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Children as ethnographers: space for children's narrative knowing within classroom intra-action

'We must allow children their complexity' (Kehily, 2012)

Abstract

In this paper, the writers examine the children's perspective on school and present an approach, in which children are taken seriously as researchers and knowledge producers. The study seeks to respond to the call for messy methodologies within childhood studies, taking the complexity, ambiguity and diversity of contemporary childhoods as the starting point. The narrative ethnographical data was produced by ten-year-old children in their own classroom. Children were given an open-ended task to observe their class and type their observations, thoughts and stories on a laptop computer.

The writers first reflect the study with existing narrative research. The open-ended narrative space invites descriptions that are at many points similar to existing ethnographies on school. Mostly, however, the physical, the formal and the informal layers entangle and pierce each other freely. The incoherence of the narratives, the blurring of fact and fiction as well as the emphasis on materiality, connections and flows leads the writers to think about the study with Barad's (2007) agentic materialism and the notion of intra-action. This theoretical move has consequences on the ethical positions of the researchers and the researched. Also, the agentic force of the children's writing becomes visible.

What happens if children were to spend an entire school day on a laptop computer, follow life in their classroom and write down their observations, thoughts or stories? What kinds of accounts would the child-ethnographers write about their environment, things and activities in school? What kind of knowledge would emerge? What would be the consequences of children as ethnographers?

Schools have historically been studied mainly from the perspective of adults, usually with educational aims as the focus. Ethnographic research on schools has proved valuable in deepening our understanding of life processes in schools and embracing perspectives other than only formal, curriculum-related ones. Nevertheless, despite the recent developments in participatory

methodologies in recent decades (see Christensen and James, 2008; Milstein, 2010), observations and field notes have mostly been produced by adult researchers. In this paper, we describe our ethnographic study in which we aim to elicit children's perspectives and knowledge about life in school. Moreover, we examine how positioning children as researchers and knowledge producers generates not only new understandings, but also new material, discursive and social formations of life in school and in research.

Recent studies on childhood emphasise the instability and diversity of contemporary childhoods (Prout 2005; Lee 2001, 2008). Many researchers have called for new kinds of 'messy' methodologies that are able to account for complexity and contextuality (or ethnographical texts that are, in the words of Denzin & Lincoln (1994, 559), 'messy, subjective, open ended, conflictual and feminist influenced'). In our approach, we work on notions of narrativity and ethnographical methodology in order to create new kinds of spaces for children's voices and children themselves to be taken seriously as researchers and knowledge producers.

As peculiar as it may sound, the idea of children simply telling whatever they want in the classroom can be considered rare, both in terms of pedagogical practice and research. Nevertheless, for us, the use of as unregulated a narrative space as possible has served as the methodological basis of our attempts to elicit child perspective knowledge. We agree with scholars who suggest that participatory methods should be examined critically and reflexively (see our earlier work in Hohti & Karlsson, 2013). For example, James (2007) notes that many studies with participatory agendas may produce those kinds of children's voices and perspectives that easily prove useful for the pre-fixed purposes of adult researchers (see also Mazzei 2009; Spyrou 2011). While our approach is based upon open-endedness, we emphasise reflexivity in listening to children's voices. Thus, we don't assume voices unitary in themselves, but constructed from the social, discursive and material resources available (see Hohti & Karlsson 2013).

In this paper, we first discuss our study in relation to existing narrative and ethnographic research. Giving examples of the data produced by children, we move on to thinking about these examples with Barad's (2007) agentic realism and her notion of intra-action (see Mazzei & Jackson 2012; Kleinmann, 2012). Along with this theoretical move, we see the research and the researchers as connected and mutually transforming in a new way, meaning that a new kind of relationship between knowledge and life emerges (see also Lenz Taguchi's (2010) studies on Reggioemilian pedagogical documentation; Hermansson 2013, 45). We conclude by considering this relationship

and its consequences for the ethicality of ethnographic child perspective research and classroom practice.

In defining an approach, we do not wish to fix and provide strict guidelines in the desire for planned and standardised research results. By describing in detail the transformations of relationships as well as the spaces of knowing that then emerge in our study, we wish to convey our approach to others who may want to apply it and experiment with it in their own diverse situations. In the end (see Appendix), we nevertheless present our method as a clear and articulated practice with its own instruction. In so doing, we seek to provide a starting point for each and every time something new and unforeseen to come into existence.

Living, observing and thinking in the classroom: the emergence of Children as ethnographers

Our study has its origins in the third grade classroom of a Finnish elementary school, where Riikka Hohti worked as the class teacher.

> Riikka:
>
> In spring 2010, I was teaching the third grade, a group of lively children with whom I had already worked since the first grade. I grew very tired in my work. My teacher education at the university had been based on constructivist notions of learning, which means that attention should focus on individual students' construction of knowledge in relation to their previous experiences. Thus, my frame of teaching was based on staying in touch with children's thoughts and listening to them. Ethically, I also considered it essential to remain alert about every child's well-being, listening to issues that were important to them and responding to their initiatives. These ideals were brought to tension with my keeping up with the demands of daily school practice, which included lots of paperwork and networking with various professionals about certain children's issues. With the large group of children, everything took a long time, whether correcting tests or solving problems in the children's friendships. Some mornings, I was shocked to find myself hoping that, in order to get through the school day, no-one would say a word to me.
>
> At that time, all of the teachers at the school received new laptop computers: gleaming white, attractive MacBooks. Children used to gather around me whenever I needed to work on it in class. When they were around me, I was painfully aware that we had not been practicing computer skills. I began to realise that I would like to offer my laptop to the children to use. I knew that there would be several positive aspects in doing so. For example, using the word processing program, it would be easy to practice grammar use – commas, full stops and so on. I also assumed that writing on a

computer would help those who were motorically less skilled to express themselves by writing.

Looking back, the methodological development that started in the class could be presented as an intentional and linear path of pedagogical and scientific thought, one step leading to another. But doing so would not be faithful to the situation, in which many factors encountered and entangled each other, forming a complex landscape that invited us to experiment with rather than develop a method in any intentional way. These factors were not only discursive (pedagogical and ethical), but also material and social.

Riikka:

Underlying and intertwined with these recalled moments of pedagogical thought was the conviction that even a crowded classroom should have space for children's knowledge, and that this space must not be fixed, but be as open-ended and free as possible.

Various forms of telling, writing and listening to stories were a popular activity that we had engaged in already since the very first class. Children, mostly together with a friend, regularly asked if they could choose a place and write stories. The stories would then be created freely, without corrections, and often be read aloud in class. These moments were always focused, full of rapt attention and enjoyment. I had come to learn about Storycrafting[1] as a research method while writing my Master's thesis and had continued applying it in my work as a teacher. Through Storycrafting, I came to understand how choosing not to direct and correct the children's stories, which are considered important as such, can build trust and joy between the participants and enable new forms of knowledge to develop.

I then suggested to the children that we make a new book – a book of our own life in our class. We would do it by looking closely at what is happening in the class and writing it down on my new laptop computer. Two pupils at a time would serve as the diary writers, and I arranged a suitable place to work. They would have an entire school day to write with no other duties. The children accepted the idea with a great enthusiasm.

The class possessed a strong narrative culture, which included writing stories and Storycrafting (Karlsson 2005, 2009). Both the children and the teacher shared an understanding of narrativity as something natural, joyful, and socially shared. Through narratives, motivating the children to read and write – including those who did not otherwise enjoy writing – proved easy. In addition, for the

[1]In Storycrafting, the adult says to the child: '*Tell a story that you want. I will write it down just like you tell it. When the story is ready I will read it aloud. Then, if you want to, you can correct or make any changes.'* (Riihelä 1991; Karlsson 2005, 2009)

teacher, the children's stories served as 'narrative meeting places' (see Puroila et al. 2012), landscapes in which the teacher could learn about the thoughts of her pupils in the classroom in a different way than usual. The enjoyment and motivation often observed in narrative pedagogical practices can be considered related to children having their voices heard and participating in the society (Karlsson 2005); the pedagogical is intertwined with the ethical in classroom practice.

> Riikka:
>
> The original enthusiasm continued throughout the research process, from March to December. The school days would begin with choosing diary writers, and each time almost all the pupils would eagerly volunteer. One of the pupils, however, did not want to participate in writing, and three pupils refused the use of their writings in the study. Authorship was granted to the children: they had the right to refuse to show their texts to others at any time. Nevertheless, the children almost always eagerly showed their written diaries to others, sometimes with some slight editing beforehand.
>
> The practice was socially open and became very much a part of our social life. Sometimes, we would immediately hang the diaries on the wall for others to see, other times we would print them out and place them in a separate folder for the children to read, and some were saved only on the computer. We discussed the writings both simultaneously while writing and during specific lessons. We elaborated on issues during group discussions and used drama techniques.

In our earlier work on narrativity as a way of knowing among children (see Hohti & Karlsson 2012, 2013), we have found that narrative spaces are constructed under certain conditions. First, there must be a physical space and time for narration. This is demanding, especially in schools – educational institutions with a long history of regulating and silencing children's voices. Second, the focus must be on relational and reciprocal processes of narration, rather than on single and quickly-generated results. Last, but perhaps most important, an awareness of power relations in the situation is needed. If adults wish to encourage children's narration while providing themselves an opportunity to learn about children's lives, they must abandon the usual guiding and controlling attitude. In the classroom, when children work as ethnographers, teacher neither corrects nor assesses their writing, whether concerning language or the content of the writing. With emphasis on the process nature of the activity, a short story or silence is considered just as valuable as a long and carefully constructed narrative. Accordingly, the child takes on a position in power and knowing, and mutual trust and reciprocity are given a chance. The teacher then distances herself from her usual position as an expert and positions herself instead as a listener of something she does not know (Davies 2011).

> Riikka:

At almost the same time as I started the classroom diary activity, I began to plan my doctoral studies. Liisa Karlsson became my supervisor and joined the study at this point. Tarja Palmu joined us as my second supervisor since autumn 2010. Our research project eventually resulted in my engagement in full-time doctoral studies since 2011. There were now two interrelated, but very different ways of looking at what was going on. As a *teacher*, I examined the *classroom diaries*, being careful to note the effects of the practice on individuals and the classroom and school community, as well as on learning and the learning environment. *As researchers*, interested in the connections of the emerging method with existing ethnographic and narrative participatory research methods as well as its potential in creating new child perspective knowledge on school, we called the practice *Children as ethnographers*.

The data

The core data to which we refer here consists of about 80 documents written by ten-year-old children in their own classroom in March-December 2010. There were 30 pupils in the class, making it the largest class in the small elementary school located in a peaceful Finnish suburban area with working class and lower-middle class families. Furthermore, the data also include autobiographical data written by the researcher (Riikka), memories (some of which were written down) and conversations with the children during 2010-2013 (some of which have been tape-recorded). Various kinds of school materials, such as the teacher's notebook, are also part of our data.

After about one month, the spoken instructions were shaped into written form (see Appendix). In the instructions, the task is separated into three components: (1) writing observations, (2) thoughts and (3) stories. The instruction was formulated clearly in order to invite the children's narrative knowing in a way different from that of normal school-like tasks, which tend to shape children's accounts into 'correct answers' (see Hohti & Karlsson 2013; Davies 2003). The instructions also offer the opportunity to draw pictures or cartoons, but in the end almost all the children preferred writing on the laptop. Consequently, we focus here on the textual data.

We will now delve deeper into the features of children as ethnographers and discuss the approach in relation to existing school ethnographies, narrative research, and recent theorisations of childhood based on complexity (Prout, 2005; Lee, 2001; 2008). We will simultaneously reflect on what it means and how it matters that the emerging method is open-ended, process-oriented, reciprocal, non-linear and 'messy'.

Classroom diaries as ethnographic field notes: beyond the school taken for granted

The classroom diaries written by the children were at once fully recognisable as ethnographic field notes, and at many points included parallel notions with existing ethnographic research on schools. On the second day of the classroom diary practice, ethnographers Raila and Eini[2], two girls, described a school day:

> 2 March 2010, Raila and Eini
>
> This morning we learned how to divide things into groups
> Then the boys went into the hall to listen to information about a boy choir
> We girls were allowed to draw on the blackboard and play the piano
> Then we went for lunch
> after lunch Patrik asked for us to put his name into this diary.
> Then Patrik, Ruut, Elviira, Titta, Siiri, Veikko, Petri, Terhi and Henna came to see what has been written into this diary.
> Then we had arts and crafts
> and the teacher gave instructions
> and she asked what are the primary colors.
> We had to paint a landscape with one color of the color circle.
> The boys and Solja started arguing about who has the biggest amount of money and who had the best television in their room.
> Veikko shouted to Elviira that she was messing up his place.
> We changed places on English lesson.
> (. . .)

As in Gordon et al. (2000), Raila and Eini describe how school organises activities. The group of children is divided into smaller groups and then reunited, and all the groups participate in different activities in different spaces in different phases of the school day. Numerous regulations big and small allocate people, things and activities in school, permitting certain activities in certain places and times, and nowhere else or at no other time. Several ethnographies on school have investigated these *time-space paths* (Gordon et al. 2000, 148-154), which also frame many classroom of the diaries written by the children. In the example above, 'dividing thing into groups' takes place during the math lesson in class, while eating takes place in the main hall, where all the groups of pupils proceed according to a certain order. Each student is assigned an individual seat, and places cannot be changed without the permission and guidance of the teacher. This is the 'school taken for

[2] All the names of the research participants and some other details have been changed. The quotations from the classroom diaries have been wrapped in order to improve readability.

granted' known to generations of schoolchildren (see Jackson 1968). The third graders mostly seem to have acquired the skills of 'the professional pupil' (see Gordon et al. 2000, 71-76), who masters these small rules perfectly – and also knows how to challenge them (Hohti & Karlsson 2012).

School ethnographers have used the analytical idea of three distinct layers (Gordon et al. 2000). These layers – the formal, the informal and the physical – can also be found in the ethnographic field notes written by the children. *The formal layer* includes activities belonging to the curriculum and planned by the authorities, such as the class teacher. In the example above, the teacher 'issues the instructions' and has the authority to organise things and activities in various places and times, whether it is 'classification' in the maths lesson or the primary colours in the arts lesson. *The informal layer* refers to interactions between peers. Here 'the boys and Solja argue', and Veikko accuses Elviira of messing up his place. *The physical layer* then emerges, for example, in the notions of the children's own places – the chairs and tables – or when they eat, which the children mention almost every day as an important part of the school day.

In the children's classroom diaries, however, the layers are seldom as easily distinguishable as in the previous example. In most descriptions, the formal, the informal and the physical pierce each other freely, intertwining and entangling each other. The time-space paths give way to messy, rich and high-speed accounts in which playfulness, humour, action and imagination are central. The school no longer looks like 'the school taken for granted':

> 12 November 2010, Siiri and Petri
>
> The day began
> and the teacher is telling us a cruel story.
> Tuure [the school assistant] is venturing around the room,
> Raila is picking her nose.
> What is the difference between a diagonal cross and a vertical cross?
> Harri and Akseli are chatting,
> Teijo kills a gorilla [the class mascot]
> The teacher comes in late.
> And Pekka shows the picture he has drawn and laughs.
> Konsta was holding his football cards
> Sebastian is talking with Teijo.
> Tuure is keeping an eye on Sebastian
> and Teijo
> and now Aapeli,
> Judah kissed Jesus!
> Sebastian is playing some kind of murder
> and laughing with Satu,
> Konsta is tired,

And suddenly Virpi [the PE teacher] comes in and asks about some play time training
Konsta is asking if there is school tomorrow
but there isn't.
The teacher rages at Urho
and Sebastian is playing with a tape roll
but Tuure took the gorilla from Teijo
and Aapeli is messing about
and now we have to sing
some kind of bible religion song.
Teijo is not singing
or Sebastian
now it's 10 minutes inside play
Ville is putting his cards into his pockets,
Now a story begins.

The example above shows that Siiri and Petri take advantage of the open-endedness of the narrative task. The formal, the informal and the physical layers are mixed and entangled, and the chronological and thematic order is abandoned. The result is literally a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973). Whereas in the diary written by Raila and Eini, the voice of the teacher dominated and the formal time-space path of the school framed the activity, now it is the informal, embodied and material draws attention. The formal content of the religion lesson – the events of Good Friday – is but one faint fibre within the entanglement of the events that take place: *Judas kissed Jesus!* The classroom is unpredictable; it is each moment new, chaotic and dynamic. The thematically readable and coherent narration is left behind and the messy takes over. The text has a strong *verisimilitude*, life-likeness (Heikkinen et al. 2005), and the narrative voices of Siiri and Petri are strong and evocative. But how are we to approach these descriptions as narrative ethnographical accounts?

Classroom diaries as narratives: towards the open-ended spaces of children's narrative knowing

In the previous section we discussed the physical spaces of the school. Inside and intertwined with the physical (material) spaces of the school, the discursive (mental) and social spaces are also constructed (see Gordon et al. 2000). The practice of children writing classroom diaries/working as ethnographers can be approached in terms of creating a narrative space for children's voices and knowledge within the discursive, material and social practices of the school (Hohti & Karlsson 2013, forthcoming; Puroila et al. 2012).

Our earlier work among children's narratives in schools, homes, public places and daycare centres has shown that access to children's knowledge can be problematic (Hohti & Karlsson 2013,

forthcoming). The usual ways of approaching children's perspectives would be to ask questions. In so doing, the position of power remains with the one who asks the questions (Karlsson 2005). In our approach, in contrast to the logical-scientific or paradigmatic knowing where cognition works through logical reasoning and arguments we rely on the children's narrative knowing (Bruner 1986; see also Polkinghorne 1995; Heikkinen 2000, 56), in which meanings are created in narrative processes that combine elements across categories. Narrative studies have recently developed an interest in stories that need not necessarily be coherent. So-called 'small stories' (Ochs & Capps 2001; see also Puroila et al. 2012) are constructed from a variety of elements belonging to everyday interactions. It is not only what is written, but the interplay of the stories with their cultural-discursive, material and social environment that matters. In the framework of narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein 2008), understanding narratives as dialogical and reciprocal in nature (Riessmann 2002; 2008), we can take into account the interactional and performative nature of the classroom diaries. It is often the joy of experimental writing, challenging the classroom regulations and catching the readers' attention through humour that motivate the writers and shape the emerging narratives.

The open-endedness of the narrative space is essential to inviting alternative voices other than the dominant and taken-for-granted voices of the educators. In the instruction, we provided a simple suggestion to closely examine the environment. The questions were not focused, but wide and unfixed: What is there? What is happening there? There was no guidance or correction from the adult, and short stories and silences were as acceptable as longer stories – in contrast to the usual pedagogical demands imposed on children's narration in educational settings. We learned a lesson about this during our study. At one point, soon after beginning the practice, Riikka wanted to guide the attention of the child-ethnographers toward things that *she* considered interesting. She provided a list of examples that the children could handle in their texts. This resulted in a narrow report-like text that gave predictable 'correct answers' to the questions suggested by the teacher. School strongly shapes the narratives told in classrooms. The question for us as researchers and educators is: Do we want to produce knowledge that is predictable and easy to handle by our analytical procedures or do we want to learn something new, to gain perspectives into the not-yet-known?

The free narrative space allows the blurring of fact and fiction. The children found the realms of fictive worlds inviting especially when the reality got boring. In the following example Sebastian, Aapeli and Urho do not participate in the swimming lesson. They spend their time in the entrance hall of the swimming pool, writing on the laptop and finding ways to amuse themselves by drifting into a horror story.

12 April 2010, Sebastian and Aapeli

(…)
Now Sebastian is going to the toilet because he was thirsty.
Three old men are talking.
Urho is playing something.
The teacher is teaching kicking in the pool.
The teacher taught floating
The cashier is organizing candies
And now because we can't think of anything else
so we decided to do something like
once upon the time there was a horror toilet

part 1.
I was sleeping until I decided to go to the toilet.
I went towards the toilet
until I saw a monster in front of the door.
The monster started growling grrrr grrrr arrrr
I was terribly frightened

To decide to receive open-ended data, short, long, incoherent and coherent narratives, assemblages of fact, fiction, observations, thoughts and stories means to take a strong stance in support of the narrative rights of children (Puroila et al. 2012; Hohti & Karlsson 2013)). Children need not be factual and articulate their thoughts in adult ways in order to participate in their communities. The narrative spaces for their emerging narrative knowledge can at best be playful, allowing them to go beyond the categories of factual knowledge of our adult worlds. Some researchers have indeed commented that a weak point of our study is that we permit the mixing of fact and fiction, as in the example above. Yet for us, it is a deliberately intentional decision. We do not presume that children are prepared to carry out research *with us adults*, but rather position ourselves as the ones who do not yet know, ready to be surprised. Our methodological choice is to distance ourselves from our earlier notions of children and childhood (see Hohti & Karlsson 2013). We ourselves aim to be capable of participating in the children's worlds, to carry out research *with children*.

Life, observations and knowing connected: thinking with intra-activity

Upon receiving the classroom diaries of children, our attention focused on the role of the material in the children's descriptions. Hermansson (2013, 11-12) notes in her study on preschool children's writing:

'The writing events unfold a myriad of connections between different elements, human elements, such as children, laughter, and talk, and non-human elements, such as notebooks, computers and chairs. Also, other elements are involved, for example knowledge about the functional use of writing, but also educational discourses, and global flows of economic and social forces.'

That life is lived by embodied beings, whether children or adults, and takes places in relations to material entities, such as architectures, food and oxygen, is nothing new. In educational settings, however, there is a long history of privileging the mind over the body; and teacher education, for example, is based largely on theories of social interaction and the construction of individual discursive knowledge. Material beings have only been seen as mediating tools in the processes of social interaction or knowledge construction (Rautio 2013), and relations between material and living bodies as such are not yet considered worthy of examination. Receiving children's accounts of their classroom, we nevertheless began distancing ourselves from the psychologically oriented gaze of educational specialists, as well as from ways of centering the social and linguistic construction of meanings familiar from poststructurally oriented feminist ethnography. The following example, a diary written by Teijo and Anssi, demands a different understanding of the relationships between the material and the discursive in children's lives in the classroom:

> 28 September 2010, Teijo and Anssi
>
> The teacher started reading The Hobbit.
> Raila is shutting the curtains.
> Solja and Hanna are talking
> Siiri is playing with the tape.
> Henna is showing her middle fingerrrrrr.
> Sebastian is sucking his hand.
> Elviira and Terhi are buzzing!
> Now we are doing the mother tongue's workbook
> Solja is raging!!!
> Sebastian is going to intensive care!!!
> Konsta is venturing.
> Playtime starts soon
> Aku is doing bitchslaps.
> ANSSI FARTED!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
> Henna is whining!!!
> Playtime ended.
> Aapeli is speaking about his dog.
> The teacher is preaching about the maths test.
> Konsta is shouting and sitting on the table.
> Sebastian is shooting.
> Siiri is saying I dunno…
> Titta and Siiri are playing with tape.

Konsta is shouting again.
Kaarlo is playing with a rubber.
Lea is biting her nails.
Sebastian is shouting I waaaaant
The maths lesson starts now.
(. . .)

A thick multitude of connections is indeed constructed in the classroom. These connections involve not only humans, but also non-human and material bodies: a book, curtains, adhesive tape, body parts such as hands, nails and fingers (and the discursive potential of the middle finger), bodily actions such as slaps or farting (again, a strong discursive and performative action), a table, a rubber, and so on. These connections cannot be overlooked if we want to take children's observations seriously. Evidently, 'we need a language and theory that encompasses more of these complexities' (Lenz Taguchi 2010, 4). We must overcome the divides that keep mind and body, the psychological, the social and the material apart, thus preventing us connecting theory and practice in our work in educational settings and research (see Lenz Taguchi 2010).

Attempts to find language to overcome the dualistic divisions in educational research have recently drawn from the theoretical thoughts of Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987). Deleuzian concepts such as *becoming* and *encountering* and the Deleuze and Guattari-inspired notion of *intra-action* developed by Barad (2007) have been used to approach educational events differently, constructing perspectives which take complexity as the starting point rather than something that must be eliminated (see Lenz Taguchi 2010; Davies & Gannon 2012; Lee 2011; Rautio 2013, in press; Hermansson 2013; Jackson & Mazzei 2012). Two basic and common features of the theoretisations within these approaches are: (1) the role of material entities as agents is highlighted, and human agency decentred. According to Barad's agential realism, matter and meaning are inseparable and mutually produced (Lenz Taguchi 2010, 3; Kleinmann 2012): the material (e.g. rulers and chairs) is also always discursive, and discourses (e.g. the mathematical phenomenon of dividing) have their foundations in materiality. Humans can only be agents as parts of entangled agencies of the material, social and discursive entities. (2) Relations and the inherent connectivity of all entities present in an event are taken into account. Focusing on relations rather than individual beings enables one to investigate movement and change through phenomena such as flows and intensities (Hermansson 2013; 30). This also permits one to think beyond binaries. Lenz Taguchi (2010) clarifies that trying to go beyond binary thinking means to abandon not only the 'either – or' paradigm (e.g., either professional adult knowledge or irrelevant child perspective knowledge), but also that of 'both – and'. The profound connectivity of everything in a constant flow of transformation is not

exclusive, and, according Hermansson, knowledge can therefore be simultaneously professional *and* childish *and* practical *and* theoretical, for example.

For us as ethnographers, in our double task of looking at life in classroom and looking at children as they write their observations, thoughts and stories in the classroom – and attempting to formulate a methodological understanding of this, this theoretical move has large ontological and epistemological consequences. These consequences are at the same time ethical, as the last section will demonstrate. The binary divisions between the researcher and the researched, the teacher and the researcher, and the adult and the child are troubled. By theorising with Barad, it is possible to see the connectedness of these binary ends when they mutually produce each other (see the following empirical example).

In the previous section, we took up an example that showed how children take advantage of playful ways to use the narrative space of classroom diaries (see also Hohti & Karlsson 2013). The following example views this playfulness in a broader way, neither as a phenomenon possessed by children as individual agents, nor as a discursive ideal that should be be applied in pedagogical activities among children. Playfulness emerges in-between the computer and the child who is intra-acting in the diary writing event (together with the discursive context of the specific classroom):

> 5 May 2010, Urho and Veikko[3]
> (. . .)
> Ville is chatting away to Aapeli,
> Konsta is sharpening his pencil
> APPLESŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎ
> ŎŎ
> ŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎŎAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRGGGHHHHHHHHHH
> HHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
> APPLES ARE TAKING OVER THE COMPUTER! NO! NO! UMPH!!
> ŎŎ
> Back to the diary…
> The teacher tells the religion homework
> CHAPTER P.71 and EXCERCISES 3, 4 and 5 into the notebook answer in whole sentences.

In her study about child-matter intra-action, Rautio (2013, 2) states that ‘without wishing to portray a nostalgic rendering of a “proper” child, it is possible to argue that children (. . .) are open and ready for things to play with them and to befriend them’. In our study, thinking with intra-activity, we

[3] The Ŏ symbols in this text are originally the Macintosh ‘Apple’ symbols.

observe how the computer actively provides fonts, layouts and symbols (MacBook apples), thus inviting children to play, shaping and constructing the emerging narrative together with them (see Hermansson 2013). Not only does the text become mutually constructed, but so does the child and the writing event itself (see Hermansson 2013, 30). Without the practice of children as ethnographers, it would not be the same child, and without the child writing, the life reported would not be the same. What matters are the unique relationships between all the discursive, material and social elements that intra-act in this particular encounter.

The consequences of the knowledge created in intra-action are also noteworthy. The ethnographic knowledge created by the children cannot be considered a narrative text separate from the life it describes. As Barad (2007, 49) notes: 'Knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing something, but rather from a direct material engagement with the world'. Knowledge is not separate from the material, discursive and social relations present, and can be neither possessed nor claimed better or prior by any of the participants. Like Lenz Taguchi's (2010) examples of pedagogical documentation in the context of Reggioemilian early child education, the texts of our data are capable of producing knowledge that comes from being inseparably related to life in the classroom. The texts become texts with agency (Lenz Taguchi 2010, 116), and their transformative potential is acknowledged: the theory/practice-binary is troubled.

'Events are not as things': ethical and practical considerations

In this paper we have described our study, which has its origins in classroom practice: the practical, ethical and pedagogical need to make spaces for children's voices in the classroom. The research began with several aims, notions and intuitions. As *childhood researchers*, we were inspired by the new theorisations which call for more complex notions, rather than the former approaches that emphasise *either* biological, psychological *or* socially constructed notions. As *narrative researchers*, we had already engaged in studying children's perspectives through narrativity, and we had found, that open-ended narratives can yield strikingly different knowledge and alternative perspectives. *As ethnographers*, we sought to question our adult gaze and to observe how ethnographic knowledge produced by children as researchers would disturb the power relations in research and allow one to create knowledge that we could not know beforehand, ready to be surprised and to distance ourselves from our previous assumptions.

To conclude this paper, we return to the questions with which we began. We asked: *What happens if children spend an entire school day using a laptop computer, follow life in their classroom and*

write down their observations, thoughts or stories? What kinds of accounts will the child-ethnographers write about their environment, things and activities in school?

Children as ethnographers as a classroom practice permitted the creation of an open-ended narrative space for children's voices. Children could now be listened to even in a crowded classroom, where the teacher was physically tired of listening. Children could be taken seriously as producers of research data. The children's writings provided perspectives that were sometimes similar to existing school ethnographies, yet at many points they enabled one to see the school differently. Material beings, bodily actions and joy as well as relations between peers were central to the children's accounts. In the open-ended and unregulated narrative space, life in the school was mostly described as constantly shifting, with contrasting intensities of events, flows and transformations.

Deleuze (1980/1987) urges researchers to pose practical and dynamic questions instead of static and analytical ones. Rather than to ask 'What it is?', he says that it is more important to ask 'What does it do?' In line with this, we also asked: *What kind of knowledge is emerging? What are the consequences of children as ethnographers?*

Questions of authority and power are relevant in all ethnographic research (see Tolonen & Palmu 2007). Hakala (2007) investigates the relationship between the teacher and the students as well as the relationship between the researcher and the field as parallel power relations, in which the teacher and the researcher are easily constructed as the ones who know better (i.e. 'I know what is best for you') (Ellsworth 1997, 8, cited in Hakala 2007, 176). In the open-ended narrative space of classroom diaries the children were granted authority, and space for alternative knowledge, something that the adult researchers did not know beforehand, was created. Nevertheless, the fact that children make the ethnographic observations does not provide an escape from the central ethical dilemmas of educational ethnography (see Tolonen & Palmu 2007, 92). Raila and Eini (2 March 2010) observed: *'(. . .) after lunch Patrik asked for us to put his name into this diary. Then Patrik, Ruut, Elviira, Titta, Siiri, Veikko, Petri, Terhi and Henna came to see what has been written into this diary.'* Just like with adult researchers, children as ethnographers are the ones with the power to select and name the people and events in the diaries. The children's observations can become instruments of negative power processes. The texts (just like adult researchers' texts) can be construed as an increase in surveillance and governance: the ethnographer's gaze is unescapable. A further dilemma for (feminist) ethnographers is how to return the results to the research participants without occupying a position as the one who knows better (see Ellsworth before). Nevertheless, in our future work we will show how taking complexity and ambiguity as the starting point can surprisingly help discussing research results with children (Hohti 2013, in process).

The ethical dilemmas and asymmetrical power relationships of ethnographic research can thus not be wiped away, nor can the power dynamics between peers in the classroom. As a consequence of thinking with intra-activity, the ethical challenges of doing research actually intensify. By seeing the inherent interconnectedness of all the intra-acting participants, whether human, non-human or material, the consequences of the research do not fall solely on the researched, but on us all. The question is not only what kind of knowledge is being produced and conveyed, but what kinds of beings are produced. What transformations take place? And how are we becoming as researchers, children, or texts in these mutual processes? Focusing on the relations of these agents and the transformations that occur in-between them, telling and listening can become powerful, even radical tools (Davies 2011).

It is common to conclude with reflections on the restrictions of a study. In our case, these might include the solely textual nature of the activity and the too close relationship of the teacher-researcher with the subjects of the study. Thinking of children as ethnographers in the light of intra-action (Barad 2007), we are not trying to hide away the closeness or the specifity of writing as inquiry. We have given up the notion of children's knowledge as truth about what it means to be a child, which in an ideal situation could be reached. Instead, with the help of intra-activity, seeing the profound interconnectedness of all the entities present in the research event (including ourselves as researchers), we have entered into the transformation process of life itself. The ethnographic writing of children in their classroom can be seen in the light of what Deleuze and Guattari say about *events*: that one should not see them 'as things to be interpreted, but as creations that need to be selected and assessed according to their power to act and intervene' (Colebrook 2002, cited in Hermansson 2013, 36). Accordingly, the writings of children as ethnographers can become an agentic force. They have the ethical and practical potential to become parts of the processes by which we all constitute each other in the unique and changing situations that connect us. Following Hermansson (2013): the writing child is a consequence of the writing event. *We* as researchers and educators are consequences of the writing event and of the writing child.

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Appendix

Children as ethnographers/classroom diary, instruction

1. *A suitable place for two writers of the diary is arranged. They have a (laptop) computer, paper and pens available.*

2. *The teacher/researcher tells everybody that the purpose of the activity is to produce knowledge about this particular environment (e.g. the classroom). Specifically, the intention is to produce knowledge about the lives of children.*

3. *Two children are selected from those who volunteer. They form a pair of ethnographers/diary writers whose task is to write down their accounts (for one school day, for instance). While completing their task, the writers have no other assignments to do.*

4. *The teacher/researcher says to the writers:*
   'Look at your environment (e.g. the classroom) as carefully as you can.
   What do you notice there? What is happening there?
   Type your accounts on the computer.
   You can also write your thoughts or your stories.
   You can also draw pictures or cartoons.'

5. *In the end, the documents that the writers produce will be published (with their permission).*