

## **Rethinking everyday ‘becomings’ in early childhood**

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*Children’s identities, knowledge, understandings, capacities, skills and relationships change during childhood. They are shaped by many different events and circumstances. Becoming reflects this process of rapid and significant change that occurs in the early years as young children learn and grow. It emphasises learning to participate fully and actively in society.*

(Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 7)

*The girl’s becoming is stolen first, in order to impose a history or prehistory, upon her....the girl and the child do not become; it is becoming itself that is a child or girl.*

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 305-306)

### **Introduction**

The EYLF offers some openings for thinking deeply and differently about early childhood education. In particular, the loose descriptions of the key signature themes belonging, being and becoming on page 7 invite an opportunity for critical engagement. In addition, the theoretical perspectives listed in page 11 supplicate a practice of thinking about early childhood “...in a range of different ways” (Commonwealth of Australia 2009).

In this article I take up this invitation for critical engagement with the concept ‘becoming’ to share some of my thinking about how, by using different theoretical perspectives, my understandings have expanded. Drawing from the teacher-research and research with children that I undertook in my doctoral studies (Giugni 2010), I will share some stories about how my colleagues and I expanded our ways of thinking about ‘becoming’ in our everyday practices with young children. Drawing from the French philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari I’ll offer one possible alternative way to rethink becoming in early childhood. I offer a concept that I call ‘evental becomings’ as a way to recognise the complexity and multiplicity of who, how and where we become. Finally, I illustrate the limitations to this perspective in order to reiterate that its unlikely that any theory is whole and complete and that I’m not intending to replace one perspective with another, but instead expand my repertoire to be able think about early childhood from a range of different perspectives.

## **The research context**

Drawing from Cameron and Gibson (2005) my doctoral research project was called a ‘poststructuralist action research’ study. The study took place in two contexts. The first was a long day care center in Sydney where the teacher-researchers, child-researchers and their families generated an action research process together. The second research context was a ‘critical curriculum community’ (MacNaughton 2005) of teacher-researchers from across NSW who met once a month for 12 months also generating an action research process together. The stories I will share in this article are drawn from the research that took place between the teacher-researchers and child-researchers in the long day care centre called ‘Dragonfly Creek Children’s Centre’<sup>1</sup> (a pseudonym).

The research questions that we were working with focused on the idea of, and how and to what extent equity and social justice were practiced in ‘the everyday’ living at the centre. Our collective investigations drew us to consider the significant part that routines played in shaping everyday life in early childhood curriculum. Beginning with everyday routines offered us a familiar framework for our investigations. It compelled us to consider what our understandings of routines were, the theoretical frameworks that shaped these understandings, and then the extent to which our way of practicing them, based on our theoretical understandings, were equitable and/or socially just.

The children who appear in this article are aged between 3 and 5 years. They chose their own pseudonyms. The early childhood teacher-researcher who appears has been working in the profession for 15 years. Her experience and insights were invaluable to this part of the research process.

## **Routines in early childhood**

In the early childhood professional literature, routines are described as “the events that happen regularly and at approximately the same time each day” (Hutchins & Sims, 1999, p. 65). Similarly, Egle (2004/2008) writes that “routines provide a framework around which the program is structured to provide a sense of order and predictability to the children’s days” (p. 102). Malenfant (2006) concurs by asserting that “a routine activity within an educational setting is a predictable basic activity that has to be performed daily. Such activities are generally scheduled at

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<sup>1</sup> Aunty Tracey Linn Bostock suggested the name ‘Dragonfly Creek Children’s Centre’ based on the significance of the place and its local Indigenous story knowledges.

a fixed time and form the core of the day” (p. 7). These three descriptions offer a broad idea of how routines are performed in early childhood curriculum. Each of these writers gives a rationale for the significance of routines as a framework that is shaped round the individual needs of ‘the child’. For example, Egle (2004/2008) states that “routines ensure that each child’s needs are met in an individual and consistent manner” (p. 102). Likewise, Hutchins and Sims (1999) testify that “each person has his or her own routine” (p. 65). Malenfant (2006) confirms that “for the educator, routine and transition activities constitute a special opportunity for personal contact with each and every child” (p. 7). While I imagine that there are always exceptions to these descriptions, they exemplify those that appear to be most common in early childhood professional literature, professional learning and training, TAFE and university courses.

Together these descriptions of routines indicate that routines play an important part in how a child’s day is structured for the purposes of ‘becoming’. In addition they point toward the significance of how individuals have their own routines within broader sets of routines. Furthermore, these descriptions of routines indicate that ‘predictability’, ‘order’ and ‘consistency’ are necessary for children in their early childhood settings. Theoretically, these descriptions appear to be shaped by a broadly established modernist Western discourse of routines and childhood. This modernist Western discourse might be more familiarly called a developmental discourse (Cannella 2002; Burman 2007). The particular developmental discourse that these descriptions appear to construct is one that positions the child as a unit who will grow and develop (or become) in an environment that is predictable, ordered and consistent. It gives the impression that children require this kind of ‘civilising process’ (Elias 1939/2000; Leavitt and Power 1997; Giugni 2010) in order to become particular kinds of citizens.

Interestingly, our research illustrated that the way everyday routines are presented in this professional literature varied vastly from those that we practiced at Dragonfly Creek Children’s Centre. In addition, once we began to investigate what everyday routines generated in terms of equity and social justice, we recognised that we needed different theoretical concepts to rethink how we understood growing, learning and developing as ‘becomings’.

If we turn to the EYLF for a moment, it’s possible to detect developmental thinking about how children grow and learn in the description of ‘becoming’. For example, it gives the impression that children do not know how to ‘participate actively and fully in society’ but that they will once they learn how to. This indicates that children just being in the world is not participatory.

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Yet, this description also offers other possibilities for thinking about the everyday becomings of children in early childhood settings. For example, I want to pick up on the '*many different events and circumstances*' that shape children's lives (and our own) and the kinds of becomings (learning, growing and developing) that can happen in an early childhood setting when different kinds of theoretical ideas are used to conceptualise practice. I'll turn to theory now to introduce a different way of thinking about the notion of an 'event'.

## **Events**

Events are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity....  
(Deleuze 1993, p. 76)

The 'event' is a way of thinking about everyday occurrences and the time and place in which things happen (Deleuze and Parnet 1987). It is a way for ordinary everyday occurrences to become something else. Thought about this way, seemingly ordinary everyday events, such as routine times, can be generated in new and different ways. Gilles Deleuze (2004), a French philosopher who is regarded as a social and posthumanist theorist explains, quite complexly, that:

With every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual or a person, the moment we designate by saying "*here, the moment has come*". The future and the past of the event are evaluated only with respect to this definitive present, and from the point of view of that which embodies it... (p.172)

What Deleuze is arguing here, it seems, is that events do not pre-exist us, but instead that we generate them. We generate them in the time and place in which we are situated and it is both by performing them and naming them that they become events. For example, mealtimes are constructed as an everyday event through a process of creating a place where children eat and drink. This might include etiquette about how they should eat and drink, the kinds of tools they should eat and drink with, a time for when they should eat and drink, decisions about who they should eat and drink with, what they should eat and drink and why and so on. All of the decision-making that goes

into creating a mealtime as an event is based on particular understandings (or discourses) of ‘the child’, of rules and regulations, what we imagine quality to be, health and hygiene and all of the cultural and personal values we hold about food and eating. In addition, because these mealtime events occur in educational settings, we have an added ‘educational’ dimension to consider about the extent to which mealtimes can be understood as pedagogical and curriculum moments. So, mealtimes do not pre-exist their enactment. We make them happen in conjunction with places, people, objects, resources (such as food!), elements (such as heat and water). Thought about this way, events are a kind of ‘assemblage’ of a whole host of places, people and things that produce a moment in time.

While the moment in time actually happens, it also passes and slips away. It becomes a memory of an event. In his broader philosophy Deleuze (1989) and his co-author Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) might argue that it is these memories that we build up in our minds that then shape how the next event might happen. So we create what appears as ‘pre-existing knowledge’ about an event. In addition, he might argue that parts of the event that were not as desirable as one might have imagined (like when things do go to plan!) may become a focus for change the next time the event is performed. So in the case of meal times, Deleuze might suggest that there is no right and proper way to ‘do’ mealtimes in early childhood, but that we practice them based on the knowledge we have learned from professional literature, regulatory documents, each other in everyday practice, research (mostly not done by teachers) and so on. Simultaneously, we don’t always take these knowledge sets in their totality. This means that we have our own ‘spin’ on the knowledge sets presented to us and so perform or enact them with all kinds of other cultural knowledge sets.

This way of thinking about events as assemblages of places, people, things, resources, elements etc enabled my co-researchers and I to think very differently about routine times in early childhood curriculum. We began to see them as generative times of the day that had some elements what we knew or recognised, but also many that we may not have expected. This way of thinking about events as assemblages taught us that we did not have to comply with any hard and fast rules about mealtimes as an example or pre-existing practice. Because we began to think about how mealtime events were ‘assembled’ with all of the bits and pieces mentioned above, we realized that to some extent, we had the capacity to reinvent them.

In order to reinvent them we first decided to enter into a mealtime event differently with all of our senses alert for what was going on – what was assembling in that moment and in that place to produce the mealtime event.

Our philosophy about mealtimes included using the space in particular ways in order to construct a place for all kinds of becomings during the mealtime event. The notion of ‘environment as educator’ or ‘pedagogue’ (Gandini 1998) heavily influenced our practice. We tried to consider all of the environmental factors both indoors and outdoors including things like the vista and the outside world around us. We dedicated a room to mealtimes to illustrate their significance. We chose both ‘child sized’ and ‘adult sized’ tables so that children could choose (to some extent) where they wanted to sit. We set up the surrounding parts of the room in a way that indicated that this place was for eating together. The room was adjacent to the kitchen. It had large windows on three sides so we had a view of the creek behind us, the casurina trees across the garden, and the compost bins outside. We could see planes flying overhead and keep an eye on the changing weather. We were in discussions about how to have an environmentally conscious menu. We used ‘good quality’ china and glass ware, although the children preferred the coloured plastic cups we used outdoors!

With all of this attention to creating a place for mealtime events, we also brought all kinds of assumptions about how that ‘place would educate’ children about mealtimes – nutritionally, culturally, socially, environmentally and so on. We assumed that because we had dedicated a place for mealtime routines and resourced them well, that they would, as the literature suggested (e.g. Hutchins and Sims 1999; Egle 2004/2008; Malenfant 2006; Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer Eyer 2008; Greenman, Stonehouse et al. 2008), be consistent, predictable, attentive to children’s individual needs and enable quality practices. In turn, children’s experience of ‘becoming’ (in developmental terms) would also be ordered, consistent, predictable and attentive to children’s individual needs.

Yet, when we moved beyond the question of ‘quality’ to a question about ‘equity’ in everyday routines, the ‘environment as educator’ taught us something we had not anticipated. Mealtimes events were assemblages full of strategies to include and exclude people based on arbitrary and shifting rules. In addition, the most ordinary objects such as spoons and cups became political weapons. In addition, the table and chairs became a contested site of struggle about who sat where and on what terms as the stories below illustrate.

### **Becoming included and excluded during mealtimes**

“the meal is a physical event that classifies social and cultural boundaries, highlighting not only what constitutes food, *but how and where we eat it*” (Yue, 2003, p. 162, emphasis added).

One of the most effective strategies the children used to include and exclude each other during mealtimes was gendering space at the table and creating a girls' and a boys' side. The children used a number of tactics to execute this strategy including:

- Checking in to ensure inclusion;
- Using trickery to include and exclude; and,
- Negotiating shifting rules to include and exclude.

### **Checking in to ensure inclusion**

The tactic of checking in to ensure inclusion formed the basis of how Hendrix (my co teacher-researcher) saw the children 'gender' sides of the table. In this example, three boys negotiate which side was the 'boys' side' of the lunch table by using a tactic of establishing what *not* to do as a way of checking in:

*In the bathroom while washing hands before lunch:*

1. *Superman:*                *Don't sit on the girls' side ok.*

2. *BuzzLight Year:*        *Don't sit near BSM she will make you crazy.*

3. *Hot Wheels:*            *I'm on the boys' side.*

4. *Superman:*              *Near the window?*

5. *BuzzLight Year:*        *Yeah. I will show ya [sic]*

This example illustrates how this particular group of boys had gendered rules about where to sit at the table, but also that there was potential for changeability of the space at the table in terms of which was the 'boys' side' and which was the 'girls' side'. The process of checking in with each other indicates that there was desire to be together at the table but perhaps also hesitation about ending up on the girls' side! This practice was simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary in a way that set up space for a 'gendered becoming' during lunchtime.

### **Using trickery to exclude**

A second tactic the children utilised in their negotiations of gendered spaces during mealtimes was trickery. In this case, the two girls, Princess Mira and BSM, planned their tactic of using trickery to exclude Sanaria during preparation for the mealtime routine. This practice happened regularly, partly because it seems the girls had negotiating to do that was similar to the boys, but also because Rethinking everyday 'becomings' in early childhood - Miriam Giugni  
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BSM was a ‘cross bencher’ and sometimes sat on the ‘boy’s side’ of the table. This was a risk that regularly needed trouble shooting:

*Sitting under a tree in the garden during story time before lunch:*

1. Princess Mira: *[whispering] don’t sit on the boys’ side ok*
2. BSM: *no I’m only sitting on the girls’ side*
3. Princess Mira: *don’t tell Sanaria it’s the boys’ side [they laugh]*
4. BSM: *yeah trick her*

Even though BSM sometimes sat on the ‘boys’ side’ with the boys, for the rest of the girls, it was still a threat to be excluded from the girls side. So this tactic of tricking Sanaria was to lure her onto the ‘boys’ side’ of the table in order to be excluded!

So, Princess Mira and BSM use the contested space at the table as a way to claim their own gendered space and subjectivities, but also to ‘trick’ Sanaria into placing herself at what appeared to be the less credible ‘boys’ side’ of the lunch table. This tactic is indicative of Princess Mira’s and BSM’s knowledge of gendered rules and how they can be effectively exercised in terms of productive power to “make easier or more difficult” (Foucault 1982, p. 220). In this case, they exercised their power strategically to refrain from advising Sanaria of their seating plans at the table and instead made a tactical decision to trick her instead. This tactic effectively disempowered and excluded Sanaria by forcing her to choose a seat that was perhaps less desirable and therefore generated a less desirable gendered becoming.

### **Negotiating ‘shifting’ rules to include and exclude**

A third tactic used by the children to include and exclude each other was a practice of negotiating shifting rules about gendering the space at the lunch table. Spiderman, like BSM was a ‘cross bencher’ he sometimes sat on the ‘girls’ side’ but he had an attribute that enabled him to sit there without too much risk to his inclusion in the boys’ friendship group.

*During pack up time in preparation for lunch*

1. BSM: *Are you sitting on the girls’ side or the boys’ side?*
2. Spiderman: *I’m sitting next to you.*
3. BSM: *I’m sitting next to Princess Mira*

4. *Spiderman:*            *and me?*
5. *BSM:*                    *Um [she pauses] I think you can't [looking at Princess Mira and shrugging].*
6. *Princess Mira:*        *He can because he likes pink.*

The importance of this moment is that it illustrates that there are not really any clear rules that pre-exist us about how we become gendered. We invent the rules based on how we construct the world culturally and how the world reflects gendered discourses back to us (MacNaughton 2000; Robinson and Jones Díaz 2006). Some of these gendered discourses are more seductive than others, some appear more powerful than others and some might have become so normalized that sometimes we don't even realise that they are there acting on us or for us to inhabit them.

Still, the equity experiences for some individual children like Spiderman in those events meant inequity for others like BSM in how the inclusionary and exclusionary practices of negotiating gendered spaces at the table during meal-time routines played out. This shows that in the very same moment, different things can happen differently for different people. There is no 'equity' practice or rule that can be enacted because it will always depend.

These examples illustrate that becoming is not solely a 'positive' developmental experience. It was not possible to trace a line from one point to another over the 12 months we researched mealtime events. The tactics and strategies of the children give a hint that 'becoming' can be fraught with all kinds of complexities and inequities as well as desires and pleasures. Thinking about these three moments in time from this perspective illustrates that there is more than learning about food, eating, and cultural and social etiquette going on here. Thinking about these three snippets in terms of 'events as assemblages', opens up for all of the known, not known, and yet to be known possibilities that can happen in any place at any time and differently for different people.

The significance of how the space at the table was constructed by the children illustrates that there are many 'players' or 'actants' (Latour 2005) that are part of the 'mealtime event assemblage'. For example, Latour (2005) argues that objects "'express' power relations, 'symbolise' social hierarchies, 'reinforce' social inequalities, 'transport' social power, 'objectify' inequality, 'reify' gender [and race] relations, they can be at the origin of social activity'" (p.72). So, the table, seat benches, and chairs also played a significant part in the everyday becomings the children produced.

The table had a kind of 'agency' to enable the children to group together via their gendered rules.

This enabled them to ‘become’ girl or boy because of where they were seated. These are two of many stories like this that happen on an everyday basis. The significance of how the table prompted who sat where was crucial to how the children navigated their friendship groups.

Together these moments also illustrate that becoming is not necessarily ordered, consistent, predictable, or individual as the early childhood literature I outlined earlier might have us believe. Indeed, becoming is a generative process that includes all of the human and non-human others (tables, benches, cups, spoons and so on). Deleuze & Guattari (1987) put it this way: “we can be thrown into becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things...” (p. 322). Being ‘thrown into becoming’ suggests, as I argued earlier, that who, what and where we can become does not necessarily pre-exist us. Instead it’s something that happens and we play some part in that.

In light of our research question about equity in everyday routines in early childhood curriculum, conceptualising ‘becoming’ as something we can be ‘thrown into’, means that there are any number of possibilities for thinking, being and doing things differently. It’s important to note that to some extent we have ‘agency’ to negotiate who, what and where we become, as the children did by employing tactics and strategies to invent girls’ and boys’ sides of the table, but this agency is not necessarily individualized, but rather, something generated *between* people places and things.

So if we return to the EYLF’s claim that ‘events and circumstances’ shape who children become, and think about those events in the way Deleuze (1989) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) do, then growing and learning can be reconceptualised from ordered, consistent, predictable, or individual developmental becomings to what I have called ‘evental becomings’ (Giugni 2010). Evental becomings are those that we are ‘thrown into’ together in assemblages that are “a chaotic multiplicity” (Deleuze 1993, p. 76) of times, places, objects and so on. They take account of who we are with, where we are, and what else is here with us. Evental becomings are generative processes not plan-able predictable outcomes. They are ‘assemblages’ of all of the ways of being, knowing and doing and the physical places we inhabit (discursive and material) to be, know and do. Thinking of routines, or any part of early childhood curriculum, as ‘evental’ detaches us from the limitations of the knowledges that have shaped practice. Thinking ‘eventally’ enables space for considering what else is happening that we might have overlooked. Who and what else is here with us that we might not have ‘included’, and the significance of where we are and the local knowledges that have created the places that our children’s centres are built onto and into.

If we return to the idea of ‘environment as educator’ (Gandini 1998), with the children’s stories about where to sit at the table in mind, then a more political understanding of what kind of teaching objects (like tables) and places (like the dining room and the land on which the centre is situated) do, seems necessary. Thinking about environment as educator as one of the players or actants (Latour 2005) that are ‘thrown into’ our eventual becomings, then the certainty and predictability of what the ‘environment can teach’ is also thrown into question. By throwing the certainty about what and how the environment can teach into question, new possibilities for how we see children, and ourselves, open up. This kind of conceptual work expands our repertoire of who, how and where we become. It’s worth noting that thinking this way does not *replace* developmental ways of knowing, but instead it adds to, expands and contributes to a broader set of knowledges that we can draw upon to think about early childhood from a number of theoretical perspectives “...in a range of different ways” (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 11).

### **Concluding thoughts**

There are many different ways of thinking about becoming in early childhood curriculum. The EYLF enables us to explore these possibilities by recommending that we draw on a range of different perspectives and it also offers some theoretical perspectives as a starting point. The benefits of exploring a range of different ways of conceptualising becoming are that we are more likely to be open to new and different ways of seeing the world, having a willingness to question what we come to take for granted like ‘equity’, ‘routines’, ‘environment as third educator’. Using a range of theoretical perspectives to expand our knowledge of concepts, such as becoming, also offers new and different ways of seeing what we may have overlooked and new and different ways of seeing the work we do in early childhood as significant, complex and political work that can make a difference.

If you are interested to learn more about different theoretical perspectives and how you might use them in your everyday practice to expand your theoretical repertoire, then you might like to visit - <http://actpsc.com.au/resources/worldviews-of-child-services/><sup>2</sup>

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