

‘The toys you sleep with’: embracing otherwise literacies in early childhood wor(l)ds

Abstract

Early childhood literacy is pervaded by dominant discourses telling children both what to say, how to say it, and what is worthy of adults' attention. These discourses are affected by the need to constantly see language through solely representational accounts, and children as still progressing, developing and becoming literate while excluding the strong presence of more-than-humans and the diverse ways of being child. However, the field of posthuman studies has introduced other perspectives on literacy that are neither solely exclusive to humans nor solely representational or intentional. They trouble the dominancy of literacy that can serve to diminish children, especially those from minority groups. Building on this framework, we propose to address how otherwise literacies are created among children and objects, such as toys. Our data come from a current research project being developed in a school in Seville (Spain). The children in our research are 4 to 5 years old and come from different socio-cultural backgrounds. In our research, our data are written as a vignette which describes different affective encounters in a classroom. These encounters are part of an action that required children to bring from home a treasure box with cherished elements inside. We diffract these data through theories of affect to consider what otherwise synergies emerge between children and toys and what we can learn about literacy through them. We claim that the toys you sleep with bring otherwise (political) ways of being and becoming through literacies embedded in more-than-wor(l)ds. They recall how literacy practices involve objects that affect (with) us in unpredictable and not easy to describe ways, but that are essential to consider more justice-oriented practices.

Key words: Early Childhood, posthumanism, literacies, postqualitative, affect

Introduction

Our study adds to the endeavours of other academics working with/in posthumanism who advocate the importance of discussing the ways in which literacy has been theorized because they do not do justice to what happens between children and their material surroundings (see, for example, Dernikos, 2020; Hackett, 2021; Thiel and Jones, 2017; Truman et al., 2020). We embrace those moments in which literacy must be honoured as more than a set of practices represented through linear or descriptive wor(l)ds (Hackett, 2022a) and children not as subjects ‘in development’ but full of potential and more-than-human connections that cannot be known in advance (Murriss, 2016). Hence, drawing on the work of Hackett (2021), our interest revolves around those literacies that are written as ‘messy, provisional and holding in tension multiple possibilities, meanings and affects, moving and slipping between the representational and non-representational, between ‘literacy’ and ‘not-literacy’ (86). Finally, we understand that the way literacy is framed (or not) contributes to more justice-oriented practices in early childhood (Thiel and Dernikos, 2020).

Accordingly, our work builds on our weekly experiences in a state-funded school located in the city of Seville (Spain). The school borders a low-income neighbourhood.

The students we work with (4 to 5 years old) come from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Spanish, Roma and Latin American among others). In this school, we instigated a series of four ‘actions’ that re/created spaces, materials, and times with the children¹. These actions are part of larger research project which investigates early childhood literacy (MATILDA / PID2019-104557GB-I00). By the time the first action took place (March 2022), researchers had already spent a considerable amount of time with the teacher and the children supporting, learning, exchanging ideas about the project and getting to know their classroom routines (we started our weekly visit in November 2021). Children have also had time to ask questions about us, the notebooks we used for field notes, the cameras and to know that we would like to understand more about their ways of doing literacy, learning and relating. Parents received all the information about the project and provided consent for their children. In one of our actions (involving a walk in the neighbourhood), some of them were also involved proposing ideas and co-researching. We understand these actions to be neither a one-off nor unilateral event, but a coming together of wor(l)ds and im/possibilities. More specifically, we adopted the term ‘actions’ to disrupt the idea of intervention as solely coming from one side and to avoid thinking about the necessity of a product or a result. In this sense, we agree with Kuby and Gutshall Rucker’s (2020), re-etymologizing what they refer to as ‘E/Interventions’ to recognise in our research that children, more-than-humans, teachers and researchers were always present, acting and re/creating each other.

The first section of the first action, which is the one we discuss in this paper, consisted of children bringing a treasure box to the school with cherished toys inside. This was planned as a ‘kick off’ to learn more about ‘more-than-human literacies’ (see Hackett, 2021). We had previously shared the idea of the action with the teacher, who besides asking for support from the parents also gave her opinion on how to work with this group of children and what adaptations in terms of space/time would be necessary. She also worked with the treasure boxes in her classroom encouraging some children to share with the whole group what their boxes contained. At the end of the action, an interview was carried out to hear her opinion and plan the next sections. That said, it is through ‘re-turning’ (Barad, 2014) to the moments of our encounters with Luca’s treasure box that our research unfolds. Our main objective is to address Abigail Hackett’s (2021) call to expand narrow understandings of literacy by focusing on this question: ‘how might we notice, describe, value and encourage what happens between children and things?’ (Hackett, 2021: 109).

We start by reviewing some of the criticism of representational or developmental accounts of childhood (and) literacies. We point out how posthumanism allows us to see literacy through a broader perspective that, for instance, does not take for granted the role of humans or the purpose of literacy. Affected by one of the children’s rephrasing of our humancentric questions by inviting us to speak about ‘the toys you sleep with’, we read our encounters with children and toys by diffracting (Barad, 2007) them through different theories of affect (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Massumi, 2002, 2015). In this ‘re-turning’ of data and theory, we discuss (i) the limitations of seeing toys as solely tools for literacy (ii) what we learned about toys as affecting and being affected and (iii) the contributions of affect to a reconfiguration of literacy practices. We conclude by pointing out how affects—as ‘forces and intensities’ (Springgay, 2011: 67)—place children, toys, and ourselves in a terrain of literacy where not everything can

be represented, separated in different boxes (humans and non-humans) or predicted by adult guidance. Building on Massumi (2002), we argue that in a field full of affects, the intensity matters and not just the accuracy. Moreover, literacy through this perspective is not seen as solely produced by humans, but by assemblages of children-toys-objects (Kuby and Gustshall Rucker, 2016). We highlight how these are (more-than-human) ways of seeing literacy, which trouble the deficit discourses that exclude and marginalize, specifically when considering children from minority social contexts. ‘The toys you sleep with’, therefore, point out to more justice-oriented practices in ECE.

Children (and) literacies: some possibilities beyond representation, development and humans

The following dialogue draws from a conversation between a teacher and a 5-year-old. It is circle time and, as usual, the teacher invites them to share any ideas, experiences, or stories with the others.

It is circle time and we long to share our feelings, thoughts, and news.

Alba (student): Today four people woke me up!

Carla (teacher): Who lives with you?

Alba: Two women and two men...Margot...

Carla (interrupts): Who is Margot?

Alba: It is my dog!

Carla: Then it is not a woman, it is a dog.

Alba turns around, turning her back to the assembly.

A noisy silence takes place.

(Giovanna’s Journal notes, February 2022)

Unpacking the injustices of representational and developmental logics

The urge to ask and simultaneously make sense of children’s wor(l)ds is deeply connected with our focus on *language* as a source of representation and order (MacLure, 2016). Barad (2007: 137) points out that ‘representation takes the notion of separation as foundational’. It considers that one can name, interpret, and represent the reality of people or things from a distant and static perspective. In the field of literacy, representational thinking has been associated with the need to find a purpose or an end to children’s literacy practices (Leander and Boldt, 2013), while in research in general, representation contributes to a static understanding of data (MacLure, 2013). With reference to the vignette above, we notice that we (adults) need to represent through language which ones are the dogs and which ones the humans, what makes sense and what does not, what is reality and what is fantasy.

Important power dynamics that are at the core of representational ideas about children’s wor(l)ds are emphasised by some authors. For example, Viruru (2001) points out that language can be used as a colonizing mechanism to ‘civilize’ children under certain logics, logics in which silences or inaccurate responses may be taken as a ‘lack’. As a result, in Hackett’s (2022a) accounts, a ‘hierarchy of talk’ is established that expects children to produce meanings that are evaluable and clear (representable) from the adults’ perspective, disregarding, for instance, bodily practices. Following Maclure’s (2016) work, this hierarchy also leads to the cartesian divide that insists on separating children’s bodies from their minds. Meanings that are neither sufficiently accurate nor rational (such as Alba’s) may easily be dismissed, questioned or challenged. According to such reasoning, adults are positioned as the ‘judges’ and ‘saviours’ of children’s

language development (Hackett, 2021), perpetuating what Murriss (2021a) has claimed to be a colonizing relationship in which children, and their knowledge, are seldom taken seriously.

Rather than pointing out an individual practice, or to claim that representation is always inappropriate, the vignette above helps us to explore how representational thinking provides some possibilities for understanding children's literacy practices, as well as some impossibilities. As Thiel (2020) explains, a child may engage in practices that are anything but producing an outcome or a sense to adults. In this sense, representation may help us to know that Alba has a pet or to categorize the members of her family, but what else could we have learned from her relationship with this pet? What else could we have learned about being a family or about the mornings in which everyone (including her dog) comes to wake her up? What can we learn about the many times Margot joins the classroom without an apparent connection to what is being discussed? Focusing only on the representable aspects may prevent us from considering literacy moments that exceed the limits of causality or explanation. Not every way of doing literacy is linear (Hackett, 2022b). Hence, when language is not sufficient to please adults' expectations, this does not mean that children are not 'literate enough', but perhaps we need to question the background logics that start with an assumption that children are 'lacking' certain characteristics (see Murriss, 2022).

The discourses of 'lack' draw on a long tradition in the educational field. Murriss (2016) reviews the way in which developmental theories have set homogeneous goals and steps for children's progress. She claims: 'developmentalism has created a "two-world view": a world for children and a world for grown-ups' (226). For Murriss (2022), embedded in this binary (Adult/Child) is a Western logic that splits nature (that which children are) and culture (that which is brought to them). The consequence for Murriss is a child that is always perceived as, by their very nature, lacking 'responsibility, maturity, trustworthiness, natural goodness, experience, rationality, norms, and values' (Murriss, 2022: 45). In other words, we may perceive children, fundamentally, as 'lacking' and needing to be 'humanized' (Snaza, 2013). Therefore, the logics of developmentalism and children as lacking do not take into account the multiple ways in which one can be a child (Rautio and Jokinen, 2016). This is an issue that affects every child, but especially children in minority contexts. After all, as Kromidas (2019) argues, 'Development instantiates white middle-class children as the selected, casting out every other child as dysselected' (72).

Expanding literacy: posthuman insights for 'otherwise'

Dominant discourses (adult, white, middle-class, abled-bodied) about children are related to what literacies are acceptable, or even celebrated, at school. For example, Dernikos (2020) discusses how a series of norms dictate the ways in which children's literacy should sound or not during reading. For her, 'whiteness' controls bodies of colour according to humanistic logics. Similarly, Thiel and Jones (2017) consider how the material disposition of a play space can 'make sense of black, brown, immigrant and poor humans as potentially criminal and in need of being contained or restricted' (324). In other words, not everyone is considered literate enough and some are trapped in the discourses of 'lack' (Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2020). Failing to make sense or to represent the world in specific adult, white, middle-class, and able-bodied logics, may mean failing to be 'more developed' and 'more literate'. For this reason, the literature claims that 'literacy has historically functioned as a humanist and humanizing project that produces a particular kind of literate subject through inclusionary and exclusionary

logics' (Truman et al., 2020: 233). It is, however, by combining the work of different authors that this paper commits to tracing 'otherwise' narratives about literacy as more than a set of abilities (to be) dominated by some (Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2020).

Immersed in the new material turn, research drawing on posthumanism made advances by claiming for otherwise spaces for childhood (and) literacy (Kuby et al., 2019). Braidotti (2019) clarifies that posthumanism does not mean leaving behind humans, but rather (re)working 'affirmatively' to (re)consider that this subject is (and has always been) tied to many others. It is about not taking a category of human for granted (Barad and Gandorfer, 2021), because humanistic and representational explanations of literacy are 'cuts too small' (Kuby et al., 2019). These cuts deny that which fits neither representational nor developmental structures (Hackett, 2022b) and/or dismiss the powerful presence of more-than-humans in literacy practices (Hackett and Somerville, 2017). Posthuman readings embrace literacies that challenge individualism and dominant ideas about what it is to be human.

Posthumanism allows us to think about literacy in a relational plane, troubling the prior humanistic logics of 'lack' (MacRae, 2020). In these accounts, literacy can be affective, not only representational (Leander and Boldt, 2013), and shared not only among humans, but also with objects, toys, etc. (Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2016). More specifically, posthuman thinking leads to an idea of literacy as 'the intra-active, in-the-moment becoming of child/materials/time/space/peers/adult' (Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2016: 25). Literacy does not need to build on any framework, but rather can be about embracing moments in which children and more-than-humans relate in a scenario that does not always involve words or definite meanings (Hackett, 2022a). An example of literacy practice for us would be Alba, bringing unusual contributions to the circle time, recreating her more-than-human encounters with Margot, or even expressing through the blink of her eyes how it feels to be awakened every morning by her dog. Such broader understanding of literacy reveals other ways of being and creating (with) the world, which also demand otherwise ways of researching.

Postqualitative inquiry: diffracting through emergent data while learning with ethics-to-be

Our research

During our 'actions' and drawing on the work of Hackett (2021), we aligned ourselves with posthumanism while making use of ethnographic techniques. Such an approach meant that we were not interested in seeing children as separate from ourselves, the environment, the language practices, or the more-than-human agents (such as toys). Working with Barad's (2007) concept of phenomenon indicates that we need to see all of these elements as intra-acting agents that cannot be analysed separately; they are all entangled. With that in mind, during our stays at the school, we engaged with 22 children (4- to 5-year-olds) from different social-cultural backgrounds, but we also worked with materials, objects, spaces, and other more-than-human objects.

Field notes, videos and photographs—collected during and after the field work—assisted with the writing of vignettes. Our vignettes, such as the one at the beginning of this paper, are materialized through short text-entries. However, they encompass more than what is written because they help us to think about or rethink happenings, feelings

and sensations (that we are part of) in an open-ended, non-representational, and affectional way (see Truman et al., 2020).

Doing postqualitative inquiry

In this study, we decided to work with postqualitative inquiry. Murriss (2021b: 6) states that ‘postqualitative research does not do away with qualitative research but works differently with data and opens up new perspectives of what counts as data’. Coined by St. Pierre (2019), the term postqualitative inquiry does not focus on retrieving the meaning or purpose of data (certainty), but rather acknowledges the fluidity of reality, the constant ‘becomings’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Accordingly, postqualitative research troubles the idea of a powerful researcher that takes standardized decisions (such as coding) to choose what data are or what data represent (MacLure, 2013). Rather, as Murriss (2022: 61) discusses and drawing on Barad (2007), objectivity here is also about acknowledging how the researcher is ‘part of the material be(com)ing of the universe’.

In postqualitative inquiries, data are not considered passive, waiting to be collected or chosen; ‘the distance between researchers and data disappears’ (Koro-Ljungberg, 2013: 275). Seeing data as part of the researcher’s experience allows us to see data as ‘made not found, assembled rather than collected, and ever dynamic’ (Ellingson and Sotirin, 2020: 14). By not denying our own subjectivity in data construction, we can embrace those moments in which data exceed our research questions or purposes; they ‘glow’ (MacLure, 2013), calling our attention to one thing or another. The way these data are ‘made’ produces an ‘agential cut’ (Murriss, 2022), which for Karen Barad (2007) does not mean a bounded cut (there are always other intra-actions happening), nor is this cut solely produced by the researcher, as ‘there is no “I” that acts from the outside’ (Barad and Gandorfer, 2021: 30). By cuts we mean a relational decision to trace an intra-action while knowing that this cut is always opened and connected with other intra-actions. Consequently, rather than asking if these cuts/data are sufficient or accurate for discussing literacy, this kind of research demands us to ask, ‘what matters and what is excluded from mattering’ (Barad, 2007: 394). That is, rather than following protocols, postqualitative inquiry invites us to trouble standard protocols and to work differently in each encounter to create new knowledge (St Pierre, 2019).

In proposing that knowing and be(com)ing are entangled, Barad (2007) contends that a political background cannot be dismissed, coining the term ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’. This relational perspective troubled the ethics of our research, expanding our orientations beyond predetermined ethical procedures that distance the researcher from the phenomenon (Bozalek, 2021). Consequently, ethics is about ‘responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are part’ (Barad, 2007: 393). In practice, for Murriss (2022), this is about continuously questioning the cuts we are part of. For example, with reference to our first vignette, we could ask what changes when this cut produces Margot as a ‘non-human’? Is she allowed to have the same importance in the classroom? How does asking Alba to explain her categorization of dogs and persons produce a particular view of literacy and child?

Reading diffractively

The vignette that is presented next is discussed through a set of ‘diffractive readings’ that allow us to keep unpacking our assumptions in research (Murriss, 2022). All names

used are pseudonyms. These diffractions draw on Barad's (2007, 2014) work, where she discusses diffraction in relation to quantum physics, and defends a reading that superposes and questions *through* different theories, that 'aerate' research (Barad and Gandorfer, 2021). Diffraction encourages a process of constantly evoking 'what else is going on' in our cuts (Murriss and Peers, 2022: 351), such as evoking the questions we exemplified above. As Murriss (2022: 64) says, 'we must keep asking how these cuts are made'. Reading theories diffractively, therefore, is not about fitting data into specific concepts, but rather allowing data and theory to assemble, troubling previous conceptions (Mazzei, 2014). We present a vignette and read it through different theories of affect (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Massumi, 2002; 2015) in order to think literacy 'otherwise or not-yet-known' (Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2020: 30). Throughout the text, the use of 'I' and 'we' are purposefully changing to connect Giovanna's own thoughts about living the event and all three researchers' conversations about working with this data.

Engaging with wor(l)ds-to-come: a more-than-human vignette

The following vignette is a cut from the very first time we enacted an 'action' with the children. We focused specifically on the moment Luca's box was being explored. It was the start of many things planned and many others about to happen. Elena (the headteacher) had distributed each child's treasure box. They had brought them from home, upon our request, with different items inside. I (Giovanna) stayed with a group of 5 children (Luca, Aima, Sara, Alba and Lída). Two cameras were set up to record the action, one of them hanging round my neck and the other standing beside us on a tripod. Fernando and Eduardo were working with other children in the room.

When we started the activity, the other groups had taken the tables available in the classroom. I thought it would be good to stay on the floor, as this was also the space children are used to being in with the teacher during circle time. However, I was also concerned if that space would allow them to really experience each other's boxes. I was worried both about the sounds in the environment, as there were many people speaking at the same time, and about my own Spanish skills to understand them (my mother tongue is Brazilian Portuguese).

Building on this scenario, we share with the readers a vignette of the encounter between the five children and their treasure boxes. We chose to work with this cut because the limits of a small, square box and children's/adult's choices seemed to be constantly expanding from the moment we found ourselves sitting on the floor moving between opening and not opening the boxes. The toys and objects within those boxes, which until then had not been permitted in the school because of COVID-19, started to re/act in unexpected ways, taking the event always a step ahead of what we had imagined, or even feared.



Picture 1. The day the treasure box came to school

Excitement. We find ourselves sitting in a circle in the middle of the classroom wondering where to start - as if there had to be a command so that things could start happening. There is frenetic movement and loud sounds coming from everywhere. The children start showing their treasure boxes containing toys to each other. In an impulsive, teacher-like-role, I try to organize the order of presentations for each treasure box. I spin a pen in the middle of the circle. Sometimes the pen ends up between two children. It raises some laughs and arguments about who will start first. Excitement. When it gets to Luca's turn, he opens his fully decorated treasure box. While he shows his belongings, the others gaze into their own boxes. I ask them to listen to Luca's presentation. He grabs a collage of pictures of his family and points to the picture of the day he went to the cinema; there was popcorn! Excitement.

...

The other events in the pictures overlap with bodies, sounds, voices, and toys. Any attempt to follow a chronological (re)telling of the scenes in the pictures seems nonsense. Suddenly, Luca lifts up the "very soft" stuffed egg that the three wise men brought him. He passes it round and all hands squeeze it, ensuring they discover the softness of it. He shows the letter written by his mum and I start to read it: "My name is Luca, this is the box of my favourite objects, there is a picture of my family, a puppet...". However, I am stopped in the middle as the treasure box calls us back to whatever is going on in there. Luca finds the t-shirt from his favourite football team. Children notice that it matches with the stickers he used to decorate the box. Aima enthusiastically exclaims that there are more toys inside. Many fingers are now pointing to the team shield. Excitement. A car from Captain America pops in and, unexpectedly, the car is gone again. Under the shelves, fast, here we go. Tension. No worries, the car is safe! We go back to the unpacking.

...

*Luca picks up another toy which I did not recognize or understand the name of. I ask the name of it again but remain clueless. I remember there are times in which my Spanish (language) skills seem just not enough. He moves the toy through the air and our eyes fly around with it. Excitement. Back to the floor I start to ask, "**taking everything that is here...**" Aima finishes the sentence, "**Which one is your favourite?**". I repeat the question, repeating the word she mispronounced "Which one is your*

favourite?”. Luca cannot choose just one of the toys and seems to be facing a terrible dilemma by being asked to do so. Aima, moving her arms, interrupts: “**Your favourite one, you sleep with it**”. Time and space freeze in those wor(l)ds.

(Giovanna’s Journal notes, March 2022)



Picture 2. Wondering about favourite toys

Diffractional reading: thinking with toys, affects, and literacy

In the next sections we discuss our vignette. The intensity of our encounter with ‘the toys you sleep with’ required reading this data in three moments. In the first part of our discussion, we connect our own experience in ‘action 1’ with the limitations of taking for granted more-than-humans as passive in relation to human existence, and solely tools for literacy development. Following this rationale, in the second section, we read our data through theories of affect to draw an alternative narrative regarding the role of the more-than-human in education. This conversation embraces the question ‘*how does affect work between children and objects such as toys?*’. Finally, in the last section we consider how affect theories may allow us to think about literacy differently in our event by posing the question: ‘*how do affects connecting us to ‘the toy you sleep with’ reconfigure what we understand by literacy?*’

*Objects ruled by **adults** in the literacy classroom*



Picture 3. Ruled or ruling pen?

Sitting in a circle with children is a common literacy practice conducted by teachers in Early Childhood Education. The fact that I had worked with children in schools in the past brought back memories of this routine as soon as I found myself surrounded by Luca, Aima, Sara, Alba, Lída and their treasure boxes. Moments such as these can be followed by activities such as ‘the hello song’ and the subsequent expectations of children’s use of language (Hackett et al., 2021). For example, a quick search in Google images about ‘rules for circle time’ yielded a series of charts that can be used as classroom rules: to sit in a certain way, to raise hands, to listen, etc. They remind us of what Dernikos (2020: 146) refers to as “‘appropriate’ affective rhythms’ expected in a literacy classroom. Although not all these rules are applied in Elena’s classroom, there is an unwritten agreement that goes hand in hand with how children should behave and what they should talk about during circle time; one is that they are not allowed to bring toys or other objects to that event. This is the time Elena usually designates for classroom assembly or taking the register. She invites children to help her noticing who is present and who is absent and also encourages them to share experiences, ideas or questions about any topic. Nonetheless, in the event that objects happen to be found in children’s hands or pockets and providing they do not interrupt the flow of activities or discussions, they are not removed by the teacher.

Toys or other objects, such as the ones prohibited in circle time, tend not to be seen as having potential in classrooms outside of adults’ pre-determined guidance. Jones et al. (2012) discuss how, occasionally, they may be taken as distractions or corruptors of order, which disturb the natural logics of development. One of the specific educational purposes of toys and other objects is that their use can be associated with children’s language development (Hackett, 2021). In this specific use of more-than-human bodies, objects are thought to serve adults’ purposes (Murriss, 2022). They are intended to be used at the right moment and may well be followed by questions for scaffolding language skills. In our event, the question “*which one is your favourite?*” is an indication of that. We could easily rephrase this question thus: ‘what do these toys *mean* to you?’ My question carried the expectation that Luca detach himself from everything else that was happening around—the toys, the movements, the intense laughs, the touches—and rationally express verbally his favourite toy to the evaluating adult. In this framing, the value of the toy/object is placed outside of that unique experience and, consequently, dismisses emergent and unpredictable aspects of literacy, as pointed out by Leander and Boldt (2013). Both questions above indicate a specific idea about childhood and literacy that often involves children autonomously making clear meanings of the world (to the adults) through describing, telling, choosing, narrating, etc. (Hackett, 2022a). However, through these lenses, objects are doomed to be passive, and we may miss the surprising connections they might establish with children (such as the moment Aima evokes ‘the toys you sleep with’). In MacRae’s (2012: 124) words, ‘To separate objects and subjects from the complexity of the lived event assumes that they can be distinguished from the desires that bring them together’.

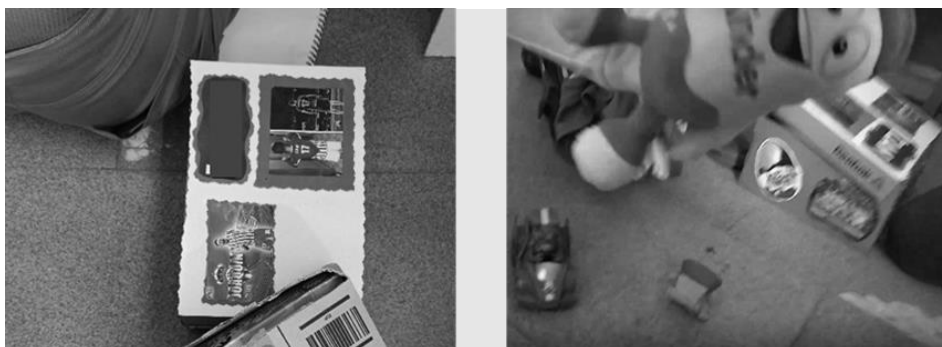
Carefully ‘re-turning’ (Thiel and Dernikos, 2020) to the data while also letting ourselves be affected by Aima’s call for ‘the toys you sleep with’ provides us with the opportunity to notice how in this event toys started to re/act in unexpected ways. For instance, right at the beginning of the action, a pen is selected by me to organize the oral discussion (Picture 3). The pen, however, seemed to add more to the event. Children focused on the way it moved on the floor, laughing at its uncertainty about which child to choose

and fascinated by how our hands could help it to move faster or more slowly. These small moments seemed to be more vital than knowing if the pen had eventually chosen someone. The pen became more than a tool. These unique human and more-than-human connections were suggesting to us that (i) objects could have more to say than we thought and that (ii) there could be more than representational ways of expressing their roles and affections with children. Hence, we wondered: *what difference would it make to our research practice if those toys were not there to answer any of our questions? What else could happen in a literacy classroom when toys and humans meet?*

From an affective perspective research points to how more-than-humans can be coadjutants in literacy events that are not solely led by humans (Boldt and Leander, 2020). In this sense, authors drawing on posthuman and affective theories, invite us to turn to the connection, the encounter between the human and the more-than-human object/toy (Hackett, 2021), and to acknowledge how those events may inevitably exceed understanding or planning (Burnett and Merchant, 2018). We are then invited to welcome moments in which children and toys do not necessarily have a specific purpose to be (Hackett, 2021). For instance, a car may invite a child to move under the shelves or a stuffed toy may demand touch without a particular reason. The relationality of sleeping with a toy may matter more than whether we can pin down this toy as favourite or not. This matters to our research because it invites us to look at actions (between humans and more-than-humans) that arise without the need of finding a (adult) motive or explanation for them. This is a way of moving beyond intentionality and beyond individualistic accounts of child-toy relations (MacRae, 2020). Consequently, we wondered: *Would treasure boxes be just prompts brought from home to fulfil 'our' research purposes?*

For this reason, in the next section we move from a (humancentric) perspective of toys/objects as tools in literacy practices, or (only) as serving pre-designated adults' purposes, to their potential to be affective and affected things (Bennett, 2010). We build on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) ideas that we cannot know a body (be it a toy or a child) without knowing its affects. That is, our pre-established 'cuts', thoughts about and expectations of children and objects are likely to be only partial. There is always a 'what else?' question to be addressed (Osgood and Mohandas, 2020).

*Objects and humans ruled by **affects** in the literacy classroom*



Picture 4. Escaping human's intentional boxes

When we talk about affects, we are referring to intensities—even if subtle (Springgay, 2011)—that are hard to explain and that are not bound neither to an individual nor

humans (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). They are not just about being happy or sad (emotion), which would be ‘a very partial expression of affect’ that can be explained, categorized, universalized, etc. (Massumi, 2015: 5). Hence, Dernikos et al. (2020) introduce the idea that affects work through the idea of ‘scratching’. They explain this metaphor thus: ‘the scratch is a frequency: a cut or vibration that momentarily slips out of groove and exceeds capture in language. It guides, dis/connects, excites, startles, interrupts, diverts, and reorients’ (4). As a continuous activity, affects cannot belong to someone, but to the relation (Boldt and Leander, 2020), so that whatever happens is always connected to a specific event (Massumi, 2015).

Thinking about affects for our event helped us to notice how we experienced different ‘scratches’ while encountering the toys in Luca’s treasure box, for example, when Aima said ‘the toys you sleep with’ and time and space seemed to freeze momentarily. Without a clear reason, those toys moved (with) us somewhere else. We could no longer exist in the same way. Kuby and Gutshall Rucker (2016: 37), drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987), explain that ‘assemblages of desire’ are created among affective intensities making it hard to analyze bodies as bounded individuals. The ‘toys you sleep with’ became a part of us as we are a part of them, being affected and affecting, driven by desiring forces. Thus, affects trouble curricula that are centred solely on humans or in readymade frameworks (Boldt and Leander, 2015). As a result, they urge us to feel the vibrancy of each event or more-than-human assemblage, to think about what/who impacts and changes its relations, and, consequently, to re/consider our assumed cuts about the role of humans and literacy.

The potential of affects made us notice how an ordinary encounter with an object, such as a collage of images (picture 1), can take us to places we did not think of going to. For example, when Luca shows the paper full of scenes of his life, we seemed to embrace the cosiness of watching a movie and the smell of popcorn. Nothing else mattered. Affecting and being affected by more-than-human objects require us to exceed easy-to-answer questions such as ‘who went to the cinema with Luca?’ or ‘what movie did they watch?’. As Hackett (2022b) points out, straightforward questions seem not to do justice to what is affectively experienced when with children. Affects are forces resonating ‘out of reach’ (Massumi, 2015: 5) that may change the nature of the event (Ehret, 2018). Therefore, we are surprised by exactly that which has not been asked or planned by adults: for example the call for ‘the toys you sleep with’.

Affects guide us to value the specificities of each encounter as unreproducible (Boldt and Leander, 2020). In our case, the specificities of *that* popcorn emerging in between *that* little circle of *those* children and *that* researcher. They make us think about *those* giggles and *those* curious eyes all jumping into the picture. They exceed clarification, ‘appropriate’ acoustics or Giovanna mastery of the local language. They just happen. In consequence, the activity becomes much more than a ‘show and tell’ presentation based on hearable or describable words because this would mean that the event could be easily reproduced by other children following the same ‘presentation script’. However, affect has no script and requires sensing more-than-human bodies (such as flying toys, or popcorns) through relational and material accounts, not just through descriptive and intentional ones (MacRae, 2020). Like sleeping among toys, affects can never happen again in the same way.

Although affects do not come from ‘a’ body, such as Luca or a toy, or from somewhere –but from an in-betweenness—the specificities of each body play an important role in this perspective (Massumi, 2015). As Boldt and Leander (2020: 520) state: ‘Each new thing that enters and exits the field brings new possibilities for what else might happen. They are intensities, in the sense of new combinations that catalyze new possibilities.’ For example, Luca’s gift from the three wise men (the stuffed egg) provoked different synergies among children and researchers. The stuffed egg connected some children to a very well-known Christian tradition in Spain (even though Spain does not have an official religion). It consists of waiting for the three wise men to bring you gifts, eating special pastries and joining parades in the town. Even though this is celebrated in January, the power of such traditions continues to resonate throughout the year. Hence, in that small group of five children, it did matter whether the toy was a gift from the three wise men or not. They looked at each other, and at the toy, amused. There was a sense of agreement on how precious it was. A new dimension emerged: ‘a shock’, as Massumi (2015: 53) says to discuss how affects work. A toy brought by the wise men might recall affective and embodied memories for some (Guzmán-Simón and Pacheco-Costa, 2022), whilst for Giovanna, and perhaps for others, the three wise men could not have such an impact as they have never celebrated this tradition. Following the affective intensities is more than decentring the humans and universal truths about childhood, it is about mapping the rules of each event.

Affective encounters with toys involve an intriguing dynamic (from the adult-centric perspective). Studies have highlighted the way in which children engage in their own ‘sorting, arranging, grouping and curating’ of objects (Hackett, 2021: 107). These arrangements refer to children affectively choosing and being chosen by each object, following a logic proper of the affects. In our event we also experienced similar affectively-led dynamics. For example, there were moments in which things changed direction more quickly than we expected. What was making sense in one second (e.g., Giovanna starting to read the letter) did not make sense five seconds later (no one asked her to stop, but it seemed right to do so). What was being asked (e.g. about the favourite toys) was quickly rephrased to how/what relationalities mattered in that moment (‘the toys you sleep with’). As emphasized by Hackett and Somerville (2017), humans are no longer the centre of meaning-making here. Therefore, events driven by affects disrupt adults’ ideas and attempts to impose a humanistic logic for children’s encounters with more-than-humans (Rautio, 2014).

There is a flexibility and ephemerality in how affect resonates among humans and more-than-humans. Any agreement or logic in our event could be reconsidered at any point. For example, we started our action with Luca’s command that no one should touch his toys because of COVID-19, even if these measures were no longer being applied by the school. However, in the middle of the activity, that rule just vanished. No one agreed on “now let’s all touch the toys”. Bodies simply affectively reacted and felt the need to touch. Autotelic, and easily ended, affective synergies between humans and more-than-humans are defended exactly because of their intense importance in humans’ lives and the way they disturb the humanistic and capitalist logics of events (Rautio, 2013). They are neither generalizable nor reproduceable, but important to how things matter when (not only human) bodies co-compose with no clear intentions.

All of these ideas lead us to understand how we could never know how or whether toys would touch us and how children would respond. Affects could follow multiple

trajectories (Dernikos et al., 2020). Massumi (2002: 30) discusses them through ephemeral possibilities in time:

They are tendencies— in other words, pastness opening directly onto a future, but with no present to speak of. For the present is lost with the missing half second, passing too quickly to be perceived, too quickly, actually, to have happened.

Taking this into account, we think of affects among children, ourselves, and toys as secrets-yet-to-be. A secret that is yet-to-be can be perceived as something that is hidden, but, at the same time, constantly ‘becoming’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). It is too intimate to be shared but also too indetermined to be describable. Secrets-yet-to-be are especially meaningful when we think about the value of ‘the toys you sleep with’ for understanding literacy. Aima is calling to what (else) had not yet been voiced, a secret that mattered somehow differently to each of us. A secret-yet-to-be is about the infinite possible paths in child-object relations. Letting ourselves be secretly affected by the ‘toys we sleep with’ is a way of calling bodies to be affected and to affect, rather than only using our (rational and representational) minds (Hackett et al., 2021).

In this section we have discussed *how affect works between children and objects, such as toys* in our event. Mainly, affects made us start noticing that when more-than-humans assemble with humans, unexpected things, which escape descriptions, happen (a laugh, a touch, a word that freezes worlds, etc). This exceeds anthropocentric assumptions of toys as passive or predictable objects and teaches us the following:

- Affects may connect children and toys to unplanned actions.
- Affects may invite children and toys to un/settle their own orders and rules.
- Affects between children and toys may hold temporary synergies that are hard to describe, they are secrets yet-to-be.
- Affects may connect children and toys to indeterminate literacy practices.

For us these lessons relate to the efforts of different authors who explore how literacy can be ‘otherwise’ than humans producing fixed meanings, individuality, development, certainty, purpose, etc. (Hackett, 2022a; Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2020). These authors focus exactly on these affective moments where things happen and ‘an internal “yes”’ invades the scene (Ehret, 2018: 568). In these moments, borrowing Hackett’s (2021: 19) words, ‘language and literacy practices can be understood as occurring as a result of people, places, objects, and things being caught up together in particular ways through affective flows and circuits’. With these ideas in mind, we now delve into the affective worlds of toys and children to ask “*how affects connecting us to ‘the toy you sleep with’ reconfigure what we understand by literacy*”.



Picture 5. Meaning un/making

During the action, the more I (Giovanna) tried to grasp, record, or make sense of what was going on between children and more-than-humans, the more I seemed to miss. Most of the time I felt I was a step behind. For example, when I was trying to read the letter written by Luca's mom, there were already other things happening among children and toys. When Luca repeated the name of the toy twice so that I could understand, I felt divided between the words I did not recognize and the flying toy that was already replying to my question (Picture 4). Suddenly, while I am still insisting on a narrow and orderly understanding of language (MacLure, 2016), I am faced with the statement "the ones you sleep with". It was in this moment that I felt somehow dragged back to the floor, back to the intensity of those wor(1)ds. In Hackett's (2021) accounts, 'it is from these intensities, this slipping and sliding, that various kinds of literacy emerge' (103).

Aima and the 'sleeping toys' trouble the rush of adults to retrieve specific meanings in objects-child relations (Rautio, 2014) or to see literacy only through words that 'we' can understand (Hackett, 2022a). Driven by affects, Aima refuses to resonate with a question that requires just one meaning, or even just one way of pronouncing (*favourite*). Her response resonates with the idea that 'starting from affect in this way is an invitation for an indefinitely constructive thinking of embodied, relational becoming' (Massumi, 2015: 51). Hence, we are brought to a relational field in which literacy is not *only* about that which is (re)produced by *a* (hu/man) body, with *a* meaning, for *a* purpose, *to* some other hu(man) (Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2020), but also about the meanings being constantly reconstructed between toys, children, and affects. They can change quickly and through more than words, materializing the 'non-verbal, affective and sensory forces "inside" language' (Hackett et al., 2021: 915). Accordingly, what stayed with us, 'scratching' through the weeks we worked with the data, were the deep breaths of children and researchers looking at each other and then to the toys, those hands holding the chin (Picture 2), those textures, and those frozen wor(1)ds (Picture 4). Luca's answer or the words mis/pronounced did not seem to matter more than the affects resonating every time a new toy came out of the treasure box. As Thiel (2020: 78) argues: 'our bodies know things that our words just can't comprehend'.

Affects resonating through 'the toys you sleep' with are about reconsidering structures that believe one can predict what happens, or should happen, in a literacy classroom (Boldt, 2021). What we believe to be the way to literacy, or the way to become more 'humanized' and less 'wild' beings (Snaza, 2013), is troubled through the 'toys you

sleep with'. Rather, as Massumi (2002: 26-27) discussed, 'intensity' is missed if and when we prioritize 'structure'. In practical terms, this means literacy can be about the unplanned affect 'scratching' in our classes (Dernikos et al., 2020), for example, in the moments in which words play different roles in different contexts (Boldt and Leander, 2020), or when children and more-than-humans do not reply verbally or accurately to an adult's impressions (Hackett, 2022a), and even when unexpected more-than-human companions join the class (Lenters, 2019). For us, this implies the need to be open to being surprised by the unstructured wor(l)d that affectively connects, in our case, children and toys, the wor(l)ds that lead children (such as Luca, Aima, Sara, Alba and Lidia) to relate, un/make meaning and affect dismantling the 'Western bourgeois project' (Kromidas, 2019: 65).

Considering our context, in which students largely come from one of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Seville, we see affective connections with toys as an opportunity to trouble both deficit discourses that may accompany their literacy practices (MacRae, 2020) and 'hero narratives' that may overestimate the power of adults (Hackett, 2021: 162). Therefore, we draw on different authors who have claimed that thinking with affect requires thinking about politics (Boldt and Leander, 2020; Truman et al., 2020; Thiel and Dernikos, 2020). For Truman et al. (2020: 233) 'affects are not neutral and not convivial; affects are bound up in power'. Drawing on these authors, Boldt and Leander (2020) claim that whether literacy is allowed, or not, to exist can differ when the target is a 'raced and classed and dis/abled reader' (Boldt and Leander, 2020: 526). Hence, when expanding our understandings of literacy, objects working with children may point to more ethical ways to think about race and class (Thiel and Jones, 2017) and, consequently, address in/equity (Thiel, 2015). An example is questioning how easy it is to dismiss ways of making meaning and affectively relating between the toys and Aima—a child coming from a Roma family—when the adult's focus is solely centred on the child's ability to respond, pronounce, describe, etc., or in objects' ability to scaffold all of those. Hence, from 'the favourite toys' to 'the toys you sleep with' there is not only an affective shift of wor(l)ds, but also a political shift. From dominant questions, well-pronounced answers, dominant versions of being a child, and adult-led literacy practices, we are challenged by the more-than-human, emergent, and shared worlds of literacy. Even so, we agree with Truman (2019) that it is necessary to keep questioning the whole structure of literacy, not merely claiming new narratives. We see 'the toys you sleep with' not only as another 'cute' literacy (Hackett, 2021), but also an indication of (in)humanist curricula that silence some bodies and ways of existing more than others (see Kromidas, 2019).

Finally, thinking with 'sleeping-toys' has demanded reworking how much we do not know as individuals/adults and how much we are willing to be open to know and not control in assemblages of children-toys-objects-boxes-affects-secrets (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Like the act of sleeping, there is much that we should not predict or 'own' in children's literacy. While sleeping, children, adults, toys, blankets, and other more-than-humans lose their boundaries even before dreams start. While sleeping, we cannot decide how our bodies will move, think or do. Sleeping starts before we think and ends before we notice. Sometimes we remember the dream, sometimes we just feel it happened. Consequently, the alternative, for some researchers, is to allow oneself to feel literacy 'through the event' (Ehret, 2018) and not through preconceptions of how literacies ought to be. With this in mind, the phrase 'the toys you sleep with', an

indicator of affective wor(l)ds, matters because it allows us to consider how literacy may *also* (so not only):

- escape the world of words.
- perform through affective, ungraspable, and unplanned wor(l)ds.
- flourish, change, and fade away according to affective intensities among children and toys.

Conclusion

This article has taken Hackett's (2021) provocation to expand narrow understandings of early childhood literacy, thereby pondering 'how might we notice, describe, value, and encourage what happens between children and things?' (Hackett, 2021: 109). Our work was built on our experiences in an 'action' instigated in the school our research project is working with. We wanted to delve into the moments where children explored Luca's treasure box filled with cherished items brought from home. We started by positioning the claim of different authors that humanist ways of framing literacy are exclusionary and unfair (see, for example, Truman et al., 2020; Dernikos, 2020; Thiel and Jones, 2017). We reviewed how the thirst for linear or representational ways of making meaning tells just one narrative about literacy (Leander and Boldt, 2013). This narrative risks an understanding of literacy practices as solely those which make sense or produce settled meanings (Hackett et al., 2021), have an intention (MacRae, 2020), or are seen through anthropocentric accounts (Hackett and Somerville, 2017). Following Murriss's (2016) criticism of developmental logics, we also pointed out how such a rationale perpetuates a perspective of children as lacking and, most importantly, how this narrow narrative maintains dominant images of being human (adult, white, middle-class, able-bodied) (Kromidas, 2019; Snaza, 2013).

Captivated by the ways in which children and toys in our research connected through more-than-words and outside of our predictions or fears led us to discuss 'otherwise literacies' (Kuby and Gustshall Rucker, 2020). Hence, in our first diffractive reading we underlined the limitations of placing toys or other objects as solely ruled by adults' proposition for children and their literacy practices. We argued that such an approach is a limiting way to understand literacy. In every encounter, there was always something else happening between the children and Luca's treasure box that could not fit a narrow rationale. This prompted us to look at the connections between children and toys through the concept of affect (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Massumi, 2015). Affects allowed us to map what 'dis/connects, excites, startles, interrupts, diverts and reorients' (Dernikos et al., 2020: 4) in child-toy assemblages.

Affects required us to be driven by intensities, and not only by im/possible meanings between children and toys (Hackett, 2021), and not to take them as separate bodies (MacRae, 2012). This points out the specificity of each child, each toy and each event as unique and full of potentialities (Boldt and Leander, 2020). Through thinking with affects we noticed how there were flexible rules and secrets-yet-to-be connecting children and toys, opening a world of possibilities for these encounters, which will not always be clear to adults. We do not need to seek responses but to feel the potential of the event itself (Ehret, 2018). These dynamics expanded our ideas upon a toy's role and use in literacy classrooms, prompted by the words 'the toys you sleep with', which deviate from adults' narrow and representational questions and answers about the items in the treasure boxes. 'The toys you sleep with' was a reminder that children are more than what *they* say and more than what *we* ask. Following affects is, therefore, a path to literacies that is more just and more attuned to the unexplainable dynamics that occur

with/in a classroom, such as the intimacy and absence or need for words in doing/becoming (otherwise) with toys and affects.

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ⁱ Although the series of actions are finished by now, we are still working and learning with the educational community of this school. We are currently developing activities to think about literacy with parents and organizing an exhibition to share with the community the experience of the actions. We have also finished writing a book for early practitioners containing pedagogical documentations and discussions on literacy building on this project. The teacher has also taken part as a co-author in this book.