Children and objects: affection and infection

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Abstract.

This paper considers young children's (aged 3 – 5 years) relations with objects, and in particular objects that are brought from home to school. We begin by considering the place of objects within early years classrooms and their relationship to children's education before considering why some objects are often separated from their owners on entry to the classroom. We suggest that the 'arrest' of objects is as a consequence of them being understood as 'infecting' specific perceptions or constructs of young children. We further suggest that a focus on the dichotomy between affection/infection for and of certain objects offers new possibilities for seeing and engaging with children, thus expanding the narrow imaginaries of children that are coded in developmental psychology (Burman, 1994; 2008; Morss, 1996), UK early years education policy (DfES, 2007) and classroom practice.

Key words: objects; early years pedagogy; affection; infection

Introduction

Early years education and care is inextricably linked with objects. As way of capturing something of this history we offer a brief overview that foregrounds some of the underlying principles and philosophy between (some) objects and children's educational well-being. We also briefly summarise contemporary approaches to working with

objects where they are seen as potential sites for community building (Pahl, 2004; 2007; Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) and identity performance (Butler, 1990). We then move to look at a particular phenomenon that occurred in each of the four classrooms where we were undertaking an ethnographic project. In all four classrooms we became aware that some objects that were brought from home were often separated from their owners on entry to the classroom. Very often the teachers or the child would place the objects in a drawer or a box; sometimes parents would be encouraged to take certain item(s) home. Subsequently we offer a sustained analysis around this practice where we address a number of questions including: why are some objects denied access into the classroom? In what way might some objects threaten or be understood as 'infecting' perceptions of 'the child'? We go on to suggest that a focus on the dichotomy affection/infection for and of certain objects offers new possibilities for seeing and engaging with children, thus expanding the narrow imaginaries of children that are coded in developmental psychology (Burman, 1994; 2008; Morss, 1996) UK early years education policy (DfES, 2007) and classroom practice.

Affection for objects: why 'matter' matters within early years pedagogy

Zuckerman (2006) coins the phrase 'learning objects' to describe the physical objects that are universally used in western early years classrooms. He defines three categories of learning objects based

on the educational pioneers of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and John Dewey (1859-1952): construction and design; conceptual manipulation and reality role-play (p. 1). Froebel, for example, designed and developed a series of instruction materials that he referred to as 'gifts and occupations'. A gift was an object including sphere, cube or cylindrical blocks. The primary function of the 'gifts' was to engage the child so she could express her own ideas through design and construction. By contrast, the methods and use of objects pioneered by Maria Montessori fall within the category of conceptual manipulation. Montessori's materials were designed to isolate a specific attribute such as height, length, width, depth, or colour. Materials were developmentally graded so that the child moved from simple objects to more advanced ones, at their own pace. The teacher's role within the Montessori method could be described as passive/active where on the one hand children were encouraged to work independently whilst on the other the teacher was constantly vigilant about providing opportunities for learning through 'indirect teaching and educational input' (Zuckerman, 2006: 4). John Dewey's philosophy was predicated on his belief that objects should contribute towards children's understanding of and an appreciation of themselves within the real world. His views spawned a proliferation of child-scaled, real world artifacts including kitchen appliances. household tools, furniture, cups, plates, food and so on. Because such objects were part of the child's 'habitat' they could

form the basis for 'active occupation' and 'directed living' through which the child 'will learn' (Dewey, 2001: 13).

Having briefly foregrounded something of the history of why matter 'matters' in early years classroom we want to turn to more recent use of objects within education where they are perceived as having the capacity to create opportunities for developing understanding about culture, family life and community (Pahl, 2004; 2007; Pahl and Rowsell, 2010). By drawing on cultural studies, ethnography and anthropology objects or 'artifacts' are used so as to address a number of pertinent questions (e.g. 'how do artifacts connect communities?') within times that are characterized by diversity and fragmentation (Hall and du Gay, 1996). As said, the driver underpinning this work with objects is one of 'understanding'. This is predicated on a pedagogy of 'domain crossing' where an artifact or object moves from one context (e.g. home) to another, (e.g. school) where the 'crossing' itself is invested with 'significance' (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010: 16).   As Pahl and Rowsell (2010: 16) note, 'when a child takes a special object such as a favourite teddy bear or cup, and talks about it at school, a boundary line has been crossed'. Objects are therefore seen as being imbued with children's every day lives and they can as a consequence 'make connections across the domains of home, community, and school'. They carry 'the today-ness' (p. 16) of children's lives and for that reason offer insights into that life.

Objects of affect(ion): transitional objects

We noted how some objects could manage the trauma of separation. Alisha, a three-year-old girl of Pakistani heritage and her Brown Dog were for instance inseparable. Following Winnicott's psychological theories (2009) we could understand Alisha's dependence on Brown Dog as stemming from a realization that she is dependent on others, particularly her mother and in so doing she loses the idea that she independent, a realization that manifests in frustration and apprehension. Brown Dog, as a 'not me' possession, offers and represents a form of mothering. Brown Dog is a defence against anxiety and allows Alisha to negotiate the separation from home and the complexities of schooling. For Alisha her relationship with Brown Dog carries almost magical qualities. We observed that Alisha's teachers were always sympathetic to her need for Brown Dog and indeed they included the dog in all the daily rituals of classroom life including calling Brown Dog's name at registration time and inviting the dog to 'paint a picture' and so on. As an object Brown Dog is being perceived as a precursor to a trusting relationship between Alisha and her early years classroom. Referencing Winnicott we could say that Brown Dog handles the '… space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world' (2009: 69). Brown Dog, security blankets, teddy bears and dolls are all objects that have been embodied within (UK) belief systems and customs concerning

young children. They are part of what Clarke et al refer to as 'maps of meaning' that 'makes things intelligible to its members' (quoted in Jackson, 2003: 2). Hence Alisha's teachers see her current need for Brown Dog as perfectly normal.

Objects and disciplining the body

We saw other objects being 'put to work' but where the objective was to instill inclusion by rendering a child docile. Ishmael, a four-year-old Libyan boy who was thought to have autistic tendencies was often given a soft toy to hold. However unlike Alisha the need for the object was less to do with engendering trust and more to do with instilling a form of docility (Foucault, 1977) within the boy and provoking a semblance or performance (Butler, 1990) of the 'normal child'. Ishmael was allowed to take a soft toy into the school's large hall when he and the rest of his reception class joined the whole school for morning assembly. The act of cuddling and stroking the toy worked at both calming him and distracting him so that he wouldn't stand up or call out or perform any of the idiosyncratic behaviours that marked him out as different when in the classroom. The soft toy instilled conformity so that he gave an appearance of being 'less different' and hence more regular. He 'fitted' within what is seen as customary or as 'making sense' within this school community. Through the object Ishmael could give a performance that is commensurate with a 'stages and ages' based account of childhood. The soft toy therefore becomes a tool for 'bringing in'

(Graham and Slee, 2005: 6) Ishmael from the margins. Graham and Slee elaborate further when they note that to 'bring in', 'presupposes a whole into which something (or someone) can be incorporated'. They continue, 'it would therefore be reasonable to argue that there is an implicit centredness to the term for it discursively privileges notions of the pre-existing by seeking to include the Other into a prefabricated, naturalised space' (p. 6).

The colonising of objects

In one setting we became curious about the active use of Superheroes in the writing area of the classroom. Superheroes have a checkered history in early years classrooms where they are closely aligned with gunplay and violence (Author, 1999; Author and Brown, 1999; Author, 2001; Holland, 2003) and are as a consequence often outlawed. Indeed, in each of the four classrooms there were examples of small Superhero figures, including Batman, Superman and Buzz Lightyear that had all been 'arrested'. Paradoxically this included the classroom where a range of superhero paraphernalia (pencils, pictures, stickers and figures) was being used as an inducement to encourage the children, particularly the boys to the writing area. What appears to be happening then, is that on the one hand artifacts from popular culture (Dyson, 1993, 2003) are being mixed with school-based literacy practices (Street and Street, 1991) where they work at inspiring writing (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010). But on the other they are viewed with degrees of

suspicion which as we outline below results in banishment.

The 'arrest' of objects

We have, albeit briefly, tried to map out the evident affection that objects hold within the context of early years education. They can (and do) prop up children's learning, they can offer magical solace to a worried three year old and they can contribute towards disguising out of kilter and (ec)centric behaviour. There are however other objects that are subject to control. In the UK some of these are itemised in home-school agreements or behaviour policies[2]. Rationales for controlling objects refer to the dangers of distraction, theft, loss, covetousness, bullying and or physical harm. In such rationales, we start to glimpse the threat of objects. An object may be a danger to self or others; or a distraction from the serious business of learning; or an incitement to inappropriate social behaviour, such as coercion or theft. It may stir up unwanted affect, such as anxiety if lost or stolen; or annoyance or complaint from parents. Expensive objects may encourage undesirable tendencies such as bragging or ostentatious display, and correspondingly, feelings of envy or exclusion on the part of children who could not hope to possess them.

Already we can see, then, how objects are implicated in the social and moral order of the school. Seemingly inert, their arrest at the threshold of the classroom suggests that they have a lively potential

for causing trouble on a variety of fronts – pedagogic, emotional, and social. It is worth noting that the capacity for trouble that is discerned in objects amounts to recognition of a sort of agency. When objects travel from home to school, outside to inside, they become potential *agitators*, both in the sense of agents with the power to make things happen, and infiltrators who come from 'outside' to stir up unwanted actions and feelings. As *agitators* certain objects do not sit comfortably with the Early Years Foundations Stage (EYFS) guidance (DfES, 2007) where there is an emphasis on 'taking turns', 'sharing fairly' and 'understanding that there needs to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups of people…to work harmoniously' (EYFS: 1).

Objects and the 'infection' of 'the child'

We can learn more about the threat of objects by looking at some examples that were 'arrested' in each of the four classrooms where we undertook the study.   These included: a dummy (pacifier); two model metal cars; a motorbike; a bracelet made up of bright plastic beads; a purple feathery headband replete with two antennae on which two plastic butterflies were attached; a small plastic Winnie-the-Pooh model; several pairs of pink plastic sunglasses; several children's watches - one adorned with a Superhero figure; two Bratz dolls' annuals; several tubes of bright pink lip balm pens; a small plastic replica of a Start Wars' Light Saber; Super Mario, Spider-Man, Thomas the Tank Engine, Ben 10 ; Wall-e the robot; a 'Top Trumps'

pack and a 'pog'[3].

Without attempting to analyse or account for every item in detail, we can see that the collection opens up some further insights into how objects may offend, and what this can tell us about both the normal order of the classroom and perceptions of children and childhood. Perhaps most obviously, the child's dummy (pacifier) suggests that objects may be out of place in the classroom if they are 'age inappropriate'. Pacifiers[4] also carry the controversy that surrounds their very use. So on the one hand they sooth and calm a fractious infant. But on the other there are medical theories, which indicate that they can delay speech and prevent babies from using their mouths to learn about toys and other objects. Dummies also carry (in)appropriate parenting practices where their (over)use gestures towards an 'easy fix' instead of seeking to understand what might be bothering the child. As a transitional object the dummy might well be managing trauma but culturally it is tainted and thus held in check.

This defence against the encroachment of culture is also suggested by the presence of branded products, several of which are associated with spin-offs from TV series, films, books or video games – Super Mario, Spider-Man, Thomas the Tank Engine, Ben 10, Wall-e the robot. Such objects may be considered to be infected by commercialism, and therefore a further offence against the

innocence of the natural child (Buckingham, 2000; Giroux, 1999). Trading games and card games (represented here by the 'Top Trumps' pack and a 'pog') are unnatural because they introduce competition (and potentially extortion) into what should be natural and harmonious relations of play and friendship between children. It is also notable that many of the objects are made from plastics and are machined, including the cars and motorbike, in addition to several of the branded spin-offs. Objects made from petrochemicals and industrial technology may also therefore count as 'unnatural' – compared, say, to the craft-made (or craft-simulating) 'natural' wooden toy. Such objects may also contain whispers of social class affiliation. Antipathy to branded or hi-tech toys, and a preference for 'natural' wooden ones, is associated with middle-class parenting values. We can capture something of this phenomenon in Barthes' (2009) essay 'Toys' where he rails against plastic and metal toys. Such toys he suggests are 'the product of chemistry, not of nature… the plastic material of which they are made has an appearance at once gross and hygienic, it destroys all the pleasure, the sweetness, the humanity of touch'. Wooden toys by contrast, do not sever children from 'the tree' and through 'living' with the child there is an alteration in 'the relations between the object and the hand' (Barthes, 2009: 40). For Barthes, plastic marks our turn away from all things original and natural in preference for imitation and artifice. The relationship between child and plastic can be seen as particularly heinous when the child is framed with the ideal of

Rousseau's (1979) Romantic child where nature, especially the 'garden' are considered necessary for the natural growth of the child.

Whilst dummies might be for babies the lip-gloss pens might signal age-inappropriateness of the opposite valency – as being too 'mature' for a 4 or 5-year-old girl. Additionally, the bright pink plastic packaging of the pens caused one of the practitioners to describe them, derogatorily, as 'too girly'. So, whilst the tubes contained nothing more than aloe vera, aimed at mosturising and protecting lips, they were considered as being '*more suitable for teenagers*' (early years' practitioner). Thus offending objects may embody and invoke *developmental* principles, concerning the interests that are 'proper' to a 4 or 5 year old and indicative of her correct position on the developmental path.

However, the negativity towards lip-gloss pens paled in contrast to the abhorrence that was directed by one teacher towards the Bratz doll annuals. Bratz dolls are the successor to the Barbie doll and like Barbie they have triggered all kinds of condemnation from adults. Such criticisms coalesce around the implication that they are both tampering with and robbing girls of their innocence[5]. As one practitioner noted when flitting through a Bratz doll annual, '*it's as if we have never had feminism*' and in some respects its possible to

see her reasoning when we read McAllister's (2007) description:

> Bratz are sassy young females with provocatively stylish, some even say 'street walker' (Macpherson, 2005: 1) clothes, faces characterized by large anime eyes, full mega lips, and virtually no nose, and the catch phrase, 'Girls with a passion for fashion' (p. 247).

Interestingly, the self-same practitioner who put a ban on Bratz books was also using Superheroes as an 'inducement' to encourage literacy, a situation that seems on the surface to constitute an ideological entanglement where both Bratz dolls and superheroes rely on highly stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity (Author, 1999; Author and Brown, 1999) which in turn are situated within relations of hegemonic power (Bartlett, 2005). However, we think that there is something else at play here where the alignment of the object, the Bratz dolls, with the girl/child works as to produce abjection and disgust (Kristeva, 1982; Jones et al, 2009). The meaning of abjection as described by Kristeva is 'one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable' (1982: 1). We experience abjection as a spontaneous reaction that may manifest in a form of unspeakable horror, often expressed at a physical level as uncontrollable vomiting, when faced with a breakdown in meaning caused by the generic loss of habitual distinction. And whilst the Britz dolls clearly did not induce vomiting we suggest that

the dolls do work at threatening or maybe even revoking sets of meanings and truths about who the young girl/child is. Bratz dolls go beyond the sanctioned scripts of child's play. They push at the supposed asexuality of children. They remind us in an uncomfortable way of a world beyond normative accounts of the innocent child. To argue whether they are 'right' or 'wrong' is to acknowledge that we desire a 'preferred' normative notion of what a doll should be and by implication what a child should be. Bratz dolls, with their cropped tops and provocative stances transgress what is familiar within the bounded space of childhood and in that sense they are revolt(ing). They pour out of the frame that we use to circumscribe childhood. Higonnet (1998) notes that the innocence of childhood always brings into play adult sexual knowledge where perceiving one value (innocence) always entails thinking of the other value (adult sexual knowledge). Whilst the Bratz dolls are described as 'girls' their lips, eyes, hair and clothes make them into monstrous bodies (Shildrick, 2000). As monsters they make us fearful, but just what is that we fear? Toffoletti (2007) suggests that part of our uneasiness towards dolls like the Bratz is because as 'bodies' they are 'neither a real nor unreal representation of the female body' but rather 'an appearance that challenges the reality principle' (p. 59). Put a little differently a Bratz body is not normal but on the other hand as a body Bratz dolls call attention to the very question: what is a normal body? The arrest of feminised objects underscores the strong relation between developmental and moral

'discipline', and the school's obligation to act as a bulwark against the encroachment of inappropriate cultural influences, which might threaten the innocence or the 'natural' development of young children.

Concluding remarks

By focusing on the dichotomy affection/infection for and of objects attention has been drawn to both the wonder and the mischief of objects. As we have seen, they trouble many of the underpinning assumptions upon which early years education rests. If we return briefly to Ishmael, we can understand the soft toy as a benevolent prop that tampers his behaviour. But whilst well intentioned the object nevertheless becomes part of and instrumental in 'normalising' Ishmael (Burman, 2007: 50) where what it means to be normal is set within the terms of developmental psychology. As we have noted elsewhere:

> There is an inevitable interpretive circularity in the discourse of normal development: specific child behaviours come to be read as signs of deviation from the normal path; yet the integrity of the normal path is consolidated by the identification of deviations (Author et al, 2010).

Following Bhabha (1994) we could also see the soft toy that Ishmael carries into the school hall as a requisite component of

16

mimicry. Bhabha identified mimicry as an essential, yet fundamentally ambivalent part of the colonial relation. The toy then becomes part of this relationship aimed at 'civilizing' Ishmael. The object simultaneously works at disguising Ishmael's difference whilst marking him as 'other'.

Objects also pull at and disturb particular templates or narratives within which we want to inscribe the child. Thus on the one hand 'learning objects' such as child-scaled furniture, kitchen utensils and so on are the basis for 'active occupation' and 'directed living' (Dewey, 2001: 13) which allow children opportunities to play out their adult futures. We catch glimpses of such futures as children take on the role of 'mother', 'father', 'baby', 'husband' and 'wife'. We are not disturbed by such play because it allows children's sexuality to persist in a benign form where the underlying assumptions are predicated on an assumed heterosexuality (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004). But the incursion of an object such as a Bratz doll causes us to panic because it destabilizes the innocent child. So whilst some objects happily reference the 'todayness' (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010: 16) of children's lives, others are arrested. Bruhm and Hurley (2004) highlight how 'architects of the child in culture' have developed 'elaborate means of editing out or avoiding the kinds of sexuality children aren't supposed to have' (p. xi). The Bratz doll within the early years classroom is matter out of place– in other words it is 'dirt', in Mary Douglas' sense (2003: 36). In

Douglas' anthropological analysis the elimination of dirt and its putative danger is central to the maintenance of social and symbolic order. As she notes, 'It [i.e. dirt] implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system' (p. 35). Objects, including Bratz dolls, plastic figures, metal cars, lip-gloss pens and so forth are, then, literally and symbolically out of place. It is possible therefore to see how 'arresting' certain objects works, as a 'pollution rule' where banning some objects becomes a practice in 'marshalling moral disapproval when it lags' (p. 132). Objects, like children, must therefore be 'disciplined'.

Notes.

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2. A typical example of a home/school policy relating to objects can be found at: http://www.sirwilliamburrough.towerhamlets.sch.uk/share.htm

3. Not all objects that pass from home to school are constituted as 'out of place': pencils and other writing implements, gym kit, clothes, will normally travel back and forth without becoming an issue. However the acceptability of objects is not

just a matter of their function or purpose: a pen or hair band may stop at the border if it is considered to offend in one or more of the ways outlined above. Moreover, objects that are not allowed to pass from home to school may be similar to others that are found in the classroom, such as balls or soft toys. The 'dressing up' box in the classroom might contain accessories and decorative items of a kind that would not be admitted if they came from home. This suggests that uncontentious objects have undergone a kind of baptism that renders them clean and safe for use. In contrast, offending objects have not been cleansed or baptised – i.e. initiated into membership of the learning community.

4. For further information relating to dummies/pacifiers see: http://www.babyfriendly.org.uk/pdfs/dummy_statement_08.pdf

5. Prime Minister David Cameron has ordered an independent review into whether retailers and broadcasters should be subject to new restrictions preventing them selling sexualized products aimed at children. Sarah Teather, Minister of State for the Department of Education has announced that she has asked Reg Bailey, the chief executive of the Mothers' Union Christian charity, to conduct a review on the sexualisation of childhood.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/dec/06/david-cameron-review-sexualised-products-children

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