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"We are all just family":

Exploring teachers' views of infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting

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Abstract

This thesis explores teachers' views of infants and toddlers as capable and competent in their contributions, care and learning within one mixed-age setting. It engages with the aspirational statement of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki,* for children "to grow up as competent and confident" (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, p. 9) by pursuing how teachers see infants and toddlers as *already* competent and confident. This research found that a mixed-age setting allows infants and toddlers to be viewed as agentic and purposeful in their language, social and physical engagement, and interactions with peers, adults and the environment.

An interpretative, qualitative, case study design is utilised, drawing on interviews with six teachers, analysis of centre documentation, and field notes gathered from one mixed-age centre. Key findings reveal that intergenerational relationships that connect teachers, families, and children as a community are highly valued in this mixed-age setting. Infant and toddler wellbeing is supported by meaningful connections to siblings and older members of the extended family and therefore led to teachers identifying that infants and toddlers are confident contributors in their interactions with others in the community. Wenger's (1998) ideas of community, culture, identity, and belonging are used to theorise the findings of this thesis within a community of practice and form the conceptual framework for this study.

Infant and toddler contributions to the mixed-age setting are recognised and valued when teachers see that the sense of belonging and identity of each child are entwined with their relationships with others. Access to intergenerational relationships and community connections allow teachers to practise pedagogy that is representative of children's and teachers' cultures. This pedagogy of connectedness recognises teachers' unique ways of responding to the curriculum, particularly interpreting the principles of relationships, family and community, and empowerment (MoE, 1996) and reflects practice that is specialised to infants' and toddlers' ways of being. This thesis concludes that infants and toddlers are both independent and interdependent in their interactions and explorations within the mixed-age setting. Access to people, spaces, and things means infants and toddlers can show their ability to be *already* both competent and confident in their contributions to the setting.

Acknowledgements

A person is a person no matter how small – Dr. Seuss.

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Chapter ONE

INTRODUCTION

"Children matter as human beings growing in, and contributing to, society. How a country cares for its children is one measure of its humanity. The question must be asked – do we in New Zealand value children enough?" (Public Health Advisory Committee, 2010, p. 2).

The number of infants and toddlers in early childhood settings has markedly increased over the past decade (Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011). The Ministry of Education statistics for 2014 indicate that 64.5% of children two years or under in New Zealand access a form of out-of-home care (Education Counts, 2015b). Therefore, it is critical to consider environments that best support the education and care of our very young children. The New Zealand early childhood curriculum values the relationships and social context of learning; recognising the integral role that peers, teachers, family, and community play in children's learning and development: "the curriculum builds on what children bring to it and makes links with the everyday activities and special events of families, whānau, local communities and cultures" (MoE, 1996, p. 42). There is increasing evidence that explores the capability and competence of infants and toddlers as active engagers with sophisticated social and cultural awareness (Dalli, Rockel, Duhn, & Craw, 2011; Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Kalliala, 2014). In the context of this research, with a focus on infants and toddlers, a mixed-age setting is seen to support all these integral groups of people as contributors to the same setting with no segregation, no isolation based on age or development. It follows, then, that infants and toddlers too are integral and are to be viewed as contributors in mixed-age settings. Using an interpretative, qualitative, case-study methodology, this research investigated the views of teachers from one mixed-age setting on their perceptions of infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors to the social context of a mixed-age group.

This introductory chapter introduces the research topic, outlines the context of infants and toddlers in mixed-age grouping, presents the research rationale and aim, and lastly provides a thesis overview.

Research Context

The emphasis of mixed-age grouping values the importance of children's wellbeing and sense of belonging within a community. These key concepts are captured in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* that emphasises care and learning being both social and cultural (MoE, 1996). Seeing the mixed-age early childhood environment as a community supports the view that learning is a holistic endeavour, not relative to position, age, or stage of development. Given the increasing number of infant and toddler enrolments in early childhood centres and the emphasis placed in the curriculum on children's wellbeing, belonging, and community, it is pertinent to consider the role of infants and toddlers as active participants in their own lives. The aspirational statement in *Te Whāriki,* that children will "grow up as competent and confident learners" (p. 9) poses the overarching purpose of this research, which explores how teachers view infants and toddlers as *already* capable and confident in mixed-age settings.

This research examined the complexities of mixed-age grouping for infants and toddlers in one early childhood setting. It specifically looked at teachers' views of infants and toddlers and explored the role that infants and toddlers play in a community which is a mixed-age setting. Mixed-age settings are viewed in the literature as being of benefit to children's holistic development (Aina, 2001; Fagan, 2009), however older literature around mixed-age grouping tends to have a Westernised perspective and developmental focus, considering what children in this type of setting have to offer peers' social, language, and physical development (see Bailey, Burchinal & McWilliam, 1993; Brownell, 1993; Whaley & Kantor, 1992). More recent Australasian literature considers mixed-age settings from a socio-cultural perspective and considers how this type of setting might be responsive to children's desire to be an authentic part of a community (see Brennan, 2007; Edwards, Blaise & Hammer, 2009; O'Hara-Gregan, 2010). This research will highlight the perspectives of teachers and the contributions to the community that infants and toddlers in a mixed-age community make, situated within a New Zealand perspective.

For the purpose of this research Whaley and Kantor's (1992) definition of mixed-age grouping as "life-together" (p. 370), which supports the idea of family-like groups of children was utilised. The mixed-age setting participating in this research is defined as an early childhood centre that caters for infants, toddlers, and young children, who share the

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same play and learning spaces – the age-span was, in this instance, up to four years. Following the *Te Whāriki* definition of the overlapping age categories of infants and toddlers, this research reflects that infants and toddlers fall within the age range of birth to three years of age (MoE, 1996).

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum and its sociocultural focus is an integral part of this project as it grounds the discussion in a New Zealand context. The aspiration of *Te Whāriki* clearly argues for the centrality of social context as "one of the foundation stones of the curriculum" where "relationships and the environments that children experience have a direct impact on their learning and development" (MoE, 1996, p. 7). It is evident that there are ties to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory with the importance of children's connectedness to their families and those within the early childhood setting, through lived experiences. *Te Whāriki* suggests that "opportunities for learning are equitable and each child's contribution is valued" (MoE, 1996, p. 64). This learning centres on not only a sense of who children are as individuals but also on their part in the collective group where they may be developing relationships based on responsibility, empathy, respect, and appreciation of, and contribution to, group wellbeing. Therefore, in recognising the connection of this research with *Te Whāriki*, the principles of relationships, family and community and empowerment (MoE, 1996) will be utilised to structure the findings. These three key principles recognise that social learning involves key people in a mixed-age setting: teachers, family and peers, and the infants and toddlers themselves.

The project is theorised in terms of the notion of communities of practice based upon Etienne Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning. An alignment between *Te Whāriki* and Wenger's social theory of learning has been noted (Fleer, 2003) and both refer to the importance of learning and meaning being socially constructed. As the mixed-age setting involved in this research was viewed as a community of practice, there were certain characteristics that Wenger (1998) indicated should be evident. How the mixed-age community defines and negotiates their unique practices will define its enacted culture; this enacted culture, too, has an impact on belonging and identity. Transferring these key notions of culture, community, belonging, and identity, to interpreting teachers' views makes them meaningful for understanding their perceptions of infant toddler contributions. Wenger (1998) argues that "being included in what matters is a

requirement for being engaged in a community's practice, just as engagement is what defines belonging" (p. 74). Theorising the project as a community of practice enables a relatively familiar set of ideas to be explored with teachers who will be able to recognise the terminology, thus providing a focus for the teachers' views on infants and toddlers' place in the mixed-age community.

<u>Research Rationale and Aim</u>

My interest in infant and toddler learning and care has developed over many years of working with infants, toddlers, and young children, either separately or together. For a period of time I worked in a mixed-age setting in Rotorua where the structure resonated with my own personal professional philosophy and my belief that siblings should have the opportunity to stay together, both for support and consistency. Over time, I watched these infants and toddlers show me how amazing they were, how much they directed the *goings on* within the centre and how they engaged with children both younger and older than themselves. As time progressed, my postgraduate studies led me to investigate infants and toddlers more and more. Combining my passion for infant and toddler care and mixed-age settings seemed like a logical progression for a thesis topic, particularly as the scholarly research in this area, while developing, is still quite small.

The overarching research question is:

> *How do teachers in a mixed age setting view infants' and toddlers' contributions, care, and learning?*

This research examines teachers' views on infants and toddlers as contributors in a mixed-age setting and how this type of setting supports infants' and toddlers' care and learning. By focusing on one centre, this project endeavours to appreciate the participating centre's philosophical choice of mixed-age grouping and teacher perceptions as unique, while giving a deeper understanding of the complexities and context that a mixed-age setting offers infants and toddlers.

The aims of this research are:
- To explore and examine how teachers view the contribution of infants and toddlers in a mixed-age early childhood centre community;

- To contribute to the development of research around mixed-age settings that include infants and toddlers; and
- To investigate how teachers view mixed-age settings responding to the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, policy, and practice.

<u>Thesis Overview</u>

This thesis is presented in six chapters: This chapter, Chapter 1, is an introduction to the study; it has provided some context and an explanation of the study rationale as well as an overview of the theory and method guiding the research.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review where two key bodies of literature pertaining to infants and toddlers and mixed-age are explored. This review highlights the significance of infants and toddlers requiring teachers with specialised knowledge and points to importance of teachers' views of infants and toddlers in regard to these children's sense of belonging and wellbeing. The mixed-age literature reveals key areas of challenge in defining mixed-age, as well as the benefits of mixed-age.

Chapter 3 explores the methodology of this research: a qualitative single-case study. The research site is introduced and data gathering and analysis techniques are examined. Issues of validity and reliability are discussed and ethical considerations of the study are explored.

Chapter 4 provides an account of the teachers' views from interviews, as well as drawing on the centre philosophy and policies. Three principles of the early childhood curriculum document *Te Whāriki*: family and community, relationships, and empowerment (MoE, 1996), guide the reporting of the findings in this chapter.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the research findings by drawing on concepts of the theoretical framework from Wenger's (1998) communities of practice: culture, community, belonging and identity. Three key ideas are considered: the role of culture in teachers' infant and toddler pedagogy, the value of community connections, and promotion of infants' and toddlers' belonging and identity.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and draws out key findings relevant to answering the research question. The implications of the study are provided and the limitations are expressed. Considerations for further research are offered.

Chapter TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review explores literature relevant to the capabilities of infants and toddlers in mixed-age settings. In section one, three key themes emerged from the literature that considered infants' and toddlers' ways of being:

- The need for specialised knowledge unique to infants and toddlers;
- Teachers' understandings of infants and toddlers as capable and competent; and
- The importance of a sense of belonging for infants' and toddlers' wellbeing.

Section two draws on literature that considers the implications of mixed-age grouping. Five key themes structure this section:

- The challenge of defining mixed-age grouping;
- The benefits of mixed-age grouping;
- The impact of the developmentally appropriate approach on mixed-age grouping;
- Teachers' understanding of mixed-age grouping; and
- An exploration of the mixed-age setting as a community.

The purpose of this literature review is to draw together the two bodies of knowledge—infants and toddlers and mixed-age grouping—to develop a better understanding of how the participation of infants and toddlers is understood by teachers, and how this insight can be useful in a setting that defines itself as mixed-age.

Section One: Infants' and Toddlers' Ways of Being

Throughout this thesis, infants and toddlers are referred to as being children under-three years of age. This aligns with the Ministry of Education's (1996) definition of infants as aged birth to 18 months, and toddlers as 12 months to three years, which recognises the "variation between individual children as well as different cultural perspectives about appropriate age arrangements" (p. 20).

Key ideas that have become apparent from the literature and are further explored in this section are:

- The need for specialised knowledge unique to infants and toddlers;
- Teachers' understandings of infants and toddlers as capable and competent; and
- The importance of a sense of belonging for infants' and toddlers' wellbeing.

A need for specialised knowledge unique to infants' and toddlers' ways of being.

Te Whāriki is founded on the aspiration for children "to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (MoE, 1996, p. 9). Even at the time of the publication of *Te Whāriki*, the Ministry of Education acknowledged the growing number of infants and toddlers in early childhood settings, while endorsing a curriculum framework aimed at responding to the needs and capabilities of this age group (MoE, 1996). Moving forward two decades, the number of infants and toddlers in out-of-home care settings has continued to increase markedly. The Ministry of Education reported 2013 census data that 75,514 children under the age of three were enrolled in early childhood services nationwide. This is a significant 53% increase from the year 2000 statistics that showed 49,322 children enrolled (Education Counts, 2015b). This increase compared to the increase in enrolments over the same period of 13% for three year olds shows the uptake for infant toddler care and education is a huge growth area. The *Growing Up in New Zealand* longitudinal research data also adds another dimension to the Education Counts figures, with their finding that, at two years of age, the average length of time that the children involved in this study (6,745 children at two years of age) spent in care settings was 24 hours per week (Morton et al., 2014). These figures are influencing the research sphere where much needed empirical research is becoming available. Such research enables us to consider the special place of infants and toddlers in early childhood care and education settings, and to consider the need for teachers to have specialised knowledge, skills and ability to understand the role that infants and toddlers play in their early childhood setting.

Specialised knowledge is required to support the growing numbers of infants and toddlers in early childhood settings. The Ministry of Education (1996) highlights the need for a specialised knowledge of infant and toddler care and education, as infants and toddlers are signalled as having different requirements than those of older children, specifically: communication may be non-verbal, mobility will vary, and trusting, respectful relationships are key to wellbeing (MoE, 1996). *Te Whāriki* is clear that infants and

toddlers in care and education settings require a curriculum that is not a simplified four-year-old's programme, but reflective of the needs and desires of the under three-year-old age group (MoE, 1996): needs and desires that, for infants and toddlers, focus on the security of consistent practice, and people and teachers who are responsive to each child's rhythm (MoE, 1996).

The Education Review Office ([ERO], 2009, 2015) has provided two comprehensive reports, specific to infants and toddlers that illustrate the need for a higher standard of quality care and education than is currently available. These reports highlight that not all centres are providing responsive, high-quality education and care for infants and toddlers (ERO, 2009, 2015). The most recent ERO (2015) report is specific about the need for specialised care and education for infants and toddlers. It recommends that centres look beyond wellbeing and belonging and focus more on communication and exploration. The findings from this report focus on the 235 early childhood services visited by ERO in 2014, of which only 56% of centres displayed a responsive curriculum. A responsive curriculum is defined by ERO as having teachers who are attuned and respon[sive] to the infants' and toddlers' verbal and non-verbal communication. In responsive centres, children [are] encouraged to try new things and to explore experiences they [are] interested in more deeply" (p. 2). ERO's 2009 monograph, *The Quality of Education and Care in Infant Toddler Centres* drew on findings from 74 centres, reviewed over the 2005-2008 period, that catered for children under the age of two. It found that a portion of centres were not providing high-quality care and education for infants and toddlers; these centres lacked responsive routines and accessible resources for children. They deemed 8% of the 74 centres unsatisfactory – so much so that these centres warranted a supplementary review in 12 months (ERO, 2009). Centres attaining a high-quality performance rating were seen to include a focus of relationships with children and their families, and a nurturing, safe, and well-resourced environment (ERO, 2009).

Interestingly, ERO's change of focus, from wellbeing and belonging in the 2009 report to communication and exploration in the 2015 report, appears to be at odds with the importance that many other scholars place on belonging and wellbeing being central to a relationship-rich curriculum for infants and toddlers (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009, 2014; Degotardi, Sweller, & Pearson, 2013; McGaha, Cummings, Lippard, & Dallas, 2011; Salamon & Harrison, 2015). Degotardi and Pearson (2014) acknowledge the significance

of relationships, stating: "Relationships have a pervasive and long-lasting influence on people's social, emotional and psychological wellbeing" (p. 4). The difference in views about the importance of relationships suggests the need for specialised knowledge and understanding infants' and toddlers' ways of being and the importance of focusing on relationships, and not just on the communication and exploration. McGaha et al.'s (2011) action research about the relationships between infants and toddlers demonstrates that children are highly capable in forming and sustaining relationships when teachers are intentional in their environmental arrangement, planning, and encouragement of social interactions. Research shows that children can engage in communication and exploration as a means for fulfilling wellbeing and belonging(see Degotardi & Pearson, 2009, 2014; Degotardi et al., 2013; McGaha et al., 2011), indicators that ERO felt needed to be focused on in the context of relationships.

Recognising infants' and toddlers' unique ways of being acknowledges the role that the teachers' practice plays in supporting infants and toddlers (Salamon & Harrison, 2015). Teachers' understanding of infants and toddlers is visible in their pedagogical practice - in the environment they provide, the experiences they facilitate and the way they engage with infants and toddlers in language and action.

A concerted effort for a higher degree of understanding and knowledge of infants' and toddlers' ways of being is now long overdue. Clearly there is cause for some concern: the number of infants and toddlers in care is increasing year on year; ERO (2009, 2015) has expressed concern about the curriculum for children under two; and a number of scholars, such as Kalliala (2014), Lee (2006), Rockel (2009), and White and Mika (2013), suggest that there is an urgent need for specialised knowledge and an appropriate learning context for infants and toddlers that recognises infant and toddler agency. This research aims to contribute to the developing knowledge-base around what an infant toddler specialisation might entail, with a particular focus on mixed-age setting.

Teachers' understandings of infants and toddlers as capable and competent

Teachers have an important role to play in the present discourse around infants and toddlers being viewed as capable and competent (Cooper, Lovatt & Hedges, 2015; Dalli, Rockel, et al., 2011; Kalliala, 2014; McGaha et al., 2011; Rockel, 2009; Salamon & Harrison, 2015). The literature suggests that there is a tension between seeing children as

agentic and purposeful and seeing children as needing to be kept safe and protected. It is through understanding the teachers' actions, behaviours, and ways of being, with infants and toddlers that we can recognise the children's physical, social, and emotional contributions to the setting.

Salamon and Harrison's (2015) research into teachers' beliefs about infant capabilities found that teachers' views about infants and toddlers influence their practice. This is reflected in the language they speak and opportunities they provide for children. Salamon and Harrison found that when teachers consider infants as capable, regarding their physical and cognitive learning, teachers' practice encourages this capability. Considering infants as capable is recognised in the way the teachers speak to children, in encouraging independence, and visible in practice as teachers choose to encourage independent learning by not intervening in play (Salamon & Harrison, 2015). McGaha et al. (2011) express similar ideas about teachers' beliefs, "we learnt that our own expectations as the adults in the classrooms were critical in influencing the kinds of behaviour the infant and toddlers demonstrated as their relationships developed" (p. 15). Edwards et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of research that is representative of the "thoughts and action of teachers, rather than continuing to study the effects of early childhood programs on children's development" (p. 56). This suggests that it may be important to explore the teaching and learning that takes place within the mixed-age setting, from the perspective of teachers themselves.

The significance of teachers' thoughts and actions places teachers at the centre of the emerging discourse about infants' and toddlers' capability and competence. Research acknowledging teachers' views about infants' and toddlers' capability, and how these views influence their practice, is becoming increasingly visible and indicates a possible shift away from a developmental perspective in approaching infant toddler capabilities (Edwards et al., 2009; Kalliala, 2014; McGaha et al., 2011; Salamon & Harrison, 2015). In gathering teachers' views, Elwick (2015) cautions about only viewing children with an adult lens. Teachers' views of children are predicated on their past experiences, and their alignment to a particular theory or approach, or understanding of development (Salamon & Harrison, 2015).

Contrasting views of teachers about infants and toddlers are evident within the literature. For example, the contradiction between notions of infants and toddlers as vulnerable,

helpless, and passive, and infants and toddlers as capable, agentic, and purposeful, is well documented (Cooper et al., 2015; Dalli, Rockel, et al., 2011; Kalliala, 2014; McGaha et al., 2011; Salamon & Harrison, 2015). Dalli, Rockel, et al.'s (2011) research with teachers across five New Zealand centres suggests that the "how, what and why" of infant toddler pedagogy unveils a multiplicity of views about infants and toddlers as learners. On the one hand, teachers of infants and toddlers expressed their view of children as discoverers, sense-makers, embodied learners, and future citizens. Such views were spliced with contradictory descriptions of infants and toddlers as vulnerable and in need of security. Salamon and Harrison (2015) explain that teachers within their study saw toddlers as more *and* less capable, due to individual differences and "ways of being" (p. 284). However, Kalliala (2014) embraces the infants' and toddlers' somewhat competing attributes of being needy and vulnerable as well as competent and strong, and encourages teachers to engage in practice that can recognise and respond to these variations in infants' and toddlers' ways of being.

Such a multi-faceted view is also strongly evident in *Te Whāriki,* where special characteristics of infants are described with terms including "need; rapid fluctuations; demand; totally dependent and very vulnerable" (MoE, 1996, p. 22). Toddlers are similarly described as, "intense and unpredictable; impulsive and can lack self-control; [with] desires … often ahead of their language and physical abilities" (p. 23). These terms reflect the tension between the aspiration for infants and toddlers to be viewed as competent and confident, and the pervasive developmentally appropriate approach [DAP], which focuses on a particular 'norm' for ages and stages and perpetuates the view that infants and toddlers are less capable. Cooper et al. (2015) acknowledge this tension between the image of the child as both capable and vulnerable in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, which emphasises infants and toddlers needing "care, safety and dependence" (p. 74) while also being capable and competent learners. Dalli and Te One (2012) speculate that seeing children as immature and not competent is dangerous, out-dated, and an infringement of children's rights. Instead, they position children as agentic by "both *being* and *becoming* citizens just like older human beings" (p. 224). Researchers' desire to understand children's perspectives has led to an increasing body of research that is situated in exploring an authentic view of young children's experiences, seeing them as capable and competent social actors in their own lives.

Fleer (2006) argues that early childhood education is often viewed with a focus on child development. The pervasive discourse pertaining to early childhood education has been particularly grounded in DAP, which portrays infants and toddlers as ultimately vulnerable and needy (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). Bredekamp and Copple's (1997) book, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programmes,* is structured around the developmental expectations timeline – which outlines what should happen during a particular age/stage of life. The pervasive view of age and stage specific behaviour of infants' and toddlers' is exemplified in the New Zealand longitudinal research - *Growing Up in New Zealand,* in which 78% of parents/caregivers of the children involved in the study termed their toddlers as being in the 'terrible twos' stage and were described as often "having temper tantrums or hot tempers" (Morton et al., 2014, p. 18).

The challenge remains for teachers to look beyond the prevalent developmental discourse to reflect practice that acknowledges the capabilities of infants and toddlers. Elwick's (2015) research using a 'baby-cam' (a small video camera secured to a baby's head) highlights the pervasiveness of a developmental approach that teachers often fall back on in responding to images captured by still cameras. When presented with images captured from the baby-cam of the child's view of the same scenarios also captured on stationary video cameras, teachers were led to reconsider what they "know" about infants, based on the different perspective that the baby-cam images portrayed. The baby-cam images followed the direction of the child's gaze and revealed a child determined and interested to engage with peers and caregiver. One of the key findings from this research was the impact of the baby-cam sequences on the participating teachers' interpretations; the ability to literally see experiences from the infant's perspective allowed teachers to consider higher ethical sensitivity and respect for the "dynamic presence" (Elwick, 2015, p. 335) of the infant. Similar findings about the tension between teachers viewing infants and toddlers as capable but also vulnerable were evident in research with Australian teachers working with infants (Degotardi & Davis, 2008). The participating teachers interpreted infants' behaviour while viewing their video-recorded experiences during play and/or care-giving experiences (nappy changing or dressing) with individual infants. This process elicited a range of teacher responses based on their own personal philosophies and learning; some of the responses were considered descriptive and based solely on understandings of infant and toddler development as opposed to considering

intepretations from a child's perspective. This research encourages teachers to look past their own adult perceptions of what is visible or known, to consider the infant as a full participant in research, rather than research happening to or about the infant, and to consider their unique perspective as equal and invaluable to adult interpretations.

In summary, a move towards teachers viewing infants and toddlers as capable and competent is evident within the literature – though a tension remains for some teachers between recognising infants' and toddlers' capability and competence along with teachers' actions that perpetuate infants and toddlers as vulnerable. The move beyond explaining infant toddler experiences from a developmentally appropriate view and more towards a view that infants and toddlers are capable in physical, cognitive, language, and social domains, is recognising the imbalance of power that currently exists. The current study is positioned to further explore the views of teachers who work closely with infants and toddlers, to consider what sets infants and toddlers apart as agentic, purposeful, and ultimately capable in a mixed-age setting. This research is concerned with the thoughts and actions of teachers related to infants and toddlers, alongside their own teaching histories and experiences and how these influence their teaching. A specialised knowledge that sees beyond development, within the context of a mixed-age setting, will be explored in the context of a centre community.

The importance of wellbeing and belonging for infants and toddlers.

Infants and toddlers are cultural and social beings who need a sense of wellbeing and belonging in order to allow relationships to form so that learning can occur (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014; MoE, 1996). These ideas are strongly associated with the notion of community and the importance of belonging or membership (MoE, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1999). Relationships that engage infants in interactions and exchanges with others: adults, peers and siblings, are key to establishing stable attachment (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009, 2014; Degotardi et al., 2013; McGaha et al., 2011). The view of infants as agentic, purposeful engagers in their interactions and responses to others, who also endear themselves to their social and cultural group, is evident in literature (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009, 2014; Degotardi et al., 2013; McGaha et al., 2011).

The importance of wellbeing is also clear in recent New Zealand literature, specifically the need for infants and toddlers to feel a sense of wellbeing that in turn fosters a sense of

belonging (Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011; Dalli, Rockel, et al., 2011; Dalli, White, et al., 2011; Firth, Couch, & Everiss, 2009). Indeed, both wellbeing and belonging are desired learning goals within the early childhood curriculum (MoE, 1996). The strands of *Te Whāriki* reflect the needs and desires of children, most pertinently infants and toddlers, *Wellbeing* feeds into *belonging,* allowing for *contribution, communication,* and *exploration* to follow (MoE, 1996). Although not always so linear, as each strand is interwoven with the others indicating a reliance on each element, a key idea in this study is the utmost importance of wellbeing and belonging with the goal that children should develop not only a feeling of belonging but know they have "the right to belong" in their early childhood setting (p. 58).

Belonging is a feeling that is culturally and socially mediated; it is a complex process of negotiation with others. Infants and toddlers require a sense of wellbeing characterised by physical and emotional safety, nurture, and connection to others. Wellbeing then entwines with a feeling of belonging that contributes to a child's "inner well-being, security, and identity" (MoE, 1996, p. 54). *Te Whāriki* does indicate the interdependent link between the wellbeing of children and the wellbeing of others involved in the child's communities, both in and outside of the centre context. Therefore, belonging is both an individual and a group process linked to a child's developing sense of identity (Stratigos, Bradley, & Sumsion, 2014). Stratigos et al. (2014) suggest that wanting to belong is a "motivating human behaviour" (p. 174) as opposed to an emotive, passive, romanticised concept. Stratigos et al. (2014) refer to two key aspects of belonging: 'a sense of belonging' characterised by a subjective feeling of value and importance to others in a group, and 'the politics of belonging' defined as "not something that is achieved with any kind of finality; it is constantly in process, being enacted, contested and negotiated" (p. 178).

Peer relationships and, in particular, sibling relationships support infants' and toddlers' wellbeing and belonging. Firth et al.'s (2009) research of a New Zealand home-based care network examined how transition practices fostered children's wellbeing and belonging. They discuss the distinct importance of older children and siblings in the support of younger children. In particular, the researchers found that siblings were an extremely valuable source of support for the younger child, providing connection between family and the early childhood setting and, therefore, a sense of belonging for siblings. The ability to have older siblings involved in the care and education of infants

and toddlers is a key attribute of a mixed-age setting. Although it offers a powerful benefit for children to be able to stay together as a family, a mixed-age setting may not have siblings attending; however, the current study endeavours to find out how infants and toddlers contribute to their centre community, even in the absence of older siblings.

The importance and value of peers in early childhood settings is shown in the way children actively seek out other children for friendship and companionship (Degotardi et al., 2013). Degotardi and Pearson (2014) recognise the value that peer relationships have on infants' and toddlers' belonging, togetherness, and identity in-group settings. It is within peer contexts that infants and toddlers construct relationships, determine and shape norms for social and cultural activities that take place within the centre community, and negotiate a shared existence that arises from "mutual interests, concerns and activities" (p. 95). It is these ways of being and doing that establish a sense of belonging and community and, thus, warrant close attention in studies focused specifically on infants' and toddlers' engagement with social relationships.

The current study has been designed to explore teachers' views on the capability and competence of infants' and toddlers' ways of being; the tension between vulnerability and capability may be evident in the teacher interviews in this section, in line with the literature that indicates contradictions about the image of the infant and toddler exist. The current study will contribute to the growing body of empirical research that considers infants and toddlers having and playing a significant role in the early childhood setting; it is not intended as a study of development or age and stage but rather of infants' and toddlers' roles. This research is positioned to explore infants' and toddlers' ways of being that support their wellbeing and belonging within in a mixed-aged community.

Section Two: Considering the Implications of Mixed-Age Grouping

Literature discussed in this section has been purposely selected to cover mixed-age groupings that include infants and/or toddlers. This includes a discussion of the literature that explores:

- The challenge of defining mixed-age grouping in early childhood;
- The benefits of mixed-age grouping;
- The impact of the developmentally-appropriate approach to mixed-age grouping;

- Teachers' understandings of mixed-age grouping; and
- An exploration of the mixed-age setting as a community.

The challenge in defining mixed-age grouping – the relevance of age-span for including infants and toddlers.

The age range of children is an important detail in empirical literature as this determines the researchers' definitions of what constitutes mixed-age grouping. Providing a concise definition that fits most research has proven a challenge, as mixed-age literature includes settings that range from six-months through to four years and is often characterised by a comparison between same-age and mixed-age settings.

The term mixed-age has been challenging to define in terms of children's chronological age, though what is common-place within literature referring to mixed-age settings is the similarity to family-like groupings that provides a more natural and culturally-appropriate approach to living and being (Dalli, White, et al., 2011; Evangelou, 1989; Rameka & Glasgow, 2015; Whaley & Kantor, 1992; Williamson, 2006). In contrast, Stratigos et al. (2014) refer to the complexity of groupings that are labelled as being 'home-like' or 'family-like' as the "the qualifying word 'like' indicates that this is not family nor home for the children in care" (p. 179). Whaley and Kantor (1992) believe that a mixed-age setting enables children a more natural ability to live life together and reduces the need for transitions, thereby minimising disruptions to the 'work' of development, particularly for infants. Katz et al. (1990) specify that a mixed-age setting caters for children with an age-span of more than one year. Rameka and Glasgow's (2015) nationwide survey, conducted of Māori and Pasifika teachers in Māori and Pasifika centres, gives a slightly different approach to defining mixed-age grouping. One respondent to the survey acknowledged "traditionally and culturally, Pacific children are 'one' not an infant, toddler or young children … they are one being regardless of their age and developmental ability" (p. 142). However, the perception of mixed-age grouping as a family-like setting is less emphasised in the literature described below, literature with a Westernised view of development.

The literature sourced, relevant to mixed-age grouping, spans decades, some of the earliest work from the late 1980s is still current today. The literature heralding the educational and social benefits of mixed-age was most often limited to the early 1990s

and while influential, few were empirical research (see Evangelou, 1989; Katz et al., 1990; Katz, 1995; Whaley & Kantor, 1992). When empirical literature did emerge in the 1990s, a common element was the comparison between mixed-aged and same-aged settings which focused on the differences in social interactions and skills, or attachment between mixed or segregated age groups. This added to the view that mixed-age settings held social and educational benefits for children (see Bailey et al., 1993; Brownell, 1990; Pool, Bijleveld & Tavecchio, 2000; Umek & Lesnik, 1996; Winsler, 1993)

In the reviewed research the youngest children involved in mixed-age research were toddlers, with the youngest being 18 months of age (Brownell, 1990). Brownell's (1990) research is distinct for its specific focus on toddlers between the ages of 18 and 24 months. Therefore, Brownell (1990) considered the age-span of six months fitting within the mixed-age context. Similarly, when Whaley and Rubenstein (1994) examined how toddlers 'do' friendships in a mixed-age setting, the age range of the participating children was 22-32 months. Interestingly, this lack of research involving children under two years of age may be, in part, due to the difficulty of engaging pre-verbal children in research (Dalli & Te One, 2012; Elwick, 2015; Johansson, 2011).

This close age-span of participants is in contrast to other research where the age-span has been much greater. In the Netherlands, Pool et al. (2000) examined the effect of different age grouping on parent-child attachment; the age range of the participants in this project were from 2 – 6 years. Just 10 children were enrolled in a mixed-age setting, with the authors explaining that mixed-age grouping is a less common type of care setting in the Netherlands. Logue (2006) undertook an action-research project to consider the advantages for children in mixed-age groupings with children from 2-5½ years of age. Bailey et al. (1993) completed one of the first longitudinal-research projects specifically designed to explore the development of young children from 21 months of age over a four-year period in same and mixed-age groups. Their mixed-age group consisted of children with an average age-span of 25.5 months. Other early studies from Winsler (1993) and Umek and Lesnik (1996) compared the differences between same-age and mixed-age settings in relation to social and cognitive development and classified their mixed-age groupings as including children from three years old up till the age of seven – a span of up to four years.

In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education reporting data makes it difficult to define mixed-age grouping (Education Counts, 2015a). Mixed-age settings are included as a type of operating structure, though the Ministry does not specify the practical application of this in centres. The only clue could be in the way early childhood centre licenses are issued and for how many children. The *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations (2008)* regulate for the possibility of catering to 150 children over two and/or 25 under-two year olds, although when identifying as a mixed-age the centre may have no more than 50 children. Both Beach (2013) and Fagan (2009), in their Master's theses, have also lamented the decline of mixed-age settings, or the rolls in mixed-age settings, in New Zealand over the last decade. There is no statistical information from the Ministry of Education that refers directly to mixed-age settings, as each setting could operate under any one of the nominated service types: education and care, playcentre, Kōhanga reo, or casual education and care (Education Counts, 2015a). Other types of centres which may also identify as mixed-age, but which are classified predominantly as another type, have seen a decline in enrolments: playcentres have decreased from 469 in 2007 to 435 in 2015, and Kōhanga Reo have declined from 480 in 2007 to 462 in 2015 (Education Counts, 2015a).

In summary, the age-span of children in past research suggests quite different views of what constitutes a mixed-age setting. As revealed in the above research, there is no clear guideline on what constitutes mixed-age grouping in an early childhood setting, as each researcher captures a different age-span. Capitalising on the differences of abilities and knowledge of children is where this research is positioned, if infant and toddler enrolments in early childhood services in New Zealand are burgeoning then research inclusive of their age group in mixed-age settings warrants investigation. Therefore, the current study will be concerned with the age-span in a mixed-age setting of birth to five years.

Benefits of mixed-age grouping.

Mixed-age research literature has tended to outline the benefits and social advantages for children in terms of friendships, prosocial behaviour, and engagement in play experiences (see Brownell, 1990; Fagan, 2009; Gray, 2011; Whaley & Rubenstein, 1994; Winsler, 1993; Umek & Lesnik, 1996). Both Brownell (1990) and Whaley and Rubenstein (1994) proclaim the social benefits for toddlers, with Brownell (1990) reporting "heightened

rates of social exchange in mixed-age settings" (p. 846), while Whaley and Rubenstein (1994) believe that the mixed-age setting allows toddlers to form friendships with older children through social construction. Katz (1995) suggests there is a specific benefit: "the intention of mixed-age grouping in early childhood settings is to increase the heterogeneity of the group so as to capitalise on the differences in the experience, knowledge, and abilities of the children" (para. 2). This again refers to benefits of grouping in order to maximise the social and educational benefits for children. The current study will also take a positive approach to the benefits of mixed-age grouping, as there is an overwhelming cache of literature to support this view (Bailey et al., 1993; Fagan, 2009; Gray, 2011; Katz et al., 1990; Logue, 2006; Whaley & Kantor, 1992).

Although there is little literature that takes a clear position against mixed-age grouping, some research does consider the challenges (Beach, 2013; Brennan, 2007; Brownell, 1990; Edwards et al., 2009). In their review of literature specific to examining quality early childhood education for under two year olds, Dalli, White, et al. (2011) argue that "there is little evidence to suggest one [same or mixed-age setting] is better than another for infant and toddler pedagogy" (p. 86). Beach (2013) explores, in detail, the perceived challenges with mixed-age grouping in her research with teachers employed in same-age and mixed-age settings. One such challenge is the concern for infants' safety which is raised as being a key perceived disadvantage of mixed-age grouping (Beach, 2013; Edwards et al., 2009; O'Hara-Gregan, 2010). Teachers in Edwards et al.'s (2009) study vehemently denied, in response to parent concerns, that safety was more of a concern in mixed-age settings. Teachers explained that, from their experiences in mixed and same-age settings, incidents occurred far more frequently in same-age classrooms. Although limited in number, the studies identified in this review take an overwhelming position that mixed-age settings are holistically responsive to children's learning, development, and enculturation, and the challenges often relate to teacher and parent perceptions (Aina, 2001; Edwards et al., 2009; Gray, 2011; O'Hara-Gregan, 2010; Pool et al., 2000; Rameka & Glasgow, 2015). The current study is positioned to explore the benefits and challenges of infants and toddlers in a mixed-age setting from teachers' perspectives and consider what these views mean for infants' and toddlers' contributions, learning, and care.

The developmentally appropriate approach to mixed-age grouping.

There is clearly a belief within the mixed-age literature that mixed-age settings support developmentally appropriate practice (Aina, 2001; Bailey et al., 1993; Edwards et al., 2009; Whaley & Kantor, 1992). Aina (2001) believes "multi-age classrooms are truly settings in which developmentally appropriate practices flourish" (p. 220). However, the literature is dominated by a Westernised view of mixed-age grouping as many studies took place within Western countries (United States of America, Slovenia, and the Netherlands) and/or with middle- to upper-class families (see Brownell, 1990; Whaley and Rubenstein, 1994). Some studies make no mention of ethnic makeup or socio-economic placement of participants and their families (see Pool et al., 2000; Umek & Lesnik, 1996). The only studies that acknowledge the inclusion of different ethnicities, including African-American, or Hispanic participants, or low-income families, are Winsler (1993) and Bailey et al. (1993).

In later years, mixed-age literature has emerged that steers away from this developmental approach to a more holistic sociocultural approach of recognising the benefits of age mixing in early childhood settings. Edwards et al. (2009) encourage a postdevelopmental view for re-evaluating mixed-age groupings by shifting the attention of research to "focus on how the approach is defined and experienced by participants, in order to identify the complexities and issues associated with teaching and learning in this way" (p. 56). Their research attempts to examine how the complexities and issues of mixed-age settings are experienced and defined by the participants (teachers, parents and children) rather than focusing on child development or benefits. Although the intention of the research was to see past the developmental expectations, participating teachers relied heavily on their own understandings of child development to interpret mixed-age grouping. Even so, the researchers deduced from the teachers' views that mixed-age grouping "values the contributions children of different ages bring to the classroom, without necessarily focusing on the particular developmental 'level' associated with their ages" (Blaise et al., 2009, p. 61).

Rameka and Walker (2015) encourage a similar move away from a developmentally restrictive view of childhood, their view is that mixed-age grouping reflects a more culturally (Māori and Pasifika) appropriate response to traditional caregiving methods. The tuakana-teina [older-younger children] relationships that are recognised as an

appropriate way of respecting children's ways of being, while learning the culture, are emphasised as a key element of their research (Rameka & Walker, 2015).

Implications of this research for the current study are linked to a similar move away from a restrictive view of infants and toddlers based on what they can or cannot do and what is deemed to be 'normal' development. This study will consider the purposeful nature of infant and toddler interactions in a mixed-age setting that places less emphasis on their physical development and more on their capabilities in interactions and relationships that may be influenced by, or a response to, culture.

Teachers' understandings of mixed-age grouping.

How teachers themselves understand and perceive mixed-age grouping affects their teaching and ways of working with infants and toddlers. As Beach (2013) discovered, there was confusion among teachers in her research into same-age and mixed-age contexts as to "what constituted a same-age or multi-age setting, with several teachers believing they worked within the opposite setting" (p. 89). Beach's (2013) and Edwards et al.'s (2009) studies have focused not only on the benefits for children in a mixed-age setting, but also the impact on teachers. Teachers suggested that there was a reduction in stress, in mixed-age settings, due to existing relationships between older and younger children that supported a less stressful environment. For example, older children were able to attend to a younger child when the younger child was upset, thus reducing the amount of times a teacher may be called on in a conflict situation (Edwards et al., 2009). In contrast, Beach (2013) found teachers indicated the need to be increasingly vigilant in mixed-age settings due to the varying mobility of the children sharing one space. In exploring the territory of teacher beliefs and understandings Pajares (1992) states: "existential presumptions are the incontrovertible, personal truths everyone holds" (p. 309).

Most recently, Fremaux and Liley (2014) reported their recent move away from segregated age to adopting a mixed-age approach in a New Zealand early childhood setting. This change was in response to teachers' observation of the desire of the younger children to be together with older children and siblings. As a Māori-medium early

childhood centre, there was a desire to follow Kaupapa Māori[1]. As a way of respecting and living Māori principles and the shared community perspective inherent in Kaupapa Māori , the centre decided to bring all the children together to share and care for one another another, thus enabling them to integrate the principle of tuakana-teina [older-younger children] more fully into the educational setting. The outcome of this merger was seen as beneficial for the children, as the authors reveal: "the psychological security of our pēpi [babies] and tuakana [older children] was validated … we fostered within them a strong sense of belonging, providing a platform upon which to develop learning dispositions such as self-esteem, identity and dignity" (Fremaux & Liley, 2014, pp. 16-17). Fremaux and Liley's work highlights the importance of infants and toddlers being seen as capable and competent in their dispositions and characteristics when engaging with each other in their community – something that this research wishes to explore further.

The mixed-age setting as a community.

Mixed-age settings can be classified as a community of their own, with particular ways of doing, being, and saying. A mixed-age community can recognise the socio-cultural nature of grouping people together – the importance of interdependence relationships between peers, siblings, parents, and families, on the wellbeing of infants and toddlers (see Davis & McKenzie, 2016; Fremaux & Liley, 2014; Rameka & Glasgow; 2015). There are certain cultural practices or approaches that those involved will take in a mixed-age setting, including the routines, actions, responses, and engagement, that support the notion of community.

There is, perhaps, a shift towards valuing the element of learning together by viewing mixed-aged settings as communities; this is particularly evidenced in some of the New Zealand studies discussed above. Ritchie (2001) and Rameka and Glasgow (2015) argue that young children and the early childhood education system are predicated on a colonised Western view of what a centre structure should look like. Ritchie (2001) proposes an approach that suits viewing a mixed-age setting as a community well, in her

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[1] Māori culture plays a significant role in New Zealand, Māori are recognised as the forefathers of New Zealand and Te Reo Māori is one of New Zealand's official languages.

use of the term 'collectivism' – where children are encouraged in collective endeavour and responsibility, rather than the focus being on independence and autonomy.

In more recent mixed-age literature, a movement towards an approach to structuring early childhood settings in terms of mixed-age, with an understanding that the child (no matter how young) is part of a wider community, is evident (Aina, 2001; Beach, 2013; Edwards et al., 2009; O'Hara-Gregan, 2010; Rameka & Glasgow, 2015). Both Brennan (2007) and Nimmo (2008) question how early childhood environments respond to a child's sociocultural self. Katz et al. (1990) have long been protagonists in advocating for mixed-age settings in early childhood services, and propose a change stating, "although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them" (p. 10). Children's desire to belong and be accepted as an individual while being part of a group was a key theme within Brennan's (2007) research. Brennan raises a tension between separating children by age group because they need special attention, and the cost of separating children from others (children or adults) who are rich sources of learning about cultural and social 'codes'. This idea suggests that infants and toddlers could also be users of cultural and social codes in a mixed-age setting, as they engage and negotiate intergenerational relationships with adults and children.

In an early childhood context in New Zealand, children, including infants and toddlers, spend their days in early childhood settings refining their relationships, developing and maintaining friendships, making compromises, negotiating with those older and younger, and exploring joint learning ventures alone and with peers (Beach, 2013; Fagan, 2009) - all of which are complex examples of roles in a community of practice. Wenger (1998) defines a community of practice as human beings engaging in enterprises of all kinds. Engagement requires interaction and fine-tuning of our relationships with one another and the outside world which, in turn, leads to learning. That "collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations" (Wenger, 1998, p. 45). Aina (2001) proposes that a mixed-age setting with a strong sense of community is the perfect vehicle for learning. The importance of community is also identified in *Te Whāriki* where the significance of community is recognised:

> The curriculum emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated
> learning and of reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people,

places and things. Children learn through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others. (p. 9)

McDowall Clark and Bayliss (2012) have drawn together the concept of a community of practice and early childhood educators' exploration into working with infant and toddlers (of which they may not have had previous experience). In their UK based study of teachers gaining Early Years Professional status by engaging in professional practice with infants and toddlers, teachers not only enhanced their learning and understanding of infants and toddlers but also facilitated a community of practice that encompassed others also on the shared learning journey. The sharing of practice and engagement in a joint enterprise enabled the participants to create a community of practice that enabled contextual and meaningful learning about infant toddler pedagogy and leadership (McDowall Clark & Bayliss, 2012). The current study is interested in teachers' views, not only of infants and toddlers but also of themselves as members of the mixed-age community, and therefore how this collective approach may influence their interactions with children and other adults.

Rogoff (2003) has long been an advocate for the recognition of sociocultural learning, stating, "children and their social partners are interdependent; their roles are active and dynamically change in activities of the community" (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995, p. 54). Rogoff (2003) points out that children learn through observation and intent participation through community activities. All those within the community have something to offer in terms of teaching and learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) point out the centrality of learning within social practice, relying on the interrelationships between "agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowing" (p. 50). Therefore, a community relies on many functioning attributes to work effectively; the child as an individual, and the children and adults together, refining practices and routines. Rogoff et al. (1995) elaborate that participation in social practices is entwined with personal, interpersonal, and cultural processes that support one another to form sociocultural activity. Sumsion and Harrison (2014) agree, stating "that there are many kinds of spaces and many different kinds of dynamics operating within those spaces. They are imagined, experienced, lived and interpreted differently by the people who inhabit them, as well as by those who have an interest in those spaces" (p. 4). The current study is concerned with the role that infants and toddlers take in a mixed-age setting as a

community, in the ways they are independent but also interdependant – and how infants and toddlers contribute to the ongoing life of the cultural practices in an inherently socio-cultural community of a mixed-age setting.

Summary

Themes that have been explored within Section One are the need for a specialised knowledge about infants' and toddlers' ways of being; teachers' understandings of infants and toddlers being capable and competent; and the importance of belonging for each child, which leads to a sense of capability and competence within a community. Section two focused on literature about mixed-age grouping and explored implications of this type of grouping. Themes were indentified about the challenge in defining mixed-age grouping; the benefits of mixed-age grouping; a developmentally appropriate approach to grouping; teachers' understanding of mixed-age; and, lastly, seeing the mixed-age setting as a community.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum and its sociocultural lens is an essential part of this study as it grounds the discussion in a New Zealand context. This research will explore teachers' views of infants and toddlers as capable and competent within a mixed-age community. Relationships and culture as foundations for teachers' specialised knowledge about infants and toddlers will be explored. The impact of wellbeing and belonging on infants' and toddlers' ability to be agentic and purposeful in their contributions, care, and learning, will be explored through the lens of a mixed-age setting. Given the significant rise of the numbers of infants and toddlers in early childhood services, there is a need to contribute to the empirical research about how infants and toddlers learn and engage with their community, peers, and adults. The importance of belonging to a community to foster wellbeing has been shown within the literature. How teachers view infant and toddler capabilities and competence in wellbeing and belonging will be considered from a mixed-age community perspective. This literature review has led to the following research question:

How do teachers in a mixed-age setting view infants' and toddlers' contributions, care, and learning?

The next chapter will explain the interpretative, qualitative research methodology and rationalise a single-case study approach. The overarching conceptual framework,

combining Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning alongside three principles of *Te Whāriki,* family and community, relationships, and empowerment (MoE, 1996), will be introduced. The research site will be described, and the data collection and analysis methods will be explained. This study's reliability and validity will be explored and, finally, the ethical considerations will be outlined.

Chapter THREE

METHODOLOGY

"Qualitative inquiry seeks to discover and to describe in narrative reporting what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them" (Erickson, 2011, p. 43).

Qualitative research makes an attempt to interpret the intricacies in the social world and the people within it (Edwards, 2010). In the previous chapter, literature was explored around infants' and toddlers' ways of being, as well as the implications of mixed age grouping. This chapter outlines how teachers' understandings of infants and toddlers will be investigated and analysed in an ethical way. It first provides an overview of the qualitative research methodology employed in researching a single case: one mixed-age early childhood setting. Details of the research setting are then discussed, followed by the data collection methods, the study's validity and reliability and, lastly, the ethical considerations are outlined.

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm deemed appropriate to this project is interpretivism. The interpretivist approach recognises the importance of social reality and "looks for culturally and historically situated interpretations of the social life world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Interpretivism acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed, with multiple realities of events and situations, dependent upon different perspectives (Merriam, 2014). For the purpose of the current study, this idea suggests that in an early childhood mixed-age setting, knowledge is a socially constructed process involving both adults and children. This study drew on teachers' unique perspectives and views that were based on their own histories, cultures, and experiences, to construct an understanding of how teachers view infants and toddlers as contributors to their own learning and care.

Qualitative Research Methodology

A qualitative research methodology aligns with an interpretivist paradigm and was been chosen for this project for the close ties it has to studying people in a naturalistic way (Punch, 2009). The common features of qualitative research that align with this study, are

the desire to explain and make sense of a real-life situation, with the researcher gaining an understanding of what 'normal' looks like in this mixed-age setting. The features, rules, roles, and philosophy are elements of a person and/or organisation that require conversation, observation, and interaction that can only be uncovered with qualitative research (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The purpose of this study is to delve into a specific context, in this case one mixed-age centre with infants and toddlers, to discover the perceptions and understandings of one team of teachers regarding infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors.

This type of study is an instrumental case study where the research question aims to look deeply at a group of teachers' answers about the broader topic of infants and toddlers (Stake, 1998). The understanding of teachers' actions, interactions, and perceptions is critical to investigating the research question: *How do teachers in a mixed-age setting view infants' and toddlers' contributions, care and learning?*

Case study research design.

This research is designed as a single-case study (Merriam, 2014; Yin, 2014). It falls into what Yin (2014) defines as a common case where "the objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation" (p. 52). The everyday situation in this study provides an in-depth look at teachers' understandings of infants and toddlers in one mixed-age centre. The bounded context of this case is the finite number of teachers' views of a mixed-age setting that integrates infants, toddlers, and pre-schoolers together in one group. The focus on infants and toddlers then becomes the phenomenon. Stake (1995) refers to this type of case as instrumental – using the case of the teachers' views from one mixed-age setting to make sense of the phenomenon of infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors. Yin (2014) describes inquiry into a single-case as being descriptive, where the purpose is to authentically describe how and why this case works, as it does, in a real-world context. The research takes place in the everyday setting of an early childhood centre, and allows the individuality of the teachers' world views to be uncovered. Capturing and studying teachers' views in a natural context ensures there is as little disruption and discomfort as possible, allowing for their 'truths' to be revealed (Swanborn, 2010).

Lewis (2003) suggests the defining factor of a case-study approach is the "multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context" (p. 52). In this study, the *specific context* is the mixed-age grouping of the childcare setting and the *multiplicity of perspectives* refers to beliefs and practices of the team of teachers who work together and share particular views of infants and toddlers. The importance of the teachers' voice in developing an understanding of how they articulate and enact their practice, in relation to infants and toddlers, has been discussed by a number of scholars (Dalli, Rockel, et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 2009). Dalli, Rockel, et al. (2011) suggest that when teachers further understand and reflect on their own practice this can "draw on the multiple knowledges and perspectives that can help untangle the complex discourses at play" (p. 9). This research is therefore positioned to examine the complexities of how and why teachers view infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in their mixed-age setting. It allows for appreciating both the uniqueness of the participating centre's philosophical choice of mixed-age grouping and uniqueness of the participating teacher perceptions, while giving a deeper understanding of the context of mixed-age complexities.

Merriam (2014) explains that concentrating on the phenomenon, in this case infants and toddlers as part of a mixed-age setting, allows the researcher to uncover and explain the significant factors that characterise their place from the perspective of teachers. Undertaking a single-case study research allowed for a rich description and deep explanation of the research question.

Conceptualising This Study

Two complementary sets of ideas were utilised in interpreting and organising the findings and discussion chapters. The first set refers to the three principles of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), and the second to Wenger's (1998) communities of practice. Together, they provide a structure for organising the data.

Using the principles of family and community, relationships, and empowerment (MoE, 1996) provided a framework consistent with teachers' practice, as they were familiar with *Te Whāriki*. These three principles also reflect and acknowledge the working together of key participants in a mixed-age setting: teachers, adults, family, and children. These principles also reflect two key assumptions that underpin this study, namely: first, the

view that infants and toddlers are capable and competent, and second, mixed-age grouping supports infants' and toddlers' care and learning.

The principle of relationships recognises that learning is a collaborative effort based on connections and interactions with self and others. "Interaction provides a rich social world for children to make sense of" (MoE, 1996, p. 43). Infants and toddlers in a mixed-age setting desire to engage in relationships with others; what is significant about a mixed-age setting is the ability to engage with a range of adults and children of different ages. The principle of family and community recognises the centrality of people for infant and toddler wellbeing (MoE, 1996). A mixed-age setting reflects a family-like structure where infants and toddlers have consistent access to their siblings and other extended family members; this access values the importance of physical and emotional wellbeing for children. The principle of empowerment recognises the confidence and competence of infants and toddlers, acknowledging their unique ways of being, and fosters "an enhanced sense of self-worth, identity, [and] confidence" (p. 40).

The principles of family and community, and relationships (MoE, 1996) are strongly connected to the philosophical purpose of mixed-age settings responding to children as sociocultural beings that belong within a shared space that recognises the importance of family, adults, and other children (Aina, 2001; Gray, 2011; Rameka & Glasgow, 2015). Empowerment too plays a significant role in this research for its link to the phrase 'capable and competent'. This research explored the teachers' enactment of the principles of *Te Whāriki*, most specifically how they viewed infants and toddlers as empowered individuals who participate in learning as active co-constructors, not passive receptors of knowledge (Nuttall, 2013).

The second set of ideas that formed the framework refers to Wenger's (1998) social learning theory. The theoretical concepts from Wenger's (1998) work on community, culture, identity, and belonging, align well and formed a natural progression from the *Te Whāriki* principles of family and community, relationships, and empowerment (MoE, 1996) within this research. What drew these two complementary, overarching ideas together is the centrality of people in both Wenger's (1998) concepts and in the three relevant *Te Whariki* principles (MoE, 1996), which reflected the sociocultural nature of learning.

Wenger (1998) explains that communities of practice have a unique set of cultural practices: rules, responsibilities, and roles that are constructed, refined, and fulfilled by those within them. "Practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another" (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). Shared cultural practices indicate that community, culture, identity, and belonging are important ways of learning and functioning in this setting. These key concepts are drawn on, in particular, to investigate how teachers view infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors, initiators, and followers of cultural practices that situate them as agentic and purposeful in their relationships with other children and adults. Wenger (1998) determines that when a person is a full member of a community there is familiarity and recognition, "we experience competence and we are recognised as competent" (p. 152).

Wenger's (1998) social learning theory of communities of practice refers to a group of people engaged in intricate social relationships, where collective knowledge and learning define cultural practice. In this mixed-age setting, this research considered the teachers' pedagogy and teachers' explanations of infants' and toddlers' ways of being in relationships. This mutual engagement in practices exists due to the meanings that those involved in a community create with one another. According to Wenger (1998), a community is defined by how people engage in and identify with the everyday practices that reflect, and are unique to, the tasks, relationships, roles, or rules. Thus, the ongoing nature of the negotiation and refinement of cultural practices that the community engage in defines the community of practice as a living curriculum (Hoadley, 2012; Nuttall, 2013). *Te Whāriki* refers to curriculum as all experiences that a child takes part in, either directly or indirectly across their day (MoE, 1996). Therefore, a lived curriculum indicates fluidity; the learning and knowledge of cultural practices are communally moulded and shaped by those within the community, including children, as they participate in practices relevant to their mixed-age setting based on their engagement in relationships and roles. Cultural practices are decided and enacted by the people, places, and things that children and teachers engage with in their mixed-age setting. This is reiterated in the introduction of *Te Whāriki*, which states, "this curriculum emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal, responsive relationships for children with people, places and things" (p. 9).

The idea that community membership facilitates identity and belonging indicates their importance as key concepts for this research. Wenger (1998) suggests that collective knowledge through shared practices that are enacted and refined over time leads to a sense of identity and belonging. The concept of identity acknowledges the individual and social facets of self, recognising that membership in a community of practice is negotiated, as identity and belonging are lived social and cultural experiences (Wenger, 1998). Acknowledging the complex role of individual identity in shared identity means understanding that learning is developed through shared knowledge and common interests, but is also unique to the lived experiences of those individuals within the community of practice. Also of interest to this research is the notion that, as a member of a community of practice, there is a sense of familiarity that shows competence due to the understanding and enacting of roles and rules around engagement with others of the community (Wenger, 1998).

This research was concerned with how teachers in one mixed-age setting view infants and toddlers as competent members of a community of practice, therefore Wenger's (1998) key concepts of community, culture, identity, and belonging, and three principles of *Te Whāriki,* relationships, family and community, and empowerment (MoE, 1996), were used to complement one another. However, infants and toddlers cannot be examined solely as others in the setting; peers and adults are also a part of the social and cultural makeup of the setting in which all parties have an influence on one another. Although infants and toddlers have a special place in this research, the role of others cannot be ignored; the roles that others play in engaging in this mixed-age community will exemplify and highlight the collective shared nature of contribution to learning and practice. Acknowledging this single mixed-age setting as a community enables an in-depth examination of the practices the family and community undertake to support infant and toddler wellbeing. How teachers view infants and toddlers as empowered, capable, competent, and independent showed how these practices support the identity and belonging of infants and toddlers. The selected principles of *Te Whāriki,* and the document itself, are influenced by sociocultural theory, which values the importance of children's connectedness to their families, and to those within the early childhood setting, through lived experiences (MoE, 1996; Te One, 2013).

Table 1

Consolidating the Key Concepts

	Findings Section One: Teachers	**Findings Section Two: Family and Community**	**Findings Section Three: Infants' and Toddlers'**
Principles of *Te Whariki* **(MoE, 1996)**	Relationships	Family and Community	Empowerment
	Key word: Connection	Key word: Wellbeing	Key words: Capable; Competent; Independent
Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998)	Culture	Community	Identity & Belonging

Table 1 shows the complementary nature of the principles and theoretical ideas from *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) and Wenger (1998). When considering the valuable people in the mixed-age setting, from the perspective of the teachers, this allowed for key concepts to be drawn on to support and interpret the findings. Each findings section will be relevant to a group of people deemed important by the teachers and will be guided by the appropriate principle (as indicated in Table 1).

The Research Context

Site selection.

Due to the limited number of early childhood centres in Auckland that identify as mixed-aged settings, purposive selection took place based on the researcher's professional knowledge of centres in the Auckland region. As a visiting lecturer for the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching) programme at Manukau Institute of Technology, I have visited a number of early childhood centres over the past six and a half years' of employment with the Institute. This provides me with knowledge of centres that utilise mixed-age grouping and that also support children under two years of age. For this

reason, purposive selection was appropriate, due to the particular characteristics that a centre is required to embody for this research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Punch, 2009). There were also three firm criteria (see criteria, p. 37) set for this research to ensure the participating centre was a mixed-age centre that catered for infants and toddlers. None of my friends or family attended this centre as teachers (voluntary or employed) or were enrolled families.

The participating centre was situated in Auckland and licensed for 50 children from birth to five years of age. The ethnic makeup of the centre was predominantly Pasifika and Māori. Many of the families attending the centre were related, so there was a large contingent of children who were part of an extended family. The teaching team were also ethnically diverse. Some teachers identified with the predominant cultures in the centre and others were of New Zealand European descent.

As a bounded case study there are several criteria that were to be met to support this research and the methodology. These boundaries were as follows:

1. The centre was a mixed-age setting, and licensed for no fewer than six children under two. This was important to clearly show that communities of learners encompass all ages.

The centre was, at the time, licensed for five under two-year olds, and was in the process of renewing its licence to cater for 15 children under two

2. The centre philosophy was appreciative of the mixed-age grouping.

The centre philosophy did convey value for mixed-age grouping with the concept of ako (teaching and learning together). The chosen centre showed their appreciation of a mixed-age setting both in their licence structure and the physical set-up and grouping of children in the setting. Children of any age had access to all areas of the centre.

3. No fewer than three employees (qualified teachers or students in-training to be teachers) were to take part in the project.

Six teachers agreed to take part in the research. Their personal views have been captured during teacher interviews.

Participant selection criteria.

Six teachers agreed to participate in the research: five teachers are qualified and work fulltime; and one teacher-in-training is in her second year of study towards a Bachelor of Education (ECT) and worked on a voluntary basis, as well as being employed on a casual basis. There was no maximum number of participants for this study as there was significant value in each teacher's contribution. Focusing on qualified and/or in-training teachers ensures there is a level of understanding of the early childhood curriculum, personal pedagogy, and philosophy, as well as some degree of training/understanding of the unique attributes of infants and toddlers. To encourage confidentiality, teachers were asked to choose pseudonyms to represent themselves within this research.

Karen is the centre manager and has been at the centre for 21 years, since it opened. Mary has worked at the centre for nine years, she has prior mixed-age setting experience and identifies as a proud Pacific Island woman. Winnie has been at the centre for five years and has a background in teacher aiding, she came to the centre because of a family connection with Karen's mother. Leanne has been at this centre for almost ten years, and teaching for fifteen, she lives locally and values how community-based this centre is. Amy has been with the centre for three years, though her relationship with the centre extends past this to when her children attended. She too has teacher-aide experience; Amy is the key primary caregiver for the infants and toddlers in this centre. Rhiannon is a teacher-in-training and has been with the centre for two years, she was also a HIPPY (Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters) tutor for three years, with connections to the centre prior to that.

Access to the research site.

Ethics approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC) for this research project was granted on October 8th 2015. A phone call to a centre manager was made to arrange a convenient time to visit to discuss the project in October 2015. At this visit, an outline of the purpose of the study was presented to the centre manager, the manager participant information sheet (Appendix A) and consent form for access to the centre (Appendix B) were provided and discussed. Copies of the teacher participant sheet (Appendix C) and teacher consent form were also provided (Appendix D). The centre manager agreed to give access to the site and teachers, and another meeting was arranged to speak directly to teachers. This meeting was arranged

for the following week during a regular team meeting. This was an opportunity to give teachers an overview of the project and to answer questions about their involvement and participation. This initial visit established communication and developed a sense of trust with the participating teachers. Once the invitation to participate had been accepted, I was able to begin data collection.

Data Collection

The data in this case study came from three sources:

1. Teacher interviews (six interviews - one individual interview per teacher lasting up to 60 minutes);
2. Centre documentation (including the centre philosophy and policies); and
3. My own field notes (including notes on the physical environment and interpretations of interview settings and ambience).

These three data sources allowed for teachers' views to become apparent; for a unique view of the centre to develop, including how collective decisions are formed; and for an authentic picture of infants and toddlers in one mixed-age setting to form.

Semi-structured interviews.

Individual interviews are an important data collection tool. Eight semi-structured questions provided a broad range of personal views around mixed-age grouping and teachers' views of infants and toddlers. Punch (2009) believes the interview to be a sound way of capturing "perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality" (p. 144). The interview questions were initially broad semi-structured questions that remained closely aligned with the research question. They focused on three themes: 1. teachers' understandings of mixed-age grouping; 2. teachers' personal perspectives on the benefits and challenges of mixed-age; and 3. teachers' perceptions of infants and toddlers in mixed-age settings. This allowed for personal interpretation and discussion to emerge from each teacher participant.

The good rapport and level of trust developed between the participants and myself, enabled them to consider the interview like an intimate and in-depth conversation (Punch, 2009). Participants were encouraged to freely share their own perceptions, interpretations,

and examples of how they viewed infants and toddlers as capable and competent members of a mixed-age setting.

Each participant came to the interview with different experiences, interpretations, and meanings to share; despite working as a team, the teachers each had their own views and perceptions which added to the richness in the findings. Haggis (2009), too, believes that even within a shared context, such as this mixed-age setting, there would be significant difference between the individuals involved which cannot be simplified to 'one size fits all' responses; she believes "people, groups, institutions, cultures and societies, whilst continually emerging as a result of openness, connection and interaction, are nonetheless also specific to themselves" (p. 55). It is those different views gathered during interviews that gave good insight into each teacher's individual perceptions of infants and toddlers and mixed-age settings, even in a team with a shared overarching team/centre philosophy.

Prior to beginning the interviews with the teaching team, I engaged a critical friend in a mock-interview situation to discover if the flow, order, and structure of the questions were appropriate (considering the answers I received from the mock interview). I was able to re-order and re-word some questions to better elicit the type of information pertaining to key concepts I had identified in the literature review.

A time allowance of no more than 60 minutes per individual interview was agreed upon with the centre manager. The interviews took place over a period of two weeks following negotiation of suitable dates and times with the centre manager and teachers. Interviews took place in a quiet space free from interruptions, as designated by the centre manager.

Each of the participants received a transcript of their interview within four weeks of the final interview. They were asked to read for accuracy of the transcription and provided with further opportunity to comment on or correct their responses. Teacher participants had a two-week period to edit their transcript before it was collected by the researcher. When participants are able to verify their interview transcripts, this adds to the internal validity of the project (Punch, 2009). Returning the transcribed interviews to each participant ensured teachers were able to verify that their responses had been interpreted with authenticity in the transference to written text. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) believe the quality of the transcription is equal to the quality of interview itself and should not be

underestimated in its ability to enhance the reliability and validity of the interview data. Transcription was completed by a University of Auckland approved transcription service.

Centre documentation.

Key ideas that were looked for in centre documentation, policies, and the environment were directly related to the key ideas from the research aim and identified from the literature review: views/perception of infants and toddlers, and mixed-age philosophy. Prior to the participant-teacher interviews, time was spent accessing relevant centre documentation. Centre documentation, in the form of policies, licence, and philosophy, provided information about the way teachers were expected to practise, and what the centre valued. Stake (1995) explains that analysing documents can provide important evidence that may not be easily captured in other types of data collection. Reviewing the centre philosophy and policy documents allowed me to consider and review my interview questions. Interestingly, it was during a review of the centre philosophy that I identified that although the centre structure and practices fully supported a mixed-age philosophy, this was not articulated in the centre philosophy itself. I was then able to add a question that asked teachers why they believed mixed-age was not specifically mentioned in the centre philosophy, into my interview schedule. This review of the philosophy and policies, before any other data collection, was helpful in understanding the centre's stance on infants and toddlers and mixed-age grouping; I was then able to follow up on this within individual interviews.

Field notes.

Field notes provided information about how the centre's physical environment supported infants and toddlers in the mixed-age setting. Field notes were focused on my interpretation of the environment and on what and how the participating centre reflected important concepts relevant to the research, in their documentation, centre philosophy, policies, and environment set up. I also collected field notes about my interpretations of interviews and conversations. Field notes were a less direct form of personal observation. Cohen et al. (2007) discuss the value in case-study observations, stating, "the world is subjectively structured, possessing particular meanings for its inhabitants" (p. 260). It is this subjectivity and value placed on key concepts that I wished to gather through collecting field notes about the centre environment. This allowed me to become familiar

with the centre's unique context and how the teaching team viewed/showed key concepts within their setting.

In single-case research, Edwards (2010) outlines the importance of using low-intrusion collection methods to cause as little disturbance to the natural goings-on of the centre as possible. I sought to minimise any disruption to centre routines and processes during my visits. This then allowed for a more authentic picture of the mixed-age case to be formed from the information collected.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data collected from interviews, centre documentation, and field notes required refining, reducing, and interpreting. A thematic analysis is used which allowed for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Coding and analysis of the data set took place within one month of collection of the approved/checked interview transcriptions. This timing of the coding and analysis allowed the data to be revisited multiple times and, while still fresh in my mind, provided a "healthy corrective of built-in blind spots" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 70) in the event the process became overly drawn out.

There is a challenge in analysing case study data, due to the lack of fixed formulas or detailed tools; however, Yin (2014) believes that rigorous analysis can result from "empirical thinking, along with the sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations" (p. 133). Through direct interpretation and categorical aggregation of the analysis and synthesis of the data I was able to, as Stake (1995) explains, pull the case apart and put it back together in a meaningful way that responded to my research question. Presentation of the coding and themes to my research supervisors allowed for considerable discussion and justification about how the coding and themes related to the research aim and question.

To lessen the possibility of straying from the research question or selective bias that moves away or shuns key data, Miles et al.'s (2014) monster-matrix technique was used. This involved physically cutting, pasting, and moving around pieces of data that provided clear representations of key ideas, on large wall-mounted poster pages. The following steps where employed for generating meaning in qualitative data analysis based on Miles et al.'s (2014) suggested techniques:

1. Attributing codes to the data collected from the interviews and researcher field notes. These codes were stemmed directly from the identification of key concepts from the literature review.
2. Noting personal reflections and comments in the margins.
3. Sorting through the data to identify relationships, patterns, differences, and commonalities.
4. Elaborating and teasing out the small set of identified ideas.
5. Confronting these ideas with further investigation into pertinent literature.

Validity and Reliability

Structural corroboration of the data-collection methods is crucial in showing validity and reliability of the findings (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). Triangulating the data from interviews, centre documentation, and field notes ensured that I interpreted the data with accuracy and logic. It also ensured that the teachers' voices were heard in a variety of ways – directly, through the interviews, and indirectly, through the centre documentation and field notes.

Triangulation.

Yin (2014) suggests a sound case study should involve multiple sources of evidence which allow the researcher to address a greater range of issues: behavioural, attitudinal, and historical. Teacher interviews allowed for personal attitudes and teaching behaviours to be shared in response to the questions. Teachers also had the opportunity to consider their own history and story, and how this had contributed to their teaching and choice of employment. The importance of using multiple data-collection methods is critical for triangulation, to avoid a limited view (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The strength of answering the research question therefore relies on the triangulation of multiple sources to corroborate and fortify the findings (Ary et al., 2010; Yin, 2014). Analysis of centre documentation prior to teacher interviews prompted a question around the centre's written philosophy and gave me time to consider how these documents affected and reflected infants and toddlers. Field notes of the centre environment and my interpretations of conversations related to the research question reinforced what I had gathered in teacher interviews or by looking at the environment. Yin (2014) too states the importance of utilising multiple sources of evidence to add the validity of the research,

stating, "the multiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon" (p. 21).

Internal and External Validity.

Accurate reporting of the data collected was addressed by ensuring that teacher participants had their interview transcripts returned to them to ensure correct recording has taken place; this was also an opportunity to correct errors in interpretation within the transcription. This limited my ability to make incorrect inferences about what teachers may or may not have meant in their interview responses (Yin, 2014). Teachers were given the opportunity to make additional comments of explanation if they so desired when transcripts were returned to them for checking, two teachers did make comments about the language they used and corrected this as they saw fit.

Transferability.

In terms of external validity, there is no attempt to make the findings of this research appear generalisable about mixed-age grouping. Although there may be some areas of transferability, the intention is to generate discussion in the wider early childhood community about their role in supporting infants and toddlers in mixed-age settings. Rich, varied, and triangulated data, along with rigorous analysis, would enable others to determine transferability to their own settings or practice with infants and toddlers, should they so choose (Cohen et al., 2007).

Ethical Considerations

"Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (Stake, 1995, p. 103).

Utmost in my mind was ensuring that participant teachers' were valued as knowledgeable contributors to my study. Authenticity of the teachers' experiences and philosophical standpoints in relation to their practice were crucial to understanding how infants and toddlers are viewed as capable and competent within a mixed-age environment.

Informed consent

In line with the University of Auckland's ethical guidelines, informed and voluntary consent from participants was sought. Information sharing and informed consent are

crucial to participants feeling that they could choose to be a part of the research journey, or withdraw at any time (Ary et al., 2010). Teacher participants could withdraw at any point until the data analysis began, without risk or penalty, for any reason they saw fit (UAHPEC, 2013).

Minimisation of risk

There were no anticipated physical or psychological risks involved in this research. To avoid any possibility of psychological harm, participants were made fully aware, from the outset, that they could choose not to participate. In studies such as this, there is a slight possibility that a teacher may be critical of the centre's practices and that the manager may be able to identify the teacher. However, the focus of the study was on the teachers' views on infants and toddlers in mixed-age settings, and the likelihood of this occurring was minimal. Furthermore, any criticism of centre practices made by teachers during interviews would only be used if directly relevant to the study. All findings were treated sensitively and reported in such a way that protected teachers' identities. It was reinforced within the centre manager/supervisor Consent Form that should teacher participants respond in any way that may be deemed critical of centre practices, there would be no negative consequence to their employment or professional relationships.

Confidentiality

Although anonymity cannot be guaranteed, due to multiple members of the teaching team taking part and the small size of the early childhood sector, concerted effort was made to maintain confidentiality. Confidentiality was respected and pseudonyms (of the teachers' choosing) were used in reporting data, particularly in relation to interview data; no names were recorded in the interview transcripts. Damianakis and Woodford (2012) provide an interesting perspective in considering qualitative research involving the interaction between small, connected communities. There was an importance of confidentiality and freedom for participants to participate in a full and frank discussion, which can pose a challenge when discussions take place outside of the data gathering when teachers work closely alongside one another in shared space. Damianakis and Woodford (2012) suggest guidelines during the research that were pertinent to this project. For example, employing pseudonyms, though also being aware that the participants may be able to attribute a pseudonym to a particular person or centre risking a breach of confidentiality. When

transcripts were returned to individual teachers, these were enclosed in envelopes along with a letter revisiting the use of pseudonyms. During interviews, some teachers had indicated they were not concerned about which name they were given; however, I felt it important to revisit this in writing and teachers were again asked to indicate a pseudonym of their choosing.

Summary

This chapter has introduced and rationalised the use of qualitative design in the form of a single-case study. The data collection methods of interviews, centre documentation, and field notes were explained and justified. The validity and reliability of the study has been explored and, lastly, the ethical considerations have been defined.

The next chapter will explore the findings based on teachers' experiences of working with infants and toddlers in a mixed-age setting. Three principles from *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996): relationships, family and community, and empowerment, will be employed to structure and present the findings chapter.

Chapter FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter explores teachers' views of infants and toddlers as capable and competent in a mixed-age setting. The findings focus on the teachers' voice in answering the research question: *How do teachers in a mixed age setting view infants' and toddlers' contributions, care and learning?*

This chapter is divided into three sections:

- Teachers' relationships with infants and toddlers that recognise connectedness
- How the teachers viewed the interdependence within the centre community and its impact on infant and toddler wellbeing
- How the teachers viewed infants and toddlers as capable, competent, and independent contributors

A brief review of the conceptual framework is provided (as discussed in full in Chapter 3, pp.32-36). Principles from *Te Whāriki* are used as a conceptual framework to present teachers' views and key insights in relation to the research question. Being a single-case study the teachers' views are imperative to understanding what makes their particular setting work for them. The teachers' responses to questions during the interviews highlighted the value they place on those involved within the mixed-age setting. Each of the three sections provides insight into how children, teachers, and families are valued, and the part they play in supporting the contributions of infants and toddlers.

Driving this research is the exploration of the aspiration from *Te Whāriki* for children "to grow up as competent and confident learners" (MoE, 1996, p. 9). The research question focuses on teachers' views of infants and toddlers *already* being capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting. The conceptual framework foregrounds Wenger's (1998) social learning theory about communities of practice, to provide the overarching theoretical context to this thesis. Wenger's (1998) key ideas of community, culture, identity, and belonging align closely with three principles of *Te Whāriki*: family and community, empowerment, and relationships, which structure this chapter (MoE, 1996). These principles provide a way to gauge how teacher understandings and pedagogical practices align with the aspiration from the curriculum document. The principles aid in

the interpretation of teachers' reported practices and views based on how they play a part in the mixed-age setting. During interviews, teachers emphasised the roles that they and others play in the wellbeing and care of infants and toddlers in the centre. Each section of the findings begins with a brief introduction of the relevant principle from *Te Whāriki*, followed by an excerpt from a teacher interview that best captures the importance of each group of people in the centre community.

Abbreviations have been assigned to the findings to indicate the source of the data. Teacher interviews will be indicated (TI), field notes (FN) and centre documentation (CD).

Section One: Teachers' Recognise the Importance of Connectedness in Relationships with Infants and Toddlers

This section discusses the teachers' understandings of who is connected when using the term 'mixed-age'; it shows that teachers are connected other adults and children as members of the mixed-age community. Lastly, this section describes teachers' relationships with infants and toddlers that show the complex image they hold of the youngest children.

Te Whāriki's principle of relationships (MoE, 1996) emphasises the key importance that relationships have on infant and toddler wellbeing. In particular, it affords utmost importance to social relationships that build on respect and trust in developing infants' and toddlers' security and confidence: "adults [should] know the children well, providing the basis for 'give and take' of communication and learning" (p. 43). The following excerpts from the teacher interviews illustrate ways that the notion of connection is implicit within the relationship principle in *Te Whāriki*, evidenced itself in practice at the study centre.

> *I carried with my baby [at the centre] and then when I gave birth and had bubba*
> *we met … every Friday we have an excursion and this little group came to meet*
> *me and bubba at the park … and then that was meaningful for those five children,*
> *like meeting with aunty and the new baby in the park and then they still went back*
> *to those portfolios and revisited that story about Aunty Amy, she's had her baby*
> *now, we met her in the park. And that still brings back memories for them so then*
> *when they see my baby now growing up they still revisit him, they talk about that*

story, they say that he's growing now, they still come and take care of him. (Amy, TI, p. 4)

The continued connection with children during parental leave and the new connection that was facilitated between Amy's baby and the centre children is exemplified in this excerpt and shows a strong link to Amy's views about the importance of relationships with infants and toddlers in the setting. Amy reminisced about how she remained connected with the children at the centre while on parental leave, which allowed a continuation of the relationship that she had established with the children prior to her baby's birth. She played a dual role during these excursions, of both teacher and parent, as she remained a part of the children's lives at the centre while also introducing her own infant to the centre children from birth - a connection that continued to grow and was often revisited by the children after her return to work (Amy, TI, p. 4).

Amy's story exemplified the investment that the teachers have in their centre community and how they can facilitate an enduring reciprocal connection for the children and for themselves. Amy emphasised this in her interview, when she acknowledged she had stayed at this centre because of the relationships she had built with families (TI, p. 2).

The importance of connection is also emphasised in other teachers' interview responses. Teachers understood the importance of knowledge and understanding of individual children and families that enabled them to pick up subtleties in the children's communication. Evident in the centre philosophy was the belief that teachers would care for children feelings and listen to what children are saying (CD). Karen and Leanne believed this intuitive listening further strengthened their relationships with children and families.

> *... what's happened in your house on the weekend? Because I can see it. And I can feel it in you. Their behaviour, their whole body, personality, is changing, tells us what's wrong with them, you know, without words. (Karen, TI, pp. 11-12)*

> *We have to be aware of who we are caring for and we have to be able to have some understanding ... to be knowing and knowledgeable. (Leanne, TI, p. 13)*

I think it's about them also like I know that when they've had enough they'll sit there, nine months' old and make a face or make a sound and you think okay they've had enough, move away, look he's had enough. (Karen, TI, p. 11)

Understandings of who is connected when using the term 'mixed-age'.

A strong sense of family and connection is evident in the teachers' passionate responses when asked about how they defined mixed-age and the features of this particular centre (Appendix E). This illuminated ideas about the nature of connections and relationships between teachers and infants and toddlers. Specifically, their definitions of mixed-age are not specific to age – this setting is inclusive of everyone. For example, Karen, Rhiannon, and Mary refer to mixed-age settings as reflecting whānau (family).

It's children of all ages all in the one place. When I think of mixed ages I just think of whānau. (Karen, TI, p. 3)

It means everyone as one so we don't have separate things. We meet all of their needs but we are all one big whānau really. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 2)

We are a community-based centre, meaning that you come in as a family; we take you as a family. We don't split you up. You come in, what you bring us we accommodate. (Mary, TI, p. 3)

Winnie referred to inclusiveness a number of times in her interview and also did not mention age at all in her understanding of mixed-age.

Being able to be everywhere and anywhere. Inclusiveness of everybody … just everybody is included. (Winnie, TI, pp. 1 & 3)

All the teachers saw their mixed-aged centre as being fluid, and eschewed labels of age and stage. The centre-philosophy documentation and policy statements also did not discuss the benefits of mixed-age grouping (CD). When questioned about this, Karen stated: "it's never been an issue as it's always been that way. We don't identify this as something that makes us stand out" (FN). The inclusivity and ability to interact with anyone was apparent when I observed teachers and children interacting in the centre environment (FN), even though the centre licence specifies under twos and over twos

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(CD), the physical space and teachers' practice encourage and allow for all the children to be together. This view is evident in Karen's response:

> *Never had occurred to me to differentiate between the age groups because we would just be treating them baseline all the same and then extras for different people ... not as age group wise. Again because we're all just part of a whānau. We don't actually see them as being separate, it's separate on the licence but they're just part of the centre. (Karen, TI, p. 17 & 18)*

Connecting on a personal level seemed important to Karen, who also believed that addressing the needs of infants and toddlers is an individual process, not due to age but because this would allow her to connect with each child and family on a personal level. She reiterated the strong sense of family connection shared by other teachers as being a vital component of their setting.

> *Our whole purpose or our whole being is about whānau. The most important thing that we have and that we offer is about being whānau. And so when you're whānau you don't determine between who, what, where, age groups or whatever, you're just a whānau and so I would hope that all our practice is around nurturing the whānau. .... They're just another child in our centre that we work with, that we nurture, that we have hugs and kisses with. That just might need a bit more caring or sort of has different needs but they're all just part of the whānau. (Karen, TI, p. 17)*

Teachers connected as members of the mixed-age community.

Teachers viewed themselves as part of the centre community and valued strong connections with family. Teachers identified as members of the wider community outside the centre; five teachers live in the area and had worked for the centre for a number of years – ranging from Karen as a founding member of the centre (21 years), to Rhiannon as the newest team member (2 years). All the teachers interviewed had connections to the centre that went beyond their own work as employees. Even the newer teachers cited connections that went back to their own children and even their grandchildren attending the centre (Rhiannon, TI; Amy, TI; Winnie, TI).

The connection to family and close relationships could be seen in the way children and their families referred to the teachers, and even how teachers referred to themselves. Intimate terms of endearment such as "Nan" or "Aunty" are suggestive of close connections and signalled teachers' integral place within the centre family. Amy, Karen, and Leanne indicate that being called Aunty or Nan showed strength in the relationships they have with the children.

> *They see us teachers as whānau, like Aunties, and being called Aunties is something that … it resembles family, whānau. (Amy, TI, p. 3)*

> *I think the whole thing about them calling us Aunty, Aunty and Nan, is also part of that whānau feeling … that whole relationship thing is really cool. (Karen, TI, p. 5)*

> *We have really close bonds. A lot of them call us Aunty. We are like family with them … That's really important to me like I am really passionate about relationships. (Leanne, TI, p. 2)*

Teachers' strong connections to the mixed-age community and their commitment to the children and their families is evident in the pedagogical decisions made in response to attending professional development. A team decision to implement a primary caregiving system for the infants and toddlers was based on their shared view of the importance of the relationship with infants, toddlers, and their families. After attending a professional development course on brain development six months earlier it was decided that Amy would fulfil the role of primary caregiver for children under two (Winnie, TI). Winnie and Karen were positive when they spoke of the primary caregiving role and its benefits for infants and toddlers.

> *It's working really well that they [the children] are calm and collected …. (Winnie, TI, p. 2 & 6)*

> *The children are a lot more settled, the babies are a lot more settled. (Karen, TI, p. 5)*

The teachers reported that they had found that the children were more settled and secure, to the point they reached beyond their primary caregiver to other teachers. Karen and

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Winnie's views reflect their belief that security fosters a stronger connection when the caregiver is a familiar, trusted person to the child:

> *I think it's about them knowing who they feel safe with, so identifying .... not necessarily just the primary caregiver, but often they'll come to me, they'll go to somebody else .... so feeling safe around, among the people, the adults that are here (Karen, TI, p. 11)*

> *Being able to approach ... any of the teachers for their wants and needs to be met, that they are not exclusively reliant on Amy for everything. Happy to come and be with us. (Winnie, TI, p. 6)*

Teachers' relationships with infants and toddlers show the complex image they hold of children.

There is a tension between how the teachers described the infant and toddler as capable and competent, and other ways that assumed a less positive view. For example, Winnie, Karen, and Leanne spoke of understanding some of the challenging aspects of infants' and toddlers' behaviour, while at the same time acknowledging these as positive characteristics. Further, the way infants and toddlers were described denoted a strong sense of endearment and connection to each child. During interviews, teachers talked affectionately of infants and toddlers and referred to them as 'bubbas' (FN), but also referred to them in other ways:

> *Pain in the bum ... That is when they are being frustrating ... On the other hand, angelic, beautiful, exciting, interesting. (Winnie, TI, p. 6-7)*

> *Rat baggy ... When you have a really good relationship with them, and you just see just how amazing they are and just what they're, just so capable of and so aware of. They're so cute. And they're such ratbags. (Karen, TI, p. 11 & 12)*

> *Adorable. Curious. Yeah challenging. Adventurous. Emotional. Loving. (Leanne, TI, p. 11)*

Mary described infants and toddlers as cunning and mischievous – the words themselves bring up negative connotations in Western culture. However, the way Mary explained this indicated a sense of pride (FN).

> *I always see their mischievous ways, their very cunning ways, their very playful ways, especially with infants and toddlers, especially toddlers. (Mary, TI, p. 6)*

There is clarity in teachers' shared position, with a strong adverse reaction to the term "infant and toddler". When asked for ways of describing infants and toddlers, teachers are firm that infants and toddlers are viewed as capable individuals not restricted by age or developmental norms. Leanne, for example, stated that she does not use the term toddler and is often taken aback when others do (e.g. practicum students). Using the child's name is common practice for the teachers in the centre (Leanne, TI). However, although Mary also did not want to 'label' children, she had instigated a team discussion in a meeting about whether it is more appropriate to call the youngest children infants and toddlers or under twos and over twos (Mary, TI).

> *It's hard to think about … but when you ask questions and you separate them, like over two under two … it's hard to separate them because they've been like together and it doesn't seem like you can separate them anymore. (Amy, TI, p.11)*

Likewise, Winnie's response about dependence preceding independence reflects her view of an infant and/or toddler's capability and competence.

> *Well, in order to be independent you have to be dependent first so it's just a natural progression. (Winnie, TI, p. 7)*

Teachers also found it challenging to define the notion of an infant and/or toddler, rather indicating that what sets the youngest children apart are routine-caregiving experiences; being in nappies or being fed and going to bed earlier (Rhiannon, TI). Karen and Leanne reaffirm the view that infants and toddlers should be treated as individuals rather than as an age or stage.

> *Babies and littler babies. Or babies and those a little bit bigger. Birth to under three at least, depending on the personality of that child. Sometimes they end their toddler years at two, sometimes they don't, sometimes it might be before two, they seem to be a lot more grown up, independent, ready to do their own thing. But when they're … at 18-months to two and a half, we kind of forget who is who. (Karen, TI, p. 7)*

I look at infants ... like they are mobile, you know, so that's how I classify ... as soon as they start to be active .... I call them bubba or just refer to them by their name. (Leanne, TI, p. 13)

While the teachers often refer to "infants and toddlers", the use of the term "under twos" is only used in the *Health, Safety, and Environment Policy* (CD), where there are specific procedures regarding the health and safety of infants and toddlers. The age distinction is mentioned nowhere else in centre documentation.

In summary, this section on relationships focused on exploring the teachers' views of infants and toddlers in their mixed-age setting and how teachers, and children are positioned as connected members of the community. The inter-relational nature of the teachers' practice embodies the *Te Whāriki* principle of relationships (MoE, 1996), and is evident in their interview responses about defining mixed-age grouping. Teachers' inclusive approach is evident in the reports of their practice being influenced by their own connection and interaction in the centre community, which Karen eloquently articulates, "we're all just part of a whānau" (TI, p. 18). The teachers' positive image of the infants and toddlers is evident in their terms of endearment for children and being called Aunty or Nan; the fact that teachers have and do engage in professional dialogue and professional development shows their respect for their families and children. The strong connection between teachers, and infants and toddlers, in this teaching team, is evident in how they speak about one another; the fact that the teachers believe that infants and toddlers feel safe enough in their connections with other teachers to seek them out, rather than only their primary caregiver, shows relationships that are built on respect and trust.

Section Two: How the Interdependence Within the Centre Community Impacted on Infant and Toddler Wellbeing

This section draws on teachers' understandings of mixed-age settings being intergenerational and, thus, inclusive of infants and toddlers; teachers' investment in families and the community; and, lastly, the role of siblings and cousins as family members, but also part of the mixed-age community.

The teachers' understanding of mixed-age grouping clearly linked to the *Te Whāriki* principle of family and community (MoE, 1996) which emphasises the integral position that the family and community have on children's learning and development: "the

wellbeing of children is interdependent with the wellbeing and culture of adults in the early childhood setting and families" (p. 42). This value of families, children, and adults, as contributing members to this mixed-age setting, is emphasised by the teachers. In this section, the discussion draws on key concepts of family and community with a specific focus on how teachers' views of the interdependence of all parties within the centre catered to the overall wellbeing of infants and toddlers. The key themes of wellbeing and interdependence, relevant to the *Te Whāriki* principle of family and community, are also discussed by teachers during interviews, including in Karen's story about the grandma club:

> *We used to get a bunch of grandmas that used to come ... they would walk their grandchildren to preschool, so they'd take 20 minutes to walk here. They'd get here, they'd be really tired, then they'd have to walk all the way home. So that's when we started to set up the grandma club and these grandmas would come, and .... we'd say, oh just say nan, stay, I'll make you a cup of tea ... Then they started doing the kids' puzzles. And they'd start doing three-piece puzzles, woohoo! Look at me, look at me, I did it! They'd stand up, they'd do a dance, they'd sing in Samoan and Tongan and dance. So then they started moving to five piece, 10 piece, 12 piece puzzles .... And then they got up to like 1500 piece puzzles and they'd roll it out and they'd sit there and they'd do it. Well, a baby would come. Baby would crawl along the floor ... they'd kind of look, crawl along and then touch and then, ohh sss- ... then it would be boring or they would go away. Oh, then they'd start again. But when there was a baby crying, if a baby got upset, then they'd say, okay here nan, and they'd take the baby and they'd sing Tongan songs, Samoan songs, do another puzzle, sing, pat the baby, rock the baby ... just to have that age group in the centre being there for the babies. So they were really good like that. When they'd finish a puzzle they'd jump up and they'd dance and sing. And then we'd all clap that they'd done the puzzle, we'd take photos of them with the puzzle and then I'd PVA glue the whole puzzle, put it on the side and then get them another one. (Karen, TI, p. 16-17)*

Karen's excerpt about the 'grandma club', shows the strong connection this centre had to its families. The teachers saw the grandmas' wellbeing as an important part of centre life, intricately interwoven with their grandchildren's wellbeing. Karen's narrative illuminates

the subtle ways in which the grandmas' wellbeing and contributions became part of the fabric of the centre and central to the wellbeing of the infants.

The grandmas' ability to help soothe and settle babies in an appropriate way, whether they were their grandchildren or not, as well as engage in their own social connections with other grandmas, shows the interdependent nature of the relationships. The above example shows the importance the centre placed on portraying their mixed-age setting being not just for children, but recognising the importance and contribution of older adult family members who, when their wellbeing is taken care of, reciprocate with their support of unsettled infants. Teachers supported this intergenerational element and made it a key feature of their mixed-age setting. The centre acknowledged the importance of teachers creating an environment that "welcomes and values whānau and extended whānau and which interacts with the wider community" (CD). As Karen pointed out:

> *I think it's also that, you always know that when the parent is happy, the child is happy, so when the parent is happy coming in and feel that they belong then the child also feels that they belong (Karen, TI, p. 14)*

This mixed-age setting reflects the importance of family connections.

The 'open door' practices of this centre encouraged families to contribute in their own ways, providing families with a sense of belonging where their unique contributions are valued. The centre philosophy clearly outlines the importance of others within the setting, stating, "parents and whānau are part of the centre environment and curriculum" (CD). When the outdoor space was redesigned earlier in the year, Karen indicated that some of the grandmas had willingly offered to take on the role of gardeners, planting edible plants for the centre (FN). The centre's *Relationships with Parents and Families Policy* states that "whānau will be welcome to stay during the centre sessions, they may do as little or as much as they like, just being there can be a valuable experience for all" (CD). Mary and Karen both alluded to the value which the connection with 'home' the grandmas' presence gave to some of the young mothers. The teachers supported cultural practices that families were accustomed to, understanding that this catered to their wellbeing and that of their infant and/or toddler. Karen and Mary both allude to families feeling they were at a home away from home within the centre.

Just having the older women around and sometimes with those grandmas the young mums would come, the babies would be around in their hands and they'd hear the singing and they'd, sometimes they'd just sit there and they'd sing hymns and do their puzzles at the same time, and then some of the young mums would come in and then they would sit and watch. That was a really cool thing about having a mixed age centre that was going from birth to grandma. (Karen, TI, pp. 16-17)

[The parent says] You guys are so welcoming. It's like being in Samoa where everybody takes a turn in looking after their children. (Mary, TI, p. 9)

Winnie suggested this had a positive effect on the grandmas' wellbeing – where they too felt part of the centre community. The interdependent nature of the grandmas' role was then to contribute skills that reflected their cultures, to support infant and toddler wellbeing.

We have had grandmothers come and sit with their children and be included and do weaving with the children ... Offer their points of view about water play ... But just to be inclusive that they are welcome at any time ... Some of them will ask them to read a book. Happy that they are there because they are part of the whānau really. (Winnie, TI, p. 5)

Mary talked about the personal connection to family, indicating that as she is of Pacific Island descent the feeling of interdependence within the family had a strong place in her teaching.

It was just that whānau, whānau and family based where for me being PI [Pacific Island], family is very important. I learn from grandmothers. You learn from your older siblings, uncles, your mothers and fathers (Mary, TI, p. 1)

Some teachers had to deepen their understanding about the importance of family and the unique perspective on family that this mixed-age centre had, through practice and reflection. Winnie spoke about having a Pākehā upbringing and how a mixed-age setting challenged her perception of family roles and interdependence, and her idea of who could care for the infants.

That tuakana-teina [older-younger children] thing, which coming from a Pākehā background … I still find interesting because that didn't happen in my own family. The mother-father looked after the kids and the kids did their own thing whereas there is a responsibility in this centre for the older kids to have some kind of accountability for the smaller children … I think that's just what you do, it comes from home, that's what they do at home … it's what you do, you look after the little ones. (Winnie, TI, p. 4).

Similarly, the following excerpts demonstrate connection through family, in particular intergenerational connections. Throughout, there is a sense that familiarity begets a feeling of belonging, a strong sense of group, and individual identity. Karen and Leanne talked in terms of time and the younger generation of attending families returning to the centre.

We've been here for 21 years and now we have children of children coming and that tells me that they belong, course you belong here, your children, you came here as a child. (Karen, TI, p. 14)

A lot of our parents come … from when they were children here, so they are familiar and they liked it here so they come back. (Leanne, TI, p. 3)

Teachers invest in the wellbeing of the community and families.

Teachers' responses acknowledged that an infant and/or toddler comes to the centre as part of a family; they then see it as part of their role to take care of the wellbeing of the whole family. The responses below show the teachers understood their centre community revolved not just around the infants and toddlers who attended the centre, but also around their families, as an extension of the centre family. The teachers revealed they had done many things to support families outside general teaching expectations, such as make connections with other families to combine transport, and feeding children when they had seen families struggling. Those acts of kindness further encouraged belonging and connection. The teachers have a strong desire to work and support the community, particularly the families of children who attend the centre.

Karen talked of grocery shopping for her own family at the local supermarket and running into families down the aisles. For Karen, the importance of the wellbeing of the

community is reflected in her visible contribution outside the centre (FN). This is valued by Karen's employer also and is reflected in her employment contract.

> *I'm not always out on the floor, I'm out in the community ... that's part of my job ... even within my job contract, 20% of my time can be spent doing community things of my own choice. (Karen, TI, p. 2)*

In Amy and Mary's responses there is a sense of wanting to take care of the wellbeing of families.

> *We're willing to help, it's about how else can we help this family, how else can we support them? Is there someone in our circle that can help them that goes along that same route that they have? I think it's about the networking that we have and the support we have that show that we could help this family. (Amy, TI, p. 15)*

> *But that is what this centre is all about. It is so home-based. Home based in the sense that we can also feed you. We don't have that much food but we've even got noodles, we've even got spaghetti. (Mary, TI, p. 4).*

Teachers' investment in their centre families showed a strong sense of responsibility and recognised their role in supporting and contributing to a sense of community. In the following excerpt, Karen talks about taking a three-week-old baby into the centre, knowing that they aided the mother's mental and emotional wellbeing.

> *We had a mother who came in, she'd had this baby and at three weeks she came in and she said, here take him, I've had enough ... We took that baby and we looked after that baby and loved [him] ... he was our baby from birth, from three weeks' old. The challenging thing was like recognising that she needs time out, she needs space and we'll just care for him, we'll just do what we do for him and that's okay. It's not about making, sending her to CYFS or making her do parenting courses, it's recognising she needs time out and she needs space and we'll look after him, that's alright. (Karen, TI, p. 6)*

The role of older siblings and/or cousins in supporting infants' and toddlers' wellbeing.

Teachers talked about some of the challenges of meeting the family expectations about infants and toddlers in a mixed-age setting. Teachers recognised the important role

familial connections, such as older siblings or cousins have for settling, caring for, and assisting teachers with infants and toddlers. In the following excerpts, Leanne, Karen and Rhiannon talk of the tension they perceive between family expectations of older children and the older children's choice to be a part of their infant and/or toddler sibling's wellbeing and care.

> *For us it's still giving them those opportunities for them to make sure their younger sister is all right or younger brother and not saying no, we are the teachers, that is our job, you don't do that. We are still giving them those opportunities that they can still have that same connection with home and make them feel proud and happy and I am sure they go home and I guarantee that parents will be like 'did you make sure that your sister was alright?' and they are like 'yes mum I did'. It's very important to the whole family. (Leanne, TI, p. 8)*

> *Sometimes we have to talk to parents about the pressure on older children to look after the younger ones, and you know, it's not really her job … it's what we're here for. Give her a break. But parents will do that, don't forget, look after your baby, don't forget, you know. (Karen, TI, p. 15)*

> *Sometimes you hear, have parents come and say oh make sure you look after little brother and sister, but no one makes them do anything they don't want to do. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 4)*

Mary believed that older siblings are naturally inclined to want to support the wellbeing of their younger siblings. She implied that no force, parental persuasion, or reminders are necessary as older children appeared to have the knack of knowing when to step in to support their younger sibling.

> *Pressure comes from the parents. I think it's because the older one has gone and then they just expect the next one to come through to take that over. I think it is just expected. I say to the parents it's actually just natural. If you don't enforce it, it will just come natural to them and that's how it is. (Mary, TI, p. 6)*

Rhiannon viewed the benefit of having siblings in the same group from a child's perspective—she believed that having older siblings or cousins in the centre aided an infant or toddler's transition into the centre.

I think it's nice that they've got family in one room, so especially we've got the two sisters and when the youngest one started that was her go-to person and she settled in quickly because she had that comfort. With [child N] and [child A] because their older sister used to come here too so she transitioned [child A] in and [child A] transitioned [child N] in. And it's just been cool to watch the whole family come through but keep together. (Rhiannon, TI, pp. 2-3)

Mary made the point that when older siblings are present in the shared space of a mixed-age setting they could take the role of soother and supporter in a much more attuned way than that of the teacher. She also observed the younger siblings taking comfort in the familial relationship as they called out for an older sibling or the older sibling had an instinct about when to be available.

Real highlight for me is when younger sister cries and big sister comes in and cuddles them. Would they get that in another centre which is divided? I don't think so because they go to adult for comfort. (Mary, TI, p. 4)

Karen recounted a story of how fluid sibling relationships could be. Three siblings attended the centre: The oldest child would take great pride in letting the teachers know what the youngest sibling (infant) did and did not like. The middle sibling paid very little attention to his youngest brother's care until the oldest brother went to school. He then took on the role of making sure the teachers are doing what was right for his baby brother (Karen, TI).

In summary, the findings reveal a strong connection among teachers, infants and toddlers and their families. Teachers' practices reflected their belief that when an infant and toddler attended the centre then the role of the teachers is not only to care for the wellbeing of the child but also of the whole family. Teachers' spoke affectionately about intergenerational relationships, valuing the input older family members contributed to the wellbeing of all community members. Teachers saw their role as advocates for the wellbeing of both infants and toddlers and their families. They showed a strong desire to invest in the centre community, recognising the hardships that some families faced and doing their best to find solutions that positively affected families' wellbeing. Acknowledging the connections of siblings and valuing their place in supporting younger

infant and/or toddler siblings shows the teachers understood and valued the intergenerational nature that the mixed-age setting provides.

Section Three: Infants and Toddlers as Capable, Competent and Independent Contributors

This section draws on teachers' understandings of how access to a place, space, or person can support infants' and toddlers' identity as independent, capable, and competent beings; infants' and toddlers' ability in social interactions with others; and, lastly, how teachers viewed infants and toddlers as taking charge.

This section draws on the *Te Whāriki* principle of empowerment. Empowerment is defined in the early childhood curriculum as children having a strong sense of identity, the ability to take responsibility, and displaying confidence (MoE, 1996). Each early childhood service is expected to "assist children and their families to develop independence …. to enable them to direct their own lives" (p. 40). Key themes of the principle of empowerment discussed in *Te Whāriki* are being capable and competent and demonstrating independence (MoE, 1996). These key themes are identified in teachers' interviews in relation to infants' and toddlers' social and language interactions.

> *Two toddlers were sitting at the table with their food and one of them was not very happy. This [child is] pretending to take her food … she'd kind of look, … he'd pull back and he'd have this little giggle. And he was trying to cheer her up … [I'm thinking] none of you can even speak, you don't even have words but you're trying to cheer her up, you can see she's not happy and you're having this little game cos he'd do this and he'd come back and he'd look at her and he'd laugh and then he'd do it and come back and then finally she kind of settled a bit, she was alright … wow look at what you're doing, that was amazing, you know, they're caring for each other. (Karen, TI, p. 11)*

Karen's excerpt captures how teachers recognise the ability of children, even under two years of age, to engage in social and emotional practices that show capable connections with others. In the above instance, one toddler recognised the unhappiness in another toddler and intended to make her happy. The ability of one toddler to soothe and calm

another toddler is possibly attributable to what the infants and toddlers see role modelled in other interactions between older and younger children in this mixed-age setting. The models of empowerment they are exposed to, of responsibility and confidence, sees toddlers as capable of connecting with others.

Empowerment is fostered when infants and toddlers are seen and treated as agentic and purposeful. The centre's *Health, Safety, and Environment Policy* procedures are in place to support children's wellbeing through encouraging independence and promoting interdependence (CD). The findings in the following section share teachers' many examples of infants and toddlers as capable and competent during social and language interactions, of how they take charge but are clear in their agenda.

Having access to a place, space or person supports an infant's and toddler's identity as independent, capable and competent.

Some teachers talked about identity being nurtured when infants and toddlers knew and had ownership of something that connects with home. Teachers talked of the importance of things or objects. This was evident in the room set-up in which the youngest children had a separate designated place for their bags which were visible and accessible at all times (FN). When asked during the interviews about what belonging looks like, Mary and Leanne felt it is about knowing 'what is mine' and 'where my things are' which led to feelings of independence, responsibility, and confidence.

> *I see them being independent as well when they know their belongings. Those are mine. Very egocentric … I want my food. I'm going for my food, regardless it's not my food but that is my food. (Mary, TI, p. 10).*

> *… As soon as they start walking, maybe even nine months, they know which one is their lunch box and they will go there and help themselves. They might need help with opening it up but they soon definitely learn that skill and everything else to get into it, all strategies, because a lot of the older children they teach them to get the scissors and cut it. There's lots of learning there going on… It makes them feel … like a big person … I think that gives them a sense of belonging too in the centre. That is something that I have from home. Mum's put it together. This is mine. (Leanne, TI, p. 14)*

The teachers talked about the connections that infants and toddlers had with home and access to centre objects and spaces. For example, Rhiannon talked about the confidence infants and toddlers displayed in being able to identify their own sleeping spaces.

> *They know where their beds are … they know the routines. They know what's expected, they know that it's sort of nappy change and then we are going to have kai [food] and then it's moe [sleep] time, all together as well … They are not stopped from combining with everybody else. They have … that freedom to mingle and feel that belonging with everyone. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 9)*

The teachers valued infants' and toddlers' access to all spaces in the centre, both indoors and outdoors, allowing children to show their independence and confidence. Having the freedom to access any space, resources, or experiences, was seen as an important part of how the teachers valued the mixed-age setting. Teachers believed they were empowering infants and toddlers when they encouraged children to take opportunities to explore the environment fully. For example, Winnie, Leanne, and Amy spoke of the importance of ensuring free access to resources and experiences.

> *They are at the carpentry table … that necessarily wouldn't be set out for under-twos so they have access to resources. And being able to take the opportunity to talk to different age group children and this is more just hanging out with the big kids. (Winnie, TI, p. 2)*

> *They have opportunities to do things for themselves … If they want to come to the other [food] tables that is fine, they can do that, we give them those opportunities to do that. (Leanne, TI, p. 9)*

> *[Infants and toddlers are] less shy and alot more open in the way that they do things and forget that they're not at home. [They] lose themselves within our environment … We join in with each other so … they have nothing to fear … they don't have to be scared in our environment, they feel they belonged (Amy, TI, pp. 15-16)*

The physical space was set up with freedom of access during the times I visited. The doors between the in- and outdoor spaces were open and children could move independently as they chose. The outdoor space had been recently refurbished and the

lack of physical obstructions to newly mobile infants was evident. The use of inclines, as opposed to steps, into the sandpit and the deck ensured even very young mobile infants would be able to freely explore with ease (FN).

Although Rhiannon agreed about the value of infants and toddlers being able to access all spaces, she also indicated the importance of a space where they could have quiet time that would not be interrupted by older children. A separate sleep room for the youngest infants was the only physical separation noticed in the room setup (FN).

> *They have got access to all the resources that everybody else has. They are not sectioned off in one particular area. They have their own area for quiet time or if they want to play with their own toys sort of have space from the older children ... There are no gates and barriers ... They have got that freedom to go and choose what they want to do. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 8)*

Teachers also shared examples of infants and toddlers employing many social skills that showed they are capable and competent. They mentioned skills such as imitation and observation, which teachers believed showed infants and toddlers being agentic and purposeful. Some teachers talked about areas of the outside play space posing difficulty for younger children, and their desire to imitate the older children around them but were constrained by their own physical development restrictions. Leanne and Karen considered it important for infants and toddlers to have the freedom to explore all spaces, requiring adaption to their teaching techniques. Both teachers saw that infants and toddlers did not recognise some perceived physical challenges and often tackled the experience with confidence.

> *There are some limits with their development but everything is open ... for them to explore and to try and the teachers give them those opportunities .... They can watch everyone and I can't wait to get up on that. When they finally get there it's just that confidence and just helping them and guiding them until they can do it. (Leanne, TI, p. 10)*

> *Our children ... are really keen, they are confident and they are giving things a go ... as soon as they start walking they want to get up there. We are just supporting them. It can be challenging with them being very confident, wanting, you can't say you are not ready, you can't have the skills, that might be true but it doesn't mean*

we are going to say no I am sorry, you are going to have to wait until your development is improved and then you can have those opportunities. (Leanne, TI, p. 11)

In the outdoor play I see really confident toddlers because they are watching what those older children are doing ... they're watching and they're seeing that ... so in some instances they're a lot more confident at what they're doing. (Karen, TI, p. 9)

Teachers valued the input and responsibility of older children, in a mixed-age setting, to support younger children's independence in play experiences. Amy also saw that infants and toddlers are observant of older children and re-enact what they see – the good and the bad (Amy, TI).

They're still yet to attempt the monkey bars but that's understandable. Yeah and the cool thing is that they turn to the older children for help ... Not just us adults. (Amy, TI, p. 13-14)

Teachers also emphasised the importance of human contact as being vital in supporting infants' and toddlers' sense of identity. As previously mentioned in Section One, many teachers emphasised the importance of a primary caregiver. Karen, Amy, and Rhiannon revisited this notion again when they considered the importance of a person, child, or adult, to the infant or toddler.

They notice things that are theirs or they recognise things that they like and that they know and that they want ... toys or just a space or a person. Sometimes it's just another child ... that they reach out to. (Karen, TI, p. 14)

The older children, [are] just as important as ... the adults. Because we're all learning from each other. And they play an important role as well, our older children ... sometimes they're there too; they're probably there before, sometimes before us teachers. (Amy, TI, p. 14)

That is who they are and they can trust that the older kids, you know, they are not shy of them because they have grown, well lots of them have started here as babies and they have always been with them. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 10)

Teachers felt that infants and toddlers could find confidence in their access to other children – something only achieved in a mixed-age setting. Winnie brought along a collection of ten photographs to her interview to visually support her discussion of how she saw infants and toddlers being capable and competent. In the majority of the pictures there are younger and older children together, Winnie explained that these captured the joy and engagement in the environment and in the children's social interactions. What struck me from her images is the positioning of the infants and the toddlers, that is, the younger children appeared to be equal counterparts in the scenarios, rather than recipients of the older children's desires in play (FN).

Teachers indicated that in a mixed-age setting, having access to the older children encouraged infants and toddlers to be adventurous. Rhiannon and Karen viewed infants and toddlers as being more physically, socially, and linguistically advanced due to the input of older children.

> *He [young child under two] just runs across the ladder thing because he can do it now, but he sees the confidence in the older children and then they get their own self-confidence and they just do it. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 3).*

> *I'm thinking in some ways they're a lot quicker [to] pick up things … because they've got the role models … I see [a child] is doing all the things that her big sister does because her big sister spends a lot of time with her, drawing, talking, cutting, showing her how to do things and what to do (Karen, TI, p. 9)*

> *The babies just watch and they learn [the older children's] language skills, their singing, playing, just being happy. If the teachers are busy doing things the older children will come and play with the younger children, so they just get that bonding … just following them, watching what they are doing … They just learn so much from watching their older friends. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 6)*

Infants and toddlers are capable and competent in their social interactions with others.

Teachers reported that when they paid close attention to peer-to-peer interactions, infants and toddlers revealed their ability to be responsible, caring, and to engage in reciprocal interactions with other children when afforded opportunities to show these attributes. The centre philosophy acknowledges the Māori concept of ako (teaching and learning

together) with the belief that children have choice and can negotiate with teachers and other adults (CD). In Karen's example, below, she commented that infants and toddlers are exposed to language from multiple sources, including adults and older children, and this encouraged them to take responsibility in their interactions with other children.

> *[Of a child she has not heard speak] I was in the office one day and the ranch slider was half opened and locked and I heard this child and she said, "help me, help me, it's stuck, it's stuck" ... Her little cousin came in and she saw this little arm poking through and said, "come, come, help me, I stuck". And these two girls on either side of the door having this conversation ... one of them [has] just turned two, one of them is just over two. But they were quite clear in what they were wanting and what they were saying. (Karen, TI, p. 9)*

Rhiannon and Karen both made the point about not expecting children to behave in an adult way but to see the value in infants and toddlers having the opportunity to identify as the confident 'older' child with other younger infants.

> *I like seeing the younger ones comforting each other ... Even though they are so young they still learn that they're bigger and older and stronger and they need to care for those younger ones. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 6)*

> *It just gives [younger children the] opportunity ... to be the big brother or the big sister ... not an adult but like an adult, to have an adult type role. (Karen, TI, pp. 7-8)*

Winnie recognised an infant's ability to lead a social interaction with adults too.

> *When I can wave from the office to a baby that is being held waiting and then the baby laughs and carries on thinking it's really funny and that kind of interaction that they are happy, that they want to have interaction with you. (Winnie, TI, p. 7)*

Teachers' views indicated that infants and toddlers offered opportunities for leadership to older children, alongside opportunities to show responsibility, affection, and to be oneself. Winnie and Leanne believed infants and toddlers showed confidence and competence in drawing in others, engaging, in choosing, and in responding.

They [infants] are like a magnet. One four-year-old, he just loved … to read books, play, lay down with this baby and just spend lots and lots of time with him. We were really impressed because this boy was English as a second language as well … as the baby got older and he still started to play and read and do those play activities, almost like a teacher himself, started to get confidence in himself and started to show leadership skills which made him feel important, whereas in his age with his peers that might not have been … established. (Leanne, TI, p. 5)

They just really love it when a small baby comes and snuggles up to them, they just really like feeling that they belong as well. (Winnie, TI, p. 11)

Infants and toddlers are capable of taking charge.

Teachers shared how infants and toddlers take responsibility for their choices. Most teachers agreed that an infant and toddler's sense of identity showed in what they deemed to be enhanced interactions and developmentally advanced behaviour. In the following excerpts Karen, Mary, and Rhiannon show they believe that infants and toddlers are vocal about their wants/desires by using action in indicating and achieving what they want.

When we did separate our infants and toddlers, at food time, at kai time, was because our toddlers would come around and eat all the food from all of the older children's lunchboxes and the kids would just sit there at the table. And they'd just sit and look and let these babies, you know, the babies come round and wolf up this and sniff around and eat this and eat that, and then you'd look at the table and you'd say, what's wrong? … That baby ate all my food so then we'd have to take that baby away, go eat your own food over here. (Karen, TI, p. 4)

You see my bubbas were pushing away because once they finished [with a cuddle] that's it, they push you away, they want to get down. (Mary, TI, p. 7)

Exploring by themselves. Getting down and wanting to go do it, not hopping down and sitting there by the teacher … they sort of autonomously go and do what they want to do, whether it's outside, inside, sandpit, quiet time by themselves, just knowing, them knowing what they want and just doing for it. (Rhiannon, TI, p. 7)

Amy and Winnie expressed that when younger children feel capable and competent in the space with those around them this had an impact on how they reacted in different situations.

> *I think that when they have that sense of belonging ... their sense of character comes out more ... confident to do and play around and just be funny and just be the kind of person they are. (Amy, TI, p. 15)*

> *Have the confidence to have a tantrum, yeah that they are safe. How do they portray that they are safe? That they are happy to be here and yell and scream. (Winnie, TI, p. 7)*

In summary, this section explored teachers' views on infants and toddlers as capable and competent in their contributions to social and language interactions with others. There is an acknowledgement from teachers that infants and toddlers are independent and purposeful in their interactions with peers. Teachers acknowledged the importance of access to a place, space, or person, that infants and toddlers are familiar with. Teachers believed that when infants and toddlers are familiar and comfortable with others they are empowered to engage in social interactions on their own terms. In this manner they are vocal, in speech and/or action, to be confident in attempting what they have observed older children doing, and in leading interactions.

Summary

Drawing on the principles of relationships, family and community, and empowerment to interpret the data collected illuminated how teachers positively viewed infants and toddlers as part of a mixed-age social community. Teachers valued their connection with multiple generations of families and children and indicated this is how they viewed and maintained a sense of wellbeing for children and their families. Teachers viewed infants and toddlers as capable, competent, and independent in their social interactions, as contributors to their own care and learning in a mixed-age setting.

Overall, the findings presented in this chapter show how teachers in this mixed-age setting valued the infants, toddlers, other teachers, and family, in this community. This commitment was reflected in the centre philosophy and in policy documents. Teachers reported practices, both individual and collective, that showed a strong sense of a

connected community where identity and belonging appeared to be key outcomes for all involved. The next chapter will draw on Wenger's (1998) ideas of culture, community, identity, and belonging to discuss teachers' understandings of infants' and toddlers' contributions to their care and learning in this mixed-age setting. The discussion will acknowledge infants and toddlers as integral members of a mixed-age community, with much to contribute.

Chapter FIVE

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses key ideas from the findings to answer the research question: *How do teachers in a mixed age setting view infants' and toddlers' contributions, care and learning?* There are three sections in this chapter that address the research question:

- The role of culture in teachers' infant and toddler pedagogy
- Community connectedness
- Promoting infants' and toddlers' identity and belonging

Each section engages with the findings and key ideas from Wenger's (1998) communities of practice: culture, community, identity, and belonging. In Chapter 4, principles of *Te Whāriki,* namely relationships, family and community, and empowerment, were utilised to interpret and structure the findings (MoE, 1996). The role of the teachers themselves, along with families and other children, all have a significant part to play in the wellbeing of infants and toddlers in this particular mixed-age setting. In this chapter, Wenger's (1998) key concepts further acknowledge the integral nature of these key groups of people (families, peers, teachers) teachers identified during the interviews. Wenger's (1998) concepts will add structure to the discussion chapter and provide a layer of complementary theoretical concepts atop of the principles of *Te Whāriki* that aided in intepreting the findings (MoE, 1996; refer to Table 1: Consolidating the Key Concepts, p. 36). Significant findings from the previous chapter will be drawn on throughout this discussion chapter and will be indicated as (F, p. #).

Section One: The Role of Culture in Teachers' Infant and Toddler Pedagogy

This section explores the role of culture in infant and toddler pedagogy, emphasising two key ideas: 1. A family-like culture as a discourse for specialised practice, and 2. Culture as a key influence on a pedagogy of connectedness with infants and toddlers. Drawing on the findings in the previous chapter, this research suggests that teachers' family-like practices were seen as significant in connecting infants and toddlers with the mixed-age community.

A family-like culture as a discourse for specialised practice.

Teachers in this study emphasised the importance of a family-like culture comprised of trusting, relational connections with infants, toddlers, their families, and each other. A sense of belonging within their mixed-age community, through family-inspired practice, suggests the importance of a specialised pedagogy based on familiarity, consistency, love, and care. Teachers' practice indicated that the familiarity and consistency that develops over years spent together, and a general knowingness that comes with a strong connection, built over time with the child and their family, enabled a clear philosophy and cultural practices to be enacted (F, p. 51). Nuttall (2013) acknowledges that familiar and consistent relationships allow teachers to collectively "negotiate with each other the beliefs, understanding and practices that constitute 'teaching'" (p. 179). The familiarity and consistency of the teachers meant clear team practices had developed over time. Amy, Leanne, and Karen all spoke of the value they placed on relationships with the centre families; this influenced their practice and was evident in the way they supported families and treated families with care – like an extension of their own family (F, p. 50 & 58).

Teachers in this study championed practices that draw in families as part of the extended centre family. This mixed-age setting valued the family connections and led to specialised practice as they care for infants and toddlers alongside their siblings and extended family within the same space. The centre embraces family practices that reflect the needs, desires, and aspirations of their centre community. The everyday culture of the centre is to take care of their families' wellbeing, knowing that this would mean care for their infants and toddlers. As Mary stated: "We are a community-based centre, meaning that you come in as a family, we take you as a family. We don't split you up. You come in, what you bring us we accommodate" (F, p. 51). This sums up the underpinning philosophy of a family-like culture and aligns with the view of Leggett and Ford (2016) who propose a "shift in focus from *child-centred* to *child-centred within communities*" (p. 195). This view values the learning that takes place within a social and cultural context. This centre practices from a child-centred within-a-community-approach, with specialised practices that recognise the connections between children, and teachers' ability to draw on older children if needed, acknowledging the value they place on family.

The children and teachers in this setting use familial terms to describe and to refer to each other. This is reflective of a practical way of incorporating family-like practice into teachers' interactions with children and families. Teachers revealed that children and families often refer to them as 'Aunties' (F, p. 53) and teachers often referred to infants and toddlers as 'bubbas' (F, p. 54). These terms of endearment hold affection and warmth and acknowledge that the teachers see children and their families as part of the centre family as well as children feeling comfortable to use family terms. Teachers described infants and toddlers in a mixture of ways, some acknowledging positive attributes and others less positive: capable and competent, as well as mischievous, cunning, frustrating, and challenging (F, p. 54). Kalliala (2014) explains these apparent contrasts in views as normal, as infants and toddlers can be characterised as both "competent and needful" (p. 5). What this research shows, however, is a group of teachers who, when asked, "how might you describe infants and toddlers?" chose words that did not focus at all on children being vulnerable and needy. Teachers talked with pride when they described infants and toddlers with what may be considered less pleasant characteristics (mischievous, frustrating and challenging, F, p. 54), in the context of the interview, these however, were synonyms for being clever, playful, and exciting, attributes are valued in children.

The teachers practiced a specialised pedagogy of connectedness through physical acts of love, through affection, and care, which reflected the value teachers saw in their relationships with infants, toddlers, and their families. Karen viewed the affectionate interactions teachers have with children as a way of letting them know they are part of the centre family, "they're just another child in our centre that we work with, that we nurture, that we have hugs and kisses with. That just might need a bit more caring or sort of has different needs but they're all just part of the whānau" (F, p. 52). Although there may be an underlying assumption in the literature (Hughes, 2010; Rockel, 2009) that professionalism and love have a complex connection and are at odds within teaching, this tension was not evident with this group of teachers. Teachers in this centre embraced the idea of loving the children and seeing them as family, in their teaching, engagement with families, and their team conversations. There has been considerable literature published over the last decade about the pedagogical approach that values love and care as part of an appropriate response to caring for infants and toddlers (Brennan, 2008; Dalli, 2006; Hughes, 2010; Rockel, 2009). As Hughes (2010) suggests, love is closely linked to

professionalism; she fervently supports the idea that love for children can be shown in a passion for teaching, advocating for children, and collaboration with families—teachers in this centre clearly spoke about their practice within all these elements. Wenger (1998) suggests a connection between learning and knowing, which relies on engaging in meaningful experiences. Learning and knowing for infants and toddlers could be facilitated by experiencing a setting that simulates a family environment with meaningful connections with teachers who became an extension of that family.

Interestingly, the paticipating centre has recently implemented a primary-caregiving model of caring for infants and toddlers. The notion of primary caregiving is a Western idea (Keller, 2016) promoting the importance of consistent and continuous one-to-one interaction; this centre had previously focused on a team/family approach. Teachers talked passionately (F, p. 51) about the fact that their mixed-age setting is structured like a family, which indicated infants and toddlers had access to anyone, so it is interesting that they have now implemented a primary-caregiver system that sees one teacher being almost solely responsible for the group of infants. This is a new initiative and it will be interesting to see how well this works alongside the family-like approach espoused by some of the teachers, as Karen stated: "when I think of mixed ages I just think of whānau" (F, p. 51).

In a centre that caters to predominantly Māori and Pasifika families, the idea of one person taking sole responsibility for the infants and toddlers does not reconcile with literature that supports an "emphasis on communal caregiving" (Rameka & Glasgow, 2015, p. 146). While *Te Whāriki* promotes primary caregiving and describes the practice as, "particularly suitable for infants and toddlers …. [as] it facilitates the attachment of very young children to one adult" (p. 99), current research suggests that knowledge of culturally appropriate practice and Western ideas of quality may not always mesh (Keller, 2016; Rameka & Glasgow, 2015). This centre's policies and philosophy documents consistently refered to the importance of family being part of the centre experience and curriculum for children (F, p. 58). The teachers were positive about this practice at the time, though it remains to be seen how this practice develops and evolves over time in line with a mixed-age ethos. In line with Wenger's (1998) belief that "practice is not immune to the influence of theory, but neither is it a mere realisation of theory or an incomplete approximation of it" (p. 48), the teachers within this centre will, I expect,

deliberate, reflect, and negotiate the appropriate application of primary caregiving that best fits with the cultural needs of their children and families, and teachers' specialised family-like practice.

In summary, this study suggests that a specialised practice of working with infants and toddlers can be modelled on family-like practice, comprising a genuine desire to draw in infants, toddlers, and their families, as part of the extended family of the centre. Practices that are underpinned by the value of relationships and incorporate familiarity, consistency, love, physical affection, and primary care, account for the context and cultural make-up of this mixed-age setting. Wenger's (1998) ideas about a community indicate that the practices are and should be unique to the setting and the people involved. This indicates meaning and learning should be reflective of the language, roles, and symbols of the community.

Culture as a Key Influence on a Pedagogy of Connectedness with Infants and Toddlers.

Cultural practices can be based on ethnic culture, but can also be practices that become familiar and negotiated ways of being in a mixed-age setting – therefore a centre/community culture (Seele, 2012; Wenger, 1998). *Te Whāriki,* too, acknowledges, "culture is not a synonym for ethnicity" (p. 99). Ethnic cultural influences played a significant part in how teachers connected with infants, toddlers, and their families in the participating centre. Māori concepts such as whanaungatanga (family, relationship) epitomised the way teachers approached their relationships with children and families. A pedagogy of connectedness invited intergenerational contributions and appreciated the role of grandmas', the tuakana-teina relationship (older and younger children), and principle of ako (teaching and learning together).

The idea and implementation of whanaungatanga was strong within this centre and was evident in all areas of teachers' practice, interactions, and documentation, with the importance of family, within this mixed-age community, recognised frequently in the centre policies and philosophy (F, p. 58). O'Hara-Gregan (2010) indicates that a centre's philosophical choice affects the structure of their environment and grouping of children. Though the term mixed-age is not mentioned anywhere in this centre's philosophy statement or policies (F, p. 51), the policies do reflect the importance of relationships,

family, and community – all attributes of a mixed-age ideology. The implication of whanaungatanga is the recognition that each person has rights and responsibilities and are committed to ensuring cooperation and cohesion of the family (Rameka & Walker, 2012). The strong sense of whanaungatanga, the recognition of practices and philosophies, and a commitment to aroha (love, compassion), appeared to drive teachers' practice, which in turn promoted the overall wellbeing of each person within the family/whānau (Pere, 1997; Rameka & Walker, 2012). My sense, from reading the policy and philosophy documents and talking with the teachers, was that the idea of a "mixed-age setting" was not so much an omission from the philosophy and policy documents as an underlying assumption of practice. Nutbrown and Clough (2009) affirm the significance of policies that support practice, stating "inclusive *policies* only really find meaning in inclusive *practices*" (p. 192, emphasis in orginal). The importance of the match between policy, and practices that connected with whanaungatanga, was affirmed by the strong relationships that teachers created with families, as well as children, in this centre, which indicated their desire to provide a positive experience for children and families.

The teachers' cultural values and practices were evident in their teaching, which promotes ako. Teachers stressed the importance of family/whānau and how their commitment to families best represented their practice. The term ako is in the centre's philosophy statement (F, p. 69). The recognition and value of not only the children's culture, but also the teachers' own culture, led to the understanding that cultural practices relevant to ethnicity had an impact on the ways teachers engaged and interacted with families, infants, and toddlers. Mary talked about how she is influenced by her upbringing and how this impacts on her teaching: "It was just that whānau, whānau and family based where for me being PI [Pacific Island] family is very important. I learn from grandmothers. You learn from your older siblings, uncles, your mothers and fathers" (F, p. 59). Winnie identifies as Pākehā and initially found mixed-age grouping confronting, as it differed from her own upbringing, though she too could see the benefits of the older and younger children together (F, p. 59). These examples suggest that learning involves social participation as an "encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to those communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4, emphasis in original). Rhedding-Jones (2004, as cited in Duncan, 2006, p. 35) also acknowledges that there must be recognition of self, of the impact of culture and social expectations, and that this in turn affects each person's way of being.

Teachers in this centre recognised their own cultures and embraced these as ways of implementing ako, of teaching and learning together and alongside children.

Winnie's personal challenge, based on her Pākehā upbringing (F, p. 58), of accepting the role of older children in a mixed-age setting, is acknowledged as relevant to teaching. Recently, Jenkin (2014) recognised the challenge of implementing the bicultural skills and knowledge of a bicultural curriculum when few teachers identify as Māori. This often then restricts the teachers' views of culturally appropriate learning and compromises their perception of children from a Western perspective (Davis & McKenzie, 2016). However, the findings from the current study recognise this challenge is also experienced by teachers who identify themselves as Māori or Pasifika, in implementing a bicultural curriculum. Although discussing a Kōhanga Reo – a full language immersion Māori setting, McKenzie (2006) recognises the complexity of teachers' dual role where "they are all at once, at any one time both teachers and whānau [family]" (p. 41). The challenge, therefore, lies in the marrying of teachers' personal ways of being, knowing, and doing, that are influenced by their own culture and experiences, with that of the way they interpret these ways of being, into their centre's cultural practice.

Teachers responded to their Māori and Pasifika families' wishes for siblings/family members to take care of one another which were in part driven by cultural norms of the families through the value placed on tuakana/teina relationships and responsibilities. Teachers' application of practices, informed by the families' cultural expectations, allowed them to maintain close connections with their infant and toddler families. Comer and Ben-Avie (2010) propose a similar strategy of employing recognised cultural and/or family practices, in their case relevant to Jewish living and learning, to support family engagement and children's learning in their research. The inclusion and acknowledgement of families, children, and teachers is seen to positively affect children's learning and development the most when "family engagement is interwoven into the community's plan to achieve the desired learning and developmental outcomes of the children" (p. 93). However, Davis and McKenzie (2016) indicate preliminary findings from their research investigating children's working theories in an English-medium centre, which showed children quickly make sense of the cultural values and practices of a centre even if those practices may not be consistent with home values, for example blessing food before eating. In the current study, the centre value of taking care of one

another is evident when infants and toddlers are cared for by older children who perhaps did not have siblings, or are not the younger child's family; they had connected to centre practices that had been role-modelled by teachers and sibling/cousin relationships (F, p. 64). What this does indicate is that children easily assimilate and appear to have little challenge in doing so, though teachers too have to understand and know their own ways of being, and how this is enacted in their teaching. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) ideas around communities of practice, in this case children and teachers are engaging in a joint enterprise, a recognition that practice is negotiated within the group; not everyone will or must agree, but it becomes a productive way of lived experience within a group setting such as this mixed-age centre.

Section One: Summary.

This section has explored the role of culture in an infant toddler pedagogy focused on connection. Teachers in this centre utilised cultural practices that affirmed infants' and toddlers' place in the community: the mixed-age setting appreciated whanaungatanga, tuakana-teina relationships, and ako. Wenger (1998) proposes that community is supported when there are meaningful experiences for those involved. This thesis proposes that teachers can support infant-toddler care and learning with a specialised practice modelled on family-like and cultural ways of knowing and being. When teachers are confident in their own culture this permeates their teaching in a positive way and allows them to negotiate and adapt acceptable centre practice. These cultural practices, which at times replicated ethnically-appropriate practices and, at other times, negotiated ways of teaching within the centre team, connect infants and toddlers in this centre to practices, relationships, and routines that are familiar and home-like. Clearly, the cultural practices within this mixed-age centre community reflect the unique negotiation of practices that support and connect each member of the group and value a child-centred approach within a community approach to teaching.

Section Two: Community Connectedness

The discussion within this section focuses on community-connectedness and implications for infants and toddlers in two sections: 1. Fostering connections: Caring for the community, and, 2. The special place of siblings/cousins in infant and toddler wellbeing.

This study places infant toddler learning as a product of engagement in social activity, the very nature of being social requires the involvement of others (Wenger, 1998).

Fostering connections: Caring for the community.

The intergenerational mix of teachers and family members appeared to influence infants' and toddlers' wellbeing, belonging, and learning in a positive cyclic way – when all groups were cared for they were able to provide care for others. Connections with children and families where examples of the warmth and connection between families, teachers, and children, were evident in the teacher interviews. Karen believed the return of children as adults with their own children indicates a connection that shows longevity in the belonging they feel with the centre (F, p. 60). Comer and Ben-Avie (2010), too, believe that "every interaction within an early childhood program either promotes community or disrupts it" (p. 87).The reciprocal investment in relationships between the centre and its families recognised the importance of those relationships cultivated by teachers over time.

Connections with families did not only take place within the centre; as Karen explained, her role is partly taken up with community work and she felt it important to be visible in the community where she teaches (F, p. 60). This visibility and connection recognises that relationship is not an individual endeavour (Wenger, 1998) that relies solely on the experiences that take place within the confines of the centre, but is one part of a whole process of learning that takes place for all those within the community of practice, in this case the mixed-age centre. The interconnectedness of all the people involved in this mixed-age community of practice shows their importance as integral contributors to the holistic nature of caring for the infant and toddler. Community and connection is a theme that was reiterated by teachers frequently within their interviews, the importance of relationships and family – "the most important thing that we have and that we offer is about being whānau" (F, p. 52).

The choice of being a mixed-age setting showed the care and investment this centre has in its families. The teachers in this centre valued infants' and toddlers' desire to participate in the community, while also appreciating the value that extended family have in making the centre a connected community. This is reflected in policies and practices which enable close and extended family members to be a regular and appreciated fixture of the

centre environment (F, p. 58). What is important, is the view that a socio-cultural response to the curriculum is about connecting children to real life experiences and relationships situated within the early childhood setting itself, hence the focus on mixed-age grouping. The idea of children in early childhood settings being a part of their community is prevalent in recent literature (Brennan, 2007; 2008, Duhn, 2006; Leidums, 2016; Nimmo, 2008). Respecting Māori and Pacific cultural principles values the place of tuakana-teina relationships, and ako, together in a mixed-age setting; community and family wellbeing and connection sits at the heart of teaching in a New Zealand context (Fremaux & Liley, 2014; O'Hara-Gregan, 2010; Rameka & Glasgow, 2015). Amy's example of the connection she maintained with the centre children, while on parental leave, recognises the value of caring for the members of the community – not only did that provide continuity for her and the participating children, but it also provided a pathway to connect her newborn child to the centre community, of which the child is now a part (F, p. 50). A mixed-age setting allows infants and toddlers to contribute to the early childhood community in a valuable way that is not restricted to levels of development (Brennan, 2007; Edwards et al., 2009; Leidums, 2014). Teachers provided numerous examples of infants and toddlers who contributed to the setting in ways that were not determined or restricted by physical or language development. Rhiannon talked about the role of toddlers comforting younger children: "Even though they are so young they still learn that they're bigger and older and stronger and they need to care for those younger ones" (F, p. 70). Infant-toddler contributions are their active involvement in language, social, physical, and emotional interactions with others. This connection to others in their centre community then recognises infants and toddlers as "cultural members in their own right, which means they are not only merely included but are in active relationship with society" (Brennan, 2007, p. 7).

Ensuring adults are cared for in the setting engenders shared care for the infants. It is clear within the interviews that when family members' wellbeing was cared for, this enabled them to offer care and support to others in the centre. Karen's story of the grandma club exemplifies the reciprocity of care and kindness, when the teachers took care of the grandmas, the grandmas were able to then take care of the unsettled babies, even if they were not their own grandchildren (F, p. 57). The Grandmas' active participation in the centre is an example of learning, "engaging in and contributing to the practices of their community" (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). Teachers talked about what had kept

them at the centre and for many it was about the team relationships, as Rhiannon (TI, p. 1) shared: "it's the team that I work with are so supportive" and for Amy (TI, p. 2): "the community, the passion and the love that I have with the job that I do. The family orientated centre that we have and also the relationships that I have built within the families that are here as well". Both extended family and teachers benefited from the community connections that ensured they felt they belonged. This sense of connection and belonging then ensured teachers stayed in their roles, which the teachers saw as having a positive impact on the vital, consistent relationships for infants and toddlers.

The special place of siblings/cousins in infant and toddler wellbeing.

Teachers recognised the contribution that siblings/cousins made in regard to the wellbeing and belonging of younger children in this mixed-age setting. This brought about another layer of connection to family, in that siblings/cousins possessed unique knowledge of the younger family member and their own home context, which supported both teachers and their younger siblings. Teachers emphasised the importance of these connections between the siblings/cousins of infants and toddlers as being one of the key differences between a mixed-age setting and a segregated setting, Mary stated: "Real highlight for me is when younger sister cries and big sister comes in and cuddles them. Would they get that in another centre which is divided? I don't think so because they go to adult for comfort" (F, p. 63). However, in tune with other literature (Beach, 2013; Firth et al., 2009; Gray, 2011), the teachers' view of sibling relationships was also sometimes seen as a hindrance. While, at times, teachers saw that siblings were able to settle and console younger siblings, this could also play out as over-protectiveness and interference (F, p. 60). The challenge teachers saw was balancing older siblings' desire to contribute to the care and wellbeing of their younger sibling, with the younger child's wish to do their own thing. Although the idea of sibling support is not contested in the literature, there is little literature that discusses this benefit from a mixed-age perspective.

Ultimately the teachers believed that siblings/cousins have a special part to play in supporting the wellbeing of younger children. This is reinforced by Firth et al. (2009) who indicate "siblings' … very presence ensures a connection for the younger child between the family home and the care and education setting" (p. 44). In some cultures, it is entirely appropriate for older child family members to take on much of the care of younger children (Davis & McKenzie, 2016; Keller, 2016; Rogoff, 2003). Teachers

reported similar ideas, also indicating that some families placed very high expectations on older siblings to be accountable for younger siblings (F, p. 61). Although teachers recognise this expectation, they are clear that this accountability is not forced during their time in the centre. How teachers and children cooperatively approach these family expectation aligns with Wenger's (1998) idea of joint enterprise within a community of practice. Joint enterprise refers to the negotiation that takes place between members of the community to collectively navigate a particular situation, making one another accountable to the community itself (Wenger, 1998). Each participant's actions and response to the familial expectation of taking care of the younger sibling was negotiated and addressed on a case-by-case basis. Teachers' talked about involving older siblings, if they showed a strong desire to contribute, in taking care of the younger child during caregiving routines. Other older siblings, although held to the same familial expectation, are not expected by teachers to contribute unless they chose to (F, pp. 61-62). Leanne believed: "it's still giving them those opportunities for them to make sure their younger sister is all right or younger brother … they can still have that same like connection with home and make them feel proud and happy" (F, p. 62). The 'rules' of joint enterprise in a mixed-age setting may stem from what is perceived to be the norm, what behaviours are allowed and/or encouraged by teachers, who are also part of the community, and then how children negotiate them within their peer interactions. The use of the term 'rules' indicates that each setting will have a set of governing guidelines that children are either obliged to meet or create as part of a community of practice, therefore, joint enterprise. As Cooper et al. (2015) suggest, mixed-age settings allow teachers to: "facilitate and sustain a thoughtfully considered environment, and relational interactions in an ongoing manner, that engages all children, no matter the age" (p. 78).

Evident in Rhiannon's story is the succession of responsibility for siblings as the oldest moved off to school. The child who was the youngest becomes the oldest and takes care of the new younger sibling, just as their older sibling did for them – the mantle of responsibility is passed down to the next-oldest child (F, p. 63). Interestingly, Gray (2011) acknowledges that children observe and imitate older siblings far more than they do younger siblings. Mary is clear in her interview that she felt this responsibility took place naturally; she felt that the older siblings instinctively knew to take care of their younger brothers or sisters (F, p. 62). This aligns with Davis and McKenzie's (2016) findings of cultural familial expectations: "The family appeared to trust the five-year-

old's ability to care for her cousin. Furthermore, they seemed to expect her to take responsibility" (p. 12). Roberts (2010) goes on to indicate that belonging to a family/community promotes "respect, awareness, familiarity with routines and rule" (p. 38). This study proposes that siblings/cousins be appreciated for their contribution to their younger siblings' emotional and physical wellbeing. Teachers in this study recognised this connection and negotiated suitable opportunities for support between infants and toddlers, and their siblings. In line with caregiving practices globally, where it is common practice for older siblings and related older children to be classified as caregivers (Keller, 2016), perhaps a greater role could be given to older siblings/cousins here in the New Zealand context.

The older child family members' ability to connect their infant or toddler family member to centre life shows their role within the centre community. Older siblings or cousins not only support younger children in the transition process, but are their comfort at times of unsettledness (F, p. 62). Amy recognised the role of older family members surpassing and, to a point, becoming more important than that of the adult teacher (F, p. 68); this shows the power of a community at work, where one person is not responsible for everything, each member has a part to play that contributes to the overall wellbeing and function of the community, and all parties have something to offer to the teaching and learning of others (Gray, 2011; Keller, 2016; Rogoff, 2003).

Section Two: Summary.

This section has explored the nature of community and puts forth the term 'a pedagogy of connectedness' as a contribution to the infant-toddler context. Teachers were part of the mixed-age community that valued the role that older generations of infants' and toddlers' extended families took in their wellbeing and care. Teachers welcomed grandmothers, older siblings, and cousins, as contributors to infants' and toddlers' physical and emotional wellbeing, and encouraged their participation in the centre community and routines. Joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998) is demonstrated as teachers operate on a case-by-case basis that allows siblings/cousins to contribute to their infant's or toddler's care in ways that suit both parties. Recognition of the effectiveness of sibling and older family members' contribution to infant toddler wellbeing is perhaps overlooked in mainstream early childhood education. The mixed-age setting sees intergenerational relationships

valued as appropriate ways of integrating infants and toddlers into the centre community and appreciating their contribution to the setting.

Section Three: Access Promotes Infants' and Toddlers' Identity and Belonging

This section explores infants' and toddlers' sense of belonging and identity, addressing two key points: 1. That infants and toddlers are agentic and purposeful engagers in a mixed-age setting, and 2. Contribution and independence is developed through access to people and practices. This thesis proposes that infants and toddlers are agentic and purposeful engagers. The findings suggest there is an inextricable link between wellbeing, belonging, and identity, indicating that belonging is firmly rooted in a strong sense of self, supported by acknowledging that identity is considered in relation to others (Roberts, 2010).

Infants and toddlers are agentic and purposeful engagers in a mixed-age setting.

This study is positioned to see how teachers view and experience infants and toddlers as capable and competent in their own learning and care. Teachers in this mixed-age community recognised infants' and toddlers' ways of being agentic and purposeful in social interactions, by the ways children chose who to interact with, their connections to a space, person, or thing, and their ways of being independent. The literature on mixed-age settings often talks about what older children can offer to younger children (Bailey et al., 1993; Gray, 2011). Though Gray (2011) does contemplate the value of younger children to older children in mixed-age settings, the focus remains on the benefits for the older child – he believes mixed-age play offers older children the ability to lead, and to learn through teaching, and the inspiration for creative endeavour. This does not acknowledge the younger children as agentic and purposeful, but rather as more passive recipients in the social exchange (Edwards et al., 2009). The findings of this study challenge the idea that only older children have something to offer other children. Teachers shared many examples of infants and toddlers who took the lead in social interactions with older children, made choices about their interactions, and had the ability to make older children feel confident and to engender a sense of belonging (F, pp. 70-71).

Teachers spoke often with pride about the way younger children took charge in social interactions. This study showed the genuine reciprocity in the relationship where infants and toddlers have just as much to offer as the older children and can be agentic and

purposeful in their role. This mixed-age setting values the connections between peers in agreement with Degotardi et al. (2013) who state, "friendship and long-term companionship are perceived as being afforded most strongly by peers" (p. 16). The findings in this study demonstrate that infants and toddlers have much to offer their often-older counterparts. Karen and Leanne both gave examples of how infants and toddlers chose to be engaged and took charge of the social experience (F, pp. 64 & 70). They offered their peers safety of expression and used humour to make another happy. In supporting belonging, teachers recognised the value of peer relationships, "peers have an enormous influence over the children, and the children clearly form their own 'culture'. Thus any consideration of belonging for infants in early childhood education and care must move beyond infant: educator dyads to include the peer group" (Stratigos et el., 2014, p. 181). In particular, this study revealed that a number of teachers genuinely felt that peers could, at times, offer more or better support that of the adult teacher (F, p. 68).

Teachers referred to infants and toddlers taking the lead in social situations with verbal and/or non-verbal cues (F, p. 70). They recognised that although the infant or toddler may not be able to speak, this did not indicate incompetence in social situations. White and Mika (2013) agree, explaining that verbal and non-verbal communication "successfully facilitates meaningful friendships between peers and inter-subjective relationships with adults" (p. 103). Teachers recognise infants' ability to be purposeful: in choosing who to take comfort from, being forceful about wanting to get down, and even having a tantrum (F, p. 72). These situations link to what Wenger (1998) describes as rebellion by which he means that disagreement, challenge, and competition between participants in a community "often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity" (p. 77). Amy, too, indicated that children's characters are more evident when they feel at home, secure in their relationships with others (F, p. 72). A study by Lee (2006) concurs with this study's findings of purposeful infants and toddlers; in her study infants and toddlers were also shown to indicate preferences, expectations, and understandings, in their engagement with others. In contrast, however, the findings of this study indicated that infants and toddlers engaged in close, secure, synchronous relationships with peers, not just caregivers as was the focus of Lee's study.

Teachers also recognised toddlers' ways of initiating and taking on the role of the 'older child'. Infants and toddlers being observant was a key theme that emerged from teachers'

discussions about infants and toddlers (F, p. 67). "Children first learn about culturally relevant activities—and acquire other knowledge about their culture—just by observation" (Gray, 2011, p. 510). Teachers felt that infants and toddlers spent much time observing what older children did in play and in interactions, and replicated these actions when taking on the role of the older child themselves. Clearly, observation and replication are key ways of learning for infants and toddlers (Degotardi & Pearson, 2006; Gray, 2011; Rogoff, 2004). McGaha et al. (2011) also recognise observation by children as key to relationship building for infants and toddlers, noting that it is not only infants who observe the older children, but the older children who observe the infants, noting "this mutual observation seemed to lead to strong connections between the infants and older children" (p. 5). Teachers in this study saw toddlers comforting peers younger than themselves in confident ways that indicated their desire to, as Karen suggested, "not [be] an adult but like an adult, to have an adult type role" (F, p. 70). The replication of practices which the infants and toddlers see teachers and other children engaged in, shows a keen sense of observation. This ability to be engaged and responsive with others not only indicates belonging but a sense of identity and agency (Legget & Ford, 2016; McGaha et al., 2011). These ideas suggest that a mixed-age setting affords infants and toddlers the opportunities to be capable and competent in their contribution to the community, by caring for others.

Infants' and toddlers' connections to a space, person, or thing exemplify their desire to develop an identity and to belong in the mixed-age setting. This study's findings suggest that teachers appeared to recognise infants' and toddlers' ways of belonging, and connected these to particular things or routines. When infants and toddlers could connect and identify with something familiar to them that had come from home, a lunch box for example, teachers felt this aided their sense of belonging. Amy talks about children "losing themselves", almost forgetting they are not at home because this space has become familiar and home-like for them (F, p. 66). The sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki* emphasises the importance that relationships and interactions with others have on young children's learning and development (MoE, 1996). However, there is literature that proposes that although "belonging and connectedness may co-exist, it is possible for one to exist without the other—to be connected to a group or organisation but not feel that you belong" (Stratigos et al., 2014, p. 177). This study proposes that belonging and connectedness do co-exist, particularly in a mixed-age group when infants and toddlers

have older siblings/cousins to support the transition. Rhiannon shared about two sisters: "the youngest one started that was her go-to person and she settled in quickly because she had that comfort" (F, p. 62). These sisters were already connected, which helped the younger sibling to develop a sense of belonging more quickly.

Contribution and independence is developed through access to people and practices.

Teachers emphasised the importance of giving infants and toddlers opportunities to contribute to the setting in independent ways. Independence is recognised by teachers who shared many examples of infants and toddlers who are independent in their exploration. This exploration was facilitated by free access in the open organisation of the environment and in the resources available to all children, not just to those who are older (F, p. 66). Teachers were clear they felt this was indicative of their mixed-age setting, and that in a segregated-age setting children would not have such 'grown up' experiences and resources. The independence derived from access to people and experiences is reiterated by McGaha et al. (2011), who also found that infants and toddlers need "less adult support and [can] direct their own interactions" (p. 13) when they have access to open-ended resources and older/younger peer interactions. In this study, the use of routine and familiar caregiving practices enabled infants and toddlers to be independent (F, p. 66). The term 'access' was raised by Rhiannon and Winnie who linked access to infants' and toddlers' ability to engage in independent play and choice of interactions (F, pp. 65 & 66). Legget and Ford (2016) indicate that being, belonging, and becoming part of a community require access to social and cultural contexts in group experiences, whereas Papatheodorou (2010) believes that if teachers secure "children's *being* and *belonging*, their *becoming* will be achieved in time" (p. 13). This thesis argues that when an infants' or toddlers' identity (being) is taken care of, their sense of belonging is fostered which leads to them contributing to their community.

Perhaps independence may be viewed as a contrast to a mixed-age ideology, in which collective endeavour and shared responsibility is implicit (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009). A mixed-age setting that recognises the contributions of all children is, as Ritchie (2001) explains, a move toward collective endeavour and responsibility. This centre values both independence and interdependence in their policy documents (F, p. 65). This thesis argues that infants and toddlers can be independent in their interactions, while still maintaining a close connection and contribution to the group setting. Wenger's (1998) belief is that it is

as "misleading to view identities as abstractly collective as it is to view them as narrowly individual" (p. 146). Teachers indicated that infants' and toddlers' engagement with one another showed their ability to be independent but also to share in the responsibility for others. Both Karen and Rhiannon shared stories of toddlers taking responsibility for assisting other infants or toddlers, in settling them or assisting them in a challenging situation (F, p. 70). Infants and toddlers appeared to be able to contribute to their community in ways that were both independent and collective.

Teachers talked about infants' and toddlers' strong sense of identity, believing that identity is linked to their ways of exploring and interacting with others. Teachers appeared to be intuitive and responsive to individual infants' and toddlers' ways of being, which acknowledged each child's identity (F, p. 50). Knowing a child and their family situation allowed teachers to quickly assess the child's mood or needs, based on their reaction, and then adapt their response. A child's wellbeing, sense of belonging, and identity, are inherently linked (Roberts, 2010; Stratigos et al., 2014); when one element is cared for, so too are the others. This also goes some way to answering the research question, in that infants' and toddlers' contributions, care, and learning, can also not be separated, but remain equal parts of a bigger picture.

Belonging is not determined by age or stage, though perhaps more by contribution. Teachers in this centre had collectively resisted the age and stage mentality that affects the way infants and toddlers are viewed (F, p. 51). Although teachers indicated, during interviews, different images of the very young child, they consistently approached talking about infants and toddlers in positive and familiar ways not relevant to age. Although age and stage are not key indicators for teachers in assessing children's competence, there was a tension in how they enacted and responded to the way infants and toddlers wanted to engage with the environment (F, p. 67). Infants and toddlers were seen as contributors to their own learning in the way they accessed the environment, it became their choice about who and what to engage with even when teachers could see that perhaps the child was not yet ready for this experience. This aligns with Leggett and Ford (2016) who state: "large groups serve the purpose of reconnecting individual children to the larger community within a centre. They re-gather after their experiences of play as individuals and in smaller groups" (p. 196). This recognises that belonging is not determined by age

but more akin to a connection to a community, therefore teachers in this centre recognised that infants and toddlers had a secure place.

Section Three: Summary.

When very young children are given access to the people and practices of their community—in this case a mixed-age centre—their contributions show them as capable and competent participants proficient in leading and initiating interactions. When infants and toddlers have access to familiar people and practices, this affirms their identity within the community and recognises their ability to contribute in meaningful and independent ways. Infants and toddlers are agentic and purposeful in their observations, interactions, and imitation of others. The fundamental need to belong is constructed in a way that is not passive, but is a "motivating human behaviour" (Stratigos et el., 2014, p. 174). The tension between the interdependence of a mixed-age philosophy and the independence of infants and toddlers is not at odds, but rather a complementary way of negotiating an identity in a mixed-age community. Wenger (1998) agrees and cautions that identity is both collective and individual. Therefore, infants' and toddlers' belonging and identity is strengthened through consistent access to people and experiences in this mixed-age setting.

Summary

The findings from this research suggest that the development of a strong culture of trust among teachers, children and families which aligns with cultural and familial ways of knowing. Paramount to developing this trust is teachers' recognition that all people involved in a centre community contribute to infant and toddler wellbeing and belonging. Developing family and cultural connections, and accessing people and experiences, enable infants and toddlers to develop and shape their belonging and identity, and to be agentic and purposeful contributors who are both independent and collective in their role within a mixed-age community.

The following chapter will conclude this study, drawing together the literature review, findings, and discussion in response to the research question. The limitations of the study will be considered and implications for further research will be explored.

Chapter SIX

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored teachers' perceptions of infants and toddlers in their mixed-age setting. The research question informing this study is: *How do teachers in a mixed age setting view infants' and toddlers' contributions, care and learning?* The use of an interpretative, qualitative, single-case study employing teacher interviews, analysis of centre documentation, and researcher field notes focusing on the environment, addressed the research question. Three principles of *Te Whāriki*: relationships, family and community, and empowerment (MoE, 1996), were utilised to interpret the findings, showcasing the value of all those involved in this setting (teachers, family, peers). The key concepts from Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, of culture, community, identity, and belonging, then framed the discussion and proposition of key findings.

Key Findings

There are three key findings from this study: 1. Culture has a role in teachers' pedagogy with infants and toddlers, 2. The value of community connectedness, and 3. Access to people and places promotes infants' and toddlers' identity and belonging.

The role of culture in this mixed-age setting was influenced by teachers' and families' culture and also the cultural practices that became the negotiated norm for this group of teachers. Teachers utilised specialised practices that responded to infants' and toddlers' ways of being such as: familiarity, consistency, love, and affection, to drive their practice and influence their interactions with children and their families. Teachers recognised that when an infant and toddler comes to the centre their family is also part of the package, and they endeavoured to care for them also. The appropriate pedagogical application of specialised practices such as whanaungatanga, tuakana-teina, and ako, that teachers in this centre implemented, are based on their negotiated understanding of their own and children's cultures for supporting relationships (culture). Teachers' application of whanaungatanga, tuakana-teina, and ako, was in appreciation of the culture of teachers and families. The implications of this finding are that early childhood teachers should consider their own assumptions about professional practice and align them closely with family-like practices that respond to teachers' own and families' cultures as a way of engendering familiarity and consistency for infants and toddlers. This thesis proposes that

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a pedagogy based on family-like practice is a way of implementing a specialised pedagogy of connectedness that is responsive to infants' and toddlers' ways of being. This finding adds to the literature that supports both culturally appropriate pedagogy and infant/toddler-specific practice.

The value of families, peers, and teachers as a connected community was the driving force behind the teachers in this centre's practices. Teachers were clear about the importance of families, teachers, and peers being a powerful contributor to infant toddler wellbeing (community). Karen's description of "having a mixed age centre that was going from birth to grandma" as "really cool" (F, p. 57) captures this centre's value of the intergenerational relationships that a mixed-age setting perpetuates. This thesis proposes drawing on siblings and cousins for increased support of infants and toddlers. This can only take place in a centre where free access to important people in a child's life is possible – a mixed-age setting. Multiple teachers in this study indicated that infants and toddlers would often seek out other children to respond to their wellbeing, rather than an adult. The implication of this finding is that a truly open-door policy, or implementation of mixed-age grouping to encourage family participation, not only benefits the children but also the adults themselves. This finding adds to the knowledge that relationships are a valuable and appropriate learning context for infants and toddlers, while also proposing the view that a mixed-age setting can be a highly appropriate way of supporting intergenerational and family relationships.

Teachers appeared to understand the importance of infant toddler wellbeing and provided infants and toddlers with access to people and places that facilitated both their independence and interdependence (belonging and identity). Teachers valued access to people, spaces, and things that are deeply important for promoting infants' and toddlers' sense of identity and belonging. Their practices recognised that when a child "is deeply connected with his/her roots and culture [he/she] has a sense of identity, belongingness and connectedness" (Papatheodorou, 2010, p. 6). Many examples of infants and toddlers being agentic and purposeful in social, language, and play, exchanges showed the younger child taking charge and instigating interactions that may be perceived as beyond their developmental capabilities in some settings. The implications of this finding is that it may be appropriate to revise teachers' views and practices that may inhibit infants and toddlers, by moving away from developmental or age appropriate norms. This thesis

proposes that infants and toddlers are indeed capable and competent in their contributions to the care and learning of others and themselves.

Limitations

There are a couple of limitations to the current study. The first is that, being a single-case study, the findings and discussion are not generalisable. The findings enable an in-depth view of a particular group of teachers' beliefs and practices, though these cannot be assumed to be the beliefs and practices employed by all mixed-age settings in the early childhood sector.

The second limitation was my own ethnicity and culture: Being a Pākehā (New Zealand European) woman, I did not want to be insensitive or misinterpret anything from the literature or the findings. While the centre did not specifically identify as Māori or Pasifika – Māori and Pasifika cultures turned out to be a significant influnce. While I have checked my findings with the literature and with the teachers, I am aware that I too am influenced by my own culture and experiences. Ultimately, although I believe I was respectful and careful to embrace the influence of ethnic culture, and have drawn on literature from other world views, the reality is my interpretation is informed by my own culture, experiences and beliefs.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are multiple avenues for further research that could build on this study. This study has focused on one mixed-age setting; it would be interesting to undertake a comparative study of several mixed-age settings to examine whether the key findings have any relevance outside of the one centre. Mixed-age settings are so few and are sometimes viewed negatively, as teachers at times expect infants and toddlers to get hurt or interfere with older children's work (Beach, 2013). Undertaking research that takes a closer look at how infants and toddlers are capable and competent in a range of mixed-age settings, may advocate for the viability of mixed-age centres as an appropriate response to infants' and toddlers' ways of being. The phenomenon explored in this study is of infants and toddlers being capable and competent contributors, and the means of achieving. The findings have the potential to inform teachers, in other settings, who work with children under-three of the children's ability to be agentic and purposeful when their ways of being are appreciated.

Of course the adult views indicate only one perspective. Involving children, and their families, in the research would be an appropriate way of gathering multiple perspectives on mixed-age settings and what they have to offer infants and toddlers. Teachers have shared many examples of how they believe infants and toddlers contribute to their setting. Observing children and making respectful attempts to capture their perspective could show a richer element of infant toddler contribution to a mixed-age community.

Significance of the Study

This research has engaged with the aspiration of *Te Whāriki* "for children to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators" (MoE, 1996, p. 9) by putting forth teachers' views and examples of infants and toddlers who are *already* capable and competent in their interactions and behaviours in this mixed-age setting.

This thesis contributes to the literature in two ways. It adds to the literature of recognising a mixed-age setting as an appropriate setting for infants and toddlers. A mixed-age setting values the connections of immediate and extended family in intergenerational relationships as a valid learning context. Secondly, this research adds to the literature that views infants and toddlers as capable and competent in their language, social, and physical interactions and explorations. Infants and toddlers are "already innately and fully developed: they simply need time and the right conditions to flourish" (White & Mika, 2013, p. 97).When the perception of infants and toddlers is as individual and confident children, and not based on their age or development, their capabilities are recognised.

Appendices

Information Sheet – Centre Manager/Owner

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Centre Manager/Supervisor)

Project title: Exploring teachers' views on infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting

Researcher: Kylie Smith

Research Supervisor/s: Dr Sandy Farquhar and Maria Cooper

Dear Manager/Supervisor of (*insert Centre name*)

My name is Kylie Smith and I am conducting research as part of my studies towards a Master of Education at the University of Auckland. I teach at Manukau Institute of Technology with the Faculty of Education and Social Science specialising in early childhood education.

This study will investigate teachers' views of infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting.

I would like to invite teachers in your Centre to take part in this research project to share their insight, experience and understanding about infants and toddlers in a mixed-aged setting. If you consent to this research taking place in your Centre I seek your permission to approach teachers at a time and place convenient to you and the teachers to invite their voluntarily participation in this research. All teachers who are qualified or studying towards a qualification, and who are employed on a permanent or long-term basis will have the opportunity to participate in this research. I enclose a copy of the Participant

Information Sheet for Teachers. Your consent to this research places no obligation on the teachers to agree to participate in this study. Further, I seek your assurance that no member of staff will experience any negative consequence to their employment as a result of their decision to participate or not.

I would like your permission to make copies of relevant Centre documentation. This would include: the Centre's policies relevant to mixed-age grouping, the Centre philosophy statement, and/or anything within the Centre environment and documentation visible on Centre walls that highlight infants and toddlers and/or concepts relevant to mixed-age grouping (belonging, community, identity).

The research will involve my conducting one 60 minute individual interview with each teacher who agrees to participate. These interviews will be audio-recorded and will take place in a quiet space preferably designated within the Centre at a negotiated and suitable time outside of working hours. Participants will have the right to ask for the recorder to be turned off and to edit a transcript of their recordings.

I will visit the Centre up to four times:

- An initial visit to invite teachers' participation

- Two-three visits to undertake interviews with teachers and collect Centre documentation. (See attached Participant Information Sheet for Teachers.

The confidentiality of teachers and the Centre will be protected with the use of pseudonyms and de-identification of data. I will do my utmost to protect the Centre's identity. A University-approved transcriber may be used to transcribe the audio-recording and will sign a confidentiality agreement. Due to the small number of early childhood Centres utilising mixed-age grouping in Auckland, there is a slight risk that someone reading the research might be able to identify the Centre. I will appeal to the teacher

participants and appeal to you that you also respect confidentiality and refrain from discussing the research with others.

You have the right to withdraw permission for the use of your Centre at any time up until the first teacher interview takes place (anticipated this will be October 2015). If you decide to withdraw your Centre, all data collected will be destroyed and no report/publication will be produced from this data.

Signed Consent Forms and data gathered during the research will be kept in secure storage in the Principal Investigators (Dr Sandy Farquhar) office at the University of Auckland for six years. At the end of this period, all written and printed data will be shredded and audio-recorded and electronic files of data will be erased.

At the conclusion of the research a koha (gift) of up to $50 in value will be presented to the centre. You and the participants will receive a summary of the research findings.

The findings of this research will form the basis of my Master of Education Thesis and may be used to support future publications and inform teaching and contribution to the research environment.

If you are satisfied with the information you have been given, please complete the enclosed Consent Form and return to the stamped self-addressed envelope provided as soon as possible.

Thank you for taking time to read through this information. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Kylie Smith

CONTACT DETAILS AND APPROVAL

Student Researcher name and contact details	Supervisor/s name and contact details	Head of Department name and contact details
Kylie Smith kmsi637@auckland uni.ac.nz	Dr Sandy Farquhar Director, ECE School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice (09) 373 7599 extn.48270 s.farquhar@auckland.ac.nz Maria Cooper Lecturer School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice (09) 373 7599 extn. 48786 m.cooper@auckland.ac.nz	Associate Professor Lorri Santamaria School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice (09) 373 7599 extn. 46353 l.santamaria@auckland.ac.nz

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz.

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 8 October 2015 for three years. Reference number 015929

Consent Form – Centre Manager/Owner

CONSENT FORM (Centre Manager/Supervisor)

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: Exploring teachers' views on infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting

Researcher: Kylie Smith

Research Supervisor/s: Dr Sandy Farquhar and Maria Cooper

Contact email address for researcher: ksmi637@aucklanduni.ac.nz

I have read the Participant Information Sheet. I understand the nature of the research and why this Centre has been invited to participate. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to grant the researcher permission to access the Centre teachers to invite their participation in the research.
- I agree to take part in this research with the understanding that participation is entirely voluntary.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission for this research to take place in my Centre up until the first teacher interview takes place (anticipated to be October 2015).

- I agree to the teacher Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms being distributed during a time convenient to me and to all the teachers at *(name of Centre)*.

- I give permission for Kylie Smith to make pre-arranged visits to the Centre to take copies of Centre documentation which may include:
  - the Centre's policies relevant to mixed-age grouping
  - the Centre philosophy statement
  - samples of the Centre documentation visible within the Centre environment that highlight infants and toddlers and/or mixed-age grouping.
- I understand that teacher participation is entirely voluntary and I give my assurance that no staff member will suffer any negative consequence in their employment as a result of their decision whether or not to participate.
- I agree that there will be no negative consequence for teachers who voluntarily participate and share views that may be critical of Centre practices.
- I agree to maintain confidentiality by refraining from discussing the research with others.
- I understand that the data gathered will be used for the basis of this research and may be used to support further analysis, teaching, future publications or presentations.
- I understand that teacher participants will be interviewed for up to 60 minutes at a negotiated and suitable time outside of working hours in a quiet space I have designated within the Centre.
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement may transcribe the audio recordings.
- I understand that pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of the Centre and teachers participating in the research.
- I understand that all data generated by this project will be stored securely at the Faculty of Education, for a period of six years. At the end of this period, all written and printed data will be shredded and audio-recorded and electronic files of data will be erased.
- I understand that at the completion of the research I will receive a summary of the findings.

Name: _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Email address for a summary of research findings:

_____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 8 October 2015 for three years. Reference number 015929

Information Sheet - Teacher

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Teacher)

Project title: Exploring teachers' views on infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting

Researcher: Kylie Smith

Res

earch Supervisor/s: Dr Sandy Farquhar and Maria Cooper

My name is Kylie Smith and I am conducting research as part of my studies towards a Master of Education at the University of Auckland. I teach at Manukau Institute of Technology with the Faculty of Education and Social Science specialising in early childhood education.

This study will investigate teachers' views of infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting.

I have been given permission by your Centre manager/supervisor to undertake this research in your Centre and therefore invite you to take part in this project, to share your insight, experience and understanding about infants and toddlers in a mixed-aged setting. You have the right to choose to participate or not. Your manager/supervisor has agreed that there will be no negative employment consequence for you as a result of your decision.

The research will involve one 60 minute individual interview. The interview will be audio-recorded at a negotiated and suitable time outside of working hours in the Centre. You have the right to ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview. A transcript of your interview will be returned to you in hardcopy format within one month of the final interview. You will be able to review the transcript to ensure correct transcription, to be collected by the researcher within two weeks.

Due to the nature of this research, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. However, I will do my utmost to protect your confidentiality and the Centre through the use of pseudonyms and de-identification of data. I ask that you also respect confidentiality and refrain from discussing the research with others.

A University-approved transcriber will transcribe the audio-recording and will sign a confidentiality agreement.

You have the right to withdraw your interview data without providing a reason up to the end of data gathering (anticipated this will be by December 2015). If you decide to withdraw your consent the audio-recording and transcript will be destroyed and no report/publication will be produced from this data.

Signed Consent Forms and data gathered during the research will be kept in secure storage in the Principal Investigators office at the University of Auckland for six years. At the end of this period, all written and printed data will be shredded and audio-recorded and electronic files of data will be erased.

At the conclusion of the research a koha (gift) of up to $50 in value will be presented to the centre and you will receive a summary of the research findings.

The findings of this research will form the basis of my Master of Education Thesis and may be used to support future publications and inform teaching and contribution to the research environment.

If you agree participate in the research, and are satisfied with the information you have been given, please complete the Consent Form and return to the secure box provided located in the Centre's office.

Thank you for taking time to read through this information. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Kylie Smith

CONTACT DETAILS AND APPROVAL

Student Researcher name and contact details	Supervisor/s name and contact details	Head of Department name and contact details
Kylie Smith kmsi637@aucklanduni.ac.nz	Dr Sandy Farquhar Director, ECE School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice (09) 373 7599 extn.48270 s.farquhar@auckland.ac.nz Maria Cooper Lecturer School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice (09) 373 7599 extn. 48786 m.cooper@auckland.ac.nz	Associate Professor Lorri Santamaria School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice (09) 373 7599 extn. 46353 l.santamaria@auckland.ac.nz

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz.

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 8 October 2015 for three years. Reference number 015929

Consent Form – Teacher

CONSENT FORM (Teacher)

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: Exploring teachers' views on infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting

Researcher: Kylie Smith

Res

earch Supervisor/s: Dr Sandy Farquhar and Maria Cooper

Contact email address for researcher: ksmi637@aucklanduni.ac.nz

I have read the Participant Information Sheet. I understand the nature of the research and why I have been invited to participate. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research with the understanding that participation is entirely voluntary.
- I understand that I can withdraw my interview data without providing a reason until the completion of teacher interviews (anticipated this will be by December 2015).
- I understand that the data gathered will be used for the basis of this research and may be used to support further analysis, teaching, future publications or presentations.

- I understand that I will be interviewed for up to 60 minutes at a negotiated and suitable time outside of working hours in a quiet space designated within the Centre.
- I understand that my interview will be audio-recorded and I have the right to ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time.
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement may transcribe the audio-recordings.
- I understand that I will have the opportunity to review and edit a transcript of my interview recording within one month of the conclusion of interviews, to be collected by the researcher within two weeks.
- I understand that due to the nature of this research, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed however pseudonyms will be used protect my identity.
- I agree to maintain confidentiality by refraining from discussing the research with others.
- I understand that all data generated by this project will be stored securely at the Faculty of Education, for a period of six years. At the end of this period, all written and printed data will be shredded and audio-recorded and electronic files of data will be erased.
- I understand that at the completion of the research I will receive a summary of the findings.

Name: _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Email address for a summary of research findings:

_____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 8 October 2015 for three years. Reference number 015929

Appendix E

Interview Schedule

Indicative semi-structured questions that may be used for individual interviews

Introductory questions:

- Years of experience?
- What has brought you here to this centre?

Features of a mixed-age setting:

- What are the features of *this* mixed-age setting? *Prompt – If you had to explain to a potential new family about the centre, what would you say?*
- No mention of mixed-age grouping in the philosophy?

Personal positives of mixed-age grouping:

- Can you tell me about some of the great moments you have had involving infants and toddlers?

Personal challenges of mixed-age grouping:

- What are some of the challenges you have had teaching infants and toddlers?

Infants and toddlers in mixed-age settings:

- In your opinion what do you think infants and toddlers have to offer their peers (of any age) in a mixed-age environment and vice-versa?
  - o Where do you see yourself and other adults (teachers, parents etc) fitting in the mixed-age setting? *Prompt – roles*

- What does infants and toddlers being capable and competent in a centre environment look like to you? *Prompts – socialisation, language, physical attributes, behaviour*
  - o What other words might you use to describe infants and toddlers? *Prompts – vulnerable, dependant, competent, explorers etc.*

- What does it mean to belong?
  - How might you see belonging evident in infants' and toddlers' interactions and experiences?
  - Does belonging look different in a mixed-age setting? If so, how?

Transcriber Confidentiality Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF **AUCKLAND**
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau
NEW ZEALAND

**EDUCATION AND
SOCIAL WORK**

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Research project: Exploring teachers' views on infants and toddlers as capable and competent contributors in a mixed-age setting

Researcher: Kylie Smith

I agree to transcribe the interviews recorded for the above research project and understand that the information contained within may not be disclosed to, or discussed with anyone other than the researcher.

I agree to store any audiotapes (if used) in a secure location whilst they are in my possession and to return them to the researcher upon transcription, and/or delete digital files once the transcription is completed.

Name:

Date:

Signed:

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 8 October 2015 for three years. Reference number 015929

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