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## Posthuman child: Implications for pedagogy and educational research?

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## Posthuman Child: Implications for Pedagogy and Educational Research?

### Abstract

Posthumanists propose an urgent and complete re-thinking of our relationships to other humans and the more-than-human. The Western culture/nature dichotomy is currently the ontological framework responsible for (adult) humans' extractive and detached relationship to nature. The current ecological crisis forces us to re-examine the ontological foundations of how humans relate to one another and to the worlds we co-create. In this chapter, I re-turn to the question what the human *is* through the concept 'child', thereby pushing back at those scholars who simply include child in their critique of 'the' human. But child as a concept is complex and refers to chronological, fleshy child in spacetime, as well as the abstract notion that exists only because of its polar opposite, i.e., adult. Working with multiple temporalities and the awareness that earth dwellers – including children and more-than-human – are not all 'on the same timeline' is particularly generative for childhood studies: child(hood) is not something we (adults) leave behind. With reference to various examples from scholarship that resists erasures between past and future(s), the chapter asks ontological questions about the concept 'child' and discusses why it matters epistemologically, ethically and politically for teaching and research to move away from current representational paradigms in education science.

### Keywords

Posthumanism, agential realism, Karen Barad, childhood studies, child agency

## 1 A meeting of disciplines

The theme of the 2023 Annual Conference of the German Society for Educational Science (DGfE) was the *meeting* of two disciplines – Childhood Studies and Primary Education Research. And, as poignantly put by one of the other speakers, Heike Deckert-Peaceman (see Deckert-Peaceman's contribution to this volume), the conference focused on the perspectives of children in a crisis-ridden and rapidly changing lifeworld. The concept of 'lifeworlds' is of interest to posthumanist researchers whose concern about species extinction, climate change and environ-

mental decline have urged an investigation into what it means to be human and what is happening to humans' lifeworlds. Posthumanists propose an urgent and complete re-thinking of our relationships to other humans and the more-than-human. Considering the current ecological crisis, re-examining the ontological foundations of how we relate to one another and to the worlds we create and find ourselves in as humans is crucial and especially relevant for the themes addressed at this conference, as are the relations between adults and children.

### 1.1 Adult 'meetings' in academia

The concept of 'meeting' is a central one in the philosophy of Karen Barad – a thinker who has inspired much of the philosophy that underpins this article. Barad is an agential realist. Agential realism is a kind of posthumanism where Quantum Field Theory (QFT) and queer studies meet. Barad's influential book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* from 2007 has made waves across the disciplines. Agential realism was already mentioned earlier in their scholarly work in a book about breaking the gender barrier in teaching in what we now call STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) (Barad 1995). Meetings are what posthumanist Anna Tsing would call "gatherings" – they bring about unpredictable "happenings" (Tsing 2015, p. 23). Conferences are such 'happenings'. Barad proposes that

[w]e meet the universe halfway, to move toward what may come to be in ways that are accountable for our part in the world's differential becoming. All real living is meeting. And each meeting matters. (Barad 2007, p. 353)

*Meeting the Universe Halfway* makes an ontological proposal for diffracting through the disciplines (transdisciplinarity) and *undisciplining* the disciplines we are so familiar with in academia. This is urgent because the Western culture/nature dichotomy is currently the ontological framework of these disciplines and responsible for (adult) humans' extractive and detached relationship to nature. For the sake of clarity, viewed simplistically, researchers tend to be either scientific realists or socio-constructivists. For the former, science discovers human-independent facts *about* nature (e.g., the nature of children and how they develop); nature itself remains untouched by practices of knowing (e.g., observing children's digital play doesn't change how they play). The human gaze is 'detached', i.e., it does not interfere with how the world works. In contrast, for social constructivists there is no direct or pure access to nature or the world as it is (Barad, 2007, p. 48); culture and context (read: humans) mediate through knowledge systems that have been developed collaboratively through language and other semiotic systems (e.g., observations of children's digital play are mediated through humans' sense-making such as visual images, concepts).

Agential realists reject the *representationalism* that underpins both of these dominant paradigmatic orientations (Juelskjaer et al. 2021). Both assume that subjects and objects are individualised bodies *in* the world and are re-presented as they really are (i.e., by nature), or as the product of social-cultural activities (i.e., shaped by culture). Put differently, science either mirrors nature (realism), or culture (social constructivists). But agential realism is critical of Western science that claims to leave the *mirror itself* untouched – a mirror that has become so entrenched methodologically that it has become “common-sense” (Barad 2007, pp. 48, 418). Representationalist paradigms assume the ontologies of Euclidian mathematics and Newtonian physics – the independent existence of objects that move through space (as a container) and forward in (unilinear) time. Instead, agential realism explicitly theorises the significance of materiality in socio-cultural practices; even its theoretical engagement is seen as performative – doing science differently. Barad encourages us all to *ask prior questions*, e.g., ‘What is already given ontologically before these theories get underway?’ In this case, the culture/nature dichotomy poses an existential threat to human and more-than-human survival in the current geological period of the Anthropocene – a human-damaged planet. My contribution to these enquiries is mostly to focus on the concept of ‘child’, which is still ‘missing’ in the writing of key posthumanist thinkers (Murriss 2021). In particular, I am interested in what we bring to the concept ontologically and, therefore, how we practice education research. It is where child(hood) studies and primary education meet.

## 1.2 Undisciplining research on child

One way to ‘undiscipline’ education research and to de(con)struct<sup>1</sup> (Barad 2017) the separation of nature and culture with all its pedagogical and methodological implications (see below), is to ask ontological questions about the concept ‘child’ as some child(hood) studies scholars do (Murriss/Reynolds 2022). Barad would probably say that ‘What is child?’ is the wrong question, because asking it detaches concepts from the world, which does its own violence by, among other things, making the concept into an idea rather than turning to the *material historicity* of a concept (Barad/Gandorfer 2021). The concept ‘child’, like the concept ‘human’, is normative. It is not a signifier of an individual object or subject *in* the world, but a *political* category – one that expresses a power position. In response to a long-standing debate in Western philosophy, Barad takes up the position that “reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena” (Barad 2007, pp. 392–293). Phenomena as primary units of existence form the agential realist basis for a new relational ontology that decentres the human. Words signify phenomena,

1 Barad diffracts through Walter Benjamin, who argues that destruction is the condition of the possibility of construction. Such de(con)struction brings the “energetics of the past into the present and vice versa” (Barad, 2017, p. 23).

not things in the world, and that includes ‘child’ (Murris 2016). I return to how and why this matters and for whom in section 2. First, I delve a bit deeper into the philosophy and the way in which agential realism troubles unilinear time. This is important for how the figuration of child-as-phenomenon (‘posthuman child’; Murris 2016) informs postdevelopmental pedagogies and research practices.

### 1.3 Multiple co-existing temporalities – temporal diffraction

To return to the focus of the conference, in times of crisis, there is a lot of talk about the future. Barad (2018, p. 220) states clearly that the current notion of the linearity of time is salvageable but requires a “radical reworking from within” and cannot, or should not, be replaced with a perhaps superior notion of time. Barad does not suggest we should replace one temporality (e.g., linear) with another (e.g., circular), but asserts that what is at stake is “the undoing of time, of universal time, of the notion that moments exist one at a time, everywhere the same, and replace one another in succession” (Barad 2018, p. 223). Rather than substituting one for the other, which ironically would be like falling into the trap of the logic of progress, Barad points out that ‘new’ and ‘old’ temporalities are already threaded through one another and cannot be separated (Barad 2018, p. 221). Barad argues that each history “coexists with the others” (Barad 2018, p. 220). This is the case when reading data through one another of human and more-than-human bodies that move at different speeds – children, brittle stars, mountain ranges and atoms – a methodology they call temporal diffraction. In section 3, I will list a few examples of where data has been analysed using temporal diffraction and the notion of multiple temporalities. Barad (2007 p. 91; *my italics*) argues for an objectivity that is accountable to the “*specific materializations* of which we are a part”. Barad proposes that in the “thick-now of the present moment”, like in a constellation, some stars that are present are dead and some alive at the very same time in the “thick-now” (Barad 2017, p. 34). Stars in the dark sky<sup>2</sup> are not the same distance from us, the observers. Barad’s de(con)struction of chronological time has profound implications for teaching and education research (see 3). Agential realism does not reject linear time as such, but its ‘lines’ are entangled multiplicities.

## 2 Posthumanism, primary education and childhood studies

Following on from the radical reworking of linear time in the previous section, the kind of posthumanism enacted in my teaching and research is not about an ‘anti’ or an ‘after’ humanism. ‘Post’ does not mean ‘doing away with’ or, for example,

2 Not all night skies are dark. For example, in summer in Northern Finland where I live, the sun does not set.

‘going beyond’ the human. ‘Post-’ does not suggest a (Cartesian) rupture with the past, a deletion of what has gone on before, or replacement by the ‘new’. Post-humanism is about rethinking what the human *is*. On one hand, the answer to the question (what is the human?) is assumed as already given in education. On the other hand, it is the end goal of the educational process that aims towards becoming fully human, that is more like a mature adult. Posthumanism is about acknowledging the always already existing intra-dependence between human and more-than-humans (e.g., other animals, machines). Before we open our eyes or do anything, we are already ontologically part of existing relationships. Posthumanist Braidotti (2013, p. 14, Figure 1.1) refers to Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man as the iconic image of the perfect human of humanism (see, e.g., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian\\_Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian_Man)). This white male able-bodied man has perfect proportions, extending into the universe. He has free choice and is in control – an autonomous individual with agency. The image portrays the ideal proportions of the human body, with each separate part as a simple fraction of the whole. Interestingly, the bodily proportions are unlike those of children. For example, in the image, the head measured from the forehead to the chin is exactly one-tenth of the total height, and the outstretched arms are as wide as the body is tall. But children’s proportions are very different! Their heads are much larger in relation to their bodies. Although not mentioned by Braidotti, age is also an important category of exclusion in humanism. Children are routinely discriminated against because of their age in “a taxonomy that locates subjects according to so-called natural kinds” (Barad 2014, p. 172). As Braidotti puts it:

This model sets standards not only for individuals, but also for their cultures. Humanism historically developed into a civilizational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalizing powers of self-reflexive reason ... Europe is not just a geo-political location, but rather a universal attribute of the human mind that can lend its quality to any suitable object. (Braidotti 2013, pp. 13-14)

The humanist civilizational model of reflexive reasoning acquired with age (adult human) has become the hallmark of developmental discourses of maturation and progress, whether the development of nations or of individuals (Murris/Reynolds 2018). Universal, abstract, chronologically developing human has become the norm by which each young individual is measured, thereby hiding the ethico-political dimensions of the concepts ‘human’ and, by the very same token, ‘child’.

## 2.1 Posthuman child

The posthuman figuration of (the) child is, of course, not mainstream. I introduced it in my book *The Posthuman Child* (2016). What researchers tend to bring to their research practices are assumptions about child *in abstraction*. It is this latter, abstract notion of the universal child that has become the signifier of all ‘young

human beings' for professionals and researchers globally. Biologically and physiologically categorised by, for instance, height, weight, neurological state, linguistic or motoric distinctives, child human as a concept has come to signify the chronologically developing child (e.g., [the] child of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). It has become the norm by which each young individual is measured, and by taking so-called natural talents, intelligence and abilities as markers of 'full humanity', the always non-innocent, ethico-political dimensions of the concept 'child' and 'human' remain hidden.

The figuration of the posthuman child challenges dominant notions of child agency and articulates child-as-phenomenon (see above). It is a response to the hegemonic literature on child agency, which can be summarised as *human-centred*: it does not consider *the agency of the material*; ontologically assumes *an individual self* (subject) separate from the body; thrives on *power-producing binaries*, such as individual/social, human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate and the core dichotomy, culture/nature; assumes *linear temporalities* underpinned by notions such as 'development' and 'progress' for individuals and nations; and is *colonial*, because it presupposes an agent who has advanced *semiotic and linguistic capabilities*, thereby excluding those who are not credited with those abilities *at all*, e.g., animals, matter, digital cameras; or, *not yet fully*, e.g., children, differently-abled and Indigenous peoples.

## 2.2 Figurations of child(hood)

The prevailing notion of child agency rests upon the culture/nature dichotomy – the philosophical basis of Western thinking introduced by Plato and solidified by thinkers such as Aristotle, Locke and Rousseau, which has produced figurations of child(hood) as inherently deficient. This discourse regards child as of nature and, like animal, basically a non-thinking, non-speaking 'other' in need of taming, domesticating and civilising through education (culture), as articulated in a set of figurations of childhood (Murris 2016; 2022). These Western theoretical influences are significant in how these figurations have become the norm through which we understand child and childhood. The culture/nature binary clearly demarcates the human being as adult, capable of voicing well-thought opinions through well-organised speech. See, for example, how the concept of 'voice' – having and giving a voice – has become synonymous with agency. The figurations are not descriptive but are multi-layered thinking aids that demand accountability for one's position, and responsibility for one's complicity as adults in positioning the mature, more developed, rational, autonomous adult self as the normative ideal of childhood. Childhood has become synonymous with 'deficit' and 'lack'. The 'developing child' lacks maturity and needs adult guidance and scaffolding; 'ignorant child' lacks rationality and experience from birth and needs instruction and training; 'evil child' lacks natural goodness and requires control and discipline; 'innocent

child' lacks responsibility, therefore needs protection and facilitation; 'egocentric child' lacks empathy, social norms and cultural values and requires socialisation by elders; 'fragile child' lacks resilience and needs diagnosis, protection and possibly medication. The figuration of 'posthuman child' escapes definition – it doesn't signify a bounded body in the world, but announces a radical ontological shift in how we perform the human.

### 2.3 Ontological shift

Crucial for reconfiguring child(hood) is that the shift away from the (adult) human *reconfigures the relationship between the social and the individual*. Posthumanism challenges the humanist conviction that humans are the only beings with intention and agency. But note that more-than-human agency is *not* about granting agency to material objects or animals in a similar way that children are granted agency in the children's rights discourse. On the contrary, nothing exists on its own (Barad 2007). *Agency is not what a human or thing possesses*. Posthumanism reconfigures how humans relate to themselves and others, including 'inanimate' things such as rocks, stones and sand. Each human cell, organism, vegetable and photon is irreducibly composed of an 'intra-active' host of others (Barad 2007). The use of 'intra' by agential realists instead of 'inter' articulates an ontology whereby relationships are not understood as links between pre-existing self-contained independent 'things'. Posthuman subjectivity is unbounded and embedded. It is impossible to say where 'child' ends and 'adult' starts or vice versa, or to refer to childhood as a discrete phase in a human's life.

A posthumanist conception of childhood disrupts the idea that childhood is temporally and spatially located and simply a characteristic of a young human being of a particular age. For posthumanists, the 'human' materialises differently over time through continuous, diverse and repetitive processes of enacting specific norms that become expressed as part of the particular enactment or phenomenon (Barad 2017). Posthuman child is conceptualised and performed as *more than* a bounded body, (a) porous self, always connected, embedded and embodied, dynamic and active. 'Posthuman child' escapes definition and being pinned down as it doesn't signify a bounded body in the world. It is constantly being formed through relationalities.

### 2.4 Child as natureculture phenomenon

In sum, the figuration of posthuman child disrupts the pervasive conception of temporality that takes development and progress as inevitable and thrives on the culture/nature binary. The posthuman child disrupts the (unilinear) path of progress and child development. It articulates *the empirical fact* that child is always already in relation and does not exist prior to these relations.



Posthuman child is a natureculture phenomenon that relocates agency from inside the body to relational mutual agency, from thinking contained in a mind (or brain) to thinking in movement, from individualised actions to ‘messy’ entanglements in worldly relations, and it invites us all to be fully present in the thick ‘now-time’ (Barad 2017). So far, so good, but how can the figuration of posthuman child be mobilised to inspire different pedagogies and research practices?

### 3 Examples from education practices

For more than a decade, I have been enacting posthumanism in my teaching in classrooms, in teacher education, reading groups, supervision, research projects and academic writing. But unlearning *chronos*, unilinear time, is difficult. Barad’s use of phenomenon changes how I refer to the self and the politics of attributing a particular age to a human. After Barad’s visit to Cape Town in 2017 for a research project (*Decolonising Early Childhood Discourses*) that I was leading and they are a member of, I became intrigued by how agential realism disrupts dominant developmental theories. This fuelled my passion for diffracting the human of any age through the child as phenomenon (Murriss/Bozalek 2023), articulated, for example, through writing/drawing together-apart an animated cartoon with Brandon Reynolds (2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikN-LGhBawQ>).

#### 3.1 Narrative characters – ‘matterphors’

Barad’s use of narrative characters, such as brittlestars, stingrays, \*\*\*, queer atoms, the void, constellations, crystals and virtual particles, troubles the notion of independent, bounded bodies and, therefore, narrow conceptions of ‘family’ and ‘kin’. Paying attention to the more-than-human radically changes how we read research data and the stories we tell. These Baradian characters have been inspirational for combatting deficit models of education (Murriss/Babamia 2021) and for reconfiguring teaching and learning through, for example, diffracting the performative practices of the ‘clairvoyant’ self-stinging stingray, the midwife and the pregnant human body through one another (Murriss 2017) or through a diffractive engagement with a heron (Murriss 2018), the snail (Murriss/Peers/Woodward 2021), the void (Murriss/Crowther with Stanley 2018), constellations and crystals (Haynes/Murriss 2019). These characters are not metaphors. As Barad explained in a Q&A session during their visit to Cape Town:

The brittle star grabbed hold of me as a felt way of being part of the world and knowing, to talk about the ontology of knowing and [...] to not have the brain and Cartesian subject in the way. Always, already before the question gets going about epistemology. So, it is [...] about [...] being with the brittle star so that I could start from a totally other place. (Bozalek/Murriss 2023, p. 30)

The playful use of these “matterphors” (Barad/Gandorfer 2021) – not metaphors – is an epistemological as well as an ethico-political opportunity in academia to reimagine the role of the pedagogue and the education researcher. It brings the philosophy of agential realism alive, in and outside the university classroom.

### 3.2 Enacting temporal diffraction

Since Barad’s visit, my conference presentations, research practices and academic writing articulate a greater awareness of temporal diffraction and how the methodology resists erasures between past and future(s). Working with multiple temporalities and the awareness that earth dwellers – including children and more-than-human – are not all ‘on the same timeline’ is particularly generative for childhood studies: child(hood) is not something we (adults) leave behind.

Child as a concept is complex and refers to a chronological, fleshy child in space-time, as well as the abstract notion that exists only because of its polar opposite, i.e., adult. The concept requires continuous opening up and aerating so it can “continue to breathe” (Barad/Gandorfer 2021, p. 31). Temporal diffraction introduces ‘haunting’ into the very construction of each concept, including ‘being’ and ‘time’ (Schrader 2012). Discourses about child(hood) resemble prejudicial assumptions about women and people of colour. Agential realism has inspired postcolonial and postdevelopmental conceptions of child(hood) that trouble the human-centred orientation of human rights discourses and capability approaches to early childhood in policies and curriculum development (Murris 2019). Age also shapes normative decisions about who and what can be playful (Haynes/Murris 2019) and reconfigures digital play as ‘postdigital’ play (Dixon et al. 2024). The agential realist disruption of taken-for-granted concepts, such as ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘now’ and ‘then’, helps to reimagine the notion of, for example, doing field trips as part of one’s teaching. I have taken concepts generated by my students ‘inside’ the university classroom, such as ‘tidying up’, ‘alive and dead’ and ‘family’, ‘outside’ during field trips to an ‘abandoned’ zoo (Murris 2020), an aquarium and a park with ‘alien’ trees (Murris/Reynolds/Peers 2018), and a beach haunted by violent deaths of students – an experience that exemplified the notion of ‘planetary literacies’ (Murris/Somerville, 2021).

### 3.3 Enacting posthuman child – decolonising child(hood)

Child-as-phenomenon (the figuration of posthuman child) “extends’ across different spaces and times” and remains open to change (Barad 2007 p. 383), bringing the energetics of the past into the present and the present into the past (Barad 2017, pp. 21-23). By disrupting chronological time in education (Murris/Kohan 2020) and moving ‘beyond’ chronological child, temporal diffraction teaches the educator to ‘teach without teaching’ (Murris/Muller 2018) at a snail’s pace (Murris/Peers/Woodward 2021), thereby also troubling teacher-centred

notions of authority (Murris/ Haynes 2019). The methodology works without erasing chronological child or the adult human (Murris/Osgood 2022) because the human and the apparatus that measures is always already part of the phenomenon, including the technology routinely used in education research. In this way, temporal diffraction also helps enact a reanimation of video and sound in research (Murris/Menning 2019; Menning/Murris/Wargo 2021; Menning/Murris 2022; 2023). Attuning to a multiplicity of times makes a critical difference when analysing photographs ‘of’ children (Murris 2022; Dixon et al. 2024), classrooms and other research sites (Murris/Haynes 2018). When re-turning to photos of researching a Grade 2 classroom in Cape Town, we wondered what we were missing – not feeling, hearing or seeing with our human senses. The land (skin) on which the school has been built is entangled with its apartheid history which is there and not there at the same time, disrupting binary logic and troubling a meta/physics of presence. Because we are so used to Newtonian conceptions of space and time, such an idea hardly makes sense to us now. But what is it we are *not* noticing? Not even noticing we are not noticing? (Murris/Crowther with Stanley 2018). Agential realism helps pedagogues and researchers to articulate this “strange topology” where past, present and future are inside one another (Barad/Gandorfer 2021, p.23), silently rupturing ageist, ableist, extractive and settler-colonial logics with/in the place of a school.

## 4 Conclusion

An overview of a sample of my more recent academic writings shows how I have brought radical agential realist approaches to how to read ‘texts’, such as classrooms, research sites, picture books and photographs. It exemplifies how post-humanism is not only a theory or philosophy but inspires a political activism of doing education differently, as teacher, lecturer and researcher. It has also inspired many of my postgraduate students (Chambers 2021; Crowther 2021; Giorza 2018, 2021; Meiring 2018; Peers 2018; Reynolds 2021; Thompson 2020). Decolonising education involves disrupting the binary logic of Western education that adults absorbed as part of the process of growing up, by learning from and with chronological children to ask childlike questions (Murris 2022). Decolonisation involves re-turning to be (the) child adults ‘came from’ but never left. This is what diffracting teaches us:

[r]esponding – being responsible/response-able – to the thick tangles of spacetime-matterings that are threaded through us, the places and times from which we came but never arrived and never leave. (Barad 2014, p.184)

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