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## Original Article OPEN ACCESS

# Manifesting Magic: Co-Designing ‘Wishes That Work’ in Classroom Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

Global perspectives on early childhood education increasingly focus on the significance of standardised notions of knowledge acquisition. Over recent years, policies in England have particularly focused on raising standards in the early years in relation to subjects such as English. Concurrently, there has been a narrowing of early years and primary curriculum provision with an increasing focus on its more formal aspects and on linear concepts of progress. However, many educationalists argue that we need to foster creative learning experiences that are responsive to the diverse interests and funds of knowledge that children enact in their play. This paper reports on research with 20 early years teachers as they developed and facilitated an ‘immersive play’ project with the theatre charity Punchdrunk Enrichment. This involved co-designing a magical ‘Wishing Cupboard’—as both installation and drama process—which brought children’s writing and drawings to life. In this project, the children’s ‘wishes’ were manifested through manipulation of materials, uses of spaces and interpersonal interactions. Throughout this process, teachers recorded ‘significant moments’ related to children’s learning and professional practices. Analysis of these moments revealed the educational significance of ‘wishes that work’ in motivating children to write, developing their oracy, extending community relationships, transforming children’s use of classroom spaces and materials, and bringing joy into the professional lives of teachers. The research also demonstrates how ‘magic’ was sustained and valued by teachers as part of their pedagogic practices.

Educational policy in England specifies pupils should have a ‘broad and balanced curriculum’ (DfE 2021), but academics have argued that there has been a narrowing of the early years and primary curriculum provision in schools with an increasing focus on formal aspects and linear concepts of progress, particularly in relation to ‘school readiness’ (Kay 2018). Globally, there has also been an increasing focus on the significance of standardised notions of knowledge acquisition in early childhood education, and this is also true of the English education system (Moss 2013; Wood and Hedges 2016). However, many educationalists argue that it is important to foster learning experiences that are responsive to the diverse interests that children enact in their play (Chesworth 2019; Hedges and Cooper 2018) and to value and integrate non-standardised funds of

knowledge (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014; Chesworth 2016) and cultural understandings that children bring to the classroom through play. A review of research relating to early years and foundation stage practice (Pascal et al. 2019, 42) argues that there is ‘strong evidence of the value and benefits of a play-based pedagogy for children throughout the Foundation years and even beyond’. However, research suggests that to be responsive to the diverse interests and funds of knowledge that children enact in their play (González et al. 2005; Chesworth 2016, 2019), we need to move beyond curricular and social framings of play to consider both socio-material affective aspects and the ways in which humans and non-humans ‘intra-act’ in the environment (Barad 2007, 2008). An exclusive focus on human-centred play provides only a partial

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perspective, and a post-humanist lens enables us to attend to the affective qualities and entanglements of play and literacies across and within spaces, materials and time (Kuby and Rowsell 2017; De la Calle Cabrera et al. 2024).

This paper reports on research undertaken with 20 early years teachers, across 18 schools as they developed and facilitated ‘immersive play’ (Colvert 2018) with the theatre charity Punchdrunk Enrichment. Punchdrunk Enrichment are internationally known for building detailed sensory and ‘site sympathetic’ (Sims 2016) installations in which children are immersed cognitively, emotionally and physically (Colvert 2018). They also create teacher-led adventures in which educators facilitate children’s engagement with imagined worlds by setting up miniature installations and playful missions in school settings (Machon 2026). These procedural and episodic narrative adventures are similar to alternate reality games (Garcia and Niemeyer 2017) in the way they overlay fictional missions over real-life spaces and require children to interpret artefacts, follow clues and contribute written, oral and embodied responses as part of the unfolding story (Machon 2026). Their signature pedagogical approaches (Thomson et al. 2012) also build on a well-established drama-in-education tradition in which dramatic inquiry (Edmiston 2013) provides a powerful context for literacy development and learning and purposeful participation in shared narrative worlds (Bolton 1984; Heathcote and Bolton 1995). Situating learners as active agents within story-worlds, their work exemplifies the process drama principle of ‘living through’ a fictional experience to foster deep aesthetic and social inquiry (O’Neill 1995). However, Osbourne explains that ‘immersive theatre differs from process drama in that the children remain as themselves within the fiction, rather than assuming the role of a different character, which Punchdrunk [Enrichment] argue increases the children’s engagement with the story come to life’ (Osborne 2023, 604).

Recent interdisciplinary work relating to immersive experiences has explored ‘enchantment’ as a design principle—highlighting that environments, systems and narratives can create the perception of magic (Bakk and Makai 2024). These ideas are particularly relevant in relation to ‘immersive learning’ design where environments are deliberately structured to produce wonder and curiosity. Indeed, Machon’s extensive research into Punchdrunk Enrichment reveals that ‘references to awe and wonder, by creatives, producers and associates who have directly witnessed its effects on audiences, are notable’ as are references to ‘magic’ (Machon 2026). In many ways then, immersive drama environments can be understood as supporting ‘pedagogies of wonder’, which may prompt ‘active wonder (ing), which entails a drive to explore, to find out, to explain [but also a] deep or contemplative wonder [which ...] as a response to mystery, may leave us lost for words’ (Schinkel 2017, 538). In this sense, immersive projects function by ‘re-enchanting’ educational spaces and inspiring children to engage with meaning-making within the unfolding narrative and environments. This paper focuses on the development of a teacher-led immersive adventure for EYFS classrooms called The Wishing Cupboard to explore two questions: What was the pedagogical significance of magic in this project in relation to children’s literacies? How was magic manifested and sustained?<sup>1</sup>

## Overview of the Project: The Wishing Cupboard

Tara Boland, the Associate Director at Punchdrunk Enrichment, had created a range of teacher-led adventures, but ‘The Wishing Cupboard’ was the first that she had designed specifically for EYFS classrooms. This was also the first Punchdrunk Enrichment project where the artists did not begin with any preconceptions or draft concepts about how the project was going to work—making a deliberate shift in their design processes to co-create with EYFS teachers from the very start. Boland explained:

I do think we were more open this time. Although we did know that this was going to be a teacher-led adventure and this is the fourth teacher-led adventure that I’ve made, so it’s not just like ‘Oh. We’re going to see what happens’, but we didn’t have a pre-existing character [...] We weren’t piloting ‘Hey we’ve got an idea, and we want to see how this goes’. It was like ‘we really don’t know what this is, and so we are going to come and ask you about your classroom and how you work and what’s going to be useful’. I think it was really open so we could really listen to them and [consider] ‘What can we make then that’s going to really fit into their practice?’

(Tara Boland—Associate Director at Punchdrunk Enrichment)

This iterative development was achieved over a series of workshops over the course of a year. The initial educational purpose, shaped by teachers, was ‘a need to support social cohesion and communication for a cohort starved of exposure to face-to-face engagement and opportunities for collaborative play in their infancy due to Covid-19’

(Machon 2026, 353)

In the introductory workshops, teachers supported artists to understand EYFS practices. Boland noted that teachers regularly referred to ‘rituals, music and more open-ended play’, so these principles and approaches were integrated into the first iteration of the project. The Punchdrunk Enrichment design team created a small box that would seem to ‘appear’ in classrooms overnight. When the teachers and children opened it, they would find an object inside with a message (see Figures 1 and 2), which reads:

HELLO DEAR FRIEND! If you find an object here, it means it has lost its way and wishes to find out where it belongs and what it can do! REMEMBER We would never judge a thing by the way it looks, and all wishes can come true here!

Children would then be encouraged to imagine what the object might ‘wish to become’ and find its ‘true purpose’. If children left wishes by the cupboard, then the teacher would secretly bring one of these to life overnight with a new installation appearing in the classroom by the morning. Interestingly, the project was initially referred to as The Magic Cupboard in early stages of design, but by the end of the year, the name had been





**FIGURE 1** | The instructions inside The Wishing Cupboard created by Punchdrunk Enrichment (Photo credit: Punchdrunk Enrichment and Stephen Dobbie).



**FIGURE 2** | Children and teachers examining the object inside the Wishing Cupboard. Photo credit: Punchdrunk Enrichment and Photographer Nina Robinson.

changed to The Wishing Cupboard, foregrounding the role that children and teachers played in ‘manifesting the magic’ through expressing their hopes and dreams for the objects and transforming their uses.

Such responsivity to children’s ideas was built into the mechanics of the project, and in this respect, the Wishing Cupboard was more flexible and emergent in structure than any other project they had created. Boland explained:

It’s probably the only project I’ve made where you see the results of their imagination genuinely manifest. Whereas with a lot of other projects, we allow the children to build a world around them, but then we manifest the things that we’ve created [...] that are kind of premade, so they are not going to kind of be the things that children have imagined. Agency is

a big part of our work, and I think in this project in some ways they have the most agency because truly they make wishes about what the object is for, or what an object can be, and then the teacher makes them into little realities, and we’ve left that quite open.

(Tara Boland - Associate Director at Punchdrunk Enrichment)

The children, then, were given more human agency, but as Kuby and Rowsell suggest, ‘from a post-humanist stance, agency is defined as an enactment between humans and nonhumans [...] Enacted agency is a force emerging between people and materials, not residing solely in individuals’ (Kuby and Rowsell 2017, 357). From this perspective, The Wishing Cupboard also opened ‘the possibility for re-storying our understanding of matter, and how matter acts in relation with children’s play’ (Harwood and Collier 2017, 352). This paper explores the ways in which literacies emerged in The Wishing Cupboard through assemblages of human and non-human actors and how meaning-making was continuously negotiated through embodied and sensory encounters.

## 1 | Research Design: Playful Embodied Participation

This research project (Sept 2021 to July 2022) was part of a wider longitudinal study funded by Punchdrunk Enrichment, which I undertook over 5 years, investigating the impact of their ‘Immersive Learning Collective’ on teacher’s practices (Colvert and Stephenson 2024). The Immersive Learning Collective brought 18 schools together with artists and was structured in three phases: Phase 1, understanding principles; Phase 2, co-design; and Phase 3, independent design. This article focuses on the second phase and sets out to explore the ways that participants articulated and characterised pedagogical approaches

and design practices in The Wishing Cupboard. Twenty teachers participated in the co-design process and agreed to participate in the research. These teachers were from 18 different schools in London. Within this group, three focus teachers were selected to be representative of different levels of familiarity with Punchdrunk Enrichment's practices: One had lots of experience with teacher-led projects, one had some experience, and one had little prior knowledge of their work. Two artists also participated, along with nine focus children who were observed by focus teachers and the researcher during the project.

The British Educational Research Association (2018) ethical procedures and guidelines were adhered to at every stage of the research and the project was approved by the Ethics Committee at the University of Roehampton. Informed consent was sought from all participants, and parental consent was obtained before observing any children, as well as children's verbal assent. All participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, and I remained attuned to and responsive to contextual ethical implications (Hendry et al. 2024). For example, if children showed with their body language that they did not want to engage with the research (e.g., through moving away from the researcher), this was taken as a sign of temporary withdrawal from the research. Data collected over the year included interviews, observations and teacher reflections. Two 45-min one-to-one interviews were undertaken with each of the three focus teachers and the artists at the start and end of the project. Observations were undertaken in the focus teacher classrooms as well as at every workshop that the teachers attended. In total, 6 hour-long observations were undertaken in each of the focus school settings: one classroom observation of the pilot and one observation of the final iteration of the project. Observations were also undertaken when artists and teachers engaged in co-design: three teacher–artist planning workshops and two artist planning sessions. Teacher reflection documents recorded ‘significant moments’ (Stephenson and Lofthouse 2023) during the project, through written notes and photographs. An arts-based approach to data generation (Leavy 2020) meant that creative artefacts produced by teachers and artists were included as part of the data set.

In ‘crystallising’ (Colvert et al. 2024) playful moments, a post-human perspective (Barad 2007, 2008) was adopted to diffract the multifaceted nature of play—attending to the intra-actions between spatial, material, temporal and social practices and the ‘interrelations, interdependencies and coexistences of meaning and matter’ (Taguchi 2014, 81). Thematic analysis of data (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2020) was also undertaken. This involved coding data descriptively and then inferentially (Miles and Huberman 1994) with attention to the teachers’ conceptualisations and embodied enactments of immersive play and the pedagogical practices that evolved during the process. Adopting both approaches, the affective and effective aspects of immersive play were in focus (Colvert 2018) during the research. (For a full list of these codes, see Colvert and Stephenson (2024, 2026).

## 2 | Findings: Manifesting the Magic

Across interviews, observations and reflections, the notion of 'magic' emerged as a central organising concept, used by both

artists and teachers to describe the desired pedagogical and affective experience. Rather than understanding ‘magic’ as a purely metaphorical or imaginative construct, the data suggest it functioned as a relational pedagogical assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Mulcahy 2012) emerging through the interplay of sensory, emotional experiences of humans and their interactions with materials, spaces and temporal factors. Manifesting the ‘feeling of magic’ was framed simultaneously as an affective embodied and relational experience and as an effective pedagogical practice. Drawing a strand from this broader data set (Colvert and Stephenson 2024), this paper examines teacher-reflections to the theme of ‘magic’. In doing so, it builds on the work of Escott et al. (2025) who suggest that ‘there is much currency to be gained from exploring the ways of considering the “magic” of what people get caught up in as a means through which to undertake literacies research’ and that of Rowsell and Kuby who reflect on ‘magic and literacies and their combined strength in locating literacies as embodied, relational, and sensory’ (Kuby and Rowsell 2022, 231).

## 2.1 | Material Facets: Enchantment by Design

In relation to the materiality of The Wishing Cupboard as an artefact, the teachers felt that its aesthetic properties supported children to 'believe' in the magic and engage in imaginative play. One teacher explained:

I think that [the cupboard] really created that sense of wonder and that sense of authenticity because it's so beautiful inside, that It has that sense of magic that you just wouldn't see anywhere else [...] I think the object itself becomes proof of the magic.

(Focus Teacher 1)

The cupboard was seen as providing an ‘authenticity’ for the magic as it appeared to be an ‘otherworldly’ artefact. Possessing a different aesthetic quality to other items in the classroom, it stood apart from mass-produced purchased items or those that teachers had made—adding to the mystery and ‘proof of the magic’. In drama education, such objects often function as signifiers of narrative possibility, enabling children to suspend disbelief and enter imagined worlds (Cremin et al. 2016). However, the data suggest that the cupboard exceeds this representational function, operating instead as part of an affective experience—a felt sense of wonder. In relation to early years literacy, this highlights how meaning-making is not solely generated through language, but through multimodal, sensory and material encounters (Rowse 2013).

When the children found an object inside the cupboard (such as a feather, stone, key or pom-pom), teachers and children began ‘wondering together’ about what the object might want to become and engaged in ‘possibility thinking’ (Chappell et al. 2008; Craft 2013; Craft et al. 2007). In this, they drew on diverse funds of knowledge and interests, as one teacher explained:

There was a boy who has a big fascination, like his big love is Spiderman, so then he was delighted that



maybe it could be something for Spiderman: 'Maybe it's Spiderman's car!' And I think that's really positive that he thinks that 'ah well maybe he can be creative in the direction that I'm really interested in' and we were like 'Yes. Yes, it could be!'

(Focus Teacher 1)

However, teachers noted that the type of object that was placed in the cupboard had an impact on the types of 'wondering' that took place, reporting that some objects led to more figurative and unexpected responses, particularly if it were not an object that the children immediately recognised. After reflecting on children's limited responses to what a feather might 'become' in the pilot, one teacher decided to launch the final version of the project by selecting an item that the children would be less familiar with.

I chose the pompom because they aren't going to immediately have a definite sense of what this is, and I think that really helped [...] I'd say they needed a little more scaffolding to start with just to get them to open out their ideas but then [...] as time went on they definitely came up with much more creative answers.

(Focus Teacher 1)

Although this could be viewed as an example of children engaging in Vygotskian notions of symbolic play (Vygotsky 1978), from a post-human perspective, we can begin to recognise how materials invite, resist and transform children's semiotic activity (Chesworth 2016; Änggård 2016) and frame them 'as actants rather than objects' (Bennett 2010, 35). Teachers noticed how children were drawn to some objects over others and how materiality affected what these objects could 'become'. In this instance, the teacher selected a tactile and malleable object that had less representational significance. Such items were agentic in shaping magical possibilities through their affective qualities and material properties. Reflecting on the intra-actions with the cupboard, teachers noted traces of play as materials and children played together:

We had a few breakages [...] the paper flower is not quite looking like a paper flower anymore, but the rest of the objects were quite sturdy, but then if I was using it again I'd use different objects every year.

(Focus Teacher 3)

Here, the teacher notices that materials have their own capacities and limits that shape what 'magic' can become. The objects here are not passive props but are actively participating in play. The 'breakages' and transformation of the paper flower signal that materials are resisting, changing and reconfiguring the activities in 'co-relational productivities' (Taylor and Fairchild 2020; Taylor et al. 2010). In this The Wishing Cupboard invited children to suggest how the objects' purpose might be represented but also invited 'direct material engagement with the world' (Barad 2007, 49). The teachers also grappled with objects that shaped what was possible in their

installations. One reflected: 'They wanted the stone to fly so I got fishing wire and tied it to the ceiling, and it had a little cape, and it look longer to tie up because the stone was really heavy'. The images below (Figures 3 and 4) are taken from the reflection document created by Focus Teacher 3. Figure 3 displays the image of a beetle created by one of the children to convey the idea that the feather wanted to become a hammock for a beetle. Figure 4 shows the installation that the teacher created to bring the wish to life.

## 2.2 | Spatial Facets: Magical Mobilities

One of the most effective mechanisms for creating an illusion of magic in the project was very simple: Every night, the box would move to another place in the classroom. This change of spatial location led to the heightened excitement and engagement of the children, which teachers felt was central to the feeling of magic.

One of our children [who] struggles with speech and language and his sounds just aren't clear and he talks really quietly [...] came running up to me and he was saying 'Miss, Miss!' and I said 'What's the matter? Calm down' and he was just so excited that the cupboard was there that he was really trying to talk in sentences, and he was really trying, and it took us quite a few attempts because he was [...] excited

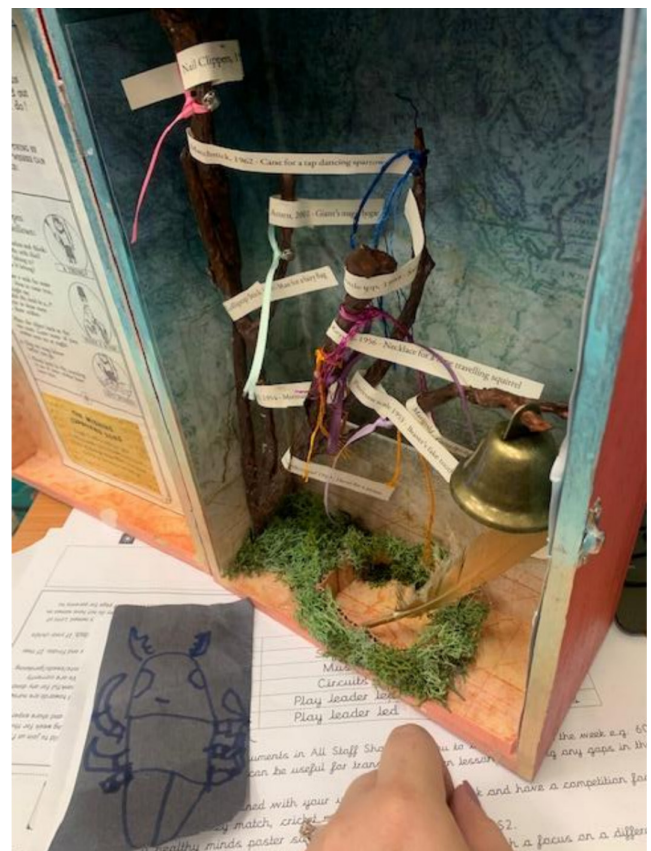


FIGURE 3 | A child's wish conveyed in a drawing.



**FIGURE 4** | The installation that the teacher created.

and talking quickly. But he was trying to tell me that 'the cupboard's moved and we need to open it and you need to come and see it because the cupboard's moved!' and he's one that's never excited about things and [...] I liked that he was so motivated to come and get someone to come and look at it.

(Focus Teacher 2)

I have one child in my class [who] has quite a lot of [challenging] reality to contend with at home so he can be not very responsive and very lacking in enthusiasm for lots of the learning [...] but actually he was the one who came up with lots of theories about it [moving around the classroom] and convinced lots of children with his certainty, and he's the one whose been saying 'where is it coming back?' [...] Maybe he's the one who needs a bit of magic.

(Focus Teacher 1)

In these reflections, teachers conceptually linked children's imaginative engagement with the magical movement of the cupboard and noticed how this impacted on their embodied and relational oracy practices (Stephenson and Patel 2025), but there was also a sensitivity to the 'excitement' and 'enthusiasm' and reflections on a child's emotional need for 'a bit of magic'.

Teachers often reflected on how the illusion of the cupboards 'magical mobility' influenced and shaped children's own mobilities in and across classroom spaces as the presence of the cupboard prompted children to use the classroom in new ways.

We had a group of boys who never really accessed the creative area, it just wasn't their thing and as a result their fine motor skills were a little bit behind [...] because of The Wishing Cupboard and they wanted to be part of it and have their wish come true they started to access the creative area more and developed their fine motor skills through trying to make their picture more detailed.

(Focus Teacher 3)

Where there have been scenes in the class it has definitely drawn the children to playing in that area. [...] It highlights that space to them.

(Focus Teacher 1)

They were looking at The Wishing Cupboard [...] There was a crown made of paper, so they went to the creative area, they created something and then took it to the Small World play area. Whereas before if it wasn't in the Small World area it wouldn't be used in that area.

(Focus Teacher 3)

The literacy practices that were observed by teachers during The Wishing Cupboard project were not fixed within designated classroom areas but rather emerged through movement and reconfiguration of space. The mobility of the cupboard can be understood as generating new ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), disrupting the habitual organisation of classroom space and enabling children to move beyond fixed patterns of engagement. These moments of rupture created new possibilities for interaction, imagination and meaning-making through intra-actions between spaces, materials and peers. This aligns with post-human accounts of spatiality as relational and processual, where meaning-making unfolds along trajectories of movement and encounter (Hackett and Somerville 2017; Hackett 2014, 2021; Daniels 2021). In relation to drama pedagogy, this reinforces the role of the environment as an active co-creator of narrative and meaning (Cremin 2015), highlighting the educational value of designing spaces that provoke exploration and collaborative storytelling.

## 2.3 | Temporal Facets: Timing of Magic

The temporal aspects of ‘immersive play’ (Colvert 2018) were reflected upon by teachers facilitating the project in classrooms as they tried to sustain the magical nature of the experience for children. In reflection documents and in final interviews, teachers regularly made conceptual links between time constraints and the state of the magic:



It's not been the best time of year [...] there is that worry 'am I going to lose the magic?' [...] it will be easier when we're planning the timescale.

(Focus Teacher 3)

I felt slightly sad that the magic was lost initially, but it made me think about timing and practicality and giving the children space to experience the scene.

(Reflections—Focus Teacher 1)

I felt that the children were more engaged with the magic today, and I think that may have something to do with the repetition of the cupboard giving it increased significance. I was delighted that the children came up with their own spontaneous ideas about the cupboard being able to fly around the classroom. This was magical to me!

(Reflections—Focus Teacher 1)

Here, the teachers reflect on how the magic could be adversely affected or 'lost' by insufficient time and space to experience the installation or if the time of year was not ideal (due to other pressures). Rowsell and Kuby suggest that 'magic has the potential to frame literacy moments as socio-material instances filled with affective flows and intensities' (Kuby and Rowsell 2022, 1). For these teachers, the magic was indeed an affective experience and relational. The magic was co-produced and *felt*, not just *perceived* as demonstrated in the way the teacher 'felt sad' before 'thinking about timing' and the teachers 'delight' in the 'magical' experience. Here, teachers sensed that the timings of the project were key to maintaining the magic in classrooms and sometimes disrupted the 'flow' of play and the 'affective intensity' of the magic.

The teachers also reflected on how The Wishing Cupboard disrupted daily routines and practices, 'opening up' time for more exploration with children:

I think we get so busy with all the things we need to get done, and we need to do this activity and this activity, I need to do this observation and it kind of forces you to—or the children force you to—stop what you're doing and listen to what they're doing with The Wishing Cupboard [...]this project makes you spend more time sitting with the children and talking with the children.

(Focus Teacher 3)

In this, the presence of The Wishing Cupboard and the temporal quality of play was experienced as a reconfiguration of the school's habitual rhythms, allowing for 'deep play' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) and slowing down and 'tuning in' to the children's interests and needs.

## 2.4 | Practices: Maintaining the Magic

Escott et al. suggest that in classroom settings 'thinking about magic involves considering the interpersonal, sociopolitical, and

sociomaterial elements involved in literacies being seen to transpire' (Escott et al. 2025). Similarly, Chesworth (2019) suggests that we might usefully view learning opportunities from three perspectives: policy, peer culture and intra-action. Perhaps unsurprisingly due to the policy context and accountability culture (Ball 2003) in which the teachers were working, many teachers reflected on how The Wishing Cupboard aligned with curricular learning outcomes and assessment practices. They identified multiple ways in which the themes of The Wishing Cupboard linked with areas of the EYFS curriculum, particularly those related to Communication and Language Development (C&L) from Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED). Teachers explained:

It has lots of talk potential and it can definitely link in with lots of areas of the Early Years curriculum. It has some great PSED (Personal, Social and Emotional Development) things because you know that sense of wanting fulfilment out of life and how the object might be feeling and there's kind of lots of opportunities for talk, so communication and language potential for getting into the more geography side of things, so understanding the world and ways in for perhaps exploring life in another country.

(Focus Teacher 1)

Once we'd seen a few scenes come to life they WANTED their scenes to come to life, they wanted to be involved in it [...] communication and language—there were so many outcomes with that. We have one little girl who has EAL but she also has a little bit of delayed speech and [...] before [she was] using probably one or two words but now she can use a whole sentence, five or six words, cause she was wanting to explain what her wishes were! [...] Some of them actually tried to write words more than just the initial sounds. Because they thought it was for someone else, it wasn't just for me [...] They were more willing to have a go at writing because they thought the cupboard needs to know what it is when Miss isn't there to tell it. [...] Whereas before they would give me a circle and tell me what it was [...] They were developing their creative skills as well and imaginative skills and putting the detail into their picture so that I didn't actually need them to tell me what had happened. I could see what their wish was without them telling me.

(Focus Teacher 3)

Teachers also noticed how the fictional framing appeared to motivate meaningful engagement with writing and spoken language (Cremin et al. 2006), and all EYFS teachers routinely planned opportunities for learning with the intention of supporting children to achieve specific outcomes, linked to the EYFS curriculum. However, when piloting The Wishing Cupboard project, they approached teaching in a more exploratory and less



structured way, often noticing a range of outcomes that had not been formally planned for. This was seen as a strength of the project by many teachers.

I think [...] the fact that it had endless outcomes so we could take it anywhere was really good, and it worked really well that it didn't matter that the outcome that I'd really thought about hadn't happened. There was a learning outcome; no matter what we did, there was some kind of learning outcome.

(Focus Teacher 3)

In relation to interpersonal aspects of play, the teachers observed shifts in peer culture and social interactions between children in their classes and valued the way that The Wishing Cupboard drew children together as a community of learners and players (Colvert and Stephenson 2024, 2026). Teachers explained:

They just wanted each other's wishes to come true and they'd be so excited if someone else's wish came true and they'd remember whose wish it was and then they'd come together at that wish and role-play it out. Normally the person whose wish it was would have the main thing in the scene, and then their friends would have all the other little objects and then they'd chat to each other it was just really nice.

(Focus Teacher 3)

It was children you wouldn't necessarily see playing together who would be standing around and talking about it. Some of the children who were always outside were coming inside to see the cupboard and it was just quite nice to see that it seemed to mix up—yeah they are all friends, none of them don't get along—but they all gravitate to the same people, but it was nice to see that if you were standing near the cupboard it didn't matter who you were because 'I'm going to talk to you anyway'.

(Focus Teacher 2)

During such observations of children's social interactions, teachers often noted the children drawing on what might be characterised as diverse 'funds of knowledge and funds of identity' (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014) during play (relating to popular culture and their own 'wishes').

In relation to attending to intra-actions, some teachers also began to reflect on their own practices and on the potential of materials and objects to guide children's play (rather than needing adult scaffolding and interventions). For example, one of the teachers explained that The Wishing Cupboard project had an impact on the way she set up areas of the classroom.

I'd always tried to make it so that children led their learning but this [...] reinforced for me that this is the best way for my class to do it and putting [The Wishing Cupboard] in different areas kind of showed me where I needed to come in and help and where I didn't—where I could step back and not set up. [...] Obviously, they need to learn through play, and they need their outcomes, so we are meant to set up an environment that gives those outcomes. I think that sometimes we go too far where everything is set up by an adult. Whereas this showed me that I don't need to set everything up—I can just have a selection of resources there and they know what to do [...] before I would set up a beautiful scene and [...] it wouldn't be used how I wanted it to be used. The outcome I thought it would be there for wasn't achieved. Whereas now [...] my Small World play area is now completely child-led.

(Focus Teacher 3)

Although this teacher focused on the human agency and the play being 'child-led', they also demonstrated an increased sensitivity to the influence and agency of non-human factors too as children intra-acted with 'a selection of resources'. This research highlights that the project opened spaces for children, teachers and artists to engage in exploratory learning and emergent play practices (Broadhead 2006) and enabled teachers to notice 'child playing-with-materials *and* materials-playing-with-children' (Kuby et al. 2017).

From a post-human perspective, the material qualities and attributes of The Wishing Cupboard and its contents can be understood as part of a pedagogical assemblage that shaped and constrained what could be imagined, said and created (Kuby and Rowsell 2017). However, Escott et al. suggest:

Literacy objectives, class behaviour, teachers' professional identities, and contemporary 'schooling' are all precariously balanced on something transpiring and being seen to have transpired. The challenge is that this orientation is toward a focus on narrow framings of what should and could transpire.

(Escott et al. 2025, 13)

In The Wishing Cupboard, manifesting the 'feeling of magic' was framed simultaneously as an affective embodied and relational experience and an effective pedagogical practice. Although teachers were highly attuned to the effects of the magic in *learning outcomes*, they also became more attuned to *affective encounters* and noted these as 'significant moments' (Stephenson and Lofthouse 2023). Evans suggests we need to attend to 'child-matter intra-actions and their potential for supporting a more complex and nuanced understanding of transition in the early years particularly in relation to transition' (Evans 2025, 1). However, further research is needed to 'explore how posthuman theories can transform educators' theoretical

beliefs and practices in educational settings for young children' (Lin and Li 2021, p82).

### 3 | Conclusion: Wishes That Work

The originality of this paper lies in the conceptualisation of 'magic' as an embodied, affective and immersive assemblage of *playful encounters*. This framing extends understandings of drama pedagogy, in which emotional engagement and imaginative investment are viewed as central to meaning-making, by foregrounding how literacies emerge through relational entanglements of bodies, materials, spaces and time. Drawing on teacher reflections, this research has highlighted the educational significance of 'wishes that work': Teachers were able to demonstrate and reflect on the *effects* of magic and 'immersive play' (within policy, curriculum and socio-cultural framings) but also began to tune into the *affective* unfolding (of intra-actions) that 'felt magical' and seemed to disrupt usual patterns, rhythms or material-spatial assemblages. From a policy perspective, The Wishing Cupboard provided a valuable context for developing standardised notions of 'knowledge' such as communication skills, but teachers also noted that 'wondering together' foregrounded non-standardised funds of knowledge and opened spaces for these to enter the classroom in meaningful ways. From a peer-culture perspective, The Wishing Cupboard became a focal point for interpersonal, collaborative meaning-making and imaginative engagement as 'magic' was manifested in classrooms through immersive play. However, in relation to post-human perspectives, there are clearly challenges in sensitising ourselves to non-representational happenings as children play with and across spaces, especially within performative cultures and policy contexts that require 'evidence' of learning. Teachers' affective attunement to classroom atmospheres is an embodied, pre-reflective capacity to sense shifts in engagement, relational dynamics and emotions. Although there were only traces of this in the way the teachers reflected on 'magic' in the classroom, their accounts nevertheless highlight their sensitivity to temporal, spatial, material intra-actions and agencies. This is significant in relation to teacher development opportunities as it suggests that 'manifesting magic' through immersive play not only enables teachers to co-create effective literacy pedagogies and practices but also supports them to tune in to affective encounters through 'magical possibilities', 'losing the magic' and 'feeling magical' and the 're-enchantment' of the EYFS classroom.

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#### Data Availability Statement

Data are not available as the qualitative data would risk participants being identified. Data extracts are included in the article.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Although this article focuses on the development of The Wishing Cupboard over 1 year during the Immersive Learning Collective, the final project was later rolled out in Nurseries in Scotland and is now

part of Punchdrunk Enrichment's national and international offers to schools, available on their website: <https://www.punchdrunkenrichment.org.uk/projects/the-wishing-cupboard>.

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