

Re-Thinking Joy and Young Children's Literacy Practices Through a Relational Lens

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intricate dynamics of joy and literacy practices within the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland. By adopting a relational ontology, the research shifts the focus from traditional human-centred approaches to one that considers the agency of both human and more-than-human actors—such as objects, spaces, and materials—in the educational setting.

This conceptual paper is positioned within a postqualitative and non-representational methodological approach. Data are presented as companions for thinking, seeing, and feeling *with* rather than as representational examples. By thinking with theory and data, the focus is on the relational and material becoming rather than separate pieces of data. This methodological framework enables an exploration of how joy and literacy practices are entangled with the relational, material and affective dimensions within ECEC settings.

Keywords - Early childhood education, literacy practices, affect, relational ontology

Literacy practices and joy in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care

Finnish early childhood education and care has a strong tradition of playful, child-centred pedagogy that emphasises children's agency (Kumpulainen, 2018; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2022) affirms each child's right to experience learning joyfully through play, creativity, and exploration (Kumpulainen, 2018). This curriculum mandates a playful, multimodal approach for ages 0 to 8 and ensures equitable access to high-quality education, focusing on process over product, without formal assessment of a child's competency and literacy learning (Nordström et al., 2022).

Children's entanglements with diverse texts form a foundation for their literacy development as they engage with others, symbolically use tools, toys, and materials, and establish rules and roles within play (Sintonen et al., 2018; White, 2012). This paper explores young children's literacy practices as playful fluid, nonlinear, embodied, and dynamic (Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kress, 2005; Leander & Boldt, 2013). Literacy practices are regarded as socially situated practices, embedded in cultural and historical contexts, also recognising the various modalities of communication and meaning-making (Kress, 2013; Larson & Marsh, 2014; Street, 1984). Also, building on sociocultural theorising informed by the affective and material turns in educational sciences (see Hackett et al., 2020; Leander & Ehret, 2019), young children's multimodal literacy practices, meaning-making, and sense-making are addressed as being entangled with the social and material dimensions (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; 2020; Hackett & Rautio, 2019). In

broadening the sociocultural perspective, materials like tools, technologies, bodies, actions, objects, texts, and discourses are viewed not merely as mediational, but as agentive entities intertwined within children's text worlds (Fenwick et al., 2015; Hackett, 2021).

Texts encompass a wide range of forms, including written language, images, symbols, gestures, sounds, and their combinations (Kress, 2005). The ideas of multiliteracies and multimodality capture this broader understanding of text. Furthermore, the Finnish early childhood curriculum highlights multiliteracy as a transversal competence integrated into various activities (EDUFI, 2022). The concept of multiliteracies broadens conventional literacy to encompass diverse ways of using, interpreting, and creating texts (New London Group, 1996), viewing literacy as more than a skill set (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). Multiliteracies expand the idea of reading and text to include written, oral, audio-visual, print, digital, and mixed modalities, emphasising text production alongside reading, writing, and understanding (Kumpulainen et al., 2018; Välijärvi & Sulkunen, 2016). Literacy practices are seen as social, multimodal interactions that incorporate movement, embodiment, and sensation (Leander & Boldt, 2013). This shift from linear print to multimodal communication highlights young children's meaning-making across modalities (Kress, 2003; Kress, 2005; Larson & Marsh, 2014). This thesis examines how relational and material perspectives contribute to understanding children's literacy practices, emphasizing the spatial, physical, and temporal aspects of meaning-making (Burnett et al., 2020; Fenwick et al., 2015; Kuby & Rowsell, 2017; Leander & Ehret, 2019) and recognizing children's interests and experiences in communication (Burnett et al., 2014; Leander & Boldt, 2013). Literacy is considered an everyday social and material practice, encompassing ways of thinking, knowing, and meaning-making, beyond reading and writing skills (e.g., Daniels, 2019; Kalantzis et al., 2016; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020).

Further, the research literature on young children's literacy practices highlights the role of emotions and affects in literacy learning and teaching (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Hackett, 2021; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Murray & Palaiologou, 2018; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). However, there is a notable gap in research focused on understanding how affects emerge within social and material relations during the early years (see Kuby, 2014; Nordström, 2023). To understand how joy unfolds in early childhood education, we must consider its relational and socio-material emergence (Zembylas, 2007). This involves investigating how joy arises in moment-to-moment entanglements. In this paper, affect is seen as both private and social, regarded as a social and cultural practice rather than a psychological condition (Ahmed, 2004). Affects are pre-personal and precognitive intensities (Dernikos et al., 2020; Massumi, 2015). Affect is considered an overarching concept that includes emotions, feelings, atmospheres, and moods shaped in social and evolutionary contexts (Leander & Ehret, 2019; Shuman & Scherer, 2013). Building on this, joy is seen as an affective intensity that creates new relationships and experiences (Leander & Boldt, 2013). Affective intensities are considered as actions performed in relation to others, embracing the unpredictability of interactions and understanding the broader relational, historical, and ideological contexts in which they arise (Kuby, 2014). These intensities materialise in encounters and connections between bodies, enabling interactions with entities, objects, or networks, and participating in semiotic, material, and social flows (Albuquerque & Pischetola, 2022; Hickey-Moody, 2013).

Snaza et al. (2014: 39–40) argue that educational research has overly focused on humans, while a material turn in social sciences explores the entanglement of humans, nonhumans, and more-than-humans in producing knowledge and relationships. This posthumanist movement is known by various names, each with unique yet intersecting characteristics and histories, in common exploring how humans, nonhumans, and more-than-humans are intricately interconnected in creating truths, realities, knowledge, relationships, and literacies (Kuby & Rowsell, 2017). Working with and through a relational ontology (e.g., Barad, 2003; Murriss,

2021) emphasises the interconnectedness of phenomena, focusing on what happens in the in-betweens and everyday practices in early childhood education. A relational ontology is concerned with what and how we know and why it matters (Murriss, 2021). This approach shifts attention from individual intentions and attributes to what is becoming through intra-actions, recognizing that entities do not pre-exist but come into being through their interactions. Early childhood researchers have highlighted the complex meaning-making and knowledge production that occur through these relational processes (Hackett and Rautio, 2019; Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Rautio, 2013). By focusing on the dynamic and interconnected nature of educational practices, a relational ontology provides a framework for understanding how relationships and interactions shape learning and development in early childhood settings.

The rationale of this paper is to understand how relational and material perspectives contribute to joy and literacy practices, recognizing the entanglement of social, material, and embodied dimensions. By addressing the gap in research on affective and embodied dimensions of literacy, this paper seeks to provide insights into creating supportive, engaging, and equitable literacy environments in ECEC settings. The paper discusses post qualitative inquiry and a non-representational methodological approach, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the relational, material, and affective dimensions of joy and literacy.

Posthuman perspectives and a relational ontology

In the past two decades, many educational theorists have emphasised the importance of understanding interaction, communication, and meaning-making beyond traditional linguistic boundaries (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012; Kuby, 2014; Zembylas, 2016). There has been growing interest in shifting focus from the individual learner to the educational assemblage, thereby moving away from viewing the individual as the central point in education (Alasutari et al., 2020; Clough, 2007; Fenwick et al., 2015). This shift, often described as the material or affective turn, reconsiders research objects like affects, bodies, and objects by focusing on their capacities rather than their fixed definitions (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012; Dernikos et al., 2020; Leander & Ehret, 2019). Such perspectives are not entirely new, as seen in Indigenous knowledge traditions, which value interconnected ways of knowing and being (Kuby & Rowsell, 2017; Kuby, 2020). These approaches embrace the complexity, uncertainty, and messiness inherent in research processes and the phenomena under study (Fenwick et al., 2015).

A posthuman approach seeks to disrupt traditional assumptions about young children's literacy and language practices, viewing them as inherently embodied, situated, and political (Hackett et al., 2020). By applying posthuman, new materialist, and affect theories, we aim to broaden our understanding of young children's literacies, while also addressing the critiques that these approaches may lack transformative power and fail to fully engage with issues of power and inequality. Burnett et al. (2020), challenge deficit views of young children's language and literacy by emphasising the diverse relations that sustain these views. They highlight the potential generated when people and materials assemble, adopting a relational ontology that foregrounds material, embodied, and affective dimensions of meaning-making. By conceptualising people and things as 'relational effects,' they address social inequalities and examine the material effects on young children's literacies.

A posthuman perspective offers ways of thinking about childhood in our complex, multispecies world, urging scholars to reappraise relationships and disrupt binary logic (Barad, 2007; Murriss & Osgood, 2022). It emphasises relational ontologies and embodied entanglements, decentering the human and focusing on the assemblage of human and non-human entities (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2016; Kuby, 2020). This perspective challenges traditional separations of humans from non-humans, nature

from culture, and mind from body, advocating for a more ethical and responsible engagement with the world (Murriss & Bozalek, 2019; Niccolini & Ringrose, 2020).

Also, a posthuman perspective highlights the importance of intra-actions, where entities are not separate but become through their relationships (Barad, 2007). It reconfigures how affective intensities unfold in literacy practices, emphasising the role of space, resources, and embodied interactions (Hackett et al., 2020; Hackett, 2021). Despite its challenges, such as bridging theory with practice, posthumanism provides a valuable framework for understanding the interconnectedness of human and non-human agents in educational settings (Kuby et al., 2018).

Some critics argue that flat ontologies treating all bodies as equal can obscure issues of justice, power, and violence (Murriss & Osgood, 2022). Further, Hackett et al. (2020) warn that focusing on materiality can overlook the political, historical, and intersectional elements entangled with subject positions. Conversely, a flat ontology might help undermine inequities by highlighting their human-made nature, challenging the binary logic imposed by normative epistemologies. Posthumanism encourages us to unlearn these categorizations.

Examining young children's literacy practices through a relational lens highlights the use of space, resources, and embodied interactions (Hackett et al., 2020; Hackett, 2021). This perspective emphasises the assemblages of human and non-human entities, considering the temporal, spatial, and physical aspects of literacy practices (Burnett et al., 2020; Kuby & Rowsell, 2017). Literacy practices are seen as affective, embodied, and entangled interactions (Ahmed, 2004). The posthuman viewpoint challenges binary distinctions and reconfigures how affective intensities unfold in these practices, focusing on the entanglements of human and nonhuman bodies.

The concept of the posthuman child, as discussed by for example Murriss (2016), and Sintonen and Nordström (2023), views the child as an entanglement of social, political, biological, and cultural forces without defined limits. This perspective builds on affective, material, and linguistic turns, integrating sociocultural theories (Kuby et al., 2018; Nichols & Campano, 2017). Posthuman theories offer new ways of thinking rather than definitive answers or models.

A relational ontology, inspired by Barad's (2003) agential realism, emphasises becoming over being, challenging the idea that researchers can objectively study the world separately (Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). This view highlights the interconnectedness of entities, where phenomena emerge through their intra-actions. There is growing interest in the relationships between subjects, affective and embodied communication, and the complex interactions between people and materials in literacy practices (Burnett et al., 2014; Burnett & Merchant, 2018; 2020; Leander & Ehret, 2019). This approach questions the primacy of language in meaning-making, emphasising affective and embodied entanglements (Leander & Ehret, 2019).

The concept of becoming involves the entanglement of human and non-human entities, focusing on how they co-create new realities (Barad, 2003). Literacy practices in early childhood education are seen as transformative sites where dynamic relations and connections are formed across signs and bodies (Leander & Boldt, 2013). This perspective underscores the importance of understanding the intricate and dynamic relationships among children, adults, and materials in literacy learning (Wohlwend & Thiel, 2019).

Engaging with data

An ethnographic approach was adopted to explore the dynamic nature of the social and material literacy environment, which included using images, documents, interviews, and video recordings (Pink, 2015; Zembylas, 2007). The data for the

thesis this paper builds on (Nordström, 2023) was generated as a part of the Finnish national 'The Joy of Learning Multiliteracies' programme, funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. This programme aimed to enhance multiliteracies among young children (aged 0–8 years) in educational and cultural settings, based on the pedagogy of multiliteracy by the New London Group (1996) and further developed by researchers in Helsinki (Kumpulainen et al., 2018; Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2019). The four studies included in the thesis were conducted in 2018 and 2019 with children aged 4 to 6 in socio-economically and culturally diverse Swedish-speaking early childhood education centres and pre-primary schools in Southern Finland. The data consist of observations, video recordings, interviews, and documentation of children's artefacts.

Provocation

In the following section, I present what I term a 'provocation' (inspired by Murris, 2021), illustrating an everyday moment where joy was emerging, as depicted in my field notes. Rather than a simple vignette or example, a provocation invites us to view the data as thought-provoking events or diffractive moments from practice. This provocation is shared with humility, intended as a companion for thinking, seeing, and feeling, rather than as a prescriptive or representational example (Vintimilla et al., 2021). This provocation aims to offer an imaginative sense of how joy can be felt, seen, and experienced (as presented in Nordström, 2023, p. 15-16).

Three children, Noah, Malin, and Viggo, and the teacher Tove sit at the table in the group room at the ECE. I sit on the other side of the table with the camera. Spread out on the table are crayons, magazines, scissors, paper, and a stuffed animal which turns out to be Viggo's teddy bear. Each child at the table is working on their own multimodal storybook. The children are creating their own stories on the pages of their storybooks, in their tempo, and the teachers' primary concern appears to be supporting the children's endeavours. Viggo, who is five years old, is finishing his story about sharks on the last spread of his book. Viggo tells his whole story to Tove as he and Tove peruse the book. Viggo is telling his story so that Tove can write it down and later include it in his book.

Tove: [looks up from the paper on which she is writing down Viggo's story] Snipp, snapp, snut, så e sagan slut (literally: Snip, snap, snout, thus the story ends; a common ending for stories and fairy tales in Swedish¹). What a wonderful story you have.

Viggo: [flips through his book smiling, then closes the book and keeps it in his hands] Now my story is finished.

Tove: [smiling and looking at Viggo] Now it is finished, yay!

Viggo smiles and looks out the window, lifting his book to his chest and hugging it with both arms. Aww, says Tove and smiles at Viggo. Her tone of voice is soft, and in this short statement, her voice is almost crackling, which I read as being deeply moved and even overwhelmed.

Tove: [makes eye contact with Viggo, says with pride] This storybook is your own. You have drawn and told the story all by yourself.

The teacher looks at me and smiles. I smile back. I am surprised and touched by Viggo's reaction to finishing the book, and his relationship to it, I did not expect this. I feel warm and happy, and this feeling follows me the whole day. Also, when I remember or come back to watch the video of this situation, the warm feeling re-emerges. Maybe this could be considered a moment of joy?

In this excerpt, I aim to convey the intense warmth and affection of the moment, though capturing its full essence in words feels nearly impossible. The experience of being there and feeling part of the shared joy is difficult to translate. This moment was pivotal for my exploration of joy, as I realised the complexity of joy in literacy practices and my own entanglement as a researcher in the context. The embrace

between Viggo and his storybook deeply affected me, and it took time to accept that I could feel with the moment and the children while conducting my research, without needing to be a neutral observer.

The performativity of joy in this instance was subtle yet powerful, akin to what MacLure (2013) describes as 'glow' or Bennett (2010) as 'enchantment'—a sensation that something chooses you as much as you choose it (Nordström, 2022). This moment disrupted the ordinary classroom activities, with joy emerging in the in-between spaces, materialised through embodied intra-actions. Joy became both an object and a subject, an agentive force. Its affective intensity was distributed across the assemblage, space, and time, affecting Tove, the other children, and me. This entanglement of matter and feelings developed over months, not just in this single moment. I feel it again when revisiting the excerpt, and perhaps this joy extends to other readers of Viggo's book, and even to you, reading this paper.

Exploring non-representational methodological approaches and thinking with theory

There has been a call for more diverse methodological approaches to studying affect and everyday practices, emphasising that understanding the mundane is crucial to social and educational sciences (Hall & Holmes, 2020; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). Focusing on the remarkable and experiential aspects of everyday literacy practices can deepen our understanding of joy as an embodied and affective event (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). It is important to note that "mundane" does not suggest that all children or adults experience joy daily; rather, it refers to the seemingly ordinary moments that might go unnoticed in everyday activities. These activities include literacy practices in early childhood education, where children interact with others and use tools and materials to develop, tell, and document their stories.

Thinking with theory, as suggested by Jackson & Mazzei (2022) aims to experience the phenomenon as agential, avoiding distinctions between theory, method, and data (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; Wohlwend & Thiel, 2019). This approach can liberate postqualitative inquiry from conventional qualitative approaches, offering alternative ways of thinking and experiencing phenomena (Albuquerque & Pischetola, 2022). It emphasises relational, material, and performative becomings over separate pieces of data (Jackson, 2013; Sheridan et al., 2020). This allows for us to pay attention to delicate details and differences that matter rather than focusing on coding, categorising, or comparing (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). The non-representational approach allows for rethinking with the data, rather than merely reporting findings (Dernikos, 2020; Leander & Boldt, 2013). It also highlights the entanglements of bodies, actions, and materials in everyday situations, showcasing dynamic aspects of becoming in early childhood education.

A non-representational methodology challenges the representationalist idea that researchers can objectively study the world independently (Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). This approach emphasises understanding joy as emergent within a relational field, where human and non-human forces coexist and interact (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). It focuses on becoming rather than being (Barad, 2003), and views joy and literacy as dynamic relations formed across objects and signs in situ (Leander & Boldt, 2013). Unlike traditional methods, it seeks to disrupt and reimagine established ways of thinking (Vannini, 2015). This perspective highlights the constant change and emergence within relational fields, where phenomena come into being through intra-actions (Barad, 2003). Postqualitative inquiry starts from relations, not identities, emphasising the interconnectedness of phenomena (Murriss, 2021; St. Pierre, 2011). Theory and methodology are intertwined in an onto-epistemology, reflecting the inseparability of knowing and being (Barad, 2007; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

When viewed through a relational lens, the provocation discussed earlier transcends a mere illustration of everyday literacy practices in ECEC settings. Barad's (2007)

concept of response-ability, which combines ethical responsibility and the ability to respond, suggests that all entities, seen or unseen, are agential. This perspective sees materialities and affects as co-constituents in meaning-making and knowledge creation. A relational ontology, inspired by Barad's (2003) agential realism, focuses on becoming rather than being, challenging the notion of objective, detached research (Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). It emphasises the interconnectedness of entities, where phenomena emerge through intra-actions (Murriss, 2021). This approach opens up opportunities to understand joy as emergent within a relational field, where human and non-human forces interact in the process of becoming (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). The relational field is dynamic, with constant change and emergence, influencing agential entities and creating a flow of performances (Wohlwend & Thiel, 2019). Performativity, as an alternative to representationalism, shifts the focus from representing reality to exploring practices, actions, and becomings (Barad, 2003; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018; Vannini, 2015).

Discussion

Within the non-representational, onto-epistemological approach of postqualitative inquiry, we can reimagine relationships among humans and non-humans in everyday early childhood education activities. Guided by posthuman ideas, this approach encourages slowing down, contemplating, and focusing on details, allowing for new ways of producing knowledge and rethinking educational practices (Clark, 2022). Haraway's (1988) concept of 'situated knowledges' emphasises that understanding is always embodied and context-specific, challenging the notion of neutral observation. Non-representational ethnography analyses events, practices, and affective structures, highlighting the dynamic, more-than-human elements of lifeworlds (Vannini, 2015). This perspective raises questions about child and childhood perceptions, challenging the Western child/adult dualism (Bohlmann & Hickey-Moody, 2019).

Research interest in subject-subject relations, affective and embodied communication, and the role of collaborations in literacy practices is increasing (Burnett et al., 2014; Burnett & Merchant, 2018; 2020; Leander & Ehret, 2019). There is a growing call to understand the affective and embodied aspects of literacy, as they are embedded in social and material contexts and formed through intricate relations between people and materials (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Leander & Ehret, 2019). Literacy practices are seen as ongoing reassemblages of people and matter, especially in early childhood education (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; 2020). This relational approach challenges the primacy of language in meaning-making, emphasising the need to consider affective and embodied entanglements (Leander & Ehret, 2019).

Findings suggest that children are more engaged when provided with diverse materials and opportunities to explore literacy practices (Thiel, 2015). A posthuman perspective and relational ontology highlights the use of space, resources, and embodied intra-actions in early childhood literacies (Hackett et al., 2020). Understanding the nuances of affective intensities and their entanglement with literacy practices is essential for unpacking the complexity of literacy learning and teaching.

The findings from Nordström (2023) show that joy emerges in multimodal and playful activities, where children create, share texts, and navigate affective text worlds (Nordström et al., 2019; 2022). These findings suggest the importance of material resources, diverse modes of expression, and attention to affective intensities in children's meaning-making. Affects are deeply entangled in the social and material aspects of literacy practices, highlighting the presence of joy in early years education (Nordström et al., 2022). These perspectives are crucial for understanding children's participation in complex social interactions and the unexpected assemblages in their literacy practices (Daniels, 2019; Nordström et al., 2021). The performative and transformative force of joy is an intricate entanglement within

intra-actions, emerging through thinking, seeing, reading, and engaging with theory (Nordström, 2022). Joy is influenced by the agentive entities involved but remains elusive and uncontrollable. It cannot be forced or easily predicted, requiring time, immersion, and openness to being moved and transformed by the event (Bennett, 2010; Nordström, 2022). Attending to the context and situatedness of these events, as well as their assemblage in place and time, is crucial to understanding joy as a performative force. Joy is diffused across assemblages, emerging in various modes through the intra-actions of agentive entities, rather than existing as a singular subject (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Kuby, 2014; Sheridan et al., 2020).

Re-Thinking Joy and Young Children's Literacy Practices

In this paper, I explore joy in young children's literacy practices through sociocultural and posthuman lenses, informed by the affective and material turns in educational sciences. Joy is examined as relational, material, and performative. Relational joy emerges from entanglements, material joy manifests in human and non-human interactions, and performative joy involves embodied actions and forces. A critical review of sociocultural and posthuman theories was conducted, evaluating their potentials and limitations. This paper discusses new methodological approaches to studying joy and literacy practices.

Methodological considerations

One aim of the paper was to broaden our interpretations of joy as an affective intensity, which goes beyond mere measurement and representation. Traditional research methods like interviews and observations are often insufficient for capturing the complexity of everyday life, suggesting a need to expand our empirical toolkit (Hall & Holmes, 2020). By focusing on affect and the openness of unfolding moments, a non-representational methodology was adopted to better capture these dynamics (Hackett, 2021).

This approach raises questions about how researchers engage with data, challenging the notion of data as passive and instead emphasising the active role of researchers in 'making data' (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Adopting a postqualitative methodology informed by posthuman theories allows for tracing the events, relationships, and intra-actions that contribute to the emergence of joy (Murriss, 2021; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018). This perspective suggests using the concept of 'empirical' to resist a positivist epistemology, focusing on experience rather than static data (Denzin, 2013).

An ethnographic methodology provides valuable insights into interactions, affects, and embodied experiences (Denzin, 1997; Zembylas, 2007). Ethnographic research also enables close attention to physical and social contexts, movements, sounds, and spatial elements (Pink, 2015). Sensory ethnography, in particular, enriches descriptions of events, helping readers to vividly experience them as portrayed in the study (Pink, 2015). In the research process, the material, sensory, corporeal, and fleshy dimensions of fieldwork play a significant role (Vannini, 2015), even if they are not seen as central to the empirical data generated (Hall & Holmes, 2020).

Ethical considerations

Researching children and their everyday lives involves complex ethical issues, particularly regarding the power dynamics and the role of the researcher as a knowledge producer (Chesworth, 2018; Hall & Holmes, 2020). Barad (2007) emphasises the inseparability of ethics, ontology, and epistemology, suggesting that knowledge production shapes the world and holds researchers accountable (Barad, 2007; Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). Posthuman perspectives argue for viewing children as subjects, emphasising their ongoing development alongside adults (Murriss, 2016; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

A post qualitative approach acknowledges both the nature of knowledge and its creation process (Ulmer, 2017), highlighting the role of affect and the researcher's reflective and affective involvement (Zembylas, 2007; Hall & Holmes, 2020). This approach often involves immersive and reflective methods that engage all senses, recognizing the limitations of words alone (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020; Pink, 2015). Researchers are always part of the research context, influencing and interpreting literacy practices (Kuby et al., 2018).

Pedagogical implications

The pedagogical contributions of this research highlight various ways to explore joy and promote multimodal literacy practices in ECEC. Nordström et al. (2019) emphasise that viewing children as capable producers of cultural artefacts allows them to be active and competent meaning-makers. Integrating materials and activities with children's personal experiences and reflections is crucial for meaning-making. The studies valued children's autonomy and choice, promoting equality through a pedagogy of multiliteracies and emphasising the potential of multimodal and sensory texts (Nordström et al., 2022). Expanding learning environments to include forests, libraries, and cultural institutions enhances children's agency and freedom.

The findings suggest that creativity, imagination, storytelling, and play are essential in early literacy practices, as joy often emerges unexpectedly in these contexts. Pedagogical designs should allow open-ended activities, enabling children to explore and engage with materials freely. Considering the entanglement of materials, spaces, and atmospheres in pedagogical choices can transform young children's literacy practices.

Capturing the messy reality of children's everyday lives is challenging, as research often seeks neat, generalizable representations. This research focuses on novel perspectives to approach joy, appreciating the present rather than solely preparing children for the future.

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