Vibrant Matter: The Intra-Active Role of Objects in the Construction of Young Children’s Literacies

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Abstract
Drawing from the theories of feminist new materialism, this article looks closely at the ways children and things, particularly fabric remnants, work together to coconstruct stories. The data presented are part of a yearlong ethnographic study in the multimodal literacy play work of three early childhood aged children from working poor families. The data were collected during summer enrichment and an after-school program at a community center in the Southeastern United States located in the children’s neighborhood. Findings argue that children are more deeply and intellectually engaged when given access to a broader range of materials and opportunities to perform and participate in literacy practices.

Keywords
new materialisms, multimodal literacies, embodied literacies, muchness

“Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”

Bennett, 2010, p. 6

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Cedric’s mix-matched-socked, shoeless feet slide down the hallway back into the front room where the group waits patiently to make choices about the work they will engage in at the community center on this Monday afternoon. Visibly animated, Cedric is grinning from ear to ear, his tiny first-grade frame shaking from head to toe while he uncontrollably bounces up and down and giggles with excitement. In his attempt to sneak to the back workrooms before exploration begins in our after-school Clubhouse, Cedric has made a discovery—a tailor’s and designer’s bodice on which to work with fabric and design.

In the weeks prior to this afternoon, Cedric had spent many hours with a basket full of cloth remnants to create fashion designs for him and his friends. While discussing this fabric work together, he had expressed to me that it was a bit difficult to create designs on ones’ self (see Figure 1). I agreed and told him how my mother often used a bodice dress form when she sewed. This intrigued Cedric and not only did he want me to show him what one looked like on my iPhone, but he also wanted me to find a way to get one so that he might have a chance to design with one as well. Today was

Figure 1. Kids and fabric intra-act.
the day I revealed the surprise—that my mom had in fact had a spare dress form that she was willing to donate to Cedric so that he could design more freely—a surprise that Cedric had found on his own after a quick trip to the restroom that sat adjacent to what we all called the building room. Now Cedric was so full that his body was bubbling over and I couldn’t help but laugh with him as we both tried to wait patiently for the afternoon meeting so that we could begin working together.

**Encountering Objects**

This vignette is from a larger set of data collected as part of an ethnographic study of young children’s play literacies in an informal community space in the southeastern part of the United States. The purpose of this article is to explore the role fabric and accessibility to materials played in the children’s composition of costumes and fashion designs and how this can be seen as a literacy practice. As part of this article, I will revisit specific examples of children intra-acting with fabric during their play during my research observations. As a daughter of a seamstress, I am well aware of the ways fabric can transform and be transformed. My mother spent hours hunting for the perfect fabrics and then through the careful deconstruction of several yards of cloth, she would reconstruct each textile piece into slipcovers, curtains, and prom dresses. I am also aware of how a particular fabric jutting out from a stack of other fabrics can call to a person saying, “Psst! I am the perfect blend for that dress or bedspread or the unknown project that you haven’t quite discovered yet.” But as a participant researcher and early childhood educator, I had never really spent much time thinking about how fabric might evoke and invoke specific embodied literacies and action narratives during young people’s play.


**New Materialism at “Play”**

New materialism is the philosophy and theory that all things in the world, including humans, are matter and that phenomenon and knowledge occur through continuous and varied material exchanges of both living and nonliving entities. The scholarly feminist movement led by physicists (Barad, 2007), political scientists (Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010) and culture and gender studies scholars (Dolphins & van der Tuin, 2012) calls us to pay attention to the ways bodies, both human and
nonhuman, collide, focusing on the intersections of materiality, embodiment, and subjectivity. Three particular concepts I draw attention to in this encounter are (1) materials as actants explaining how materials become important in the creation of action text (Bennett, 2010); (2) intra-action between object and subject explaining how two things can experiment with one another to coconstruct stories during play (Barad, 2007); and (3) the concept of muchness (Thiel, 2014) explaining the ways bodies react, respond, and engage intellectually when given access to materials.

Jane Bennett (2010), a scholar of political science, draws our attention to the way objects become “vibrant matter” or “actants,” resonating with potential to incite and entice us to do something. She goes on to explain that there are moments when “the us and the it slip-slide into each other” (p. 4) creating powerful affects that can boost or dwindle the power of others (p. 3). In other words, both humans and objects hold the capacity of agency and coconstitutively transform each other (Lenz-Taguchi, 2014). Rather than seeing objects as being malleable, ready to be played with, Bennett’s theoretical concept of actant sees objects and humans as equally malleable, playing together and coconstructing encounters (and for the purposes of this article, coconstructing literacies). The resulting affects are entangled in thing and human, a space where both are vital to the production of the something created. For children, this something created could be a drawing, a sculpture, folding paper into a spinner, or creating costumes and fashion designs with fabric. For example, in the opening vignette, Cedric was moved by the excitement manifested through his physical body when he saw the tailor’s bodice in the building room. He was jumping, shaking, laughing, and smiling. In other words, the dress form caused Cedric’s body to respond. This response can be read as the moment that Bennett (2010) refers to when she talks about matter as being vibrant or being an actant. This vibrancy is not of Cedric’s own volition but doesn’t solely belong to the dress form either. Both are constituents of each other. They rely on one another to create a more powerful moment where both become crucial in the storytelling that takes place once united at the Clubhouse.

This entanglement might be thought of as a moment of muchness (Thiel, 2014) where, thing-power, “a not-quite-human force... add(s) and alter(s) human and other bodies” (Bennett, 2010, p. 2). The theory of muchness began as an autobiographical study where I examined my personal experiences of finding muchness and its connection to my childhood growing up in a working-class family. I then chased the phenomenon of muchness by entering the intellectual lives of children (like Cedric) and listening to the embodied ways children and materials intra-act (Barad, 2007), such as movements (both uninhibited and careful), sustained relationships with materials, spaces, other children, and so on and visceral and emotional reactions. Muchness isn’t about the ways humans engage with the world but rather interdependent relationships between human and nonhuman matter.

Muchness emerges as an affective moment of embodied, intellectual fullness, which can manifest in different ways, such as affect, materiality, composition, and spatiality and is only named muchness after the phenomenon has occurred. For me, as a writer, this fullness often occurs during my acts of writing. This intellectual
engagement bursts forth while I struggle with the words and while I am pressing my fingers into the keys of the computer and in the way my body “hunkers down” near the screen to bring the stories I tell to life. There is a great energy that ignites this process. I call this energy affective energy and it is the energy that spills out on the pages of my word documents and scribbled in note form on the pages of a notebook that sits beside me. Another example of muchness is in the opening vignette; Cedric’s excitement cannot be contained. Just as my energy spills onto written pages, his energy spills out of his body and into the Clubhouse space provoked by the presence of the dress form. It is this spilling of affective energy that ignites muchness.

One way a person might experience muchness is through the entanglement of thing and human or what physicist and feminist scholar Karen Barad (2007) terms as a “mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (p. 33) or intra-activity. An example of this entanglement can be illustrated through a moment I recently experienced while attending the orchestra. It was at this concert that I noticed something I had not paid attention to at concerts in the past: the bodies of musicians during play. As the musicians worked, their bodies moved in tandem yet not exactly the same, leaning deeply into and extending from the instruments held passionately in their hands and arms. The instruments seemed to lead the musicians, becoming extensions of their bodies rather than foreign objects being held and manipulated. This intra-action (Barad, 2007) between instrument and musician becomes a place where the human and the instrument are no longer the same thing they were when they were alone. They have become something different when fused together, a musical ensemble that can be seen as what literacy education scholar Wohlwend (2013) calls an action text or a shared narrative created through particular movements among a group (p. 106). These movements can be read as embodied literacies (Jones, 2013) or practices that bodies “just know how to do” (Wohlwend, 2013, p. 107) and are only possible through mutual entanglement between musician and instrument.

Just like the musicians created musical narratives with their instruments, children often create narratives through their interactions with the materials that surround their environments. It is within these entanglements that both the child and the object become something different. Furthermore, these narratives or stories can be unspoken, multimodal practices lived out through actions and bodies rather than more traditional forms of narratives and storytelling. For example, a child playing superhero might use a piece of fabric as a cape that allows the child to fly across the playground. Or a child might invoke rocks to become diamonds in a quest to save the world (Thiel, 2014) through pretend play. In both of these scenarios, the thing and the child are no longer seen as separate but as entities that constitute a mutually new construct of what is possible to do and be.

The Awesome Clubhouse: A Not-School Space

A rental community in a southeastern context, the neighborhood of South Woods is located on the western outskirts of town, close to the border of an adjacent county line.
The city in which South Woods is located ranks as one of the highest poverty-stricken areas in the nation. Small in size, the county predominantly hosts college-aged students who attend the local university, which owns more than 50% of the tax-exempt property and also is one of the main sources of waged-work employment. There is a great divide among the wealth in the county and many of the permanent residents live at or below the poverty line. This is certainly true of the residents at South Woods. Predominantly, the community is home to both a high number of Latin@ and African American families, most working in the industrial and service industry which includes local restaurants, a chicken processing plant, and construction. It is not uncommon to see multigenerational homes in South Woods and extended families living within walking distance of one another.

The Awesome Clubhouse is a community center crafted through a three-way partnership between the university, the regional food bank, and a local nature connection program to provide free resources for children and their families in the community. Primarily, the center offers community members opportunities for their children to explore intellectual interests through meaningful play. It is not intended to mimic school but rather the space demands something quite opposite of the traditional after-school care or extended day learning model (Jones et al., n.d.).

During my year as a researcher in this community space, I have served both as a participant-observer and codirector. This role has provided me with the opportunity to develop our learning space and to interact and engage with families and their children in multiple ways. Based on the philosophy of Reggio Emilia schools, class-sensitive pedagogies, and theories of social critique and justice, the children are encouraged to explore and negotiate their interests to build their own theories about the world through discovery and play (Malaguzzi, 1993; Vecchi, 2010). Rather than focusing on direct instruction, we provide a space and materials with opportunities for the children to intellectually engage in and build knowledge about their selves, community, and to express that learning in any mode they see fit.

**Entangled in Data and Method**

The data in this article are part of a larger postqualitative research inquiry that is interested in the ways children learn outside school. The children in this study are all residents of the South Woods community. Families were given the option to be part of the project, and no one was turned away from the community center regardless of their decision to participate. This encounter includes data from one 5-year-old, one 6-year-old, and one 8-year-old who were specifically drawn to working with fabric during play through the summer and early fall.

Recently, there has been a movement among philosophers, theorists, and qualitative researchers to consider the object and its role in research, theory, and practice (Ahmed, 2004; Appadurai, 1986; Bennett, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg, 1981; Daston, 2000, 2004; Henare, 2006; Hoskins, 1998). Seeing objects charged with significance, this new materialist turn attempts to explore the stories of objects and the
social, cultural, and political role they play in the world. Entangled with these theories of new materialism, this encounter is specifically concerned with the relationship between children and things.

Using theories of new materialism, I approach my analysis through the methodological process of thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; St. Pierre, 2008, Ringrose & Renolds, 2014). Similar to Richardson’s (2000) writing as method, thinking with theory asks researchers to take up or “plug into” a particular theorist or theoretical concept (i.e., intra-activity, actant, and muchness), as they write and “put that theory to work” on sets of data in order to gain deeper and multilayered understandings of social life. Rather than coding or categorizing, “thinking with theory” asks researchers to spend time looking for “hot spots,” where the data spark or “glow” and “create a sense of wonder” (MacLure, 2013). Chosen theories are then used to illuminate and make sense of these spots, wonderings, and curiosities through thoughtful, analytical writing. When thinking with theory, researchers ask how do these theories help me make sense of my own entanglements with the data? The researcher is never separated from the research but rather is a mutually constitutive entity in how the research unfolds and how it is experienced. In this way, the data were lived out intra-actively (Barad, 2007) rather than seen as static, waiting to be “discovered.”

Data sources include the materials used by children to create stories, video, photographs, field notes, and observations during fabric play. All of these artifacts were collected during my time with children at the Clubhouse, where I spent everyday in the summer and two afternoons a week during the school year. Visits typically lasted 3–4 hr during each interaction, where I would situate myself as an active participant while children engaged with particular materials over time. Fabric was one of these materials.

**A Month Before Cedric’s Encounter With the Dressmaker’s Form**

The children had spent a good portion of their summer creating through embodied and multimodal literacy practices. They created books. They created paintings. They created clay sculptures. And they created superheroes. In order to elaborate their superhero work, the children found themselves particularly drawn to a box of fabric that I had brought to the Awesome Clubhouse earlier in July to use in a weaving project. However, like most of the materials at the center, the kids found new ways to breathe life into the fabrics and soon these large fabric remnants were being used to create masks and capes and clothing for warriors.

Cedric was one of a large group of boys who liked to spend hours creating with fabric. Using scissors, tape, and sometimes pipe cleaners, the children would spend time crafting pieces they could use to extend their playground stories by becoming fantasy characters. One day, I walked to the back of the Clubhouse to join children in our library. It was here I found Cedric, Ramone, and Zach hard at work. All three boys had chosen different pieces of fabric and with keen focus, each were in the
process of trying to make the fabric do what it was they wanted it to do in order to tell the multimodal stories they wanted to tell.

Zach was slowly struggling to make a pair of children’s scissors cut through a thick piece of yellow corduroy. The corduroy would soon become a mask for Zach to wear as he pretended to keep the universe safe on the playground that day. After making what represented a circle, he carefully planned to cut holes for the eyes. Laying the piece of fabric directly on his face, Zack reached up and put his fingers on the fabric where his eyes hid underneath. Being careful to keep his fingers on the fabric where his eyes were, he flipped the fabric off of his face and started the difficult process of trying to cut the holes for the eyes. He repeated this process several times, once more for the eyes and again for the mouth and the nose. Once he was satisfied with the placement of the holes, he then began the process of trying to tie a striped white and brown strip of fabric to each side of the mask so that he could tie it in place behind his head (see Figure 2).

Ramone was experimenting with different materials to try and wrap a white cape around himself. First, he used tape, then staples. But the staples kept popping out each time he tried to “take off in flight” (see Figure 3). Eventually, he decided to get pipe cleaners to hold the two sides of white stretchy cotton fabric together, weaving the pipe cleaners through precut holes at the neck of his cape, looping the pipe cleaners, and twisting them tightly to hold the cape in place.

Cedric, who had worn shorts, a T-shirt, and cowboy boots to the Clubhouse that day, sat down with the largest pieces of fabric from the basket. He had chosen pieces that were about a yard or two in length, one white and one green, to work with. I watched as Cedric spent approximately 20 min getting the green fabric to wrap around
his waist just right, so that it didn’t fall off. This proved to be a difficult task, as the fabric was made of cotton knit and stretched. So, every time Cedric pulled the fabric and stapled it shut, it would give a little, pop open, and/or fall down around his ankles. However, Cedric never lost patience. Instead, he persisted in getting the toga-like apparatus to stay put on his tiny 5-year-old frame. Once he had that accomplished, he then took the white fabric and twisted it to create a covering for his head. To hold the white fabric in place, he gathered some yarn and asked his older sister to tie it on, so that his creation would stay atop his head. Seemingly satisfied with his design, Cedric went to join the others on the playground in their imaginary superhero play. But before leaving the room, he stopped, earnestly looked at me and asked, “Does this outfit go with my boots?” (see Figure 4).

In this one afternoon, the work these children engaged in illustrates (1) fabric as an actant in the play literacies of children, (2) the intra-action of fabric and child in which both are transformed, and (3) embodied intellectual engagement with objects to create stories through play. In the following paragraphs, I will unpack each of these points.

**Figure 3.** Cape stapling.
For each of these children, the fabric served as the actant that propelled their work at the Clubhouse that day. Before the presence of fabric, the children had either imagined their costumes or had used store bought costumes to perform the role of superheroes on the playground. While both of these afforded opportunity to construct and negotiate superhero identities, the fabric provided an opportunity for their imagined or potential costumes to become a reality during the construction phase of their play, moving the experience from what social theorist and philosopher Brian Massumi (2002) calls the virtual to the actual or moving something from the abstract to the concrete. Furthermore, since the fabric was raw (uncut and unsewn), the children’s superhero attire was not bound by the pre-determined limits that come in pre-packaged, store bought costumes. Instead, the boys were able to listen to and experience the vitality of the fabric through their own intellectual lenses and creative theories.

Figure 4. Does this go with my boots?
Fabric and Child Intra-Act

Physicist Karen Barad (2003) explains that the world is not out there waiting to be discovered by scientists but rather becomes lively through intra-actions—a communal engagement between persons, places, and things—and it is this interconnectedness or the in-between space where reconfiguring and agency take place (p. 140). Here, agency is understood as being enacted through relationships rather than an innate characteristic uniquely possessed by individuals alone (Barad, 2007, p. 178). Therefore, the children and the fabric can be seen as performative agents working together to produce a “more powerful” costume than might be available to them otherwise. This performative action of reconfiguring elements is similar to early childhood literacy researcher Anne Haas Dyson’s (2003) research exploring how children appropriate cultural text to remix—or invent—something new in their everyday literacy practices (p. 25) out of their repertoire of communicative practices.

Dyson’s (2003) work shows that children use all available discourses (language, values, beliefs, relationships, popular culture/media, etc.) to construct meaning and make sense of the world. Here, I would add that children also use what they know and discover about bodies, space, and materials as they theorize, conceptualize, and craft intra-actively. On this occasion, the available materials, the Clubhouse, the children’s bodies, and their knowledge of superheroes are all put in dialogue with each other. As Cedric, Zack, and Ramone draw on their own superhero literacies to tell stories through their fabric creations, they reconfigure what is possible to do as superheroes. The children know that superhero costumes are important to a superhero’s performance. Certain elements in a costume allow superheroes different abilities. For example, a mask allows a superhero to have an alternate identity, a cape gives the hero the ability to fly, and in Cedric’s case, the costume allowed him to create a warrior design that had not been performed in their collective play up until this point.

In this regard, the fabric is no longer seen as just fabric and the children are no longer just children—both have been reconfigured through the process of intra-acting together, one becoming costume and the other becoming superhero or warrior. Similar to education scholar Lenz-Taguchi’s (2010) study on intra-active pedagogy in preschool, the fabric is no longer passive and collaborates with the children and their superhero expertise interdependently, allowing new possibilities for fabric, superhero play, and action literacies—the narrative work being performed by the children (p. 4). In turn, the fabric becomes one of the discourses made available to children, allowing them to socially construct a new reality for what is possible during their intra-active literacy play work.

Fabric and Intellectual Engagement

Coauthors and literacy education scholars Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell (2008, 2010, 2011, 2014) suggest that home literacy practices are infused in family artifacts
or objects, representing powerful memories and generational stories that can be seen as artifactual literacies:

A sensory response to artifacts is important when working with material culture. . . . Artifacts smell, they can be felt, heard, listened to and looked at. Objects carry emotional resonance and they infuse stories. Paying attention to meaning through artifacts involves recognizing embodied understandings as responses. . . . Objects uncover people and epistemologies. Not having respect for an object undermines a way of understanding the world, cutting off an important line of inquiry. (2010, p. 10)

These scholars go on to explain that affective and emotional connections to objects “enable educators to create listening spaces for students . . . that can shift understandings of communities, identities, and neighborhoods and can involve young people in storytelling opportunities” (p. 11).

Just as Pahl and Rowsell (2010) suggest that artifactual literacies (objects and their accompanying stories) are connected to the understanding of social and cultural contexts, object exploration (or tinkering) offers an opportunity to develop theories and concepts about those contexts. Scholars and educational researchers from the After-School Tinkering Project and the San Francisco Exploratorium at Stanford University describe tinkering as,

A playful and subjunctive modality—one often replete with the utterances and practice of what if, could be, maybe, perhaps, let’s try it out, etc. These phrases and ways of approaching materials may be seen as the sensibilities modeled and encouraged by educators in a tinkering setting, grounded in an effort to recognize and deepen the educational potential of the fantastical. (Vossoughi et al., 2013, p. 4)

Subsequently, tinkering can be read as a type of textual play where objects and bodies serve as text and the act of tinkering serves as playful literacy exploration. Engaging in this type of action-oriented textual play is important to the intellectual work of Zach, Ramone, and Cedric. For example, the children’s costume designing at the Clubhouse is performed through the inquiry of objects, more specifically by handling, maneuvering, and controlling fabric, where the children come to know by doing. Zack, Ramone, and Cedric were compelled to engage in costume design, blurring the boundaries between what they know about superheroes, what they imagine through their superhero play, and what the fabric remnants were able to perform. In this way, tinkering or action-oriented textual play (Wohlwend, 2013) can be seen as part of the process that allows children to find intellectual fullness, spilling out through their fabric work. In the next section, I will provide a second example of this intellectual work by revisiting the opening vignette and Cedric’s individual design work.
**Back to the Bodice: Cedric the Designer**

Cedric continued to engage with the fabric long after it had lost its luster for other children. He would spend hours manipulating the basket of fabrics and would often take the fabric outside so that he could create atop the crow’s nest play equipment, treating it like a stage. Eventually, Cedric let go of the superhero and warrior story lines and began to perform more as a fashion designer crafting dresses rather than warrior costumes. The bodice dress form in the opening vignette was a key actant in this agential shift. On his first day with the dress form, Cedric fully embraced the designer role. He spent the entire day wrapping and cutting fabric to create his fashion design. Through observations, I noticed that Cedric took great care in his design choices. He would carefully look at a piece of fabric, hold it near the dress form, and manipulate it in different ways. Sometimes he would discard the piece because, in his words, “it didn’t work” for the design he had in mind. Other times he would keep the fabric he had chosen, folding and turning the remnants until they resembled a fashion design that met his satisfaction (see Figure 5).

In addition, once Cedric had designed his basic concept, he began to add other materials to his project to accessorize the outfit. First, he created a necklace from paper clips to hang around the neck of the bodice. He did this by carefully looping the paper clips together to make a chain. After hanging his paper clip necklace on the dress form, Cedric stood back and admired his work. He put his hand on his chin and started talking to himself out loud. “It needs something else,” he would say and would go to look through the other art supplies stored in small containers in the Clubhouse for the “something else” it needed.

He emerged with colored popsicle sticks and craft gems. Where he wanted to affix the sticks and gems was a relatively easy decision for him. These items had spoken to him before he had even put them on his design. He knew where they were to go. But trying to figure out how to attach the objects wasn’t as easy. Cedric tried glue. But he found that Elmer’s craft glue doesn’t adhere to fabric and in vertical positions. Once this attempt failed, Cedric ran out of the room exclaiming he would be “right back.” He reentered carrying clear tape. Using the tape, he was able to hold all of the accessories on the fabric until he was satisfied with the design (see Figure 6).

Cedric’s continuous and capricious engagement with fabric and other materials during the making process demonstrates his intellectual engagement while producing complex and ornate work. In the above intra-action, fabric serves as a powerful actant in Cedric’s textual play. Cedric’s discoveries are articulated through his fabric and accessory choice, the layout of the design, where and how he would elaborate that work, and what medium he would use to affix those choices to his product. The potential uses of the fabric and the craft materials that Cedric chose were many and varied. However, the relationship between the dress form and the fabric provided an opening for Cedric to elaborate his work in ways he was unable to do in the past. The bodice provided a 360° range of visibility. He was now able to step back and look at what he
was making and test out his theories without the constraints he experienced while designing on his own body.

With this new affordance, Cedric vigorously altered the materials in a way that was similar to rapid prototyping—a development process where something is implemented, tested, and adjusted quickly in order to see what works best. Since the Clubhouse was designed to provide children with open access to materials, Cedric was able to freely move about the rooms and explore different materials to create the dress. In this way, the Clubhouse also serves as an actant in Cedric’s ability to reconnoiter the space to figure out what he wants to use next, an opportunity that might not be made available to him otherwise had the context of this space been different. As Vossoughi, Escude, Knog, and Hooper (2013) write about the practice of tinkering,

Rather than a linear or step-by-step process, the process of making is...organized in ways that support the pursuit of new possibilities and the invention of alternative forms. These practices also open the field of activity to novel goals and unanticipated problems. (p. 3)
Since the Clubhouse is organized to provide children with access to different types of materials and to encourage children to tinker with these materials, Cedric is able to compose and test theories about what fabric can do when put in dialog with other objects and how he can engage with both (see Figure 7). If something didn’t work, material accessibility and availability permitted Cedric to try a new approach until he found a solution that was satisfactory.

**Implications: Entangled in the Fabric of Literacies**

...human power is itself a kind of thing power (Bennett, 2010, p. 10).

In this encounter, I consider the intra-action between Cedric, fabric, materials, and space and argue that these intra-actions can be read as a literacy practice. In her research on play and literacies, Wohlwend (2013) gives us some insight on how work
such as Cedric’s can be seen as literacy engagement. She writes, “these wordless designs directly link to children’s developing literacies as they make decisions about meaning and audience . . . (to) represent their ideas” (p. 112). Likewise, Pahl and Rowsell (2011) explain that “writing in the home is inscribed not only within toys and books but also on images, and it can be found in visual and linguistic formats on video games and digital equipment” (p. 130) adding that “literacy itself is artifactual” (p. 133). Therefore, Cedric’s work with the bodice, the cloth, and the other materials is a form of literacy and has implications for theory and practice.

In the words of Reggio Emilia atelierista Vea Vecchi (2010), schools often privilege only two types of expression: reading and writing. These expressions are complicated by the social and political privilege given to particular ways these reading and writing literacies are produced, which are often middle-classed renditions of what it means to perform and be literate. Therefore, one implication of this analysis is to broaden the scope of recognized and accepted expressive practices used in the typical classroom. Cedric’s composition was performed through and with fabric. There were

Figure 7. Cedric’s finished design.
no words written on pages. He wasn’t given a prompt in order to offer response. In fact, most of Cedric’s work was done quietly, until he had an idea for elaboration. Then, Cedric’s voice would boom with great volume long enough to announce his ideas and then he would quietly go back to work. By working with fabric, Cedric was not only able to engage in an activity he enjoyed but this experience also offered him an intellectually stimulating and challenging way to build literacy practices through action-oriented textual play (Wohlwend, 2013). In this way, Cedric’s intellectual engagement can be read through his bodily actions (planning, elaboration, and revisions) during composition rather than through written assessments—bringing with it the promise of change to educational practices that have become steeped in testing culture (Kohn, 2000; Ravitch, 2011; Sacks, 2001).

Collectively analyzing the work of Cedric, Ramone, and Zack also implies that acknowledging fabric play as a literacy practice affords a broader narrative of what it means to grow up in a working-class community. In this context, these children are seen as creative intellectuals at work rather than being reduced to deficit interpretations of what it means to grow up in poverty. Literacy education scholar Jones (2012) explains, “we must work against mainstream ways of responding to children that are saturated with deficit view of class marginalization” (p. 29). And Vossoughi et al. (2013) suggests that pedagogical practices associated with tinkering:

> take on new meaning in the context of working with young people whose resources and capacities are often overlooked by narrow notions of intelligence and dominant representations of science, and whose schooling is characterized by the kinds of test-centric and regimented curriculum that disproportionately effects working-class students and students of color. (p. 4)

This quote offers insight on how classrooms might become more equitable for children whose proclivities are sparked through broader, less traditional notions of literacies. One possibility is through being more attentive to the ways things serve as actants in the lives of children and attending to the vibrant matter that matters to children. According to Bennett (2010),

> vital materialism . . . set(s) up a kind of safety net for those humans who are . . . routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular (Euro-American, bourgeois, theocentric, or other) model of personhood. The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies and such. (p. 13)

By seeing children as exercising power through and with things, and by considering these engagements valuable, a more equitable language arts classroom can be cultivated. This encounter also denotes that using new materialism as a tool in studying the literacies of children offers new possibilities and insights for research and practice. According to Barad (2012) in her interview with Kleinman, “responsibility is not about right response, but rather a matter of inviting, welcoming, and enabling the
response of the Other” (p. 81). Practices that regulate and regiment learning to a limited set of activities constrain what is possible in a language arts classroom and privileges particular ways of knowing. Conversely, listening to the ways children intra-act with their material surroundings reconfigures pedagogical efforts to invite and welcome new ways of knowing and engaging with literacies—one that can be seen as an “in addition to” rather than an “in lieu of” approach. Furthermore, providing open access to materials situates learning in a context where children are able to tinker with and make decisions regarding composition on their own terms.

As a researcher at the Clubhouse, I have learned that materials provide new reference points for teachers and children alike. As children are discovering new ways of knowing through their engagements with materials such as fabric, I am learning to discover new ways to approach teaching, engaging, and listening to children and the materials they use. Further research might explore the ways children, teachers, and materials intra-act in typical classrooms, how classroom spaces might set up conditions that give children access to a variety of materials chosen by teachers and children, and how these intra-actions contribute to a diverse set of literacy practices in the language arts classroom.

The theories children make about the world are entangled in the conditions, discourses, and materials that are made available to them. Just as the philosophy of Reggio Emilia (Wurm, 2005) reminds us that there are many teachers in a child’s life including families, teachers, and the environment, the work of children at the Clubhouse reminds us that the materials a child is given access to and how they use and think about materials play an important role in the learning environment. When given the opportunity to use and experiment with different expressive languages (Rinaldi, 2006), what is produced is nothing short of extraordinary.

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**References**


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