

## The “Unruly” Snowflake: (Re)imagining School Readiness for Two-Year-Old Children

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### Abstract

Engaging with Posthuman theories this article puts to work concepts of affect, bodies, and voice to reimagine an ordinary classroom event of making cards for families and carers. The event is explored in relation to the dominant developmental discourse that underpins assessing school readiness in England. With a focus on the rollout of the two-year-old offer of free funding, this article will outline how Human Capital Theory and neoliberal logic can reveal how specific ways of demonstrating learning are privileged in practice. To challenge the dominant discourse, and the binary of ready/not ready, this article makes a call for an intra-active posthuman pedagogy, so that time in space can be slowed down to follow the agentic rustles of material voices and bodies to (re)imagine school readiness.

**Keywords:** School readiness; voice(s); more-than-human matter; entanglements

### Introduction

The concept of “school readiness” has become a focus for English Early Childhood and Care (ECEC). Although this term has multiple definitions, its key elements include a child’s social, emotional, and intellectual readiness that will provide them with “the right foundation for good future progress through school and life” (Department for Education (DfE), 2022, p. 4). The desire and need for a “school ready” child has promoted national policy development which has included a change in curriculum, and the rollout of “free” ECEC of up to 15 hours per week during school term times (DfE, 2015). These places equate to 550 hours spread annually for two-year-old children, partially covered by Government funding. To date, research on school readiness has centred around: determining definitions; identifying policy impact and shaping ECEC practice. In addition, research has highlighted: how documentation of records shapes perspectives of child development; quantifying parental understanding of the term; and interpreting the experiences of children aged four and over as they transition to formal schooling. Much of this research reflects a linear notion of child development, where readiness is seen as a precursor for school outcomes and life chances. This article draws from my doctoral study on the rollout of the free funding policy targeting two-year-old children. I employed observations with eight two-year-old children in two nursery settings in the North East of England piloting the funding. In addition, I interviewed a range of ECEC educators and parents to explore their views on the policy and resultant practice. The outcomes of my research became a “material turn” (Reddington & Price, 2018, p. 2) where posthumanist theory allowed me to think differently about school readiness.

The article is organised into four key sections. The first details how ECEC in England has been subjected to intense political scrutiny because of the dominance of developmental and readiness discourses, and how the concept of “school readiness” has impacted on formalising practice. This will be linked to neoliberalism and the ideal citizen rhetoric, influenced by global supranational organisations that support a knowledge economy that builds on Human Capital Theory (HCT), (Moss, 2019). Next, I explore a classroom event that describes the enmeshment of humans and more-than-human matter to reveal a reconceptualisation of school readiness. Following on I work to (re)read school readiness with posthumanist theories which include notions of plugging-into “voices”, affect, and intra-actions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). The concluding section is a re/con/ceptualising<sup>1</sup> of school readiness that illuminates my political and ethical (re)reading of the event from a posthuman perspective. The article calls for social activism to move beyond, and push back against, neoliberal forces that enact binaries in ECEC.

### **School Readiness and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**

In England, ECEC has received unprecedented political focus since the 1990s. The impact has been a fundamental drive to provide a developmental curriculum and increased support for families with young children. This has resulted in considerable changes to early years funding, altering how ECEC was shaped, provided, and thereafter monitored by the UK Government education regulator, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (Neaum, 2016). Politically, the agenda is to ensure children arrived at school<sup>2</sup> ready to learn. This has led to a dominant discourse of readiness in the curriculum and ECEC practice. These discourses were influenced by international research-informed policies, in particular the Head Start programme in the United States of America, evidencing positive long-term outcomes for children because of early interventions supporting child development (Ang, 2014). This encouraged the English government to strengthen the focus on preschool education, leading to the rollout of 15 hours of subsidised early education per week for three and four-year-old children. In some cases, this was increased to thirty subsidised hours for working families meeting specific financial thresholds (DfE, 2022). Subsidised education was later extended to two-year-old children who were deemed disadvantaged (Gibb et al., 2010). The rhetoric’s of education and readiness in policy morphed into the concept of school readiness that has dominated ECEC as “a political push to ensure children’s readiness to enter formal education” (Cronin, Mulhaney & Pearson, 2017, p. 88). A parliamentary report in 2019 highlighted how the early learning goals (ELGs)<sup>3</sup>, which are learning objectives embedded in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, measure a child’s school readiness (House of Commons, 2019). Political focus on establishing “the right foundation

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<sup>1</sup> To note: the use of bracketing and slashes in the article are deliberate, I use them to encourage receptivity to new ideas, new ways of thinking and inspire readers to speculate on the infinitesimal ways of reading the world. As Sellers (2015) says they “disrupt [the] linearity of thought~thinking towards opening (to) rhizomethodological possibilities for thinking differently and thinking other/wise/ways” (p. 7).

<sup>2</sup> In England the formal start of schooling begins at the age of five, or the term after the child’s fifth birthday. However, most children start school at four, turning five during their first academic year. This contrasts with other countries such as Germany or Spain where children start school at age 6, and age 7 in other countries, including Sweden and Finland.

<sup>3</sup> You can read more about the Early Learning Goals in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile 2022 Handbook. Available at the Department for Education. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1024319/Early\\_years\\_foundation\\_stage\\_profile\\_handbook\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1024319/Early_years_foundation_stage_profile_handbook_2022.pdf)

for good future progress through school and life” (DfE, 2022, p. 4), moved the concept of school readiness from implicit to an explicit focus and outcome of ECEC pedagogy.

### **Development of School Readiness Discourses and Research**

Moss argues the dominant readiness discourse has been encouraged by international comparisons and reports, based on standardised assessments, predicated on the notion of investment return and HCT (Moss, 2019). Davies and Bansel (2007) posit that investing in children’s education to drive economic rewards for the state is a “reconfiguration of subjects as economic entrepreneurs” (n.p.), underscored by neoliberalism. However, pinpointing the emergence of neoliberalism and the relevance this has for ECEC, is nebulous. Conceptually, neoliberalism has emerged within various fields in different guises and at various times (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Neoliberalism focuses on driving up standards and accountability, where quality is driven by top-down measures, monitored, and controlled through compliance infrastructures (Sims, 2017). These central tenants of standards, accountability, and compliance are reflected in England’s ECEC curriculum guidance that drives educational outcomes, with compliance assessments performed by Ofsted, which now includes the explicit measuring of school readiness (DfE, 2021). This frames the school readiness agenda with linearity, privileging outcome over process approaches to get children from point A to B in their learning (Nielsen et al., 2006). The result of these policies has seen a shift towards a more formal and *schoolified* ECEC entrenching the child within an ‘ideal citizen in the making’ rhetoric. It does this by driving standardisation in teaching, planning, provision, and assessment against curriculum learning objectives (Clausen, 2015; Pykett, Saward & Schaefer, 2010). The need for data generated from these assessments is one element of schoolification, impacting ECEC practice by pursuing formal teaching strategies such as grouping children by ability, formalising maths, and more focus on literacy (Bradbury, 2019). Moss (2012) explains this cultural change can be evidenced throughout Europe by the intensifying of relationships between preschools and compulsory settings. It has been suggested that settings adapt their practice to conform with schoolification of early education by engineering play activities towards meeting formal learning outcomes (Teager & McBride, 2018). Here the unintentional educator-adult-centred focus overshadows following children’s interests as natural learning opportunities.

Research on school readiness has cemented dominant discourse of an outcome-over-process approach by linking learning with a HCT framing of investment and return. A snapshot of recent global research on school readiness also illustrates how certain types of quantitative or qualitative methodologies are favoured. For example, research on how four-year-old children in England felt post-transition to formal schooling using child-friendly evaluations and thematic analysis (Brown, 2019) reflects a dominant way of doing research. In Tanzania, research focused on parental perspectives on educational aspirations for their children (Jose et al., 2020). Smith and Glass (2019) explored educator perceptions of ethnic/minority children’s mathematic readiness to close attainment gaps using a qualitative ethnographic approach with predefined areas of interest to observe. Even when a less traditional methodology was employed, developmental outcomes and attainment remained as a core focus. For example, Burgess and Ernst (2020) argued their “nature preschool movement [is] grounded in a desire to foster a connection to the natural world while also supporting important developmental processes and school readiness” (p. 18), yet research designs used pre- and post-testing methods to consider

learning and developmental growth between nature and formal education settings. Maintaining a binary between these different pedagogical positions.

### Reclaiming Research and Curriculum Practices

According to Moss (2019) current approaches to education, reflected in the research described above, should move beyond “investment and returns” (n.p.). Current research can mirror entrenched readiness discourses to seek out what works best that “sets up a binary opposition between process and outcome... inscribed with certain values and assumptions... linear progress, objectivity, and universality [and] the child as a knowledge reproducer” (Moss, 2007, p. 230). He argued for research to be reclaimed as a democratic process, moving beyond any reification of neoliberalism. Campbell-Barr and Nygård (2014) highlight the preoccupation with HCT in current research is linked to supranational organisations, such as the OECD, as they prioritize human capital. The impact of this reframes and positions the “child as neoliberal human capital” (Moss, 2019, n.p.), and provides an “ideal” universal image of the child that benefits political ECEC outcomes. All of these fail to account for new and alternative perspectives of school readiness, reflected in Needham and Ülküer (2020) who call for a recentring of education as a site for social justice.

Spyrou (2018) argues much of the current approach to ECEC curriculum delivery and assessment is not congruent with the image of the child as active, autonomous, powerful, and capable of having a voice in matters that involve them. Consequently, there have been calls for a slowness in ECEC research to mediate attention away from a singular construct of the child to account for other marginalised “voices” that can “produce something new: a constant, continuous process of making and unmaking” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 747). One example urges educators to challenge mundane politics in everyday ECEC practice by seeking out sites of activism to amplifying multiple voices (Albin-Clark & Archer, 2021), a stark contrast to the current deficit approach emerging from the previously cited literature. Mundane political acts aim to highlight children’s competency, positioning them as active participants and citizens in everyday practices in education (Millei & Kallio, 2018). These moves require hope and the enactment of slow pedagogy, such as the Froebel-inspired project led by Alison Clark. Clark has drawn on the Froebelian principles of relationships and connectivity to argue for slowness in practice whereby “slow... indicates the importance of an unhurried approach in pedagogy” (Carlsen & Clark, 2022, p. 208). Other acts of mundane politics include *Socks, power cords and things all over the place – making the momentariness of babies’ everyday materialities matter*<sup>4</sup> (Makii, 2021). Both are considered as activism associated with reimagining social justice in ECEC. In the remainder of this article, I move beyond the current dominant discourses by engaging with posthumanist theory to explore the role and importance of more-than-human matter and school readiness. In this regard, I (re)imagine what school readiness could look like in practice.

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<sup>4</sup> You can find out more about this project by watching the recorded Webinar Series via the url [https://mmutube.mmu.ac.uk/media/t/1\\_lihljz7r](https://mmutube.mmu.ac.uk/media/t/1_lihljz7r)

### Turning to Notice

When researching school readiness, I tried to make sense of what I was seeing, feeling, hearing, and interacting with by thinking-with art, short animations, and children's books. This type of research-creation (Manning & Massumi, 2014) calls for an "ethical commitment to learn[ing] to become affected...by the relational movement of bodies, and a political...claim that we can never determine in advance the kinds of relational matrices of which bodies are capable of becoming involved" (McCormack, 2008, n.p.). Here, bodies are not only human but can be anything, such as stick(s), paper, doilies, glitter, or glue (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Part of my turning to notice relationality and connectivity to more-than-human matter in classrooms happened when children ran their fingers through the fibre bodies of carpets during story times; how children were drawn to specific places as if called by them; when children wore certain role-play outfits at specific times; and how sounds moved physical bodies. Previously I had considered these as mundane, everyday moments and dismissed them as "data". Yet, they continued to stay with me, slowing down my thinking and affording me time and space to notice the children's connectedness with/in/through the materiality of the things they engaged with. By slowing down I recognised that more-than-human objects are not inanimate in any interactions, they do not sit in the backdrop (Albin-Clark, 2022), they are alive with dynamism, vitality, and agency (Barad, 2007).

MacLure (2013) refers to this kind of noticing as glow data, the mundane moments, gestures, or fragments of fieldwork that start to "glimmer, gathering our attention" (p. 282). The glow can be long-lasting and inspire wonder, encouraging us to linger and dwell~with these moments. For me, wonder moments are ongoing and ever-changing, full of speed and slowness, they imminently pique my attention and then linger. I dwell. The dwelling slows down events and my thinking speeds up, and vice versa. The classroom moments have metamorphosised into meaningful events that I have dwelled with/in/through them over time. I have made connections between theory and practice, leading me to consider new forms of knowing. Yet, this is not to say my dwellings are comfortable or secure, they have been moments of uncertainty, creating chaos in my thinking to challenging the status quo. As Ingold (2005) explains to dwell is a way to remind oneself that "the production of life involves the unfolding of a field of relations that crosscuts the boundary between human and non-human" (p. 504). Thus, I conceptualise my dwelling(s) as *spacetimematterings* comprised of small (seemingly) meaningless elements that co-produce larger more meaningful ones about school readiness. It is a way of thinking differently through both material and discursive practices of knowing, and theorising to (re)configure the world (Barad, 2007). To highlight these movements hereon I will use the tilde ~ between words. Sellers (2013) used the tilde "when terms, ideas, concepts are co-implicated, that is, each (e)merging from/with/in the others" (p. 7). I build on this by encapsulating bidirectional and fluid movements, putting them to work as silent disruptors to emphasise thinking with theory, data, and then theory again. Therefore, classroom events become story~events, (re)telling how school readiness was un/en/folded by sticks, paper, doilies, glitter, glue, human hands, and spoken words.

### Story~Event: The “(Un)ruly” Snowflake

Let me now introduce you to a colourful, chaos~dancing, (un)ruly snowflake that made me dwell, creating mess in my thinking and knowing. The snowflake came to life in a dance between humans and more-than-humans, it’s colours emerged between bodies revealing that “humans are no longer—and perhaps never were—‘masters and possessors of nature,’ deploying the tools of science solely for their advantage and progress...a new story waiting to be told” (Zallouh, 2021, p. 21). Click on the link under the image below (**Figure 1**) and you will be redirected to a recorded story involving a girl named Poppy and an unruly snowflake that led to my conceptualisation of the snowflake’s playground. A messy space, filled with uncertainty, an ecological unfolding of ways to think differently about school readiness.



**Figure 1**

**“From Shallow Focus” [Photograph]. A Photo by D. McCoig (2018).**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgBZ\\_xVk6I4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgBZ_xVk6I4)

### Intra-acting Bodies

This story~event of bodies in colourful chaos~dancing and making~with the unruly snowflake has stayed with me since the day I found out Poppy liked yellow, and my intra-actions with the unruly snowflake. Intra-action is a neologism coined by Barad (2007) a reworking of interaction, defined as “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (p. 33). As we collectively intra-acted with activism, policy, assessment, human and more-than-human matter in the middle of the snowflake playground, a lively entangled ontology was revealed. Here the bodies existed relationally to the chaos~dancing event which included time, space, matter, social factors, humans, and much more. This performativity is conceptualised as agential realism (Barad, 2007) and has been integral to my (re)thinking by drawing attention to established binaries of school ready/not ready and assumptions around HCT in ECEC. Fox and Alldred (2018) highlight the importance that “personal memory can play in producing the present and hence the future” (p.

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20). My memories here are not of individualistic concern, the affectivity of remembering the story~event will support me as I (re)imagine the future of school readiness later on.

### **Affecting Bodies**

Dernikos et al. (2020) argues “affect emerges with/in encounters” (p. 16), and the snowflake playground was alive with affective moments, a continuum of polyphonic “voices” that move with/in/through emotions, feelings, and states of knowing. These affective moments can unconsciously become the impetus for making new connections and for new thoughts to emerge because of material and social configurations, cited as “affective action and affective-discursive meaning-making” (Weatherall, 2012, p. 102). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) propose that affect is the capacity for bodies to change when they are relational to other bodies. Affects are precognitive, personal intensities that can impede and/or strengthen the body’s capacity to act, an ever-changing event that can continue to “affect and be affected” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xvii). Therefore, any relational encounter can shape personal and emotional experiences because of the affect it has on someone or something, and vice versa. That said, affect can be difficult to understand, and define. Strom and Mills (2020) provide a useful way of understanding affect, “[It] is not what it [affect] is, but what it does—which we can analyse and describe” (p. 190).

Mazzei and Jackson (2012) argue we have become historically conditioned to do research in the same way repeatedly, unconsciously, or consciously, “seek[ing] out data and meaning through text or ... [human] spoken words” (Ovington, 2020, p. 31). So, to move beyond this, I was inspired to (re)consider the affect of “voices” in the snowflake playground. These voice(s) were three-dimensional, unpredictable, emergent, and “entangled with other things” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2016, p. 2). Mazzei (2013) describes this as a “voice[s] without organs” (p. 732), an unbounded, complex ever-changing mix of human and more-than-human forces. Consequently, I “listened” to the emergent voice(s) of school readiness, and the resultant affect created a crack in my thinking. An impetus for thinking differently. The impact of this allowed me to trouble the notion of school readiness by working~with affective voices that emanated from the snowflake playground.

### **The “(Un)ruly” Snowflake and School Readiness**

The (un)ruly snowflake was an embodied event, transgressing interpretivism and representations, destabilising the dominant developmental discourse of school readiness at play in ECEC. The stick(s), paper, doilies, glitter, glue, desk, and chair were alive with thing power (Bennett, 2010). The materiality in the snowflake playground supported Poppy to emerge with agency with/in/through matter to (re)conceptualise the “school ready” snowflake to be a more fluid and vibrant force – (un)ruly. Poppy and the snowflake subverted the requirement to conform and replicate a task. The circulating agencies, as a mutual becoming of unruliness, directly resisted that their playful learning~together that might have been reduced to a tick box exercise. Together the human (Poppy) and the more-than-human (snowflake) destabilised the school readiness discourse by challenging the linear assessment favoured by the ELGs. Their movement became an embodied site of activism that revealed there are no binaries, boundaries, or borders to readiness. Everything, human and more-than-human, is always in a state of readiness. Ready to think, ready to challenge, ready to make sense of the world, ready to try, ready to wait, slow down, and much more.



The entrenched linearity of assessing children by observation provides a secure method of knowing school readiness according to political agenda. This, then influences how a school ready child is identified by practitioners, such as producing a representation of a snowflake. The snowflake revealed that the affect of HCT steers educators to a fixed understanding of what school readiness is and should be. Dismissive of the (un)ruly snowflake thing-power one of the educators said, “well I guess they can do what they want – it’s their snowflake” (Ovington, 2020, p. 264). Their comment overlooks the importance of material-discursive playful practices and shifts attention away from “Human and non-human bodies...thought upon as forces that overlap and relate to each other” (Hultman and Lenz-Taguchi, 2010, p. 529). The unruliness towards the preconceived task was conflated with unreadiness. Labelling children as ready-obedient/not ready-defiant reinforces the binaries to satisfy the school ready child. An extension of the ideal citizen rhetoric, positioning children as individuals who are incapable of knowing what it means to be good or how to act in education (Pykett, Saward & Schaefer, 2010), ergo conforming to the developmental readiness discourse. The unruly snowflake disrupted the performative gaze using collective and entangled voices to provide an opportunity to notice creativity, and the political resistance the intra-acting bodies made in response to the dominant discourse. The snowflake was always in a state of readiness and provides me with the space to think-otherwise, and account for the emergence of agency when bodies collide in disruptive, political, and resistant events.

However, the affects of school readiness start before educators observe and assess learning activities. For example, during an interview the educator said, “schools [formal schoolteachers and institutions] want children to go into reception class without crying, being able to understand phonics and write their name and do what the school wants them to do”, and that educational spaces for two-year-old children have become “preparational stage” (Ovington, 2020, p. 246). The affect from this rippled into the snowflake playground, and the everyday, normalised routines in ECEC that enforce political ideologies by affecting pedagogy. Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call this a “magic capture” (p. 471) where the pull of the status quo leads to fix and stabilise normative ideas of child development that frame “not only who the child ‘is’ but who the child ‘might become’” (Jones & Duncan, 2013, p. 204). The views of school readiness can reveal an educator’s dogmatic image of “a school ready child”, who can conform and comply, meeting linear assessments at any given time. Leading to missed opportunities to (re)imagine classroom events as inventive turning points (Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

Noticing inventive turning points shifts pedagogical practice to work in the middle, between the child and matter to “allow the children to code, de-code or re-code, what they do, that is, how we give and read meaning, and then re-construct such meaning-making in the intra-active processes taking place” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 38). Instead, the dominance of school readiness can speed up the educator’s pedagogy toward meeting an outcome, towards a judgment of readiness, which rubs against the material-discursive practices working to slow pedagogy down. Intra-active pedagogy is an ontological leveller that can collapse hierarchies of knowledge-making to move beyond binaries to a more relational view of pedagogy. (Re)imagining ECEC pedagogy as an intra-active pedagogy creates a shift in practice to account for slowness with/in/through material-discursive happenings. Pedagogically, this would position the teacher~student in an embodied relationship where knowledge emerges with/in/through circular event(s) that accept subjectivity-construction. These embodied relationships highlight how learning is emotional and affective, drawing on inter and trans-subject practices as tools for



making meaning. Pedagogy becomes a way to follow the scent of more-than-human matter and be receptive to fluidity in teaching practices (Bennett, 2010), rather than fixing pedagogical practice. This could produce a way of synthesising the voices of “affect and be[ing] affected” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. xvii) of school readiness. An intra-active pedagogy could support educators to turn to notice the affects of intra-actions with/in/through events. A shift towards more fluid understandings of how school readiness is a transversal continuum, without codifying behaviour and expectations as part of the school ready child. As Lenz Taguchi (2010) argues “It is the material-discursive forces and intensities that emerge in the intra-actions in-between the child and the materials in the room that together constitute the learning that can take place” (p. 36). Thinking school readiness~otherwise would decentre the human and account for the material-discursive forces and intensities, allowing educators to follow the creativity and curiosities in entangled thing-matter-energy-child assemblages.

### **Re/con/ceptualising School Readiness**

In its current guise, school readiness is a confidence trick! Children already have the capacity and ability to express themselves, they are agentic. Their voice(s) exude with/in/through more-than-human matter, and the snowflake playground revealed the fluidity of school readiness as something that cannot be bound. The concept is porous. Collectively the child and more-than-human matter troubled ways of doing and knowing school readiness. This acts as a disruption to the investment and returns rhetoric, and the expectation of the child having to act accordingly to rules set by adults. We just need to be receptive and change our ways of listening. The entanglements in this article did link to an ELG focused on self-management, perseverance, and resilience however, the (un)ruly snowflake became an act of defiance even if this was not noticed as such by the educators. The thing-matter-energy- child-assemblage challenged anthropocentric ways of learning by decentring the teacher and school readiness. This calls for educators to develop a lively and performative curriculum that can go with the flows and desires in the classroom.

School readiness should, as an ethical imperative, be (re)defined beyond neoliberal rhetorics. It should focus on and notice the curiosities and wonders performative human and more-than-human agents call us to, by being open to hearing the “agentic rustle” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 35). Pedagogy should be reorientated so that educators can respond to their shared sense of social justice in their classroom spaces, and not just be accountable for the linear curriculum they are affected by, and must adhere to (Latto, et al., *Forthcoming*). By hearing the agentic rustle, educators can listen and respond to more-than-human voices they are unwillingly, and sometimes unknowingly, affected to overlook. Therefore, school readiness should be assessed and understood as a posthuman intra-active pedagogy that is put to work intermezzo (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Posthumanism can be a natural transition from humanism for us all, a movement that can start with keeping sight of the human when we account for affect in practice. A pedagogy that “embraces ‘the world with us’ that can – by decentring but not abandoning the human entirely – sensitize our attention towards the entanglement of us, our ideas, and the material world in which we are enmeshed” (Bennett 2016, p. 70).

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