



# A new materialist (re)configuring of sexuality, age and the discourse of 'childhood innocence'

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## Abstract

This article explores the potential of feminist new materialisms for rethinking enduring debates that cohere around children, sexuality, age and 'childhood innocence'. A new materialist ontology of sexuality and Karen Barad's concept of spacetime-mattering are employed to conceptualise sexuality as an emergent becoming of relational material-discursive forces. Within this paradigm, mobilisation of arguments about 'sexual innocence and readiness' become a matter of entanglement of contingent 'things', 'spaces' and 'ideas', that includes young people's own sexual knowledge. We consider how this reorientation shifts the contours, debates and possibilities of sexuality education beyond restrictive 'age-appropriate' narratives.

## KEYWORDS

child, new materialism, sex, sexuality education, spacetime-mattering

## INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to offer a theoretical contribution to the body of literature that critically examines the discourse of 'childhood innocence'. We are particularly interested in how this discourse regulates sexuality education content via notions of 'age appropriateness'. For example, the idea that students should not be exposed to certain sexual topics until they have reached a particular age-related level of maturity. The discourse of 'childhood innocence' is inextricable

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from western conceptualisations of the child and idealises childhood as a time of innocence and purity, where sexuality is considered irrelevant and potentially harmful to children's lives (Egan & Hawkes, 2008, 2009; Kehily & Montgomery, 2008; Robinson, 2008, 2013). Within this discourse children are positioned as asexual, 'too young' or 'too immature' to understand and navigate sexuality-related knowledge. As contained within this discourse, 'innocence' is an inherent and 'natural' aspect of being a child that subsequently serves to regulate the 'normal' character of a 'healthy', 'growing' child. Drawing on a feminist new materialist ontology that employs Barad's (2007) concept of spacetime mattering—a dynamic and indistinguishable entanglement of space, time and matter—we attempt to theoretically reconfigure ideas about 'age' and 'sexuality' which underpin this discourse. This work is undertaken in the hope of destabilising the hold these ideas have over what content is deemed 'appropriate' in sexuality programmes.

The notion of childhood innocence is understood as a social and moral concept created by adults for adults, who define what a child should know and how they should behave (Robinson, 2008; Robinson & Davies, 2008). What it means to be a child is constituted in opposition to adulthood, producing an adult/child binary and contingent hierarchical power relationship. When children are considered devoid of sexuality and innocent, sexuality becomes 'the exclusive realm of adults' (Robinson, 2008, 116). This dichotomous positioning establishes a powerful boundary which perpetuates 'the belief that differences between adults and children are logical, biological and natural' (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2017, 218). Within this dyad, innocence and sexuality become mutually exclusive qualities; one belonging to the world of the child and the other the preserve of adults (Gittins, 1998; Robinson & Davies, 2008).

The discourse of childhood innocence is mobilised to regulate the behaviour of both children and adults. Children that demonstrate sexual knowledge or expression are considered 'inappropriate' or even 'deviant' and their behaviour is seen to warrant adult concern and intervention (Egan & Hawkes, 2009). Adults become gatekeepers of sexual knowledge and are responsible for protecting 'vulnerable' children from potential exposure and 'corruption'. Since the mid-nineteenth century, discourses of protection have become increasingly powerful and have served to reinforce the dualistic positioning of the 'innocent child' and 'knowing adult' (Egan & Hawkes, 2009). Discourses of innocence and protection also deny young people are surrounded in their daily lives by sexuality-related knowledge and meanings through media, families, friendships and popular culture (Robinson, 2008). In contrast, childhood and educational researchers have demonstrated children hold an array of sexual knowledge and actively constitute their sexual subjectivities (Allen & Ingram, 2015; Bhana, 2007; Blaise, 2005; Epstein et al., 2002; Renold, 2005; Renold et al., 2015), although these are not unaffected by dominant discourses of heteronormativity whereby gender is understood as a binary where opposites attract.

The negative implications of the discourse of childhood innocence have been well documented. Rather than achieving its professed aim of protection, this discourse endangers young people by restricting their access to sexual knowledge and denying their capacity for sexual agency (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Giroux, 2000; Gittins, 1998; Robinson, 2013). Filtering and restricting knowledge refuses children control over their own bodies and represses their expressions of sexuality (Kitzinger, 1990). Sexuality becomes a taboo subject (Robinson, 2013), and this silence contributes to sexual misinformation and diminishes children's capacity to talk to adults (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2017). The regulation of sexual knowledge is keenly evident in controversies surrounding children's access to comprehensive sexuality education (Irvine, 2002; Wanje et al., 2017). These debates often manifest as concern about developmentally 'age-appropriate' content and are underpinned by dualisms that constrain children's sexualities, such as appropriate/inappropriate, innocence/knowledge and ready/not ready (Gibson, 2007).

Education is understood as a key institution that (re)produces the discourse of childhood innocence (Renold, 2005). This function is partly attributable to high levels of surveillance that educational settings are subject to from parents, the wider community and media (Robinson, 2008). Ongoing debates and moral panics concerning students' exposure to sexual knowledge that is 'age-appropriate' continue to hinder the potential and scope of sexuality education (Albury & Lumby, 2010). In Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, sexuality education is a compulsory part of the curriculum from year 1 (5 years old) and there is scope for coverage of a diverse range of topics including friendships and relationships, gender stereotypes, gender and sexual diversity (Ministry of Education Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga, 2020a, 2020b). Despite this potential, anatomy, physiology and pubertal change continue to be the most prevalent topics taught in Primary and Intermediate Schools (Education Review Office, 2018), which suggests age and the onset of puberty are enduring biological markers that govern children's access to sexual knowledge. This narrow biological focus is a familiar theme internationally (Pound et al., 2016). In the UK, young people's perspectives of sexuality education paint a picture of 'too little, too late, too biological' (Renold & McGeeney, 2017, 20), at the expense of topics such as relationships, and gender and sexual diversity. Several studies highlight how adult-centric notions of 'age appropriateness' and childhood innocence play a powerful role in the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ content from primary school curricula and teacher education programmes more broadly (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Neary, 2023; Neary & Rasmussen, 2020; Payne & Smith, 2014).

When children's sexuality is constituted as 'non-existent', 'immature' or 'hypersexualised', 'sexual agency is unthinkable and ultimately unattainable' (Egan & Hawkes, 2009, 389). The denial of sexual agency hinders young people's ability to negotiate varied and contradictory discourses encountered in daily life. Egan and Hawkes (2008, 360) argue this limited capacity for sexual agency obscures and silences 'children's cultural, historical and subjective variability', producing an abstract view of the child—'a categorical object instead of subjective being'. This version of childhood has been critiqued for privileging white, western and middle-class images and values (Robinson, 2008, 2013). Childhood innocence has also become profoundly gendered and increasingly mobilised in 'moral panics' surrounding girls' sexualities (Egan, 2013; Renold et al., 2015). Within sexualisation debates, societal anxieties largely cohere around the premature or hyper-sexualisation of the girl child, which further contributes to the denial of girls' sexual desire, expression and agency (Gill, 2003).

When innocence is considered a 'natural' part of being a child, the loss of innocence poses a threat to a 'normal' and healthy childhood. The construction of a normative childhood works to pathologise children who do not conform to this perceived norm (Egan & Hawkes, 2009, 2012). A romanticisation of childhood innocence stigmatises the 'knowing' child and excludes children who do not embody this ideal (Kitzinger, 1990). Children who transgress dominant constructions of childhood can be perceived as a threat to others and the broader social order and subsequently, these children 'may find themselves outside the classification and protection of "childhood" itself' (Egan & Hawkes, 2008, 357). There is a 'paradoxical logic' at work here 'that clings to the presumptive asexual child while simultaneously creating various techniques to control and manage its sexuality once initiated' (Egan & Hawkes, 2008, 356). These contradictions are palpable within schooling culture where students are positioned as 'ideally' non-sexual, diminishing young people's access to sexuality knowledge and sexual agency (Allen, 2007). Simultaneously however, young people's sexuality is constituted as 'dangerous' and 'in need of control', engendering an emphasis in sexuality education on managing sexual risk and sexual behaviours (Allen, 2005; Fine, 1988).

These contradictions and tensions raise important questions about the ontology of sexuality upon which discourses of childhood innocence are built. They prompt questions about the nature of young people's sexuality such as is it essentially innocent or dangerous? Along with, where does it reside (biology/social construction)? Drawing on social constructionism, Egan and Hawkes (2009, 391) suggest discourses of protection conceptualise childhood sexuality as 'the result of an outside or deviant stimulus ... the outcome of something done to children' rather than something that occurs within a larger constellation of children's engagement with the world. This framing of sexuality constitutes a child as a discrete entity, separate to, and in need of protection from, external influence and corruption. It is also premised on a clear subject/object (child/sexuality/discourse of childhood innocence) divide and draws on linear logic of cause and effect. In this article, we consider new materialisms' potential for disrupting and reorienting the ontological foundations and epistemological boundaries of the notion of childhood innocence. A new materialist ontology of sexuality (Allen, 2015) along with Barad's concept of spacetimemattering (2007) is mobilised to rethink key debates and binaries that cohere around childhood and sexuality. We consider how a dynamic reconfiguring of the individual human subject, sexuality, space and time opens up ways of conceptualising childhood sexualities and sexuality education, beyond restrictive narratives and 'age-appropriate' rhetoric.

## NEW MATERIALISMS AND SEXUALITY

Posthumanism has been instrumental in (re)configuring contemporary understandings of children and childhood (Diaz-Diaz & Semenec, 2020; Murriss, 2016; Taylor et al., 2012). Posthumanist scholarship, of which new materialism forms a specific strand, entails significant ontological and epistemological shifts in childhood research practices, in an attempt to avoid anthropocentric accounts of childhood and arguments based on developmentalism and western binary logic. Barad's (2003, 2007) new materialist agential realist framework has been particularly influential in offering more expansive ways of thinking about young people, gender and sexuality beyond a discursive and anthropocentric focus (Allen, 2013; Ingram, 2022; Janak & Bhana, 2023; Juelskjaer, 2013; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019; Osgood & Robinson, 2019; Renold & Ringrose, 2017). Barad urges us to think about humans and the material world as dynamic intra-active entanglements. The concept of intra-action is central to Barad's agential realist philosophy and denotes 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies' (2007, 33) whereby the material and discursive do not exist prior to each other but rather emerge through their mutual entanglement. This means, that human and non-human matter do not have distinct boundaries nor pre-exist each other, and instead come into being through mutual engagement in the same moment.

Barad's relational concept of intra-action provides the theoretical basis for a new materialist ontology of sexuality, where sexuality *becomes* via a more expansive array of entangled human and non-human forces than conventionally understood (Allen, 2015). Conceptualising sexuality as intra-actively emergent entails an ethico-onto-epistem-ological (Barad, 2007) shift around what plays a role in the becoming of sexuality. The term ethico-onto-epistemology refers to the entanglement of ethics, ontology and epistemology, which recognises the nature of being, knowing and ethical responsibility as inherently intertwined. Rather than viewing sexuality as exclusively biological or discursive, matter and meaning emerge contingently in the same moment. This intra-active becoming can entail all manner of material-discursive forces including bodies, spatial arrangements, objects, affects, sensations and temporalities. Within this theoretical framing, discourses are conceptualised as inseparable from materiality with the hyphen between them

(e.g. material-discursive) signalling neither are separate from, nor prior to, the other. Sexuality within a new materialist frame becomes *at least* material-discursive, that is, a dynamic enfolding of matter, ideas, affects and other forces unknown to humans. This offers a different ontological scene for imagining the nature and locus of sexuality (i.e. the human) as well as ideas of causality and the subject/object divide which underpin notions of the 'innocent' and 'asexual' child at risk from the external influence of sexuality-related knowledge.

A new materialist ontology disrupts the idea of sexuality as something located in, emanating from, or belonging to, an individual human body and identity. Instead, we can think about sexuality-as-assemblage (Allen, 2013; Fox & Alldred, 2013): a material-discursive entanglement of multiple forces and affective flows that include, but are not limited to, the human. This approach unsettles the idea of sexuality as inherently belonging to adult bodies and identities—a perspective that underpins notions of childhood innocence and the curation of sexuality education devoid of perceived 'adult only' knowledge. The concept of intra-action also undermines a subject/object divide, where an independent subject (child) is separate from, or precedes, the object (sexuality). This separation becomes untenable in a new materialist approach as intra-action does not assume things (child, sexuality, adult) exist before coming intra-relation with each other. For Barad, 'individuals' do not have an independent prior existence, they only exist within what Barad calls '*phenomena*' (particular materialised/materialising relations). Phenomena are 'ontological entanglements' (2007, 333), and it is through agential intra-actions the boundaries and properties of 'individuals' are made determinate. In this framing, the child and sexuality emerge through intra-action so that sexuality is not a property a child develops (in adulthood) nor can be devoid of (as per their innocence in childhood). This conceptualisation of child and sexuality entails an open-endedness and indeterminacy which means how their subjectivity will manifest is not fully knowable in advance.

When the child and sexuality are understood as emergent phenomena (Barad, 2007), notions of subjectivity extend beyond the individual and are configured as a relational mattering of diverse forces. In this way, subjectivity is 'opened out' so that it exceeds the notion of the human as some manifestation of flesh (nature) and/or discourse (culture) (Osgood & Guigni, 2015, 349). Extending this idea to the notion of the child, 'Child is an entanglement; constituted by concepts *and* material forces, where the social, the political, the biological, and its observing, measuring and controlling machines are interwoven and entwined—all elements intra-act and in the process "lose" their clear boundaries' (Murriss, 2016, 91, italics in original). In this sense, a child's subjectivity is not a product of nature (i.e. innocence as an inherent natural quality), nor is it constituted through language as evident in a social constructionist approach. Instead, child subjectivity can be conceptualised as 'bodymindmatter' (Murriss, 2016, 91) where the child is *part* of the world—an entanglement of human and non-human forces. Here, the child (human) is 'a material-discursive *doing*, not a *thing*' (Murriss, 2021, 69, italics in original), and as such, cannot be captured by a unified universal category.

Within a new materialist framing, child sexual subjectivity is constituted intra-actively. Rather than involving a fully formed individual subject, sexual subjectivity is contingent upon conditions of emergence which shift and vary depending on relations present (Allen, 2018). From this perspective, childhood sexualities can be understood to matter differently, in ways potentially more expansive and which do justice to the complexities of young people's lives. Barad (2007) characterises their work as grounded in questions of ethics and justice and subsequently describes agential realism as an ethico-onto-epistem-ological approach for understanding the relational mattering of the world. Central to this ethics of mattering is the desire to avoid privileging human over non-human, discourse over materiality, and to avoid reinscribing the nature/culture dualism.



Conceiving matter and meaning as entangled, posits nature as inseparable from culture; hence, Barad uses the term ‘naturalcultural practices’ to signal this inextricable relationship (2007, 32). Therefore, sexuality cannot be understood purely as nature (i.e. biologically determined) or culture (i.e. socially constructed) because neither pre-exist the other (Allen, 2015). In this regard, arguments premised on a nature/culture divide become unintelligible, including related dualisms such as natural/unnatural, real/constructed and innate/learned (Barad, in Kleinman, 2012). Such a conceptualisation helps disrupt the dichotomous logic that underpins the notion of innocence as a natural and innate quality of being a child, and in turn, disrupts media moral panics regarding sexuality education topics deemed a threat to children’s ‘natural’ innocence, such as masturbation or sexual acts (Cooper, 2022; Murphy, 2023; Southgate, 2022).

Agential realism encourages us to reconfigure sexuality differently including ideas about causality and agency. Causal relations depict one distinct entity (e.g. sexual knowledge and expression) as affecting another (e.g. child) in a linear manner, a logic which becomes impossible when there is no pre-existing subject/object divide. In a new materialist rendering, causation along with capacities and constraints are intra-actively produced through human and non-human relations present in any given moment. Within this paradigm, it no longer makes sense to think of sexuality as an external stimulus (i.e. as something socially constructed) or even an early biological tendency that threatens childhood innocence (Egan & Hawkes, 2009). As Barad (2007, 136) explains: ‘Posthumanism eschews both humanist and structuralist accounts of the subject that position the human as either pure cause or pure effect, and the body as the natural and fixed dividing line between interiority and exteriority’. The becoming of childhood sexualities far exceeds the boundaries of the human and the body and notions of discourse, and instead, entails an indeterminacy and openness to non-human and inhuman elements of the world present. From this perspective, what children are, for instance in terms of being ‘innocent’ (or, ‘problematically’ sexually knowing), cannot be known in advance, and is always intra-actively produced via entangled relations present. This indeterminacy destabilises sexuality education curricula premised on pre-determined ‘sexually innocent’ or ‘sexually knowing’ children, and instead opens up possibilities for sexuality education that is more responsive and open to change.

## RECONFIGURING CHILDHOOD SPACE AND TIME

The construction of ‘normal’ sexual development is reinforced through child developmental theories where children proceed along a trajectory towards adulthood and sexual maturity (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2017). Age and biological/physiological stages such as puberty function as key markers along this pathway, signalling a child’s ‘readiness’ for, and access to, sexuality-related knowledge (Robinson, 2008). Developmental theories reinforce the notion of the ‘innocent’ and ‘asexual’ child by framing the child as too emotionally and cognitively immature to comprehend adult sexual knowledge (Robinson & Davies, 2018). Yet, children are curious and hold knowledge about sexuality, “but as adults we might be unable or unwilling to see this, because it remains unthinkable within conventional or adult-framed understandings of sexuality” (Blaise, 2013, 812). Developmental logic constitutes adulthood (and legitimate and mature sexuality) as the end goal, subsequently positioning children in a stage of becoming, incomplete or not yet ‘fully human’ (Murriss, 2016).

The idea of children progressing along a linear pathway towards adulthood and ‘legitimate’ sexuality is premised on the external parameter of chronological time. Developmentalism and linear temporality underpin ‘age-appropriate’ rhetoric, which is frequently mobilised to restrict

young people's access to sexuality education. McClelland and Hunter (2013, 61) describe the term 'age-appropriate' as a firm, yet vague, paradox; while it signals 'something dangerous afoot and protection is required. There is, however, very little understanding of exactly where the line in the sand is drawn or why'. Who or what defines 'age-appropriate' for a 9-year-old child? Does this differ to what is considered 'age-appropriate' for a 12-year-old child, and if so, what forms the basis of this judgement? The vagueness of this term carries a power which enables it to operate as a taken-for-granted assumption that justifies censorship and restricts curriculum development and young people's access to information and resources, for instance, books and curriculum content that might include topics such as LGBTIQ+ identities, abortion or teenage parenthood. With these elusive and paradoxical qualities, the term 'age-appropriate' is 'an empty signifier. It stands in for meaning, but remains inherently meaningless because its meaning is always in flux and at the whim of the speaker' (McClelland & Hunter, 2013, 61). As such, its meaning lies in what it conveys about the speaker, rather than reflecting any truth about the needs and character of children.

Ideas of 'age-appropriateness' are also deeply entrenched within sexualisation debates amid the concern that 'sexualization hampers normal cognitive, physical and emotive progress by diverting attention away from age-appropriate milestones' (Egan & Hawkes, 2008, 298). The notion of 'age-appropriate milestones' as a universal measure for children is contentious. Childhood scholars have highlighted how linear time is neither benign nor neutral. Instead, it is integral to the ways children are measured along a continuum of progress, producing a universal notion of childhood, and excluding those who do not fit this ideal (Lesko, 2012; Robinson, 2008). To move beyond these restrictive framings of children, Blaise (2013) argues for a 'postdevelopmental logic' to reframe current debates about childhood sexualities. Blaise works with Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts to expand postdevelopmental perspectives about childhood and sexuality that avoid moral panics, and instead, enable possibilities for conceptualising children's sexual agency and meaning-making. This argument echoes thinking of other scholars (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Taylor, 2010; Faulkner, 2010) who note 'the failure of current epistemological frameworks to unpack childhood sexualities' (Blaise, 2013, 803). Cognisant that simply re-visiting childhood sexualisation debates with different theoretical framings might not be sufficient, Blaise (2013, 804) suggests the debate 'must be re-assembled, and so requires a new set of concepts' that might propel us out of traditional modes of thought.

Contributing to this theoretical discussion, we suggest agential realism holds potential for dismantling linear developmental logic through a dynamic reconfiguring of space and time. Agential realism conceptualises space, time and matter as produced together through the dynamics of intra-activity—a process Barad refers to as *spacetime mattering* (2007). This means time is not a given externality or a 'succession of evenly spaced individual moments', nor is space merely a 'container' for things/people to inhabit; rather, the dynamics of intra-activity constitute the making and marking of space and time (Barad, 2007, 180). There is a significant re-assembling of space and time at work on an ontological level here. If temporality is constituted through iterative intra-actions, then time only makes sense in the context of specific phenomena. Time is no longer universally given but articulated or made through various material arrangements or phenomena. This complicates the use of time as a neutral external parameter in which to measure the 'progress' of children's bodies and what is deemed 'appropriate' sexual knowledge, behaviour and development in accordance with them. The child is not a thing situated in space and time, but rather becomes *of* space and time—an intra-active becoming or spacetime mattering which ontologically shifts the foundations of arguments based on developmental logic. From this perspective, it makes no sense to claim that children develop along a time delineated trajectory

whereby puberty marks their entry into sexual maturity, thereby granting them access to certain sexuality-related knowledge.

A crucial aspect of a Baradian understanding of space and time is it displaces the usual sense of time as chronological. What we take to be 'past', 'present' and 'future' are no longer separate or sequential; rather, they are entangled with one another. Barad describes the making and marking of time as a 'lively material process of enfolding', where 'the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment' (2007, 181). There is no inherent determinate relationship between 'past', 'present' and 'future', nor do they follow one another in a linear fashion. In this entanglement or intra-activity, the 'past' is no longer determined or pre-existing, nor does the 'future' progressively unfold; rather, the 'past' and 'future' are continually reworked through the dynamics of intra-activity. These temporal entanglements disrupt time-related constructs associated with childhood, such as 'growing-up' and the notion that certain knowledge and behaviour are appropriate at specific points in children's age-dependent development. For example, discussions about conception, safer sex and contraception often do not occur until secondary school (Education Review Office, 2018). Similarly, content related to pornography and sexual violence are often omitted or delayed until senior levels of secondary school (Dixon et al., 2022).

Barad's reconfiguring of time has been taken up by childhood and educational researchers to complicate and expand notions of temporality in relation to childhood (Gavin, 2022), educational environments and practices (Bodén, 2015; Hohti, 2016; Karin & Kohan, 2021) and the becoming of young people's gender and sexual subjectivities (Ingram, 2019; Juelskjaer, 2013). This body of work illustrates how agential realism brings a sense of fluidity and multiplicity that invite ways of thinking about temporality and young people beyond reductive or singular narratives. As Hohti points out, 'rather than thinking of children as beings or becomings in time, we could see children and adults as being and becoming with time or *of* time, thus opening up both time and children as complex and hybrid' (2016, 189, italics in original). This complexity entails a sense of openness and unpredictability, where the past and future are never closed (Barad, 2007); where 'Children are not just of a certain age or place, they are a tangle of times, experiences, spaces, and relations' (Gavin, 2022, 162). These temporal tangles blur the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, or as Murriss (2021, 81) succinctly puts it, when the 'past and future are always already threaded through the present—childhood is not something adults leave behind'. This offers a re-assembling of developmental 'age-appropriate' logic that constrains childhood sexualities and determines what young people are 'allowed' to know and when within sexuality education, and how they are expected to behave.

The becoming of sexuality in a new materialist sense is not 'an unfolding in time but the inexhaustible dynamism of the enfolding of mattering' (Barad, 2007, 180). Children's sexualities as phenomena do not occur or appear at a particular moment in time, rather they are emergent via specific ongoing spacetime-matterings. It no longer makes sense to think of sexuality as a property that humans possess and something that a child will eventually 'grow into', manifest or acquire. When sexuality is conceptualised as an emergent becoming, the notion of sexual 'readiness' becomes a matter of entanglement, contingent upon young people's knowledge and the multitude of other things, spaces and ideas at play, for example, discourses of sexuality, everyday experiences of sexuality encountered through peers, media, television, online games, music and advertising, as well as non-human and inhuman phenomena (such as sexual affects).

Childhood sexualities are neither fixed, linear nor stable, they are open-ended and multiple, which opens them to recognition of children's sexual knowledge and potential agency. In their critique of discourses of protection, Egan and Hawkes (2009) argue that in order to recognise and



support the sexual agency of children, we must acknowledge a multiplicity of sexualities and sexual expressions. Conceptualising the construction of sexuality within a sociological context and influenced by Judith Butler's theory of recognition, they posit sexuality 'is never simply our own nor is it only a reflection of dominant culture—it is an amalgamation of culture, biography and experience'; as such, Egan and Hawkes argue we need to 'avoid cultural parameters that produce a singular vision. The shape of children's sexuality cannot be known, defined or supposed in advance. Recognizing children as capable of sexual agency requires that we get more comfortable with ambiguity and be open to its becoming' (2009, 397). While the theoretical underpinnings of Egan and Hawkes' argument differ, their vision resonates with a new materialist ontology of sexuality and its capacity for openness and indeterminacy. We argue new materialisms require us to 'get more comfortable' with the fact that children's sexuality is *indeterminate* and *ambiguous*. It also asks us to relinquish pre-existing entities/identities and reconfigure what it means to be human—intra-relation with the world. Subsequently, within this framing the becoming of children's sexualities cannot be presumed or defined by sexuality education in advance.

## THE POSSIBILITIES FOR SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Deconstructing child/adult binaries and developmental perspectives are essential for enhancing young people's access to quality comprehensive sexuality education. New materialisms offer one way of doing this by reconfiguring childhood sexualities and notions of 'innocence' at an ontological level. New materialist thinking unsettles the idea of sexuality as a property that resides within, and is expressed by, the human body and instead conceptualises it as a material-discursive entanglement of forces that also include the non-human (Allen, 2013; Fox & Alldred, 2013). Drawing on Barad's concept of intra-action to understand the nature of sexuality, within such a conceptualisation there are no discrete boundaries between things, including the human and non-human. Instead, what sexuality is, manifests within specific material arrangements that can include, but are not limited to bodies, spatial arrangements, objects, affects, sensations and temporalities. This theoretical framing undermines notions of 'sexual innocence' by troubling the idea that sexuality is the preserve of adult bodies, while 'sexual innocence' is a natural property of children's. Such a conceptualisation is impossible within an intra-active account of sexuality because adults, children, sexuality and innocence are not discrete entities that precede each other. That is, children do not inherently possess sexual innocence nor gain sexual maturity in adulthood as these qualities only come into being via their intra-relational presence in the sexuality-assemblage. When the propensity for children to be sexually innocent is undermined by such an agential realist perspective, the ideas that underpin arguments for age-appropriate content in sexuality education begin to disintegrate.

We argue new materialist thinking renders arguments around 'age-appropriate' content in sexuality education that serve to restrict children's access to sexual knowledge redundant. Barad's notion of spacetime-mattering disrupts the idea of linear time where children travel along a developmental trajectory towards sexual maturity. When what it means to be a child is understood as an intra-active process of becoming with the material world, then sexual innocence is no longer an inherent quality of childhood. Whether sexual innocence manifests for a child is contingent upon the human and non-human phenomena present in their life rather than temporal markers such as their 'age' or 'developmental stage'. Subsequently, calls to preserve children's sexual innocence by restricting certain knowledges in sexuality education around for example sexual relationships and sexual activity (particularly involving LGBTIQ+ identities) are no longer

valid. A recognition that children's sexuality emerges through intra-active phenomena present in their lives lends an open-endedness and indeterminacy to their sexual selves. This conceptualisation holds possibilities for more expansive understandings of what appropriately constitutes 'the child' in ways that may better reflect the complexity of children's lived realities. An understanding that diversifies what being a child might entail, also has potential to embrace *difference* in a way that is more ethical and supportive of children who do not conform to dominant discourses of child (sexual) identity. It does this, by allowing and thereby legitimising, ambiguity, uncertainty and diversity in who children are.

When we recognise the open-endedness and indeterminacy of sexuality, it has implications for how we might think about the sexuality education curriculum offered to children. A new materialist postdevelopmental logic has the potential to shift the contours and scope of sexuality education by offering a rethinking of sexuality education curriculum and pedagogy beyond familiar frames of thought (Allen, 2018, 2021; Allen & Rasmussen, 2017). Current conceptualisations of sexuality education presume to know what a 'child' is and that their sexuality will develop along a pre-ordained continuum to adult sexual maturity. Curriculum content and pedagogies are currently designed in accordance with this view, where certain knowledge is believed appropriate and therefore offered to students at particular ages. For instance, children are not given information about safer sex and condoms use until puberty (approximately 12–14 years), when their bodies are deemed to be maturing and hormones have activated feelings of sexual desire. When the recipients of the curriculum cannot be known in advance, then devising content based on what students are thought to be, no longer makes sense (e.g. sexually innocent during primary years, or, burgeoning into sexual maturity at secondary school). A new materialist rendering of the sexuality curriculum means it would not be pre-determined in advance, but come into being during the moment of intra-relation with students.

Bozalek (2022) suggests it is Barad's notion of indeterminacy that offers a radical reconfiguring of the curriculum. Noting the philosophical distinction between indeterminacy (which is about ontology and the nature of reality) and uncertainty (which has to do with epistemology and knowledge), Bozalek suggests indeterminacy in agential realism involves an undoing of an essentialised identity of the student and makes it possible to think about students and concepts as coming into being through particular material arrangements. For Bozalek, this means, 'curriculum and pedagogy need to remain open to being reconfigured, rather than assuming a givenness of what is...' (2022, 14). This encourages a shift away from what we think we 'know' about children and sexuality, or what we think students 'should know' and when, and encourages us to start with where students currently are, and what matters to them in that moment. It also troubles how the traditional focus of sexuality education—that is, sexuality—is conceptualised, by opening it out to non-human phenomena. The implication here is that students are tasked with thinking about sexuality in more capacious ways than something that is situated in, and experienced by the body, and instead how the material world is entangled in its emergence (Allen, 2022). New materialism also blurs spatial and temporal boundaries in ways that release the need for sexuality education to be confined to the classroom. When sexuality is understood to emerge intra-actively with the material world, then entering this context to learn more about it may hold value for students [see Allen (2021) for examples], teachers, parents and policymakers.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflicts of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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