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Researching Children's Literature *Otherwise* to Decolonise Childhoods in Experimental Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This article explores children's literature as a tool for decolonising childhood and curriculum through experimental reading practices. Based on post-qualitative enquiry, and grounded in decolonial, feminist, and posthumanist theories, the study analyses two reading encounters with children using picturebooks from Global South. These experiences gave rise to assemblages in which children's agency emerged through relationality and entanglements with books, bodies, materialities, and spaces. We argue that literature and childhood, which is often subject to adult norms, can facilitate plural and situated readings that affirm children's worldviews and knowledge. This approach interrogates the conventional and universalist conceptualisations of childhood and reveals possibilities for reimagining the experimental curriculum as a relational and co-creative space. The article promotes an epistemic and ethical reconstruction of research with children that decentres adult frameworks and expand new possibilities for children's subjectivities and knowledges.

1 | Introduction

The ways societies imagine and assign value to what children should know are deeply intertwined with prevailing ideas of childhood, literature, and curriculum. Far from being neutral or innocent, children's books reflect and enact these complex relationships, especially those between adults and children, which come alive in processes of recognised or 'valid' reading and meaning-making. In this context, researching *otherwise* in Critical Childhood and Curriculum Studies implies an 'epistemic and subjective reconstruction' (de Castro 2024; following Mignolo and Walsh) that destabilises hegemonic frameworks of knowledge, research authority, and disciplinary categories. This decolonial gesture involves an openness to children's worldviews and challenges researchers to (un)learn theories, (un)discipline methodologies, and exercise ethical reflexivity. In this article, we explore how children's literature can be used as a tool to decolonise childhoods and the curriculum, focusing on the assemblages created in reading with children. When we generate a collective reading/writing of worlds, some questions,

imaginaries, and subjectivities emerge with, from, and for childhoods.

In this research process, we approach children's literature as a field of experimentation, to collectively re-create childhoods, situating ourselves in southern Europe and South America, to explore other forms of knowing, feeling, and narrating. This research occurred while accompanying the initial phase of a doctoral thesis,¹ in which Estrella is the novice researcher and Montse and Marta are her research supervisors. This doctoral research is part of the Spanish project *AGEncias*, which investigates children's agencies from a situated and relational perspective and plural forms of knowledge with the aim of producing inclusive narratives of childhood for (teacher) education. Thus, our research constitutes an initial, situated contribution that seeks to raise new questions and explore the possibilities, as well as the tensions and developments, in encounters with children and literature. Its value lies in the practical experimentation of alternative approaches to meaning-making with children, to explore the potential to reimagine childhood narratives.

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Our work stems from a desire to inhabit the questions that emerge in the margins, rooted in the need to navigate knowledge that has been historically marginalised. In this transition, reading with children became an ethical practice, a way of de-centering the adult gaze and its evaluations of childhood, opening ourselves to uncertainty, to the unpredictability of reading experiences, and experiencing research as a relational possibility that transcends the traditional design of a doctoral thesis. As researchers and educators, we began our journey by reading four picturebooks from the Global South to expand the aesthetic repertoires typically addressed to children. At this junction, we explored children's literature as a space of affective, political, and epistemic mediation, a vantage point from which to reimagine childhood and the curriculum through a practice of aperture and shared inquiry. These picturebooks were:

- *La Costura*, by Argentinean author Isol (2021), recounts the story of Lila, a young girl who frequently misplaces her belongings. Using traditional Palestinian embroidery² as a backdrop, the book explores everyday life and the entanglements between human and non-human as complementary forces. Through embroidery, the illustrator creates a world where a visible dimension of community life coexists with a spiritual and ancestral one on the fabric's reverse side, forming a visual and narrative threshold between both worlds.
- *Migrants*, by Issa Watanabe's (2019), is articulated in the silences of a wordless reading that narrates the transitional experience of displaced people, in the back-and-forth of uncertainty, death, and collectivity as forms of resistance.
- *9 kilómetros* by Aguilera and Lyon (2022), as a metaphor for the right to education, also situates us in the exercise of transit, in this case, the 'walking children' who travel long distances to get to school. Set in the geography and nature of southern Chile, we follow a child's walk through forests and meadows in the company of animals, vegetation, experiences, and childhood reflections.
- *Origen* by Nat Cardozo (2024), which recovers the stories of some 20 native peoples worldwide. Through their illustrations and first-person narratives, he presents diverse forms of life that challenge the limits between the human and the non-human, blurring the material frontiers between bodies, nature, and territory.

We conducted shared reading sessions between the adult researchers and children, designed as open, semi-structured spaces, to foster free experimentation with books, stories, and other materials. To explore these relationships, we draw on the intersections among Critical Childhood Studies, analyses of power relations in children's literature, and perspectives that claim the epistemic protagonism of childhoods, from decolonial and feminist perspectives.

2 | Entanglements and Tensions Between Childhood, Curriculum and Children's Literature

There are shared concerns between Critical Childhood Studies and Children's Literature Studies about power relations between

adults and children and the role that children's experiences and worldviews can play in understanding and generating knowledge about childhood. In these fields, conceptions of children and their capabilities have shifted gradually from a perspective centred on idealised innocence, to consider them as a project under construction to become an adult subject, or as a social actor capable of intervening and affecting their context (Ramjewan and Garlen 2020; Pavez-Soto and Sepúlveda Kattan 2019). Despite their nuances, all these conceptions always place the child as an 'actor-other', vulnerable, in a constant relationship of dependence with the adult world (Rifà-Valls and Bertran Tarrés 2020).

This structuring of childhood responded to a larger construction of images, narratives, and values that have historically perpetuated epistemic inequalities and injustices. Authors such as Abebe et al. (2022) and Twum-Danso Imoh et al. (2022) note that children, especially the most vulnerable, have not been recognised as creators of knowledge and, therefore, do not form part of scientific discourse or official knowledge. This exclusion not only reflects an epistemological denial but also a political and cultural one. This interpretation is consistent with Liebel's (2019) conception of childhood as a 'colonised subject', whereby the logic of domination and control applied to children was part of the system of subordination practices directed at colonised peoples in the Global South. Such communities were considered immature and incomplete and were said to 'remain in a state of infancy' (p. 99), a condition used to justify their exclusion and tutelage. The hegemony of the Global North in the development of theoretical knowledge in this field is called into question, as are the extractive research practices in the Global South, and the universalist conception of childhood that denies its plurality and diversity.

This colonial logic has left deep traces in how childhood has been represented and thought of in the curriculum, pedagogical discourses, and children's literature. As a tool of control, the curriculum has operated as a matrix that hierarchises knowledge and subjectivities. According to Hernández Morales (2019), the stamp of colonising knowledge is based on a Western rationality that validates "scientific" knowledge from a Eurocentric perspective, treating it as absolute and universal truths. In this framework, the curriculum functions as a device of 'epistemic violence', denying the possibility of imagining other-relationships with knowledge, presenting itself as a closed and prescriptive body. This view reproduces a historical-political pattern of knowledge validation that perpetuates unequal power dynamics and reinforces hegemonic practices, imposing a global definition of what is 'legitimate'.

In this article, we approach experimental curriculum from the intersection between feminist and decolonial theories (Rifà-Valls and López Ruiz 2024), which unfolds as an emerging space for the reconfiguration of knowledge as territories of emancipation. In both language and literature, these perspectives foreground embodied experience and pedagogical imagination: in language, by moving beyond standardised literacy strategies towards a relational and plural understanding of meaning-making (Perry 2021); in literature, by exploring how materiality and the positionality of subjects expand the ways in which meanings are created (García-González et al. 2019). Grounded in an onto-politics of relationality, this approach draws on three

interconnected strands in decolonial curriculum studies: the indigenization of curriculum to repair and care from relational ethics while embodying decolonial education and community participation (Fellner 2018; Karsgaard et al. 2025); posthumanist children's agencies in constant interaction with material, symbolic, human and more-than-human frameworks (Malone et al. 2020; Murris 2016); and spatial literacy from black geographies as a way of embodying knowledge through spatial relations in our/other stories we create (Germinaro 2026; Karsgaard et al. 2025).

This critical shift in curriculum development aligns with the inclusion of children's voices, experiences and knowledge within what several authors have conceptualised as the 'ontological turn' in Childhood Studies (Spyrou 2018; Abebe et al. 2022; Oswell 2024; Kraftl 2020). Thus, when understanding education as a transformative practice (hooks 1994), curriculum and teaching processes are reinterpreted as political, ethical and affective dimensions to transgress hegemonic knowledge. In addition, decolonial pedagogies (Walsh 2013) question and subvert the colonial matrices of power-knowing-being. As a contested space, the curriculum is constructed in dialogue, entangling subjectivities, and fostering the collective production of knowledge as a pedagogical act. Moving towards decolonial, posthumanist and feminist perspectives, the situated and relational practice becomes an ethical act for recognising the embodied experiences of subalternised subjects (Walsh 2020). The curriculum is then reconfigured as an embodied and insurgent feminist and anti-racist practice, open to listening and learning through the others—human and more-than-human—, when children affect and are affected by the reading/writing process.

In children's literature, traditionally, a paradoxical cultural device has played a crucial role in constructing agency, diversity, and knowledge about childhood. In its ambivalent condition, children's literature has reflected and reinforced power inequalities between the adult and children's worlds as a tool of control over children's imaginaries and the transmission of socially acceptable behaviours and values. Nikolajeva (2009) argues that this field constitutes a form of asymmetrical communication directed at children as powerless subjects. To this end, she introduces the concept of 'aetonormativity', which explains the predominance of the adult perspective in children's literature production. This logic of vertical hierarchy—in which the adult narrates, prescribes, and educates while the child listens, learns, and obeys—has been understood mainly as an ideological medium and normalising and universal key, rather than as an artistic, aesthetic, or autonomous expression.

From the concept of aetonormativity, power relations and subordination have been analysed in their dynamics and complexities. For example, Beauvais (2013) argues that power in children's literature is multifaceted and must be interpreted in multiple layers and contexts. Aligned to this, Gubar (2013) proposes the 'kinship model', focusing on adult-child interrelationship to overcome this dichotomy. Even so, age and power relations remain an issue of great interest in the field. Authors such as Murris (2016) have warned of an *onto-epistemic injustice* that has historically silenced children's voices and ways of knowing, naturalising age as a structural axis of inequality. A crucial response to this is

the construction of intergenerational relationships with literature praxis, where children are recognised as co-creators of culture and not merely passive consumers through collaboration and respectful and equitable dialogue between adults and children, both in the creation, critique, and circulation of books and knowledge (Van Lierop-Debrauwer 2022).

Consequently, the view of children's literature as an exclusively adult channel for transmitting values is superseded by an interpretation situated within a dynamic ecosystem of relationships, where text, children, adults, language, the publishing market, and reading practices converge to challenge binary frameworks of children's knowledge (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González 2023). Inspired by new materialisms, this approach understands books beyond their linguistic and discursive structures. The aim is to reconsider literary practices as relational spaces for the co-creation of meaning as events, formed through diverse assemblages between children, stories, adults, and other forces and materialities present (García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2020). In turn, the emergence of new and increasingly diverse contemporary productions (García-González et al. 2019; Torres and Medina 2021), especially from displaced contexts, has contributed to pluralise and destabilise traditional narratives, proposing more critical, heterogeneous and situated representations of childhood. These works question visions of child development, morality, and universality and open the way to *other-worlds* where children appear as agents of imagination, desire and knowledge (de Castro 2020).

3 | Towards Research by and With *Otherwise* Childhoods

Experimenting with curriculum and constructing knowledge in research from a subjective and epistemic reconstruction perspective (de Castro 2024) implies assuming the need to generate co-creation processes of knowledge with children, rather than about them. This approach implies challenges and transformations in the positioning of research, opening onto-epistemic, ethical, methodological, and political possibilities for re-imagining research practices by moving away from an 'extractivist logic' that has treated children as objects of study (Spyrou 2024). In children's literature research, there is a recognised need to adapt and develop participatory, situated, and embodied methodological approaches of joint exploration (Abebe and Refstie 2024), reciprocity, and intergenerational creation between adults, children, and other forces (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2023).

This shift aligns with decentre knowledge production, questioning where authority resides in the research process (Kraftl 2020). Building on this decentring, we adopt the concept of '*perspectiva niña*' (Magistris and Morales 2021), which emerges from South America to reimagine epistemologies of 'childhood-knowledge', a wisdom rooted in the political and collective agency of children. Within this framework, research becomes a site of shared encounter and belonging, an open-ended process that shifts away from the adult-centric gaze to embrace uncertainty. It recognises the legitimate ways in which children think, feel, imagine, and create 'on their own terms', as well as their participation in collective actions (Pérez-Céspedes 2025).

In our research, addressing children's literature *otherwise* to decolonise childhoods has led to experimenting with the collective creation of multiple and plural narratives as the core of curricular praxis. Assembling children's stories and imaginaries introduces relationality and the concept of pluriversal literacies, described by Perry as: "the practices of sensemaking in fluid and intra-active global contexts through the multiple texts of culture, language, place, and materials that we navigate from our various positions on the globe" (Perry 2021, 305). Aligned to this, a picturebook does not belong to a specific place, people, language, or platform; it engages "taken up with an awareness of their contingency within the plural onto-epistemological contexts that meaning making occurs" (Perry 2021, 305).

We approached this experience from a post-qualitative perspective on research (Lather and St. Pierre 2013; St. Pierre 2021) to narrate emerging and changing encounters between adult researchers, children and stories. We set out to experiment with a 'methodology in process', to orient ourselves to open spaces and thresholds in the interweaving of theory and data (Mazzei 2021). In this approach, the methods are not reduced to a closed set of techniques but expand in different directions as the research evolves with multiple traces: childhood experiences, book images and words, sensorialities, our own trajectories, and the territories that cross us. This enables the generation of new questions, reflections and movements, as well as the establishment of new relationships to explore phenomena (Basu 2021). In this case, we seek to scrutinise those resonances and new ways of inquiring childhood, children's literature, and the experimental curriculum from a relational gaze that simultaneously configures and overflows the experience of reading and research.

Methodologically, research has been mobilised as an iterative and constantly reformulating process. In the first stage of Estrella's doctoral research, we set out to interweave theories, picturebooks, and children as integral parts of the project design and research questions. The adult researchers began to configure different everyday dialogues around children's books, memories, and reading experiences, particularly with picturebooks, for their capacity to generate narratives of differing intricacy via multimodal processes of meaning-making (García-González 2021). We identified the need to engage with literary narratives and cosmovisions from the Global South, especially from South America, Estrella's territory, in an exercise of positionality and to situate the research within its own trajectory and enunciation. Then, we asked ourselves whether these readings might offer different stories that would bring us closer to new knowledge and experiences about/with childhood that could nourish our own reflections.

The book selection began with authors, illustrators, and publishers previously known in the field of children's literature publishing in Latin America and Spain. Subsequently, the search was extended with a review of recommendations catalogues from recent years (2019–2024) by internationally recognised organisations, such as The White Ravens of the [Internationale Jugendbibliothek](#), publications of the [Latin American branches of IBBY](#) (International Book and Youth Organisation), and the [Troquel collective](#) in Chile. While these organisations offer relevant information for exploring recent publishing productions, we recognise the power relations that permeate the field

of children's literature, which is dominated by Global North markets. As Guijarro Arribas (2021) warns, Latin American children's literature is underrepresented in these 'legitimising spaces' of literary quality. For this reason, its use as a search resource responded to the enquiry into which those narratives—others (following Walsh) that are putting the hegemonic imaginaries from the South under tension.

Thus emerged the four mentioned works that have become significant in our reflection on how childhood is narrated and pluralised through literature. In shared reading among adult researchers, the selected texts are composed of visual and textual frameworks, and they establish transnational dialogues that localise and delocalise territories and ways of representing childhood, as well as establishing a dialogue between relationalities and possible worlds. We conducted two shared reading encounters with children to meet the challenges of participatory research with children (Liebel and Markowska-Manista 2021), to explore how children deployed processes of signification that make the re-imagining of stories, possible worlds, and links and ways of inhabiting books and literature possible. It was not intended to be a workshop with a specific didactic purpose but rather a territory of experience, a relational space where books, materialities, childhoods, and adults could intertwine in a free, creative, and collaborative dynamic for the creation of meanings (García-González et al. 2019; Pérez-Céspedes 2025).

The encounters took place at the home of one of the researchers. The space was designed to invite free transit and multi-sensory exploration, ensuring conditions of comfort, warmth, and accessibility for both books and bodies in movement. For this, we were inspired by the work of the feminist cooperative '[La Magrana Curiosa](#)' in creating art and free-play spaces for children and families—whom we met through the AGencias project—and by our conversations after reading the books. The space was equipped with materials in symbolic dialogue with the themes and aesthetics of the selected works: elements of nature, textures, supports, images, everyday objects, and other resources. Conceptually, we planned three moments for the meetings with children: free exploration with the books, space, and materials; shared reading of one or more stories; and a moment of creation, performance, or play for the reinterpretation of meanings (Figure 1). However, it was borne in mind that this proposal could be displaced during the activity regarding children's desires and movements.

4 | (Dis)encounters Between Children's Literatures, Childhood Reading Agencies and Curriculum

The first meeting with children was attended by Val (9 years old), her sister Mel (6), and Bea (6), a classmate from her school.³ Val and Mel are the daughters of Laura, a Mexican friend of one of the researchers who also connected us with Monica, of Colombian origin, who helped us set up the second meeting with her daughter Sol and the twins Fer and Rio, all aged 9. Both mothers are based in Catalonia. We highlight their migrant origin because it motivated some of the conversations with the children. From their position of displaced subjects, a support network is articulated, which we believe



FIGURE 1 | Design process of the meeting space with the readings.

motivated them to participate in the research, particularly considering that one of the researchers is also living a migration process. This shared experience fosters mutual recognition and trust. These transnational trajectories also bring us closer to understanding the broader postcolonial power relations that persist in the research's global context (following Liebel 2019). Our converging path enabled us to establish a situated South–North global space within the boundaries we inhabit within the territory.

In the case of Val and Mel, both girls knew Estrella as the researcher who facilitated the activity and visited her home before, so the situation had a certain everydayness to them. Val enjoys books and reading, while Mel is drawn to more physical activities. Moreover, both Mel and Bea are learning to read at school and already decode written text. In Sol's case, she met one of the researchers a few weeks before the book encounter, but they only exchanged a few words. Fer and Rio, on the other hand, met the researcher at the beginning of the experience, at the invitation of Sol and her mother.

The relationship between children and reading experiences is framed within research on picturebooks as spaces for making meaning through multimodal narratives (García-González et al. 2019; Farrar et al. 2024) and overcoming the adult-child binary that has shaped knowledge about childhood (Murriss 2016). When we invited the children to participate, we explained that the activity was part of our university research project, in which we were trying to find out how children approach books and what recommendations they could offer for exploring with them. We also outlined the participation dynamics, including that it was a free space where they could use all available materials and leave the activity at any time. In both meetings, the mothers, Laura and Monica, waited for the children in an adjoining room. One of the researchers took on a participant role in the meeting.

Furthermore, we emphasise the importance of ethical and political reflexivity (Abebe and Refstie 2024), an essential component of a feminist decolonial approach, which involves questioning the power relations and privileges present in the research process with children. As adult researchers, we recognise the

influence of our academic training, cultural frameworks, and adult biases on the research. Although we aim to conduct research by intertwining and co-creating meanings with children and their imaginative capacity to shift, reformulate, and expand our ideas in designing the doctoral research project. We are also aware of the limitations of this process. These drawbacks are particularly evident in our prior knowledge of participants, the final systematisation, analysis, and translating children's fluid representations into a formal academic structure.

The experiences were analysed using a narrative approach within the context of post-qualitative enquiry (Rifà-Valls and López-Ruiz 2023). The analysis focused on the relational dynamics among the children, the books, the materials, and the space in which the reading sessions took place. We focused on moments when the agency of the children transformed the dynamics, adult expectations and relationships that shaped the reading experience. We will follow three directions that motivate our reflections. First, we will refer to the displacement of the books as a central object in favour of shared reading and storytelling processes. Second, we will explore reading as an embodied and material practice shaped by movement, silence, contact, and space. Third, we reinterpreted stories as intertextual processes of collective creation and deliberation.

4.1 | Unpacking the Books to Explore the Reading of Shared Experiences

From a new materialist and posthumanist perspective, the first meeting with the girls began with an open invitation to explore the books and the available material freely. We also challenged them to explore possible connections between the objects and the stories. Time and space matter in childhood and curriculum. Often, there is a gap between expectations and reality, and children inhabit time and space differently than adults (Hackett and Somerville 2017). Moreover, reading is a singular and embodied process. Each girl took a book and started to browse through it, a review that took no more than 2 or 3 min. Only Val decided to go through all the books sitting on a sofa, while Mel and Bea decided to explore all the materials.

Mel: What are we going to do with all this? [*Going through the box with papers*].

Estrella: What would you like to do?

Mel: Mmm... I don't know, I think a craft, I think I'll make a pencil, can we sew?

Researcher's field notes, first encounter with children

The girls began making creations outside of reading or any connection to books. The fact that they decided to move away from the books so quickly left us puzzled and a little fearful about how the rest of the encounter would proceed. This unexpected 'decentring' of the books caused by children's reading practices destabilised our expectations, even though we knew our initial planning would be reshaped in dialogue with the children. However, we decided not to interrupt their intentions, so we chose to sustain the uncertainty and remain open to what could emerge. As Mignolo and Walsh (2018) point out, research to decolonise knowledge implies a doing-feeling-thinking [*sentir-pensar-hacer*] in a different way, particularly from non-adultcentric views. In the encounters, we were challenged by the children to make this 'epistemic break', an invitation to rethink our ways of looking at experience and begin to shift our understanding of the book as an object and the reading experience.

Even though books were pushed into the background, the space fostered a connection with children's experiences of everyday life, which they used to create their own stories. That week, there was a massive blackout on the Iberian Peninsula and the girls wanted to talk about it. By narrating those experiences, they connected with some of the topics in the selected books. Bea said that her neighbours had a barbecue and that they had been invited. '*We ate all their food*,' she laughed. At the same time, Val and Mel shared different situations from that day: how their father had gone to pick them up from school, how only one of the mobile phones had an intermittent signal during that day, and that on Tv [*la tele*] they had said that some people had died because of the lack of electricity, but that they had not been afraid.

The displacement of the books moved us to experiment with reading their own stories as situated narratives, as a reconstruction of shared relationships, memories, and affections in an expansive process of encounter outside a fixed text. As suggested by Nolas et al. (2019), these spaces for exploration and play bring us closer to discovering the '*idioms*' of childhood, as an instrument for exchange and the creation of children's worlds. The books selected created an atmosphere for sharing these stories and opening up a relational field, a way to exploring the layers of children's cultures. In other words, delving into those expressions of their voices, objects, plays, experiences, and practices that go beyond the book and reading as codification (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González 2023). From a decolonial perspective of childhood, these embodied and shared experiences help us reflect on the role and potential of children to share and construct their own narratives (Medina Melgarejo and da Costa Maciel 2016).

4.2 | Embodied Moments and Forms of Reading: Noise, Silence and Contact

The encounters allowed us to rethink the moments and ways in which reading occurs, recognising it as a situated, intersectional, and relational process. Far from a developmental perspective focused on reading competence (de Rijke et al. 2023), our readings were traversed by different networks of materialities, sensorialities, affects, and desires that suggested other ways of understanding experiences, books, and stories. In the first encounter, the books reappeared only after conversation, after iterative interaction with the objects and the telling of their own stories. The researcher asked them if they wanted to read together, and Val took the initiative to read to the others 9 *kilómetros*, the book she had liked the most. She sat in a chair and began to read to us, showing us the pictures as she turned the pages, similar to how they do it at school. We sat on the sofa, listening to her, while the girls continued to create with the fabrics and coloured paper.

The reading followed the protagonist's adventure but at a different rhythm. Bea was very curious about where the boy in the story was heading: '*Where is he going? I think he is getting lost*', she commented as we tried to follow the boy across each page. In this dynamic, Val, who served as our 'reading mediator', pointed to illustrations to guide our visual and multi-modal exploration (Farrar et al. 2024). However, this curious exploration was suddenly interrupted by Mel's intervention. Although she had seemed disinterested during the reading, she had been paying attention to the oral narration. Upon seeing an illustration that resembled a school, she quickly intervened, stating that the boy was heading there. She also asked Bea to look closely at the pictures. Thus, Mel's quick interpretation redirected Bea's curiosity, bringing together these different but active ways of reading. Unlike what we imagined of a classic reading experience with children, the process of narration was interrupted by comments, movements, and displacements between the sofa and the search for threads, fabrics, and papers, which did not close the space of comprehension.

[Val reads the story out loud]

Bea: It's true, it's going too far.

Mel: No, she's going to school. See, she's going to school. Bea, you can sew now [*hands her the needle*].

Researcher's field notes, first encounter with children

At the second meeting with Sol, Fer, and Rio, we decided to offer a more detailed initial invitation, as the children were still unfamiliar with us and appeared somewhat nervous and expectant about engaging with both the facilitator and the space. We encouraged them to begin by exploring the picture-books and then turn to the surrounding materials that might resonate with the stories. Although we explained that they were free to read together or individually, each child naturally gravitated towards reading on their own, selecting a book and

quietly immersing themselves at their own pace and silence, without interrupting the others' process. Afterwards, we invited them to share the readings they had done. They all used the book to comment on some of the fragments of the reading in their own words and showed us their favourite images.

From a posthuman perspective, the encounter with books and their stories did not occur only in the act of decoding. Instead, it emerged in a material-discursive assemblages, where bodies, books, space, noises, and silences converged to shape situated experiences of reading (de Rijke et al. 2023; Oswald 2024). In these encounters, reading was not centred exclusively on the text, but appear to be constituted through the relational imbrication of multiple agencies. These included children's agencies, manifested in the children's spontaneous decisions and bodily expressions; spatial and material agencies, activated through the affordances of the sofa, floor, threads, and the 'reading' chair, which was later re-signified through play; and human and more-than-human agencies, expressed in the co-presence of others, objects, and ambient forces. These interactions suggested a reading process that was non-linear and characterised by affect, whereby reading also became sewing, commenting, moving, doubting, sharing, or remaining in silence (Figure 2). As Kirby (2020) observes, "children's agency might be assembled and infrastructured within and across a range of devices, materialities, technologies and other sentient beings" (p. 18, quoting Oswald 2024). Drawing on this understanding, we are invited to consider children's agency not as autonomous or isolated, but as an emergent property of relational fields where various forces, human and non-human, participate in the becoming of the reading event.

4.3 | Reinterpretation as a Process for Intertextual Creation and Deliberation

In our material-discursive reading of the books, we observed how the children activated diverse processes of signification that not only expanded the stories read but also displaced our own expectations about the experience. At the end of the reading, we invited Rio, Fer, and Sol to explore a range of available materials and identify which of them could be related to the stories. To one side of the space designed for the activity, there was a bookcase with decorative objects and personal mementoes. Although we had not included them in the proposal, Rio was drawn to some of them, revealing how the elements of the environment also play an active role in the construction of meaning and exploration.

Rio picked up a small decorative bicycle and linked it to his reading of 9 kilómetros. "If it were 9 kilometres, I could do it on a bicycle". His comment surprised us not only because of its practical logic but also because it highlighted how his reading operated from a concrete experience of the world. This connection moved our frames of interpretation again, revealing how children could re-signify objects. In our proposal, the materials chosen, woods, stones, papers, fabrics, threads, etc., were related to the books from a compositional framework with the objects and materials that were described in the works, considering a multimodal and multisensorial logic of the research experience (Pieta and Sokolovsky 2023). However, curatorial choices were replaced by others that were more affectively charged with the narrative and the children's experience, questioning our curation in the design of the activity (Figure 3).

In the same dimension, Sol's interest was particularly stimulated by the variety of textiles and yarns on display. She elucidated that she derived great pleasure from crocheting and sewing, a pastime that resonated with the narrative of *La Costura*, particularly when we delved into the way embroidery constituted a pivotal element of the tale as we perused the book, where threads, fabrics, and hands intertwine to narrate the story. Therefore, when we invited them to create with the materials, Sol selected the crochet hook and initiated the process of knitting, thereby instigating an embodied storytelling practice that evoked both memory and affection for the book. This action revealed what seemed to be a new dimension of connection with the reading that gave way to a situated learning practice in which Sol guided Fer in the development of knitting. This knowledge co-creation scenario proposes a legitimate form of knowledge with reading, while also de-centring the role of the adults (Magistris and Morales 2021).

Regarding Rio's creation, he was unsure what he wanted to do, so we encouraged him to resume his experimenting with the bicycle. Gradually, he began to compose a scene of a route, incorporating some other decorative objects from the room, such as animal figures, like the birds that accompanied the child on his journey to school in 9 kilómetros, as well as music boxes. The latter especially captured his attention. He listened to them several times, took them apart and finally selected one of them to integrate into her montage. He explained to us that this music was more appropriate for the walk, as the other 'was better for a desert'. This aesthetic decision revealed a sensitivity



FIGURE 2 | Moments, silences and corporealities of reading.



FIGURE 3 | Children's creations and learnings.

attuned to tone, space, and affect, aligning organically with the journey portrayed in *9 kilómetros*. In both reinterpretation processes, the sounds, fabrics, and objects selected by the children did not function merely as anecdotal elements within the composition, but disclosed possibilities for thinking and telling through memories, emotions, and imaginaries in dialogue with the non-human. This material reworking adds complexity to the interpretation and meaning-making of books when read and experienced with children.

Through these creative processes, spaces for dialogue were created where the children connected the works to their biographies. For example, when discussing *Origen*, Fer shared his reading by showing one of the illustrated peoples, the Wayuu, who inhabit the area of Latin America, encompassing now territories of Colombia and Venezuela. This led Sol to mention that her mother was from Colombia and unfolded a conversation about her family, the links at a distance, and questions about her knowledge of these territories-peoples. In another encounter, after reading *9 kilómetros*, Bea expressed her astonishment and concern about the distance the boy travelled to school. She asked why he walked so much, which allowed us to explore the additional information in the book about 'walking children' who make such journeys worldwide.

Finally, we identified some attitudes rooted in the book and reading practices of formal teaching contexts. On the one hand, Val recommended that in a subsequent meeting we should have a list of questions about books to monitor reading comprehension. This comment reflects the expectation that reading is a fixed and monitored comprehension process. On the other hand, when asked about reading, Mel was emphatic in clarifying that she did not like reading but liked mathematics. This binary contrast between disciplines shows the value loads associated with reading that early on are part of the children's tastes and

preferences and their possible disconnection from reading as a playful activity.

5 | Conclusions

During our encounters with the children, we explored how reading children's books could be reimagined as an open, flexible, and uncertain curriculum practice. Allowing ourselves to be carried along by the non-linear, interwoven movements of childhood shifted the focus away from the book and the adult, enabling us to explore the constantly fluctuating material and discursive relationships. Reading picturebooks from the Global South allowed us to experience children's situated ways of narrating, rooted in their everyday embodied experiences, affections, biographies, and memories. Adopting decolonial perspectives encourages us to create narratives that challenge universalist representations of childhood. This gives way to a relational view of children's agencies in interaction with texts and other material forces as modes of knowledge. We consider these assemblages to be a means of challenging hegemonic understandings of children and of reconceptualising childhoods within the curriculum. This represents a move to restore the epistemic legitimacy of children, whose ways of knowing have historically been marginalised.

These experiences foster reflection on the implications of the experimental curriculum for educational practice and teacher training, which is emerging as a space for emancipatory, relational, and constantly evolving learning (Rifà-Valls and López Ruiz 2024). In the curricular sphere, this necessitates challenging normative notions and dominant discourses surrounding learning, childhood, and children's literature; and it requires diversifying educational narratives and integrating historically

marginalised voices into the curriculum. A decolonial approach could facilitate transnational dialogues and enable to understand the children's life stories and trajectories in globalised educational contexts and increasingly diverse spaces. In training and teaching, this approach prompts questions about the literary repertoires in circulation in schools with the aim of expanding knowledge and including diverse and divergent children's narratives. When reading is considered an embodied event involving multiple agents, children's books become spaces for exploring and redefining meanings. Therefore, it is important to move towards non-adultcentred educational practices, in which teachers can embrace different interpretations and fundamentally relinquish control in order to facilitate authentic encounters with children's agency and knowledge.

Researching children's literature with children otherwise has stimulated our reflexivity, inviting us to ask new questions about children's narratives and to discuss how we understand reading and literature when children agency challenges established beliefs and relationalities. Driving multimodal research for post-human and decolonial childhood studies has enabled narrative learning opportunities based on children's knowledge and ways of knowing. Decentring our adult frameworks reveals the multiple frictions that challenge our expectations for conducting research grounded in relationality and uncertainty. Guided by a '*perspectiva niña*' as an emancipatory horizon (Magistris and Morales 2021), our research continues to evolve towards experimenting with spaces for the co-creation of collective narratives and re-signifying the pedagogical encounter as a shared territory for epistemic transformation with children.

Author Contributions

Estrella Moya-González: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing – review and editing, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft. **Montserrat Rifà-Valls:** conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing – review and editing, supervision, writing – original draft. **Marta Bertran Tarrés:** conceptualization, investigation, supervision, writing – review and editing.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for AGencias Project was obtained from the research ethics committee of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (CEEAH 6624).

Consent

All participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. Families signed an informed consent form for their children to participate in the study while the children gave their assent orally and then in writing once we explained the purpose of the research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

Endnotes

¹ This work has been produced as part of the PhD programme in Education at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

² The book was originally conceived as part of the Palestinian Museum's project *Palestinian Art History as Told by Everyday Objects*.

³ All participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. Families signed an informed consent form for their children to participate in the encounter, while the children provided oral assent and then wrote it down once explained the purpose of the experience.

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