New materialist research in childhood studies focuses on understanding how discourse, matter, and children have co-productive agency in activities of play and learning where children intra-act with other humans and the more-than-human material world around them (Taguchi 2014). Children’s books both represent human discourse and belong to the material environment with which children and adults ’intra-act’ (Taguchi 2014). I discuss the emergence of this ‘relational ontology’ (Taguchi 2014) in ChildAct–Shaping a Preferable Future: Children Reading, Thinking and Talking about Alternative Communities and Times, a participatory project I have co-organized in Cambridge, UK, in 2017-2018. Its goal is the creation of ‘common-worlds’ (Taylor and Giugni 2012) in which young and adult readers collaborate towards understanding how utopian literature shapes ideas for the desirable future, how these ideas evolve in the encounters with the materiality of readers’ local environment, and how they call readers into individual and collective action in relation to these environments. I argue that such a complex network co-constituted by discourse, socio-political concepts and matter grants productive agency to children, adults and the world around them, thereby creating an opportunity for hope and change. I also focus on the relational processes among the child scholars and myself as a children’s literature researcher, including not only shifts in my own perceptions of literature, utopianism and the materiality around me, but also changes in myself as the researched human bodymind. Bearing in mind the new materialist commitment to understanding how researchers – in their production of knowledge – participate in shaping the future for humans, non-humans and the material environment (Barad 2007), I conclude with a reflection on the significance of the ‘material turn’ in children’s literature studies. While new materialism has been acknowledged in looking at texts for children through the lens of ecocriticism, animal studies, plant studies, posthuman theories or cognitive criticism (Nikolajeva 2016), a focus on the material-discursive presence of children’s books in the common worlds of adults and children should lead us to the yet unexplored issue of how knowledge produced in our field can have materialist consequences and create new, ‘more livable’ (Haraway 2008) realities.

Keywords: children’s literature, participatory research, new materialism