

Agency as assemblage: Using childhood artefacts and memories to examine children's relations with schooling

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Abstract: In this article, we explore how childhood artefacts and memories might help us think retrospectively about children's agency and its relationship to schooling and teaching. Across four university sites in Canada and the United States, we asked undergraduate students in teacher education and childhood studies programs to choose an artefact or object that encapsulates contemporary conceptions of childhood and to discuss them in a focus group setting at each site. Building on three participants' descriptions of how they remembered and reflected upon school-oriented objects – a progress report, a notebook, and a pencil sharpener – we explore how participants used their artefacts in ways that allow us to theorize children's agencies as assemblages, where agency is relational and contingent on multiple social and cultural factors. Drawing on our participants' interpretations, we consider how a reconceptualized concept of agency may expand our understanding of the possibilities of children's agencies in school and raise new questions about the meaning of childhood within contexts of teacher education and childhood studies.

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Introduction

Since the emergence of the “new paradigm” of childhood studies (James & Prout, 1990), scholars of childhood from a range of disciplines have called for “children to be seen as social actors shaping as well as shaped by their circumstances” (James et al., 1998, p. 6). As Alan Prout (2011) observes, “The agency of children as actors is often glossed over, taken to be an essential, virtually unmediated characteristic of humans that does not require much explanation” (p. 7). Yet while naturalized as a *human* characteristic, agency tends to be regarded in practice as a property of adulthood. When it comes to school, where so much of one's early life is spent, we continue to see school policies and practices that “construct adults as developed, mature, intelligent, and experienced, based solely on their age,” a perspective that justifies the continuation of adult control over children's subjective experiences and decision-making (DeJong & Love, 2015, p. 490). Particularly, as the world struggles to cope with and recover from the global COVID-19 pandemic, deep concerns about the future of schooling have led to new, urgent efforts to regulate teaching and evaluate learning in ways that perpetuate this deficit perspective toward children's agency. In spite of calls for more holistic, flexible, and student-centered approaches to teaching and learning (Garlen, 2021; Mitchell, 2021; Whitley et al., 2021), as well as existing research that has demonstrated the need to include young people in educational decision-making (Irizarry & Welton, 2014; Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013), the panic over learning loss has resulted in strategies that recentre neoliberal values around evaluation, accountability, and competition (Betebenner & Wenning, 2021; McShane, 2021). In New York, for example, this has resulted in a barrage of new testing that requires teachers to administer a 43-question assessment to screen the social and emotional wellbeing of children (LeBuffe et al., 2009). Called DESSA, for Devereux

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Student Strengths Assessment, this Likert-type scale reports a composite score used to measure social-emotional competence and support “good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (Masten, 2001, p. 228).

How, then, can we reconcile the fundamental belief that children have the capacity to choose, act and influence matters in their everyday lives (James & James, 2012) with the overwhelming evidence, both current and retrospective, that children’s lives, particularly their relations with schooling, are so deeply affected by adult decisions? In this article, we grapple with this tension between childhood agency and adulthood by considering how childhood artefacts might help us think about children’s agency and its relationship to schooling. Amid a growing number of studies featuring the perspectives and experiences of children themselves, we suggest that *adult* memories of having once been children can be read as important archives chronicling childhood agency. That is, we speculate that adults’ memories of their own childhood agencies – including times when they were disciplined and/or discouraged in these efforts – represent an untapped resource in the larger agentic turn within childhood studies. Across four university sites in Canada and the United States, we asked undergraduate students in teacher education and childhood studies programs to choose an artefact or object that encapsulates contemporary conceptions of childhood and to discuss them in a focus group setting at each site. While in a previous publication, we analyzed the entirety of the artefacts and drew findings along the contours of nostalgia and melancholia (Farley et al., 2022), here we examine how three of the 15 artefacts, presented as outliers within our larger study, inform our understanding of how adults remember childhood agencies in the context of school.

Building on our participants’ descriptions of how they remembered and reflected upon these school-oriented objects – a progress report, a notebook, and a pencil sharpener – we explore how participants used their artefacts in ways that allow us to theorize children’s agencies as “something that happens in the relations between the different bodies within a given assemblage” (Gallagher, 2019, p. 190) – where agency is contingent on multiple social and cultural factors. By assemblage, we refer to the theoretical construct attributed to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), which we understand as “a set of relations in which elements appear to be meaningfully related” (Nail, 2017, p. 25). Assemblages are abstract in that they are not concrete “things” with specific, fixed characteristics, “but rather something that lays out a set of relations wherein concrete elements and agencies appear,” (Nail, 2017, p. 24). Here, we consider agency within the assemblage of school, the “emergent potential” of which is produced by the “flows of life, people, materials and ideas” that circulate within it (Dovey & Fisher, 2014, p. 50). With these insights in mind, we consider how a reconceptualized concept of agency may expand the “conditions of possibility” (Foucault, 1966, p. xxiii) that exist within schools and raise new questions about the meaning of childhood within contexts of teacher education and childhood studies. In the next section, we revisit the construct of children’s agency and its critiques to situate our analysis in relation to Michael Gallagher’s (2019) recent articulation of agency as “something that arises from the relations within heterogeneous assemblages” (p. 188).

Schooling Practice as Neoliberal Adulthood

The response to the pandemic’s impact on student learning illustrates the extent to which the conditions of schooling are shaped by neoliberal aims that construct children as future adults whose education is directly linked to the promises of economic progress. While many have called for a radical transformation of schooling in ways that prioritize the physical and emotional needs of children and their families (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; McKinney de Royston, & Vossoughi, 2021; Sonu et al., 2022), such demands have largely gone unmet in North America due to the widespread focus instead on responding to the purported “learning loss” incurred by school closures (Betebenner & Wenning, 2021; Dorn et al., 2020; Kuhfield et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2021; Zhao, 2021). Business analysts and policy makers have asserted that these losses will lead to decreased literacy rates, lower test scores, and wider achievement gaps, all of which predict a less stable world economy (Economist Leader, 2020; World Bank, 2021). When such neoliberal priorities drive education, teachers are cast as “instrumental means to commercial ends” whose purpose is to produce “predetermined, desired effects—namely, the

improvement of student test scores on international comparative tests” (Phelan & Hansen, 2021, p. 2). Through the mobilization of developmental frameworks, literacy levels, and career readiness, schooling practices focus on educational outcomes that may have less to do with what children, families, and teachers want or need now and more to do with the demands of a competitive global market. The very meaning of childhood is profoundly shaped by the political and economic priorities underpinning educational outcomes in Western capitalist countries, such as Canada and the United States. As Debbie Sonu and Jeremy Benson (2016) observe, “These outcomes symbolize imagined expectations of the child, not as a being with tangential thoughts, curiosities, or psychic particulars, but as an empty vessel, first carved out, then refilled by curriculum standards, practices, and policies” (p. 237). Educational policies and practices that perpetuate outcomes and assessments illustrate the ways that schools overwhelmingly reflect neoliberal interests, even as individual teachers work to attend to the immediate social and emotional needs of their students.

The persistence of schooling practices that centre economic priorities not only perpetuate neoliberal values, but reflect the hegemony of adultism, which John Bell (1995) defines as “behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement” (p. 1). According to Bell, “except for prisoners and a few other institutionalized groups, young people are more controlled than any other group in society” (p. 1). Within this context, objects – inorganic materials that populate school spaces – often become mechanisms of control, especially when they are animated by children’s affected attachments (Jones et al., 2012). In relation to this idea, Sara Ahmed (2019) traces how, from the early 19th century, education was used to redirect working class children away from mischievous tendencies and toward activities that were deemed more useful societal aims. Proposed as crime prevention, Ahmed (2019) demonstrates how the notion of useful knowledge took on a moralistic dimension that required children to assume a particular station in the social hierarchy, organized and administered by the circulation of certain objects including assignments, school work, selected books, and progress reports. While school is just one of the many adult-created bureaucracies that children must endure, it is certainly one of the most influential and restrictive. At the same time, such a pessimistic view of the overdetermination of childhood by adult economic concerns seems inconsistent with the focus on agency that has informed the field of childhood studies from its inception.

Childhood Agencies and Assemblages

As Dierdre Horgan, Catherine Forde, Shirley Martin and Aisling Parkes (2017) note, childhood studies, with its focus on children’s agency and relationality, has contributed significantly to a growing awareness of the “participative child” (p. 274). Most often conceived from a Global North perspective, the limits and possibilities of children’s participation in society have been explored by a range of scholars in recent decades (Percy-Smith, 2010, 2015; Raby, 2014; Roche, 1999; Smith, 2007) and has been highlighted as an emerging issue within children’s geographies (Horton et al., 2008; Jones, 2008). Across this body of work, agency is generally understood as the capacity of a child to assert their subjective views and take action in shaping the world. In the specific context of schooling, Margaret Vaughn (2021) defines agency as “a student’s ability to have ideas, intentions, and to exert influence and take actions in the learning context” (p. 4) and argues that students who enact agency are more likely to be engaged as active learners. While recognizing that agency is relational - co-constructed with teachers and students in the complex social environment of the classroom - Vaughn (2021) views agency as “part of the fabric of who we are as individuals” (p. 1).

Such contemporary constructions of children’s agency have been criticized for their proclivity “to treat children’s agency in a celebratory, uncritical, a-theoretical, non-relational, locally-bound and non-reflective manner” (Huijsmans, 2011, p. 1308). Shadowed by the blissful and innocent child of the Western imagination, notions of deservedness around agency can reproduce the Western trope of an individualized subject who single-handedly affects the world through autonomy and rationality. This construction of agency also reproduces a history of raced, classed, and gendered inequality propelled by the colonial engines of progress and civilization, societal aims to which childhood has always been tethered. Scholars

who work in the new sociology and reconceptualist strands of childhood studies show how this reduction of agency to individual capacity reinforces humanist ideals that distribute privileges along produced definitions of normalcy, leaving great numbers of minoritized children the subject of adult anxiety and intervention. This uneven distribution of agency not only disregards the complex social realities of children in diverse cultural and political contexts (Canosa & Graham, 2020; de Castro, 2020), but orders a system designed to determine which child comes to be recognized as deserving the gifts of willful agency and which are to be limited by their need for management and guidance.

Likewise, recent critiques launched within critical childhood studies reveal how a universalized understanding of agency can reduce notions of freedom to a personal attribute or, returning to Ahmed (2019), an object of 'useful' possession. While agency has become a much-needed focal point to understanding children's relationships to institutional structures such as school, arguments that rely on an overly-powerful theory of the individual can flatten, instead of expand upon, ideas of action and activity that can account for the myriad *relational* ways that children act upon the world. Post-colonial and post-structural thinkers refuse the modern dualism of individual-society as a remnant of the Western imperial episteme, arguing that there is no identity uncontaminated from the condition which dominates it. From this perspective, agency refers to actions that bend and alter in ways that can subvert dominant authority and that are simultaneously intrapersonal, interpersonal, and socio-political. Agency is thus tangled rather than clear-cut. It refers to the ways we are always critiquing from within a structure that we are also complicit in perpetuating.

In response to debates over the meaning of agency in childhood studies, Gallagher (2019) draws on Michel Foucault's theorization of power, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of assemblages, and Jane Bennett's (2010) vital materialism to rethink common notions of child agency through four entry points:

1. Agency is not a staid attribute of human nature, nor a force for liberation
2. Agency arises from and is contingent on specific relations and assemblages
3. Agency spans a range of inventive forms
4. Agency is continually unfolding and reconfiguring, producing new assemblages and combinations of effect

Again, careful not to think of agency as simple opposition to defined structures and institutions, this reconceptualization of agency is central to challenging liberal humanist terms that define individuals as autonomous beings with a set of choices in their own freedom. Who we are is not solely determined by the choices we make from an infinite world of options. Instead, we become that which we are not-yet through a paradoxical and dual process of both reaffirming the conditions that make the recognition of ourselves possible, while practicing what Bronwyn Davies (2006) calls a "radically conditioned agency" which can subvert and eclipse the very dominating discourses that act on us (p. 426). Thus, while subjectivity arises from within existing frameworks and discourses, "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1977, p. 23) do not determine the ways one can exercise their minds, the beliefs they can adopt, or the actions they can attempt to perform.

Within this tangled web of agency, the child is subject to "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1966, p. xxiii) that require a reflexive turn towards what is expected of them and what can be created within the epistemological and discursive limits of our own existence (Gallo, 2017). For Foucault (1966), the production of scientific knowledge, which can be extended to include the "nature" of the child, is underpinned by latent underlying structures that shape what it is possible to know. Applied to a child subject, we might say that existing knowledge about childhood "grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1966, p. xxiii-xxiv). Similarly, what it is possible to do is not a fixed human characteristic but

rather a potential that is continually renegotiated in relation to established and emerging patterns and structures.

Therefore, returning to Gallagher (2019), agency does not exist prior to acts of agency, nor does it float around outside of specific relations and assemblages. Instead, agency is produced from mutually constitutive relations that are embedded in discourse, but also through our encounters with other, both human and non-human, material entities. For Timothy Ingold (2011), agency appears as an intentional movement of humans and non-humans, where the idea of ongoing change is central to our ontological and mutually constituted relationships with each other, an entangled condition of being alive in the world. Agency, then, is not just an event that involves an action; it is the very event of becoming itself, an event that changes both the acting subject and the world, an act that expresses our transformation (Grosz, 2010).

Far from a celebration of a child's right to do as they please, agency is an assemblage. The concept of assemblage, drawn from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), offers a more expansive concept of agency that considers how children are situated within their social and cultural contexts. We understand an assemblage as a collection of like and unlike entities, including bodies and objects of any kind. According to Gallagher's (2019) interpretation, the defining features of assemblages include: contingency (interdependent relations between bodies), continuation (perpetually forming relations), and disunity (reconfigurable parts that do not constitute a whole). Gallagher's articulation of assemblage as it applies to children's agency acknowledges that "in any significant action, there are always many bodies and forces at work, both internal and external to the analytical unit of 'child'" (p. 192). This approach to childhood agency not only enables an investigation into the conditions that lead to specific kinds of agentic moves by children, but also relies on a belief that agency is contingent on multiple factors that are themselves continually in flux and subject to change.

Significant to our interests in education, "schools are complex and sometimes incoherent social assemblages" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 2). Set within the mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality, many schools around the globe reinforce dispositions of grit, resilience, self-determination, and advocacy, which download collective responsibilities to individual efforts (Au, 2016). Yet as argued by Noah De Lissovoy (2012), agency can also be considered as a "horizon of integrity" (p. 480) through which students consistently refuse the deficit-oriented characterizations of them, exercising their own creative methods to assert themselves on terms not always recognized or even known by schools and teachers. Jonathan Silin (2006) recalls and reflects on his own creative methods as a child, and specifically, how he transformed "the teacher's lessons into personally meaningful ideas" (p. 236). Silin's analysis of childhood memory foregrounds the ways children can and do shape curriculum – despite teachers' aims and intentions. His work calls for teachers to notice and support children's creative efforts to use school texts to "unlock interior rooms" made from desire (p. 237). Paula M. Salvio and Gail Boldt (2010), too, underscore the creative methods of "play and fantasy" at work in children's agentic uses of symbols, objects, and words to facilitate their personal and social reconstructions of meaning that productively refuse the "utilitarian demands" of school contexts (p. 203). As a creative method and horizon of integrity, agency is, then, a critical, although sometimes quiet, bending of the hegemonic forces that schools impose, and it works persistently in times of both self-formation and public-facing protest, particularly for students who experience marginalizing school contexts. Our study draws from these varying frameworks on agency, including the ubiquity of agency within the assemblages of schooling, to analyse what chosen artefacts of childhood might mean to three undergraduate students and their future work as primary school teachers.

Method

Across four major urban cities in Canada and the United States, including Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, and New York City, this project investigates how undergraduate students entering professions and fields of study devoted to working with children draw on personal and popular discourses to think about the meaning of their future roles in relation to children and concepts of childhood. To this end, we asked participants to bring a cultural artefact or object they believed represented contemporary views on childhood to discuss in a small focus group of approximately 3-5 participants. Our initial focus groups,

conducted in-person before the pandemic, yielded 17 participants across the four sites and a range of artefacts. The following year, we conducted a second round of virtual focus groups with 15 new participants.

In planning for the virtual focus groups, we took into account several ethical considerations, which were presented to and approved by the research ethics board of each institution. To protect participants' anonymity and eliminate any potential for coercion, we utilized the assistance of student research assistants to recruit participants and conduct the focus groups. Participants were not recruited from courses that we were teaching or those of colleagues where there might be crossover with our current students. In order to protect participants' anonymity, participants provided the research assistants with pseudonyms, and only the research assistants had access to the participants' personal information. The audio transcripts of the virtual focus groups were rendered by Zoom and then edited for accuracy and anonymized by the research assistants before being shared with the faculty researchers. Photos of the artefacts were also provided by the research assistants.

The artefacts from the second set of focus groups, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, were not dissimilar from the artefacts of the first set of focus groups, which took place before the pandemic. Across both focus groups, the main artefacts of choice were stuffed animals, cherished books, tools and toys, expressions of creativity, and symbols of achievement. For the purposes of this paper, we decidedly focused on three participants who brought to the group artefacts that showed direct connections to school. To note, we were quite surprised that of all participants, only three chose to represent schooling experiences even as school is considered a formative part of a child's growth and development. Although some participants chose items that could be perceived as having some relationship to school, only the three items featured here were discussed in relation to experiences that took place in school. For example, participants who brought books spoke of them in relation to family time or reading with loved ones at home, while one participant's presentation of a graduation cap and gown focused on the societal pressure placed on children to be future-minded and achieve success. Since the essence of these artefacts did not reflect experiences in school, we did not include them in the final analysis.

Before the focus group, participants completed a short online questionnaire that asked for demographic information, an uploaded photograph of their chosen artefact, and written responses to two questions: 1) Why did you select this item? 2) How does your artefact represent childhood and what meanings of childhood (in terms of age, gender, ability, innocence, interest, futurity etc.) does it convey and assume? Focus group sessions, conducted by research assistants at each site, ran approximately 60-90 minutes and were held on Zoom during the early months of 2021. At the end of the session, participants were also asked to provide a brief written response in which they reflected further on the meaning of the artefact. All submitted materials, including transcripts of the focus group sessions, were read and all researchers, including assistants, met on multiple occasions to analyse the data. In keeping with our previously established approach to data analysis (Chang-Kredl et al., 2021; Farley et al., 2020, 2022; Garlen et al., 2020; Sonu et al., 2020), we conducted a thematic content analysis to discover what insights were surfaced through the focus groups. We first utilised NVivo to conduct a word frequency analysis in order to generate initial codes and familiarize ourselves with the data. Then, working in teams with the research assistants, we manually coded the transcripts with an inductive approach that sought to map out the content of the discussions and identify relevant themes for further analysis. For this particular study, the authors returned to the discussions of these three artefacts for further deductive analysis that sought to identify what, if any, insights the artefacts held for children's relations to schooling. Following a close thematic analysis of each participants' words, we also considered the nature and form of each artefact as it related to larger social and political contexts.

Twelve of the 15 participants were between 18-24 years of age and three participants fell above this range: 27, 31, and 44 years. They ranged in the ways they described themselves by race and sexuality, with all the participants identifying themselves as female, except for one non-binary and one male individual. The three participants who are the subject of this paper are Denise, Sky, and Liza, all residing in Canada

and of Asian descent. Sky is an 18-year-old, pansexual non-binary Filipina who attends university in Ottawa; Denise is a 24-year-old Vietnamese female who attends university in Toronto; and Liza is a 21-year-old bisexual Asian female who also attends university in Toronto. All three of them also preferred to teach children who were older than the typical age indicated by most undergraduate students enrolled in such programs. While childhood studies and teacher education programs for elementary school teachers usually draw university students interested in working with young children, these three participants were outliers in their intention to work with young people between the ages of 10-18.

Findings: Agentic Artefacts

While acts of resistance in school tend to be thought of through episodes of acting out or forthright protest, the three artefacts we present in this paper demonstrate how children draw from their own creative capacities to re-claim their own sense of agency amid the disciplinary measures and normative pressures of institutional life. Returning to Gallagher (2019), these artefacts represent times when “the inventive tendency of agency can be seen on the rarer occasions when children and young people repurpose assemblages in unforeseen ways” (p. 195). Each of these artefacts stands out as an example of how participants used objects that were intended to manage them along the values of schooling and usurped their function to create “unexpected eruptions that disturb the status quo” (p. 195). Such transformations of use may not carry the force to change entire structures of schooling, and they may indeed feel quotidian or “small” compared to the penetrating discourses of schooling and its function to govern society (Bamberg, 2006, p. 2). However, each artefact captures the significant ways that children invent new uses of school things to express when their own needs and desires come into contradiction with authoritative demands, illustrating the converging and conflicting relations at work within the school assemblage. The tensions between the child’s agency to create and the institutional aims of these artefacts urge us to attend to the meanings children make through their intimate and personal uses of school objects and artefacts, meanings that often exceed school expectations. Indeed, this agentic work should also extend into adulthood, insofar as adults reflecting on early life experiences may recall the many and complex ways they acted on the world as children, which in turn, may also be applied to their conceptualizations of childhood today.

The Progress Report Drawing

The artefact that Denise brought to the focus group was her kindergarten progress report (Figure 1) that featured a drawing she produced and the pre-printed words “WATCH ME GROW . . .” in capital letters at the top. At the bottom of the page, typed instructions, seeming to address the adult evaluator, read: “Child’s comments on learning at school (pictures and/or words).” Denise’s drawing can be read as a commentary on her experiences of learning at school, or a response to the request for such commentary. Denise explained that she chose the picture because she was looking for a drawing that was similar to what she used to draw as a child. Since the mid-twentieth century, drawings have been used in schools and clinical settings to evaluate intellectual development and diagnose mental disorders (Goodenough, 1926; Harris, 1963). In the late twentieth-century, when identifying individual factors associated with low achievement became increasingly common, drawings were used to determine which kindergartners should be considered “at risk” (Goldman & Gilbert, 1992). As neoliberal educational reform took hold in the 1980s, children, as learners, were increasingly classified by the “ability to inscribe oneself and self-govern through the language of levels and assessments” (Sonu & Benson, 2016, p. 242). Beginning in preschool, students are continually evaluated to determine their academic progress in relation to external benchmarks, and drawing prompts are frequently used as a method to assess motor and cognitive skills in children whose reading and writing skills are still developing.

Outdoors as an Agentic Site

Denise’s drawing depicts an outdoor scene featuring a stick figure person, an animal, flowers, and some unidentifiable objects of various shapes and sizes bordered by green grass at the bottom of the page. Above the figures are three squares divided into four parts to represent windows, likely indicating the

school in the background of the scene. In the open section just below the picture the words “*I like to by*” fill up most of the available space, with the words “*pants*” appearing above in the picture itself, suggesting that Denise might have run out of space for the sentence she wanted to write. Reflecting back on the drawing as an adult, Denise did not recall her exact intention, but shared her assumption that it was meant to be a picture of herself and an animal. Denise explained that nature-oriented scenes were something she remembered well from her childhood, particularly as she grew older:

...when I got to grade four and five, I would draw like faces on . . . flowers and like the grass and like the sun and stuff, so . . . I was really fascinated with nature.

Denise also described the significance of her artefact both in relation to its school function as well as the insight it could offer into her perspective as a child. As she explained, the drawing was

..personal because it . . . is like a grade report so it . . . tells me like the skills that I had at the time when I was younger . . . and . . . the way I was evaluated and how I like saw the world at that time of my life.

At that particular time of her life, Denise explained, she rarely had access to drawing supplies at home, a fact that highlights the specialness of her artefact as something that grew out of and represented a relationship to the school environment.

Taking the drawing as a reflection of how Denise “*saw the world,*” we might consider her response to her teachers’ prompt as an illustration of her relationship to school. Her positionality in relationship to the yellow windows suggests that what matters to Denise about learning exists, ironically, outside of the classroom. As Denise explained, her drawing shows “*how secure and safe I felt as a child, of this sense of wonderment . . . also like exploration of nature.*” Also notable is that while Denise located the matter of learning outside of the classroom, she also acknowledged her use of school supplies to which she “*rarely*” had access. Denise speculated further with contemplative hesitancy, suggested by her halting speech:

...children that, um, like have, um, like um, are growing up in low socioeconomic um standards or backgrounds, they don’t really have access to these, um, tools.

This observation, that children who may not have access to supplies use school tools to enact agencies that exceed the aims of the institution, repeats in all three participant narratives under discussion in our paper. Denise underscored precisely this point in noting the discord of her drawing, specifically, that it depicts “*a lot of things that doesn’t [sic] really make sense*” but that are “*put together.*”

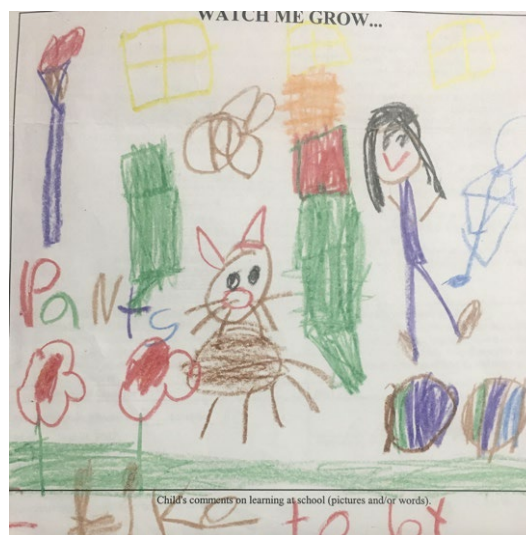


Figure 1. Progress report drawing

Rewriting Relations to Schooling

Instead of functioning as a medium through which Denise’s academic skills can be directly measured, the progress report, as she describes it, is transformed into a refusal of school as the central concern of her child life and a celebration of her “*vibrancy,*” which flourished in spite of the demands school

placed upon her. As Denise explained, for her, the picture reflected children's need for play, which makes recess *"a really valuable thing."* She also noted how her choice of bright colours speaks to *"a sense of imagination that you still have and a sense of playfulness"* as a child. The *"innocence," "youth,"* and *"happiness"* that Denise saw reflected in the picture seem to defy the assessment tool's narrow evaluative purpose. Denise explained further that she saw in the picture a message that children *"need . . . time to play . . . they need time to . . . explore the world. They have like a very . . . huge imagination."*

Reflecting on what Denise's artefact might tell us about children's agency in and relations to school, we might consider it as an example of routine agencies, which, according to Gallagher (2019) "happen wherever bodies or forces act in ways that develop or reproduce conventions, comply with rules or follow patterns" (p. 195). In responding to the prompt as a kindergartner, Denise was complying with the demands of the assignment, at least to the extent that she was asked to draw a picture and she did so. However, as Gallagher (2019) further explains, "routine agency is not slavishly deterministic; even with ingrained patterns of action, for something to constitute agency, there needs to be room for a degree of indeterminacy and improvisation" (p. 195). Denise's response, which seems to suggest that what was most important to her about learning at school happened outside of school, reflects a certain measure of playfulness that works within established patterns of response to circumvent, but not fully contravene, the force of evaluation. Her drawing reminds us, as Gallagher (2019) notes, that "children find ways to exercise something that looks like agency despite or against the dominant orientations of the power relations within an assemblage" (p. 193). We would add that Denise's reflections tell us something about how adults reflecting on childhood artefacts may hone these early resistances to regard the critical capacities of children they will one day teach.

The Stolen Notebooks

For Sky, a small, black sewn composition notebook (see Figure 2) became an object that surfaced for her the tension between their embodiment of gender and sexuality and learning to write in school. When asked to explain the significance of the notebook, Sky recalled the familiar school routine of writing in similar notebooks for at least fifteen minutes a day. The prompts were determined by the teacher, who, in Sky's words *"was always like, go and write about so and so,"* and Sky remembers being expected to write even if they weren't *"very qualified to write about some of the topics."* Sky recalls that at some point in this routine of daily writing, they eventually started taking notebooks home. *"This sounds bad,"* they said apologetically, *"but I would like . . . steal some of these notebooks and then I would just bring them home."* At home, freed from the directives of the teacher, Sky filled the notebook with pictures, notes on gender and sexuality, as well as short stories and poems.

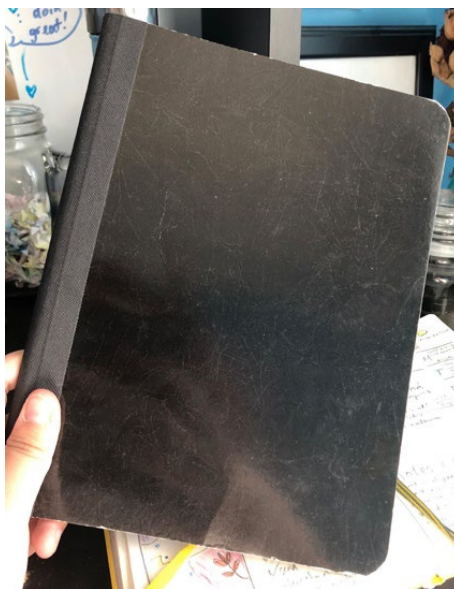


Figure 2. Black notebook

Writing as Routine Agency

As an artefact of childhood, the composition notebook reflects the importance that is placed on writing as a primary focus of early education. It also reflects the influence of neoliberal values on writing instruction. As Shari Stenberg (2015) observes, when the purpose of education is understood as preparation for economic futures, writing is viewed as “a masterable, commodified skill whose purpose is deployment in the workplace,” and therefore other purposes of writing such as personal inquiry or the exploration of new and different perspectives are diminished (Salvio & Boldt, 2010). As Stenberg (2015) notes, “since neoliberal logics value a streamlined approach to predetermined outcomes or competencies, there is little tolerance for learning processes that entail engagement of (an often recursive) process, collaboration and dialogue among learners, and reflection” (p. 8). This tendency is reflected in the way that Sky’s teacher asked students to write to a specific prompt, even if it wasn’t something they were interested in or informed about. Although the students were not allowed to choose *what* they wrote about, we can assume that they could choose *how* they responded to the given prompt, as journal entries are not typically assessed for accuracy in primary classrooms. By Gallagher’s (2019) definition, the act of responding to the prompt could also be considered routine agency, which he describes as acts that function through “patterns of response” that “comply with rules or follow patterns” (p. 195).

Stealing as Inventive Agency

In describing this daily writing routine, Sky explains that:

not everyone in my class loved the writing thing, either, because . . . it was mandated, like you had to write for 15 minutes. We weren’t going to do anything else unless you wrote a certain amount of words in 15 minutes.

As they elaborate, such rigid schooling directives were not conducive to self-discovery or personal disclosure:

I didn’t really talk about my . . . ideas very much in class mainly because I couldn’t . . . articulate it.

However, Sky circumvents this rigidity by taking notebooks home in order to enact a wholly different purpose:

It was really only until I started stealing notebooks and just like writing on my own like on my own time that it actually like meant something to me. So, I also think that like, it shows how like maybe . . . there’s many ways to kind of like utilize things that are supposed to be like standardized or like normal and make our own meaning out of it.

For Sky, the stolen notebooks became a space where they were able to explore themselves in a way that felt out of place at school or with other adults. Specifically, Sky, who identifies as non-binary and pansexual, shared that even though sexuality and gender identity were “*way out of [their] realm as a kid,*” they remember writing about liking girls and acknowledging that it seemed taboo at the time. Ultimately, Sky’s reappropriation of the notebooks ignites their love for both girls and writing, and becomes “*a way to write to this invisible person that I guess I needed in my life.*”

Reminiscent of Silin’s (2006) creative use of school texts to ‘unlock’ desire, Sky’s repurposing of the notebook from a tool for writing instruction to a private medium of self-discovery and exploration can be understood as an act of inventive agency. As Gallagher (2019) explains, “Bodies through which this kind of inventive agency flows are transformed by it, and in turn transform the assemblages in which the body participates” (p. 195). Sky’s act of stealing the notebook from the school setting and repurposing it redirects the restrictive hegemonic forces of schooling to produce a different relationship, with the object, with the act of writing, and, retrospectively, with their perception of childhood itself. In taking the notebook, Sky may also have been attempting to secure a much-deserved corner of the world for themselves. When asked in the focus group by another participant whether the stealing of the notebooks might be seen as “*the opposite of innocence,*” Sky responded by saying, “*Yeah, I sucked as a kid. [Laughs]. It was not cool. [Shakes head and laughs again].*” Sky’s statement suggests that there is something about the act of stealing the notebook that was not “*kid-like*” when viewed through a normative lens. When the participant pressed Sky about whether the stealing was an intentional act of rebellion, Sky said that although it was “*one of the more riskier*

things" they did as a kid, they saw the stolen notebook as an opportunity *"for something good."* With this interpretation, Sky resists a normative construct of the *"good"* school child, embracing their transgressive act as an agentic move to create a viable existence for themselves in a space where they were otherwise silent. If identity is, as Judith Butler (1988) tells us, "instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" repeated so commonly that they come to be seen as natural (p. 519), then we might say that Sky used the notebook to engage in "a different sort of repeating" (Butler, 1988, p. 520) that broke away from the school routine and allowed them to enact different possibilities for themselves beyond the constrictive measures of school routines and expectations.

The Pencil Sharpener

When Liza was in the fourth grade, she snuck out of her tutoring centre and made her way to the store. She drew out her allowance and bought herself a pencil sharpener (Figure 3), an object she would hold well into her adulthood. When asked to bring an artefact to the focus group, Liza was worried that her artefact, in comparison with the others, wouldn't be *"professional enough,"* but she chose it anyway because it symbolized for her *"innocence, joy, and hope"* during the *"not so nice time"* of school. Having been bullied *"a lot,"* Liza recalls the *"mental health issues"* she had experienced during childhood and how she *"always got really anxious and just hated school in general."* On occasions when she would *"not feel welcome"* or *"very scared,"* she would pull out her notebook, take her pencil sharpener and jot down her thoughts and ideas. *"I dream of, like, the future, um, that would be better,"* Liza shares.



Figure 3: Pencil sharpener

Liza grew up in Hong Kong and moved to Canada at the age of 17. During the focus group, she described this transition as a time when she realized that *"things can have different meanings."* In Hong Kong where she remembers school as a *"bank"* with too many students, teachers were just *"stuffing them with the information without caring about mental health."* She shares her observation that children in Hong Kong, unless they were *"on the edge of being suicidal,"* were rarely approached by adults about emotional matters. Whereas in Western countries, Liza continues, children speak openly about emotions so that when there is an issue, *"you're both doing it together."* A deep contrast to her representation of Hong Kong, she finds that in Canada, *"there is a lot of talk about inclusion...and promoting positivity."* This stark distinction seemed to serve a reflexive purpose for Liza and she shares her surprise in learning that even Canadian universities offered mental health support for their students. *"It was all new to me,"* she exclaims, having learned firsthand how the very chance of where one grows up can make a world of difference in how *"you see the world ... like how you see yourself."*

Agentic Self-Protection

Like Sky's notebook, the pencil sharpener signals a place of calm amid the turmoil of school. While Sky found refuge from the hegemonic structures and dominant discourses that constricted their writing and identity, Liza came to writing as a way of protecting herself from the emotional despair left by bullying. In Liza's case, she anchors her experience of school violence in the cultural mores of Hong Kong where she

grew up as an only child with two working parents who, as she described, were rarely home. Even as she did not have direct experience growing up in the Canadian context, she presumed that the Western approach to child-rearing would have supported her in her time of emotional need. Indeed, we see her taking up the discourse of care as central to the work of teaching, albeit through the cultural split of her immigrant experiences. On the one hand, she seems to reinforce well-being as a result of care in the West and on the other hand, characterizes the support she needed as a child as unavailable to those in the East. About her own role as a teacher, she remarks *“how important it is for a child to be comfortable in the school area...to feel welcome in the environment that they’re in - and feel included.”*

Liza’s act of splitting seems to create certainty from difficulty, offering her an anchor to work through the losses of her childhood and perhaps also to support her efforts in learning to teach within a “new” school system of the West. However, the bullying that Liza endures does not only dwell in the personal. Rather, acts of school violence emerge from within broader institutional forces and pressures that continually sustain the possibility of and for such injury. Built into the culture of schooling, perhaps across the globe, such violence is connected to a host of schooling practices that encourage competitive behaviors among children, using achievement and compliance as predictive markers of success that students must fight to obtain or setting up conditions where some children enact a need to dominate and make themselves recognized over others.

Agentic Resistance

The assemblage of forces that pressed down on Liza involved bullying by other students, but also included judgements made by her childhood teachers, the absence of her laboring parents, and the disheartening consequences of using tests to measure a child’s developmental progress and worth. As she explains:

I did not do well in school so my teachers did not like me. Um, some of the teachers actually joined the students to bully me as a kid, so I did not have like a very good experience, um, from school, um. And I guess that's like, because I didn't have good teachers, um, my teachers did not believe in me when I was a kid... Um, so growing up, I like when I was doing tests and stuff, I did not have any motivation of like studying, um, because I like never believe in myself, I don't think I would succeed, um, because no one ever believe in me, not even my parents.

Even as a young adult who is now studying to be a teacher herself, this childhood memory haunts Liza during times when she undergoes a test or is required to turn in a class assignment. *“It’s the first thing that comes to my mind is mostly, the [teacher] is just being good to me. It’s not that I’m that good.”* Each time she receives a good grade, she is undermined by an inner voice that questions her deservedness. Perhaps the pencil sharpener, a symbolic representation of Liza’s need for safety, can be understood as part of a larger context in which bullying is sustained through the demoralizing effects of a hidden curriculum that privileges relations of competitiveness and judgment, rather than care and compassion. The pencil sharpener, then, together with Sky’s notebook and Denise’s drawing, all illustrate ways that children are creating spaces through which they push against the instrumentality of school, and albeit seemingly small, can serve as powerful reminders of how children sharpen their agentic revolt against the aims and effects of schooling they find too debilitating to bear.

Both Sky and Liza’s narratives demonstrate how even in the most authoritative or disavowing of circumstances, children are exercising their own agencies. If we consider the imposing quality of education’s evaluative imperative, we can also see a similar, albeit more routine, form of agency represented in Denise’s drawing. All three artefacts show how such agentic moves can be existential to the formation of an identity that is continually being tested within the institutional space of schooling. The prescribed logic of outcomes is now reconfigured as a space of expression and self-identification in Denise’s drawing and Sky’s notebook, and the pencil sharpener becomes the tool through which Liza tries to defend herself from the targeted abuse of her peers. These artefacts provide the ontological material from which acts of agency and self-formation unfold within constrictive schooling contexts. They set into motion the invention of hidden, even secretive and stealthy corners of expression created for and by children themselves.

Conclusion and Discussion

Many of us may recall from our own childhoods the school objects from above: the official script of school progress reports, the scribbled-on pages of composition notebooks, the grinding of the pencil sharpener rising above the classroom din. None of these objects appear in memories as detached or solitary. They conjure up entire social scenes that open up a world of possibility; uses that exceed the expectations of their intended purpose in school, as illustrated by the artefacts presented here. The progress report, typically used to record academic levels and grades, ironically becomes a window to explore the joys of being on the other side of the classroom wall. The composition book, stolen from the school site, hides away the intimate feelings and secrets otherwise discouraged or silenced in school. The pencil sharpener inspires dreams of the future, a life away from the despair of bullying. In all cases, ordinary school objects are transformed into agentic critiques of schooling itself.

With these critiques in mind, we suggest that the stories these artefacts tell present an opportunity to interrogate the binary construction of agency as something that either is or is not possessed or realized, moving individualizing conceptions toward more contextualized perspectives that acknowledge the range of ways that children are shaping relations among themselves and within school spaces. In teacher education, directing our focus toward what agency does and how it operates within the assemblage of bodies, objects, and forces could create opportunities for teachers to better understand how agency becomes initiated within classroom settings as a complex relation, and not simply an individual achievement. Karen Guo and Carmen Dalli (2016) suggest, too, that children enact agency through their “clear attempts to bond with others and establish a sense of belonging” (p. 264). The argument for agency as relational also holds for our analysis of childhood artefacts. Each of the meanings the participants attached to these school-related artefacts spoke to their need to develop and express a sense and understanding of themselves within the school and sociocultural context. For all three participants, that need was made urgent by a sense of rejection and containment of who they were as children. Taken together, the artefacts remind us that children take active part in negotiating their relations within the school assemblage of rules, expectations, materials, teachers, parents, and peers. They urge us, as teachers and teacher educators, to acknowledge that, as Gallagher (2019) notes, “children’s decisive actions always happen in relation with other kinds of beings and objects,” and children are “key players in shaping these relations – never the only players, but certainly players worth taking seriously” (p. 193).

The demand to “take children seriously” can, however, lead to an oversimplified conceptualization of agency as a property of the individual. The three participants described above tell us otherwise: that agency is entangled, fluid, and transgressive. While efforts to ‘manage’ children in classrooms may inadvertently support their unquestioned compliance to the rules of schooling, an overly determined critique of how children’s capacities are diminished by educational demands may not be the most generative approach for teachers or students. Rather, if we appreciate children’s vulnerabilities to outside demands as an opening for further understanding, rather than a closing – if we treat them as an invitation into the unresolvable tensions that circulate in school spaces – then we may be able to see that agency emerges not in spite of but *through* contexts that otherwise aim to manage and even control their very actions (Gallagher, 2019). Drawing on the work of Butler et al. (2016), Gallagher (2019) suggests that such a view of agency enables us to consider vulnerability not as something to be overcome, but as “a radical openness to being affected by events, which is fundamental to the ability of life to feel, grow, change and act” (p. 193). Perhaps it is in this tension between school and student that a focus on agency can instruct, not at the extreme ends of freedom and control, but rather as contextualized experiences from which we can further support human dignity and growth.

For us, a key question raised in and through the above narratives is how a critical focus on teachers’ childhood memories might support a theory of children as agentic subjects with the capacity to resist the demands of school, without also leaving them to their own devices. That is, while agency can emerge in and through difficulty, and while the participants of our study recall their own efforts to that end, we are left with a question of how memory can remind teachers of the need for a supportive context in which to

try out disruptive or experimental ideas and actions. As Outi Ylitapio-Mäntylä (2013) found, memory work offers a way to “contemplate constructions of caring and power and develop critical ways of thinking about truth and knowledge” (p. 274). Zsuzsa Millei et al. (2019) assert that memories offer insight into how children both reproduce and resist normative roles and produce “their subjectivities with, within, and against dominant narratives” (p. 10). For Gannon (2015) collective memory work can help us identify the “historically and culturally specific processes whereby one is subjected to particular discursive regimes and regulatory frameworks and through which individuals and their social contexts are constructed” (p. 62; see also Davies & Gannon, 2006). As the artefacts remind us, discursive regimes that mark children as innocent and lacking in agency do not reflect the participants’ remembered experiences of childhood. Instead, they urge aspiring teachers to expand and reconfigure the lenses through which they view the children with whom they work, including of course, the social, political, and material particulars of their own classroom settings. As we have written elsewhere (Farley et al., 2022; Sonu et al., 2020), memory can serve as an important vantage point from which to examine not only one’s history, but how our own recollections of being children reflect or disrupt dominant cultural beliefs about what childhood *should* be.

We hope that engaging in the kind of active and critical memory work featured in this study can encourage beginning and experienced teachers to take notice of and challenge the ways that they might be neglecting, resisting, or inviting a range of children’s agencies. As these moments of resistance and invitation frequently occur at the microlevel, such deliberate reflections may require us to engage in the “repurposing of classroom moments” (Stenberg, 2015, p. 11) as opportunities to recognize and foster spaces of contravention. Drawing on Louise Archer’s (2008) insights on neoliberalism and identity, such an approach embraces the notion that children and teachers are not simply “inevitable neoliberal subjects” but agentic actors with the capacity to “carve out new spaces for being otherwise” (p. 272). The inventive meanings and critiques that emerge from these artefacts of schooled childhoods remind us, as Gramsci (1971) writes, that hegemony is never absolute. While we can never really know the experiences of those we care for, and therefore cannot strive for certainty, complete protection, or total control, rethinking the converging and conflicting relations at work within the school assemblage opens possibilities for working both within and against current structures, and in effect, invites the imagination of practices that can subvert the repetitive and normalizing processes of school in order to create space for the unforeseen and the agentic to emerge.

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