

Place, sustainability and young children's emergent literacies

Monday 1st July 2019

10-4:30, room G16, Brooks Building

At a time of increasing global anxiety about both the 'proper' development of young children, and the environmental sustainability of the Earth, research that bridges these fields may offer a route to reconceptualise the purpose and scope of early childhood literacies. In this seminar, invited academics working at the intersection of materiality, place, sustainability and young children's emergent literacies will discuss research that foregrounds the significance of non human encounters (with places, objects, the weather, materials, animals) for young children's meaning-making. The day marks the start of the development of an international research network, strengthening and formalising existing relationships with key academics in UK, Australia, Finland and Norway, with the aim of theorising an understanding of planetary sustainability that extends beyond human mastery and control, and articulating the contribution of early childhood education to this.

Programme

10am Arrival, tea and coffee

10:30 Big data and the micropolitics of the earth's becoming

Margaret Somerville, Annette Woods, Iris Duhn, Pauliina Rautio, Sarah Powell, Alison McConnell Imbriotis

12:30 Lunch

13:30 Affirmative literacy education?

Päivi Jokinen & Riikka Hohti, University of Oulu, Finland

14:00 Lines in the snow; minor paths in the search for sustainable early childhood education

Anne Myrstad, University of Tromsø, with Abi Hackett, MMU

14:30 Tentacular thinking in the sand tray

Christina MacRae, MMU

15:00 Working with Black radical studies: Decolonising childhood, language and pedagogy

Laura Trafi-Prats, MMU

15:30 Discussion time

16:30 End

Abstracts

Big data and the micropolitics of the earth's becoming

Margaret Somerville, Annette Woods, Iris Duhn, Pauliina Rautio, Sarah Powell, Alison McConnell Imbriotis

Our presentation will address the methodological problem of Big Data. In our small focused presentations analyses and publications about Naming the World, the focus is on exquisite moments of encounter with children and their vital sensory emergent worlds. Even in a single site there are an infinitesimal number of these moments that have been recorded. When we come to consider the data from all of our sites, we realise that our data is BIG, and confront the question of what to do with BIG data. So we engage with contemporary discussions about data in relation to the phenomenon of BIG data in order to inhabit the binary of BIG data versus qualitative, postqualitative, and posthuman research.

Affirmative literacy education?

Päivi Jokinen, University of Oulu, Finland and Riikka Hohti, MMU

“The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people” (Orr, 2005). The field of literacy education is moving more and more in a neoliberal, progress-oriented and skill-based direction although the discrepancy between the central aims of our educational systems and the context of the seriously worrying state of our planet seems completely unsustainable. We, adults, have failed to carry our responsibilities and now the younger generations have needed to step up, in the words of the 15-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg: "We live in a strange world, where children must sacrifice their own education in order to protest against the destruction of their future."

Recently in our thinking with Riikka, we have been strongly drawn to ethical considerations. We have been re-imagining how, when practiced in “minor ways” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986), educational research on literacies could be enforced differently, so that by creating a “laboratory of the new” called forth by Braidotti (2018), we as researchers might be producing hope and action for more sustainable literacy landscapes. Working with Spinozist affect theory might offer one way of producing minor science where the more-than-human bodies’ capacities of affecting and being affected within worldly assemblages could produce lines of flight to escape from the “Trumpocene”. With Kuby & Rowsell (2017, 293) we ask whether posthumanism in literacy studies could serve activist purposes since the state of the planet calls for new ethics where “we are continuously generating justice by being in time with others who are an entangled us (Ehret, Hollett & Jocius, 2016, p. 374).

Lines in the snow; minor paths in the search for sustainable early childhood education

Anne Myrstad, University in Tromsø

This paper explores what place means for early childhood education at a time of global environmental precarity. We draw on fieldwork in ‘the north north’, Arctic Norway, where kindergarten children spend time with deep snow for more than half of the year. The paper interrogates some examples of children’s entanglement with snow, in order to

highlight how children's movement attunes to the nuances and diversity of the snow, as seasons, temperature, light, wind and weather changes the consistency of snow and the possibilities for what can occur. In a place where seasonal temporality matters, in extreme ways that change how children's bodies can move, we consider what children's entanglement with snow can teach us about sustainability. We argue that paying attention to what happens here enables us to think beyond the notion of humans as masterful and in control of environment. Writing against mastery, Ingold advocates for a "lifetime of intimate gestural and sensory engagement" as a way of learning to attune more deeply to place and take seriously the way in which place shapes human action and human action shapes place.

Tentacular thinking in the sand tray

Christina MacRae, MMU

I will reflect on a slow-motion video clip of the hands of three young children as they play with toys in the sand tray. Foregrounding sand, the toys that are handled, as well as hands that grasp and relinquish things, I explore how things animate bodies, and how this produces the felt-sense of other desiring bodies. As hands tender things they are animated by what they touch, and simultaneously things are animated through the give and take of pulls and pushes of desire expressed as a kinetic force. The slowed film of hands in motion draws our attention from words, towards a (re)cognition of a sensed intelligence which is not pre-language, but is produced *before* language, as well as *with* language. I use the data to explore ways that child development theories are inextricably bound up in narratives of human exceptionalism founded in language and moralism, in order to make the case for re-instating sense as a mode of attention in order to counter a lack that is perceived until children learn language. By troubling the boundaries drawn between the animal and the human, I will argue that, as adults, we might learn from very young children's capacities for sensory ways of knowing that can be eclipsed language.

Working with Black radical studies: Decolonising childhood, language and pedagogy

Laura Trafi-Prats

In this paper, I think with the concepts of place, the outside, and the senses through the perspective of Black radical study, and in the context of an art project done in collaboration with urban children in a city of the American Midwest. Black radical study constitutes an interdisciplinary field of philosophy, cultural studies of diaspora, aesthetic theory, art and politics that stems from the legacies of abolitionist thought and Black feminism. Black radical study demands modes of thinking capable to attune towards minor, almost imperceptible movements of life that happen within scenes of violence, lack of care and subjection. I propose that Black radical study could be central in the envisioning and enactment of childhood pedagogies that attend to other affects in images, sounds and world-matterings that do not yield to the imperial, capitalist and governance aesthetics of the Enlightenment and modern science. Black radical study suggests practices of care based on listening for "other affective frequencies" (Campt, 2017, p. 9), and inventing radical forms of expression and communication (Moten, 2018) that point at the possibility that there is always *more to pedagogical relations than* what is seen, what is said, and what is known (Sharpe, 2017).