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Relationship-Based Infant Care as a Framework for Authentic Practice: How Eun Mi Rediscovered her Teaching Soul

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Cover Page Footnote

We acknowledge the contributions of our Teachers College students who have participated so willingly in research on their practice. Their powerful commitment to becoming better practitioners continues to inspire us.

Relationship-Based Infant Care as a Framework for Authentic Practice: How Eun Mi Rediscovered her Teaching Soul

Susan L. Recchia and Seung Eun McDevitt

Background

Our work with Eun Mi¹ began when she was a participant in a larger study focused on preparing culturally diverse pre-service teachers in our master's program to engage in authentic practice (Recchia & McDevitt, 2018). She stood out among the participants for several reasons. First, unlike the others who were newcomer immigrants, she had immigrated to North America from Korea as a high school student and had attended a Canadian undergraduate program in early childhood education. As a result, she was much more well-versed in Western-based thinking in the field. Although she had never worked with infants before, she had had several experiences as a student teacher with preschoolers in schools and programs that resembled her placement site. Perhaps because she had had more time to think about and process her teacher identity informed by actual teaching practice, Eun Mi seemed ready to engage in the infant practicum at a deeper level from the start. She was also able to articulate her thoughts and ideas with greater detail, making full use of the integrated structure of the infant practicum as a catalyst for new learning. Most importantly, Eun Mi had a powerful story to tell that went beyond the scope of our previous study. This paper is our attempt to more fully honor her voice.

As we reanalyzed Eun Mi's journey through the infant practicum, we relied on the framework of funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2016; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a; 2014b) to explore the dynamic unfolding of her changing sense of herself as an early childhood teacher. Our growing understanding of Eun Mi's sense-making about her experience, which evolved within an ongoing process of feedback and reflective engagement, was further informed by the work of Heffron, Ivins, and Weston (2005) on use of self in authentic practice. We describe below how each of these constructs contributed to our ways of synthesizing and giving meaning to Eun Mi's shared memories, emotional experiences, and reflections as she encountered infant practice for the first time.

Funds of Identity as a Framework for Dynamic Change over Time

Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a) define funds of identity as "historically accumulated, culturally developed, and socially distributed resources that are essential for a person's self-definition, self-expression, and self-understanding" (p. 31). Funds of identity draw on an individual's funds of knowledge in a dynamic way, incorporating the person's historical and cultural beliefs into new understandings that emerge through continued lived experiences. As such, they are seen as resources which can be both "empowering and constraining tools" (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a, p. 34) in this process. In our study

1 All names in this article are pseudonyms.

on authentic practice (Recchia & McDevitt, 2018) we found that ultimately, each participant had to find her own way of making sense of the intersection between her own funds of knowledge and identity and the new knowledge to which she was being exposed. The synthesis looked different for each participant, but became an important component of finding their authentic practice and further developing their teacher identities for all of them. This dynamic learning process is explained by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a) in the following way:

... learning takes place when participants, supported and guided by others, are involved in activities that enact connections between prior knowledge and experiences (incrusted in their identities) and new information. In that regard, funds of identity act as a lens through which we view and absorb new information and new identities. It is a dynamic composite of who we are and who we are becoming, based on what we have learned (and we are learning) from both our academic and everyday experiences. (p. 44)

Elaborating on Vygotsky's (1926/1997) ideas regarding the fallacy of separating intellectual and emotional experience and the critical importance of total human experience as an essential foundation for education, Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014b) discuss the tangled connections between emotional and cognitive knowledge in funds of identity. They note the challenges involved in studying or analyzing the ways that funds of identity change over time as ideas from the past fold into interpretations of the present, and they call for more longitudinal studies to capture the trajectories of funds of identity. They suggest that interviews alone may not reveal the complex relationship of past and present; doing so requires methods that go deeper, such as examining focused drawings, stories, or narratives that inspire deliberate, conscious reflection. Responding to the ideas put forth by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a; 2014b), Nogueira (2014) offers a role for the teacher educator as a creator of opportunities that involve students in a critical process of meaning-making through which they can reimagine their own funds of identity; this process can serve as a catalyst for uncovering historical roots and ongoing connections that can bring funds of identity to life for analysis. In studying Eun Mi's journey, we were inspired by multiple data sources that taken together give insight into her interwoven experiences as she participates fully in all aspects of the infant-toddler practicum.

Authentic Use of Self in Relationship-Based Work with Infants

The Infant and Toddler Development and Practice course that served as the context for Eun Mi's experience is uniquely designed to introduce students to a relationship-based approach to teaching and learning. The course is required for all students pursuing early childhood teacher certification in our program. Students spend a minimum of 12 hours per week in an infant or toddler room where they focus on a "key" child beginning in the second week of the semester, taking responsibility for the majority of their key children's caregiving needs, observing key children carefully for course assignments, and developing special relationships with them and their families throughout the time of

the practicum. Student caregivers present their key children in our weekly seminar as we discuss infant-toddler learning and development, often sharing their own new understandings about the children and their ways of being and learning together. Thus, the actual practice of teaching, caring for, and developing relationships with babies is central to the course and foundational to all of its other aspects. Other components of the practicum, described below, are understood as integral aspects of supporting teaching and learning through a relationship-based framework.

Reflective journals. Weekly reflective journals, which are ungraded, informal, and designed to encourage students to share their ideas freely while raising questions about their practice, have been shown in previous studies to be an organic, unfiltered data source that captures students' thoughts and feelings about their experiences (Beck, 2013; Recchia & Shin, 2010). Through the journals, students engage in a reflective dialogue with the course instructor, in which they continually share new experiences they have had with their key children and receive responses to particular questions they pose. The course instructor draws on her multiple roles in the practicum as an interactive partner in the journaling process. As the field supervisor for the students, she incorporates her insights from site visits to respond to questions about particular practices and key children. As the liaison between students and their cooperating teachers (CTs), she provides supportive feedback and raises questions for further discussion when issues arise with other adults at the students' sites. As a partner in the relationship-building process, she provides feedback to students that prioritizes the relationships she is building with them, modeling a way of teaching and learning that honors individual differences and builds on strengths.

Readings and assignments. Course readings are carefully selected to provide a foundation for learning not only about early development but also about the nature of adult-child relationships and their power and influence in young children's lives. Students read attachment-based papers such as "Angels in the Nursery: The Intergenerational Transmission of Benevolent Parental Influences" (Lieberman, Padron, Van Horn, & Harris, 2005) and "Watching, Waiting, and Wondering: Applying Psychoanalytic Principals to Mother-Infant Intervention" (Muir, 1992).

Course assignments include reflections on these readings, encouraging students to think more deeply about their own perspectives on a topic and examine more carefully the ways that their previous experiences influence their responses to children and families. About midway into the semester, students conduct a home visit with their key children's family, which provides an opportunity to make a stronger connection with the family, to learn more about the contributions of the home context to the child's life, and to gain insight into the family's perspectives on raising their children. Toward the end of the semester, students videotape their interactions with their key children to reflect on and share their practice with peers.

Encouraging self-awareness, reflective practice, and authentic relationships. Heffron et al. (2005) provide a thoughtful set of ideas around the infant-toddler practitioner's work in finding an authentic voice in her practice. They suggest that this happens for practitioners as they become more able to understand and accept the ways that their own internal experiences impact their work with infants and families. The infant-toddler practicum works toward this goal by asking students to think deeply

about their own early experiences of being cared for and about their own emotional responses to challenging or difficult situations with infants and families. Thus, their professional preparation goes “beyond explicit content and knowledge about a situation to include an awareness and exploration of reactions and deeply held beliefs. Such explorations require careful attention to the feelings, values, and beliefs that are activated in one’s self and others...” (Heffron et al., p. 323).

Caring for infants can bring out forgotten memories (Recchia & Loizou, 2002; Recchia & McDevitt, 2018) and “evoke past or present personal experiences ... on a conscious or unconscious level” (Heffron et al., p. 325). Developing skills to reflect on the connections between remembered and present experiences can serve as a tool for changing practice (Schon, 1983). Reflection on and in practice comes about through different channels; some students engage more fully in journaling reflectively, while others seem to reflect more deeply in the context of class or peer discussion or within the supervision/mentoring process. Heffron et al. (2005) discuss the mentor’s use of gentle inquiry to encourage further thinking:

For the inquiry to be truly gentle and to promote a process of mutual discovery, rather than to be a pedagogical act, the supervisor must be careful to remain open to the dialogue, must not be too certain about the desirability of any given answer, and must remain open to [the mentee’s response]. (p. 332)

In mentoring professionals new to infant/family practice, it’s important to understand that professionalism does not require that practitioners act according to one specific code or extinguish their biases, blind spots, or passions; as Heffron et al. (2005) notes, “the task is not to eliminate these feelings and beliefs, but rather to get to know and understand them in one’s self” (p. 333). The infant-toddler practicum is designed to support multiple methods of expression and ways of engaging with others that encourage self-awareness and self-understanding. For example, in addition to engaging in the interactive seminar discussions and the dialogic journaling process, students are also connected with a peer partner early in the semester. Peer partners read and respond to a portion of each other’s journal entries and videotape each other at their respective sites for the video-sharing project. Peer partners often develop their own authentic and supportive relationships as the course evolves.

Methods and Purpose

The process of following Eun Mi’s journey was both ongoing, as the first author served as her practicum instructor and supervisor, and retrospective, as the second author engaged with her in a reflective interview about a month after her practicum experience was completed. All of the data, including reflective journals, relevant course assignments, and the transcribed interview were reviewed by both authors. As coauthors, we worked together to read through Eun Mi’s reflections and interview responses, each bringing our own personal understandings to the process based on our interactions with her. Having different roles allowed us to engage with Eun Mi in different ways. As her professor, the first author served in a professional teaching and mentoring role providing formal and informal feedback; the second author, a doctoral student who is also a Korean immigrant with a similar immigration history to Eun Mi’s, acted more as a peer, engaging in an interview/conversation. Their shared backgrounds seemed to have created a congenial space for Eun Mi to share honest reflections on her life

and practicum experience. In using these methods, we hoped to be able to gain a fuller, more authentic set of responses that would allow us to explore more deeply the experiences of one student teacher as she encountered infant practice for the first time; better understand the complex forces at work as she developed meaningful relationships with babies in childcare; make connections among her multiple layers of experience—historical/remembered, current physical and emotional, and reflective/rethinking; and begin to build a theory of authentic practice through relationship-based teaching and caring.

Analysis process. Using a narrative single case study approach (Yin, 2009) seemed a good fit for the exploratory, process-oriented, and interpretive nature of our work. In our original study, we had gathered Eun Mi's data from all sources to create her individual case portfolio, which we once again accessed for further review. Our interest at this juncture was in looking more deeply at Eun Mi's story through a narrative lens, unearthing subtle connections that were not previously fully accessed. Each author independently reviewed Eun Mi's reflective journals, pertinent course assignments, and interview transcripts again, this time searching for those deeper connections as they emerged across data sources. We came together to share insights and compare and contrast our individual interpretations before synthesizing our collaborative understandings. This back and forth, careful, and comprehensive process provided trustworthiness to our analysis, which we approached as an interpretive, meaning-making process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) that allowed us to look deeply at Eun Mi's multilayered experience.

Eun Mi's Journey through the Infant-Toddler Practicum

How does Eun Mi's culture influence her teaching and caring practice?

Scholars note that teachers need to see themselves as cultural beings in order to fully enact authentic practice (Gupta, 2006). However, during the interview conversation, Eun Mi at first acted as if her culture was a separate entity from her teaching and teacher identity. She stated, "The way I was brought up in Korea or the Korean culture that I was, you know, surrounded by when I was young, I don't think that really has a huge impact on my teaching necessarily" (interview). She further described her previous educational experience: "I learned education in Canada in English. My whole interaction with the children was based in English." Thus, although she mentioned her dual identity as Korean Canadian, Eun Mi did not seem to place her cultural identity within her teaching and caring practice. She expressed, "You know, like it's just so ... there is division still" (interview).

Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a) suggest that engaging in deliberate and conscious reflection following interviews may capture richer and more nuanced interpretations of one's experiences. As we dug deeper into other sources of data such as Eun Mi's journal writing, we found subtle but cognizant ways in which she made sense of her experience within her culture(s), represented in the dilemmas she had in her relationships with infants' parents and with her CT. Having lived in North America for over a decade, attending part of high school and her undergraduate college years here, Eun Mi described her experiences in the early childhood education program as being distinct from her home culture. Yet particular aspects of Eun Mi's cultural identity as Korean did emerge as she expressed her feelings about working with adults. She commented on the difficulty she had building relationships with people who are older, including her current CT, saying, "I do have [a] very difficult time connecting with the

people who are older, you know, 'cause I'm from a culture where there is a hierarchy, a social hierarchy" (interview). In addition to linguistic differences with non-Koreans, the cultural unfamiliarity of forming "a kind of intimate relationship" (interview) with people she did not know well seemed to lie beneath her initial difficulty in establishing relationships at her practicum site. Eun Mi noted that there was "a lack of communication" (journal) between her CT and herself and mentioned in her interview that it had to do with the cultural differences:

There is the language piece so the cultural familiarity ... It's hard to kind of be friends with adults, especially parents or my CT, so I kind of leave some, you know, space between my relationship with my CT or my relationship with the parents. (interview)

Having been raised with different cultural and social norms in Korea and now living in a new country, Eun Mi's funds of identity seemed to be shifting. She initially recognized her historical and cultural experiences of having difficulty in forming relationships with older adults at the practicum site as what Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a) describe as "constraining" (p. 34). Yet these foundational experiences, guided by her reflections, became "empowering tools" (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a, p. 34), allowing her to think more deeply about the nuances in these relationships. In her journal, Eun Mi shared how she carefully observed the differences in how teachers and parents engaged with each other at her practicum site and began to consider adopting some of the teachers' strategies in her future practice. Commenting on her involvement in a parent-teacher conference, she shared:

Today, I had an opportunity to participate in a parent-teacher conference, and it was an interesting experience. There were moments of heated and emotionally charged conversations as well as joyous and jolly exchanges between parents and teachers. I was very impressed when one of the teachers, whom I deeply respect, started the conversation by saying, "I think Annie is like a sunflower." She further described why Annie is like a sunflower through various anecdotes, and this conversation carried on like flowing music. The analogy of a sunflower did not only give the parents the image of what their child is like in the classroom, but also conveyed the amount of care and respect the teacher had for the child, which is pivotal in affirming trusting relationships with the parents. The use of effective figures of speech during the conversation, including analogy, anecdotes, and humor seemed to have a very powerful impact on the parents, and this is definitely something I should employ in my future career. (journal)

Her professor responded with encouragement:

It sounds like this was a very helpful model of a possible way to engage with a parent. Speaking from a parent's point of view, I still remember so many years later some of the nice things my children's teachers said about them in our conferences. It may seem like just one meeting out of many, but it's amazing how powerful these exchanges can be. (journal response)

This complex process of crossing cultural boundaries to reimagine possibilities for herself as a teacher spoke to Eun Mi's experience of being a "dynamic composite of who we are and who we are becoming," as described by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a, p. 44).

How are Eun Mi's relationships with children and adults influenced by historical experience?

Eun Mi also articulated some powerful memories from her own childhood that she began to connect to her ways of relating to others during the practicum experience. Early in the semester, inspired by reading the article by Lieberman et al. (2005), she shared: "Reflecting back on my own personal childhood memories, I remember my mom as a very strict and emotionally vulnerable person. ... I considered my mom as a cold person ..." (foundation reading reflection). She came back to this later in the interview, stating, "I remember that my mom was, you know, on the edge and I was like careful around her. So my caregiving, like receiving caregiving experience, it wasn't warm, it wasn't, you know, responsive necessarily" (interview). In bringing this consideration of her own past experience to the forefront of her thinking about being an infant caregiver, Eun Mi began to deconstruct her ways of teaching and caring to better understand her actions and feelings:

I am very slow to anger ... in terms of caring with children, especially with children, and you know, I always smile, I always kind of remain, like maintain the calmness and that presence, and I was wondering why is it, why, why am I so hard to anger when kids do something to me or kids do something around me? And the reason could be, I think, because I've personally experienced, you know, the difficulty of dealing with the, the adults', you know, anxiety or emotional issues. I haven't really, like I don't know how that came out, like because I haven't really made sense of that in myself, but I think that could be one reason why I was so keen about, you know, maintaining my calmness and my responsibility to the children in my care. Yeah. (interview)

Eun Mi also began to think more deeply about the impact of her past experiences on the struggle she was having with her CT at her practicum site and shared a difficult interaction she had had with her:

... this week, suddenly my CT wanted to check in with me, and commented that she would like me to spend more time with the toddlers since I spent a lot of time with Liam. This was a bomb dropped in my head because I do engage with them a lot throughout the day. I read books with them, play games with them, sing songs with them, and help them with sleep and lunch. Also, when I'm there, my CT delegated Liam to me, and she either attended to other children's needs or worked on her paper in the nap room. All of a sudden, she started commenting on what I should do instead, which was from my perspective, unfairly judged and evaluated. I explained what I have been doing, and what I have been thinking, but this did not seem to be important to her. I felt like being a child once again where whatever the teacher says is the truth. I still am working on making sense of her comments, but her negative comments on my practice emerged and increased drastically this week. (journal)

Her professor's response, presented below, provides an example of the multifaceted nature of the course instructor's role as a mentor. She raises questions for consideration and further reflection, provides active support, and offers ways for Eun Mi to reconsider the value of all that she is learning:

Do you think this week was extra stressful for either of you in any way? Have you had any clues from her [CT] before this that would indicate that she wanted you to change what you were

doing? It sounds from what you are saying that this came as a total surprise. If we get a chance to debrief next week when I come to observe, is there anything you want me to bring up with her? Let me know. I am sorry to hear that you are getting such a negative feeling at this point in the semester after investing so much of yourself in the work of the classroom. If things continue to feel uncomfortable with your CT, please let me know. Also, remember that there are many good things to focus on in this practicum, like the wonderful relationship that you have built with Liam. (journal response)

Later, during the interview, Eun Mi came back to her feelings about her CT, stating: “I have some, I think, fear when I actually have to get into the relationship, and I think like I mentioned, my relationship with my mom when I was young, that really played a huge effect on me” (interview). She also likened her CT to her mother, saying, “... she was kind of similar to my mom, the way she interacted with me. She wouldn’t recognize me for what I was doing well, but she would, you know, say one thing that I can still work on” (interview).

As Eun Mi continued to explore her emotional responses to both children and adults, she showed an increased awareness of the complexity of those reactions as she tried to integrate both positive and negative feelings within her early relationship with her mother. In one of her foundation reading reports, she had articulated a very clear memory of being held and comforted by her mother when she was sick, attesting to her mother’s ability to show warmth to her under certain circumstances. She shared:

I remember one day when my mom held me so warmly in her arms to put me to sleep because I was sick. ... My mom’s vulnerable emotional state remains as a ghost in my childhood. However, the warm moment I remember with her also exists as an angel. (foundation reading reflection)

In response to these reflections on “Angels in the Nursery” (Lieberman et al., 2005), the first author commented as follows, reiterating the power of early relationships:

This is a great example of how our early experience can inform the ways we later understand emotional connections. As described in the article, when we are able to re-envision the positive components of early relationships and understand and forgive our own parents, we are better able to see and empower the ‘angels’ from our past. (foundation reading response)

As she worked to make sense of these mixed feelings, Eun Mi incorporated new knowledge recently shared with her by her father: “... mom experienced a miscarriage in my childhood, which explains her vulnerable emotional state” (foundation reading reflection). In making these connections among her multiple layers of experience—historical/remembered, current physical and emotional, and reflective/rethinking, Eun Mi seemed to gain a deeper understanding of herself and what she was bringing to her role as an infant caregiver.

What do intimate connections with babies, particularly with a key child, bring to life for Eun Mi through the caregiving process?

Developing consistent caring relationships not only benefits infants, but also allows infant caregivers to

truly experience what it feels like to be physically and emotionally available to babies. Multiple scholars have noted this capacity as an essential ingredient of quality care (Dalli, White, Rockel, & Duhn, 2011; Degotardi & Pearson, 2014; Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Manning-Morton, 2006; Recchia, 2016; Recchia & Shin, 2010; Recchia, Shin, & Snaider, 2018). Being new to work with infants, Eun Mi was surprised at first by the emotional intensity of physically caring for them. On her first day in the infant room, she began as an observer, but after a short time, a father suddenly handed her his baby as he prepared to leave for the day. Describing this experience, Eun Mi shared:

I held him in my arms with his face facing towards my chest. He grabbed my hair with his tiny hands and smiled. He put his head down on my shoulder and rested as I supported his butt with my arms. Although this first encounter with Harry was beautiful, it was so unexpected and abrupt ... My body was soaked in sweat, and I could feel the heat that captured my whole body. (journal)

Later, and in a calmer state, Eun Mi reflected on this moment “without feeling the sweat, heat, or surprise” by taking the child’s perspective and realizing in a new way how overwhelming it must be for young children to phase into childcare. Her comments speak to one of Heffron et al.’s (2005) components of authentic practice, that of attending to physiological/somatic responses—one’s own as well as those of others:

In the past, I have said numerous times, “I know... I know it’s hard to say bye-bye to mommy” to young children who are crying after separating from their parents in the morning. However, I was just trying to empathize with them verbally to calm them down without really sharing the emotions with them. Experiencing the abrupt encounter with Harry this week, I rethink about the many empty words I told children without truly engaging my emotions and thoughts. Mustn’t true empathy come from going beyond my level of understanding and experiences and the willingness to co-experience the pain the other person is feeling? (journal)

In response, her professor validated her feelings and her insights by sharing:

It is interesting to think about the ways that we can do and say the ‘right’ things as early childhood teachers without really being in the moment with the children and seeing the world through their eyes. It sounds as though Harry was doing fine through this experience, but even when a child is not crying or acting scared, just like us they may still be holding these feelings inside. I look forward to hearing more about how the children’s transition and yours unfold in the next few weeks. (journal response)

As stated above, as an integral part of the infant practicum, each student caregiver is paired with a key infant. Eun Mi’s key infant, Liam, was 10 months old and relatively new to the infant room when she began working with him. At first Eun Mi struggled with his crying, expressing feelings of guilt over not being able to calm him. She asked, “I wonder where such sense of inadequacy or guilt comes from. ... How can I be more guilt free and focus more on the child himself/herself during the moment of stress?” (journal). In response to her question, her professor wrote:

It’s hard not to feel inadequate when you cannot console a baby in distress—this feeling is part of

being human and what some theorists attribute to what keeps our species going. It is definitely not typically a teacher's fault when a baby cries—crying is a powerful way for a baby to communicate with us—our job as caregivers is to try to figure out what they are trying to tell us and how to help them solve the problem. It takes time to get comfortable with caring for crying babies—the more time you spend with Liam, the better you will get to know him and the better able you will be to respond to his needs. However, there may still be times when he is out of sorts or having a bad day—then you just have to do your best to try to comfort him. (journal response)

As she and Liam developed a more comfortable relationship, Eun Mi became more confident in caring for him, and he in turn became more responsive to her care, as noted in her video share reflection:

When Liam turned his body and approached me, instead of grabbing his body and quickly holding him in my arm, I took time to read his bodily cues and intentions. I supported his movements by gently holding him, but waited until he demonstrated what he wanted to do, such as bouncing up and down, crawling, or climbing up on my body.

Becoming a special caregiver to Liam allowed Eun Mi to think more deeply about what really mattered in her teaching practice. Once her relationship with Liam was more solid, she began to incorporate ideas that we read about and discussed in class into her work with him, building on her own previous knowledge and experience:

... building a relationship is not the sole goal of teaching and caring for young children. Teaching and caring for young children also entails close observation, deep engagement with their development, and intentional teaching that is intended to positively guide and enhance the children's overall development. This is what I started to think more about these days with Liam as the relationship with him became more secure and stable. (journal)

Interestingly, the closeness and intimacy of caring for infants that was a little scary and overwhelming to Eun Mi at first became an integral and meaningful component of her work in the infant room. Her emotional connections, particularly with Liam, continued to be a significant aspect of her practice, as she described in her journal:

... it is also interesting how this relationship with Liam burgeoned so quickly ... I wonder if such intimacy is the nature of infant care because my relationship with Liam was or had to be intimate from the beginning. In fact, from the second time I saw Liam I was already putting my arms around his body, shushing by his ears, rubbing his back, and cleaning his naked body... This is not something to take for granted, but really appreciate and enjoy! I am loving this intimate relationship I'm forming with Liam as well as with other children in the classroom. (journal)

Her peer partner validated Eun Mi's newly emerging insights with the following response:

I wholeheartedly agree with you that caring for infants is an incredibly personal process! Compared with the relationships we build with other adults, with young children, we seem to disregard all sense

of personal boundaries. There have been some instances that I've changed diapers because of a lack of available hands, and the child would look at me with the expression of "who are you and why are you wiping my bottom?" And I've found that the caregiving activity of changing diapers accelerates the sense of intimacy, as there is a tremendous degree of trust placed in our adult hands. Thank you for sharing your journal with me. (peer response – journal)

As the semester unfolded, Eun Mi's journals took on a more joyful tone as she described her daily interactions with Liam:

To stand, he crawled towards my chest and when I held his hands to support his standing, he started bouncing his legs up and down. As he bounced his legs, I counted how many times he was bouncing. I excitedly said, "1, 2, 3, 4" as he bounced up and down. As I counted and celebrated his bouncing, he responded with a big smile. After bouncing several times, he sat down, and repeated the process of crawling on my chest, standing with my assistance, and bouncing up and down. I felt as if this also became another form of social play. In this moment, although I was the only one speaking words, Liam and I shared the will to communicate with each other and experienced the joy of exchanging meaningful interactions with each other. (journal)

Her professor's responses reflected these joyful feelings back to her:

Your description makes this sound like a lot of fun—his enthusiastic response to your initiations makes it hard not to repeat the sequence. He clearly seems to be enjoying these social moments with you—such a nice way to develop a more meaningful relationship with him. (Journal Response)

On another day, Eun Mi shared her ways of being with Liam on an outing to the park:

When we were walking to the park, Liam started smiling brightly. He seemed to really like being outside. The weather was nice and breezy, and I loved it too. This was the first time I came outside with Liam. Liam smiled at me with his two front teeth shining with the sunlight, and I responded back to him with a big smile too. We constantly communicated through smiles and short words as we walked around the park. It felt different to be outside with Liam. Different settings and activities seemed to shape the interactions I had with Liam. Although the interactions might look similar from when we were inside the classroom, it felt different. It was refreshing. (journal)

Her professor responded, validating her feelings and her actions:

Most babies do like to be outside and there is no substitute for being together sharing the sunshine on a beautiful day. A change in the surround can make everyone feel different—there are new things for Liam to see and feel, and to react to, which in turn may bring a different kind of response from you as his caregiver. (journal response)

Eun Mi continued:

After a while, I covered his stroller with a blanket so that Liam could fall asleep, and he did. He

fell asleep almost instantly. As I get to know Liam more, spending time with him becomes more enjoyable. And experiencing something new with him was definitely invaluable this week. (journal)

Her professor responded:

It sounds like a wonderful outing! It is amazing how your feelings change as you develop a deeper relationship with a baby, isn't it? (journal response)

Through the process of developing caring relationships with Liam and others, Eun Mi discovered what it means to truly care for infants (Recchia, Shin, & Snaider, 2018). As Eun Mi shared, "As I got to know each child more closely, spent time together, and exchanged many emotions with them, the sense of caring and responsibility I had for them grew abundantly" (journal).

By the end of the practicum, Eun Mi's sense of herself as an early childhood teacher had changed, deeply influenced by what seemed to be a rekindling of her passion for the field. Reflecting on this change, she shared:

Through this practicum, I didn't intend to recover that passion or the joy, the emotional piece of teaching, but it just naturally came to me. And it reminded me of, you know, this is why I started... So, that emotional piece was, you know, what really, what I got and that confirmed, reaffirmed the importance of relationships in teaching, and you know, knowing it by knowledge and really experiencing it was what this practicum offers me like a turning point for me to think about my future career and how I would—what kind of teacher I would be in the future. (interview)

Discussion

This portrait of Eun Mi illustrates her journey as she traveled through a semester-long practicum experience working with infants for the first time. Her ability to articulate her thoughts and feelings so poignantly as she reflected on all she was learning gave us access to a deeper understanding of the powerful ways that relationship-based teaching and caring can impact both babies and their caregivers. The relationship-building process that Eun Mi engaged in with her key child and other infants has been shown to be the core of the infant curriculum (Dalli et al., 2011; Recchia, 2016) and to contribute greatly to student caregivers' growing professional identities (Lee & Shin, 2009; Shin, 2015). For Eun Mi, engaging in relationship-based teaching and caring within a reflective and supportive context served as a catalyst for discovering a deeper and more authentic way of being an early childhood teacher.

Participating in the practicum, which emphasized the importance of understanding one's early experience of being cared for as an integral aspect of learning to care for others, Eun Mi began to make sense of the connections between her own early experience and her ways of being with children and families. Early on, she began to reflect on her negative feelings about her early relationship with her mother. She consistently shared anecdotes in her journal that reflected her capacity to see the world through a child's eyes, perhaps as a result of feeling misunderstood or undervalued as a child herself.

Early in the semester, Eun Mi seemed to take a self-critical stance, perhaps channeling her mother's voice, as she questioned her feelings of guilt over not being able to calm Liam. She asks what a good teacher does or should do, trying to make sense of her role. Eun Mi describes herself as having a deep respect for others' feelings, which she speculates may be a positive result of her negative early experience. Yet she can also be easily jarred by her CT's responses to her, quick to interpret them as critical and seeing her mother in her CT. Over time, however, she finds great joy in the intimacy that she develops with the infants in her care, which pushes her to think more deeply about the emotional aspects of her practice. She begins to trust her ways of being with and understanding the needs of her key child, even if/when her CT sees things differently.

Building a Theory of Authentic Practice Through Relationship-Based Teaching and Caring

Despite the importance and power that emotional connections held for Eun Mi, she struggled at first to attain them in her practice. When questions and conflicts arose, she was encouraged to “dig deep” (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008, p. 7) in her problem-solving process through a synthesis of critical reflection, interactive dialogue, and continued hands-on practice. Providing a constellation of caring relationships through the practicum by caring for the student caregivers as they cared for infants, we listened carefully to Eun Mi's voice and provided space for her to interrogate both personal and professional knowledge in line with her lived experiences. Over time, it was the intimate connections with babies that helped her find the authentic early childhood teacher in herself as her practice deepened through meaningful caring and engagement.

For Eun Mi to find authenticity, her practice had to become “real” to her as she engaged in “life experiences that provide resources that help to define [oneself]” (Esteban-Guitart, 2016, p. 48). Her daily interactions building relationships with babies, and particularly with her key child, served as a catalyst to reconnect her with some of her own buried emotions. Reflective dialogue supported by the journaling process, peer feedback, and class discussions helped to reaffirm her developing identity as an early childhood teacher. The gentle mentorship (Heffron et al., 2005) provided by her course instructor also guided her to suspend her own self-critical judgements at times, embrace the joy of being with and learning from and about babies, and integrate her past and current experiences to envision who she could be in her current and future teaching and caring practice. As illustrated in our case study of Eun Mi's journey through the practicum, practitioners' better understanding of and comfort with the ways that their own internal experience impacts their work with infants and families “allows for the development of a unique and effective ‘authentic voice’” (Heffron et al., p. 323).

Implications for Practice

Our journey with Eun Mi through the infant practicum demonstrated the power of relationship-based work with infants as a context for developing self-understanding, responsivity, the ability to negotiate emotions, and a capacity for reflection. These essential components of quality teaching and caring are also critical aspects of authentic practice (Dalli et al., 2011; Recchia, Shin, & Snaider, 2018). In order for infant educators to attain this depth of practice, the support they receive must be in attunement with relationship-based practice. This begins with professional preparation for pre-service teachers

and continues through ongoing relationship-focused professional development opportunities for in-service teachers.

Understanding the essential importance of early relationships as the primary context for teaching and learning in the first three years of life has been an integral aspect of our knowledge base in the field of infant care for decades (Lally, 2013; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). There is a well-established need in the field for teachers who are intellectually and emotionally prepared to respond to the unique needs of babies through relationship-based practice within the context of group-care settings (Lally, 2013). Yet opportunities for professional preparation and development that speak to relationship-based practice are limited. Teacher licensing requirements remain the lowest for infant teachers, who continue to receive low wages and less access to professional learning opportunities (Phillips, Austin, & Whitebook, 2016). Although the number of teachers in child care settings with college degrees is growing (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013), early childhood teacher education programs across the United States offer minimal course content or field experiences related specifically to infants and toddlers (Norris, 2010). Thus, a majority of infant teachers enter the field with very little preparation to do the work they are hired for (Nicholson & Reifel, 2011).

Creating supported space for student caregivers' teaching and learning as a context for becoming quality practitioners depends on having quality places of practice in which they can be mentored (Recchia, 2016). This includes both early childhood teacher preparation programs that are committed to preparing highly qualified infant teachers and sites for field experiences that provide models and opportunities for exemplary infant care and education. Establishing through a designated infant practicum a network of caring and supportive relationships with instructors and peers as well as with CTs is key in preparing reflective and authentic infant teachers. Our work with Eun Mi also demonstrates the power of infants themselves to inspire emotional and intellectual learning through relationship-based practice (Recchia, Shin, & Snaider, 2018) and the critical importance of sustained interactions with infants as a framework for preparation. Eun Mi's story inspires us to keep moving forward to advocate for relationship-based practice as an essential component in preparing infant teachers for the field.

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