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ABSTRACT
Young children's voices have been nearly absent in the study of belonging during the early years. In this article, we propose a more inclusive understanding about *how* to study belonging, as well as *what else* must be studied in early childhood education. The importance of conducting research *with* young children rather than *on* them is provided, and factors contributing to a sense of belonging or (un)belonging in early childhood are examined. With a commitment to understanding first-hand from young children's own perspectives, research agendas can be more authentically and inclusively achieved.

A sense of belonging is widely acknowledged and valued in early childhood education and care. The shared social experiences infants, toddlers, and young children encounter with other peers, as well as adults outside the family, provide an important sense of individual and collective identity. Yet, Yuval-Davis (2006) maintained 'belonging becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way' (199). Despite general agreement about the critical role of belonging during the early years, the notion of belonging turns into a political issue when it is perceived to be in jeopardy. And paradoxically, young children's voices have been largely absent from the study of belonging suggesting that their first-hand insights, experiences and perspectives do not belong.

The research base on belonging and early childhood education and care shows that most studies originate from two geographic locations: Australia (Harrison et al. 2017; Joerdens 2014; Kervin and Mantei 2016; Little and Stapleton 2021; Niland 2015) and Nordic countries (Boldermo 2019, 2020; Grindheim 2017; Kyrönlampi, Uitto, and Puroila 2021; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021; Puroila et al. 2021; Salonen, Laakso, and Sevón 2016). The collective body of studies on belonging and young children's experiences in early childhood education and care has been conducted in a variety of settings, including kindergarten, early childhood centres, and preschool, and the majority of research focuses on children above three years, although there is a growing body of work on infants and toddlers (Boldermo 2020; Stratigos 2016).

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All of the studies use a qualitative or mixed methods research design. Essentially, the methods used to study belonging during the early years are mostly observational studies and primarily from an adults' viewpoint, although a few studies focused on children's first-hand perspectives (Joerdens 2014; Nutbrown and Clough 2009; Wastell and Degotardi 2017; Whiting et al. 2021). Despite widespread agreement about the critical role that belonging plays in a young child's life, most of the research has been conducted *on* children instead of *with* them. Therefore, adults' perspectives and interpretations, as opposed to children's, have shaped an understanding of a sense of belonging during the early years. If we are committed to understanding belonging in early childhood, how can this be realised if young children do not belong in a substantive way to the construction of this knowledge? All too often, Western-centric research relies upon one positivist truth through one conception of knowledge (Leavy and Harris 2019); however, there are many perspectives to draw from that can add multiple truths to children's lived experiences on belonging. By building upon children's natural curiosity and their 'wide-awakeness' of the world around them (Freire 2021; Greene 2014), the value that children add to the knowledge-base on belonging is not only critical but indispensable.

There has been an increase in studies on belonging and early childhood since the early 2000s, and yet there is still a dearth of research involving young children's voices or contributions. There is growing interest in belonging during the early years from a variety of perspectives such as home and families (David and Kilderry 2019; Egilsson, Einarsdóttir, and Dockett 2021), teacher beliefs and practices (Baker 2019; Souto-Manning et al. 2021; Tillett and Wong 2018), and a combination of teacher and children's perceptions (Karlsudd 2021; Puroila et al. 2021). We believe that the study of belonging in early childhood education and care needs to be more inclusive of children's voices.

The purpose of this article is to propose fresh avenues to advance the study of belonging *with* young children. We deliberately chose to narrow the focus of this article to children's sense of belonging within early education settings, given the wide-ranging interest in belonging from multiple dimensions as noted above. The intention of this article was not to conduct an exhaustive literature review on belonging, but rather offer a more inclusive understanding on *how* to study belonging, as well as *what else* should be considered. In the following section, we provide a context for the theoretical and conceptual perspective on belonging in early childhood education and care. We offer a snapshot on what is known about belonging, albeit mostly from an adult-driven lens, by answering questions such as: What role does a child's identity play in understanding belonging? How does the perception of children's identities intersect with the political nature of belonging?

Contextual framings of belonging and young children

Although a sense of belonging can arguably be found within most early childhood frameworks or curricula around the world, it has been deliberately positioned as the centre of two of the most widely-respected national guidelines. As a result, attention on belonging and young children has increased globally over the past two decades. Specifically, Mana whenua (i.e. belonging) plays a central role in New Zealand's Te Whāriki Early Childhood Curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2017), and belonging is clearly represented in the title of another set of national early childhood guidelines: *Belonging,*

Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). Despite general agreement on the importance of belonging during the early years, ongoing debates remain related to the theory, philosophy, and politics of belonging and young children (Peers 2018; Peers and Fleer 2014; Sumsion and Wong 2011).

Conceptual understandings of belonging during the early years

Growing attention to conceptual and practical framings of belonging and young children was sparked in the first decade of 2000, in a special journal issue on young children's sense of belonging and positive identity (Bernard Van Leer Foundation 2008), as well as a book chapter (Singer and de Haan 2010) on belonging in multicultural childcare settings. These and other conceptual, theoretical, and descriptive discussions on belonging during the early years have increased since 2010. In 2018, a special issue was published on interrogating belonging in early childhood environments through theoretical and practice perspectives from researchers in Australia and New Zealand (Mitchell, Wong, and Rameka 2018). Researchers in Nordic countries and the United States, contributed to another topical journal issue on the process, structures, and politics of belonging in various early childhood educational environments (Johansson and Puroila 2021). This growing interest in belonging during the early years involves fluctuating and intersecting influences including individual, interpersonal, and institutional.

In spite of, or perhaps because of these dynamic aspects, ways of conceptualising belonging in early childhood education and care continue to emerge. Sumsion and Wong (2011) developed an intricate mapping of the complex understandings of belonging to illustrate different elements related to belonging, while also pointing out the noticeable absence of conversations on the politics of belonging during the early years. In their cartography, Sumsion and Wong introduced the ways of belonging in which intersecting dimensions from the literature were identified: emotional, social, cultural, spatial, temporal, physical, spiritual, moral/ethical, political, and legal, as well as multiple axes representing dynamics and politics such as categorisation, resistance and desire, and performativity. This understanding provided an important context for investigating the myriad interconnecting and dynamic aspects associated with belonging during the early years.

Johansson and Puroila (2021), who also proposed ways of framing belonging within early childhood, suggested that there are four interconnected aspects of belonging throughout the research-base: belonging as a universal and basic human need, a sense of being connected, an acknowledgement of belonging to specific groups, and a political frame from both societal and individual levels. The conceptualisation of belonging in early childhood education and care appears multi-layered and deserves greater examination, particularly with regard to situating identities.

The influence of identities on belonging in early childhood

The complexity and political nature of belonging in early childhood seem to be largely influenced by the perspective of who is doing the perceiving (i.e. self, others). Early childhood belonging has to not only be understood across multiple perspectives and different

configurations, but experienced in a multitude of ways, and from a continual changing of time, place, and space. Age, for example, has garnered increasing attention related to belonging and young children. Much of the research on belonging in early childhood has been conducted with children above age three, but there is a growing body of studies examining infants and toddlers (Little and Stapleton 2021; Niland 2015; Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014; Sumsion, Harrison, and Stapleton 2018). A challenge in studying infant belonging is the risk of misinterpretation by researchers who may not be familiar with or fully understand an infant's behaviour, communication, culture, or temperament.

Sumsion, Harrison, and Stapleton (2018) explored the difficulties in observing infant belonging. They suggested that caution must be taken when considering belonging of infants because this must be done within a context that is dynamic and multi-dimensional. In addition, Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion (2014) maintained there is complexity as well as layered tensions when studying belonging in the youngest, most vulnerable population (i.e. danger of 'othering' infants based on their differences in development). Furthermore, Stratigos (2016) and Sumsion, Harrison, and Stapleton (2018) draw attention to accounting for the multiple factors associated with a child's environment when studying belonging in early childhood and care settings. This assemblage, or the dynamic set of factors, materials, people, and so on, influences a child within their environment.

A sense of belonging is often studied within adult–infant dyads working from the misguided assumption infants are egocentric and insular in their ability to make connections due to dependence and lack of mobility (Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014). A focus on peer groups, as opposed to examining adult–infant dyads, may provide more robust insights related to belonging during the very early years (Harrison et al. 2017; Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014). There are unique, complex and age-specific considerations that influence the study of belonging with infants and toddlers.

In addition to age, there are other identity markers which influence a sense of belonging for young children. Skattebol (2005, 2006) discussed gendered and racialised influences that contributed to an insider versus outsider status in early childhood education and care settings.

Young children's perceptions of linguistic and/or cultural diversity also contributed to their understandings of belonging or (un)belonging (Puroila et al. 2021; Whiting et al. 2021). Throughout the body of knowledge on belonging, there are intersecting identities such as culture and ethnicity in which some children are perceived as Other and therefore positioned as outsiders in early childhood education settings (Harrison et al. 2017; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021; Taylor et al. 2008). Identities, such as immigrant status and particularly immigrants of colour, can be perceived and positioned as outsiders in early childhood, while the dominant group is viewed as insiders (Guo and Dalli 2016; Souto-Manning et al. 2021). Gender, ethnicity, language, and culture have been shown to play a role in young children's sense of belonging or (un)belonging, however, the focus on disability has not received as much attention in early childhood.

The small body of research on belonging and young learners with disabilities (Joerdens 2014; Macartney 2012) encompasses related concepts such as *membership* (Erwin and Guintini 2000; Orsati 2015; Schwartz 2000) and *citizenship* (McAnelly and Gaffney 2019; Nutbrown and Clough 2009). Over 30 years ago, Schnorr (1990)

introduced the concepts of belonging and membership in one of the first examinations documenting the voices of young children. In this study, peers described their perceptions about Peter, a child with disabilities, who was perceived as not belonging to the class because he was not present fulltime, among other factors.

Young children have their own understanding of belonging that are not the same as adult's perceptions. When presented with the opportunity, young children identified and examined issues and solutions associated with belonging and citizenship that they deemed important (Nutbrown and Clough 2009). How young children perceive difference plays an important role in understanding how they make sense of belonging.

The deficit-based lens of difference in early childhood

Given the myriad of factors that can impact belonging in early childhood education and care, exclusion, stigma, marginalisation, or isolation are critical topics, particularly for children who are marked or perceived as Other. Arndt (2018) argued for an in-depth re-conceptualisation of beliefs, practices, and perceptions of cultural Otherness to support early childhood teachers' sense of belonging, which will naturally impact how children experience belonging in their early childhood environments.

It is possible for a child to be associated with a particular group (i.e. classroom, playgroup), but not necessarily feel a connection. Characterising a sense of belonging as togetherness is dangerous if based on uniformity or conformity. Specifically, 'when belonging is achieved primarily through familiarity and "sameness", it can deliberately or implicitly exclude those who do not fit the mould' (Press et al. 2018, 3). Acknowledging the multiple, interconnected aspects of identity markers (i.e. language, age, ability, ethnicity, culture, social class, gender identity, and so on) provide a fuller understanding of belonging in the lives of young children. Specifically, Souto-Manning et al. (2021) called for a 'more expansive, more humanizing, and much more inclusive concepts of and approaches to belonging' (17). Some young children during their first school experience may have difficulty developing a secure sense of belonging particularly if beliefs about difference are translated through a deficit-oriented lens.

The perception of Otherness can be addressed by directly promoting a sense of belonging in early childhood settings through classroom narratives on pride and dignity, critical reflection, and inclusive practices (Beneke et al. 2019; Erwin, Bacon, and Lalvani 2021). The purposeful selection of pedagogy, policies, and curricula educators choose, must affirm prideful understandings about human variation and difference. How diversity and difference are embraced or silenced often reveal power dynamics in classrooms and society.

Power and the discourse of difference: how teachers talk

Power dynamics between adults and young children shape a sense of belonging or (un)belonging in early childhood education and care. These politics of belonging are influenced when narratives, discourses, and perceptions 'separate the world population into "us" and "them"' (Yuval-Davis 2006, 204). The political nature of belonging, created by a socially and politically produced binary of us and them, or insiders

and outsiders, naturally positions young children either with a sense of belonging or (un)belonging (Johansson and Rosell 2021; Puroila et al. 2021; Stratigos, Bradley, and Sumsion 2014). This socially induced dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' creates a grouping mechanism in classrooms and schools that inherently structures a hierarchy of power. Puroila et al. (2021) noted a growing body of work examining young children's belonging and the recognition that positional power is an integral aspect of belonging. Resistance can occur when juggling power relations and societally-imposed categories of identity (Eidsvåg and Rosell 2021; Sumsion and Wong 2011). The jockeying for position in relationship to power creates a sense of belonging for some children, but produces circumstances that influence a sense of (un)belonging for others.

And yet, young learners can be supported in managing and negotiating these power dynamics. When children are provided with space, and at times, purposeful guidance, they are able to assume the role of 'active agents' (Eidsvåg and Rosell 2021, 3). Specifically, power dynamics embedded within educators' discourse and practices naturally impacts a group's sense of belonging (or not). For example, educators who exerted power to maintain classroom control ostracised certain young children with disabilities (Orsati 2015), yet the same 'discourse of control and conditional membership were rarely applied to children that did not have a disability label' (130). Indeed, there are deliberate pedagogical factors and structures that promote a sense of belonging for those from dominant groups while simultaneously creating (un)belonging for young children whose language, culture, and nation of origin differed from the dominant group (Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021; Puroila et al. 2021), thus suggesting that a sense of belonging is influenced by how power is perceived and enacted in early childhood settings. In this section, we underscored what is known about belonging, largely through adult perspectives. Studying belonging in ways that feature young children's voices, especially in various stages of the research process, (re)affirms the significance of their lived experiences.

A more expansive study of belonging with young children

Given that belonging during the early years is dynamic and complex, we identified consistently emerging topics in the knowledge base which offer a broader understanding of belonging and young children. When working to identify patterns and themes, 'instead of asking, what is here? we can ask, what is missing?' (Ryan and Russell Bernard 2003, 93), which is the question that shaped this article. We believe that studying belonging in early childhood education and care primarily through the lens of adults is inadequate and unjust. How can a sense of belonging be fully understood, if children's perspectives on what belonging means are essentially absent? How can human variation (e.g. ability, age, culture, gender identity, class, and so on) be understood within a context of belonging, if young children representing these identities are not specifically sought out to contribute to these understandings? By learning directly from and with young learners about belonging, a more inclusive articulation is achieved, which ultimately impacts on their lives and informs larger social action and research agendas.

Young children as researchers

Positioning children as researchers fulfils their rights, and acknowledges their competence, dignity, and agency during the early years (Graham, Powell, and Taylor 2015), as well as assists researchers and educators to better understand how young minds conceptualise belonging from a collective as well as individual perspectives. Although studies are traditionally conducted *on* children who act as study participants, what if youngsters worked in partnership with adults during various stages of the inquiry process? To gain a more authentic perspective of belonging during the early years, young voices must be consistently sought out to ensure ample representation from the very stakeholders who are being studied. Despite complexities and opportunities for engaging children as researchers (i.e. consent, ownership, decision-making, data interpretation) (Colliver 2017; Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry 2009; Murray 2016), there is a growing body of studies on belonging and early childhood education and care in which young children are researchers (Kervin and Mantei 2016; Kyrönlampi, Uitto, and Puroila 2021; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021; Wastell and Degotardi 2017). When children are positioned as researchers, their lived experiences of belonging are emphasised (Joerdens 2014).

In studies where children are observed, researchers conceptualise belonging from adult perspectives, which tend to be situated within research and theoretical structures. The capacity of researchers to understand the child's world is restricted because adults are outsiders in a child's world (Corsaro 2020; Kyrönlampi, Uitto, and Puroila 2021). In early childhood settings, there is emerging research on belonging from children's first-hand perspectives through the use of voice recordings, photo-telling, samples of their work, photographs, and digital storytelling (Kervin and Mantei 2016; Kinnunen and Puroila 2016; Kyrönlampi, Uitto, and Puroila 2021; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021; Wastell and Degotardi 2017).

Boldermo (2020) maintained that taking photos, recording videos, and discussing the recorded content with children provides multiple, insightful ways into children's meaning making of belonging. In addition, young children receive critical messages that they are trusted in important endeavours, and also learn how to actively participate in the research process. Dockett and Perry (2007) argued that children are 'valuable and trustworthy informants' (60). When children's first-hand perspectives are sought out, questions like 'what exactly does one belong to or with' and 'who decides who belongs and who does not' contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how social experiences among peers influence belonging.

Peer culture and belonging

When young children enter school, they generally experience a diverse society including peers whose identities differ from their own. The diverse classroom society, which often differs from children's experiences at home and with extended family, influences young children's sense of belonging or (un)belonging in a peer culture. Research suggested young children with disabilities experience both a strong sense of belonging as well as exclusion within the peer culture (Erwin and Guintini 2000; Wolfberg et al. 1999).

The notion of peer communities or peer culture arises as a distinctive theme in early years research that many scholars have acknowledged as a contributing element to young

children's belonging (Boldermo 2020; Erwin and Guintini 2000; Johansson and Rosell 2021; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021). The term peer culture was originally explained by Corsaro (2020)

> children develop a strong desire to do things with each other … to participate and establish communal sharing … [and] children's desire to challenge adult authority and gain control of their lives and develop a collective identity. (11)

Peer culture occurs as children co-create with their peers a shared set of rules, values, routines, activities, and identities with no adult interference or input. Adults gain a more authentic expression of the collective and individual sense of belonging about children from their own perspectives. And yet, a mostly adult-generated body of research exists on belonging during the early years, which is incongruent with the child-generated nature of peer culture.

Peer culture in early childhood reflects a complex and interrelated set of understandings. Educators support the construction and maintenance of peer culture during the early years by maintaining a classroom and school climate that encourages equity, dignity, and a sense of community. To support the peer culture by fostering belonging and minimising exclusion, educators must deliberately create an inclusive and equitable environment (Erwin and Guintini 2000; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021). Young children's curiosity might generate questions about what exactly one belongs to or with or who decides who belongs and who does not. Exploring these and other questions with young children to identify, challenge, and change barriers can elevate belonging in the classroom, school, and beyond. In addition to understanding belonging within peer communities or culture that young children create themselves, there is another kind of belonging, specifically about connections to places, that has received insufficient attention, even though an increased focus would provide a more inclusive and critical understanding during the early years.

Belonging and place-based pedagogy

How is the meaning of belonging constructed or constricted? What institutional structures shape or influence belonging? Early childhood teachers must commit to fostering belonging among all young learners and situate this as a top curricular priority (Johansson and Puroila 2021). Young children's experiences and perspectives of belonging during the early years are typically positioned among people or physical spaces such as classrooms or schools. Therefore, a more expansive study of belonging during the early years must encompass the notion of place. There has been growing interest in young children's place-belonging among practitioners, scholars, and researchers (Boldermo 2019; Duhn 2012; Fegter and Mock 2019; Hamm 2015; Kernan 2010; Kyrönlampi, Uitto, and Puroila 2021; Wastell and Degotardi 2017). Leggett and Ford (2016) explained critical pedagogy of place (CPP):

> The idea of place is related to place-belonging, which relates to emotions of familiarity and feeling "at home" in a location. Although critical pedagogy of place began in the USA as a reaction against its educational reform agenda, it resonates in the early childhood context in Australia, because it reminds us of the purpose of early childhood education and asks us to consider the space and place in which it is provided. (193)

The focus of place in early childhood education challenges the idea that young children learn exclusively within a classroom and shifts learning to a more unrestricted, contextualised space outside of school walls. Place-based education involves connecting various social and ecological realms outside of school and promoting environmental justice and opportunities to make ecological links (Altman, Stires, and Weseen 2015). Place-based pedagogy provides a pathway for young children to understand all aspects of physical, historical, and geographic locations, enabling a stronger connection to place and elevating young children's perspectives of belonging. Therefore, incorporating a place-based pedagogy into young children's education promotes their conceptualisation of place as more than just an environment, and encourages young children to critically analyse nuanced and complex connections between the past, present, and future (Hamm 2015).

Place-based education, however, is not a new concept. Dewey (1915) advocated in the early 1900s: 'Experience has its geographical aspect, its artistic and its literacy, its scientific and its historical sides. All studies arise from aspects of the one earth, and the one life lived upon it' (91), emphasising the importance of a holistic understanding and profound respect for the natural world. Moreover, the scope of place-based education is not limited to a child's physical location but extends further to historical aspects, injustices, and cultural diversity. Implementing these viewpoints into education is an opportunity to contextualise young children's learning and promote social justice, allowing them to construct their reality and question authority (Deringer 2017). Young children experience so many technological distractions in their lives that deter them from focusing on the natural world around them (Altman, Stires, and Weseen 2015). Incorporating a place-conscious education with young children encourages them to wonder more than just the space they are in, but the natural, historical, and social environment around them. Specifically, Erwin, Bacon, and Lalvani (2021) affirmed that 'place represents a deep respect for interconnectedness between history, traditions, knowledge, and rituals' (9). Toward this end, young children become more conscious of place by studying nature, environmental and ecological justice, and historical and cultural perspectives.

The study of place and belonging during the early years must reflect the fundamental importance of families, extended families and communities, and how these influences impact on young children's identities and abilities to fully engage with others. When a child comes from a linguistic background that differs from the dominant language in an early learning centre, for example, family members will be the key to assisting educators in accessing a child's sense of locatedness within family and cultural values. For young children, particularly infants, ways of belonging may differ significantly from those of the dominant culture within a childcare setting, so families are crucial to understanding how to support a child's sense of belonging. Educators and researchers must be highly aware and responsive to the linguistic, cultural and ethnic identity locatedness in early childhood education.

Engaging young children in the study of belonging: insights and implications

The study on belonging in early childhood education and care has been inadequate because the very perspectives of those being studied have been largely ignored. If we

pursue a collaborative approach *with* children, and incorporate peer culture and place-based pedagogy, a more comprehensive research agenda that questions injustice and elevates equity is achieved. By seeking and documenting young children's voices, especially in partnership with them, an understanding of belonging in early years research is more inclusive and credible. Perhaps most importantly, there is an inherent appreciation for the competence, knowledge, trustworthiness, and curiosity that young children provide because of their age, not in spite of it.

By situating children as reliable sources of data and essential co-constructors of knowledge, there is a shift to a partnership model of children and adults working together to design, generate, and interpret research about belonging. Digital storytelling, for example, was deliberately selected so young children could identify and pursue what was important to them through visual and oral documentation (Kervin and Mantei 2016). In these early stages of research, young children may identify problems, questions, or fascinations they want to investigate and determine how they want to gather information and artefacts about their chosen topic. By designing interviews protocols, determining observation parameters, or organising focus groups, young children actively engage in decision-making about the research process.

During data collection, a variety of representations can document the lives and worlds of children in their own voices. For example, in photo-telling (Kyrönlampi, Uitto, and Puroila 2021; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021) children take photographs which enable adults to gain insight into young minds through an integration of narrative and visual data. A combination of young children's voice recordings, work samples and photographic expressions provided a rich context about how belonging is conceptualised (Wastell and Degotardi 2017). During the implementation of the research process, children's roles in collecting, analysing, and interpreting data are essential to make meaning of the information (e.g. recordings, creation of artwork and labels, dictation of ideas) they gather. During final stages of research, young learners may choose to be involved in decision-making about how, where, when and with whom to share findings that emerged from their investigation.

Future research on understanding a child's world through their lens, especially supporting their developing peer culture, can shape our teaching practice as well as research agendas. The use of ethnography as a research method provides a rich and holistic view of the peer culture of young children from their perspectives in early childhood settings (Joerdens 2014). Additional approaches (e.g. focus groups, drawings, photographs, research artefacts generated by children) demonstrate how young learners actively participate in the study of peer culture and belonging (Kyrönlampi, Uitto, and Puroila 2021; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2021; Puroila et al. 2021).

The study of place during the early years particularly in partnership with young learners, can inform research and practice about belonging in multiple, meaningful ways. Investigations with children might focus on if and how belonging is constructed or constricted in the past, present, and future, or what institutional structures influence a sense of belonging and for whom. In developing a more inclusive understanding of belonging, young children need to be encouraged to use their own voices in designing, engaging, and reflecting upon place-based inquiry. Frequent opportunities to engage with place within and beyond the physical school or classroom parameters must be embedded into everyday practice. For example, actively collecting observational data in their research

journals, young children can begin to explore their sense of belonging to a neighbour-hood, business, and building as they explore a personal sense of place historically and physically (McNamara and Andes 2015). Likewise, reflecting on data in their own jour-nals, young learners can record, question, and discover a deeper sense of place rooted in a lens of ecological, environmental, and social belonging.

The study of belonging and place may involve children's literature that sparks imagin-ation of place through fantasy, to be drawn into dialogue with young learners' reality of physical space, place, and community (Fischer 2015). A bridging between the imagined and actual lived experiences of children provides a unique opportunity to explore place and belonging from a young child's curiosity, fascination, and imagination. Multiple, authentic opportunities to engage with place more directly, supports children in devel-oping profound appreciation for the history, complexity, and beauty of the natural world. Therefore, a critical examination of place and belonging must be infused within early childhood education and care research agendas.

We have explored promising ways to advance the study of belonging in early child-hood by proposing a shift about how belonging is studied and an expansion of what to study.

Learning from children about how they make sense of belonging, might very well shed light on what adults need to learn about humanity. Together with young children, we can create early childhood classrooms, schools, communities, and global structures that mirror a world where belonging is not studied, because a sense of belonging is experi-enced by all.

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