Children's Encounters with Things: Schooling the Body.

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Introduction

Elizabeth Grosz draws our attention to the way that object and things can 'pose questions to us, questions about our needs and desires, questions above all of action'. She goes on to suggest that we would do well to develop an understanding of [the] '*thing as question*, as provocation, incitement, or enigma' (2009, p. 125, author's own emphasis).

These insightful observations offer a frame in which to situate the paper where the aim is to examine how (extra)ordinary 'things' are used to (re)produce formulaic and predictable performances (Butler, 1999) within the context of an early years classroom. Using ethnographic data I focus on a series of encounters where oscillations between (in)animate objects and the child work at schooling the body (Foucault, 1975). I also note how the 'work' of things constitutes a point of tension where on the one hand they

are implicated in discourses of normalisation yet simultaneously work at 'othering'. I also argue that children's relationships with and through things can open up possibilities for dislocating sedimented pedagogical practices where 'something else' becomes possible.

Situating the paper: the context and theoretical framework

This paper is informed by a funded research project[1] where the principle aim was to understand how and why children, aged 4-5 years of age can earn for themselves or are given negative reputations including descriptors such as 'naughty'. The research was undertaken in the reception classroom[2] of four primary schools that are located in the northwest of England over an eighteen-month period. The schools covered a range of student populations and provision including: a 'faith' school with students of mainly white-British heritage and high entitlement of free school meals; an inner city school with a multi-ethnic intake including asylum seekers and refugees; a school in a 'leafy suburb' of moderately affluent homes; a city school in an area of social deprivation but where the overall organisation of the school was organised around principles of free-flow provision and free-choice[3].

Although potentially there were 108 children (approximately 27 per class) whom we could have observed and interacted with inevitably as time progressed some children garnered more of our attention than others. The project team spent one day a week at each of the schools. This ensured a consistent presence. It also contributed towards rich ethnographic (Gertz, 1983) insights into the schools' cultures. Qualitative data was collected via detailed observation/field notes, video and audio recordings of interactions both in the classroom as well as outside in the play areas, at lunchtime recess and other settings within the schools (Carbaugh, 2007). Interviews were also undertaken with teachers and children and we recorded group conversations that took place between all researchers involved in the project together with the early years teachers gathered together from across the four schools. In this paper I draw mainly on observational field notes.

The paper is informed by a discourse-based approach towards identity as articulated within poststructuralist theory (Foucault, 1972) and which finds resonance in the work of Burman, (1994; 2010); Cannella, (2002), Davies, (1989); Jones, (2001); Brown and Jones, (2001), MacLure et al, (2012). Such an approach perceives identity as produced in the discursive practices that make up the social world.

Butler's (1999) work around identity and performance is also helpful. By thinking of identity categories as 'fictional' products of regimes of power/knowledge and power/discourse there is recognition that there is nothing inevitable about identity categories including that of the 'normal' child' or the 'intelligible/unintelligible' child. I am also interested in the operations of discourses that is, what they mobilise or shut out where some actions, behaviour, performances and so on are allowed whilst others are rebuffed (Britzman, 2000).

In addition to poststructuralism I draw on theories that focus on and are sensitive to the place of the material (Brown, 2009; Grosz, 2009; Barard, 2008) within the space of the classroom (Thrift, 2008). Such a step, I suggest makes us mindful of those 'negotiated relationships' that we have 'with every aspect of [our] sensuous surroundings', where we exchange 'possibilities with every flapping form, with each textured surface and shivering entity that we happened to focus upon' (Abram, 1996, p. ix). I am, therefore, interested in the possibilities that the data offers where members are implicated in assembling themselves, objects and a whole gamut of social structures in order to produce the familiar and the habitual where what is strange or alien is rendered as 'other'.

'Thing' as question, as provocation, incitement, or enigma

The paper begins by using two examples of field notes, which serve to locate the reader within the material space of the classroom, a space that is 'made up of all kinds of things'. It is argued that through a 'continuous process of encounter' children are enmeshed in forms of 'violent training' that the 'encounter enforces' (Thrift, 2006, p. 139).

The children are all sitting on their bottoms around the teacher's chair in the small, carpeted space. It seems cramped, but some remain engaged in a whole class literacy activity. The children are looking towards the whiteboard, most sitting with their legs crossed, but a couple at the back have their legs outstretched. From her chair, Ms Kellogg calls out children's names and sends them off to begin various activities scattered around the classroom. She begins with those children who are 'sitting beautifully'. (Field notes, October 2006).

In general this first snippet of data conjures a classroom scene that – within an English context - is familiar and commonplace. Indeed the practice of … *children all sitting on their bottoms around the teacher's chair…* was

repetitively played out in each of the four classrooms where we located the study. Following Foucault (1995) we can perceive the positioning of both the children and the teacher as a discursive practice aimed at schooling and disciplining the body. For Foucault the body is key to discipline. So whilst there are no overt practices being exerted on the children's bodies the carpet is nevertheless one of the methods or in Thrift's words a 'violent training' (2006) used to subjugate the body so as to render it docile. Working in unison, the carpet and the teacher's chair both create and sustain a power relation. It is this spatial relationship that allows the teacher to 'see constantly and recognise immediately' (Foucault, 1995, p. 194). This is the Foucauldian notion of 'productive power' where ' it produces reality...it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth where the individual and the knowledge gained of him (*sic*) belong to this production' (Foucault, 1995, p. 194).

Whilst Foucault notes that it is 'visibility' that 'traps' the body (p. 200) I also want to consider material relations that are less easy to discern. Such a step means thinking beyond or outside of boundaries where the space between the bodies and the carpet are 'porous' to some degree (Thrift, 2006). Being 'porous' denotes leakiness or permeability so that the body and the carpet are 'caught up in things' (Brown, 2009, p. 14) within an 'encounter' (Thrift, 2006). It is

in the encounter that (in)visible stuff happens including the shedding of traces, memories and messages (Thrift, 2006) which fabricate a sensuous force that in this instance prompts the child to sit beautifully or persuades legs to be outstretched.

But whilst carpets are often used to soften an environment, in school they can become a place of cramped containment. The architect, writer and educator, Bernard Tschumi foregrounds the intensity that is in circulation between individuals and their immediate surroundings. Tschumi notes, "... the pleasurable and sometimes violent confrontation of spaces and activities..." where the notion of violence is described as the "... intensity of a relationship between individuals and their surrounding spaces..." (Tschumi, 1994, p. 22). It is possible to align Tschumi's thinking around the body and its relationship with buildings and objects and Foucault's work around discourses where both are 'dangerous' (Tschumi, 1994; Foucault, 1984). Thus, for Tschumi violence is not only fundamental but also unavoidable because it is linked to events in the same way that 'the guard is linked to the prisoner, the police to the criminal, the doctor to the patient, order to chaos' (18). I suggest that the classroom becomes part of a violent confrontation, a context of simultaneous space and event, where bodies violate spaces and spaces violate bodies a

series of complex relational politics within the space the classroom creates and the activities it embodies. The violent confrontation may be suggestive of an intensely regimented interaction between the physical enclosure of the classroom space, the educational discourses within which it is embedded and in turn perpetuates, and the policing of regulated and normative behaviours. Boldt (2001) continues this theme when she suggests that, 'The persistent obsession with how students move, position themselves, and make themselves aware of the incongruence between required actions and their physical needs and desires functions as a central site for the enactment of power relations' (Boldt, 2001: 94). Similarly Bourdieu highlights how:

> …nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and therefore more precious than the values given body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy through injunctions as insignificant as 'stand up straight' or ' don't hold your knife in your left hand'…The whole trick of pedagogic reason lies precisely in

the way it extorts the essential while seeming to demand the insignificant (Bourdieu, 1977: 94-95).

Let us now turn to the second example of data:

Jack sits on the teacher's chair and grins at me [the researcher] when he catches my eye. He moves to sit on the carpet. (Field notes, March, 2007).

If the spatial swirl of affects between carpet and child are - in the main - crucial to the disciplining of the child what can be said of those at play between Jack and the teacher's chair? As has already been noted it is the chair that physically elevates the teacher and as a consequence helps to mark out the dyadic relationship between adult and child and in so doing contributes towards asserting the teacher's presence and power. But I think that the above snippet conjures more than this. Following Elizabeth Grosz (2009) we can understand the chair as an object or thing, which has a history, and that, rather than being a passive and inert thing, it has a 'life' of its own, characteristics of its own. Grosz notes that 'we need to accommodate things more than they accommodate us' (p. 125) yet, whilst the data is brief it nevertheless points to the way in which the chair itself has the *capacity* to unseat Jack, where he has to accommodate

and respond to both it's lure and it's r(ejection).

Grosz makes the point that 'the thing is what we make of the world rather than simply what we find in the world'. She continues, 'things are our way of dealing with a world in which we are *enmeshed* rather than over which we have domination' (ibid, 126, my emphasis). Thus on the one hand our common sense, our language and our experiences of practical life informs us that the chair is simply for sitting on. As Bergson reminds us, 'Our intelligence, when it follows its natural inclination, proceeds by solid perceptions on the one hand, and by stable conceptions on the other' (1992, p. 223). This is a form of thinking that we are comfortable with. Yet if we see the chair or indeed the carpet as merely stable, solid entities aren't we in danger of forgetting or ignoring the states, sensations and ideas that these things conjure? Is it not possible within the brief snippet to see the chair as toying with Jack? Can we see it as *active,* redolent with vibrations, sensations, movements and intensities that call to the boy and encourage him to make the move from obedient boy to transgressor?

In Jack's classroom, and indeed in all of the classrooms where the project was located the teacher's chair is not just simply a chair. As Brian Massumi notes (following both Deleuze and Neitzche), the chair isn't just an observable fact

or 'an appearance' (1992, p.10). Rather, it is imbued with authoritative, powerful qualities. But qualities are much more than simply logical properties or sense perceptions. 'Qualities', as Massumi remarks, envelop a 'potential', that is 'the capacity to be affected, or to release a force'. I have already hinted at the chair's potential to attract/pull/draw/repel Jack; yet why does it have these qualities? Massumi offers us some directions when he suggests that, the chair as 'a presence of [the] sign is a contraction of time. It is simultaneously an indicator of a future potential and a symptom of a past'. Thus the chair 'envelops' material forces pointing forward (Jack potentially in trouble for sitting on the chair; the continuing locus of teacher-led activities as well as the continuing locus of her authority; the chair's continuing out-of-bound(ness) for the children) and backward (the evolution of the chair from materials; the cultural actions that brought that particular chair to the classroom for a particular purpose). The meaning of the chair thus becomes located within a network of material processes. The chair, as sign is saturated and enveloped in meaning, which has resonations in relation to interpretation. For the teacher the chair has use value. The use and the interpretations that all the teachers make and bring to the chair is 'defined by the cultural needs and fashions of countless others' (Massumi, 1992, p. 11). Think

here of the training that each teacher has received in particular institutions and the formalised knowledge that each has accrued. Such knowledge has not just emerged from specific institutions, but rests on the accumulated knowledge (of countless others) over extensive passages of time. Interpretation in general but specifically in relation to the chair is 'force', and 'an application of force is the outcome of an endless interplay of processes natural and historical, individual and institutional' (Massumi, 1992, p. 11).

Whilst we might see the chair as active and imbued with force it nevertheless seems to carry a constant and uniform meaning across each of the four classrooms, where its use by the teachers is stable, uniform and repetitive. It is, if you like, 'translated' in remarkably similar ways. But as Massumi forewarns, 'the institutional dimension of reproductivity does not imply a firmness under foot or fixity of connection' and that '...there is always the possibility that the event will be carried far enough afield that it will *fall from its accustomed framework* ' (ibid, p.19 my emphasis).

Given this, I ask: is it possible to perceive Jack's enmeshment with the chair, the catching of eyes with the researcher and finally his grin as implicated in or embroiled within the 'fall' from 'its accustomed framework'? So, whilst

habit and repetition suggest that there are unequivocal grounds or solid reason that determines the use of the chair are their possibilities for 'things' to go awry? Put a little differently, does Jack offer a performative challenge to the reiterative performance of the chair? Again I turn to Massumi where he notes, that the thing, is… 'in itself' …'only the sum total of the graspings to which it lends itself, a set of angles of potential intervention by outside bodies'. In Massumi's terms then, Jack and the chair are drawn into interactions or a set of affects, which constitute 'new circuits of causality'. Thus 'thought-perception' passes between each and in so doing 'reaches into things, launches them up through the atmosphere of language, and in the same motion returns them, altered, into the depths of matter'. I take this notion of 'altered' as referencing both boy and chair where both have been acted upon where movements including those of 'genesis and annihilation' (p. 37) occur. There is then, processes or dynamics between chair and boy, or, if you will, a continual 'becoming' where 'something' of both the boy and chair 'dies' but where new becomings (p. 38) are always materialised.

Within school Jack is understood within the categories of 'boy' and 'child' and it is through these that he is contained, subjugated, and schooled. They demand that he behaves, sits and moves in stable, coherent and predictable ways.

Similarly his learning is predicated on stable, coherent, predictable and formulaic steps, which are in turn based on a 'comprehensive theory of development' (Morss, 1996 p. 153). I want to suggest, however, that the dynamic between boy and chair hints at other forms of understanding which finds little or no space within the orthodoxies that circumscribe children's cognition within school. Barad echoes similar thoughts when she notes, 'There is an important sense in which practices of knowing cannot be fully claimed as human practices, not simply because we use non-human elements in our practices, but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part' (2008, p. 146).

I also want to suggest that the grin that passes between the researcher and the boy gestures towards a form of 'knowingness' that escapes schooled intervention and is as a consequence different to the scripted knowledge that Jack is meant to have or meant to acquire. His grin hints at an ironic, tongue-in-cheek knowledge of what is going-on between the teacher and the children and more specifically what is going-on with and through the chair. I will return to his (re)turn to the carpet subsequently. For now I want to focus on the use and abuse of a soft toy within the context of the classroom.

The hard lessons of a soft toy

Brian Massumi makes the point that 'any object we care to interrogate, however humble, proves to be a multilayered formation of staggering complexity' (52). I want to take this observation across to Ishmael, a four-year-old Libyan boy. Ishmael's class teacher described him as having '*some autistic tendencies*' (interview with teacher, October 2008). This descriptor was not based on medical evidence but rather on what was observed (and described) as his inability to conform physically and socially to a number of expectations that the majority of other children seemed to readily achieve. Very often the teacher would offer Ishmael a soft toy to hold. This was particularly the case when the children had to join the whole school in the large hall for collective worship. It was felt that the toy offered Ishmael comfort and solace:

Ms V makes a point of asking Ishmael whether he would like to choose a soft toy from the basket so that he has "something to hold, to touch and to cuddle" when he is in the hall (field notes, October 2007).

On the one hand we can see the soft toy as an embodiment of care. Following Walkerdine (1990) it becomes possible to

perceive Ms V as incorporating some of the qualities that characterise the early years pedagogue where she is sensitive to and nurturing of Ishmael's needs. She knows Ishmael as an 'individual'. She offers him 'choice' and by exhorting him to hold, touch and cuddle the soft toy she 'talks' him into (re)sembling the 'active' child who lies at the centre of child-centred education (Walkerdine, 1990: 119). But as Carbaugh (2007) cautions we should take such scenarios and unravel them so as to foreground the subtle imbalances that lie within Ms V's exchanges with Ishmael.

In asking, what are the consequences or 'the relative worth of this practice among the participants?' (Carbaugh, 2007: 172) I find the post-colonial notion of 'othering' helpful (Bhabha, 1994). 'Othering' is a way of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization of an "other." It is the practice of comparing ourselves to others whilst at the same time *distancing* ourselves from them. By evoking *distance* and *difference* one's own normalcy is reconfirmed. Whatever the markers of social differentiation that shape the meaning of "us" and "them" whether they are racial, geographic, ethnic, economic or ideological, there is always the danger that they will become the basis for a self-affirmation that depends upon the denigration of the other group (Spivak, 1999). It is this limiting, the act of defining

and placing the 'other' outside the boundaries of the self that is seen in the act of 'othering'.

 'Othering' is associated with and materializes in mimicking and mimicry (Bhabha, 1994; Sharpe, 1995; MacLure, 2003). As Bhabha notes, 'mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal' (p. 86). On the one hand, giving the soft toy to Ishmael becomes part of a strategy of reform, regulation and discipline. In short, holding the toy allows him to appear as a 'model' pupil where the model is prescribed within normative assumptions. But as mimic Ishmael is always a 'sign' of the 'inappropriate' and hence 'poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers' (Bhaba, p. 86). Thus mimicry is a 'disturbing and ambivalent force' (MacLure, 2003: 97), which threatens the status quo of the classroom.

If the soft toy works at camouflaging Ishmael the question then arises what exactly is it covering up? What is Ishmael 'meant' to be? What sorts of presumptions and assumptions are located in and around the soft toy? That Ishmael should be 'able' to keep his body still? That he should have certain competencies and skills? That he should be like this and not that?

Within the scope of early childhood education several

commentators have marked out how developmental psychology is used to legitimate both curricular design and pedagogy (e.g. Burman, 2008; Fendler, 2003; Cannella and Viruru, 2004). As a science developmental psychology functions as an instrument of authorization or validation. However as the cited commentators have all inferred we forget that the findings of developmental psychology need to be questioned and tested. Instead we deploy them as 'truths' and as 'truths' they justify a whole gamut of practices that mark some children as 'different' (Fendler, 2001: 125). Such differences can also lead to physical distancing where children are for example taken out of class for remediation classes, or like Ishmael given a soft toy to hold. The soft toy therefore becomes a tool for 'bringing in' Ishmael from the margins where it is presupposed that there is a 'prefabricated naturalized space' (Graham and Slee, 2005, p. 6). The soft toy is a hard lesson that aims at denying difference. It is a disciplinary tool that is based on the appeal of classification. It is a desperate measure aimed at normalising, taming and (so-called) civilising. It is used to both fix Ishmael and affix him to a normalised account of 'the child' that is in itself of questionable substance (Butler, 1999).

The possibilities of some(thing) else

Previously I noted that despite their coercive propensities, children's relationships with and through things can open up possibilities for 'something else' to become possible. Let me track back to the carpet. As I illustrated it is matter that is crucial in disciplining the body. It contains the children, keeps them still and coerces their bodies into uniform shape. As a material object within a specific space it intersects with what Bhabha (1994) calls rules of recognition that is the behavioural rules through which it is assumed the children will 'normally' occupy a space. Given this, is it possible to alter habitual practices so that we can tamper with these behavioural rules? Can we activate what Boys (2008) describes as a 'positive stutter in space and time'? To illuminate her point she cites a meeting held at Tate Modern:

> The occupants are settling: time is taken negotiating and sorting the space for a better fit. A woman lies across a large black sofa (out of her wheelchair and in less pain on her back). One of the speakers is short of stature. He rests his chin and arm directly on the table. Other people position themselves and are positioned – for comfort, for view, for friendship…The conventional serried ranks of chairs are disrupted. Adapted, some shuffled into smaller semi-circles of parallel

conversations. Relationships in the space take on a different form, from parallel and active/passive to eddying and contingent…All sorts of spaces are endlessly being negotiated.

Taking these images across to the carpet I begin to consider how it might become a 'pedagogically charged space' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 22) where different relations and sensations could be activated so as to encourage rather than deflect learning. I wonder what possible assemblages could occur where bodies, minds and carpet are intertwined, where sensations between the child and the carpet become a constituent of learning and understanding. I question how the children might inhabit the carpet so that it becomes a 'better fit' where both 'better' and 'fit' are regularly and reflexively contested?

In turning now to Jack, I ask: 'why did the researcher's glance prompt his return to the carpet?' The answer is quite straightforward. It is because the room is regulated around common sense that Jack knows he has to shift himself. Following Massumi (1992) we can see the chair as implicated in the rational project for order where through operations of power it becomes embroiled in the moral and physical training of Jack so that the 'ideal' child is produced.

But as I have already inferred, what also occurred between Jack and the chair could be described as 'force'. Massumi warns that 'force is not to be confused with power' (Massumi, 1992, p. 6). 'Power', he asserts, is the 'domestication of force' (ibid, p. 6). Paradoxically, the chair is both power and force. It keeps Jack in his proper place, a place that is defined linearly where unruly child will become subjugated subject. But I want to also suggest that the chair and Jack constitute an alliance where both are immersed in a changing state of things, in other words 'force'. Whilst 'power builds walls' (Massumi, 1992, p. 6) 'force' potentiates 'something' that is qualitatively different to the 'striated' or predictable and formulaic steps that are enshrined in linear developmental accounts of young children and their learning. Despite having to (re)turn to the carpet I do think that 'something' has happened between the chair and the boy, a 'something' that is akin to a physical frisson that 'is more elemental than a process of intellectualization' (de Bolla, 2001, p. 2) but which nevertheless constitutes a form of learning. If philosophy can be understood as the 'art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 2) can we not see education in similar terms? Doesn't 'force' break with the constraints imposed by orthodoxies and in so doing allow us - especially me - to imagine different vistas (Massumi, 1992)?

And what about the soft toy and its relationship to Ishmael? Currently his teacher deploys it on humane grounds. But we can also see how such practices constitute him as different and as a consequence the soft toy shores up the able, normal body. Her anxiety and her concerns about taking him into the school hall are two-fold where first his body threatens what is 'normal' and second he jeopardises her own performance as the 'normal' teacher who is in control and so on. She works hard to act in the child's best interests but because these "interests" are tied to political imperatives to produce normalised subjects, she has to assume the role of "the coloniser". Effectively the colonial project is channelled through her body too (Cannella and Bailey, 1999).

Whilst 'things' have traditionally been relegated to the non-human this paper has tried to understand them as 'a doing' (Barad, 2008, p. 139). So whilst there has been recognition of those discursive practices that circulate within the early years classroom I have also been sensitive to the way things 'matter'. In so doing I have tried to illustrate how both child and thing are mutually implicated. Karen Barad writes, 'We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because "we" are of the world'. And whilst I think

that such 'knowledge' is difficult and dangerous in that sense that Deborah Britzman refers to I suggest that the acquisition of it is not only possible but also necessary.

Notes

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2. Reception classes (for children aged 5) are the first stages of compulsory schooling in the UK.

3. Whilst one school was organised around the principle of 'free flow' and 'free choice' (students self select where they want to work and which activities they want to pursue) the interactional and disciplinary strategies used by staff at whole class plenary sessions were indistinguishable from those in the other schools. This suggests that interactions between adults and reception-age children are regulated by deep-seated

assumptions and discourses that may override

differences of organisation and ethos.

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