

**Notions of agency in early literacy classrooms:  
assemblages and productive intersections**

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## **Notions of agency in early literacy classrooms : assemblages and productive intersections**

Agency and its role in the early literacy classroom has long been a topic for debate. While sociocultural accounts often portray the child as a cultural agent who negotiates their own participation in classroom culture and literacy learning, more recent framings draw attention from the individual subject, instead seeing agency as dispersed across people and materials. In this article I draw on my experiences of following children as they followed their interests in an early literacy classroom, drawing on the concepts of *assemblage*, *people yet to come*, and *common notion* as defined by Deleuze and Guattari. I provide one illustrative account of moment-by-moment activity and suggest that in education settings it is useful to see activity as a direct and ongoing interplay of three dimensions: children's moving bodies; the classroom; and its materials. I propose that children's ongoing movements create possibilities for 'doing' and 'being' that flow across and between children. I argue that thinking with assemblage can draw attention to both the potentiality and the power dynamics inherent in the ongoing present and also counter preconceived notions of individual child agency and linear trajectories of literacy development, and the inequalities these concepts can perpetuate within early education settings.

### **Introduction: Observing the emergence of literacy and re-thinking the literate agent**

Sociocultural accounts of literacy learning have provided invaluable insights into the intricate relationships between children's literacy practices and their cultural experiences. These accounts have often presented the child as an active agent in cultural production and have influenced thinking about the dynamic role the child plays in literacy activity in school settings (See for example, Dyson, 2008; Marsh, 2006; Rowe, 2008, 2010; Author, 2014). Despite the richness of literacy studies that reveal the complexity of children's literacy practices, however, early literacy learning in schools in England is currently dominated by a print-focused approach that may divert attention from any alternative expression or way of *being* literate in Early Years settings . The 'acquisition' of literacy is often presented as following a pre-determined pathway of progression, based on developmental trajectories and

underscored by understandings of the agentic literate child (see also Lenz-Taguchi, 2010; Olsson, 2009). Educational goals and external pressures for higher educational standards based on print literacy 'competency' shape what is considered to be appropriate literacy pedagogy for young children and are manifest in the pedagogical practices that play out in early literacy classrooms.

In this article, I propose thinking in more depth about children's encounters in Early Years classrooms by examining what takes place moment-to-moment. In order to do this, I draw on a short episode from a year-long study during which I attentively watched a class of four and five-year-old children's activity during their first year of formal schooling in England. I draw on the concepts of *assemblage*, *common notion*, and *people-yet-to-come* as defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), focusing my attention on the ongoing bodily movements of children as they moved around the classroom. Guided by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *assemblage*, I try to explore how the classroom, its materials and children's moving bodies were prior to and generative of child-produced sites for participation and the power dynamics inherent in this production. I propose that it is useful to consider young children's literacy experiences in early education settings as highly contingent on an ongoing series of shifting and heterogeneous relationships between the classroom, the material resources contained therein, and children's moving bodies. I argue that seeing young children's activity in this way draws into question accounts of literacy 'development' currently prevalent in educational discourse, and runs counter to ideas of literacy as an individual, sedentary practice marked by a linear predetermined developmental trajectory taken-up by the agentic child. I elaborate on these themes later but before doing so, I revisit some of the ways that sociocultural theory has conceptualised the child as a subject, acting as a cultural agent.

## **The child as a social actor**

In recent years, sociocultural theory has permeated debates surrounding the notion of agency, informing ideas about how far an individual or group of individuals is an agent, free to act, and how far they are constrained by fixed or objective social institutions, systems or structures. Acknowledging literacy as a social and ideological practice (Street, 1995) implicates literacy and literacy learning deeply within sociocultural framing and associated relations of power. For example, Bruner's (1996) pioneering work drew together interrelationships between symbolic meaning making, thinking, and the 'superorganic' nature of culture as a collective consciousness that shaped the individual expression of meaning. According to Bruner (1996) this collective consciousness enables the 'negotiability and, ultimately', the 'communicability' of meaning (Bruner, 1996:3). Symbolic meaning making systems to hand within a culture therefore and assumptions around how a 'social reality' is constructed and upheld are ontologically inseparable. Framing the relationship between culture and meaning in this way currently dominates thinking around childhood learning, literacy education and education more generally. Sociocultural framing provides important explanations of why literacy practices vary across time and place (Gutierrez, Bien, Seland and Pierce, 2011) and potential dissonances between home and school literacy practices (Heath, 1983; Brooker, 2002; Levy, 2011). Early Years classrooms therefore, can be seen as places where children, with diverse literacy practices based on their own home and community experiences, come together in the joint experience of early literacy.

Whilst such accounts suggest that knowledge is founded on the structures that are generative of shared meanings, that is, language or semiosis and the significance

and emphasis placed on symbolic representation of meaning, poststructuralist theories critique the 'idea that language mirrors the world' (St Pierre, 2000: 481). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) problematise language as the dominant mode of representation and the binary distinctions such as animal / human, human / non-human, and mind / body that this constructs. A structural basis for defining knowledge therefore, foregrounding logocentric interpretations, may provide 'incomplete pictures of human existence' (Ehret, 2016: 142) that in turn limit broader or more diverse understandings of such experience (Murdoch, 2006). In addition, the focus on language is seen as ethnocentric, rooted in Western philosophical tradition and by way of this, perpetuating inequalities in social systems (Carter, 2013). These things are significant when reflecting on sociocultural accounts of child agency, where participation is predominantly seen as an expression through language or semiosis, where agency is ascribed discursively to action (Scollon, 2001) and agency and structure are seen as binaries, or 'qualities' for acting (or not) that the child does or does not have. Sellers (2015) argued that the notion of an agentic child is culturally bound; it positions a particular kind of child with particular ways of being that may be related to and privilege particular social classes and ethnic groups. From this perspective there is a problem therefore in positioning any individual child or group of children as agentic as such a notion brings with it social and cultural assumptions. For Uprichard (2010), drawing on the work of James, Jenks and Prout (1998), the construction of childhood is always in itself a structural category which positions children in particular ways, usually of lesser power, within society and in education. As Sellers (2015) suggests:

Theorizing any image of children or childhood risks homogenization, and if teachers and adults fail to generate opportunities for divergent ways of

children seeing and making sense of the world, we risk reverting to universal conceptions despite diverse lived experiences.

Sellers, 2015:73

So if agency is a sociocultural concept, discursively ascribed to (usually individual) action, and insufficient in that it can provide reductive or selective accounts of human activity, what else might be taken into account when examining agency and literacy activity in early years settings?

### **Agency as a relationship between people and things – decentring the human actor**

According to Braidotti (2013) established humanist epistemologies and accompanying anthropocentric leanings are securely embedded in pedagogical practices. Critical posthumanist perspectives challenge humanist assumptions that shore up notions of disembedded, knowledgeable and autonomous human agents with rational scientific control over themselves and others (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2016), thus rejecting the distinction between human and non/human. Such perspectives have been drawn upon in order to re-examine early literacy activity in a way that calls for a re-definition of the relationship between the human and non-human. Lenz Taguchi, for example, suggests that agency is dispersed mutually across people and the world, and that, 'the learner and the world emerge in a co-dependency' in 'entangled becomings' (Lenz Taguchi 2010: 47). Drawing inspiration from Barad's (2007) agential realist ontology, Kuby, Gutshall and Kirchhofer (2015) and Kuby and Crawford (2017) decentre the notion of literacy activity by proposing that meaning and matter are seen as existing in entanglement. Kuby, Gutshall, Rucker and Darolia (2017: 356) explore the idea of *enacted agency*, a posthumanist

concept constituting 'more-than-human-agency'. Enacted agency conceptualises agency as the 'in-between-ness, togetherness flows and forces of human(s) and nonhuman(s)' as human and non-human elements become 'entangled together as a force' (Kuby et al., 2017: 359).

In highlighting embodied and affective dimensions of literacy, some have developed an interest in bodily movements and their interrelationship with literacies (Wetherell, 2012). Leander and Boldt, for example suggest attention to 'the sensations and movements of the body in the moment-by-moment unfolding or emergence of activity' (Leander and Boldt, 2013; p22). Olsson (2009) examined children's movement and experimentation in Early Years settings and considered how learning emerged as practitioners followed children's interests, manifest and expressed through their movements. Thiel (2015:39), describes assemblages of embodied and imaginative play that create highly intensive and creative 'intellectual moments of fullness'. The bodily movements of running and walking of a group of two-year-olds are seen by Hackett (2014) as 'place-making' and a 'powerful, intentional and communicative practice' and thus agentic (Hackett, 2014: 5). Developing this idea, Hackett and Somerville (2017)) investigating the relations between sound and movement as children played together in a museum and played with mud and water, proposing that speaking, gesturing and sounding arose from embodied and sensory experiences as children moved. The authors suggested that through young children's play and movement, language and the world 'emerge simultaneously and offer new forms of literacy and representation' (Hackett and Somerville, 2017: 374-5).

The studies above have drawn acute attention to activity that takes place as literacy comes into being and have broadened what might be taken into account when we use the term 'literacy'. Furthermore, they look beyond the human actor when conceptualising what might be conceived as agency during early literacy activity, rejecting the idea that agency can be conceptualised as a binary distinction of agency/constraint. This however, does not negate the need to look at the power relationships that are inherent in early childhood settings. Instead it necessitates looking closely and beyond language in order to determine the kinds of power relations taking place moment-to-moment. In what follows I draw on an illustrative example of classroom activity in order to highlight the power dynamics inherent in the Early Years classroom.

### **Assembling and the people-yet-to-come in early literacy classrooms**

In recent years the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) has been highly influential in educational research through its emphasis on the significance of the body and its movements and sensations, providing conceptual tools to write these into accounts of human activity. Here, I draw on two concepts from Deleuze and Guattari; *People-yet-to-come* and *assemblage* that provide a lens to 'know' literacy activity in the Early Years classroom differently. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest that the body and its movements and sensations have been neglected in representational accounts of human activity. Instead, they see the human body as moving within space and time, and always in relation to an ever-changing environment, thereby giving significance to the embodied human experience of moving, being and feeling. The living human is seen as inextricable from and reliant upon the non-human, living and non-living. .



The notion of *becoming* acknowledges the condition of continual change as ongoing transformation. Here, people are seen as in a continual state of:

...the perpetual potentiality of becoming other inherent in the present...

seeing the potentiality of what is immanent, in the already existing processes of becoming around us and indeed, throughout us, *here* and *now*.

(Hroch, 2014: 50).

Forecasting the potentiality of 'people' in far-off-futures (for example through a pre-determined trajectory of literacy development) sits at odds with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of people-yet-to-come, who are already the people in the present and who are becoming other.

The second concept I draw upon is *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

Assemblage provides a way of investigating the interrelatedness and contingency of activity taking place moment-by-moment in that it suggests that activity is generated through a network of time, place, people and material objects and that an assemblage acts on and is generated through semiotic, material and social flows simultaneously. That is, it acknowledges 'the productive intersection of a form of content (actions, bodies and things) and a form of expression (affects, words and ideas)' (Buchanan, 2015: 390). In this way assemblage can help to explain the 'convergence and divergence of semiotic, materials and social flows' (Burnett and Merchant, 2017: 223). It is critical to note here that assemblage is 'an ongoing process rather than a static situation' (Buchanan, 2015: 383). Indeed Burnett and Merchant (2017: 222) suggest that the 'verb 'assembling' is used in place of 'assemblage' as this 'seems to capture ... the ongoing and ever re-constituting

dimension of phenomena, of everyday life, and of the lives in classrooms’.

Assemblage therefore, collapses distinctions between, mind/body/ human/non-human and the binary category of ‘natural’ and the ‘socially constructed’, and instead sees both as underlying expressions of material forces and flows’ (Hoch, 2014 59).

In my reading of Deleuze and Guattari, I think with the notion of assemblage as agencement, or a “word with the senses of either ‘arrangement’ or as ‘fitting’ or ‘fixing’, that is both the act of fixing and the arrangement itself” (Phillips, 2006: 108).

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of agencement relates closely to Spinoza’s idea of the *common notion* (Phillips, 2006), that is, it represents a composition between bodies (material) where two or more bodies come together. Here the ‘unity’ of the bodies ‘can be regarded as a state of becoming and an event which is reducible to neither body’ (Phillips, 2006: 118), both bodies being forever changed as a result of the composition. Furthermore, this produces emergent properties or intensities that cannot be divided. Reflecting on this reading of assemblage can offer a way to think about the ways in which children’s moving bodies, material conditions and classroom norms assemble and the ways in which these play out in what takes place.

### **Classroom assemblages and potentiality in the ongoing present**

The concepts outlined above can help guide thinking about classrooms and the potential of the here and now. Classrooms are easily recognisable and highly specialised places. They comprise of walls, and the physical layout of objects and furniture that is organised in relation to pedagogical practices and its norms and routines, designed with pedagogical goals in mind (Brock, Jarvis and Olusoga, 2014). Classrooms are not merely defined by objects, but are ‘purposeful, not simply a happenstance collocation of people, materials and actions but the deliberate

realisation of a distinctive plan' (Buchanan, 2015: 385). They are, by virtue of this, at the same time saturated with power arrangements. Classroom norms and routines are shaped by the espoused goals and aspirations of education systems. In addition, these goals may play out in direct relation with schools' and teachers' professional and personal goals and aspirations for the children they teach. Classrooms are places where children meet a range of materials, tools and resources that are associated with pedagogical goals that aim to promote and extend young children's early literacy practices and the 'correct' handling, storing and use of tools, such as pencils, staplers, rulers and so on, is a common goal in early literacy education that is tied into classroom routines and practices (see, for example, Bomer, 2003).

Assemblage therefore provides a way of thinking about what is generated through complex combinations and interactions of material objects and discursive qualities or attributes (for example those circulating around childhood, education, pedagogy), which may be similarly diverse and operating in Early Years classrooms.

### **Introducing the study: Following children, following their interests in an Early Years setting**

The research study from which the data in this article is drawn, involved following the activity of a group of twenty-four, four and five year-old children during their first year of formal schooling. In total I made 15 two-hour visits to the school between September 2014 and June 2015. During this time I focused on the ways in which children accessed the continuous provision in the setting when they were given time to select freely from particular activities, that is, they were not directly guided by an adult. Continuous provision is a term given in England to the environment provided for children aged 0-5 in England, where there are selected resources and organised spaces for children to investigate freely, following their interests and lines of enquiry.

The setting is in the north of England and the school serves a socially, culturally and linguistically diverse community of pupils including those of White British, Portuguese, Asian and Afro-Caribbean heritage. Provision in the setting was in line with that recommended in England's statutory curriculum for children aged 0-5, the 'Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage' (DfE, 2017). Much of the day allowed children to flow between the different areas and access resources with relative freedom of movement. Continuous provision is an important element of the 'Enabling Environment' (DfE, 2017: 2) which, the guidance states, should offer 'stimulating resources relevant to all the children's cultures and communities, rich learning opportunities through play and playful teaching' and 'support for children to take risks and explore'. The Early Years teacher and teaching assistant in this setting paid considerable attention and care to resourcing the areas to stimulate and cater for children's interests. Areas of the classroom included large, open plan spaces that were freely accessed by children for the most part of the day.

Regular visits to the setting involved conducting naturalistic observations of children's self-initiated activity. During my visits I would scan the classroom to see where children's interest took them and move closer so that I could observe the activity taking place. On most visits there was some particular activity or set of resources that seemed to be particularly appealing to the children that they gathered around. I followed the children, observed them and took film footage of their activities, sometimes talking to them about what they were doing. The time spent was very fluid in terms of what I observed and where I moved in the classroom, and was guided by whatever children were showing interest in. I played, where possible, the least adult role (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008), aiming not to interrupt children's

usual activity, while equally cognisant that the methods and practices I was employing and my very presence in the setting were complicit in constructing that which I was investigating (Law, 2004). Permissions to undertake the study were gained from my own institution, the school setting and parents and carers. I conducted a process of negotiated ongoing consent as exemplified by Flewitt (2006) by observing children's responses, and only continuing my observations when children appeared comfortable with them.. Data generation, and analysis were inductive (Hatch and Coleman-King, 2014), involving: multimodal transcription of micro-moments of activity (see Taylor, 2014); the construction of movement maps; and narrative accounts of activity from my field notes. Filming, repeated watching, and multimodal transcription drew attention to the positions and movements of materials and children across micro-moments. Aspects of children's activity could not be captured purely in words. The limitations of language in representing experience provided an ongoing challenge in the generation, analysis and presentation of data. . Consequently I sketched movement mapping diagrams to examine the significance and salience of movement . Producing these diagrams involved looking closely at the flows of walking and (as in the example that follows) at hand movements, as well as noting the dynamics, speed and direction of movements. In this way, my rough and hand sketched diagrams became creative generative devices (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) of impressions of being in the classroom. Together they created an ensemble of representational means that drew attention to the significance of the interrelationship between movement in the classroom, and the flow of, and changes to, material resources and children's bodies. This process led me to identify three prevalent interest/movement formations, which each reflected a different pattern of collective movement (see Author, 2018). In what follows I draw from a short episode

of what I termed 'focal point movement/interest formation' (Author, 2018: 374), a term I devised to refer to moments involving intense activity and interest in material resources within one place and which includes movement and exploration with the hands.

### **Hands, hessian strands and play figures**

In this episode I relate what I observed taking place as one child, Tomas moved materials within a spot tray. Spot trays are a commonly seen material configuration in Early Years classrooms in England, hexagonal in shape, about a meter in diameter, and formed of hard black plastic. Originally used by builders and construction workers to mix hardening materials such as concrete or plaster, spot trays have been appropriated by teachers in Early Years settings for messy play activities and keeping sets of provided resources in one place. As such, they provide a generative site for examining classroom assemblages. The spot tray and its contents that are described in the next section, is a very deliberate colocation of objects, integral to part of a more complex system, that is, the 'classroom'. But as a separate entity, the living arrangement of the spot tray can change and evolve separately. The conceptual tool of the assemblage 'enables us to disentangle it and render visible its constitutive threads' (Buchanan, 2015: 386). As young children's moving bodies encounter the material conditions of carefully resourced and prepared continuous provision, the Early Years classroom becomes a hive of fluid, ongoing, rapidly changing and shifting activity.

In this example, the teacher had provided a range of materials including natural materials and fabrics with contrasting colours and textures. There was a selection of blue fabric. One piece had a sheen-like quality; another was patterned with shades

of blue (see Figure 1 below). A third was white and stippled with tiny reflective metal discs. Two pieces of hessian were provided, one of a tightly-woven variety, and the second a bundle of very loosely woven hessian. Hessian is a durable material of a distinctive texture, again often used in the construction industry to stall the hardening-off of cement or to provide purchase for plaster on smooth walls. Here, materials of different textures and patterns had been placed together to stimulate children's sensory experiences. The conifer cone's hard leaf-like projections and the almost flat concentric circles of the wood slice provided contrasting patterns, colours, textures and qualities for the children to explore. To this arrangement, the teacher had added two wooden play figures, one young, one old, both female. In what follows, I draw on the concepts of assemblage and common notion in order to look closely at moment-to-moment activity.

Figure 1 Tomas and the Hessian (About here)

### **Narrative account of Tomas's activity**

*Tomas walked towards the spot tray, perhaps looking for something of interest. He sat down and started to move the old woman puppet around with his left hand, positioning it on a piece of wood to the left. He then moved it to the right hand side of the spot tray and dropped it. His left hand hovered in the spot tray and he brought the old woman puppet up with his right hand. Meanwhile the strands from the hessian had been touching the back of his left hand in its new position (see Figure 1). Tomas's gaze stayed on the puppets and the hessian. His facial expression was mostly one of concentration, and of a slight smile, but there was not much variation. I noticed how Tomas often seemed to focus on one hand at a time as he conducted*

*movements, rather than orchestrating these together. His left hand accidentally brushed against the hessian, and this resulted in the moving of the puppet towards it.*

Figure 2 Tomas wraps the old lady in the hessian strand (About here)

Table 1 Multimodal transcription - Tomas

Time code	Hessian	Gaze	Hand movements	Play figure
0:17 0:19	Strand of hessian resting on play figure and on child's fingers.	Looks to hand	Brings old woman play figure with left hand over lip and into spot tray.	
00:23	Hessian becomes caught between child's fingers	Looks to hessian on back of hand Looks to play figure	Left hand fingers splaying back into hessian strands  Brings play figure to spot tray with hand and moves it against the strands of hessian	Play figure in child's hand
00:25	Hessian strand encircles play figure	Looks to hand	Left hand taking a strand of hessian	
00:41	Hessian strand encircles play figure	Looks to play figure	Pulls hessian strand against play figure seemingly trying to wrap it around	Play figure moving away from hessian
	Hessian strand straightening and then falls away from play figure		Takes play figure and moves it away from hessian slowly  Brings play figure back down towards strands	Play figure resting by hessian, then turning
	Hessian strand encircling play figure		Turns hand and girl play figure wrapping hessian strand around it.	Play figure wrapped in hessian strand
	Hessian strand tightening around play	Looks to right hand	Pulls hessian strand with right hand to secure it around girl play figure.	Play figure moves through air



00:57	figure as loose end moves away	Looks to play figure	Takes arms of play figure in left and right hand thumb and forefinger stabilizing play figure and pulls away from hessian. Lays play figure on hessian.	Play figure laid still on hessian  Second play figure moving towards hessian then wrapped in hessian strand
	Hessian falls away from play figure	Looks to girl play figure	Left hand picks up girl figure and brings it towards a second hessian strand. Wraps it around girl play figure, taking hessian strand with right hand	
	Hessian strand encircling girl play figure	Looks to right hand		
	Hessian strand falls away from girl play figure	Looks to girl puppet	Releases girl play figure	
		Looks to old lady figure	Picks up old lady figure and draws it upwards until it is released from hessian threads	

As I observed I was intrigued by the tentative handling of the puppets and how movement of the hessian strands across the back of the child's hand became integral to the sequence of ongoing movements that took place. As the hessian strands brushed against the back of Tomas's hand (0:30), the tactile quality of the material appeared to draw his attention, as if attracted to the sensory feel of them. Fingers were splayed back against the strands. As fingers touched hessian, the puppet and fingers became entangled in hessian and a few minutes of movement and interaction between the hessian, fingers and play figure took place.

Figures 3.1-3.10 (below) show still shots of the child's hand movements . These are not time sequenced but illustrate patterns of movements that occurred around the

spot tray. 3.1 shows the strand resting on the back of Tomas's finger, and 3.2 how he lifts his hand towards the strands. This seemed to lead to the events that followed, as hands, hessian and play figures were moved in circles and lines to and from the hessian, becoming entangled and disentangled. Figures 3.3 and 3.10 show the circular motions of hands and the hessian thread encircling the play figure. These circular motions were interspersed with movements of pulling away in a linear movement, where the puppets drew away from the strand, the strand extended outwards, and then fell away (see 3.4. 3.5, 3.8 and 3.9). Hands, play figures and hessian came together in unity.

### **Figure 3. Tomas's hand movements (about here)**

#### **Discussion: The significance and salience of movement in the ongoing present**

It would be possible to tell different accounts of what was taking place during this short episode of activity. I could, for example, discursively over-layer the episode, positioning Tomas as an agent in the middle of the picture, over-writing his movements with an intentional move towards the spot tray with 'thoughts' of imaginative play, creating narrative of entrapment and escape, presumably based on his prior experiences of narratives. I might see this as evidence of Tomas's developing concentration and imagination, prompted by the sensory experience of the strands on the back of his hand. However, thinking with assemblage prompts me to see this episode differently. I can see the highly organised classroom environment (with its institutional norms and routines) coming into play with the doll, hessian and hand movements, providing a productive intersection, drawing attention to Tomas, play figure and hessian coming together as a common notion across

moments; Tomas's moving hands / hessian/ Tomas's hands/ play figures both affected and affecting, and the potentiality of each changed by the intersection.

I can see Tomas as a body in perpetual movement, and compelled to move. He may be 'expected' to find something to 'play' with, perhaps influenced by classroom norms of being a child in a classroom, or perhaps he is just showing an interest in exploring and handling the materials around him. Perhaps the moving body came into assemblage with the spot tray in a much more haphazard way. As moving body came into assemblage with the spot tray and its contents, the sensory feel of the hessian strand appeared to prompt a visible response from Tomas, and his fingers brushed back against the hessian. The hessian strand, seemingly becoming entangled with the puppet quite by accident (0:19-0:23) appeared to prompt the movement of puppet and hands, , and each puppet became tangled and untangled in turn in a series of patterned hand movements. These readings are mere supposition. But the reading that discursively over-layers the episode with intentionality, suggesting a deliberate motive of the child to produce a narrative representation, skates over bodily movement and the close and inseparable interplay of Tomas, the hessian and the play figures and what that produced. In other words, it mutes the contingency of the sensory experience of the material reality of Tomas's ongoing present, his state of ongoing movement as part of the ongoing assembling, and the potentiality that each moment holds.

My observation of Tomas is a short albeit detailed episode that is illustrative of the ways in which I tried to make sense of children's moving bodies, moment-by-moment, in an Early Years classroom. The exchange between the hessian strands and Tomas's hand prompted a sensory experience that seemed to propel Tomas's movements and provoke meaning. That is to say, there was nothing inherent in the

ongoing unfolding of activity that suggested the *intentional* invocation of symbolic meaning. But rather, in this episode as in many others, meanings appeared to arise spontaneously and unpredictably through the productive intersection of materials and children's moving bodies. Across episodes I noticed how moving hands and bodies came into common notion with material resources and as they did so, child produced meanings and practices emerged as a haphazard but interconnected flow of events that were often unpredictable and surprising. In the short illustrative episode reported here, and throughout my study, I observed how children's experimental and exploratory movement and handling of the materials around them led to the production of meaningful places across the spatial/ temporal and material environment of the classroom. Bodily movement in the classroom was ongoing, flowing, and always deeply implicated within shifting material configurations. Noting children's continual movement led me to revisit my understanding of children's capacity to affect and be affected, moment-by-moment. As such, movement sometimes appeared to *give rise to* symbolic representation. But to say that the intention of movement is always to make meaning or representations such as a narrative enactment with play people, is limiting as it places movement in a cultural frame where it does not belong. At times, children meandered, explored and handled objects, or just looked around, presumably looking for something of interest. Language and all that it can do played a part as children chatted, played, invited, disputed, shunned, imagined, shared, competed. However, by placing the emphasis on bodily movements in my account the significance of language receded and the contingency of the spatial/material configuration of the assemblings moment-by-moment came to the fore.

### **Productive intersections and notions of agency in assemblage**

Children's exploratory and experimental movement and the productive intersections emerging from it created ideas or set of possibilities for doing that flowed across and between children. Buchanan (2015) argues that assemblage enables the examination of the structure of authority and the way this is constituted. In many respects, going to school marks children's entry into the highly specialized, regulated and 'official' world of the classroom. Participating in classroom life can be challenging, and perhaps more so where the school-sanctioned practices and ways of being, doing and knowing literacy differ significantly to children's home and community experiences of being, doing and knowing literacy (See Heath, 1983). The classroom with its walls, norms, routines and furniture, and available materials were intricately bound and complicit in what emerged as children spontaneously moved around the classroom. However, a body moving 'too much', likewise 'too still', may be seen as 'off task' or 'lacking concentration'. Children's movements can be sanctioned, applauded, re-directed. The spot tray and its contents, including the play figures and the hessian and the many other classroom resources are not there by 'accident'. Although positioned to be accessed freely, classroom resources have been placed with the intention of prompting children's action towards that which looks like a visible manifestation of pre-defined pedagogical goals.. The physical layout of the classroom, which provided space to move relatively freely, afforded children with an at least partly flexible space where they happened upon the potential to become-other inherent in the ongoing present.

Throughout this article I have reflected on the concept of 'agency', drawing on the concepts of *common notion*, *assemblage*, and the *people-yet-to-come* in order to do so. Corsaro (2005) described children as having 'ongoing lives, needs and desires' and the capacity to bring about cultural change' (Corsaro, 2005: 7). This capacity

however, does not merely reside in the semiotic and linguistic expression of meaning. It is deeply implicated within the material configurations of their experiences and the opportunities to move in the ongoing present. Through ongoing and spontaneous activity, the children in the study often generated child-produced sites for participation. At times these were halted, or children were re-directed. At other times, the activity extended into increasingly complex webs of bodily movements through which emerged literacy practices. Literacy did not 'already exist' for children but emerged anew moment-by-moment and was always collective amongst children and the things they encountered. Massumi (2002: 9) argues that 'the field of emergence .... is social in a manner 'prior to' the separating out of individuals and identifiable groupings'. My analysis would suggest that if there is such a thing as human agency, then it resides as a bodily experience or movement, a sensory or perceptive response to productive intersections during the ongoing experience of becoming from where literacy practices emerge. In contrast, notions of pre-determined trajectories can be seen as a stumbling block, catching the moving body 'in cultural freeze frame' (Massumi, 2002, p7) that may stymie broader understandings of literacies as continually emerging from ongoing productive intersections of moving bodies and things.

These reflections resonate with Street's (1995) influential writings about misunderstandings of the nature of literacy and his challenge to the notion of individual 'il/literacy'. Specifically, however, they suggest that looking closely at what goes on in classrooms can generate new understandings that provide alternative ways of approaching such concerns. When early literacy in educational settings is seen as indeterminate; as an ongoing proliferation of shifting assemblages of classroom/movement/materials, the vision of the agentic individual literate child

fades and literacy can no longer be seen as an individual and sedentary endeavour. Pedagogical approaches that support children in being together in flexible environments that celebrate spontaneous movement and exploration can heighten adult sensitivity to the flows and dynamics of bodily movement and the diverse flow of production of ideas. In a similar way to Olsson (2009), I argue that closer attention to children's experimentation and movement holds the potential to prompt practitioners to question established pedagogical practices and the power dynamics inherent in pedagogical practices. In particular, close attention to bodily movement prompts us to know the phenomenon of literacy differently and importantly within education settings, in a way that draws attention to heterogeneity and challenges narrow conceptualisations. Looking closely at assemblings and productive intersections in classrooms is not a solution in itself, but a way of drawing attention to potential ramifications inherent in the social and material realities of children's everyday classroom experiences, and the kinds of literacy practices that are upheld and permitted to emerge.

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