

# Chapter 11

## Posthumanism: Intra-active Entanglements of Parental Involvement (as a Possibility of Change-Making)



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**Abstract** This chapter begins with a presentation of posthumanism/agential realism as a theoretical perspective entangling with early childhood education and care (ECEC), and as an ethical project, crucial for sustainable futures of all earthlings. After presenting the key concepts of Barad (*Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007), to whom the theoretical perspective of agential realism can be attributed, I try to show how the practice of parental involvement, usually understood as a human–human phenomenon, can be challenged and enhanced with this theoretical anchoring. The empirical example described further in the chapter, shows how ECEC staff in one kindergarten in Norway became empowered by this theoretical perspective to try out a different way of arranging a parental meeting. The chapter concludes by pointing to the necessity of theories that empower the vibrant intuitions of ECEC teachers and encourage them to try out new (more-than-human) ways of improving the institutional practices.

**Keywords** Agential realism · Inspiring change · Posthumanism · Parental meeting

### Posthumanism Entangling Early Childhood Education

The recent explosion of posthumanism-inspired studies and publications in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) signals that posthumanism has found its place in the field. Specifically, posthumanism has troubled the established substance ontology and offered new, radically relational foundations for knowledge and knowing (Murriss & Osgood, 2022). In the posthuman encounter with early childhood education, new ways of knowing regard the child and childhood. Taking

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departure from the intra-active ontology that explains how human existence is constituted in the complexity of intra-actions/relations to the diverse human and nonhuman elements around us (Barad, 2007), posthumanism offers re-figuration(s) of the child as a subject (Lindgren, 2020; Murriss, 2016). In “thinking-with theory as an analytic process to make sense of a world” (Murriss & Osgood, 2022, p. 216), the theory enables us to see the child as inseparable from her surroundings, continuously entangled and both constituted and “dissolving” (Hackett et al., 2020a, b, p. 6) in the surroundings. As Hackett et al. (2020a, b) put it:

The boundaries we imagine between a human body and the rest of the world - a layer of impermeable skin and brain locked safely away from harm inside a skull - are just that, imaginary. Instead, bodies of humans and non-humans are leaky, porous; we take in experiences, ideas, feelings and physical substances and, simultaneously, all these leak out of us. (p. 82)

The radically relational lens employed in the observation of the child can be interpreted as a way of coming closer to how the child experiences herself in the world and the world in herself. The inseparability of the child and her (un)living, (non) human surroundings from other earthlings allows us to see the child as more-than-human and continuously constituted in/through interaction.

Intra-action is not an interaction between two subjects/objects who exist prior to the interaction. According to Murriss (2018), “Barad’s neologism intra-action ruptures the familiar concept of ‘interaction’” (p. 40), as it underlines that the intra-acting bodies constitute each other’s existence through and in intra-action, and thus do not exist prior to the relation between them (Barad, 2007). The impression of continuity in our existence is always founded in one or another intra-action being there, as we live in “a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations” (Barad, 2007, p. 204), or, as Haraway (2016, p. 58) puts it, in a sympoiesis. Sympoiesis “is a simple word, it means ‘making with,’” and, as being constituted in our relations to everything else, each of us is a being-with, making-with, and thinking-with (Murriss, 2018).

According to Barad (2007), the radicality of this relationality is anchored in quantum physics experiments, leading to the conclusion of the human and non-human belonging to the same matter. This is visible at the level of electrons – particles that are so small that they do not owe us any spatiality. These particles vibrating in and out of our bodies, being both a part of us and outside of us, unmask the illusion of diverse dichotomic classifications, such as nature-culture, subjectivity-objectivity, and body-mind. We are all the same matter – the matter of nature, the matter of spacetime, the matter of subjectivity, the matter of solidarity, and the matter of politics and the economy – entangled together, unfolding together, and constituting each other’s existence and bearing mutual responsibility for it.

Such an ontology of the human(child) allows us to see the child as “ontologically completed” (Malone et al., 2020, p. 42) and overcome an epistemic injustice implied in either silencing them or assuming “that they are (still) developing, (still) innocent, (still) fragile, (still) immature, (still) irrational, (still) becoming” (Murriss, 2018, p. 2). Meeting the child as an intra-active being-with arguably allows us to

come closer to the child's experience as it is and the child's knowing, and to meet the child as she is emerging in the diverse and dynamic entanglements she intra-acts with.

Another feature that comes to matter in these entangled human(child) intra-actions is vibrancy, which refers to "a more-than-human atmospheric force (...) operating upon bodies from without" (Bennet, 2020, p. 29). As a political theorist, Bennet (2010) focuses her analysis on the nonhuman forces actively participating in the doing of politics, but her approach may still inspire the perception of the "vibrant materiality" flowing though and across bodies. This vibrancy is not only a sentiment, but rather an affect, or a more-than-feeling that emerges in-between bodies. As such, vibrancy could be either benevolent or non-benevolent (Bennet, 2020). Following up on the vibrant matter, Bennet (2020) describes circuits of sympathy through which diverse feelings, such as love, care, pain, and suffering, can transfer across living bodies. Such circuits allow one to feel with-the-other body and depict both non-benevolent and benevolent forces. Vibrancy exists no matter whether it is perceived or not, as it is an earthly and natural power "rooted as deeply as the geologic of gravity" (Bennet, 2020, p. 43).

## Posthumanism as an Ethical Project

Posthumanism is not only an ontology; it is also an ethics. The constitutive interdependence through which we all come to be implies an ethical responsibility for each other's existence. Another neologism of Barad's (2007), the idea of an "ethico-onto-epistemology – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being" (p. 185), indicates that, as we are entangled together in the "world-body space" (p. 185), we are responsible for each other. We, as more-than-human earthlings, not only constituting each other's being but are organically responsible for each other.

This organic responsibility is something we, as all earthlings, desperately need in the times of the Anthropocene:

These times called the Anthropocene are times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away. (Haraway, 2016, p. 35)

What the Anthropocene is looking away from, refusing to admit, and becoming response-able to is the "sympoiesis" (Haraway, 2016, p. 58), in which all earthlings are beings-with, existings-with, knowings-with, and responsibilings-with. "Humans are intra-actively (re)constituted as a part of the world's becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. 206), which also means that "human practices are agentive participants in the world's intra-active becoming" (p. 207). This explains why "we are responsible not only for the knowledge that we seek but, in part, for what exists" (p. 207). Our agency, according to Barad (2007), lies in the intra-actions we are a part of, and

these intra-actions bring forth the possibility of change when they cut together-apart (p. 179). The cutting together-and-apart escalates some connections and deescalates others. In Barad's (2007) words, "we are responsible for the cuts that we help to enact not because we do the choosing (neither do we escape responsibility because 'we' are 'chosen' by them), but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe" (p. 178). Our ethics is thus about not responding to the other "as if the other is the radical outside of the self" (p. 178), but with great awareness that we, as co-constituted and entangled together, are never alone, and that the cuts coming from the in-between affect us all.

The interconnectedness, interdependence and equality in our existence seem, however, to also be "dissolving the human" (Hackett et al., 2020a, b, p. 6), a process that is discussed in terms of its ethical dangers and possibilities. Åsberg and Neimanis (2013) point out that the intention of seeing all bodies as equal can weaken the insight into hierarchical patterns underpinning reality. Unjust power and violence, as well as discrepancies in individual rights, can become invisible through the lens of equal ontology.

At the same time, the equal ontology implies a great political and ethical strategy, proving that seeing all bodies as co-constituted and co-responsible is possible and that a parity between species and all humans (including those humans who are disregarded as humans) is imaginable/achievable. Such an order to things immensely troubles the exploitative existence of privileged humans struggling to live more sustainable lives. The new perspective of all earthlings' intra-active co-existence offers a way towards sustainability that is not only happening at the level of "habits," but instead emerges as a way of thinking of our being-with the world and our mutually responsibility for each other's survival. Moreover, the onto-ethico-epistemological departure can bring our awareness back to re-imagining sustainability as a holistic project (as it originally was considered; see Purvis et al., 2019) and motivate us to re-join its ecological, economic, and social dimensions, which, when being cut-apart, obfuscated the originally holistic focus of sustainability (Sadownik & Gabi, 2021).

## What About Parental Involvement?

How does all of this relate to parental involvement? As my systematic search of three databases resulted in no hits for the terms "parental involvement + posthumanism" or "parental engagement + posthumanism," I will spend some time here describing the potential of this theoretical approach for conceptualising the practice of parental involvement. I start with the relational character of being "a parent" and of the relevant sense of "involvement" (in ECEC). I will then discuss parental involvement as an intra-active matter and happening in/through different entanglements. My small research project is presented in the next section.

Figuring the parent through the radically relational ontology is quite interesting, as "a parent" or "a caregiver" is constituted through his/her relation to the child as

the caretaker. On the one hand, this means that it is the child(human), and relation to the child(human), that constitutes a human(adult) as a parent. On the other hand, this also implies the child's dependency, vulnerability, and need for care and parenting (Murriss, 2013, 2018). However, the child's needs for closeness and care tangles the threads of parental life and re-figures it. Specifically, it re-figures the parents' relationship with the workplace and re-arranges the entanglement of the home and its economy. The parents' ways of spending their days and nights and their intra-actions with other humans and places are also cut together-apart. Cusk (2010) describes becoming a parent as the death of the person one used to be before having a child through the abandonment of activities and relations that were previously considered to be important. All of this happens as a response to the children's needs. In this way, parents are response-able, as Haraway (2016) would put it, as they realise and respond to the child's agency in the intra-action.

Our knowledge about children's abuse and traumas in the world does not allow us to state that the parent-child intra-action is always of a benevolent vibrancy (Bennett, 2020). However, the power of sympathy allows another human to feel with the abused child and create new response-able entanglements of care.

With the goal of showing the potential of posthumanism for re-thinking parental involvement, I will not go deeper into the abuse of power that can occur with the adult-child. Instead, I take their intra-action to be mutually response-able, with agency on both sides. This agency can enact and diminish the diverse intra-actions in which both parts are involved.

At some point in the trajectory of life, as the child participates in ECEC, the parents have the opportunity to entangle with the ECEC setting, and parental involvement can indeed take place through different entanglements. For example, the entanglement of volunteering, with its benevolent vibe of the parents intra-acting with the ECEC space and children, constitutes an event for everyone. There is the entanglement of digital communication, whereby the ECEC staff send important information through a communication app, and the parent is turned toward opening the app and reading the message. The entanglement of home where other children and parents come, visit and intra-act. There is also the entanglement of voting over celebrating children's birthdays with or without cake/sugar at a parental board meeting, and the entanglement initiated by an artist parent, who, by bringing forward new equipment, transforms the setting into an atelier where a bunch of young artists intra-act with brushes, canvas, and colours. All of these forms of involvement will enable different entanglements in different localities of the world's body, and I hope that each of the readers of this chapter will be able to describe another familiar form of parental engagement through the conceptual toolkit introduced here.

The reason for which I decided to include posthumanism in this book was the fact that it can inspire new, vibrant entanglements of parents' engagements or meetings with the ECEC staff. Posthumanism can be thought of as a practice that the practitioners were too shy to try, as the ideas may have sounded too crazy. These may be practices that the teachers intuitively felt were right and worth trying, but they lacked the professional language to justify the idea. Posthumanism, with its

relational ontology, allows the parents to come to matter in the ECEC through new entanglements. Two such possibilities are described in the study presented below.

## Posthumanism as a Change-Empowering Toolkit: Empirical Notes

I will never forget how inspired I felt after being introduced to posthumanism at the ceremony for the grand opening of the Kindergarten Knowledge and Research Centre, where I currently work. On this occasion, Abigail Hackett was presenting her research on children in museums (Hackett, 2019). This lecture affected me very much. It diffracted me to another orbit of thinking about myself with the world, my mothering, my research and teaching practice, and my hobby of ice-swimming. It redefined my thinking of my entangled self and re-figured my teaching and research practice, which became slowly diffracted to a more posthuman realm.

The strong affect pressed me to share the inspirational conceptual toolkit with others, with the hope that it would empower me to enact new practices. The first time I shared this theoretical approach was during my lecture on Inspirational Day<sup>1</sup> (Sadownik, 2021). After this theoretical approach was briefly presented, the ECEC teachers from different kindergartens were assigned the task of coming up with several ideas for parental meetings that this toolkit made them think of. Around 30 participants worked in groups of six and together developed the following ideas for parental meetings. The groups underlined that this theoretical approach confirmed their intuitions that the parental meetings do not need to be of a very formal kind, and that they can take place more often. In the more-than-human groups entangled with thoughts, paper, and ink, the following ideas were written down:

- A choir. Parental choirs or meetings with parents and children where we just sing and allow the sound waves to connect us.
- Allowing parents to experience the same entanglement in which their children are involved on a daily basis. Parents can sit by the activity tables and play with some toys, games, and natural materials, as the children do. The parents can also intra-act with the materials differently and make/create some toys and musical instruments together for the children.
- Food making, or a meal could be held at a bonfire.
- Making music or art together; creating LANDart or a puzzle of ourselves.
- Transforming the room with materials, like pillows and blankets, which would give the parents the sensation of cosiness and comfort, and not one of a formal meeting.

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<sup>1</sup>Inspirational Day consists of a four-hour-long set of diverse invited lectures that the migration pedagogues from the Agency for Kindergarten in Bergen City organize for kindergartens. This is considered a platform through which diversity-related knowledge could be found to be inspiring and useful.

- Arranging activities for children so that many more families can come.
- Less serious content of the meeting; let’s talk, let’s sing, and let’s be together and see what happens.
- Many little tables, with tea and cookies, and a little tea party for the parents with informal talks.
- Coming together to clean, reorganise the space, and fix some toys inside and on the outdoor playground.

The ideas about the choir, music making, singing, and “allowing the sound waves to connect us” match to a great degree with existing posthuman research on sound as an affect (Gallagher, 2016), and literacy as emerging from vibrational entanglements of sound-making and “listening geographies” (Gallagher et al., 2017, p. 618). The teachers clearly understood the agency of all kinds of materiality and suggested exploring the potential of sound in parental meetings. However, acknowledgement of the agential role of diverse material bodies was present in all the unfolded ideas (which I had a strong desire to follow up on with further research).

### *Co-creating an Entanglement for a Parental Meeting*

Shortly after the Inspiration Day, I was contacted by one of the oldest kindergartens in Bergen, where the staff were currently working on intertwining the kindergarten’s history and past into the daily pedagogy. As they experienced that they were succeeding in entangling the children with the past, they wanted to focus on how this could be made possible with parents:

*With the children, it’s easy. We go to the basement. It’s full of old toys. We close the door; we lock it, and one of says, and now we are locked in the past... and it starts, the children go around, touch the old toys... they play as 200 years ago. We are wondering how it can be useful for our meetings with parents. (Headmaster)*

In response to this request, I conducted a 2-h workshop for five educational leaders working in the kindergarten. The workshop took place in May 2022 and comprised a short presentation of the core concepts of new materialism and the staff’s brainstorming on forms for parental meetings that this toolkit inspired them to try out.

The new materialistic concepts introduced at the start of the workshop were as follows:

1. *Intra-action*: A new perspective on interaction, underlying the fact that the intra-acting bodies constitute each other when intra-acting. According to Barad (2010), “in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’ the notion of intra-action recognises that distinct entities, agencies, events do not precede, but rather emerge from and through their intra-action” (Barad, 2010, p. 267).
2. *Entanglement*: A dynamic set of constitutive intra-actions and the agencies they carry. The dynamics of an entanglement lie in the cutting together/apart and the enabling and erasing of diverse (in)separabilities.

3. *Diffraction*: A physical phenomenon that occurs when water, light, or sound waves meet an obstacle, such as when stones dropped into the water provoke a spread of waterings/ripples, bending waves that interfere with and overlap each other (Barad, 2007). The spreading or waving to “somewhere else” emerges out of the agencies of the intra-acting bodies.
4. *Nonlinear time*: Barad presents time as a form of matter, where “past, present and future, [are] not in relation of linear unfolding, but threaded through one another in a nonlinear enfolding of spacetime-mattering” (Barad, 2010, p. 244). A diffraction to another spacetime-mattering is possible and can be enabled by the agency of any of the intra-acting elements.

During the brainstorming part of the workshop, the educational leaders came up with diverse ideas of how to expose the parents to the materials documenting the kindergarten’s history. Presentations, documents, and exhibitions were mentioned, but the group ultimately decided to lock the parents in the playful entanglement of the basement, expose them to the agency of the old toys, and meet the parents as if they were children in this kindergarten.

I did not participate in the meeting, so that the entanglement co-created by the kindergarten staff and the parents would not be disturbed. What I learned from the staff was that a letter was sent to the parents in advance, saying that the staff would like to show the kindergarten to them in an unconventional way. On the day of the meeting, some of the staff were wearing costumes from the eighteenth century and met the parents at the entrance. Such a welcoming facilitated parental diffraction to the past. The parents were guided to a playroom in the basement and said that they would allow all the toys to inspire them. They spent one hour in the basement and were then able to move outside the space to share their experiences. While some parents continued to play on the kindergarten’s playground, some shared their experiences. The stories being shared, in an oral form or through notes, captured the experience of diffraction to the past.

The diffraction to the past in Norway was a distinctive experience for migrant parents, who did not have their own past in this country/region. Travelling to the past of a country of their children’s future turned out to show the parents a new way of anchoring:

*I got my roots.*

*I got my past.*

*I’m so new here, but I already have my 100 years of history.* (Father 1)

Being in the playful entanglement with other parents seemed to make the parents more aware of the connection that they, as parents of children attending this kindergarten, shared:

*I actually never thought of our parents as a community who can do something together. It inspired me.* (Mother 1)

Felling a connection was also important for parents who did not feel competent or resourceful enough to contribute during meetings where professional or administrative issues were discussed. In the playful basement, they saw their competences as relevant:



*I never know what to say at a parental meeting when parking space, meals, and the economy are discussed. So I was just sitting there... but today, I feel that I've done something.* (Father 2)

Seeing the staff playing with the parents and meeting the teachers of their own children as playmates gave some parents the impression that the staff really understood their children, and that the child is taken good care of there:

*I saw that the staff really can play like children. Now, I don't worry so much if my child is understood for who she is. They really understand a child here.* (Mother 2)

One particularly moving impression of connectedness was shared as a note:

*Me always alone here.  
Always alone.  
But not today.  
Today, I belonged.* (Anonymous)

The staff experiences, in contrast, were more related to the theoretical toolkit of posthumanism and the effect it had on them and their professional practice:

*I've felt for so long that exposing the parents to our old artefacts is a good thing, but without professional knowledge confirming it, I would never ever dare to do it.* (Educational Leader 1)

*I'm so happy that such theories have grown in the field. For a long time, we took the materiality for granted and were focused on the human-human dimension. This also gave me some ideas for how to strengthen relations in the children's groups through the agency of some materials...* (Educational Leader 2)

*My intuition was confirmed by a theory, and I feel so much more empowered to try out more of my intuitions in my work with children.* (Educational Leader 3)

I understand these quotes as holograms of the inspirational potential of agential realism, which, by troubling and extending the established orbits of reflection, empowers the ECEC professionals to follow own professional intuitions and challenge and improve the institutional practice of parental meetings and collaboration with families. This example shows the potential for change and innovation when conceptualising diverse ECEC practices as intra-active, vibrant entanglements. The fact that agential realism inspires and empowers ideas that have no chance to be taken seriously within the humanistic common-sense of the ECEC sector, is of a great importance.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, posthuman theories were presented as potentially inspiring and empowering ways of re-thinking parental collaboration in ECEC settings as an intra-active entanglement of more-than-humans. By acknowledging the belonging of all earthlings to the same matter, this approach organically recognises families as

a constitutive part(*icle*) of more-than-parental involvement. The more-than-parental can in this case relate to both other generations or family members, as well as to more-than-human. Thinking of more-than-parental involvement as an entanglement, whose elements constitute each other and are mutually responsible for each other's existence, brings courage, inspiration, innovation, and hope to the practice of parental involvement. Empowering practitioners to try out practices that “sound crazy” and are difficult to justify through humanistic theoretical toolkits is particularly interesting, as it shows how thinking-with-posthumanism enables innovative practices. Again, such practices are often unimaginable and impossible to conceptualise within a theoretical space that reduces parental involvement to a human-human phenomenon.

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