking about colonial histories, dominant discourses, and an emerging understanding of agency as more like grains of sand slipping through one’s fingers. Agency was impossible to capture and define as it was fluid and involved the intra-actions between all that were involved in a moment, human, and more-than-human. If agency were ever captured in a defining definition, it would slip again and again through lines of flight away from this very definition.

Nor could I ignore the incredible gift that autoethnography has accorded my inquiry; as “autoethnography trusts writing is forged not only in our heads but in our hearts, in our guts and in our hips, in our sinews and on our lips” (Wyatt, 2020, p. 63). I was in the process of *self-making* as my stories and discoveries were disrupting my own flow of life, permitting a shifting identity as a teacher and encouraging me to question both the positives and negatives in the complexities of agency’s entanglements (Ingold, 2015b). This series of autoethnographic lively stories emerged as a way to throw off my formed teacher-self and her relationship with agency. It allowed me to tear

open these understandings, to shatter them into pieced and then re-form them differently, moving past romantic notions of childhood and dominant figurations of contemporary children. A beginning in forming more political, complex, and entangled notions of agency in early childhood education spaces.

## **Act Three—Below the Kinder Tree**

## Relational Ontologies and New Materialist Methodologies

### Setting the Scene

Agency was an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglement (Barad, 2007), it was a world of things in motion (Ingold, 2013), distributed, interwoven and interconnected. I now understood my previous interpretation of the educational definition of agency as choice, voice, and contribution (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022) as contributing to the forming of a child as individual liberal subject as part of positioning early childhood education as a future orientated technical practice. In coming to understand this construction of childhood and education has made me question what it means to be a child in my classroom. I was no longer adhering to managing, moulding, and forming children to serve the economic interests and agendas of adults that contributed to dehumanising and came with a sense of “unhuman” (Malone et al., 2020d, p. 30), where children were positioned as seeking and becoming human I wanted to understand my teaching as something else (Malone et al., 2020c). I needed to rethink my ontological understanding of teaching. This led me to research other configurations of agency and theoretical lenses that could help break me away from the dominant definition that I had held so close to my heart as I continued my inquiry into understanding agency from within my own practice.

My Lively Storying emerged agency as relational, entangled, and lively and that shifted my perceptions of my classroom and myself as a teacher. This shaking of my own tree had helped me move out of the Kinder Tree’s branches to sit Under the Kinder Tree, however I was also beginning to rethink what it meant to be human. As to be human, was to be “entangled with all other humans within an evolving ecology of animals, plants and others” (Malone et al., 2020d, p. 30). This positioning felt closer to how agency was experienced in my classroom environment; emerging the connections, networks, and sensations of in-movement that are ever present in a busy early childhood environment. However, my storying and positioning of agency was still highly focused on human, and I wanted to push my inquiry further. I wanted to bring in more of the more-than-human to better understand its relationship with agency and myself as the teacher. This was the beginning of my next move, a searching, a digging, and an open exploration of what might emerge from Below the Kinder Tree.

This chapter outlines what *New Materialism* is and how it could contribute to the next part of my inquiry, setting the scene of the underlying theory and thinking that affected my next move. I make connections between the New Materialist turn and childhood studies through other inquiries,

demonstrating the links and furthermore how this reading, writing, and thinking would lead my inquiry further away from human centred agency.

## Relational Ontologies

My previous Under the Kinder Tree section had started to expose the ‘I’, ‘i’ and ‘ii’ that Murris (2020c) theorised. The individual liberal ‘I’ teacher who taught the children as an ‘i’ where they were positioned as less than under the human-focused definition of agency as teachable and learnable. I wanted to move into the *posthuman child* ‘ii’ that understood human as complex, dynamic, responsive, situated and historical (Murris, 2020c; Murris & Reynolds, 2023). This meant understanding epistemology, ontology, and methodology as inextricably interwoven as in post-qualitative inquiry and shifting the relationality between ontology and epistemology (and ethics), thereby profoundly unsettling how I would do my research into agency (Murris, 2020a). “Why we cannot consider ourselves as a separate entity in the world, but rather must consider ourselves as a consequence of the world in a state of mutual inter-dependence with everything else” (Taguchi, 2011, p. 40).

I had not come across this line of thinking in my curriculum led, exemplary teaching from within the branches of the Kinder Tree, however, Taguchi alerted me to the rich research within the early childhood space that was inquiring through post-qualitative notions and different configurations of agency. The quote showed me that I could start to bring in the notions of entangled and relational that I had been beginning to emerge through my Lively Stories and use them as a catalyst in my inquiring to develop more complex understandings of agentic children as human through their connection to the more-than-human. However, before delving into this amazing and different research in my sector I needed to first understand the New Materialist turn in research.

## New Materialism

New Materialism takes up materiality and signification, inquiring into the relationship between them and works as a specific domain within posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016). In my Lively Stories, the materialities of an early childhood environment were brought to the surface as important to the lively and entanglement of agency and I was beginning to think with their relationality with agency. I was questioning myself as a teaching tool, one equipped with practices that focused on ticking boxes when children achieved outcomes as per curriculum. Surfacing the materiality in my classroom as entangled with agency pulled me to think away from



learning as outcomes and agency as human centric. This contributed to shifting my positioning to Under the Kinder Tree and I felt like reading about New Materialism was pulling me somewhere deeper, a digging Below the Kinder Tree. An emerging sensation of just how entwined materialities are in emerging different understandings of agency and shaking notions of children as less than human.

New Materialism emerged in the 1990s to describe a theoretical turn away from the persistent dualisms in modern and humanist traditions whose influences are present in much of cultural theory (Dolphijn, 2012; Sanzo, 2018) and a turning attention to matter to avoid binary understandings such as human/non-human (Murris, 2020a). New Materialism extends on advances made in post-structuralism and expands beyond its research on language and discourse (Mohandas & Osgood, 2024). It was noted as new and emerging post 1990s. However, Black and Indigenous philosophies have held similar perspectives for centuries; nonhuman agencies, materialities and relational theories of human-nonhuman as reciprocity have shaped Black and Indigenous lifeworlds (Hodgins, 2019; Osgood & Mohandas, 2019).

New Materialism research methodologies aim for the non-dualistic study “of the world, within, beside and among us, the world that precedes, includes and exceeds us” (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, p. 277). New Materialism connects to my research into agency as it questions notions of the stable individual liberal subject, which I have been surfacing as politically and globally impacted that definition of agency education promotes. Furthermore, New Materialism has a shared agenda with posthumanism as it seeks to reposition the human among nonhuman actants, questions the dominant understanding of the liberal subject and advocates for more critical materialist attention to the globe including the political influences of late capitalism and issues of climate change (Sanzo, 2018).

I had been inquiring through a Kinder Tree framework, and in *In the Kinder Tree*, I had begun to understand myself and my understanding of agency as a very individual and future focused. In *Under the Kinder tree*, the Kinder Tree had revealed to myself the positioning of this tree as a resource to support the educational definition of agency, positioning the Kinder Tree as hooked up to curriculum and notions of individual actants while never acknowledging its connection and entanglement with the kindergarten space. In addition, my inquiry had surfaced the complexities of the Kinder Tree’s entanglement with colonialism, the political and economic positionings of education, and the continual separation of the Kinder Tree as a non-human resource that was only beneficial through its educational contribution.

New materialists challenged me to dig deeper Below the Kinder Tree to question the centrality of human-focused ontology and how it frequently does so with a biopolitical perspective, probing power dynamics that designate material bodies as subjects of control (Sanzo, 2018). I now understood the configurations of agency that I practiced as controlling notions of child, children, and education alongside its role in focusing education through human focused perspectives as perpetuated through curriculum and policy. I felt also that I had been controlled in how this agency had been positioned and taught to me. New materialists persist in addressing the agendas and political considerations of post-structuralism, broadening the scope of these discussions to encompass realms beyond the human and extending into material conditions not solely shaped by language (Sanzo, 2018). Having a fixed definition of agency that was perpetuated throughout curriculum and policy had led to my understanding through their language that they had generated a very human centric conceptualisation of agency, and I too was complicit in furthering it in my teaching performance.

My engagement with New Materialism's emerged when inquiring into different conceptualisations of agency through the work of Barad and Braidotti, as they both examine how matter is agential in its emergence (Barad, 2009; Braidotti, 2006; Sanzo, 2018). Their work on ontology and agency brought new perspectives to agency that challenged my thinking and made significant political and ethical interventions that impacted my understanding and conceptualisation of agency. Braidotti's work drew from re-readings of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari alongside their background in post-structural theory (Sanzo, 2018). Braidotti's theory of zoe understands the potentiality of all matter to form networks with other matter and argues that posthuman subjectivity has immanent potential for self-assembly along the transversals of connections and that living matter forms associations with other material systems (Sanzo, 2018). Posthuman subjectivity is neither bound to the individual subject, nor singularly human (Braidotti, 2013; Sanzo, 2018). This impacted both my notion of subjectivity and understandings of children and as well as a desire for my next inquiring methods to include this notion of subjectivity as connected to living matter.

Barad's background was in theoretical particle physics and quantum field theory and they developed a theory of *agential realism* (Barad, 2009; Sanzo, 2018). A concept that links the physical laws underpinning experienced reality as ethical matter (Barad, 2007; Sanzo, 2018) in that entities did not precede their 'intra-actions', but were rather a performative and emergent event (Barad, 2007). In intra-actions, the entities interacting should be understood as the effects of their relation. An understanding of material-discursive as discourse and matter that come into being together and interfering apparatuses are only a condition of possibility (Barad, 2007; Sanzo, 2018), positions

agency as entangled within its complexities rather than trying to weed them out, a political, social, and ethical understanding of agency in experienced reality. It also understands notions of agency as in intra-action as generative and emergent over my previous understanding where agency was about confirming, defining, and achieving through predetermined outcomes that did not generate anything new.

Barad takes issue with human-centred concepts of agency, arguing that intra-actions are complex co-productions of human and nonhuman matter, time, spaces and their signification (Barad, 2007; Sanzo, 2018). The human does not act on matter but humans and nonhumans are agentic actors in the world as it continues to come into being (Barad, 2007; Sanzo, 2018). Braidotti and Barad emerge a materialist ontology that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all phenomena, where matter remains indeterminate, continually shaping and reshaping itself (Springgay & Truman, 2018). In my inquiry, through the framework of the Kinder Tree, I continued to emerge these new notions of agency, where agency felt complex, lively, and entangled. I was now wanting to delve below the Kinder Tree and understand how New Materialism as methodology could work within my inquiry.

New Materialism also makes inquiries into notions of Critical Materialism (Coole & Frost, 2010), which originates from the lineage of Marxist historical materialism, while also addressing critiques from constructivism and deconstructionism levelled against traditional Marxist theories (Coole & Frost, 2010; Sanzo, 2018). This contemporary perspective on critical materialism explores the impacts of global capitalism amidst a climate crisis, and challenges the notion that solely redefining subjectivity through discourse can profoundly alter the material realities encountered by individuals within a neoliberal capitalist globalized framework (Sanzo, 2018). I had emerged the Kinder Tree as an educational resource deeply impacted through colonialism which made me understand that nonhuman actants are politically and socially charged.

This led me to the work of Bennet and in particular their idea of *Thing-power* (Bennett, 2010). Bennet argues that nonhuman matter possesses an inherent vitality capable of manifesting distributed agency through the formation of assemblages involving both human and nonhuman entities (Bennett, 2010; Sanzo, 2018). This conceptualisation of thing-power made me understand that as I have descended from the Kinder Tree to sit under it, the Kinder Tree came with me, and I need to understand its contribution as agentic to my inquiry. Bennett believes that agency is only distributed and is never the effect of intentionality (Bennett, 2010; Sanzo, 2018). Notions of intentionality had been fundamental in developing concepts of agency through configurations of an individual's ability to act with intent via their free will. Children's actions as intentional and thus

demonstrating agency had sunk into my previous thinking, whereas notions of agency as distributed opened up the possibilities of all that affected the agency I was entangled with in my classroom.

In Bennett's notion of thing-power, objects manifest a lively kind of agency, "Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence of aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi preface). As I began to embrace the Kinder Tree as a lively and entangled agency, I became more curious about other materialities that were within my classroom. This curiosity became the basis for this section, *Below the Kinder Tree* and is explored further throughout this section.

New Materialism research has also explored authenticity and objectivity in autoethnography (Vu, 2018). It resulted in suggestions of a non-representationalist voice, highlighting that researchers must give up the authority of their narrative voice, proposing the performative voice and how experiences constrain what the author knows and how they represent participants or themselves in their worlds (Vu, 2018). Autoethnography was now a way of knowing in being. This notion of a performative voice was generative in my thinking of how to proceed with my inquiry, opening up potential through my storying with the Kinder Tree and experimenting with the unknown or unknowable, alongside how my experience had been shaped and acknowledging its constraint as I desired a way forward that was generative and new. I think with the Taguchi quote from earlier and want to consider myself as a consequence of the world within mutual inter-dependence with all that surrounds me, particularly in my classroom (2011). Clearly New Materialism had impacted early childhood research.

### ***New Materialism in Childhood Studies***

New Materialism was just one of numerous new directions in childhood studies to emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; New material feminisms, post-humanism, actor network theory, complexity theory, science and technology studies, and material culture studies are some examples of recent children research developments. Educators and researchers in education have a long history in challenging traditional research methods through issues on social justice and equity perspectives and there has been an increasing call in the field to continue to address 21 century issues (Dahlberg & Otterstad, 2022; Hodgins, 2019; Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2013). Previously in childhood studies, research focused on human and the needs of the individual child (Hodgins, 2019; Taylor & Iverson, 2013), however there has been an increased assembly of radical shifts in the social sciences that reappraise what counts as knowledge and a desire to re-examine the purpose of education (Taylor & Iverson, 2013).

To grapple with today's challenges Childhood Studies have turned their attention to the more-than-human, the non-human others and the human that inhabits our world (Hodgins, 2019; Taylor & Ivinson, 2013).

These new directions in research shift the focus away from individualised acts of cognition and questioned observed, siloed, theoretical understandings of educators in the sector (Diaz-Diaz & Semenec, 2020; Taylor & Ivinson, 2013). This new research aims to enrich possibilities for more complex understandings of education and subjectivities (Diaz-Diaz & Semenec, 2020). As a critical approach to childhood studies, new materialism understands childhood as “leaky, messy and indeterminate terrain, always already more-than the bounded ‘child’” (Mohandas & Osgood, 2024, p. 1). New Materialism in Childhood Studies further advances previous research that aimed to enhance children's agencies through various modes of attunement, by understanding these agencies as inseparable from the nonhuman world (Mohandas & Osgood, 2024). New materialisms have shaped the methodological approaches adopted in researching childhoods, foregrounding the “entanglements of matter, discourse, affect, temporalities, place and space” as critical and affirmative possibilities (Hodgins, 2019; Mohandas & Osgood, 2024, p. 1). This foregrounding shifted methods and practice to concepts that do and how they work to make a difference and contribute to displacing the childhood research as the holder of knowledge (Hodgins, 2019; Osgood, 2006).

New Materialism in Childhood Studies has opened avenues for experimentation through creative endeavours that contribute to decentring the human without erasing children in the research process (Hodgins, 2019) an idea was central to my research in an early childhood classroom. New Materialism allowed the research to expand, extend and disrupt the divisive distinctions present in binaries such as child and teacher, creating opportunities to enact research with children that offer insight into complex relations that produce childhood realities (Diaz-Diaz & Semenec, 2020; Hodgins, 2019). New Materialism extends on poststructural feminism that questioned the social construction of gendered subjectivities. Further exploring relationships between language, subjectivity and power-relations as they impact upon gender in particular. Early childhood teachers have become figured worlds, where figured worlds are intimately tied to identity work (Urrieta, 2007). Early childhood teachers are positioned as nice ladies, who do not like to offend as described in Stonehouse's aptly titled *Nice Ladies Who Love Children* (1989). New Materialism helps challenge these stereotypes of long held figured worlds of early childhood teachers, questioning notions of teaching as a technical accomplishment, the impact of political and global influences and the identity politics of gender in a highly feminised sector.

Diaz-Diaz and Semenec took up this call and edited *Posthuman and New Materialism; Research After the Child* (2020) as part of the book series *Children: Global Post Humanist Perspectives* and *Materialist Theories* by Malone, Tesar and Arndt. *Research After the Child* emphasised the meeting and intra-action of children in their common environments of contemporary childhoods, exploring how theoretical perspectives shape our understandings and influence ways of knowing the future trajectories of children's lives (Diaz-Diaz & Semenec, 2020). It asked important questions about how the theories affect practice, the implications of a decentred childhood, and what makes that possible (Diaz-Diaz & Semenec, 2020). The research examples offered insights into resisting or interrupting the individual child that contributes to notions of the human as superior and how that decentring can contribute to understanding the underexamined multiple relationships children have with the world (Diaz-Diaz & Semenec, 2020).

In *Propositions Toward Educating Pedagogists: Decentering the Child*; the authors develop understandings of how child-centred developmental practices limit ethical and intellectual work and can reiterate notions of humankind as central to existence (Land et al., 2022). The authors put forward decentring the child as a critical motion to refuse these issues by refusing legitimization through mastery and abandoning narratives of linearity (Land et al., 2022).

Taguchi (2011) asked why children who live in global economies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century were still taught under approaches that have changed relatively minimally over time, questioning how traditional schooling remained constant and unchanged despite unprecedented technological, social, economic, environmental, and political changes. Using New Materialism Taguchi critiques that popular pedagogic approaches can, in fact, produce dominant binaries in modern liberal humanist education and how a relational materialist approach attends to the interdependencies, responsibilities, and potentialities that are global childhoods (Taguchi, 2011).

Other childhood New Materialist researchers have focused in on the material; from exploring the role of small chairs as artefacts in the classroom (Bone, 2019), furniture that both supports and betrays the bodies that it contacts. In addition, classroom assemblages with cardboard that challenged normative education and showed the complexity of material experiences in early childhood to defy notions of classrooms as linear processes controlled by adults (Roa-Trejo et al., 2023).

New Materialism in Childhood Studies has looked at early childhood practice, curriculum, and governance, questioning incentive-based modes of soft governance that use technologies designed to measure performance (Brogger, 2018). Examining the performative effects of data

visualisations as a governing through affects such as shame voluntarily co-opt people and nations into the governing processes. (Brogger, 2018). Furthermore, critical encounters with emergent curriculum, where emergence can bring ethical and political engagements that complicate trends such as child-led learning (Nxumalo et al., 2018) while proposing interruptive orientations to disrupt the managerial concerns of everyday practice and human-centred consumptive practice puts in conversation with colonialism and racial concerns in early childhood education (Nxumalo et al., 2018).

New Materialism resulted in a turning to matter and, through a critical engagement, turned away from the linguistic turn and social constructionism to inquire through material realities for human and non-human while not limiting the new directions as reductive nor anti-linguistic (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018). It included approaches that complicated the either/or notions, such as that children were the products of either social or biological forces (Diaz-Diaz & Semenec, 2020). In addition, figurations of the normal knowing subject in child/adult relationships led to institutionalised, discriminatory and colonised understandings of child and configured specific roles of myself as Teacher (Murriss, 2020c).

I understood that New Materialism was not a turn away from the past but rather an inspired from re-reading the past to evoke present futures (Haraway, 2016), and the concept of re-turning generates possibilities for the not yet known (Dahlberg & Otterstad, 2022). Methodologies that complicate our understandings of realities open up notions of flux, human, more-than-human, material and discursive as interacting within their complexity (Dahlberg & Otterstad, 2022). My inquiry into the developing notions of childhood and education exposed me to figurations of child, childhood, and institutions of education and complexified how I understood how I practised agency in the classroom. New Materialism was inviting me to further experiment with how these conceptualisms form and with how, the thinking about generative methodologies should be thinking within the past, present and future of early childhood education. I understood that going beyond the theory and practice divide was a complicated process. However, I could see the potential and that there was no turning back to pedagogy as usual as my thinking had been displaced and how thinking differently could be generative (Lather, 2013; Taguchi, 2007; Taguchi, 2010).

I felt the need to experiment further; to focus in on how I might continue to extend on my own efforts to decentre the human in my research. This emerged from my inquiring through the Kinder Tree that brought to the surface Colonial and political patterns from the past, new writings with Lively stories that helped my research move further away from curriculum forming individual

liberal subjects and a desire to be more attune to the materialities in my classroom that took me further away from human centred agency.



## Remnants of Play as Affective Speculations of Agency

### Setting the Scene

The previous chapters in my dissertation track my changing thinking about agency practices with children in my classroom. Produced through my autoethnographic writings, developed through teaching, observations of children, and shifting notions of agency, I have come to understand the importance of the materialities woven into agency teaching and learning in the early childhood profession. Notions of teacher agency, children's agency and more-than-human agency affect teachers and children and form part of this teaching and learning work.

However, I still felt that my inquiry was stuck in human-centred notions of agency, an understanding of agency that risked perpetuating notions of children, teaching, learning and agency as practices that dehumanise and form notions of children as "unhuman" (Malone et al., 2020d, p. 30). I wanted my inquiry to further develop ways that challenge this idea and I wanted to take my inquiry further into the more-than-human, another step further away from human focused notions of agency, away from centralising teacher/child and deeper into the possibilities that posthuman agency thinking can offer. I leant into the St Pierre (2018) post qualitative notion that the inquirer does not know what to do first and then next and then next but rather let it unfold in its own agentic entanglement as I explored my classroom environment for input. How much further can I take my inquiry away from the teachers and learners in the classroom and continue to inquire into agency?

I looked around my classroom at the end of each day, inquired through a new materialist lens and drew from the materialities that had been played with and left behind. I found that my further experimentation contributed to a deeper troubling of my sense of I and my humanistic understanding and practice of agency. It contributed to shifting my human and curriculum led notions of agency into uncharted waters where I did not position them as less than human, human works in progress to become human through adult governing and intervention. As I moved my inquiry away from children's actions as in relation to learning outcomes by not researching the children at all, I was able to further develop posthuman sensations of agency through their play leftovers, bringing notions of the more-than-human to the forefront to reflect on agency in an early childhood classroom.

## Materialities Post-Play

I moved around my everyday spaces and looked at the materials in play; I looked for evidence of engagement but away from the active and individual participants. I was always so focused on *who* did *what*, and *why* and *how* can I present these actions as learning through curriculum, that I felt a pull to experiment away from the *who* and the *why*. What if I documented no children, no interactions with people, what could emerge from the left behinds? I photographed the leftover play experiences that had already happened and had been found abandoned, as I packed up my classroom. Surely, this would be ridiculous! What could the deserted, left behind, often falling down, or broken bits of leftover play speak about agency? Yet, abandoned also means *unrestrained* and *uninhibited* which felt away from humanistic notions of agency.

I re-turn these found objects with new materialism; I experiment and speculate on their agency as affective insights into notions of agency in early childhood education and care (ECEC). An opening to break down and speculate on re-configure-ments of dominantly figured notions of agency-child-teacher-education and their development through political, social, and discursive configurations that have previously positioned them as less-than-human.

## Photographs of Remnants of Play as Evidence of Learning

As an early childhood teacher, I have been taught how to observe and document children's learning. In a dynamic and busy environment, it is not always possible to document on the go; that is, write up lot of notes and thoughts from within the classroom without distractions. To be able to keep up with the teacher requirements and simultaneously be present within the classroom it is now common practice to take photographs throughout the day (Cowan & Flewitt, 2021). These photographs are used to document what happened during the day, as professional evidence of children's learning, teaching, adhering to curriculum and policy requirements and opportunities to inform learning to children's families. Professional documentation is seen as important, necessary and natural in ECEC because of its links with the notions of providing quality of early education (Alasuutari et al., 2014) and I understood myself as a good agentic teacher who performed these duties professionally (Hunkin, 2021).

However, my collection of photographs presented in this chapter, did not have any children engaging in them, they did not document what is in motion, instead they were photographs of remnants of play; the stumbled upon, left over, moved on from, discarded or forgotten scraps of moments that have passed as I have come through and packed up at the end of the day. In laymen's

terms, these photographs would be called ‘duds’ and deleted from the device, never to be shared, be observed, or collected as understandings of children learning or as insights into children practising agency.

These images were everyday moments containing common play resources that can be found in any early childhood service as part of play-based learning. In ECEC, play based learning is defined as a context for learning when children engage with people, objects, and representations (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). This defines the role of resources, where objects are assigned as tools for learning. Objects as learning resources are linked to concepts of sociodramatic play, such as children using dolls in play (Arthur, 2018) explored in this chapter, and pretend play as assessed for insights into children’s knowledge development alongside learning processes (McLachlan, 2013). This shows the direct links to materialities not only as tools for learning but also as objects needed for the education of the child. I was curious about what these materialities might speak of agency if the child was not the central focus of the analysis; a stepping away from a humanistic focus on children practising agency for education and an experimenting with play things as agentic.

My remnants of play photographs were not focused on children; they were not focused on their use of agency or even paid attention to the learning taking place as per curriculum and policy requirements. I as teacher, did not know what happened in the images, I had no information about the processes, actions, or critical executive functions practised here as required for correct learning and assessment (McLachlan, 2013). These photographs were duds as assessments of curriculum-based learning, yet I viewed these images through a posthuman lens acknowledging the affective forces of non-human agency (Barad, 2007), and I wanted to speculate on just how much these images had to say about agency. I saw images exposing agency as messy, complex, entangled with social, cultural, and political understandings in education and not limited to individual and humanistic dominant notions of agency *for* education in my inquiry.

## **Documentation and Assessments as Boundary Making Practices**

My series of photographs sat within the paradigm of assessment and planning; in that they would be a part of my teaching role to “collect information in a variety of ways about each child’s knowledge, strengths, ideas, culture, abilities, and interests that demonstrate the individuality of the child” (Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority, 2024b, p. 135). This was part of the assessment and planning cycle as laid out in the NQS, one part of the NQF, which provides a national approach to regulation, assessment, and quality improvements in ECEC. The NQS required that I use

this collected data to “analyse what that information tells me about how to support the child’s learning further, document, plan experiences to incorporate into the program, implement the program and then reflect on what has been learned”. (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2024b, p. 133). It was important to note that the NQS only stated that “sufficient information has been collected about the child” (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2024b, p. 135) and it did not define quantities of documentation needed, this was ambiguously left to teachers and services to interpret. Documentation and sharing of pedagogical information was not new and was a requirement in many ECEC settings as part of professional practice (Stratigos & Fenech, 2021), yet in my modern and busy teacher world, how and what was documented was changing.

The tools, practices, and social-political contexts for assessment and planning have changed significantly (Cowan & Flewitt, 2021), and modes of production through digital documentation platforms are common practice in ECEC services across Australia (White et al., 2021). These new forms of sellable apps bring complexity, including cost, privacy, and narrow forms of universal documentation that lean into forms of developmental theories of learning (Stratigos & Fenech, 2021; White et al., 2021). The new tools that are positioned as supporting educators’ sharing of information of a pedagogical nature and as a mode of lifting professional standards can also be understood as a furthering the marketization of ECEC and increasing technical constructions of teacher professionalism (Stratigos & Fenech, 2021). This created a paradox where there was an increased use of these apps, sold as making teaching easier, yet they also played a role through their use in shaping teaching, learning, and teacher agency. Tensions were beginning to arise as to whether this move to digital platforms was also a strategy for demonstrating accountability and performance (Knauf, 2020; White et al., 2021).

The children that I taught were positioned in curriculum as active participants and decision makers, they were seen as agentic and as having capacity to “make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one’s world” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 48). My teacher agency in what I chose to collect and document was always partial and influenced by socio-political factors such as curriculum and policy (Cowan & Flewitt, 2021). I had the NQS, historical developmental theories, curriculum frameworks such as the EYLF, service philosophies, neoliberal technical constructions of teaching and now paid for apps as just some of the examples of boundary making practices that shaped my professional understanding of learning. Yet, I was meant to be the professional teacher using my agency to decide what to collect and what it all meant! As I began to acknowledge and explore the ways that I was shaped and

formed as a teacher outside of myself, it led me to question if there were other formations within ECEC that led to definitions and fixed figurations.

Childhood Studies were intricately entangled disciplines structured by the concepts of child, childhood, and dominantly thought through the adult/child binary (Murriss & Reynolds, 2023) and my role as the adult teacher in a child centred space, a *kindergarten* (child-garden in German). I questioned how figured worlds of child, teacher, and education developed with scripted understandings where significance was assigned to certain acts and through materialities (Sisson et al., 2022) an example being that children needed to learn to be kind and caring as part of forming their identity—Outcome 1 (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). Under its definition of agency the EYLF shaped this example as agency as children are contributing to their world. This was taught in part through material resources being provided by myself the teacher, such as playing with dolls, now the dolls were entangled too as teaching children to be kind and caring. Dolls were a materiality included in this chapter's analysis. This created boundaries where particular outcomes were valued over others in how one must play to meet this outcome (Varghese & Snyder, 2018).

Children were positioned as a set of agents, engaged in limited acts, moved by specific set of forces, i.e. child given doll, child engaged with looking after doll, then child must be caring and thus agentic. This contributed to boundary making and this was supported through curriculum and policy materialities. Furthermore, I as Teacher must provide doll resources as they were positioned as emerging gendered caring subjects (Hodgins, 2014) and as learning resources that enhance learning when they reflect what was “natural and familiar” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 18) as mandated in curriculum.

I move into presenting my photographs and speculative analysis and further develop the idea of Figured Worlds. Developing analysis of Figured Worlds as traditional processes or established frameworks of comprehension that mould and define identities that emerged from my photographs as I grappled with my own human focused role as teacher as within Figured Worlds of teaching (Holland et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2007). I wonder whether my photographs will emerge the role speculation has in generating new realities in early childhood education, to a making of different futures (Haraway, 2013). I further my inquiry through affective notions of materialities and the *affect* of teaching and learning as subtle force-relations, inclusive of sensation and sensibility (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).



## Remnants of Play as Speculative Fabulations and Analysis

Figure 4

### *The Wheelbarrow Babies*



*It's jarring to see these two baby dolls discarded in a wheelbarrow, especially as they are life like, dressed, bald, and faces turned away so as I can't read their expressions. They feel discarded, abandoned, and a little bit creepy. Australia is not a culture that leaves their babies sleeping out the front of the café while the parent ducks inside. Fragile babies neglected and innocent, I want to rush*

*in to right a wrong, to pick them up, sit them up—the affective power of these plastic, factory made white, blue-eyed toys tells me I must care for them.*

*I want to comfort them even though I know they are dolls, I can't help but cradle them carefully in my arms as I go through the motions of deconstructing this play. My Teacher need to care and right wrongs affects my actions; I handle the dolls delicately, gently placing them in their cradle homes, in the indoor home corner. My teacher-self can't be the carefree pusher of the wheelbarrow, watching the dolls jump around and fall out of the wheelbarrow, it is too risky. I need to make things right, in the right place, in the right way and that will make me the right teacher that follows the rules.*

*Maybe that's what's jarring, not the lack of safety but the sense of out of place that I feel seeing them in a garden wheelbarrow and how this makes me feel out of place. Or is it jarring to me that there is something freeing about these tussled babies in the wheelbarrow, free from their constraints; no safety harness, not fragile, and not curriculum babies normally tied to how they must serve as Teacher to Child. Yet it is as if these dolls are something different; they have potential as strong babies, to be played with roughly, to experiment with as plastic toys and not real babies, to speculate and imagine, to plant and grow, a couple of cabbages maybe ...?*

*They have been played with differently, a rough game, risky and potentially rule-less. The dolls power as nearly indestructible hard plastic means they can be tussled, bumped, and tossed about, and they will be ok. Maybe I need a ride in this wheelbarrow, to be tussled, bumped, and tossed to loosen me up and permit the raw sensations of joy, fear, and recklessness back into my Teaching body; a jolt to my physical being, just like these dolls so that I can see and be different, outside of normative or emerging from within the mundane. Maybe thinking with these dolls is the jolt?*

*The dolls are tangled together, either having been tossed around on their ride or competing for space to prevent ending up face down in the rickety green wheelbarrow. Where have they been, or going? And why are they not in a pram asks my teacher-self?*

*This rickety green wheelbarrow, wobbly, hard to control, that more often than not takes you where it wants to go and not the other way round. This is not a pram, a safe place to transport delicate plastic life around the yard. It is dirty; typically filled with soil, sand, mud, leaves, tanbark, the organic life that sustains the yard yet is now full of plastic. Where was the Teacher to correct this play? This wheelbarrow must be the Teacher; a teaching material of sustainability, nature, gardening, caring for Mother Earth, a saviour of futures and a changer of future lives through living*

*right. The wheelbarrow gets so full, bogged down, and so heavy with its responsibility it is hard to control. It is sluggish and slow and comes to a stop. There needs to be an intra-action, a with other to come together to work the wheelbarrow. It cannot be done alone.*

*This wheelbarrow loses its appeal in other contexts, pushing it inside or on neat and smooth surfaces makes it too easy and not fun. When pushing it through tanbark or sand, you feel its full affect. You need might, grit and strength as you bend your whole body behind it. Head down, legs long and arms outstretched. PUSH, it wobbles and tips on its three wheels or one wheel once you lift and roll. It is hard to look forward while you push, more often than not, its head down and hope that you are going in the right direction. In its intra-action, the body and the metal machine make something new, something unpredictable. Together, trails are left in the tanbark, much like a lizard track, a thick long snaking line with footprints at intervals along each side of the wobbling line. Something new has been made yet it feels ancient. What is left behind is something to trace, of past movements and actions that can tell us about the story that took place. However, we need to look and trace, think, and remember and not just pack up and move on.*

*The wheelbarrow that has superpowers, positioned as such to help save human futures, yet it now lives in a landfill as its wheel fell off and it wasn't repaired. It couldn't save the Nature Child and it will never become nature, not before many generations of lives lived by the pushers of this wheelbarrow. Now it lives in its eternal graveyard, its job is over, and now it has become part of the problem.*

## Figured Worlds Within Early Childhood Education and Care

I started questioning the formation and figurations of dominant notions of agency for education, which resulted in a need to pose the same questions in relation to dominant configurations of child-teacher-education who practiced agency. I began a process of unravelling the conceptualisations of child and education as constructions of Figured Worlds (Holland et al., 1998) alongside figurations of myself as teacher. Figured Worlds were processes or traditions of understanding that shaped and formed understandings of identity, such as myself as teacher as I intersected with them (Holland et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2007). Agency could also be understood as a Figured World, the historical development, and the processes by which agency made its way into curriculum and policy in early childhood education were shaped and formed its identity.

I began to recognise myself as a particular actor, where I valued certain outcomes over others and attached significance to certain practices and not others in my understanding of being



Teacher (Urrieta, 2007). As the actor who taught agency, this meant valuing certain practices of agency by children over others; my Figured World urged me to listen and respond to children's voice, choice, and contributions, and my responses were applauded as good agency teaching (Srinivasan, 2018). This in turn forms children who understand my upholding of agency performing agency "depending on whether the audience slaps or claps" the performance (Srinivasan, 2018, p. 10). I had become that audience who decided what was good or bad agency.

Through a process of inquiring into the social context where I have felt the most comfortable as a teacher who thought I was teaching agency *for* education, my autoethnography challenged my understanding of my teaching life. I thought I had figured out how to play my teaching part in my world of education, which now felt like it led me to formations of fixed and static notions of child, teacher, and agency *for* education. This was a forming of myself as a Figured World in the form of teacher *for* fixed notion of agency.

In my dissertation, I came to understand that the agency rules, ideas, and beliefs that I developed in my early childhood teacher figured world were also used to judge in different figured worlds; this felt limiting. I knew what agency was and that any other practices were positioned as *not* agency; this developed a locking in of binaries that bounded my own figured world and discouraged looking outside of it. The idea that I developed socially constructed and culturally recognised configurations of agency that I actively participated in as the teacher troubled my understanding of myself. I had succumbed to my own Figured World that knew agency and discouraged and frowned upon conceptualisations that did not fit the bounded criteria of choice, voice, and contribution in fixed ways. I now found myself wanting to actively challenge these figurations in the course of my autoethnographic narratives as I came to *figure* who I was as the teacher and researcher engaging in posthuman thinking about agency and engaged in the process of developing new understandings of the *worlds* and the role of education in today's complex world (Urrieta, 2007; Varghese & Snyder, 2018).

I move on and inside to continue to pack up.

Figure 5

*The Tiny Toilet*



*Here I have discovered a tiny wooden dog sitting on a tiny toilet (see Figure 5) in its own wooden block bathroom. I am captivated by the thinking and creating that immediately emerge from my encounter with this play. I was not privy to its creation nor the storytelling that possibly went on,*

*just the remnants. Just a dog on a toilet—maybe I should give it some privacy before I start to pack it away.*

*Nestled amongst the wooden blocks, these wooden figurines become stories in play. All natural materials are best they say, wood everywhere but from where and made by who? That is not the focus, wooden is best, it is natural and sustainable, a teaching tool for children's childhoods and futures. This will make the Sustainable Child. My service sits on that cusp of looking like an IKEA display suite, all wood and natural materials are best, I am told (sold?) but money is tight, and most resources are second-hand in our not for profit community kindergarten; often bought from op shops as was this tiny wooden animal.*

*Colourful blocks and colourful toys, appealing to the eyes of children yet overwhelming to the senses. Natural wood is best, I am told to be the best Teacher. Minimal, natural, sustainable is best I am told as the Teacher. Yet, the blocks are everywhere, elaborate builds that are now broken and discarded. There is nothing minimal or natural about the configurations. Tower after tower has been built, knocked down and then abandoned. This dog is one of the rare survivors. I imagine her shock as the walls came down around her, exposing her but also protecting her, the evocative storying of block play. I would have come in like a bulldozer, razing everything and then tidying it away quickly already thinking beyond my kinder day, but this play caught my eye. This dog, exposed on the toilet surrounded by block rubble.*

*This dog offers up something different, it evokes laughter and fun into my packing up, a re-imagining of the scenario(s) created in its creation and play. It leads me off in my own storytelling lines of flight and reminds me of moments of collective side splitting laughter that comes with the earthy honesty of working with young children, just one of many moments of being in the space, engaging with the materials, manipulating them, discovering them, acknowledging them, using all of my senses and my mind and my body in those moments. A moment of mundane that is cut through with something new, a break from the back pain inducing pack up routine that brings light, that tiny dog jolts me in my own thinking and being. More than a teaching sustainable resource, more than a tool of Education, an opportunity to speculate, imagine and evoke difference that is also there embedded in the everyday, part of, yet not always celebrated as, the learning in the flux of this early childhood space.*

*This tiny dog, left behind on the toilet. A wooden toy figuring that can be swept up and put away without a moment's thought, got to me, invited me to take note of it, snap a photo and lead my thoughts astray like fizzing fireworks shooting in the night's sky. A tiny dog allowed me an*

*opportunity to see the everyday play as evocative and exciting, to take my thinking to other times and places as I made links to other moments in my thinking and being. Furthermore, it allowed me a moment of fun in solitude, cutting through this physically gruelling repetitive practice of packing up, it distracts me from my sore feet and back. It reminds me of why I am here, outside of curriculum and teacher led learning. The intra-action with this agentic dog sitting on a wooden toilet did this, not curriculum, not outcomes not intentional teaching, the thing-hood of this dog and her evocative power.*

*Teaching is physical and mental, it is back breaking and aching feet, it is heart breaking and exhausting being so deeply involved in families' lives and in these images, I feel these connections—600 hours a year of being with these children, giving and receiving, intra-acting and sharing moments that cannot be represented or captured in real time. What I choose to note, share, and think about as learning affect myself as the teacher and how learning is represented in the classroom, so I choose a sandy plastic bowl of flower soup (see Figure 6) as an everyday moment of learning.*

## Speculative Fabulations as Method and Analysis

I sat with this series of photographs of the leftovers of play, there were so many unknowns around the who, what and why that I would normally ask when assessing children's play to interpret and offer up curriculum led assessments of learning. More often than not, I would have lent in to the dominant definitions of agentic notions of voice, choice, and contribution (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022) to assess the levels of agency *for* education being practised in children's actions. That was not possible here as there were too many unknowns, yet these unknowns opened up possibilities for wonderings and my curiosity shifted from the children absent in the photographs to looking deeper at the materialities at play in the images. I began to speculate, to wonder and to imagine about the agency of the materialities and their figured worlds within their lives in early childhood spaces. Haraway (2016) describes Speculative Fabulation as a "mode of attention, a theory of history and a practice of Worlding" (Haraway, 2016, p. 230). Haraway's (2013, 2016) Speculative Fabulation offered me an experimentative method that helped blur the sharpness of existing meanings and interpretations and assisted my step away from falling back on interpretations through dominant policy texts and curriculum.

Accepting such a creative analysis required invention and imagination that I emerged through the series of photographs. These photographs and their speculative analysis spoke to a making of different futures; they were deeply rooted in my expertise, grounded in my situated

knowledge, and my experiences from within my everyday practices from within my early childhood classroom (Merewether, 2023; Truman, 2019). As I explored the remnants of play through forms of speculative narration (Haraway, 2013), I wanted to bring forth possibilities that are already in situation, to unfold new worlds through spectating on what is possible. An innovative way to trouble dominant notions of figured worlds in ECEC is by imagining future *worlds* through the materialities that exist in everyday early childhood spaces. By creating analysis through playful remnants and speculation, I strived to emerge a space for “curiosity, wonder, and immersion in and of the world” (Merewether, 2023, p. 20); it became a co-creating process of and with the series of photographs, where I had to inquire with fiction and storying as there were no children or actions taking place (Haraway, 2016). I had to imagine alternate worlds and future pictures emerging from the everyday materialities within the photographs, opening up to the potential for both human and non-human stories to be told and woven together (Byman et al., 2023; Haraway, 2016) through entanglements with the environment.

My engagement with Speculative Fabulations as a form of analysis freed my mind to reach and invent new dimensions within the same physical appearance, such as inquiring with the everydayness from within my classroom. My speculative narration was rooted in everyday storytelling practices prominent in my teaching role in assessing learning in ECEC but used as a tool for imagining worlds that can be radically different from the one we know (Haraway, 2013).



**Figure 6**

***Flower Soup***



*A plastic bowl of wet sand and flower petals stands as a remnant of play; time and energy have been spent here. The gathering, flowers from the feijoa tree at one end of the yard, sand*

*collected from the sandpit at the other end of the yard, water scooped from the bucket under the tap so that no water is wasted in play, and the plastic bowl taken from the mud kitchen off in another direction. This remnant of play is not a discarded sloppy mess of flower soup, even though it is. It is a physicality of thinking with materials, being with the elements, and making with these natural and human made resources over a sustained play episode; yet, what remains is a bowl of wet flowers, easy to walk past, dump out and return bowl to mud kitchen, rinse and repeat daily.*

*Sand, water, flowers, outdoors in nature, and that plastic bowl, Mother Nature, and her gifts as Teacher. The thing-power of these materials is their ability to engage, sustain and immerse children in their intra-actions. Natural materials, organic resources as Educational tools are deemed missing or taken from contemporary children's lives when they are positioned as Nature Child, yet they are ever present, just sometimes stepped over or tipped out. Urban lives, apartment balconies, courtyards, small back yards, local parks, or street walks, engaging with nature—you don't have to travel far. It's not missing, it's just overlooked. Like the wheelbarrow, sand, water, and flowers are positioned as the solution to modern urban lives; teachers of future lives to be lived differently, to correct our wrongs of today.*

*What strikes me most is that I can re-feel these moments in my body, the textural surfaces present in the images, surfaces that I have touched and touch, over and over, even though they are never the same. I can feel those surfaces re-surface, through the images. Textural feelings of fingers in dough, mud, sand, touching tree-trunk, the passing (in)-between bodies and the nonhuman, connecting in care and shared moments. Imbedded within my body this is harder to curriculum-ify; easier to leave out and focus on indoor learning in assessments and programming. The outdoors is for play, and the indoors is for the real learning.*

*The toll of all the bending, cleaning, and lifting as well as the ongoing lived traces the work on my physical body that is now shaping my physical being. The touch of wood, metal, plastic, I can feel the surfaces and re-feel those moments past, yet never the same. The repetition makes exceptional moments become mundane such as a child giving me the flower soup and sloshing it onto my legs as a delicious gift, a connection. This passing between, sharing, joined together as we both become entangled in this sensory delight; an affective force that has transpired within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities, all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed that become the everyday.*

*As the Teacher, it is easy to get tired of these moments. The fatigue of receiving ten wet soups in a row, dripped on clothes and shoes, cold and wet, the same pattern of conversation over*

*and over, the intensities of keeping my Teacher attention to learning ON, and the disruption of other moments due to other Teacher supervision requirements. This repetition of patterns can fatigue and waiver over time, yet to be chosen to receive this flower soup is special. That connection is desire, and the agency to lean in over push away is both exciting and exhausting. To be chosen as the receiver of this plastic bowl of flower soup, to be thought of as needing this intra-action, to be chosen is important. Sitting with the discomfort of my body and mind in wanting to reduce this repetition, to be not so full of soup, to accept the annoyance that my body feels at all these interruptions of other moments as I am pulled in all directions wears me down. Supervision, teaching, pedagogy, collecting evidence of learning, and being fully present while trying to shift my mindset and focus back to the uniqueness of having flower soup dribbled on my shoes.*

*This is the messiness of lives being lived, of working with children, the engagement with materials, the things, the natural elements, the sensations, and the acknowledgement of the flux of time. Never the same yet made to feel the same through repetition and the narrow focus on linear learning in curriculum. Nevertheless, I have honed-in on these mundane, everyday moments, looked closer at the everyday routine of packing up my kinder room to reveal something different. I have formed to look at the everyday materials present in a kindergarten space and their thing-power to think with them as in relation to rather than as only what they provide as Educational resources.*

## Affect

Within my early childhood classroom traditions and practices were people, materials, the space, rhythms and rituals, and the unpredictable things that happen (Boldt, 2019). I acknowledged that teaching and practices were

filled with the push-and-pull of feelings that live in bodies and are expressed through them, filled with the ebb and tide of intensities in time (one moment not like another) and over time (the flow or movement of sensations and responses). (Leander & Ehret, 2019, p. 2)

All this was part of my inquiry to speak of the *affect* of teaching and learning, the subtle force-relations, of sensation and sensibility (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).

This inquiry was my opportunity to move past the boundaries of curriculum and policy and past binary configurations that have formed my practice and my identity as the teacher, “to hold on to a space for rhythm and movement, watchfulness and thoughtfulness, and the excitement of potential and emergence” (Boldt, 2019, p. 38) in my analysis. I sought to present lives lived in the present space and time of the classroom to bring different understandings to the notion of agency as



“force-encounters” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 2) that pass between bodies, where bodies include the non-human.

## Material Figurations as Analysis and Discussion

My Speculative Fabulation picked up and extended on the idea that human and “thinghood” overlapped (Bennett, 2010, p. 4), it developed notions that things were vital players in the world of childhood and education. Thing-power (Bennett, 2010) involved thinking deeply about the power and agency of materialities, which aided my analysis of these everyday banal moments from within my classroom. It moved beyond binaries and the dominant organisational principles led by adult experience that manifested through education policy and curriculum. Speculating with the materialities within my photographs emerged an encounter as I connected it to other things, such as the social, cultural, and political over trying to solve them (Maclure, 2018). There were a number of materialities evident in my photograph that I wanted to unpack on a deeper level. I began with dolls.

### *Dolls-Figured Fragile-Potential as Strong Babies*

In ECEC the Education Child was positioned as developing, innocent, fragile, immature, and irrational (Murriss, 2020a), an empty vessel, dependent, needing to be filled up and nurtured in the correct ways (James, 2012). This troupe could also be laid over these two babies; two tussled plastic babies carted around in an old, beaten up wheelbarrow. These babies were not very cared for nor treated with care; one facedown, all legs and arms, white plastic babies, anonymous in identity and histories. Yet I did not think the dolls upheld this Figured World of fragile and innocent, they had become positioned as such and were positioned differently from the figurine of the dog in the second photo due to their human likeness (another interesting questioning in human centric notions of agency and animal representations). In my analysis, I intentionally disrupted these notions of innocent, fragile, and immature due to their rough positioning and play.

Early anthropological studies noted that children from all over the world play with dolls (Schwartzman, 1976); it would be very unusual to enter an early childhood space and not find some representation of dolls in the classroom. *“We are playing families, and May is the baby”* were common threads of play that I supported in my teaching. I would have brought out the dolls when this type of play emerged as per the EYLF that requires teachers to provide resources that “reflect children’s social worlds’ to develop children’s identity” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 26). Dolls were understood as enabling and encouraging children to communicate about a range of difficult and complex topics and were used in education, therapy, and

research on children (Koller & Murphy, 2022). The historical, therapeutic, and dominance of dolls in early childhood practices and their links to gender, care, and educational outcomes make dolls such a significant material to “think-with” (Hodgins, 2014, p. 782).

The removal of the children playing with the dolls in the image and narration made me think with the dolls over the child as I moved away from my need to humanist-ically understand this play as normatively carried out by the Education Child and interpreted by the Teacher. These two dolls, one could argue, were not being *cared for*, as they were tussled about in the wheelbarrow. I certainly felt the affective pull and needed to see them cared for even though they were two plastic lifeless dolls, my affective pull as Mother, Carer, and Teacher to pick them up and *care for* them by cradling them in my arms. My failure as the Teacher in this play to teach empathy and care as is mandated in the EYLF where I am to “model care, empathy, and respect for children, staff and families” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 27). This modelling and care as education was positioned as foundational for developing children’s sense of identity and my teacher identity and lived experiences became an impulsive affective reaction to right a wrong in picking them up. Yet, again, I felt the need to remind myself, they were plastic toys and not babies.

The agentic force of these dolls as different agency phenomena emerged in my Speculative Fabulation, not as something to possess or as a tool for individual development, it felt like these dolls offered up a radically distributed agency (Braidotti, 2006). In my storying, I positioned the potential of the dolls *as strong babies to be played with roughly, to experiment with as plastic toys and not real babies*. This positioning shifted my inquiring into creating doll realities, the children’s ongoing practices that were embodied and situated actions through children’s play emerged differently as a materiality in this photo (Brogger, 2018). This permitted a moving away from understanding dolls as only performed or predestined linear development for children and this made me as teacher, less interested in only relying on the representation of dolls as therapeutic dolls, education dolls, and teaching dolls.

I could not link learning through notions of intra-action of tussled wheelbarrow babies (see Figure 4) to curriculum or policy as the *doing* did not align with outcomes of care, empathy, or therapeutic stories playing out in this play remnant unless I focused on a deficit model of education (Wragg, 2013). In fact, it was in their lack of care (one doll is face down in the wheelbarrow), that was so jarring and confronting in this image. An opportunity through which their agency as *strong babies* helped break away from a Figured Subject such as the Education Child, away from figurations that affirmed a constructive type of man-humanity (Braidotti, 2015), known only through learning, teaching, and curriculum and doing right or wrong by the dolls.

I did not refute the role of teaching and learning empathy and care in education, and I could not resist cradling the dolls in my arms to comfort them after their bumpy ride. Rather than an over reliance on a tick box approach in adherence to curriculum outcomes that position the inclusion of dolls as THE educational resource to teach, there was a shifting of understanding of these emotive notions through a distributed force of agency and an affective lens. Thinking with tussled plastic babies became an opportunity to speculate, imagine, and evoke difference that is also there embedded in the everyday, part of, yet not always celebrated as the learning in the flux of this early childhood space. They became an opportunity to break though dominant notions of curriculum and policy by complexifying the dolls agency when it had not “been cleansed of all the wet stuff and the discomfort and the uncertainty” (Maclure, 2018, p. 199) to fit curriculum and policy.

These were not two dolls being carefully pushed around the yard in a pink toy pram by a caring child. *Quick take a photo!* These neglected plastic babies were helping move my inquiring into how matter matters (Barad, 2007) in education, how something materialises or manifests and what kind of significance and performative effects it produced (Brogger, 2018). My photo emerged a different positioning of a dominant figuration of the child and doll as fragile and innocent, not manifested in this configuration in my very real classroom. Furthermore, the dolls were not treated as frail and fragile so I should not speculate that the story makers position themselves as such.

This juxtaposition of positioning dolls as teachers of care and empathy yet here through notions of neglected dolls I could begin to reveal the ways with which both human and non-human agents were involved with shaping of changes (Brogger, 2018). Changes to dominant figurations of fragile and innocent children still in the making (Murris, 2020a, 2020c), consumers of education that I must deliver and as figurations of their future self as a production *for* society. Agency *for* education, where children’s actions are clapped or slapped (Srinivasan, 2018) as to what agency was and was not and how it was to be carried out *correctly* within the classroom yet this was also the reality of children’s play, the children knew that these dolls were not real; they could be roughly handled, moved, and discarded as they were a toy.

This image affected me like a world of things in motion, where each materiality had its own trajectories or tendencies that interfered with the trajectories of the things they encountered (Ingold, 2013). There was another materiality that had a prominent place in the image and in education. The dolls were not being transported in a pram, as one would speculate as a better mode of transport, in my white Western context rather, they were being carted around in an old rickety wheelbarrow, a resource that had now run its course at my service and was no longer in use, thrown out at our annual shed clean up and now another addition to landfill.

### ***Wheelbarrow-Sustainability—The Anthropocene Child***

This wheelbarrow that lived in the yard at my kindergarten was played with for seven hours straight daily, made with technology yet carried sensations of freedom and possibility in breaking away from being curriculum-ified as it was carted around the kindergarten yard. This wheelbarrow was my opportunity, another thing-power (Bennett, 2010) to assist (re)situating and dialoguing (Blaise & Hamm, 2022) these humanistic worldviews that position children as lacking in agency alongside notions of being othered from the living world (Blaise & Hamm, 2022). I wanted to understand the agency of this wheelbarrow and its Figured World as a tool *for* sustainability and saviour of the world in education. My Speculative Fabulation drew on the wheelbarrow's agency; it opened me up to how education can other its materialities, a deductive approach where the wheelbarrow was only valued for what it could contribute to notions of curriculum led learning, alongside its responsibility to teach and solve world problems of humanistic creation. I began to see its thing-power outside of its education *for* sustainability, Colonial histories and figurations of a nature child who was supposedly lacking in connections with the land.

This rickety green wheelbarrow helped my agentic teacher-self to move past dominant conceptualisation of agency and to take up the urgent calls for the early childhood researcher to inquire into the unprecedented complex challenges that children were facing across the globe (Malone, 2016a; Murris, 2020c). Rickety wheelbarrow babies had evoked lines of inquiry of more-than-human agency as entangled with dominant educational concepts and other-wise ways as connections to concepts of land.

The EYLF states that “resources can also highlight our responsibilities for a sustainable future and promote children’s understanding about their responsibility to care for the environment” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 18), placing a lot of the onus of sustainable practices on child-teacher-materiality through curriculum. Furthermore, the EYLF adds that resources could “foster hope, wonder, and knowledge about the natural world [for children] (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 18). These statements demonstrate how curriculum figures the role of the wheelbarrow and its responsibility in teaching; a positioning of educational resources as scientific knowledge and their agentic contribution for fixing global problems in curriculum and policy (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Mentha et al., 2015). I explored this sensation in my Speculative Fabulation; *the wheelbarrow gets so full, bogged down and so heavy with its responsibility it is hard to control*. Additionally, I felt the figuring of myself as also responsible for this teaching and my need to be in *control* as I was to “provide children with access to resources

about the environment and the impact” so children were connected with and contributed to their world (OUTCOME 2) (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 32).

This felt very much like an education that focused on a top-down, developmental approach where it relied on myself as the knowledge knower (or so I thought!) (Hunkin, 2021; Moss, 2018b). My responsibility of setting of goals for children, for them to be able to learn, while also placing responsibility on resources, through their teaching and their role in shaping futures yet actually relied on policy and curriculum as knowledge knowers (Moss, 2018b). This was highlighting that teaching was not value-free and reflected the insipid neoliberal human capital economic agenda whose effects were rapidly changing my early childhood work (Hunkin, 2018). These human developmental frameworks and progress discourses were positioned as part of universal practices that set out to better the world (Blaise & Hamm, 2022). This discourse brought me towards that green wheelbarrow and figurations of the Nature Child as the Education Child who was positioned in their education as the solution for a better world. What a weight to carry; maybe a wheelbarrow can help.

This Nature Child was positioned as lacking; supposedly having lost connections with nature due to the ills of contemporary society and even more so for urban children such as where I worked, with my kindergarten service within half an hour of Melbourne city (Malone, 2016a, 2016b). This idea of the deficit urban contemporary child drew from key anthropocentric views that children *used to be* closer to nature, that we currently lived in unnatural ways away from nature, and it was only in being in proximity to nature that learning and teaching occur (Blaise & Hamm, 2022; Malone, 2016b; Mentha et al., 2015). This green rickety wheelbarrow also started to take on a status of saviour with this world view of children; claimed deficit children, disconnected from nature were being turned into cultural universalisms that reiterated human exceptionalism and lent in to human-nature divide (Malone, 2016b) and thus this wheelbarrow was the solution.

Within this frame or thinking, this wheelbarrow took on an agency that could change the course of education for the children that I taught! It could connect children to nature, bridge the divide of urban/nature and bring learning and teaching that will fill them up, much like the role of a wheelbarrow. Or was I also the wheelbarrow, as a vessel, filled up through policy and curriculum that I then dumped onto the children so that they could be responsible for fixing the failures of adults?

The child in nature movement continued to grow in Westernised countries with the catastrophizing of urbanisation, technology and hurried nature of childhoods when compared to the

romanticising of childhoods past, “more freedom, more time and more opportunities to connect with nature” (Malone, 2016b, p. 391). As the teacher, I was required to provide “environments that embed sustainability in daily routines and practices” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 32) as part of OUTCOME 2: Children were connected with and contribute to their world. Does this connection to world/land—through wheelbarrow—also include people, land, and knowledge as property? Curriculum that positions children and teachers as responsible for sustainability in competitive and individualised subjectivity brings a colonial lens (Murris, 2020a, 2020c). All places in Australia, urban or otherwise, are Indigenous places. “Every inch of glass, steel, concrete and tarmac is dug onto and bolted onto Country” (Porter, 2018, p. 239), this meant the kindergarten, the sustainable gardens planted, and the wheelbarrow too. As I traced the histories of the lands that the kindergarten resided on it followed from hallowed grounds to the laying out of town grids, presented as heroic achievements rather than “acts of theft and violence” (Porter, 2018, p. 240). I had to question how Colonisation contributed to the instillation of non-relational ontologies and nature/culture divides where our complex and messy real world stories were kept out of my sanitized classroom (Murris, 2020c). This rickety green wheelbarrow showed me other ways, where I could begin to frame the urban as already Country as a more transformative way of thinking about futures (Porter, 2018).

Shifting my focus away from children’s abilities or capacities as individuals through this green rickety wheelbarrow, I could see the relation between the human and the more-than-human, opening up understandings where they rendered each other able (Haraway, 2016; Murris, 2020c). These understandings made the deficit understanding of the child in nature redundant. Both the wheelbarrow and child were in an affective intra-action that became able together and were part of an opportunity to understand how we were all capable of affecting and being affected (Braidotti, 2022).

This rickety wheelbarrow helped cut me and my ties to mechanistic and linear notions of agency *for* education in my teaching to provide possibilities and opportunities for understanding the world other-wise (Blaise & Hamm, 2022; Moss, 2018b; Taguchi, 2010) enabling a disruption to humanistic saviour and colonial concepts of agency.

### ***Inter-Action as a Dog on a Toilet***

Block play, fantasy play, peer play or *dog on toilet play*, these were examples of the types of definitions and schemes of play, repeated patterns of action (Arnold, 2022) as learning that were now part of early childhood education. Each ‘type’ of play was categorised, demonstrated as

learning, and linked to curriculum and policy, and these (future) learners at my kinder must demonstrate them through play. It was making me question the muddying of the waters with whose goals and interests were the focus in this siloing of learning (Hedges, 2010; Wood, 2014). Blocks equalled mathematics, fantasy meant creative-critical thinking, and peer play demonstrated that you could *work* with others. The pedagogy of play was normalised in early childhood curriculum and learning, which now meant that children were “required to play” (Brooker, 2010, p. 154) and emerged from notions of children’s rights and needs to play as a push back to traditional didactic instruction. As the provider of the environments of play, I must provide the right kind of resources and materials to make provision for this right kind of learning through play.

What if these repeated actions of pattern were not thought of as simply doing the same thing over and over? More of a Barad re-turning (2014); an iterative intra-acting and a multiplicity of processes that cannot be separated or categorised under schemas of play. An affirmative prevention of the slicing and dicing and an acknowledgement of the re-configuring of patterns as entanglements. Barad (2014) thinks with the ideas of earthworms turning and churning earth in the process of making compost. No two attempts at play are the same, and as such, this configuration of the wooden dog on the toilet is both unique and part of the everyday practices within an early childhood classroom.

The aesthetics of the classroom were now in question as they linked into notions of quality (Robertson et al., 2020). Did I meet the required subdivided learning spaces within my classroom; with the right drawing table, sand/water sensory play, a reading corner, block or science corner and the domestic house and dramatic play area? These education resources as teachers, these subdivided learning spaces as quality education were to be played with by “rosy-cheeked innocents who should be protected from the encroachments of adult anxieties and uncertainties” (Brooker, 2010, p. 153) who *must* play. Nothing was more anxiety inducing than a small dog sitting on a toilet when all the walls were crumbling around it to make me question how the resources are entangled in these concepts of learning driven play! How did I meet the quality in resources needed in meeting the child’s interest around this play? How did I extend on toilet play? What did I set up to extend on their learning? How did I teach *innocent* children in a world full of anxieties and uncertainties when walls were crumbling?

This dog on the toilet cut through all of these notions of quality silo learning in its agentic power of being a wooden dog on a toilet. Thinking with Haraway’s concept of figures, where this intra-action with the dog figurine became “material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape one another” (2008, p. 4). The wooden dog told me that the agentic powers

of these materialities were constructing my understanding of myself and affecting my practices as a teacher. Made by children in settings and curriculum designed by teachers yet not fitting into its silo neatly, evoking wonderings and questionings of what environments could be in education services where children must play for it to be deemed as learning.

There was a particular aesthetic to an early childhood classroom, and it was my responsibility to do it right. With the classroom's purpose to lead children into the next 15 years of their schooling, it had to be a soft launch to get them used to being in a school institution. How did I make all materials and resources chosen form alignment to learning outcomes or should the outcomes dictate the resources while still making the classroom feel like a place of belonging?

Should the room feel like an education showroom; like ones presented on social media, education websites and Pinterest, one where only real crockery and real homewares are considered appropriate; a move away from toys and into a miniature yet realistic homelife of past times was the most educational. Such spaces looked like they were designed for the photographer to photograph, devoid of children at play and presenting some sort of yesteryear, soft edged, romantic imagined space. Was this part of decontextualizing life, compartmentalising what was appropriate in which space? "In a visual and operational sense, each institution is a separate entity in relationship to the other: home is home: school is school, relatively impermeable to the outside world" (Tarr, 2001, p. 35). I had a couch within my kinder room. Did the children sit on it, or must they sit in front of it on the floor? The teacher was to sit above and over the children, everyone in their right place. How did the *fantasy play* wooden figurines end up in the *block play* corner? Return them to *the farm* imaginary play space, where they *belonged!*

This tiny dog on its tiny toilet has evoked these questionings, these wonderings, and created a space to think with the dog and my frustrations with linear notions of teaching, learning, and curriculum. The intra-action that occurred in capturing this moment, this remnant of play, emerges as something different. My thinking with this play is as a cutting together-apart in the (re)configuring of spacetime mattering, differencing/differing/différance (Barad, 2014). My intersection with a wooden dog on a toilet evoked an agency of constantly exchanging ideas, questionings, and wonderings, removing notions of a designated *thing* that education had done to this dog as only a learning resource.

Curriculum occurs "in an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 9), thus my role is in developing and creating these outcome driven spaces within my classroom. The provision of natural



materials, loose parts over plastic fantastic; the idea that a pine cone can be whatever was inside a child's imagination, but a plastic slice of pizza cannot be anything but food. Natural materials, loose parts, plastic fantastic in sustainability, colour, and children's desires with teaching materials, figurations of what a classroom *must be* and *look like* to be a classroom. So the children can be themselves the classroom should sit at that middle point between homely but not too homely as it is a place of learning and not relaxing, a space where children must perform as students and not as children in relation to their teacher as *mother*.

Was I Frobel's garden, where the children bloom and blossom under the kindly care of my middle-class motherhood as "good mothers did naturally" (Steedman, 1985). Was I the middle class, best example of the mother that these children *lacked* at home as was Frobel's thinking where children "could bloom and blossom under the kindly care of a mother made conscious" (Brooker, 2010, p. 2; Steedman, 1985). This notion harked back to past times where the education offered at early childhood was the *right kind* and by the *right teacher*, as opposed to in the homes of working class families, immigrants, First Nation's Children or other (Steedman, 1985).

The idea of play as important work and the role that environments were positioned to provide remained unchanged despite the rapidly changing world (Brooker, 2010). An approach to and thinking of education from the romantic past lingered with my role as perfecting this play pedagogy through adult led learning objectives, disrupting the play that was supposed to be spontaneous and goalless, free play directed by children. Is that free play or educational play (Brooker, 2010)? What does the dog say?

### *Flower Soup as Affirmative Speculations*

This wet, mucky, mixture of wet sand, picked flowers in a white plastic container with each ingredient found, carefully assembled, and collected from different points in the yard. I think with Haraway "I think we learn to be worldly from grappling with, rather than generalizing from, the ordinary. I am a creature of the mud, not the sky" (2008, p. 3). This assemblage involved distance travelled, knowledge of where to get what was needed, and infinite time spent thinking and concocting.

This flower soup cannot be stuck up on an adult's fridge as a celebration and remembrance of learning achieved. Nor can it be a romantic remembering of innocent time spent in nature, as it is a messy bowl of soup nestled within its plastic tub and not a child engaging with it to lean into the Nature Child or notions of lost childhoods in supposed modern disconnected times. I was drawn to this remnant, a felt a sense of vibrant matter; the play remnant did not feel passive but rather had

the ability to make things happen and to produce effects (Bennett, 2010). I needed to think with it to learn more about agency.

All I have to focus on is this earthly product, this flower soup, yet this vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010), this remnant of play would not be considered an appropriate entry for the annual children's art show, or be considered in the same way as a product painting of a child's family done at the easel would be. This flower soup forces me to think differently, to think with processes and not only the end product. The multiplicity of processes undertaken in this play become intra-actions between infinite combinations, yard, nature, plumbed water tap, imported *child safe* sand, factory-made plastic, imagination, material-semiotic node, human bodies, under the Kinder Tree, microbes in flowers, and agentic materialities intra-acting with child (Haraway, 2008). I think that it is within this assemblage, "in the space created by this estrangement, [that] a vital materiality can start to take shape" (Bennett, 2010, p. vii).

This messy bowl of flower soup as an end product and my role in assessing this as an outcome did not work in this assemblage and this made it harder to place value on the remnant in neoliberal education notions, harder to curriculum-ify and to see the learner and learning through this *undesirable* end product. It provided a shifting field, away from the seen rational subject and led me to the unseen drawing upon a world beyond or below appearances and away from assumptions of human exceptionalism and linear progress (Chandler, 2024).

In this everyday urban early childhood playground, I began to sit with the complexities of real life and not as the self-determined human subject separated from it (Chandler, 2024). A world beyond immediate appearances and my practices of engaging with these remnants of play as hope in this real but unrecognisable world. An action to connect with and build upon what exists unrecognised or unseen in the present (Chandler, 2024). An opening to the multiplicity of existents and the multiplicity of previous ways of existing, a Latour Worlding (Latour & Porter, 2017).

It became more than something to step over, tip out and become frustrated with as the sand was moved out of the sandpit and a mess was made. Another clean up needed, the fatigue and frustration that can flood in. The physicality of this work and how as an *undesirable* product it could result in the need to figure re-figuring, re-turning, and tuning into the intra-action in this Flower Soup that was so often overlooked (Barad, 2014) forming an affirmative hope as a discursive field of practices that promote connection with what exists unrecognised or unseen in the present (Chandler, 2024).

Thankfully there was thing-power, thinking with vibrant matter that helped me overcome “the quarantines of matter and life [that] encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations” (Bennett, 2010, p. vii). The materialities at play in this play assemblage affected with forces, trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of their own (Bennett, 2010), were vital to the play and together they have created something that has power to affect my teaching and thinking about agency.

## **Speculation and Storying Changing Practice**

Being invited in, engaging with, and producing my own Speculative Fabulations from within my classroom changed me as a teacher, learner, and researcher. It moved my teacher-self away from understanding teaching and learning as concepts of learning outcomes; teaching and learning is messy and vibrant, much more than only learning outcomes that propel you into a predetermined future. My inquiry opened up to the vibrant matter of thing power, breaking down divides between human and the more-than-human rather, connecting them up and seeing them as in relation to each other and part of an important network that emerges in an early childhood classroom. Now, if I am designing a classroom, I look, feel, and sense the materialities differently. Understanding a plastic tub of flower soup as a powerful assemblage of teaching and learning and a with children and the more than human rather than being drawn to separating them for their individual roles in teaching and learning.

Being a teacher is also being an ongoing learner as the web or network that emerges in a classroom is in constant flux and coming into contact with different configurations of human and non-human. I no longer feel the need to try to control, teacherly affect or change this web of connection as the agentic teacher. I am part of it and contribute to it as the classroom teacher. It is dynamic, exciting, and speculative in where it might go which permits a wondering, imagining, and the unexpected as part of its meandering journey and comes with a letting go of seeking constant control and trying to direct it. There is agency in this stepping back, of seeking and seeing the relationships between all, and feeling part of it rather than striving to sit at the top of it all. Being a teacher means leaning into Lester’s (2020) the next and next as generative in the agentic potential of teaching and researching.

These new sensations and agentic perspectives of teacher are also present in my new understandings of inquiring. The potential that comes from no longer trying to capture, define or sum up what agency is or is not becomes generative. Feeling connected to rather than controlling my inquiry changes my understanding of it. I let the meandering path emerge with me rather than

constantly trying to control its direction. I certainly had not set up to write *Lively Stories* or *Speculative Fabulations* when I started outthinking I could capture curriculum agency in my practice. The post qualitative affect on my writing, thinking, and inquiring became part of my agentic assemblage with my own work. It feels different, it makes different and is entangled in its being with, making with and thinking with as in relation to and not in possession of in my own research (Barad, 2007). This keeps me wondering, connecting, and lively in my relation to agency which generates new ideas and opens to potential different directions as they emerge.



## Kindergarten Teacher as Researcher Digging Below the Kinder Tree

### An Interval

We, the kinder teacher, and researcher sat Under the tree, leaning back on the solid trunk of the Tree, revaluating what it meant to sit under the Kinder Tree. My Lively Stories had begun to surface an agency that was complex, entangled, and relational to all that was connected to it. My Lively Stories began to show me how agency meant human, non-human, and more than human further troubling my understandings of agency.

I sat there in my physical self, legs and bottom connected to the ground under the Kinder Tree and wondered as I became bodily attuned to generative notions of future to come and questioned what next? Reading and the potential of re-reading the past as entangled with present futures opened up possibilities for all that I did not yet know. My arms lay beside me, palms flat on the ground to try and tether me to the Kinder Tree as I was at risk of flight, inundated with the expansiveness of *what more* or *what if*? My fingers dug into the soil under the Kinder Tree to help hold me in place, I scratched at that soil up under my fingernails and I scratched down into a Below the Kinder Tree emerging sensations of the infamous *iceberg* metaphor, where there was still so much not thought about, not visible, yet affecting up through the trunk and into the visible parts of the Kinder Tree.

In the beginning, I had come to the Kinder Tree to marvel while up in its branches at all the incredible agency teaching and learning that was taking place down below in my classroom. However, in trying to confirm it, I begun a process of rupture, rupturing the normalising, and unsettling the norms that had become imbedded in my practices and understandings of agency from my position of In the Kinder Tree. This began an emerging of a teacher and researcher who felt entangled with the Kinder Tree as a non-human agency that shifted my previous fixed notions of agency. I engaged with an inquiring while being with-the-Tree, a making with its histories and curriculum complexities and a thinking with the Kinder Tree as potential for its non-human agency. This dissolved my teaching and researching self and I was re-emerging as an in relation to and not as an in-control of agency.

My fingers continued to dig unconsciously as I sat in my agency complexities; I had come this far and yet only the tip of the iceberg had been exposed. The Kinder Tree had emerged agency like a sympoietic system and profoundly troubled my self-making as teacher and researcher. The Kinder Tree brought sensations of collectivity and collaboration through a making-with, that embraced the complexity, including its past and positioning within the education system. Agency was uncapturable; it was dynamic, responsive, and remained situated in my urban kindergarten. Sitting under the Kinder Tree, arms and legs touching the soil, my body was pulled down further Below the Kinder Tree for the potential and possibility that was still a yet to come. It was not sucking me down as much as inviting me to continue to challenge myself through understanding my lived experiences differently.

Or, could it be more of an Alice in Wonderland when Alice says, “it’s no use going back to yesterday because I was a different person then”? (Carroll, 2021, p. 125). I wanted to let go of the notions of rational humanism that I had held on to so tightly when I started this journey. Coming down the Kinder Tree and beginning to dig Below the Kinder Tree exposed my sense of hierarchal separation from the children in my teaching and positionings of dualism such as teacher and child had become imbedded in my thinking. It took a critical turn to bring in the political, historical, and furthermore the affective and material agencies that are present in my teaching to disrupt and trouble it.

I embody my relational lived experiences every day in my teaching that are profoundly affected through the intensities and forces of affecting and affected bodies that are integral in early childhood classrooms. However, these sensations had been moved to the back, hidden behind discourses, political agendas, and colonial ideologies that positioned teaching and agency as something knowable, fixed, and rewardable. I have begun to both surface them and think with them

in their entanglement with notions of agency. I have emerged affective sensations of learning from them through their relationships with agency to become more attune to connective tissues that weave in and out of each other.

I was sitting in a state of alterity and embracing the different and otherness as generative rather than a negative outside of the norm. I began to inquire through material-discursive agencies, I acknowledge that discursive was a rambling process from one subject to another and there cannot be a linear progression. It was their connectiveness and their transformative utterances from one context to another that became transformative in my own self-making. Dolls, colonial histories, wheelbarrows, Nature Child, sweeping educators, the environment as curriculum education, wet dribbly lemons, embodied sensations, and agency as sand falling through sieves, none of these ideas would have been on my research list at the beginning of my dissertation journey. Their connective tissue was enabled by inquiring outside of dominant notions of agency and early childhood education. I had to embrace the inseparability of their interacting agencies and to move way from dominant conceptualisations of agency or be at risk of being stuck in their inseparability. I had to let go in order to take up new generative conceptualisations of agency that did not feel like they were pulling me into cycles of repetition but rather encouraged a self-making through connections to matter outside of them.

By embodying agency as relational, entangled and embedded in lived experiences I had to bring to the surface affective intensities, to feel the forces of an affecting and affected body. My affected body as not detached and a-part-from the classroom where I taught to become aware of the relational force that changed my own capacity of the body to act. I had to understand that for myself, my inquiry and it revealed itself to me as I inquired into the connections presented through remnants of play; the materialism of my classroom, inquired with through New Materialism helped to surface by embodied agency.

“Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality” said the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland (Carroll, 2021, p. 1140). Speculation and Worlding helped me access the potential of futures unknown. Speculation opened up generative notions that permitted a loosening or letting go of tightly held notions of agency. With speculation I could imagine what life could be and speculative stories felt empowering to challenge and expand the status quo. They opened up new ways to formulate my ideas, subjectivities and bring to the surface my entanglements with educational agency, shifting my inquiry as ways of experiencing the world as performative and not overly reliant on representational.

My developing knowledge, knowing and the doing of my dissertation became inextricably connected as I moved away from focusing on distinctions and allowing them to collapse into each other as complexity. I could imagine radically different worlds while remaining responsible through my thinking, researching, and writing; a methodology that creates realities through the practice of storytelling.



## **Posthuman Agency as Speculative and Worlding**

I started my inquiry so certain in my understanding of what agency was. I positioned myself as intentional, purposeful, and rational in my understanding of agency and in my agency practices as a teacher (Giddens, 1984). Agency practices were about providing choices, children needed options and I was best positioned to provide them and guide their choices as a rational adult. I needed to practice active listening as children were understood as needing to contribute to their world (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022), however they were not understood as of the world, and I had to protect them and guide their access to the world in the ways that I designed my curriculum and program. The way they were permitted to contribute was controlled by how much they were allowed to know, and they were only considered as able to contribute to their own highly controlled world in early childhood education.

I believed that my choices, actions and decisions would result in meeting the known outcomes in the EYLF through my teaching (Giddens, 1984; Loyal, 2003). I was in control, and I knew what was best for the children that I taught, until I did not. My self-determination to uphold the educational definition of agency was plausible as the education world supported and enabled this existence of agency. My agency was limited to picking up, using, and repeating certain configurations of agency that were understood as free choice and my ability to act upon my own thinking was limited to these confines. Understanding this helped me come to terms with my constitution to a social world that I did not choose (Butler, 2004). I practiced an agency that had been determined as the right kind by others and in my performance to become an expert teacher of agency, I had chosen to confirm the curriculum positioning of agency as correct. I felt uneasy about the portrayal of children as inherently innocent yet needing adult intervention to mould them into civilized beings, which characterized them as both savage and empty slates. I had become the gatekeeper of other influential parties, I held access to knowledge and the information I shared was frequently restricted or manipulated to influence children towards future-oriented paths.

In my positioning of agency as human centric I was contributing to the formation of a designed child. Through my practices of agency as teachable and learnable, this placed children in competition with each other to perform this agency. The ones who understood this bounded agency were able access more of it, hence a cycle of learning performed and conformed to reinforce this liberal and individual configuration of agency. Those who struggled to understand its boundaries, were positioned as not agentic or in need of further intervention to learn the right ways of agency, to bring them into the cycle or to treat them as a problem to be fixed.

Once I had come to understand the creation, influences and contemporary ways that this continued to perpetuate in curriculum I could no longer adhere to it. I was also learning that my agency was full of paradoxes yet the idea of contradictorily opens up the conditions for possibility (Butler, 2004). By inquiring into other theories and configurations of agency, posthuman thinking showed me that doing affirmation and my capacity to transform conditions means I did not need to perform or limit myself to the fixed notion of agency I had been practicing. It opened up understanding of my subjectivity as multiplicity and was always moving in different directions that did not need to be defined or bounded in humanistic ways (Braidotti, 2015).

In embracing New Materialism I started to acknowledge all manner of bodies, objects, and things and surface a connectivity of meaning-making with matter as lively (Taylor & Ivinson, 2013). This involved stepping down from my hierarchical thinking and seeing human and non-human as productive knowledge production as revealed to me in both my *Lively Stories* and *remnants* work. They helped me to rethink my positioning of agency as a human centric notion and loosen the grip of trying to control something that had been designed to perform on me without my critical knowledge. I learnt through Barad and Bennett that human and non-human bodies are intra-actively entangled that they form an agentic phenomena through dynamic, co-constructive emergences and that I was able to surface these experiences as I brought the material from my classroom into my inquiry (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010), emerging in my day to day experiences as a teacher, that matter is agentic and all sorts of bodies and not exclusively human bodies have agency (Taylor & Ivinson, 2013).

I started to recognise the power of things and the co-constructive power of matter, to take them into account in understandings of agency within an early childhood classroom (Bennett, 2010). Forming understandings of agency that were not possessions, an agency that is not held or considered property of persons or things, agency as enactment, as possibilities and potential for reconfiguring entanglement (Barad, 2007, 2009). I looked around my classroom and saw the materialities present and how these remnants were forces of production rather than producing children as knowledge consumers. I draw from Sheldrake's research into fungi to articulate how I was now understanding my own teaching and researching of agency:

I wanted to understand fungi, not be reducing them to ticking, spinning, bleeping mechanisms, as we so often do. Rather, I wanted to let these organisms lure me out of my well-worn patterns of thought, to imagine the possibilities they face, to let them press against the limits of my understandings, to give myself permission to be amazed—and confused—by their entangled lives. (Sheldrake, 2021, p. 22)

Once revealing to myself my own sense of dominant power and my own conceptualisation of myself as an all-seeing teacher-self, I began to understand and take into account the forces, capabilities and energies inherent in matter and encompassing beyond notions of human (Braidotti, 2013). This transformative positioning shifted me outside of the limits of curriculum and my experiences within the classroom were now lively, relational, and entangled. Configurations of agency that did not lock it in to fit criteria or human-centric motives produced by other vested parties. Agency felt generative, transformative, and connected to the more-than-human.

I felt amazed and confused by my transforming understanding of agency. Amazed that I had thought it could be pinned down and understood through possession and performance, confused at how I now felt agency as embodied and had not permitted myself to acknowledge it before. Understanding agency as a form of Worlding was not a matter of free will or choice but rather something that precedes consciousness and individualism; Worlding is borne of our being in the world (Taylor & Iverson, 2013). This new way of thinking became a posthuman ethic that necessitated the revision of agency. It emerged how I came to understand agency as generative and contributed to devising other acts of engagement that enact change with notions of education and practicing with children. Worlding and common worlds are inclusive of more than human notions and contribute to my moving away from divisive distinction drawn between human societies and natural environments that dominated the way I practiced agency in my classroom (Haraway, 2017; Latour, 2004). The concept of common worlds was termed by a group of researchers, the Common Worlds Research Collective, which situates its research and pedagogy as within lively common worlds (Hodgins, 2019). Collectively, they produce research that re-situates lives within common worlds and focuses on ways in which past, present, and future lives are entangled with those of other beings. It entails a grappling with the complexities of being embedded in both neoliberal and settler colonialism, challenging dominant approaches to child studies that forefront Euro-Western developmental and anthropocentric frames (Hodgins, 2019).

I position my *Under the Kinder Tree* within its framework of foregrounding a more-than-human relational understanding of agency, emerging my own understanding of common worlds in my inquiry into agency within my early childhood teaching practices. I emerged my everyday classroom materials, the dolls, wheelbarrows, figurines and picked flowers to be understood as agentic and woven into common worlds.

I had to move through sensations of troubling at each methodological step, to emerge myself as embedded within the entangled lifeworld that I inquired into. My practices, classroom, and notions of teaching slipped and shifted as my thinking and doing with agency opened up in front of

me. I can write to my change of thinking as my conceptualisation of agency has changed, however in terms of my practices with children, it will need time and further inquiry to understand how my practices have changed. I no longer feel the pull to connect my time spent with children to the EYLF, to demonstrate how my in relation to children needs to be broken down into achievable and predetermined outcomes. I do not reference its outcomes at every opportunity as I no longer feel I need it to demonstrate my teaching abilities. My sense of a performing teacher has shifted, I do not want to be the curriculum expert if it means performing through a fixed notion of agency that forms children to expected paths. I want to work alongside and support children's own paths, designed in collaboration and in coexistence with all that surrounds us.

I inquired through experimentation, speculation and wondering that helped me understand my positioning and practices of agency as unproductive and want to seek other-wise ways of (re)telling, (re)seeing my lived experiences with agency within my classroom. I had to lean into experimenting with methods that were receptive to and that gestured towards the sensorial, the affective and speculative nature of what I could not know in advance with belief that in letting go, new and generative ideas could emerge.

I strived to become a teacher who respects the complexity of our times with a critical understanding of the teacher that I was trained to become; a critical teacher who can continue to critique Western education philosophies as a nomadic subject and not turn my scepticism or suspicions of reason into absolutes, to just generate new fixed notions of agency. I want to remain open to how ideology is used in asserting and maintaining political and economic power within the realms of education and beyond. I do not want to become stagnant as my dissertation finishes, I remain open to active relational ontology that seeks in otherness ways to mobilise and permit affirmative values and forces which may not yet be sustained by the current conditions (Braidotti, 2014a).

I want to continue to re-turn and focus on matter as vibrant (Bennett, 2010) to critique and challenge entrenched categories such as student, teacher, classroom, doll, wheelbarrow that positions them as separable phenomena. I understand meanings as emergent and within dynamic entanglements that enable thinking and doing as inspired from the provocative and generative in education as it forced me to pay attention to which kinds of matter—human and non-human—matters (Taylor & Iverson, 2013). I have started to recognise and move away from notions of a bird's-eye view of the world and have worked to take seriously and bring in my own "messy, implicated, connected, embodied involvement" in the knowledge production that happens within my classroom (Taylor & Iverson, 2013, p. 666). My dissertation as a conversation with myself has helped me

reimagine my humanist qualitative inquiry that rather than reinforced notions of a fixed a stable stance on agency in early childhood education, has rendered it as unstable, fluctuating, moving and most of all, as generative.

## Conclusion: The Dangers of Teaching Outside the Curriculum

As I come to conclude my inquiry into agency in early childhood education and care, I cannot help but look to the future of the sector. From my Victorian location, the future of kindergarten will be a rebranding into the linguistic turn of “pre-prep” (Victoria State Government, 2024). The state Government’s vision is to build and manage early childhood services built on or near school sites and double the access hours that children attend kindergarten from 15 to 30 hours a week (Victoria State Government, 2024). This investment in the sector means there are big changes on the horizon. With such a big vision, the linguistic turn towards positioning early childhood education and care and in particular 4-year-old kindergarten as “pre-prep” is concerning as a teacher and scholar. Pre-prep positions kindergarten as preparation for prep, which is the name of the first year of primary school here in Victoria.

When the whole milieu of early childhood education is socially constituted through language, the linguistic change to pre-prep is received as a further school-ification of the early childhood sector and opportunity to position early childhood education as preparation for future individual liberal learners (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss, 2018a). This re-branding feels entangled with the Council of Australian Governments own vision that the EYLF contributes to; “All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 5). A clear vision of children; where children are *still developing* and where children’s purpose is to succeed for the benefit of the nation which I have come to feel is mirrored in the notion of agency present in the EYLF.

However, Dahlberg et al., remind me that what is socially constituted through language also implies that it is open to change, I can choose to reconstruct my understanding of early childhood other-wise. My dissertation has been an undoing of understanding my agentic teacher-self under this dominant liberally focused conceptualisation of agency and an experimentation of reconstructing agency other-wise and outside of curriculum. The research question that has guided this study was: *How do I understand and practice agency as an early childhood teacher?* This final chapter addresses this question and presents what I see as being the key contributions this study has made to new knowledge.

## Researching Agency in the Australian Early Childhood Sector

In the Australian early childhood sector agency is defined in the mandated Australian curriculum *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* used

in all early childhood services. The definition states agency is “being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one’s world” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 48). I understand that the EYLF is a framework which permits openings for interpretations and pedagogical practices that build on my professional judgement and it encourages me to draw from different theories (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). Act One: In the Kinder Tree inquiries into how my own interpretation of curriculum impacted my understanding and practices of agency in the classroom. Furthermore, throughout Act One, my inquiry challenged my understanding of agency, developing agency as a complex entanglement of the political, social, and historical that informed the curriculum definition.

In the early stages of designing my research, I set out to capture and demonstrate my agency teaching to other teachers in the ECEC sector. However, my research revealed to myself, my own entanglement with neoliberal, individual future focused positioning of children in my thinking and practices with agency. In the development of my research, my teacher-self and my researcher-self designed an autoethnographic research project to capture, demonstrate and prove the agency teaching that I was leading in my classroom. I naively thought it would be straight forward qualitative research project. I used a research informed methodology and analysis that would do exactly what it was meant to, capture agency in my professional classroom teaching practices to answer my research question, However, it did not.

### *Troubled Agency*

As the researcher, I gathered up the observations, the Acts of Agency and read the one after the other, teased out and analysed expressions of choice, voice, and contribution and further faulted. There was something happening with my body; troubling sensations surfaced as my data revealed that I had formed fixed agency notions. My teaching of agency emerged as technical processes and as the researcher and teacher, agency began to feel scripted and determined elsewhere. The more I tried to lean in, to make the pieces come together as I had designed originally the more I wanted to push it away. My best practice agency teaching and researching was surfacing my contribution to the forming of an individual, liberal future orientated worker positioned as for the good of the nation. My understanding and practice of agency emerged as, part historical formation, impacted by colonialism and influenced by the needs and the desires of political and social waves in society. My believed contemporary practices were hooked up to curriculum and learning outcomes that meant I could never not contribute to this neoliberal ‘i’ child while holding on to them as conceptualisations of agency (Murriss & Osgood, 2022). I was forming the future

orientated, individual liberal learner who got ahead if they performed my notions of agency, my interpretation of curriculum agency.

My research emerged convoluted agency complexities; the EYLF was used across mine and other educators' practice and it actively guided notions of agency as a pedagogic tool, yet its development and articulation of what agency was and how it should be taught were open to multiple understandings and interpretations. It was through my literature review; *Understanding Curriculum through Historical Philosophies* that I began to trouble my understanding of agency and moreover, myself as the agentic teacher. I confronted my own agency truth and the dominant conceptualisation of agency as a politically, socially, and historically form. I came to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of agency when the political, social, and historical impacts are included in its development. My own agency truth revealed the risks in my understanding and practices of agency that included an agency that benefited some children and not all; an agency that was geared towards those who understood how it was wielded in a classroom and that this led to a pathway to get more, to get ahead. Surfacing this agency complexion so early in my research disrupted everything and resulted in a complete rethink in the direction of my inquiry.

I became troubled by my linear agency contribution, and I felt untethered. As the teacher and researcher, I felt lost in how to proceed within my linear research path that now felt static in that it was already laid out, a predetermined research project ready to follow and one that no longer felt generative of the new. This realisation troubled my understanding of my teaching-self as someone that I did not want to identify with anymore. However, I was mandated to teach agency. I understood that my interpretations and practices of agency felt like they had formed me into the expert *expected* teacher that had contributed to the benefits I had received in my teaching life; an exemplary teacher, rewarded by the system with better pay and status within the sector for teaching within fixed notions of agency. Now I felt formed, I felt very uncomfortable in my teaching skin and began to re-evaluate how I positioned myself in my classroom, my relationship to agency and a new experimentative inquiry emerged.

## Emerging a Post-Qualitative Kinder Tree Framework

Act Two demonstrates this shift in my inquiry. The Kinder Tree developed into a methodological framework, and I began experimenting with becoming a teacher who no longer understood myself as a curriculum deliverer of agency. The Kinder Tree helped develop a set of procedures, methods, and tools to guide my research process, however, they were not developed and then executed, rather they emerged and guided my inquiry along the way. Act Two developed



the Kinder Tree as a post qualitative contribution to developing other-wise teaching and thinking about agency that answered my research question differently.

The Kinder Tree became a place, source of debate and comfort, a living framework that helped me see, think, and feel my teaching and researching self differently. I began understanding the Kinder Tree as a framework by experiencing it as an up in the branches, an In the Kinder Tree. A looking down, a from a distance, a from an advantageous height, and I realised I had got In the Kinder Tree through benefiting from the linear path that had developed my understanding of curriculum agency as a doing of what had been done before. Even though I describe in Act Two the sensation of falling from the Kinder Tree, my research led me to understand that I could get down. This understanding established the different positionings that the Kinder Tree helped me see, feel, and understand in relation to understanding and practising agency. It gave me a new sense of agency and supported me as I began questioning myself as an agentic early childhood teacher.

The resulting desire to revolt and be revolted by my own understandings of my teaching-self came as a felt shock to my very body. As the researcher, analysing, and thinking with the *Acts of Agency* in Act 1 produced sensations in my body that I could not push down or ignore. If I rejected the dualistic separations of my body from my mind I risked to reject nature from culture also (Dolphijn, 2012). While analysing the participant observations I was also grappling with the historical, political, and social impacts on the conceptualisation of agency, I began to feel these histories as well as think them (Million, 2009). I felt like agency had been decided by others, with other agendas and when I saw its effect in conceptualising contemporary child and childhoods from within my very own practices I could no longer blindly perform as the good girl agentic teacher In the Kinder Tree.

In Act Two, I followed other lines of inquiry as I began sitting Under the Kinder Tree and emerged wonderings about this Coloniser tree, questioning what had been here before its planting and how had this Kinder Tree as place affected notions of agency? The research that followed as I leant into my questions, revealed felt connections with all that surrounded the Kinder Tree and myself, we were connected, woven into networks that I had felt but not *seen* before. My post-qualitative turn contributed to understanding that I could move away from researching linear notions of agency, to an inquiring through different lines of crosshatching that also spoke of agency but differently. Through developing the Kinder Tree framework, I was able to think about my understandings and practices of agency as fluid, not fixed and thus changeable. Developing my own conceptual framework aided me to realise that I could get down from the Kinder Tree. I began inquiring Under and Below the Kinder Tree; inquiring into agency with sensations of letting go of the

reigns of control and moreover, human control. A bringing in the more-than-human came with the Kinder Tree and that opened up sensations of experiencing the Kinder Tree and agency differently.

In the chapter *Emerging Understandings of Relational Agency*, the Kinder Tree spoke of histories ignored or silenced, stories of this kindergarten place that showed me connections and relationships that were complex, ethical, and dynamic. Links through the red bricks that form the walls of my apartment as historically and colonially connected to my teaching practices at my work place. Political and religious agendas from foreign countries that have informed curriculum in my work place. Under this Kinder Tree, more-than-connections to the very land of the kindergarten.

The gift of the Kinder Tree as a methodological framework emerged as an entanglement that changed my relationship with agency, where an entangled and more in relation agency emerged as a being with, making with, and thinking with and where all bodies were in relation to rather than thought of through forms of possession (Barad, 2007; Barad & Gandorfer, 2021). My contribution to knowledge emerged in forming this methodological framework that helped me map out my agency entanglement. It developed a deeper understanding of why I took the steps that I took in my inquiry; the Kinder Tree encouraged complex understandings of my research question and contributed to where I looked for data collection outside of my classroom practices.

The idea of digging under Kinder Tree felt bottomless in opening new ways of thinking with data analysis and was a framework of support over designated interpretations of the results. We became an ecosystem that spanned boundaries and transgressed categories and we emerged as a complex tangle of relationships that are only now becoming known (Sheldrake, 2021). Developing my own methodological framework provided the potential in Act Two for a diverse array of analysis to interrogate the ontological epistemological order of things in humanism (St. Pierre, 2013). I could not propose a replication of my Kinder Tree methodological framework but rather offer it as a provocation to look for one's own when grappling with complex phenomenon through post-qualitative inquiry.

## Inquiring with Post-Qualitative Methods

In Act Two, I got down out of the Kinder Tree's branches and away from sensations of teaching from above to sit Under the Kinder Tree. My researcher-self read broadly and looked for other-wise-ways to conceptualise and explore agency. I found Lively Stories (Blaise et al., 2017), through which I was able to draw from within the classroom with a shared focus on my experiences, sensations, and knowledges that was not only within the confines curriculum or policy. Lively Stories

contributed to new knowledge in the way they brought in materialities, affective sensations, and place to agitate my long-held conceptualisation of agency. They looked at the different affective forces as all impacting and part of concepts of agency and surfacing agency as shared moments. They stopped my urge to place objects and people into separate categories and surfaced resonances in the context of human agency and the agentic potential of the non-human world. My inquiry contributed to emerging agency as in relation-to and that also included myself.

Teaching in early childhood education feels first like a technical role where a posthuman approach is positioned as an add on, or a diversity inclusion to the EYLF where experience and professional interpretation impacts access to other theories. The complexity of acknowledging teaching as post-qualitatively means accepting that it does not easily conform to learning outcomes or measuring progress nor teaching as prescriptive or traditional (Fathalizadeh et al., 2024). The contribution of my dissertations is part of a repositioning of agency as in relation-to and contributes further including post-qualitative thinking and posthuman philosophies into a predominantly developmental theory bounded educational framework. It opens up to post-qualitative teacher as performing ‘the task of the impossible and calls for the curious seeker and infinite learner, resembling art, craft and creation’ (Fathalizadeh et al., 2024, p. 1). Understanding agency as in relation-to extends beyond the human and slows down the sensations of being a technician of teaching and learning. I understand teaching as creative and I embrace the playfulness of experimenting as expanding insights (Fathalizadeh et al., 2024). Post-qualitative teaching reduces sensations of being an observer of the classroom at a distance and encouraged the new to be found in complex relations.

Re-defining agency was not the goal of my inquiry as representation is not the goal of post qualitative inquiry. My inquiry was not a linear journey towards a fixed endpoint to create a new definition of agency, it was an “irregular, fluid and messy experience” in developing a more inclusive and complex relationship with agency as a researcher and teacher (Gravett, 2021, p. 1). I experienced a disruptive unsettling and fundamentally questioned myself as the teacher I thought I knew. This troubling of the auto ‘I’ is not a new concept in post qualitative as post qualitative inquiry questions positionality as part of its inquiry process (Ball, 2016; Braidotti, 2014b; Bright, 2018; emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Jackson & Mazzei, 2008; Jones, 2016; van der Zaag, 2016). My autoethnographic writings from the different positions within the Kinder Tree: *The Intervals*, were my own creative expressions of exploring and questioning the sensations of teaching and researching from within my methodological framework as I troubled my own auto.

Post qualitative inquiry gathers through applications of epistemology, ontology, and other philosophies to phenomena to develop different bodies of understandings about the subjects and their relation to the world (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2018). The experimentation and the creative possibilities of Lively Stories and Speculative Fabulations were part of my applications to understand myself differently and became the potential for the new. Developing the Kinder Tree as my methodological framework helped shift my understanding of what different bodies means and helped me understand myself differently in my long-held relationship with agency as a human centric concept.

Troubling my human grasp on understanding and practicing agency was challenging. My understanding of teaching had been built on the teacher controlling, leading, and deciding what agency was and how it was taught. My inquiry contributed in its experimentation and crafting of stories as potential for growth. Researching with New Materialism helped reveal these different sensations of agency as in relation-to as I connected all bodies, objects and things to surface their connectivity of meaning-making with matter as lively (Taylor & Iverson, 2013). Agency as in relation-to and lively are not new posthuman concepts (Braidotti, 2013; Malone et al., 2020c; Murris, 2020c; Murris & Osgood, 2022) but my work builds on what agency as in relation-to feels like in an early childhood classroom, how it affects understandings and practices of agency and how posthuman agency contributes to opening up to the new over rehashing agency as a humanist concept in early childhood education.

## The Dangers of Teaching Inside but Desiring to Teach Outside of Curriculum

This sensation of wanting to go up against the dominant positioning of agency is also wrapped up in the hegemonic globalisation of early childhood education and perceptions of what early childhood teachers should be as described in the aptly titled *Nice Ladies Who Love Children: The Status of the Early Childhood Professional in Society* (Stonehouse, 1989). Australian early childhood education is an education that makes universal truth claims and others all rival discourses, an education where English words figure prominently; *development, quality, best practice, outcomes* drawing extensively from a few disciplinary perspectives mainly child development theories and economics (Moss, 2018b). These developmental theories are positioned as *truths* and mark the child as being on a certain trajectory that is highlighted as achievable through the positioning of learning as measurable through standards and outcomes in curriculum (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Hunkin, 2021). These measurable approaches to early childhood education sit alongside the definition of agency

mandated in curriculum. This means developmental approaches are also present in interpretations of the language used that underlies notions of agency which state that by giving children choice, voice, and opportunity to contribute to their world, I am teaching agency (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022). This positions children within human-centredness paradigms that position the child as an autonomous agent while also positioning them as inferior as not a fully developed adult person (Moss, 2018a; Murris, 2016).

The literature developed in the chapters *Understanding Curriculum Agency through Historical Philosophies and Critically Understanding Agency Through Literature and Acts of Agency* surfaced the complexities of teaching outside of curriculum. It involves an uphill battle that includes the social, political, and structural complexities making it challenging to forge a way through the few lines that encourage other ways of thinking about early childhood education in the EYLF. It would be challenging to lead with these theories and ideas in early childhood settings as they are not the dominant expected, they are received more like diversity add-ons than foundational underpinnings within curriculum. My research showed this when curriculum places First Nation's Peoples and culture within its notion of diversity and furthermore the way the definition of agency is guided within curriculum. Two examples of notions within curriculum, positioned as being inclusive but defined in use to meet the figurations expected from curriculum. In effect the inclusion of post-structural and critical theories in curriculum makes curriculum look rich in input and interpretation. However, the EYLF positioning them as theories that challenge traditional ways of teaching while leading with "developmental theories" as a different theory. This feels muddy as developmental theories are used as a prominent theory throughout the curriculum (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 12; Moss, 2018b). Teaching outside of curriculum feels out of reach in an already underpaid, undervalued, underfunded, and overworked sector of public education that is positioned as needing more regulation and regulatory gaze to improve it (Colebrook, 2017; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Giroux, 2013; Osgood, 2006; Pesonen & Valkonen, 2023).

## Curriculum Glimmers

With developmental theories positioned as best-practice teaching and learning, questioning these theories can be dangerous. In a highly regulated and mandated teaching role, it is challenging to challenge status quo. In terms of mandated curriculum, the early childhood curriculum in Australia is positioned as a framework that "provides broad direction" and thus is open for interpretation and even in this mandated framework there are glimmers of other ways (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 7). There are invitations to engage with post-structural and critical theories to challenge assumptions about curriculum and include issues of

“power, equity and social justice in early childhood settings” (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 13). When dominant configurations of agency are in effect othering children; power, equity, and social justice become important contributions through critical theories that need to be for fronted and discussed. In seibert’s research into decolonizing practices in the classroom, they explore notions of “glimmers as those things that give us hope” (2024, p. 5). Having post-structural and critical theories written in to curriculum offers entry points to further surface them in teaching and learning in response to dominant theories. In Garcia et al.’s research into the affect present in moments of care in the classroom, they describe glimmers as “ephemeral, visceral sensations that linger” (Garcia et al., 2021, p. 338). I found these visceral sensations through applying posthuman methods of storying to surface different understandings of agency in my classroom. Ephemeral might be understood as fleeting but the affects of change that lingered when my storying became inclusive of the material and non-human had a profound affect on my understanding of teaching and learning with agency in my classroom.

The EYLF’s language speaks of the framework as a guide to professional decision-making and acknowledges the implementation of relational and place-based pedagogies relevant to local communities (Australian Government. Department of Education, 2022, p. 7). However, curriculum positions relational pedagogy as building trust in human relationships, so even when venturing into more relational language, it remains within the humanist construct. The complexity of working outside of curriculum lies in that first you have to know about the theories explored in my inquiry and secondly, you have to hunt through the framework for these permissions which involves a lot of reading between the lines while performing first and foremost to the defined outcomes and definitions of what teaching and learning is as a technical role; a performance that is already heavily neoliberally task heavy, with forms of managerialism through micromanagement and accountability taking up the majority of time (Rogers et al., 2020).

## Posthuman Research Impacting Affective Teaching Outside of Curriculum

How do I understand and practice agency as an early childhood teacher? It took a tethered and untethered leap from the Kinder Tree into the unknown/unknowable agency that emerged and risked engaging in inquiring other-wise into myself as an agentic early childhood teacher. In Act Three, it took understanding agency as a tiny dog on a toilet as an extraordinary moment of learning as emerged out of an unpredictable moment. Wonderings, storying, and imaginative interpretations that include rather than separate contributed to understanding how I now thought about agency in

my classroom; an agency that looks for connections and encourages questions that might not have been thought about before but in that moment became part of teaching and researching.

Inquiring into agency became a de-territorializing process that unsettled the habitual language and sedimented thought that defined my practices, it surfaced that the material overlaps with linguistic and discursive present in teaching (St. Pierre, 2013). Understanding how linguistics, material and the discursive affect my teaching practices means that I continue to seek and strive to crack open glimmers that can send my practices in new directions. The affect of post-qualitative inquiry encouraged open ended curiosity over a need to lock down agentic action to learning outcomes. Furthermore, New Materialism challenged my long held dominant educational notions and presented children as knowledge producers rather than as consumers through their play (Murris, 2020b). It permitted changing my understanding of agency in play as forces of production rather than as evidence of learning knowledge consumed. Shifting my own teaching-self to think and be with children in a space that encourages production of knowledge and stops focusing on curriculum-fying children's play changed my relationship with teaching and learning.

Inquiring and developing new notions of relational agency made my classroom feel like a force of production with human and more-than-human being part of this complex network. A classroom assemblage that was hopeful in its everyday coming together, my early childhood classroom is exciting, dynamic, and always changing reflected in the agency present too. It felt expansive in its difference; optimistic and generative; it felt like a space that I wanted to be a part of when I first started studying teaching, however I had progressively eroded myself. My classroom could feel and be understood like a dissolution of curriculum's assumption of human exceptionality. My inquiry became an intentional move away from the field of the seen of politics, and aspirations of progress, to the field of the unseen as I drew from a world which is beyond or below appearances in *Lively Stories and Speculative Fabulations* (Chandler, 2024). As a generative force it brought a sense of possibility back into my teaching and understanding of the power of education.

## Limitations of Agency Inquiring

Theoretical limits of such a creative inquiry means that I have interpreted and used theory in a manner that reflected my thinking and doing from within my own early childhood classroom. Post-qualitative and post-human theory does not tell one how to think and do, it invites engagement in ways that open up thinking through connections and networks that are always unique to that assemblage. This creates a scope, depth, and application that is unique to those involved and affected within the inquired network. Additions, changes, and the affect of the theories involved

shift and change throughout the inquiry and make it unique. For myself, this gives me scope to interpret, understand, and be affected by the work of others in ways that make meaning to myself, and this brings difference to all that I engaged with in my post-qualitative inquiry.

Autoethnography is a reflexive inquiry methodology that placed myself as part of the inquiry and brings subjectivity. Criticisms of autoethnography believe it is centred on the self and does not go far enough into the wider socio-political of the topic of research (Reed-Danahay, 2020). The focus of my inquiry emerged as wanting to decentre the human self and understand agency in relation to the non and more-than-human alongside a more critical positioning of the socio-political that completely transformed my understanding of agency. The more-than-human, the historical, and the political impact on constructions and understandings of agency transformed my thinking and were foundational to the developments that occurred throughout my inquiry. Autoethnography felt far removed from self-indulgent and proved to challenge and inform my inquiry in ways that were unpredictable from my early positioning.

My inquiry emerged from one early childhood service and one teacher who reflected on their own practice in relation to a national curriculum. My empirical evidence was gathered from within my own teaching practices and through participant observations from within my classroom and inquired through by the very teacher practicing. I asked myself how I practiced and understood agency and my answer transformed from the beginning of the inquiry into something very different by the end as I became more informed about myself as a formed teacher. I believed agency was something tangible that was human centric and was delivered as content to children through forms of control and right or wrong agency practices. By the end of my inquiry, I understood agency like grains of sand that slip through your fingers, on the move, a concept that cannot be pinned down or defined and far removed from only connected to humans but rather involving connectivity with non-human and the more-than-human that also affect and are affected by agency.

Not limiting agency to human centric, not defining or positioning agency as teachable or learnable affects my findings as it goes against the dominant positioning and the locked in definition of agency present in national mandated curriculum. Rather locking in a definition or confirming agency as accurate in national curriculum challenges the significance of my findings. The agency that I experienced in my day to day in an early childhood classroom cannot be limited to a defined notion as it controls and manages my thinking and behaviour in the classroom. By bringing in the connective network of the more-than-human and troubling the human centric definition of agency I am questioning the limits of accuracy of defined agency. It is the findings of one classroom teacher in one early childhood service. As the subject in my inquiry, I reconciled with myself that analytical



limits and findings of a small inquiry are open to debate, but I hold up the transformation that I went through as evidence of the importance of such a small inquiry. It was small in scope but expansive in its experiment-ive-ness.

I felt the ethical risks are mostly borne by myself; the participants, location and data are not impacted in a damaging or negative manner. The ethical risks are mine to bear. Putting myself out there to the education and research sector through a raw and vulnerable autoethnography that challenges to status quo of thinking and teaching agency puts myself at risk. The dangers to the future of teaching and learning through my findings are about opening up critical thought and experimentation through other ways of researching and understanding of agency and this other-wise-way of critically thinking about teaching and learning in a sector that leads with developmental theories. The benefits include permitting teaching to be exciting, innovative, and attracting critical thinkers to the sector.

## Agency in Early Childhood Education: A Rallying Cry for Change

The future of the sector is complex and neoliberalism with its economisation of everything and its role in governance has “sunk its roots deep” into the systems of early childhood education and care (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. xv). Its focus on what education must produce and what education is for became fundamental critical questions throughout my dissertation as I questioned my teaching role in the sector. It became a catalyst for wanting change, for wanting different and I came to understand this is part of a long history of traditional pioneers and contemporary activists who fight for social justice and more equitable societies (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). I felt this rallying cry emerge from within my own work. It meant confronting my own perceptions of quality early childhood education and learning that they were not value-free but rather human capital economic agendas that had and continue to rapidly change early childhood work (Hunkin, 2021). It meant confronting the role or curriculum and policy as educational experience and understanding it was enmeshed with colonial contexts and the ongoing history of invasion in Australia (Smith, 2023). My situate place, a from the Kinder Tree forced me to acknowledge the complex entanglements of lands, histories and identities within renderings and representations of place and understand how curriculum and policy mediate how invasion can be normalised and how the children and I might experience education in and of place (Smith, 2023).

My inquiry into my own understanding and practice of agency became a generative project that reminded me that curriculum is “living, breathing, dying, re-remembering” and is not being understood and used as a tool at the service of my adult teaching self (Murriss & Reynolds, 2023, p.

7). I can as the classroom teacher question constructions and my role in reinforcing adult/child binaries and understanding concepts of development that holdup adults' claim to knowledge about children and childhoods. I can disrupt configurations of education that privilege the adult over child and have disrupted myself as the teacher by bringing in the agency of the material and pay attention to the more-than-human.

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## **Appendices**

# Appendix A—Children—Explanatory Statement & Consent Form



## EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Child

Project ID: **22216**

Project title: **Troubling the agentic teacher; an early childhood critical autoethnography**

**Chief Investigator's name:**

Dr Prasanna Srinivasan  
Department of Education  
Phone: 99047312  
email: Prasanna.srini@monash.edu

**Student's Name:**

Catherine Sundbye  
Phone: 0435292434  
email: Catherine.sundbye@monash.edu

You are invited to take part in this study. Please read/listen this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to speak to your family or teacher/researcher if there is something you want to know more about.

**What does the research involve?**

This research project is being done by your teacher Cathy. She wants to learn more about how to be a good teacher and what it means to be a teacher. Throughout the year she wants to watch you play, talk to you about being your teacher as she is interested to know your ideas and thoughts. She would also like to talk to your family about being a teacher too. She will be taking notes and having discussions with you, the whole kindergarten group and your families to learn more about being a teacher. You will not have to do anything different than what you normally do at kinder.

**Why were you chosen for this research?**

Cathy wants you to be part of this research project because you are in her kindergarten group.

**Consenting to participate in the project and withdrawing from the research**

If you would like to be a part of this project, you will need to look at the attached consent form, fill it in and return it to Cathy. You do not have to be part of this project, it is your choice to say "yes, I am happy to be a part of it", or "no, I do not want to be part of it". Even if you say yes at the beginning, you are always allowed to change your mind and decided to no longer be a part of it. As the student researcher and your teacher, Cathy will never be upset or cross if you change your mind. If you decided that you do not want to be a part of the project that is ok, you will not miss out on doing anything that the other children are doing.

Once the project is finished and Cathy has started to write about the project she cannot remove you from her writing. If Cathy writes about you, she will not be using your name or any information that might make people know who you are. You will be 'anonymous', no one will know who you are in the writing.

**Possible benefits and risks to participants**

If you decide to help Cathy's project by being a part of it, she will be able to learn and understand more about being a teacher. This will help Cathy become a better teacher and she will be able to share the information she learns with other teachers and researchers.

This project should not mean more work for you to do; you should be free to participate in your kindergarten as per normal. Occasionally, Cathy might want to have a quick chat with you or your family about the project, this should be about 5-10 minutes only. This project is about watching and thinking about what you normally do at kindergarten and should not involve any extra activities.

**Services on offer if adversely affected**

If you feel you are not okay when the researcher (your teacher Cathy) is talking to you. Please let her know and she will call your family.

**Confidentiality**

You can choose a different name that the researcher, Cathy can use when she talks and writes about what you did with her. Please let her know what you'd like to be named as.

**Storage of data**

Everything you tell Cathy and what she writes will be safely kept in a small locked cabinet in her office, so that no one can get it. When the university says that it is not needed, Cathy will carefully put it away so that no one else can use it.

**Use of data for other purposes**

Everything you tell Cathy and what she writes and collects from you about this project will be used without your real name, to speak in conferences and write in special books and papers. This can also be used in other bigger projects.

**Results**

You will hear about what's happening as and when it is shared with your families.

**Complaints**

Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC):

Executive Officer  
Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)  
Room 111, Chancellery Building D,  
26 Sports Walk, Clayton Campus  
Research Office  
Monash University VIC 3800

Tel: +61 3 9905 2052      Email: [muhrec@monash.edu](mailto:muhrec@monash.edu)      Fax: +61 3 9905 3831

Thank you,



**Prasanna Srinivasan**



# MONASH University

## ASSENT FORM

For Children

**Project ID:** 22216

**Project title:** Troubling the agentic teacher; an early childhood critical autoethnography

**Chief Investigator:** Dr Prasanna Srinivasan (Student: Catherine Sundbye)

I have been asked to join in this Monash University study. The letter that explained everything about this study has been read to me and I have had a chance to ask questions about it. I understand what this research project is about and would like to join in.

I understand that being in this study is my choice and that I can change my mind and choose to not be part of this study any time I like and that no one will be angry with me if I change my mind. I know that if I have any questions I can ask my teacher/parents or the researcher at any time.

I agree to:	Yes	No
Be observed at play by the researcher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The researcher talking to my family about myself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Join in with the group discussions about the project	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you want to be part of my project? Please circle:

 YES	 NO
--	--

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix B—Families—Explanatory Statement & Consent Form



### EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

#### Families

Project ID: 22216

Project title: **Troubling the agentic teacher; an early childhood critical autoethnography**

**Chief Investigator's name:**

Dr Prasanna Srinivasan

Department of Education

Phone: 99047312

email: Prasanna.srini@monash.edu

**Student's Name:**

Catherine Sundbye

Phone: 0435292434

email: Catherine.sundbye@monash.edu

You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researchers via the phone numbers or email addresses listed above.

**What is the Study About?**

Through a critical autoethnography, a form of self-study, I want to inquire and question the tensions and trajectories that reside within my own practices and understanding of agency as a teacher. I want to examine how I view(ed) myself as a professionally autonomous early childhood teacher and what that means in the current climate of the early childhood education and care sector.

This research project involves a self-examination; reflecting on my work, relationships and understandings of my role as a professional teacher of your child. There will be no changes to the normal interactions, practices or relationships developed between teacher/family throughout this research period. The objective of this research is to gain a better insight into teachers' perspectives of their own identity and understandings of the challenges that arise from working within the current climate of early childhood education.

**What is involved?**

The researcher will be gathering information as per normal teacher requirements over the course of the year, engaging in informal communication (chats, sharing of stories, notes and emails). There is not expectation of families to be doing anything more or different than the normal engagement with the teacher researcher.

The children's participation in their kindergarten program will not be intentionally altered in anyway. The researcher may wish to engage the children in occasional discussions around the progress of the research project. This will be along with keeping the families informed as they are also part of this project.

**Why were you chosen for this research?**

You have been chosen to participate in this research project as your child attends to kindergarten group where this project is being carried out. All families whose children are enrolled in the kindergarten group that the researcher teaches are being approached to be a part of the project. The service has given approval for the project to be carried out and approved the researcher making contact with you.

**Invitation to Participate**

Please be advised that any participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice. To consent to participate in the project you are required to fill in and sign the attached consent form.

**Why Be Involved?**

*By participating in this study, you will help create a number of possible benefits:*

Possible benefits to your service from participating in the study include:



- Being involved in academic research as part of promotion further developments in early childhood education and care.
- Being part of a PhD project aimed at bringing to the forefront in-depth knowledge of a practicing early childhood teacher.

Possible benefits to society could include:

- Bringing new insights to teacher's perspectives of their own identity and understandings of the challenges that arise from working within the current climate of early childhood education.

There should be little inconvenience or discomfort to participants participating in this project. The research project is a self-study, any information collected about participants is additional information to help deepen the researcher's understanding of themselves.

Risks/side-effects might include-

Additional conversations with your child's teacher –occasional/low risk

Additional email contact with your child's teacher – occasional/low risk

#### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

All information you supply will be kept in the strictest confidence. Any names and contact details will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data concerning participants. In the final report, participants will be referred to by a pseudonym. We will remove any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity. Any information used for publication, including reporting to the DET will be de-identified or disguised to preserve anonymity.

#### **Storage of data**

Storage of the data collected will adhere to the University regulations and kept in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet for 5 years. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

#### **Results**

Results will be published in the form of a PhD thesis. Academic articles using the results may be published in the form of articles in publications. If you would like copies of the thesis or any published publications you can contact the researcher directly.

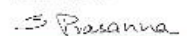
#### **Complaints**

Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC):

Executive Officer  
Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)  
Room 111, Chancellery Building D,  
26 Sports Walk, Clayton Campus  
Research Office  
Monash University VIC 3800

Tel: +61 3 9905 2052      Email: [muhrec@monash.edu](mailto:muhrec@monash.edu)      Fax: +61 3 9905 3831

Thank you,



**Prasanna Srinivasan**



## CONSENT FORM

### Families

**Project ID:** 22216

**Project title:** Troubling the agentic teacher; an early childhood critical autoethnography

**Chief Investigator:** Dr Prasanna Srinivasan (Student: Catherine Sundbye)

I have been asked to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project.

I consent to the following:	Yes	No
Informal conversations about the research topic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Informal sharing of personal stories about the topic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email exchanges about the research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Allow the researcher to make notes about the conversations/stories/emails shared	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Allow the researcher to observe and engage with my child about the research topic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C—Colleagues—Explanatory Statement & Consent Form

### 1

#### EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

##### Colleagues

Project ID: **22216**

Project title: **Troubling the agentic teacher; an early childhood critical autoethnography**

**Chief Investigator's name:**

Dr Prasanna Srinivasan  
Department of Education  
Phone: 99047312  
email: Prasanna.srini@monash.edu

**Student's Name:**

Catherine Sundbye  
Phone: 0435292434  
email: Catherine.sundbye@monash.edu

You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researchers via the phone numbers or email addresses listed above.

**What is the Study About?**

Through a critical autoethnography, a form of self-study, I want to inquire and question the tensions and trajectories that reside within my own practices and understanding of agency as a teacher. I want to examine how I view(ed) myself as a professionally autonomous early childhood teacher and what that means in the current climate of the early childhood education and care sector. This research project involves a self-examination; reflecting on my work, relationships and understandings of my role as a professional teacher. There will be no changes to the normal interactions, practices or relationships developed between teacher/colleague throughout this research period. The objective of this research is to gain a better insight into teachers' perspectives of their own identity and understandings of the challenges that arise from working within the current climate of early childhood education.

**What is involved?**

The researcher will be gathering information as per normal teacher requirements over the course of the year, engaging in informal communication (chats, sharing of stories, notes and emails). There is no expectation of colleagues to be doing anything more or different than the normal engagement with the teacher researcher.

**Why were you chosen for this research?**

The Brunswick Kindergarten team has been chosen to participate in this research project as this is the service where the researcher teaches.



### **Invitation to Participate**

Please be advised that any participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice. To consent to participate in the project you are required to fill in and sign the attached consent form.

Once the researcher has finished collecting data and starts analyzing and writing about the information collected it becomes difficult to remove a participant's input. All participants will have a pseudonym and be mostly unidentifiable in the presentation of data. Please speak to the researcher if you require further clarification.

### **Why Be Involved?**

*By participating in this study, you will help create a number of possible benefits:*

Possible benefits to your service from participating in the study include:

- Being involved in academic research as part of promotion further developments in early childhood education and care.
- Being part of a PhD project aimed at bringing to the forefront in-depth knowledge of a practicing early childhood teacher.

Possible benefits to society could include:

- Bringing new insights to teacher's perspectives of their own identity and understandings of the challenges that arise from working within the current climate of early childhood education.

There should be little inconvenience or discomfort to participants participating in this project. The research project is a self-study; any information collected about participants is additional information to help deepen the researcher's understanding of them self.

Risks/side-effects might include-

Additional conversations with colleagues—occasional/low risk

Additional email contact with colleagues— occasional/low risk

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

All information you supply will be kept in the strictest confidence. Any names and contact details will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data concerning participants. In the final report, participants will be referred to by a pseudonym. We will remove any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity. Any information used for publication, including reporting to the DET will be de-identified or disguised to preserve anonymity.

### **Storage of data**

Storage of the data collected will adhere to the University regulations and kept in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet for 5 years. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

### **Results**

Results will be published in the form of a PhD thesis. Academic articles using the results may be published in the form of articles in publications. If you would like copies of the thesis or any published publications, you can contact the researcher directly.

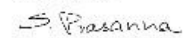
### **Complaints**

Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC):

Executive Officer  
Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)  
Room 111, Chancellery Building D,  
26 Sports Walk, Clayton Campus  
Research Office  
Monash University VIC 3800

Tel: +61 3 9905 2052      Email: [muhrec@monash.edu](mailto:muhrec@monash.edu)      Fax: +61 3 9905 3831

Thank you,



**Prasanna Srinivasan**



## CONSENT FORM

### Colleagues

**Project ID:** 22216

**Project title:** Troubling the agentic teacher; an early childhood critical autoethnography

**Chief Investigator:** Dr Prasanna Srinivasan (Student: Catherine Sundbye)

I have been asked to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project.

I consent to the following:	Yes	No
Informal conversations about the research topic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Informal sharing of stories both professional/personal about the topic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email exchanges about the research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Allow the researcher to make notes about the conversations/stories/emails shared	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



# Appendix D—The Service—Explanatory Statement & Consent Form

## 1 EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

### Service

Project ID: **22216**

Project title: **Troubling the agentic teacher; an early childhood critical autoethnography**

**Chief Investigator's name:**

Dr Prasanna Srinivasan  
Department of Education  
Phone: 99047312  
email: Prasanna.srini@monash.edu

**Student's Name:**

Catherine Sundbye  
Phone: 0435292434  
email: Catherine.sundbye@monash.edu

The service of which you are the director has been invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researchers via the phone numbers or email addresses listed above.

**What is the Study About?**

Through a critical autoethnography, a form of self-study, I want to inquire and question the tensions and trajectories that reside within my own practices and understanding of agency as a teacher. I want to examine how I view(ed) myself as a professionally autonomous early childhood teacher and what that means in the current climate of the early childhood education and care sector.

This research project involves a self-examination; reflecting on my work, relationships and understandings of my role as a professional teacher. There will be no changes to the normal interactions, practices or relationships developed between teacher/colleague throughout this research period. The objective of this research is to gain a better insight into teachers' perspectives of their own identity and understandings of the challenges that arise from working within the current climate of early childhood education.

**What is involved?**

The service will be asked to Forward a "*letter of invitation to participate in a research project*" to families that attended the service in 2020 working within my own (Catherine Sundbye's) programs. Families that agree to participate in the project will then have direct contact with the researcher, Catherine Sundbye. A poster will be displayed within the classroom with information about the research project to bring awareness of the ongoing project and for clear disclosure about the project.

The researcher will be gathering information as per normal teacher requirements over the course of the year, engaging in informal communication (chats, sharing of stories, notes and emails). There is no expectation of children/families or colleagues to be doing anything more or different than the normal engagement with the teacher researcher.



### Invitation to Participate

Please be advised that any participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice. To consent to participate in the project you are required to fill in and sign the attached consent form.

Once the researcher has finished collecting data and starts analyzing and writing about the information collected it becomes difficult to remove a participant's input. All participants will have a pseudonym and be mostly unidentifiable in the presentation of data. Please speak to the researcher if you require further clarification.

### Why Be Involved?

*By participating in this study, you will help create a number of possible benefits:*

Possible benefits to your service from participating in the study include:

- Being involved in academic research as part of promotion further developments in early childhood education and care.
- Being part of a PhD project aimed at bringing to the forefront in-depth knowledge of a practicing early childhood teacher.

Possible benefits to society could include:

- Bringing new insights to teacher's perspectives of their own identity and understandings of the challenges that arise from working within the current climate of early childhood education.

There should be little inconvenience or discomfort to participants participating in this project. The research project is a self-study; any information collected about participants is additional information to help deepen the researcher's understanding of them self.

Risks/side-effects might include-

Additional conversations with colleagues/families/children – occasional/low risk

Additional email contact with colleagues/families/children – occasional/low risk

### Privacy and Confidentiality

All information you supply will be kept in the strictest confidence. Any names and contact details will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data concerning participants. In the final report, participants will be referred to by a pseudonym. We will remove any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity. Any information used for publication, including reporting to the DET will be de-identified or disguised to preserve anonymity.

### Storage of data

Storage of the data collected will adhere to the University regulations and kept in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet for 5 years. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

### Results

Results will be published in the form of a PhD thesis. Academic articles using the results may be published in the form of articles in publications. If you would like copies of the thesis or any published publications, you can contact the researcher directly.

### Complaints

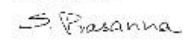
Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC):



Executive Officer  
Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)  
Room 111, Chancellery Building D,  
26 Sports Walk, Clayton Campus  
Research Office  
Monash University VIC 3800

Tel: +61 3 9905 2052      Email: [muhrec@monash.edu](mailto:muhrec@monash.edu)      Fax: +61 3 9905 3831

Thank you,



**Prasanna Srinivasan**



## CONSENT FORM

### Service

**Project ID:** 22216

**Project title:** Troubling the agentic teacher; an early childhood critical autoethnography

**Chief Investigator:** Dr Prasanna Srinivasan (Student: Catherine Sundbye)

I have been asked to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project.

I consent to the following:	Yes	No
The researcher carrying out informal conversations about the research topic with colleagues/families/children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The researcher carrying out informal sharing of personal stories about the topic with colleagues/families/children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The researcher carrying out email exchanges about the research with colleagues/families/children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The researcher observing the children within the researched groups and taking notes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Service and Director: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature : \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_