

**Threat and protectiveness as affective intensities:
anthropomorphism and co-dependency in narrative play**

DANIELS, Karen <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6604-1353>>

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Threat and protectiveness as affective intensities: Anthropomorphism and co-dependency in narrative play

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cieKaren Daniels¹ 

Abstract

Anthropomorphism, where other-than-human animals and non-living objects are imbued with human characteristics, is a common feature of children's narrative play. During narrative play, children often incorporate objects around them, infusing and embellishing them with human volitions, needs, characteristics and emotions. In this article, I draw from data generated during a naturalistic study in an early education setting and propose that anthropomorphic tendencies in children's narrative play constitute literacy practices of deeply felt and affective encounters as the body moves and feels within human and non-human assemblages. Drawing from an episode where two four-year-old boys find a beech seed mast during outdoor play, I explore how anthropomorphism of the seed led to moments where sensations of threat and protectiveness played out. These moments were accompanied by affective intensities that constituted emotional contagion conveyed by the ongoing bodily movements of the two boys as the joint endeavour took place. The ensuing discussion suggests that the tendency to make things human in narrative play is a powerful literacy practice deeply connected to how we move, feel and experience co-dependency of the human and non-human world.

Keywords

affect, anthropomorphism, literacy practices, narrative play, posthuman

Introduction

Children's engagement in narrative play, where a story line or scenario is introduced to their activity, has been explored from a number of perspectives with a focus on its educational benefits. Bateson (1955) termed children's narratives 'play texts', and this is closely associated with make

¹Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Corresponding author:

Karen Daniels, Sheffield Hallam University, Arundel Building, Sheffield S1 1WB, UK.

Email: K.Daniels@shu.ac.uk

believe play (Singer and Singer, 1990) where children play out narratives related to imaginary, social and cultural experiences. Children's tendency to engage in narrative play has been seen as a pedagogical tool to promote social, emotional as well as language and early literacy learning. Narrative play involves a process of symbolic transformation and metaplay which enhances narrative competence and is a pre-requisite to engaging in the symbolic representation involved in reading and writing (Sawyer and De Zutter, 2007). Narrative play has been viewed through the lens of multimodal communication and meaning making (Kress, 1997) and socio-material perspectives (see e.g. Wohlwend, 2011). Such work has drawn attention to the fluidity of possibilities as children readily incorporate visual, audio, gestural and spatial meaning making tools into their symbolic narrative play. Furthermore, such meaning making tools are seen as shaping the possibilities of what is produced in novel and often surprising ways (Daniels, 2019a; Wohlwend, 2011).

In this article, I draw on episodes from a project called the Sandbox Story Project, where I observed children and talked to practitioners and parents about children's narrative play in a community library and an early years centre. As a salient feature of young children's narrative play, I draw from episodes of their activity where they anthropomorphise non-living objects, presenting these from a posthuman perspective. I argue that rather than being anthropocentric interpretations of the non-human world, such episodes can be seen as children's embodied empathy, where anthropomorphism generates a way of imagining, feeling and thinking about the co-dependency of the human and non-human world.

Taking a posthuman perspective on narrative play

Narrative has been understood in dominant discourse as being a conscious, intentional and linear construction of events. This has often meant that thinking about children's narrative play has overlooked the indeterminate and affective nature of ongoing experience (Leander and Boldt, 2013) and raised questions about how this might contribute to deeper understandings of young children's literacy practices. In contrast, posthuman perspectives de-centre notions of the human agent as a conscious curator of intentional meaning (Braidotti, 2018), instead seeing humans as embedded within a dynamic environment of ongoing change. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) propose that the human body is moving within space and time and always in relation to an ever-changing environment where human activity is a network or assemblage of time, place, people and material objects that act on semiotic, social and material flows simultaneously. Authors have begun to consider the moving, feeling body and its interrelationship with child produced meanings (Daniels, 2019b, 2020; Hackett and Somerville, 2017; Wetherell, 2012). Thiel (2015: 38), for example, highlighted children's superhero play, describing this as a deeply felt, embodied literacy practice with 'moments of intellectual fullness'.

Thinking of experience as taking place within an assemblage places emphasis on both the human and non-human configurations of assemblages in a way that is useful for exploring the phenomenon of narrative play from a posthuman perspective. This perspective shifts the focus from the individual child's intentional construction of meaning – containing structural elements of stories, for example, sequence of events, character roles, metaplay and dialogue – and instead draws attention to the 'indeterminacy and emergent potential' (Leander and Boldt, 2013: 22) and the deeply felt experience of the moving, feeling body. The emergent potential of narrative play is a focus of exploration for studies re-examining narrative play from a posthuman perspective. Drawing on the work of Ingold, Mosher et al. (2025) propose that children's stories during outdoor narrative play involve an indeterminate meshwork of overlaying lines where human and non-human beings

story within a dynamic assemblage. According to the authors, such activity provides possibilities for empathy and forgiveness across and between children.

The body's movement through ever-changing assemblages is accompanied by shifting affective states. Affects, according to Massumi (2002), are non-conscious visceral bodily sensations as the body continually passes through experiential states of being, and the body moves, interacts and feels within the material environment. Ehret and Hollett (2014) propose that moving, feeling bodies, themselves being material, create affective atmospheres or affective intensities that shape the meanings that are made, often in unpredictable ways. Furthermore, Daniels (2019b) proposed that the ongoing fluctuations of speed, slowness, pauses and dynamics of bodily movements hold a semiotic salience that shapes the kinds of symbolic meanings that take place. In literacy classroom contexts, Ehret (2017) describes how within classroom assemblages, children cultivate belonging by creating places that make sense to them. In this study, therefore, I pay attention to the embodied and affective quality of the episodes of narrative play and the kinds of symbolic meanings that are produced. This necessitates considering the human and non-human elements of the assemblage, and the dynamics of children's bodily movements.

A salient feature of children's play that took place during the fieldwork of the project discussed below was children's tendency to anthropomorphise the other-than-human living things and non-living things around them. It is this element or feature of narrative play that I explore in this article, asking what a posthuman perspective might bring to our understandings. To begin, I share an episode drawn from the Sandbox Story Project where one boy anthropomorphises a toy car.

Anthropomorphism propensity in narrative play

Two four-year-old boys are playing in a large outside play area. One boy runs up to the second and holds out a toy car for the second to see, headlights first.

'Look – my car has eyes'

The second looks at the first boy's car and frowns.

'Cars don't have eyes!'

The first boy glances back to the headlights of the car in his hand for a moment, then turns and runs away, forming a meandering pathway, making engine noises as he does so.

(Field notes extract, 2 June 2025)

The above short exchange between two children in the early years outdoor play area is an interesting one. The first boy's invitation to the second to acknowledge the way he has given human or other animal characteristics to the car is not accepted by the second child, and the first boy then embodies 'being a car', running across the playground, steering round corners and making engine noises as he does so.

There are many such episodes and exchanges in the early years setting, as children imbue themselves, each other and the living and non-living entities around them with characteristics of living things. This often involves ascribing non-human entities with intentions, preferences, desires, motives and other than human (and often superhuman) capacities in different scenarios. The children observed in this study have spent a year or longer together in the setting. They are familiar with

each other and the environment in which they play. Anthropomorphism appears in their play in many ways and across many episodes, and is seamless, appearing and being sustained or appearing and dissipating rapidly in favour of other arising interests. Such seems to be the fragmented and unpredictable nature of their play during my visits.

In the sections that follow, I will present the ways in which anthropomorphism has been commonly understood and, drawing from an extended episode of narrative play between two boys, will provide a reconsideration of anthropomorphism. I argue that anthropomorphism is a form of embodied empathy and powerful literacy practice that creates a mode of expression to think, imagine and feel the co-dependency of the human and non-human world.

Perspectives on anthropomorphism

Whilst this study is not primarily guided by understandings of young children's activity from a psychological perspective, it is useful to consider the ways in which the field has conceptualised the human tendency to anthropomorphise non-human living and non-living bodies, as this draws attention to children's propensity to engage in anthropomorphism in their play and the ways in which the phenomenon has been studied previously. Studies from psychology have suggested that perception of animacy appears universally and early in children's development (Barrett and Behne, 2005), and where objects move or display human-like movement patterns, there will be a tendency for children to give them human-like qualities and motives (Baillargeon et al., 2016). Furthermore, children anthropomorphise objects even when they know they are not living agents. Piaget (1929) suggested that children's views of aliveness were initially based on all things, and later, on things in motion. Aliveness is attributed where an object moves autonomously, and young children can often be surprised when what they perceive as an inanimate object moves by itself. Psychologists have viewed this tendency as being an important step in survival, where the human child may need to determine whether or not a moving object signifies danger, is of interest or is of necessity. Studies from the field of psychology have focused on what may have been taking place in the child's 'thinking', or the ways in which their 'mind' responds to certain kinds of stimuli, for example, the moving object or a talking robot, and children's ability to determine whether an object is animate or inanimate (e.g. Saylor et al., 2010). Significantly, children's continued 'openness' and increasingly complex tendency towards anthropomorphism into later childhood, when they know objects are not living agents, suggests that there is far more significance to anthropomorphism than survival.

Smith (2025) connects narrative with Akinrinade et al. (2023), who describe 'emotional contagion' as a form of embodied empathy across living things. According to Akinrinade et al. (2023), such emotional contagion enables species to experience shared sensations, such as fear, and such shared sensations enhance social bonds. While Smith's work focuses on the way in which embodied contagion can be experienced between species through literature, here I focus on embodied contagion as an affective intensity, forged by children's anthropomorphic interest during narrative play, where the non-human living and non-living objects they play with are given human-like qualities and characteristics.

The psychological perspectives above are unsurprisingly focused upon what takes place during the individual child's development, whilst also looking broadly at patterns in children's responses. When looking closely at what takes place during narrative play, and what anthropomorphism offers from a posthuman perspective, psychological perspectives do not reflect the ways in which children seemingly enter into and forge shared investment in the act of anthropomorphism, often for its own sake, and compelled by interest in what was happening around them. This shared investment is often accompanied by affective intensities conveyed by children's ongoing bodily movements.

The ongoing bodily movements create what feels like an emotional contagion that propels the narrative play. This suggests that there is far more significance to anthropomorphism than attributing human or non-human living qualities to other-than-human objects.

Introduction: Sandbox Stories Project

The larger project from which the episode of data in this article is drawn took place in two settings in the north of England during the spring and summer of 2025. The first setting was a community library where participants included parents and their children. The second strand of the project took place in an early years setting, where I conducted naturalistic observations of young children's narrative play.

The aims of the Sandbox Stories Project were to further investigate the significance of narratives in young children's play from a post-human perspective, and were guided by the following research questions:

What role do objects and other materials play in children's narrative play?

How is narrative play stimulated and imbued with the senses?

What is the significance of the moving, feeling, sensing body in narrative play?

The study was granted ethical approval by my own institution, Sheffield Hallam University. The strand of the study from which the data in this article are drawn involved naturalistic observations of children's play, where I observed 'the stream of actions and events as they naturally unfold' (Punch, 2009: 154). For this reason, I observed children's play when they were largely undirected by an adult in the setting, and I wrote field notes of children's activity over five field visits to the setting. My notes included sketches of the positions of children and objects, and prevalent movement patterns that were emerging (see Figure 1). I took photographs of children's activity and the objects in which they were showing interest. Respecting children's anonymity, I avoided photographing their faces, and children have been assigned pseudonyms. Parental and teacher consent was gained to enter the setting and conduct the research. Whilst observing, I remained attentive and adhered to negotiated ongoing consent (Flewitt, 2006), being sensitive to children's responses and acceptance of being or not being observed. At times, I asked children about their activities, but only where I judged that this would not interrupt the flow of their activity.

In thinking about children's movements and the affective intensities that I experienced while observing them, I bring to the fore a post-qualitative account of children's activity; Lenz Taguchi (2012) writes about the concept of diffractive analysis, highlighting how diffractive analysis 'relies on the researchers' ability to make matter intelligible in new ways and to imagine other possible realities presented in the data' (Lenz Taguchi, 2012: 267). Here I am looking beyond more established understandings of narrative play, trying to describe what else might be significant as narrative play takes place. From this perspective, data are not something that is interpreted by an ontologically separate researcher, but instead the endeavour is to bring about a multiplicity of possible realities that exist. Rather than a movement from the 'reality' of the data, it focuses the attention on the way in which the researcher explores and comes to understand that reality. I consider the episode with respect to the concepts of affect and what Akinrinade et al. (2023) term emotional contagion, and the ways in which these seem to play out in episodes of narrative play.

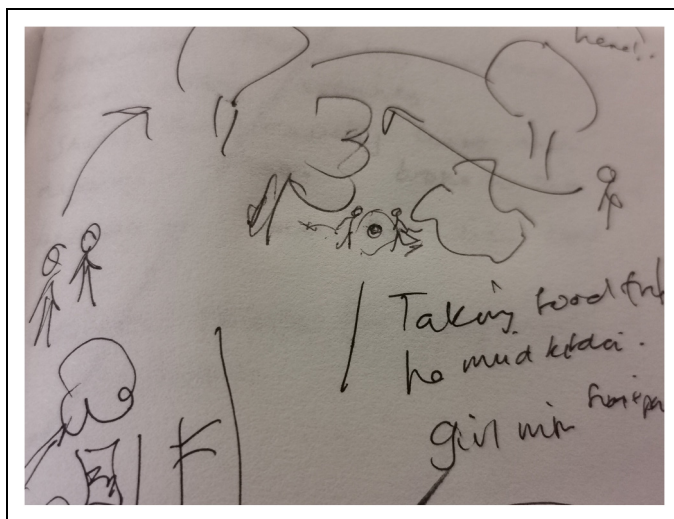


Figure 1. Hoop enclosing the nest.

This article focuses on fieldwork undertaken in an early years setting, where I became increasingly interested in the ways in which children anthropomorphised the living and non-living objects around, as this emerged as a highly prevalent feature of their narrative play. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) invite the researcher to make creative tracings that emerge from assemblages as these shift and change moment-to-moment. Following children as they pursued their interests (Daniels, 2020; Sellers, 2015), making notes, sketches and taking photographs, enabled me to create tracings of the narratives that emerged and to consider dimensions of the assemblage that facilitated such interest and how human and non-human actors shaped the kinds of meanings children made. In what follows, I present a creative tracing of young children's narrative play with a tree seed where anthropomorphism is a salient feature. The tree seed becomes a 'baby seed', and the episode below focuses on the bodily movements of the two boys, the movement and positions of the non-human objects in the assemblage and the introduction of alternating notions of threat and safety that emerged between the two boys around the baby seed as something that needed to be cared for. In this way, I propose that embodied contagion exists between the two boys as an affective intensity that is forged by the anthropomorphic interest in the baby seed.

The 'baby seed': Anthromorphism and the affective intensities of threat and protection

The following episode took place on 15 July 2025 in the outdoor area of the early years setting. This episode is one of many where children began to ascribe human qualities to other-than-human entities, which became a significant interest in the fieldwork. The outdoor area is a large space with climbing areas, gardens, a mud kitchen, a large construction area and a snack area. There are areas of shade provided by mature trees and shrubs, and various pathways that traverse the areas in undulating and curved patterns. Today, my attention is drawn to the area of surrounding trees. A calm day, the trees are quite still, just swaying slightly, and there are small groups of children moving underneath and between the trees. I notice two boys who, squatting down on the earth floor under the trees, seem intent on looking at something on the floor. I move in closer.



Figure 2. Boys and seed map.

One boy, Sun, stands up, holding a long stick that comes to a fork at the end. He holds it close to the ground and is scraping lines and poking holes in the earth. The second boy, Rae, has a small, rounded object in his hand, about the size of a small conker. I notice the object is a beech mast, its seed enclosed in a brown case (see Figure 2).

He is peeling bits of plant material from the case, rubbing it and turning it over in his hands, feeling it with his fingertips, seemingly to try and make it smooth. After a few minutes of doing this, he places the beech seed in one of the holes that Sun has been making with the stick and begins to pick up leaves, fallen from the trees above, lying nearby. At this point, I ask what he is doing. He tells me that he is hiding a seed with leaves. 'It is a baby one and we are hiding it', Rae says. 'It is its homes'.

Sun continues to root around with the stick, poking holes and moving small bits of leaf litter and earth. He keeps looking across at Rae, who is now covering the seed with more leaves. Sun bends and picks up a large pebble from nearby. He moves it towards the pile of leaves, laying the pebble by them. 'Pebble is a bed for the seed', he tells Rae.

At this point, I notice that human-like needs and qualities are being ascribed to the seed; the activity of putting the seed in a hole and covering it with leaves seems to have generated an interest in caring for the seed. Sun made holes with his stick, and Rae placed the seed mast in one of the holes. An act of sharing seemed to have taken place through an acknowledgement of each other's actions. Is this where the shared investment in the safety of the seed that follows came into play? The boys are also taking great care in the activity, with gentle and careful hand movements. Their bodies convey interest. They are facing each other, one standing and looking down, and the second squatting down above the seed, now partially covered by a bed of leaves (see Figure 3).

Sun, still foraging with the stick, bends and picks up some more pieces of debris that have fallen from the tree, and says with gravity, 'These are broken ones. They are dead'.

These statements are followed by more scraping and hole making with the stick, while Rae, still squatting, continues to arrange and gather leaves for the nest that are within reach, placing them carefully onto the growing pile. While Rae is focused on this, Sun keeps turning to watch him while



Figure 3. A bed for the seed.

he scrapes and makes holes. He then runs off and comes back with a hoop, placing it carefully around the nest of leaves, making a kind of perimeter (see Figure 4): 'This is so no zombies can get in!'

The task of caring for the baby seed, which has become a shared endeavour, is now intensified by the risk of danger in the form of a zombie attack. The hoop that has been brought into the proximity of the seed is an expression of concern from Sun, a shared interest in the seed. Rae carries on hiding the baby seed with leaves.

A few moments later, a girl runs up, picks up the hoop then runs away. The boys look up aghast, and then Sun disappears under a nearby tree. Her returns a moment or two later, carrying a large chunk of tree trunk.

At this point, I wonder about where the hoop had come from? Was the hoop part of another narrative or game elsewhere and had been taken away by Sun to protect the seed? Sun seemingly presents another expression of threat to the play, bringing the section of tree trunk to be a monster: 'This can be a monster'. He looks at Rae, still arranging leaves, places the chunk of wood alongside the nest and then goes on to dig, now embodying a zombie. 'A zombie is digging. I'm still digging'.

Rae spends the time mostly squatting down in the same position at the side of the nest, while Sun walks around the area, moving away and then coming closer. Rae is mostly squatting, focused on the pile of leaves, slowly and carefully placing leaves with his hands. Sun moves away and then back to the nest numerous times, watching Rae's acts of protection intently. The continual return to the seed nest by Sun, and the focused gaze on this by both boys, conveyed deep interest in the seed and its protection.

Part of Sun's stick breaks off (the V shape at the bottom) and he is left with two small sticks. He places the sticks in a V shape next to the leaf nest and says, 'This is a tent for the seeds. Pretend it is a tent'. He is now offering safety to the seed. 'No. This is the home', adds Rae, gesturing to the pile of leaves.

A leaf drifts down from the tree under which the boys are sheltering and lands quite close to the baby seed nest. Half surprised, Rae looks up from his leaf arranging and picks up the newly fallen leaf, adding it carefully to the nest. Sun is standing and watching. He draws a large circle scraping



Figure 4. Hands covering the seed with leaves.

away the earth around the nest and log with his stick, creating a second perimeter to replace the one the hoop had provided before it was taken away.

Rae stops and looks for a moment at something on the ground and picks up a feather. He holds it in his hand and studies it carefully, walking around as he does this. He then adds it to the nest and says, 'This is a magic wand'.

Discussion

The above episode raises several questions about the nature of anthropomorphism in young children's play and what such play might yield. The shared anthropomorphic interest in the beech seed most seemed to stem from the initial rubbing of the seed and its placing in the earth by Rae. Or perhaps the boy making holes in the ground with the stick may have 'invited' the other boy to plant the seed. Prior to this, of course, are the seeds' and leaves' presences, as things just there to explore in the outdoor area. Throughout the episode, Rae was mostly covering the seed with leaves, making a 'home' for the 'baby seed', while Sun introduced new objects into the activity and, increasingly, scenarios that centred around threat and danger, and safety.

The symbolic salience of bodily movements

The introduction of threat by Rae arose as a contrast to the 'safety' being offered by Sun, seemingly creating a tension that intensified the act of protecting the seed. This was shared through short verbal interactions between the two boys. The growing interest in the seed was conveyed by changes in the patterns and dynamics of the bodily movements of the two boys. The squatting and peering down with interest at the seed's nest, both boys facing it, the careful positioning of leaves and objects over the baby seed, the rubbing of the seed with fingertips and the positioning of objects and lines to ensure safety, all conveyed a movement atmosphere of protection.

Rae went to and from the nest, coming and going but staying quite close, returning to watch Sun before squatting down again, facing Sun, and watching the nest as it grew and bringing objects to secure protection. Rae was scraping the ground with the stick, marking a perimeter of the seed's nest. The two boys continually looked towards each other and back to the nest as they were jointly invested in the care of the baby seed.

Rae was intent on caring for and providing a nest for the baby seed and hiding it under an increasingly deep cover of leaves. This interest seemed to stem from the rubbing of the seed with his fingers and hands and stripping away the casing that surrounded it, making it smooth, and the sensory feeling of the smoothed seed. Sun was at first an onlooker to this but began offering shelter and protection to the baby seed by way of perimeter fences, tents and beds. Bringing objects to the play intersected with other children's games and narratives, for example, the hoop was only part of the narrative fleetingly until it was taken away by another child. This points to what Mosher et al. (2025) describe as the connections and networks across children as they play, and the social interaction of the larger group. The removal of the hoop was unchallenged by the boys; however, it did heighten the affective intensity of the play as the seed was now unprotected.

The interest and affective contagion seemed to be arising not just through the verbal exchanges between the two boys but by the dynamics of their movement and bodily positions, and other living and non-living objects that surrounded children in the shared space of the outdoor play area. This created an indeterminacy to the narrative, and such ruptures were repaired by the two boys in their shared endeavour of caring for the seed.

The contagion of threat, danger and safety as an affective intensity

In his attempts to join in the care of the baby seed by bringing objects to the nest, Sun also suggested scenarios that would threaten the safety of the baby seed. These suggestions seemed to be providing scenarios where caring for the seed, which had now become a joint endeavour, might be thwarted. A perimeter fence was created by a hoop, and then by a scraped line in the earth, to keep out zombies. The interplay between safety and threat brought a kind of tension to each moment. Coupled with the shared interest in and careful watching of the nest and seed, the episode held a salience that seemed to suggest that the boys were deeply invested and engaged in affective contagion, propelled by their interest in and anthropomorphism of the seed and its human-like needs as a living thing.

The human characteristics ascribed to the baby seed by the boys represent a kind of anthropocentric anthropomorphism (De Wall, 1999), which assigns the seed mast (a non-animal living thing in this instance) with what might be considered human 'needs'. This poses the impossibility of 'knowing' the seed. The peeling of the casing of the seed mast, done lovingly, could be detrimental to its chances of growing. And some very unusual 'threats', such as zombies and dinosaurs, were brought to the fore by the second child. The boys seemed, however, to be finding a way of 'knowing' the seed through experiencing it differently. Just as zombies and dinosaurs stir sensations associated with fear or excitement, they seemed to be acting as proxies for threat that propelled the intensity of the play, positioning the seed as something to be protected. Protectiveness became a shared endeavour. These events fuelled the sensation of danger and threat, and growing protectiveness. In this way, the boys could be seen to be finding new ways of experiencing or knowing the seed through anthropomorphism. Through their shared interest in the seed, and by experiencing the seed differently through imaginary scenarios, the boys were drawn to the affective intensities of fundamental cross-species experiences such as protection, threat and safety.

Outdoor spaces and the co-dependency of the human and non-human world

In the episode presented above, the human and non-human elements of the assemblage are equally complicit in the forms of expression that emerged. There seems to be something significant about the kinds of play and affective atmospheres that took place in the outdoor area, in contrast to those I observed within the walls of the indoor classroom. What struck me was how the incidental and natural changes of the outdoors and what it yielded propelled play in interesting ways. At times, the motion of children's bodies seemed to be relational to the movement of the mature trees. On the quiet, still and hot day when the episode above took place, the trees swayed gently now and again; as it was well into the summer, leaves were drifting down to the ground where children played. Likewise, children seemed to be gathered in clusters, keeping cool under the shade of the trees, with an occasional burst of running or walking. Within the episode, the dynamic relations of the living and non-living environment drew attention to indeterminacy. The mature trees within the play area were at their most abundant with leaf and swayed continually in the breeze above the boys' heads. The floor of the play area was soil and leaf litter from the sequences of growth and change of the trees. As I observed, a leaf floated down, then a feather, landing close to where the boys were playing. Noticing the event with interest, Sun looked up and added the newly fallen leaf to the pile protecting the baby seed, smiling slowly. Rae retrieved the feather and placed it within the dirt circle he had drawn. Under the tree where the episode took place, partially in the shade, I was struck by the speed and slowness of ongoing change and movements of the children's bodies, the trees and the other objects appropriated into the protective endeavour of the baby seed.

I considered how these conditions may have shaped what took place: the appearance and feel of the beech mast, the sprinkling of leaves on the ground and those floating down now and again, the falling of the feather from the tree sheltering the children that became a 'magic wand'. In many ways, this renders change taking place over aeons as significant to the assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari's idea of an assemblage has been seen as closely related to Spinoza's idea of the *common notion* (Phillips, 2006: 118), proposing that when two or more bodies come together (in this case, the child's hands and the seed mast), the unity of the bodies creates an event 'which is reducible to neither body'. Reflecting on the idea of a common notion (see also Daniels, 2019a) draws consideration of how children both affect and are affected by the non-human living aspects and environmental conditions. Interesting questions are raised by the ways in which this coming together of the assemblage plays out alongside children's predilection to engaging in anthropomorphism. Movement and change at different rates of speed and slowness are taking place: children's moving bodies, falling leaves, changing seasons, slowly decaying leaf litter from previous years are at once affecting and affected and playing out in children's narrative play.

Anthropomorphism as a powerful literacy practice

In the sections above, the contagion of threat, danger and safety as affective intensities has been explored. These affective intensities emerged from the assemblage of children's moving bodies, the place where the children were playing and what it yielded and their propensity to anthropomorphise during narrative play. Despite being a prevalent feature of human experience, anthropomorphism is often critiqued for the way it may overwrite, or overshadow, events, objects and other living species with human characteristics, closing down ways of knowing other living and non-living things. In this article, I argue that a posthuman perspective on anthropomorphism can offer a view of children's anthropocentric tendencies that is closely tied to children's endeavours to know and find a shared sense of place in the world that draws towards the notion of a

co-dependency (Lenz Taguchi, 2010: 47) of the human and non-human world. Humans are embedded within a dynamic environment (Braidotti, 2018), and anthropomorphism offers a form of expression of embodied empathy that becomes a deeply powerful literacy practice as it generates a mode of expression to think, imagine and feel the co-dependency of the human and non-human world. Before we dismiss narrative play as an anthropocentric tendency, we need to consider more carefully what it brings to the endeavours of young children to know their world and feel their place within it.

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ORCID iD

Karen Daniels  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6604-1353>

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Permission to undertake the study was granted by Sheffield Hallam University via the Converis System (Ethics Review ID: ER76617496).

An information sheet was provided and written informed consent was requested from librarian, parents, teachers and children involved in the study. This included the right to withdraw from the study within three weeks of its commencement. Naturalistic observations of children were undertaken, field notes of what was observed were written during observations and photographs were taken avoiding any features that might compromise participants' anonymity. Where children appeared uncomfortable with my observing them or where they changed their activity due to my presence, I moved away from them. This process of negotiated ongoing consent (Flewitt, 2006) is essential with young children, who may express that they do not want their play worlds observed at any moment. Assent was requested from children and countersigned at each visit.

For parental focus group and teacher interviews, I specified the right to withdraw three weeks from the point of the interview taking place. For observations, I agreed that parents could withdraw their child (and any observational data collected that included their child) from the study at any point until fieldwork was completed. Whom to contact to withdraw consent and ask any questions was provided on the information sheet. The right to withhold information was made clear on the consent sheet and verbally before any interview or focus group took place.

Consent for publication

Consent sheets signed by parents and practitioners contained a statement that requested permission to publish anonymised data from the study. This included a parent-friendly findings leaflet for parents, children and families, and permission to write for scholarly publications, including book chapters and journal articles.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The study data are held on a university secure drive, and are not available for access.

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Author biography

Karen Daniels is Associate Professor of Early Literacies at Sheffield Hallam University, UK, and her research focuses on young children's embodied and affective literacy practices.