

Darkness Re-Turning

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Abstract

This article re-turns (Barad, 2014) to empirical data from a postqualitative inquiry into the dark common worlds of children in Northern Finland. Drawing on and bringing together Karen Barad's approach of re-turning, darkness, and Andersen et al.'s dark methodologies, it examines what emerges when "old" data is reanimated through repeating analysis. Through retelling two ethnographic-analytical stories, the article explores how dark re-turning unsettles dominant research paradigms and invites alternative ways of knowing. Dark re-turning becomes a practice which foregrounds wonder, refusal, and unknowing. To close, the article proposes that dark re-turning to data and to childhood is a vital practice for educational research: one that honors the ghosts of childhood and opens space for more ethical, affectively attuned, and temporally expansive inquiry.

Keywords: Darkness; postqualitative inquiry; re-turning; dark methodologies

Introduction: Taking a pause and coming back

"Darkness matters" remind Andersen and colleagues in their special issue of this journal (2017). But how does darkness matter in childhood and what could embracing darkness produce in researching with children's un/common worlds (Taylor, 2013)? And what emerges through a dark re-turning¹ (Barad, 2014, p. 168) to "old" data when analytical refrains are repeated? This article re-turns to data collected on darkness and childhood in Northern Finland (Vitek, 2022) to bring re-

¹ The hyphens here work to disrupt thinking on the prefix re-. Re-turning is not meant to reflect on a static past but rather it is about a thick now ever changing (see also Murriss & Zhao, 2022)

turning as a methodological practice into conversation with darkness—understood literally, conceptually, and methodologically—to transform ways of knowing children and childhood in childhood studies and educational research.

I begin by discussing conceptualizations of darkness and childhood as understood in this inquiry. I then briefly describe the aims, contexts, and methods used in the original study, before introducing the practice of re-turning. Next, I re-tell two analytical stories woven from two empirical moments of childhood and darkness, in order to then re-turn to them and repeat the analysis process. In doing so, I entwine aspects previously excluded or which only revealed themselves after composting for a time. Finally, I conclude by speculating on the potentials of dark re-turning for educational and childhood research.

Darkness and childhood

Darkness is understood here both in a literal sense and as a conceptual force and methodological tool which can transform epistemologies, research practices, and ethical frameworks. In its literal sense, and in relation to the situated context of my research in Northern Finland, darkness is commonly associated with long winter nights and their cultural narratives, material conditions, and seasonal manifestations. But Finnish winters are undergoing a paradoxical transformation: they are becoming darker due to climate change-induced increases in cloud cover and reductions in snow cover, while simultaneously becoming brighter due to increasing light pollution. This artificial illumination is often justified by societal fears of darkness, particularly in discourses that frame it as a threat to (children's) safety, such as in traffic safety campaigns. Conceptually, darkness emerges as an abundance rather than as the conventional absence of light (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 62). Andersen et al., building on Karen Barad, see darkness's abundance in its generative power for reconfiguring ways of knowing and being. It is a force which challenges dominant modes of perception, disrupting ocularcentric and anthropocentric epistemologies by heightening non-visual senses (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 4). As a methodological tool, it makes vision less possible and heightens other senses, promoting a shift from "seeing-identifying" to "seeing-imagining" (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 8). "Seeing-identifying" relies primarily on the visual sense, aiming to recognize, categorize, and derive meaning from what is observed. In contrast, "seeing-imagining" engages the other senses and imagination to fill in what the eye cannot see in the dark. Furthermore, darkness allows inquiry to lose its vision, in the sense of a pre-determined orientation and goal, promoting an embrace of uncertainty (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 17). Moreover, in the dark, binaries blur, fostering the creation of new research practices (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 8). Darkness intensifies the surrounding context, since in darkness, "the context swallows and envelops us, thus forming as if a negative image of the usual research situation where individuals shine and stand out" (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 8). Instead, researchers become immersed within the environment, altering spatial and temporal perceptions (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 23), introducing "different dimensionalities, spatial and affective possibilities for inquiry" (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 25). Darkness may serve as an ethical framework, teaching how to engage with the unfamiliar and to "become and become otherwise with something" that may not be easily approachable nor comprehensible (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 71). In these ways, darkness

epistemologically, empirically, and ethically transforms timespaces so that researchers may reimagine their modes of inquiry and relations.

While a more conventional understanding of childhood underlies parts of this work, as a life phase determined by linear age, typically under 18 years, it also seeks to open up this concept and blur the binary between adult | child, viewing childhood as something continuous and iterative, not confined to a specific age or to a particular subject (the child, children), and extending beyond the human. Like darkness, childhood too can be theorized as a transformative timespace marked by specific intensities, familiar unfamiliarities, and indeterminacy (da Rosa Ribeiro et al., 2023). Memories of childhood and children's experiences are often attached to heightened sensorial perceptions of familiar unfamiliarities, such as the familiar smell of a classroom, the bitterness of vegetables tasted for the first time, or the impenetrable darkness of one's bedroom at night. Perhaps this has prompted Gähler & Stamm (2012) to declare "the night is never as dark as in childhood" (author's own translation from German). Furthermore, the end of childhood is far less clear than legal definitions might suggest. Just as defining childhood is complex, so too is determining when a child becomes an adult—or when an adult is no longer a child. Does childhood end when one turns 18 years of age, when one leaves the house, when one has a child of their own? (Murriss, 2021)? In this way, childhood is a dynamic and affective timespace, unsettling linear notions of time and fixed identities with un/familiar temporal and sensorial intensities.

In my Master's thesis "Childhood and Darkness: A Postqualitative Inquiry Into Dark Common Worlds", I explored these two transformative timespaces—darkness and childhood—as sites of vulnerability, intensity, and possibility, and I now re-turn to these timespaces in my PhD on childhood secret places. The dominant discourses of vulnerability and fear surrounding children and darkness should be challenged and what forms of risk might be acceptable in efforts to preserve increasingly darkened "common worlds" from light pollution considered. The term "common worlds", coined by Affrica Taylor and colleagues (Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Giugni, 2012) draws on Donna Haraway's concept of "worlding," Bruno Latour's relational ontologies, and Isabelle Stengers's writings on commoning and the commons. It offers a framework for understanding children's entangled relationships with both human and more-than-human others for more ethically shared and co-inhabited environments. But it is equally important to acknowledge that these worlds are also diverging and un/common, that the ways in which diverse humans and more-than-human beings experience, perceive, and make sense of the world are not the same. Rather, they are shaped by different histories, bodies, ecologies, and ways of knowing, thus shared worlds are always partial, negotiated, and in flux.

Seeking to challenge dominant discourses on children's relationship with darkness and to protect common worlds from light pollution, my Master's thesis research aimed to generate new narratives and rediscover old ones about ethical cohabitation with darkness. This creation and reactivation were guided by the two central research questions of my Master's thesis: "In the current anthropocentric era of disappearing darkness and human colonization of the night, what old and new stories do we need in order to live and die well—and ethically—together in dark

common worlds? And: What do we lose when our entanglements with darkness are undone and re-tied through light pollution, and how might humans be reconfigured and re-entangled in dark common worlds?" (Vitek, 2022, p. 133).

Methodologies for researching and re-turning to children's dark common worlds

In the next section, I re-turn to these newly generated and rediscovered stories on childhood and darkness. The stories were woven from empirical data gathered with a methodological approach which begins by positioning darkness as an active, generative concept rather than passive backdrop. Darkness here is not merely an object of study nor temporal or seasonal condition, as in previous empirical research and societal narratives, but a methodological force and a tool for unsettling normative research rhythms and inviting vulnerability, disorientation, and ethical responsiveness. This conceptualization follows Andersen and colleagues dark methodologies, first proposed in their special issue "Darkness Matters" (2017), and subsequently expanded in later works (Koro, 2025; Koro & Wells, 2024). Darkness as concept operates as a method, following Lenz Taguchi and St. Pierre's (2017) postqualitative approach of "concept as method". This approach refers to the practice of using philosophical concepts to generate methods for gathering, producing, analyzing, and thinking with data. As Sommerville et al. (2013) suggest, concepts emerge in response to inquiries posed by the world. In this sense, with "concept as method", method becomes not only a tool for finding something out but also a form of response and active engagement with the world's complexities.

Within this framework, my methodological approach continued with the concept of storytelling, itself a practice that responds to the inquiries posed by the world. Storytelling functions as a more-than-representational method for generating new narratives and rediscovering old ones. Stories and their tellings are more than a recounting of experiences; they actively world the world as part of its becoming—its ongoing transformation and emergence (Haraway, 2016). Storytelling as method converses with the world and, through its specificity and its making space for details, relations, and connections, highlights data's complexity, intricacy, and situatedness. It is thus a generative, world-making practice capable here of transforming darkness's place in children's lives and producing new ethical possibilities for living in dark common worlds. The analytical stories were crafted with data gathered using multispecies ethnographic practices (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010) during autumn and early winter and intertwined observations and lived experiences from a six-month residency in Northern Finland, including a focused six-evening observation period at a kindergarten center offering evening and night care.

This article retells these stories on childhood and darkness to re-turn (Barad, 2014) to them, treating analysis not as fixed but as the iterative creating of "new" narratives and rediscovering of "old" ones. Following Karen Barad, re-turning is not a simple act of returning to past data, but a diffractive and temporally entangled methodological practice of ongoing engagement that allows new patterns and insights to emerge from data: "[...] re-turning—not by returning as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again (...) making of (...) new diffraction patterns" (Barad, 2014, p. 168). Re-turning as methodological practice then does not mean conventional reflection on past data and research; rather, it challenges linear

conceptions of time, the presumed finality of data, the accelerated tempos of neoliberal academia, and hierarchical distinctions between the old and the new. Thus, this methodological orientation affirms that research is never complete but continually composting.

By troubling linear temporality and the logics of unilinear time (Barad, 2017), re-turning animates the generative potential of “earlier” material. It operates in the thick-now of indeterminate, “discontinuous” temporalities (p. 67). Barad conceptualizes time not as a “succession of discrete moments” (Barad, 2017, pp. 59-60), but rather, drawing on the quantum physics principle of time-energy indeterminacy, in which, “a given particle can be in a state of indeterminately coexisting at multiple times —for example, yesterday, today, and tomorrow” (Barad, 2017, p. 67) as a “linear combination of (different) times” (p. 68) where past, present, and future bleed through each other in “temporal superposition” (Barad, 2017, p. 67). In this “temporal superposition” moments are intra-actively threaded through one another, “specifically entangled” such that “[t]here is no determinate time, only a specific temporal indeterminacy” (Barad, 2017, p. 67). Through this temporal indeterminacy and superposition, “the past remains open to future reworkings” (Barad, 2017, p. 71). Thus, re-turning is not a return to the same, but a reconfiguration of what has been in light of what is yet to come. Accordingly, past data does not remain static but re-emerges entangled with current realities and future potentialities. Re-turning’s indeterminate temporalities open space for ongoing engagement and challenge the presumed finality of data and its interpretation. As Bjelkerud & Moxnes (2024) have shown, re-turning to previous research brings “(...) past memories, thoughts and feelings into the present, and further into an attunement with past events that can agitate some pulses for the future” (p. 9).

Through affirming indeterminate temporalities and the ongoing openness of data, re-turning offers a methodological resistance to the current neoliberal acceleration of academia, which prioritizes speed and efficiency (Murriss & Zhao, 2022, p. 112). It invites a slowing down of scholarship, which as Ulmer (2017) argues, questions “normative timelines for research that do not allow for disruption, delay, or dalliance” (p. 201). This shift in tempo opens space for alternative research rhythms and ways of inquiry, where data unfolds in its own time, not according to institutional nor researchers’ deadlines for project or thesis completion. Moreover, re-turning engages with those aspects of the data that only emerge slowly over time, revealing themselves later after composting. It requires responsiveness to the unexpected, agential re-turning of data itself, out-of-control of the researcher, unsettling their orientation and pre-determined vision, aligning with dark methodologies’ embrace of uncertainty and disorientation. My own Master’s data thus remains active and unfamiliar, continually unfolding and composting within shifting contexts and entangled temporalities, long after its official completion.

By affirming the ongoing vitality and generative potential of previously analyzed “old” data, the slow practice of re-turning contests academic hierarchies that privilege novelty. Within these hierarchies, data from my Master’s thesis might be dismissed as “used” and disposable, yet the “old” data re-returns here not as obsolete, but as composted material abundant with potential. Following Barad’s understanding of indeterminate temporalities, the “new” does not replace the “old”, rather they mutually constitute one another; they “(...) are diffractively threaded through

and are inseparable from one another” (Barad, 2017, p. 69). This resists “capitalism’s reliance on the continual production of new desires and a desire for the new” (Barad, 2007, p. 473 footnote 57), a reliance also found in neoliberal academic economies. By resisting privileging of and desire for the new, re-turning fosters kinder and more sustainable research practices. Data does not expire, nor do participants’ contributions end with publication. Instead, re-turning allows data to be revisited, reused, reinterpreted, and reanimated, reducing the need for constant collection and enabling “old” data to be recycled, to reenter the cycle of inquiry. There is value in this repetition; in repeating the refrain of analysis, alternative narratives may become audible. This practice also acknowledges that participants’ insights continue to shape and haunt the researcher’s thinking long after the research has ended, while also allowing researchers to consider what they may have overlooked, providing a more holistic portrayal of the data and participants. As Günther-Hanssen et al. (2021) suggest, re-turning may “push further” the analysis, expanding the ways in which research can make a difference (Günther-Hanssen et al., 2021, pp. 22-23). By sustaining an ongoing relating to the research material, re-turning invites researchers to ask: What have I excluded? What was forgotten or missed? (Murriss & Zhao, 2022) What theoretical frameworks shaped the analysis, and what might they have obscured? It may disrupt researchers’ “thinking practices” by “offer[ing] multiple diffracted readings for alternative ideas” (Evans, 2021, p. 50). As in dark methodologies, where darkness immerses the researcher in the research context, re-turning requires an intense and responsive immersion with the data and analysis. In doing so, re-turning offers a methodological practice of resisting the disposability of knowledge and the relentless pursuit of the new.

The re-turning at the center of this article was prompted by my physical re-turn to Northern Finland to begin my PhD in the same yet different place of my Master’s thesis research. This re-turn is not only spatial but also a re-turn to the seasonal “rhythms of inquiry” shaped by dark winters (Koro & Wells, 2024, p. 112). As winter settles again over this place, not only darkness re-turns but also the haunting “old” data, which refuses to remain in the past. Its temporal boundaries blur, shaping my future as a researcher. Re-turning to these stories becomes a way of attending to what emerges through repetition—through analytical refrains, alternative stories, and alternative temporalities of becoming-researcher. Working in the slow tempos of Northern winters, this dark re-turn challenges the accelerated rhythms of neoliberal academia. Darkness invites vulnerability, disorientation, and unfamiliarity to this re-turning practice, qualities foregrounded in dark methodologies (Andersen et al., 2017). It offers alternative temporal perceptions and affirms the abundant potential of “old” data that resists closure. What follows is an account of ongoing unfolding and the simultaneous “collapse of understanding” (Koro, 2025, p. 1) that emerges from haunting data and dark timeplaces. Through this dark re-turning, a reimagining of what it means to research education and childhood darkly begins to take shape, embracing vulnerability, honoring the ghosts of childhood, and listening to the world speaking in shadows.

Re-turning to “old” stories of darkness and childhood

To re-turn darkly to my research, I re-tell two empirical-analytical stories in the following section.

Each story opens with a moment of observation that offers a glimpse into possible relations of darkness and childhood, which is then woven through theories to map and expand the entanglements between darkness, childhood, and methodology. After re-telling these original analytical stories, I offer an alternative analytical story generated through a dark re-turning to these moments and experiences I had while preparing for and re-turning to the place of my research.

First Re-telling: Looking away —the refusal of knowing and the embrace of wonder

On my initial visit to the research kindergarten, I am observing some children playing in one room. When I turn to look through the doorway into another room, I notice that one of the children has been looking at me, observing me, waiting to see when I would turn to them. The child isn't moving anymore but rather staring at me. I hesitate, then turn away.

In this moment, the child's gaze interrupts mine; I am no longer the observer, but the observed. It is more than a reversal of roles, but a rupture: a moment in which, as Molloy-Murphy (2020) writes, "a world that looks back" (p. 12) demands a response. The child's stillness and gaze draw me into relation to think beyond my initial research intentions. Following dark methodological approaches, I begin to trace other lines of thought, losing my predetermined orientation and vision for the research.

Becoming-observed brings discomfort in my body, my stomach tightens and eyes avert, perhaps like the unease the children may feel being observed. The researcher gazing evokes the uneasy atmosphere of the kindergarten's brightly lit playground, illuminated to make constant teacher supervision possible. Looking away becomes a way of attuning to this discomfort, moving from intruding observer to exposed observed. From a dark methodological perspective, this looking away can be understood as a form of relational blindness interrupting oculo-centrism in research. To look away asks not what or how I see, but: "(...) what does being seen do to us as researchers? (...) What do the various degrees and positions of relational blindness produce in our research?" (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 57 f.). This moment of being seen | not seeing challenges the historically often taken-for-granted invisible researcher gazing to create and maintain supposed objectivity. This practice has been critiqued by feminist and critical science scholars such as Donna Haraway, who refutes this "god trick" (Haraway, 1988) of observing from a detached, elevated position, removed from the research context. In contrast to the "god trick," this moment renders the researcher visible, grounded, and subject to observation, while the participants remain unseen. The relations between researcher and researched shift and blur.

Looking away can be an act of "response-ability" (Barad, 2014, p. 178) and care, not a failure to witness or act of avoidance, but a refusal to consume. It resists reproducing "self-serving, manipulative and extractive" research encounters (Love & McDonnell, 2024, p. 10) within neoliberal academia, which demands a return on investment in the form of constant knowledge production from new data. Rigid timelines require researchers to control encounters, constraining possibilities for ethical responses such as waiting, revisiting, changing or forging plans, or honoring

participants' wishes, and limiting their capacity to shape the research process. Looking away follows dark methodologies advocating for a different kind of research: one that values immersion, alternative tempos, and intense, unplanned encounters.

This moment embodies a responsive "ethics of unknowing," which involves "an openness to the Other and to our own humility, that is, to the idea that we do not, and maybe cannot, know or control all within the teaching environment" (Arndt & Tesar, 2019, p. 38). Applied to research, ethics of unknowing acknowledge the researcher's inability to control the research environment, plan the entire research process, or consistently produce new knowledge. In looking away, I stay in the dark about the child, honor their unknowability, to "become otherwise with something" (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 71), unapproachable and incomprehensible.

In this darkness of relational blindness, wonder emerges from a liminal space "suspended between knowing and unknowing" (MacLure, 2013, p. 228). The moment of looking away produces affects of wonder: What were the children doing that I was not meant to see? MacLure describes moments of wonder in research, in which data "seems to reach out (...) to grasp us" (MacLure, 2013, p. 228). This moment grasps me, also through evoking personal memories of forbidden play, of secrets kept from teachers, inviting affective attunement. I feel the thrill of doing something forbidden, embodied sensations of joy, nervousness, a quickened heartbeat, and the warmth of shared secrecy. It invites dwelling in the unknowable vibrant, complex, and indeterminate worlds of the others we study, to resist the urge to classify and explain, and instead to feel, to respond, and to follow wonder down unfamiliar paths.

In re-telling this story, its lingering presence becomes evident, continually composting and re-forming itself. Through repetition, understanding deepens; each re-telling is an opportunity to think it over again, generating iterative patterns of knowing and memory, like Barad's image of the crystal casting different shadows (Barad, 2007). With every turn, new facets emerge.

Re-turning to the kindergarten: Intra-active looking away towards future memories

Aren't you afraid of the dark? Of not being able to see, of not being seen? How do you deal with the darkness, the lack of light?

These are the questions from family, friends, and colleagues, when I tell them that I am moving back to Northern Finland to pursue my PhD. As I re-turn to this same but different place, I am once again a foreigner in Finland, disoriented, vulnerable, gazes directed towards me, unsure of how to act correctly, how to speak the language, how to navigate the dark, unfamiliar landscapes and climate. The uneasy feeling of being watched in the kindergarten resurfaces. The moment of looking away from the story re-told above re-turns. It "(...) le[ft] behind some potentially disturbing keys to be used at a later point. Knowing through not knowing. Data though nondata" (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018, p. 448). This nondata of the gaze not taken, the data not collected, is not an absence but a void in the Baradin sense, a space abundant with potentiality (Barad, 2012). Now, at this "later point" of re-turning, questions of agency and the power relations emerge,

which I ponder in the following. This is both the process and product of the story re-turning and I re-turning to it. I had previously defaulted to the traditional perspective that participants had to be protected from my power as researcher (Love & McDonnell, 2024, p. 10). Despite working with agential realist theories, I still imagined a binary: I, the powerful researcher; the child, the vulnerable Other, and that this power was possessed (or not) by separately existing individuals. I failed to recognize that it was not my choice to look-away, rather the looking-away emerged from the entangled relations of children, I, teachers, place, time, and affects. And in this emergence, new possibilities for meaning were produced. Similarly, unknowing was not my choice but emerged from the entangled relations of affecting and being affected, by discomfort and wonder, by institutional dynamics and the researcher-researched, adult-child, human-nonhuman power-producing binaries.

Furthermore, this moment continues to haunt and shape my work. My current research embraces looking away and remaining in the dark, not knowing all the details of the phenomenon I study: childhood secret places, and the adults sharing their memories of them. I feel the power of secrecy affecting desires to know, yet I resist the impulse to observe directly and invite the darkness of unknowing to shape my methodologies. I collect anonymous data void of participants personal identifiers but abundant with other potentialities, and refrain from visiting the secret places themselves. I listen to the disruption's darkness brings to temporal perception, interrogating the adult | child binary and advocating for a childhood studies without children. As in that moment in the kindergarten, I strive not to colonize children's worlds. I recognize, as Koro (2025) warns, that "[...] [s]cholars' desire to understand the strange and foreign [...] can be seen as a form of epistemological and ontological colonization" (Koro, 2025, p. 5). Refusing to observe the children in the kindergarten, to visit the secret places, or to know who my research participants are, becomes a refusal to consume or possess. These moments of relational blindness "[...] creates places where individuals can refuse to learn while studying, making relations with the foreign and strange, and creating opportunities to not do but linger" (Koro, 2025, p. 1). It opens space for lingering, for not-doing, for forming relations with the unfamiliar without mastering it. And perhaps above all, this methodology embraces the wonder of not-(fully)-knowing these places and participants as a productive and generative force in research.

This re-turning is the "afterlife of data" (Cecchetto, 2022), the afterlife of that moment in the kindergarten, which continues to foster a love for darkness and an embrace of vulnerability, disorientation, and unknowing that seeps in and takes my thinking captive.

Second Re-telling: Encounter with a hare — Untamed data resisting captivity



Figure 1: A hare encounter—perhaps data, perhaps not—blurring into the dark, playing with the camera lens, resisting capture, or simply unaware of being observed

While bicycling home from the kindergarten late at night, I encounter a hare. Hares are all over the city and now that snow is on the ground, I see their footprint traces everywhere, on the paths, in the forest, near the beach, and at the playground. This hare I encounter freezes when he/she sees me, then hops, then freezes again, eats. I stop to try to take a photo of this moment. Try to capture this encounter, preserve it for later. The hare doesn't cooperate. My photos are all blurred. The hare jumps into the patch of trees next to the path and disappears. Gone.

This fleeting, unplanned, and mundane encounter with a hare—and my unsuccessful attempt to capture it with my camera—open up thinking on data's capture and escape in dark multispecies worlds. The resulting images are blurred and indistinct, resonating with Jokinen and Nordstrom's concept of "untamed data resisting captivity" (2020, p. 624). This "untamed" data resists "(...) taken-for-granted assumption in qualitative inquiry that what we are used to call 'data' must be recorded" (Jokinen & Nordstrom, 2020, p. 642). It resists the notion that "(...) data only comes into existence in captivity, and for capturing we need technological recording devices (...)" (Jokinen & Nordstrom, 2020, p. 642). This uncaptured, improperly recorded data is more-than-nothing. Its ghostly non-existence lingers, shimmering with meaning, gesturing towards an indeterminate story of entanglement, spun through the multispecies relationships unfolding in the fleeting temporalities of dark urban spaces. These spaces are both literally and epistemologically dark, marked by partial (human) knowledge, mystery, and ethical restraint.



Figure 3: Hare traces at a playground

Figure 2: Hare traces near a path

City playgrounds and bicycle paths are always more-than-human places, though human exceptionalism often renders the traces of others invisible, unnoticed, or uncared for. As darkness falls and night descends, when children and cyclists retreat, and human activity recedes, these spaces shift: other-than-humans, like hares, reclaim these spaces, leaving their footprints in the snow. Dark playgrounds and cycle paths are not empty but abundant with inhabitants. The hares' relationship to darkness and to these nocturnal places bare witness to their unique way of perceiving the world (Despret in Buchanan et al., 2015, p. 176), existing alongside yet intertwined with the human world, relating but not fully merging. Darkness blurs the boundaries between human and non-human places, opening alternative ways of knowing them. How do hares know these places? For them, darkness and night may signify protection and perhaps opportunity. They may have researched this place themselves, studying when and where children play, when most bicyclists ride on the trails, attuning to these rhythms and finding peaceful timeplaces to inhabit.

Here too, questions of observation, gaze, and ethical refusal emerge. The hare's hopping away from my camera, away from the heavily lit path into the dark patch of forest beside it, like looking away from the children in the kindergarten, are moments of moving away from invasive observation and towards unknowing. My failed attempt to photograph the hare sparks thinking on refusal as method. To take only blurry photographs or not at all could become a moment of non-intervention and non-domination, a move away from colonizing the worlds of animals, like those of children, and instead lingering in the unknown. These dark timespaces of playgrounds and bike paths belong to hares just as private play belongs to children. Yet these places are also "contact zones" (Haraway, 2008) between humans (children) and hares. They are built by humans and played on, reshaped, and inhabited by humans during the day, while hares inhabit these contact zones at night leaving their own traces. Nature and culture meet here at the playground and on the bicycle path, human and other-than-human movements interlacing, overlapping, and crisscrossing. The encounter with the hare on the bicycle path and witnessing its traces in the snow at the playground are shimmering pieces of data, affective and embodied. The quiet thrill of the encounter, the blurred photo, the crunch of snow underfoot, the cold air all calls the

researcher into response, not to capture but to connect with the world and its vibrancy.

This story of a dark in-between place, both human and more-than-human, leaves open the possibility of relating to dark common worlds in new ways, as shared places that humans could leave a little bit darker to live more ethically with nocturnal animals.

Hares re-turning: Dark untamed data taking captives

Winter begins to set again on Northern Finland. And then, all of a sudden it seems, the hares return. It feels as if I am back in my Master thesis research, a “(...)timeless and spaceless darkness where time appears as circular and returning, not linear and progressive” (Koro, 2025, p. 2). But they have never really left (or have they?). I only notice them in the winter, as the snow makes their tracks visible to me and our daily rhythms begin to align again now that it is darker earlier, I am riding my bicycle on their paths when they are using them. Their bodies hopping almost imperceptibly, I can barely see them, shadow like, ghost like.

The uncaptured data of hares re-turning, same yet different, makes evident moments of anthropocentrism. Re-turning to this not-yet-final data exposes my own still human-centered thinking, despite my attempts to adopt a multispecies ethnographic approach, which I did not recognize during the initial analysis. These places were always already more-than-human, not transformed by darkness but continuously co-created by humans and more-than-humans. The assumptions that these places belong to someone, or that the same hares always return to the same places originate from a Western human-centered notion of habitation, which ignores nomadic ways of life. Further anthropocentric assumptions in my original analysis surface: Do the hares really study this place? Do they care so much about what humans are doing? Can I, as a human researcher, even begin to capture their experiences and their lives? These questions expose the limits of my gaze and the impossibility of capture, which in turn lead to further questions: What might it mean to take seriously the data that escapes, that resists capture, that refuses to hold still, that remains a dark spot, and to acknowledge its agency? Though only briefly mentioned in my original writing, the re-turning of this blurry, shadowy data invites a deeper engagement with the productive and generative potential of “dark data” refusing and escaping conventional analysis.

Re-turning to Jokinen and Nordstrom’s (2020) concept of “untamed data resisting captivity,” refusal emerges not only as a methodological stance but also as a response to research: an expression of data’s agency, entangled with the researcher and research process. This postqualitative, agential realist conceptualization of data challenges traditional research paradigms that prioritize clarity, control, and documentation. Instead, it foregrounds data as vibrant, active, and performative as well as resistant to being molded by conventional analytic tools, with its own ways of becoming intelligible. To respond to this agency and liveliness of data, Jokinen and Nordstrom call researchers to become open to confusion and uncertainty and to

acknowledge data's unpredictable nature, moving beyond the confines of pre-determined hypotheses shaped by normative scientific standards and extractive research logics. Moreover, some data, and with it some ways of experiencing and knowing the world, escape human understanding altogether, despite our best methodological and technological attempts to get closer to it. But this escaping data is not lost; rather, it agentially produces something else that cannot be held onto but still shapes the research encounter. It prompts a methodological and ethical shift: a refusal to dominate and colonize, and an openness to unknowing.

The practice and acceptance of refusal can be understood as ethical and protective gestures. But how can knowledge be produced while letting data escape? Some data cannot be captured and analyzed: the sacred place that cannot be visited for observation or the taboo word that cannot be spoken in an interview. Their existence may be known, yet they remain unrevealed. Similarly, the worlds of more-than-human entities and children may be partially sensed but not fully recorded or translated into familiar terms. These "dark" unknown worlds have their own temporalities, spatialities, rhythms, meanings, and ways of knowing. In letting data of this nature escape, space opens for other ways of knowing that are not dependent on possession, visibility, control, or the domestication of the unfamiliar. The refusal to use or reveal certain knowledge because it does not belong to the researcher, or because its translation to human, adult, Western, and/or pre-existing ways of knowing would flatten its complexity thus produces gaps. But these gaps are not empty. They are also voids full of potential for alternatives: one visits another place, uses another word, listens differently, or follows another trace. Exclusion, in this sense, becomes inclusion elsewhere. This is the ethical and productive potential of what Giraud (2019) calls an "ethics of exclusion" a practice of letting go, of not knowing, of allowing escape. I cannot visit the timeplace of the hares when I want to. I must let them come to me. And I must unlearn the human ideas I have inherited about their lives to make space for other ways of being in and knowing the world.

The hares also affect my PhD research, past uncaptured data bleeding into future researching. Their elusive presence, and the ethical tensions they produced around capture, colonization, and a desire to know more and more, haunt the methodological approach for collecting and analyzing data for my dissertation. They reverberate in the questions I face, and ask myself, when working with childhood secret places: places that are ephemeral, resistant to capture, and which I choose not to access through direct engagement with children or by visiting the places directly, but through memory stories told anonymously. Questions of authenticity often arise: How can I know these places truly existed? Can memory stand in for presence? Can stories replace sites? Do they have to? My research methodology intentionally excludes some things, in particular me actually visiting the sites as well as who is telling me stories on childhood secret places, in order to include and center others: the other-than-human actors co-creating these places, the timeplaces in which they emerge. This wild method resists control; I do not know when or what kind of data I will receive. Yet the stories I receive take me captive and have control over me, stirring a desire to know more, while some stories escape entirely. This, too, is part of the method: a refusal of totality, a space for the unknown, and an openness to what cannot be grasped.

Discussion: Refusal, resistance, and re-turning to the darkness of childhood

Through re-turning to two dark moments—looking away in the kindergarten and an encounter with a hare—and these two moments re-turning, methodological shifts have emerged: from observer to observed, from an anthropocentric gaze to an acknowledgment of the limits of human-centered research and the generative force of refusal. These past-present-future moments, the haunting afterlife of data, continue to shape and unsettle me as researcher and my research, demanding ongoing ethical responsiveness. Building on these re-turnings, the following section discusses how refusal, resistance, and re-turning to the darkness of childhood may transform childhood and educational research.

The ghostly non-existence of looking away and the escape of uncaptured data open space for alternative ways of knowing which refuse to dominate or colonize the worlds of children and more-than-human others (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Refusal, in this context, becomes a transformative and generative force in childhood and educational research: it refuses to control, to make visible or coherent, instead honoring the indeterminacy, intensity, and iterative nature of childhood. In doing so, refusal does not close down researching childhood and education, but opens it toward more ethical, responsive, and imaginative possibilities. The refusal redirects the inquiry to questions of power, agency, and control, and shapes what parts of children's and their companion's lives are articulated with human adult ways of knowing and which are not (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Slowly composting old data bleeds into the present and future; future research on secrets, unknowing, and refusal was already germinating in the past. This composting (Hohti & Tammi, 2023) is a form of resistance: resistance to academic linearity, to the pressure for progress, and to the demand for closure. Old data is not static or trash, it is alive, a nourishing and valuable compost offering new insights over time. Becoming a researcher is not a straightforward trajectory but a temporally entangled unfolding, shaped by rhythms that linger and re-turn. Research too does not simply move forward; it resists the logic of succession and instead inhabits entangled and thick timespaces, "messy mixes" of past, present, and future (Hohti & Tammi, 2023, p. 601). Resistance, in the form of slowly composting data, non-linear researcher career trajectories and research processes, may transform how we do childhood and educational research and how we become researchers in this field: not as fixed stages or outcomes, but as ongoing, affective, and relational processes that defy structuring and normative logics.

In childhood and educational research, re-turning to the darkness of childhood is inevitable and it affects empirical practice. To research childhood is always to re-turn to it, not as it (never) was, but as it becomes again in the thick-now. Dark re-turning as methodological practice invites educational researchers to re-turn to this un/familiar timespace, where we may find an abundance of different temporalities and rhythms, lacking or diverging orientations, and affective and non-visual ways of knowing. Here, the boundaries between adult and child may blur, making possible a re-engagement of the still-child researcher with childhood not as a fixed past, but as an ongoing way of being in and relating to the world (da Rosa Ribeiro et al., 2023). This re-turning is not a nostalgic return to innocence, but an ethical and vulnerable practice, one that brings discomfort,

memory, and unknowing into the inquiry. Just as protecting dark worlds requires embracing risk and ambiguity, re-turning to the dark un/known of childhood demands a willingness to be affected and unsettled. Researching education and childhood thus also demands openness to being changed, to being confronted by one's own childhood, and to the bodily memories that surface in research sites like schools, kindergartens, or playgrounds or in encounters with children and their companions as research participants. What emerges in these encounters, be it nostalgia, embarrassment, pain, or sadness, are not affective experiences to be stifled in the name of objectivity or in the name of putting one's "past" childhood aside to see the "present" childhood of now. Child(hood) researchers are always already becoming-child again: born from dark wombs, returning to dark deaths, bodies regressing, remembering. The question then becomes: how might light and dark, the positive and negative affects arising from re-membering and re-turning to childhood, inform educational research in the thick-now?

Refusal, resistance, and re-turning go beyond adult-centric and normative research logics towards methodologies that honor the complexity and agency of childhood, children, education and students, transforming not only how we research, but who and how we become as researchers and with what speed and in which temporalities this becoming happens. Thus, they do not close down research, they keep it alive, offering new ways of engaging with childhood and education that are ethically attuned, temporally complex, and radically open.

Conclusion: Darkness re-turning

This article has traced a dark re-turning to my Master's thesis on childhood and darkness to bring darkness literally, as a methodological tool and as a conceptual force into conversation with re-turning as practice, to see what emerges through repeating analytical refrains. By re-turning to two moments—looking away in the kindergarten and encountering a hare—and listening to these two moments re-turning, this research has traced how dark re-turning opens new methodological and ethical possibilities. Rather than seeking clarity or resolution, these re-turnings have invited a different kind of attentiveness: one that embraces the haunting, the unresolved, and the unknowable. These re-turnings have unsettled both me and the research, requiring vulnerability and continual ethical responsiveness. They illustrate how past moments slowly compost, resisting the acceleration, linearity, and productivity demands of academia. The data's haunting afterlife shows that future work on secrets, unknowing, and refusal was already germinating in the past. By slowing down and resisting the privileging of "new," re-turning becomes a transformative method which redefines becoming a researcher as a temporally entangled unfolding. These re-turnings also show how refusal, resistance, and returning to the darkness of childhood can unsettle dominant research logics and generate more ethical, affectively attuned, temporally complex approaches to childhood and educational research. Re-turning may reshape how we relate, remember, and become as researchers and otherwise.

Dark re-turning opens up possibilities for a more compassionate and kinder approach to childhood and educational research. It invites scholars to engage with practices such as "looking away" from children, their multispecies companions, and their un/common worlds this "staying in the dark" about their lives and worlds, and working with/out untamed, dark data that resists capture and

categorization. Dark re-turning challenges dominant narratives in educational and childhood research by conceptualizing the child and childhood not as a knowable, linear subject, but as multiple, indeterminate, and unknowable children and childhoods (Spyrou, 2019). Future research may embrace this uncertainty and resist the urge to dominate or define children, their companions, and their worlds, instead cultivating openness to the sacred, the strange, the taboo, and the uncaptured. To do so demands a willingness to be vulnerable, to admit mistakes and past exclusions, and to challenge dominant paradigms that prioritize control, clarity, and linearity. Methodologies may become less about mastery and more about relationality and responsiveness. Dark re-turning to slowly composting data, which continues to unfold, encourages researchers to revisit the overlooked, the uncomfortable, and the unresolved, to work with one's own dark spots. We cannot always perceive nor know everything, especially not in one cut of time. Within the constraints of current academic structures, where time is limited and productivity is prioritized, there is rarely space to follow every path or to linger. Yet it is precisely in these slow re-turnings where meaningful research may emerge not from the rush to conclude, but from the willingness to dwell in the in-between, to go backwards, and to allow insights to compost over time. This has significant implications for how research timelines, outputs, and success are conceptualized.

Researching with darkness—of childhood, as phenomenon, as methodology—, with refusal, resistance, and dark re-turning could mean re-searching: searching again and again without ever finding certainty, focusing on research as practice not product. It may mean allowing for and acknowledging multiple versions, multiple truths, and multiple worldings, never in control of any of them (van Dooren et al., 2016). Instead of devising new methods to persuade participants or find ways into off-limits sites, research can accept non-participation and extend this respect to other species by not pursuing those who flee and allowing them to escape captivity while also allowing ourselves to be held captive by them (van Dooren et al., 2016). Moreover, by not-visiting un/common worlds, wonder about the unknowable may be cultivated, producing a desiring quality of (partial) connection which knowing cannot. The force of the unknowable holds us in captive awe, inviting a response to care, not because we know (that it is important, that it is intelligent), but because of the beauty, the joy, the aesthetical experience of the unknown. By unknowing dark data, embracing vulnerability, and relinquishing control over knowledge-making processes, unexpected indirect findings, new questions, and wonder-filled connections may emerge, leading to more equitable, ethical, and affectively attuned research in dark, un/common worlds.

Description of figures for screen readers

Figure 1: A photo taken in the dark with a snow-covered path in the middle of the frame. The picture is blurry. On the left side, towards the top of the frame, there can be seen the unsharp figure of a hare jumping away from the path.

Figure 2: A photo taken in the dark of a snow-covered field with hare footprints in the snow.

Figure 3: A photo taken in the dark of a snow-covered playground with hare footprints in the snow.

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