Negotiating wellbeing and belonging in an early childhood centre

What children's conflicts can teach us

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Wellbeing and *belonging* are explored in this article through sociolinguistic interactional analysis of naturally arising conflict situations, captured ethnographically on video, and through analysis of teachers' discussions during focus groups. Post-conflict analysis of child-led actions revealed children used numerous peace-making strategies to repair their peer relationships, showing relationships matter greatly for their wellbeing. Utilising the notion of a "trajectory of belonging" we analysed and linked the meaning of chronologically sequenced conflict events, illustrating that achieving a sense of belonging is not an outcome of a single event; rather it is a process of negotiation within a community and its existing hierarchy.

Introduction

Early childhood (EC) teachers and kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand are very familiar with the terms *belonging* and *wellbeing*—they are two of the five strands of the early learning curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, introduced into everyday EC pedagogical discourse with the launch of *Te Whāriki* in the mid-1990s. Each strand is described in a preamble followed by a set of goals and learning outcomes which elaborate how teachers might interpret the strand pedagogically. The 1996 version of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) also provided examples of "questions for reflection" to help teachers know if the learning outcomes had been achieved; in the refreshed 2017 version (Ministry of Education, 2017), the questions were replaced with statements of what "evidence of learning and development" might look like. Despite this profile, however, until relatively recently, belonging and wellbeing remained under-researched as pedagogical concepts in EC settings.

Wellbeing and belonging

In scholarly literature, *wellbeing* and *belonging* are both multifaceted concepts.

Often equated with physical wellness, the meaning of *wellbeing* in policy and scholarly documents is frequently assumed rather than defined (Crivello et al., 2008; Manning-Morton, 2014). Global measures of wellbeing (e.g., OECD, 2014) illustrate its multidimensional nature and highlight the various methodological approaches through which it can be investigated. The latter is evident also in the New Zealand Government's *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019). To date, however, research on wellbeing in EC settings has typically focused on the physical dimensions of health. How children acquire a sense of emotional and social wellbeing is only now beginning to gain attention.

Belonging is generally assumed to be a kind of psycho-social "glue" connecting people (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008), indicating a relationship of a part to a whole

(Peers & Fleer, 2014) and creating a sense of togetherness (Singer & de Haan, 2007). Analysing the concept of belonging in literature from different disciplines, Sumsion and Wong (2011) outlined 10 ways of discussing belonging, including emotional, social, cultural, spatial, and temporal belonging (e.g., sense of past, present, future), as well as physical, spiritual, moral/ethical (e.g., the right to belong here), political (citizenship), and legal (e.g., "it's mine") belonging.

In this article we explore wellbeing and belonging from the perspectives of children and teachers in an EC centre in a major city in New Zealand, drawing on a study in which we focused on the structure of conflict among children aged 2–5 years. We use the term *conflict* to refer to all events where "one person overtly opposes another person's actions or statement" (Shantz, 1987, p. 284). We share aspects of our analysis of children's naturally arising conflicts as a lens through which to understand how children construct their sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of children's peer relationships (Singer et al., 2011). It is part of cognitive development, fostering individual and social competence, enhancing social and emotional wellbeing, and emotional sensitivity (Ashby & Neilsen-Hewett, 2012). Research in EC settings shows that, while teachers may perceive conflict as undesirable, conflict can be a "highly productive practice" (Cobb-Moore et al., 2008, p. 596), helping children learn to co-operate and share (e.g., Licht et al., 2008), and central to group and friendship formation. Among toddlers, conflict can facilitate the use of speech, is implicated in identity formation, and helps children learn about the greater social order (Dalli, 2003; Laursen et al., 2001; Wan Yunus, 2019). When EC practitioners respond to children's conflict by using mediation versus cessation strategies, conflicts become opportunities for children to learn about their feelings and to implement solutions that they find agreeable (Clarke et al., 2017; Gloeckler et al., 2014). Strategies like "affectionate-controlling touch" (Cekaite & Bergner, 2018, p. 953) can be very powerful in defusing potential conflict situations. There is evidence that out-of-control disagreements can trigger violence, and prolonged conflict is linked to anxiety, depression, and peer rejection (e.g., Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993).

In this article we highlight some of our learnings about children's conflicts and argue that they are also a means through which children negotiate belonging and wellbeing.

The overall study

Our study is an 18-month longitudinal investigation of conflict and peace-making in one multi-ethnic EC centre. At the start of the study there were 26 children on the roll who, between them, spoke 12 home languages: English, Arabic, Amharic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Vietnamese, Samoan, Kannada, Thai, Tamil, and Urdu. The centre had four teaching staff.

Our aim is to establish an empirically based understanding of
1. how conflict is negotiated by young children with and without adult intervention
2. how the dynamics of conflict are linked to belonging and wellbeing; and
3. what belonging and wellbeing look like when studied phenomenologically through the lens of conflict and peace-making.

We gathered continuous video data two mornings a week using one stationary and one roving GoPro camera and two free-standing microphones, together with handwritten field notes. The video data were triaged to identify extracts of conflict and peace-making; these were downloaded into the software program ELAN and transcribed for sociolinguistic interactional analysis. We held three focus-group discussions with the teachers and kept notes of other conversations during which we explored their thinking about conflict, belonging, and wellbeing and tested out our thinking about the significance of extracts of data.

Wellbeing from teachers' and children's perspectives

The teachers' perspectives

Talking about the meaning of wellbeing, and how they recognised it in children, the teachers' discussion during the focus group on wellbeing (FGW) included very similar statements to those in *Te Whāriki*. The teachers spoke about children's wellbeing as having "all of their basic needs met … that they'd had enough sleep … nutritious food" (FGW 59–69) and as including feeling physically and emotionally safe, including feeling loved and looked after.

It's also obvious to us when children don't get much physical love, like attention, cuddles … they often will go about seeking that attention in quite antisocial ways initially … before we've developed a strong relationship … that's quite a biggie, isn't it, basic needs … it's key to a sense of wellbeing. (FGW 76–90)

The teachers also discussed that, within their ethnically diverse centre, the children's wellbeing was impacted by the fact that they often arrived without a shared language with those already there, and with very different experiences. They emphasised that wellbeing was also about feeling culturally included, overcoming "culture shock" and establishing connections. One teacher explained:

we experience that regularly, don't we? Children coming in here and the whole thing is a culture shock. It's not just the language that's different but it's everything! People look different … so until they feel that yeah, they (sighs) belong here, and that they've got people that will care for them, support and attempt to understand them. Yeah, they can often play out in quite physical ways: "I'm gonna fight for myself and my life until I know that there's somebody else that's gonna, sort of, do that for me." (FGW 131–143)

Talking about how they recognised wellbeing, teachers used the phrases: "relaxed, generally resilient", "feeling confident to explore and play", "engaged", "happy, laughing, and chatty", and, as one explained: "when they also start to offer to be responsible, to help, or start to really express what they want" (FGW 193–194).

In summing up the link between wellbeing and conflict, the teachers saw conflict as the opposite of wellbeing, with one of them saying: "so actually, probably when children are involved in conflict, they feel like their wellbeing is being challenged" (FGW 232–233). Murmurs of assent from the rest of the teachers led to a discussion about the impact of conflict on the individual child as well as on group wellbeing, prompting the question of how wellbeing could be restored after conflict, and what a state of wellbeing might look like from a child's perspective.

The children's perspective

Our line of thinking during the focus group led us to look closely at what happened among the children after conflict interactions. We reasoned that if wellbeing was threatened by conflict, then if we focused on the post-conflict actions that were child-led, it would be possible to gain a sense of the aspects that were important to

them, thus providing insights into the children's perspectives on wellbeing. We defined child-led actions as: (i) actions that occur when there are no teachers present or nearby during an interaction; or (ii) actions in which the teacher does not intervene even if the teacher is present; or (iii) when the strategies chosen by the children are different from those suggested by the teacher.

This analysis showed that, regardless of the apparent motivation of conflict (e.g., possession, inclusion, interruption), what children chose and pursued were actions that restored the relationship either immediately within the same dyadic or group setting where it occurred, or over a lengthier time period. The peace-making strategies we observed included: offering peace through a joke, toy, or through playing together; including someone—or presenting oneself to be included—in a game or an activity; negotiating who is allowed to do what within the peer group social hierarchy; or accepting someone else's mediation.

The following three-episode cameo is an example of the strategy of offering peace. It unfolded over an hour between two girls with the action happening first as a private exchange between them, and subsequently within a group context.

The first episode occurred at 9.15am when Hang had just sat down at the playdough table and was slowly gathering bits of playdough next to her in a box. Natia walked over to stand next to Hang.

> Natia: Can I play?
> Hang: Noo.
> Natia: Can I have some playdough?
> Hang: No.

Hang stands and walks to the other side of the table taking the box with the playdough bits with her. Natia starts sitting down in the chair Hang had just vacated. But Hang looks at Natia and moves back to reclaim "her" chair, pushing Natia off. Natia walks over to one of the teachers (T).

> Natia: I want some play … some play-dough [and …
> T: [Mmmm
> Natia: Hang say no, she say no.
> T: She said 'no'.
> Natia: I want to play.
> T: You can use … there is more playdough on the table (pointing to other bits of playdough on the table).
> Natia: Nooo.

Natia looks at the teacher, then back at the playdough table, and moves away to play with a puzzle in a different area.

In the above conflict episode, Hang clearly opposed Natia's request—through words and actions—to share her playdough. Attempting to resolve the matter, Natia approached her teacher who offered a solution that Natia walked away from.

The next time that Natia and Hang were seen together, it was 35 minutes later and another conflict interaction ensued. This time, however, it was Natia who rejected Hang's approach.

Natia and Kareem are each standing on a chair, playing with a wall-hanging decorated with pāua shells. They laugh and move the shells catching the light from different angles. A few moments later Kareem gets off the chair and walks towards the miniature trains set up in a separate area. Natia is still standing on the chair, moving the shells with her fingers, when Hang walks over and starts to climb onto the vacant chair.

> Natia: No, you cannot [you cannot].
> Hang: [I wanna] play.
> Natia: (pushing Hang off the chair) No no no.

Hang stands next to the chair looking at Natia and reaches out trying to touch one of the shells.

> Natia: (pushing her hand away) No, go away.

Hang moves her hand away and looks around; she walks off towards the mat area.

As in the first episode, this second interaction shows one child opposing another's actions and statements; in each episode, the situation was resolved when one child walked off. Analysed individually, the episodes constitute different instances of conflict. Considered together, however, they can be read as an evening-out of the score: each child opposed the other child and won a round. Moreover, when the two episodes are considered together with the next interactional episode 25 minutes later, a further layer of meaning becomes evident.

Natia and Hang are sitting at one table with two other children—Kareem and Olivia. Natia looks at Hang and makes a sound with her mouth. Hang looks up and smiles. Natia makes the sound again and Hang starts laughing.

> Natia: You can do it too.
> Hang: (laughs)
> Natia: Do it do it; try like this (does it again).
> Hang: (trying) No no.
> Natia: You try later.

Kareem starts laughing. Natia looks at him and starts laughing too and Hang and Olivia join in.

Read alongside the preceding two episodes, all occurring within the same hour, this episode shows that the earlier conflicts, which initially led to the children going separate ways, were now resolved. Natia's use of the strategy of offering something to Hang, in this case the joke of a funny noise and an invitation to join in, succeeded in restoring the two girls' relationship, and their wellbeing, thus emphasising the relational dimension of conflict and peace-making (Singer et al., 2011). It was also interesting that, while the initial conflicts occurred as private exchanges between the two girls, when Natia took the initiative to repair the relationship with Hang, she did this in a public context in front of two peers who contributed to the repair by joining in the laughter. It was as if a public statement was made that all was now well. This illustrates that, in a group setting, the relational impact of one-to-one peer conflict is not confined to the immediate participants in the conflict; it has a community dimension.

A further insight from this analysis is that by considering the three conflict interactions as connected relational practices within a continuum of interactions, rather than as individual episodes of conflict or fun, the experiential significance of conflict becomes more apparent: it challenges children's relationships. Moreover, the analysis of children's post-conflict actions reveals that they work hard to restore their relationships and thus their overall wellbeing.

Belonging from teachers' and children's perspectives

Teachers' perspectives

The structure of the focus-group discussion about belonging paralleled that of the one about wellbeing.

The teachers spoke about belonging as a feeling of fitting in and being a part of the community:

> once they fit in, they feel like they want to contribute … so "here is where I belong to, so I own here; I take care of it". (FGB 43–44)

> being acknowledged, noticed, seen and heard, feeling understood … and understanding what is going on here; fitting into routines, being familiar with them. (FGB 48–49)

> I can play with my friends and be listened to, like "I'm heard as well". (FGB 72–73)

Defining belonging also made the teachers think of the challenges to acquiring a sense of belonging.

The cultural expectations might be different … they don't come in and … it's just their culture. They're surrounded by different cultures, so just learning that whole working together with other cultures, different ways of how everyone does things … it's just coming to that common ground. (FGB 65–68)

In explaining how they recognised when children felt they belonged, the teachers spoke about children's body language showing they felt relaxed and happy; that children found things to do, were engaged; and others included them. Other indicators were: when children contributed at mat-time; when they asked others if they were OK and thus showed they cared; when they understood the cues from the teachers such as the "countdown to packing away" (FGB 178–179); and whenever children said "I can help" or "I want to help".

Discussing whether there was a link between conflict and belonging, the teachers said that conflict could lead to some children being excluded in peer activities and feeling rejected. They recounted the distress of one boy who "didn't understand, he just couldn't fit in, because all he wanted was 'I want that; you have that; I want that'… we had to coach him quite carefully" (FGB 267–275). Coaching involved explaining the meaning of facial expressions and why they might have been feeling a particular way: "we made suggestions about ways he could go about entering the play with that other child, or just encouraged his peers to say things to him that might help him understand" (FGB 281–282).

For the teachers, therefore, belonging was predominantly about gaining a sense of one's place in the community; they saw conflict as strongly implicated in this process and in the formation of relationships and identity.

The children's perspectives

Seeking to understand the dynamics of conflict and belonging as experienced by the children, we have been using the concept of a "trajectory of socialisation/participation" (Dreier, 2003; Wortham, 2005). This has enabled us to identify links between conflict events and subsequent interactions between children and to plot their "trajectories of belonging". The trajectories are helping us understand how day-to-day hierarchies are established among children, also contributing to their identity.

In this section, we outline Kareem's trajectory of belonging using data gathered over the 6-month period from his entry into the centre to his departure for a 3-month visit to his country of birth.

Kareem's trajectory of belonging

Kareem started at the centre aged 3 years 10 months as a monolingual speaker of Arabic. Over the first 3 months, he mainly engaged in solitary activities, slowly starting to follow the teachers around and engaging in "helping" activities. His language repertoire comprised "no", "ok" and "my turn" which he used in responding to peers and teachers as well as when initiating contact. His embodied actions were the other cues to his intentions.

Looking chronologically at how Kareem's interactions changed led us to identify a "trajectory of belonging" with three distinct transitions: (i) from being a character on the periphery of centre life to participating in the daily routines and peer activities; (ii) from participating to initiating action; and (iii) graduating from "baby" to "small boy".

From the periphery of centre life to participating in daily routines and peer activities

When we began following Kareem in November, he was starting to participate in activities when invited by the teachers, and with his peers he was still mostly involved in either parallel play, or attempting to participate by standing close by and asking: "my turn?". Turn-taking was a valued social norm by the teachers who promoted it through encouraging the children to give others a turn.

Helping the teachers, such as when setting up tables for snack times, visibly pleased Kareem, as he could be seen singing to himself, smiling, and jumping up and down as he performed them. Soon he began to anticipate these routines and would reach for a cloth, or point to the children's water bottles to signal his willingness to help distribute them, offering up a questioning "help?". The teachers' response of "thank you Kareem" elicited smiles and nods from him and in the following weeks Kareem used the word "help" many times to the teachers as he helped to wipe tables and perform other chores.

Right from his entry into the centre it was evident that Kareem's attention was drawn to a group of self-styled "big boys" whose core members were Rashid and Malik. By early December, it was clear that Kareem was attempting to use his new-found understanding of "help" and "my turn" to try to engage with these "big boys".

A typical example was when Kareem approached Rashid digging a hole in the sandpit; reaching out to Rashid's spade, Kareem suggested "help?". When Rashid declined this offer with a firm "no", Kareem tried his other previously successful phrase of "my turn?" which Rashid also rejected. We would classify this exchange as conflict, as Rashid repeatedly and overtly opposed Kareem's requests. Kareem started to walk away but when Rashid uttered a self-satisfied but questioning "ha?", Kareem turned back and rejoindered: "this one no funny". In light of the conflict events that we recorded later, we came to regard this interaction as Kareem's first point of resistance and a marker of his slow but steady negotiation of his centre identity that saw him move from the periphery of the big boys' social group to gaining entry.

Shortly after this interaction, Kareem made his first big stand as a boy worthy of joining the big boys' group. Having somewhat unexpectedly managed to secure a torch from Malik— one of the big boys—through his strategy of requesting "my turn?", he refused to let go of it despite numerous attempts by both Malik and other members of the "big boys" group to cajole it back from him. In the end, and under the watchful eye of a nearby teacher, the "big boys" gave up and decided to change their game and thus the need to retrieve Kareem's torch. This was a significant win for Kareem: he had moved from the periphery of the action to having an effect on the actions of the big boys.

From participating to initiating action: helping, "big boys", and "babies"

The sandpit was a constant drawcard for the big boys and the next significant interaction for Kareem's negotiation of his identity occurred here in the first half of February.

On this occasion, Rashid and Max were digging out "treasures" and hiding them again when Kareem walked over to them, picked up a large rake lying behind them, and started raking around the boys slowing nudging closer to their hole. Finally, determined to be included, he offered his trusty phrase: "I'm come help." But once again, Rashid wanted none of it, loudly declaring "No, no helping." After two defiant and oppositional "yes" statements by Kareem, Rashid lifted his spade and hit Kareem's rake resulting in a stomping match between the boys. Seeking to diffuse the situation, a nearby teacher suggested to Rashid that he might want to explain that he was busy at that moment;

turning to Kareem she then explained that Rashid might ask him later for his help. Rashid, however, was not to be so easily manoeuvred: "it's big boys' job", he declared, thus revealing the underlying motivation behind his rejection of Kareem's offer. Clearly, in Rashid's eyes, Kareem was not a big boy worthy of inclusion in digging.

With this line in the sand clearly drawn, Kareem walked off from the sandpit, but within seconds returned with a long white rod in his hand and, sitting on the swing, started swinging his feet and the rod into the area where the boys were digging, gently intoning: "Rashid baby." Flaring up in anger, Rashid grabbed and removed Kareem's rod, while Kareem kept up a gently mocking incantation of "baby Rashid". Intervening to stop a spade being lifted threateningly by Rashid, a nearby teacher said to Kareem that Rashid felt "really angry when he's called a baby" to which Kareem responded with a quiet satisfied smile.

It was clear that Kareem had managed to work out that within the group, the social hierarchy consisted of "big boys" or "baby". Unable to get Rashid to accept his help, he had succeeded in finding just the right way to even the score between them.

We were not able to see if this particular conflict exchange had a sequel that day as the two boys were not seen close to each other again that day. However, data gathered in the latter half of February shows one further significant advance in Kareem's belonging status.

Graduating to "small boy" in the big boys' group

Five days after the sandpit interaction, another of Rashid's friends in the "big boys" group turned 5 and went to school. As Rashid found himself increasingly playing alone, he was often heard to comment that other children's activities were boring. Kareem, meanwhile, was increasingly accepted and invited to enter games. On the day of the EC centre's weekly visit to a nearby library, an interaction between Kareem and Rashid provided an opportunity, born perhaps of Rashid's sheer boredom, for Kareem to graduate to the next level of acceptance into the big boys' group.

Hearing a teacher call for volunteers to go to the library, Rashid declared he would go and then sauntered over to Kareem at the blocks table. Leaning over the table and looking directly at Kareem, Rashid unexpectedly declared: "You wanna go to library?" Initially,

Kareem did not seem to understand and shook his head but when Rashid pointed to the door and repeated the librarian's name, he quickly agreed: "Yeah, I'm go", and the two of them headed off towards the door together. Halfway there, Rashid looked at Kareem and firmly intoned "I'm a big boy, you're a small boy", to which Kareem responded simply with a smile and a nod. Looking visibly delighted, he skipped his way to the door and outside to the library: he had made the cut from baby to "small boy"!

From March onwards Kareem and Rashid were seen playing together regularly, and Kareem's trajectory of belonging continued to unfold with increasing confidence and agency; his sense of belonging seemed firmly established.

Conclusion

In this article we have highlighted some of our learnings about how children construct their sense of wellbeing and belonging by drawing on our analysis of naturally arising conflict interactions and peace-making strategies among children in a multi-ethnic EC setting.

By focusing on post-conflict child-led actions we have thrown light on the work that children do to repair, maintain, or develop relationships: this shows that their peer relationships matter greatly for their wellbeing. Numerous peace-making strategies were deployed by the children both immediately following the conflict and at a later point in time; they also seemed to use both one-to-one and group contexts as the site of the repair strategies. A valuable lesson from these insights is that, as others have also reported (Bateman, 2011; Cobb-Moore et al., 2008; Singer & De Haan, 2007; Theobold et al., 2017), young children are considerably more constructive in managing peer conflict than might be obvious at first glance.

Through plotting Kareem's trajectory of belonging by analysing and linking the meaning of chronologically sequenced conflict events, we have highlighted a range of social and linguistic dynamics that worked together to construct Kareem's sense of identity, his place in the social order of the centre, as well as his sense of wellbeing (and agency) in the EC centre. This has demonstrated that achieving a sense of belonging is not an outcome of a single event; rather it is a process of negotiation within a community and its existing hierarchy.

Our analysis confirms findings reported elsewhere (e.g., Bateman 2011; Singer & de Haan, 2007; Theobald et al., 2012) that, despite its

reputation as a challenge, and despite sometimes erupting when teachers might least welcome it, conflict is an important experience through which children learn the social rules in their context.

Differently from other studies, by using conflict as a lens on wellbeing and belonging, we have learnt that, in working to restore their relationships post-conflict, children are also actively restoring their wellbeing and learning the dynamics of belonging. There are, therefore, important implications for the role that EC teachers have (or should have) in children's conflict.

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