

Beyond pseudonyms: Using new-hermetic materialism and colour theory for ethical representation in early childhood research

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Abstract

In early childhood research, children are often anonymised through pseudonyms or numbers, well-intentioned strategies that can unintentionally reduce children to data points. This paper responds to that representational tension by introducing a more affective, relational approach rooted in New-Hermetic Materialism, a synthesis of posthumanist ethics and esoteric understandings of energy, vibration, and symbol. Guided by the view that children pulsate with colour, presence, and relational meaning, this study uses colour theory as a way to move beyond pseudonyms, offering a non-reductive and ethically attuned alternative to conventional anonymisation. This paper draws from a piece of doctoral research conducted in an early years setting, where each child participant was represented by a colour. These colours were selected through a reflective process involving classroom observation, practitioner insight, and intuitive attunement. Informed by both psychological and symbolic traditions of colour, as well as vibrational and energetic perspectives, colour is approached not as a label or metaphor, but as a material-affective resonance, something that gestures toward the child's way of being without fixing their identity. This approach sits within a broader conversation about ethical representation and posthumanist inquiry in childhood research. Drawing also on educational and artistic traditions, the paper proposes a relational ethics of presence, one that allows researchers to stay with the complexity of children's becoming, while attending gently to the politics of anonymity.

Keywords

new-hermetic materialism, ethical representation, colour theory, early years

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Introduction: The trouble with naming

In research with young children, efforts to protect anonymity often involve replacing names with pseudonyms or numeric identifiers. These conventions, while rooted in ethical care, risk simplifying the complex, relational, and affective dimensions of children's presence. Names carry cultural, familial, and linguistic weighting (Charmaz, 2006), and numbers strip away nuance altogether. Both methods, though common practice, can reduce the child to a symbol of data management rather than honour their full relational being (Hackett et al., 2015).

In one phase of my doctoral research, children were invited to choose their own pseudonyms. Many children selected names similar to their real ones or chose names with strong social associations like princess Jasmine. This raised questions about their understanding of anonymity and the assumptions embedded in name-giving itself. Asking children to rename themselves placed them in an adult-authored ethical logic, one that conflicted with their lived and expressive modes of meaning-making (James and Prout, 1997). It became clear that neither names nor numbers could capture the vibrational qualities of how children were: their movements, moods, and intra-actions with others and their environments.

In response, this paper explores a colour-based alternative, a methodology that attends to presence rather than identity. Each child is represented not by a name, but by a colour chosen through relational, affective attunement. Colour becomes a way to gesture toward a child's way of being without fixing it. To say that children pulsate with colour is to acknowledge their presence as vibrational, affective, and more-than-verbal. Within a New-Hermetic Materialist (NHM) frame, colour is not simply visual but energetic, a communicative frequency shaped by movement, emotion, intra-action, and relational intensity. Drawing from Brennan's (1988) work on human energy fields, Drake's (2021) explorations of child energetics, and Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action, this study treats colour as both material and symbolic, something that hums, glows, and shifts in relation with the environment. The pulse of colour, then, is not a fixed trait but an ongoing, co-composed resonance of becoming.

This approach is grounded in NHM, a theoretical orientation that braids together posthumanist ethics (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1997), esoteric traditions of energetic symbolism (Hanegraaff, 2012), and understandings of matter as vibrant, expressive, and intra-active (Bennett, 2010; MacLure, 2013). It brings together spiritual-material sensibilities with post-qualitative inquiry to explore what ethical, non-reductive representation might look like in early childhood research.

The paper unfolds from a non-representational, onto-epistemological stance, that is, a way of thinking and knowing that resists fixing meaning in language or identity, and instead foregrounds affect, emergence, and materiality (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). In this view, colour is not metaphorical or decorative, but a relational material with its own agency, something that participates in meaning-making, not just represents it.

This inquiry begins by framing the theoretical commitments that underpin the study, drawing on posthumanist ethics (Bayley, 2020) and new-hermetic materialism to reimagine the task of representing children in research (Hanegraaff, 2012). From there, it moves into the methodological landscape in which these ideas were put to work, attending closely to the ethical and practical challenges of anonymising children without reducing their presence. Along the way, the paper dives deeper into the esoteric and energetic dimensions of colour theory, tracing its potential as a relational and vibrational medium for research attunement. Studies such as González-Martín et al. (2022) have demonstrated how warm hues and harmonious colour compositions in visual creations can evoke complex emotional atmospheres, reinforcing the idea that colour functions as an affective language in expressive contexts. These foundations then open into a detailed exploration of the colour selection process itself, with examples that illustrate how each representation came to resonate with a particular child's way of being. Finally, the paper turns to the ethical and philosophical

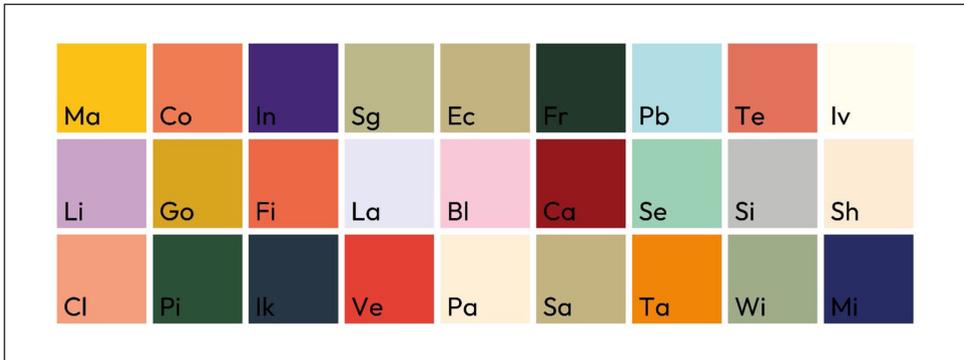


Figure 1. Children through the lens of colour.

implications of this approach, what it asks of us as researchers, what it unsettles, and what it might offer for future inquiries into the shimmering, emergent worlds of early childhood. A visual representation of the full colour palette used is included as Figure 1, offering a sensory glimpse into the vibrational field of the classroom as experienced through this ethical lens.

Theoretical framework: Tracing the glow of posthumanism and ethical representation

This study unfolds within a posthumanist and new materialist landscape, where subjectivity is seen not as fixed but as emergent, entangled, and more-than-human. Drawing on Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action and Braidotti's (2011) concept of nomadic ethics, the framework resists static identities and embraces ethical fluidity. Knowing and being are treated as mutually co-constitutive: a movement, not a position. Within this terrain, children are not positioned as bounded subjects to be named or analysed but are encountered as relational forces within a wider material field, vibrant, affective, and always becoming (Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

Haraway's (1997) concept of situated knowledges reminds us that all representations are partial and that ethical practice requires accountability to those partialities. Barad (2007) deepens this by dissolving the illusion of distance between observer and observed, insisting instead on a relational ethic of entanglement. These ideas resonate with MacLure's (2013) framing of the 'glow': those moments in research that feel charged with significance yet evade categorisation. Together, these thinkers open up space for an ethics of approximation, one that remains with the murmur and materiality of the encounter, even when it resists clear form.

To this posthumanist terrain, I bring a distinct orientation: New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM). NHM draws on posthumanist and new materialist thought while weaving in esoteric traditions that view matter as energetic, symbolic, and alive (Bailey, 1951; Hanegraaff, 2012). In this view, colour is not simply visual or metaphorical, but vibrational, resonating with specific moods, elemental qualities, or affective states. Esoteric systems such as aura theory, alchemical symbolism, chakra models, and colour healing practices offer ways of understanding colour as active and relational. In Brennan's (1988) model, for example, colour is seen to surround and emanate from the body in the form of an aura, with blue linked to clarity, red to groundedness, and green to emotional healing. Judith (2004) explains how colours map onto bodily energy centres: orange for creativity, yellow for personal power, indigo for intuition. Alchemical traditions, meanwhile, present colour as part of a metaphysical transformation, black representing dissolution, white for purification, red

for unity (Hanegraaff, 2012). Even in therapeutic contexts, colours are used to surface unspoken emotion or shift affective states (Malchiodi, 1998).

What unites these systems is a belief in colour's affective agency: that it participates in shaping how we feel, relate, and become. Rather than treating these theories as fixed or prescriptive, NHM engages them as relational languages, ways of attuning to vibrational signatures in the world (Brennan, 1988). In early childhood research, where young participants may communicate non-verbally, energetically, or symbolically, colour becomes a medium that listens rather than labels (Burkitt and Sheppard, 2013). To represent a child as Sage or Marigold is not to define them, but to honour a resonance that was sensed, shared, and co-composed in a particular moment of intra-action. NHM invites researchers to listen not only to words, but to atmospheres, textures, and tones, to the hum of relation that runs through the research encounter.

To say that children pulsate with colour is to acknowledge their presence as vibrational, affective, and more-than-verbal. Within this NHM frame, colour is understood as a communicative frequency shaped by movement, emotion, and relational intensity. Drawing from Brennan's (1988) work on energy fields, Drake's (2021) explorations of child energetics, and Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action, this study treats colour as both symbolic and material, something that hums, glows, and shifts in relation with the environment. The pulse of colour, then, is not a fixed trait, but an ongoing resonance of becoming.

The phrase material-affective resonance refers to colour not as a static identifier, but as matter that vibrates with mood, energy, and presence. Informed by MacLure's (2013) notion of the 'glow', this framing allows colour to emerge as an attuned response to the child's relational atmosphere. It gestures toward how a child expresses themselves through movement, interaction, and intensity, without collapsing those expressions into predetermined categories. Colour becomes a gentle gesture of recognition, not a claim to truth.

This theoretical framing makes space for what I describe as a vibrational ethics of representation. It resists the drive toward datafication and instead embraces the textured, relational qualities of research with young children. Where children express themselves through gesture, rhythm, or stillness, colour can offer a responsive mode of attunement (Burkitt and Sheppard, 2013). In this frame, colour is not imposed upon the child, but co-emerges with them, a shimmering trace of their participation in a shared and sensitive field of inquiry.

Methodology: The ethics of colour as representation

This study is situated within a post-qualitative, new materialist research paradigm, one that resists fixed categories and linear certainties, and instead embraces process, relation, and emergence (St Pierre, 2013). In this landscape, research is not a neutral act of extraction but a co-compositional encounter, where knowledge, identity, and matter become together (Barad, 2007). From this stance, representation becomes ethically charged: how might we attend to children's presence without pinning them down?

Ethical integrity was central to the doctoral research from which this paper emerges. Full ethical approval was granted by the university's ethics committee, and all protocols were aligned to institutional guidance and sector-wide frameworks, including the British Educational Research Association's (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research and the European Early Childhood Education Research Association's Ethical Code (EECERA, 2015). These frameworks emphasise the rights, dignity, and agency of participants, especially young children, and advocate for ethical reflexivity across all phases of research.

Written consent was obtained from parents and practitioners, who were fully informed about the study's purpose, anonymity procedures, and the right to withdraw. Children's assent (Einarsdóttir,

2007) was embedded in the everyday rhythms of the setting, supported by age appropriate visual and relational tools. Following Alderson and Morrow (2011), who argue that even very young children can express meaningful consent when supported appropriately, this study used a combination of stamps and relational dialogue to facilitate accessible, non-verbal participation. Children's agency was treated as situated, affective, and emergent, not assumed, but continually checked, felt, and negotiated. Inspired by Braidotti's (2011) concept of nomadic ethics, ethics here was not only procedural, but a daily, responsive attunement to the shifting energies and responsibilities that emerged in intra-action.

A central methodological dilemma arose early in the research: how to represent children ethically, without reducing them to names or numbers. Practitioners selected their own pseudonyms, a method that balanced recognition and confidentiality, and worked well for adult participants (Moore et al., 2015). However, when trialled with children the pilot study, it proved more complicated. Many selected pseudonyms that closely mirrored their real names, raising concerns about their understanding of anonymity and the complexities of self-representation. While this approach was intended to honour agency, it revealed the layered ethical tensions involved in inviting children into representational decisions (Christensen and Prout, 2002).

Numbers, too, felt inadequate. They ameliorated the creases of personality, flattening giggles and quirks into something dry and unrecognisable. As MacLure (2013) reminds us, it is often the affective glow of presence that matters most, even when it resists neat representation. To refer to children as Participant 4 or Child B felt not only impersonal, but complicit in the datafication and depersonalisation that increasingly pervades early childhood education in the UK (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

Once it became clear that names and numbers both carried limitations, I trialled a range of alternative methods for representation. These included using words or phrases the children had expressed, objects or images they had gravitated toward, or even a favourite toy selected by the child. While these offered more relational textures, they often felt overly interpretive or imposed. Each option risked reducing a child's presence to a narrow linguistic or symbolic lens, drawing from adult-authored meaning systems rather than staying with the child's vibrational being (Hackett and Somerville, 2017). As Clark (2010) notes, even participatory and visual methods must be handled with care, as they can unintentionally impose interpretive frames that dull the multiplicity of children's expressive modes. These methods, while well-intentioned, ultimately reinforced a representational fixity that I was trying to move away from.

In response, I turned to colour as an alternative representational strategy, one that could honour children's vibrancy without fixing them in place. This decision was both philosophical and methodological. Colour became a means of holding anonymity without erasing presence, a soft form of ethical recognition that sidestepped rigid categories (Hackett and Somerville, 2017). This wasn't just a creative flourish but a move shaped by New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM), which guided not only my thinking, but how I felt my way through the research. NHM treats colour as more than visual, alive with energy (Brennan, 1988), saturated with symbolism (Bailey, 1951), and full of relational potential (Hanegraaff, 2012). It offered a way to think differently about anonymity, what I came to understand as a vibrational ethics of representation.

Rather than naming or exposing, colour allowed me to attune to the hum of each child's presence, recognising their individuality without boxing it in. Representation, from this perspective, becomes a shimmering trace, something that gestures toward presence without locking it down. Posthumanist ethics urges us to stay with ambiguity, with emergence, and with the textures of relation (MacLure, 2013). NHM pushes further still, inviting researchers to attend to the energetic registers of participation that often pulse beneath language or role. To honour a child through

colour is not to define them, but to offer a material-affective response to how they were felt, sensed, and intra-acted with (Mazzei, 2013).

Of course, I am mindful that assigning a child a colour carries its own risks. Children are not monochrome. Children are not monochrome, and often neither are colours. What we think of as a single colour is rarely fixed, it shimmers, shifts, blends, and reacts to light, context, and perception. Throughout the year-long data collection period, the children, too, shimmered and shifted, flaring bright, fading soft, and forming new vibrational tones entirely. Over the course of the year-long data collection period, they shimmered and shifted, flaring bright, fading soft, and forming new vibrational tones entirely. Their energies, like their identities, were not stable but partial, diffuse, and always becoming (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). The colours shared in this study (see Figure 1) were not chosen during fieldwork but surfaced during the reflective act of writing, those moments when memory, fieldnotes, and embodied resonance came into focus. These colours are time-stamped, affective responses, not declarations of essence. I expect and hope that these resonances have since shifted. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) remind us, identity is not a fixed point but a line of flight.

Colour, too, is never neutral. Its meanings are socially and historically shaped. Blue, now commonly aligned with masculinity, was once viewed as delicate and appropriate for girls. Pink, often seen today as feminine, was once considered bold and boyish (Paoletti, 2012). These shifting associations reveal how colour is always already entangled in power and normativity. In selecting colours, I sought not to reproduce dominant gender scripts but to lean toward tones that felt attuned to each child's way of being. This was not about symbolic alignment with cultural codes, but about staying close to the intra-active resonances that emerged in-with-through child, practitioner, researcher, and environment. These colourings are not descriptors of how others might interpret the child, but gestures toward how they were felt within the ecology of this particular research encounter.

Colour theory: Exploring esoteric and energetic dimensions

Colour theory, in its broadest sense, asks what colour is, how it works, and what it can mean. In the visual arts, this often involves relationships between tones, balance, harmony, and design. In psychology, colour theory attends to emotional response and human perception (Elliot and Maier, 2014). Yet within esoteric traditions, colour is not just visual or emotional, but vibrational (Hanegraaff, 2012). It pulses with symbolic resonance, energetic quality, and metaphysical potential. These varied traditions, from art and aesthetics to mysticism and metaphysics, offer a complex and expansive view of colour that aligns closely with New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM). NHM thrives in these slippery spaces where meaning, matter, and energy intermingle (Hanegraaff, 2012; Lenz Taguchi, 2010). In this research, colour theory provided not just a practical tool for anonymity, but a philosophical invitation to explore the vibrational textures of being.

Esoteric colour theory is not a single system, but a constellation of frameworks, each with their own grammar of interpretation. Bailey (1951), for example, described colour as a bridge between spiritual and material realms, each tone associated with a ray of divine energy. In Bailey's system, yellow signals knowledge and clarity, while indigo represents devotion, intuition, and the deeper self. The child represented as Indigo in this study; a sensitive, often overwhelmed figure with suspected SLCN, seemed to hum with this depth. Brennan's (1988) work with human energy fields extended this interpretation, positioning colour as a form of relational charge. The 'Silver' child, often on the edges of the group but full of gentle insight, felt to align with this silvery field of quiet brilliance and reflective presence. Birren (1961), writing from a more psychological and perceptual lens, explored how colour might shape mood and cognitive performance. Eiseman (2000), drawing on design and therapeutic contexts, associated orange with confidence and social energy, qualities

present in the “Firecracker” child, whose need to move, lead, and play exuberantly aligned with this radiant spectrum. In each case, colour offered more than representation. It carried correspondence. It allowed me to attune to what was not easily named in the child’s relational and energetic becoming.

Eiseman’s (2000) work helped offer a language for mapping emotional presence through colour, especially where children’s communication was energetic or partial. The Marigold child, for instance, radiated outward warmth, motivation, and a solar energy that aligned with Eiseman’s (2000) associations between golden-yellow tones and optimism, intellectual confidence, and social harmony. Similarly, Judith’s (2004) mapping of the chakra system offered a spiritual-material register. Sage’s calm, steady interest in logic and construction evoked the grounded green of the heart chakra, associated with balance, connection, and thoughtful presence. Judith’s (2004) colour mappings did not determine my selections, but they contributed to a palette of resonance, a lexicon that helped me tune into what I was already feeling. These systems, taken together, became a multi-layered map. Not one to be followed blindly, but an entangled constellation to move with, to feel against the grain of each child’s presence.

Importantly, this was not about imposing external meanings onto children. I was not trying to make children fit the chart, but rather to listen to what colours felt close, and why. Bailey’s (1951) vibrational rays, Brennan’s (1988) fields, Eiseman’s (2000) design intuition, and Judith’s (2004) chakra pathways all offered interpretive warmth, rather than cold typology. They helped me ask: what colour holds the feeling of this child? What material quality can hold the emotional, affective, and symbolic resonance of their presence? In that sense, the act of aligning a colour became a kind of attunement, a gathering of practitioner language, observation, child gesture, and energetic reading into a tone that shimmered with more than fact.

Because colour carries historical and cultural weight (Batchelor, 2000), I remained mindful of its social meanings without being restricted by them. While the methodology section of this article addresses broader shifts in gendered colour assignments (Gage, 1993), this section stayed focused on meaning-in-relation rather than universalised association. In other words, red was not automatically masculine, nor was pink erased. Instead, I asked: what kind of red? What kind of softness? What tone of intensity or radiance is present here, and what does it do in this context? By drawing on esoteric, energetic, and design-based systems, I was able to create a more nuanced palette, one that allowed each representation to remain flexible, vibrant, and open to movement. In the ecology of early years practice, where communication is often affective, relational, and more-than-verbal, colour theory offered a language of possibility.

Findings: Putting colour to work through reflective selection

The colour-based names used in this study emerged not as an immediate output of fieldwork, but through a reflective, relational process conducted during the write-up stage. Drawing together fieldnotes, practitioner insight, and the children’s own expressive tendencies, each colour was selected as a response to how that child was felt, noticed, and intra-acted with across time. This was not about identifying a single trait or reducing the child to a quality, but about sensing into their vibrational presence (MacLure, 2013).

Instead of trying to squeeze these children into tidy categories or grids, I’ve chosen to share them through short, story-like sketches. These are not full portraits. They’re glimpses, mood-markers, flickers of energy, a way of staying close to the feeling of being there. They are built from the messy, funny, sometimes fleeting ways that children come into relationship with others. As Hackett and Rautio (2019) remind us, children’s meaning-making often travels through bodies,

movements, and moments of connection, not through grand statements or abstract ideas. That's the spirit this section holds. Not a system. A shimmer. A kind of listening.

Take Marigold, for instance: a happy, engaged child often drawn to outdoor play and collaborative group activities. Practitioners described them as confident, motivated, and excelling in literacy. The decision to assign Marigold as their identifier came during a re-reading of observations that shimmered with sunny energy. In colour symbolism, marigold is often associated with vitality and warmth, qualities echoed in the child's consistent presence within social and task-based groupings (Eiseman, 2000). NHM treats this kind of solar alignment as energetic correspondence, an expressive field rather than a metaphor (Bailey, 1951). To name the child Marigold was to acknowledge the radiant, outward-bound flow they brought into the setting.

In contrast, Indigo was chosen to reflect a more inward, emotionally complex energy. This child was described as hyperactive and easily overwhelmed, yet also deeply sensitive and expressive in moments of calm. Observations and practitioner notes reflected a struggle with sensory regulation and a deep care for peers when emotionally attuned. Indigo, as a colour, is often linked with introspection, sensitivity, and the liminal edges of expression, qualities that felt resonant with this child's presence (Birren, 1961). Brennan's (1988) work on energy fields suggests that deeper blues carry an emotional depth, a tendency to absorb and feel, rather than immediately react. To refer to this child as Indigo was to hold their intensity and sensitivity in gentle balance.

Sage emerged from quieter, measured rhythms. This child often chose construction tasks and mathematical play, working with deliberation and quiet care. Their contributions were thoughtful, often perceptive, and rarely loud. The colour sage, a muted, grounded green, carries associations with wisdom, calm, and attunement to detail (Vecchi, 2010). In NHM terms, green aligns with balance and relational harmony, suggesting a stabilising presence in group dynamics (Brennan, 1988). The name Sage therefore became not a title, but an invitation into the grounded, quietly brilliant energy this child radiated.

Then came Firecracker, a child bursting with physicality, noise, and quick excitement. Their preference for action games and competitive play was accompanied by a restless drive and a love of performance. Firecracker wasn't a typical colour name, but it felt like one. A vibrant red-orange blend was chosen to symbolise this energetic propulsion, a chromatic charge that matched the dynamism of their movement and presence (Elliot and Maier, 2014). In both esoteric and art-therapy literature, red-orange combinations often reflect enthusiasm, assertion, and physical joy (Malchiodi, 1998). As Bailey (1951) notes, these colours are not simply seen, they are felt in the body, stirring action and intensity. To name this child Firecracker was to speak to that energetic crackle, without narrowing them into stereotype.

Finally, Silver was chosen for a child who often sought solitude or reassurance, preferring the sandpit or messy play to larger group activity. They were described as artistic and gentle, sometimes unsure in social groups but vibrant in their own imaginative orbit. Silver is often associated with reflection, creativity, and fluidity, a colour that doesn't announce itself loudly, but catches the light in quiet, subtle ways (Hanegraaff, 2012). In NHM, silver represents resonance across thresholds, a liminal shimmer rather than a fixed tone. The choice of Silver honoured the child's oscillating visibility, their unique glow within the quieter corners of the setting.

Each colour, then, was chosen not as a category, but as a resonance: an attempt to reflect the vibrational presence of each child as it emerged in practice (Mazzei, 2013). This was not about diagnosing or defining, but about staying responsive to the affective patterns that formed through intra-action. These decisions were always made with care, acknowledging the partiality of perception and the potential risk of symbolic fixing (MacLure, 2013). Yet the palette offered a way of attending to the child's becoming with texture, care, and attentiveness, allowing for recognition that neither objectifies nor obscures.

This process, reflective, intuitive, and relational, offered a form of ethical approximation that resisted the dual traps of erasure and categorisation. As I move into the discussion, I explore what this colour work opened up, what it helped me notice and hold, and how NHM supported a way of being-with the child participants that was attuned, symbolic, and alive.

Discussion: Naming without fixing: Colour, gender and vibrational ethics

This paper's engagement with colour emerged as one strand within a broader doctoral inquiry into children's gender expression in early years education. As the research unfolded, colour moved from being an incidental curiosity to a key methodological and ethical gesture (Taylor and Hughes, 2016a). In a study focused on how children live, negotiate, and express gender, it became clear that conventional forms of anonymisation risked erasing precisely the relational and affective nuances that made children's gender expressions so rich, diverse, and unstable (St Pierre, 2013). To tune into children's presence meant noticing not just what was said or done, but what shimmered in-with-through what vibrated in their movements, gestures, affiliations, and affects. In this way, the use of colour became part of a wider post-qualitative sensibility, one grounded in a commitment to presence, process, and ethical attention (Taylor and Hughes, 2016b).

The use of colour as a representational method was not part of the original research design but evolved through the dilemmas of practice. As I encountered the inadequacies of names and numbers, a new approach was required, one that could hold anonymity and affect together. Returning to the methodological values of this work, I was reminded of the importance of ethics as relation. The method aligned with what Braidotti (2011) calls nomadic ethics: a situated, affective responsiveness to complexity and context. It also resonated with the ethics of care, particularly as articulated in childhood research by Noddings (2005), where attentiveness, responsiveness, and situated judgement replace static rule-following. Colour selection became a site of relational practice, one shaped by proximity, memory, and the desire to recognise without reducing.

What this approach offered was a kind of expansive care. Because each colour was selected intuitively and iteratively, emerging from a combination of fieldnotes, observations, and practitioner insight, it honoured subtle relational cues (Hackett et al., 2020). These included the soft-spoken child who always returned to the sandpit, the child whose voice grew stronger when talking about planets, the one who beamed when helping a friend find their coat. Representation in this frame was affective, approximate, and partial, in keeping with MacLure's (2013) framing of 'the wonder of data' as that which glows rather than categorises. In this sense, colour functioned as a kind of ethical approximation, an attempt to gesture toward children's presence in a way that resisted flattening.

At the same time, this method helped avoid forms of reduction common to research with children, especially in studies of gender. Pseudonyms often carry gendered connotations that risk shaping wider social assumptions (Renold, 2005), while numbers erase individuality altogether. In studies exploring children's expressions of masculinity and femininity, these modes of anonymisation risk imposing or erasing precisely what is in flux (Blaise, 2005). The selection of colour did not solve this tension, but it allowed me to sit with it differently. To minimise the interpretive limitations of my own perspective, each colour was chosen through a form of soft triangulation (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012). This involved drawing from the child's own verbal and non-verbal expressions (Clark, 2010), incorporating practitioner and parental descriptors (collected across the year) (Einarsdóttir, 2007), and layering these with my own long-term, relational observations. This gentle composite helped the colour emerge not from a single viewpoint, but from an ongoing, shared

field of meaning. As Hackett et al. (2015) remind us, research with children must grapple with the ‘frictions of recognition’: how to see and name without fixing or framing. There are no neutral gestures in representation, especially when the subject is gender. To choose a colour is also to risk misreading, but it is a softer move than categorisation. It leaves space for ambiguity, for resonance, and for multiplicity.

New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM) became the frame through which this colour work could be felt more deeply. Rather than approaching colour as a flat signifier, NHM invited attention to its symbolic, relational, and energetic qualities. Bailey’s (1951) esoteric system describes colour as an energetic frequency aligned with temperament, mood, and spiritual development. Brennan (1988) expands this into a theory of human energy fields, suggesting that colour is part of our relational charge, something that pulses through emotion, interaction, and presence. These systems, while often side-lined in conventional research, were vital in offering interpretive lenses that recognised children’s vibrancy as something more-than-verbal. The chakra system, long used in Indian metaphysical traditions to map energy centres within the body, attributes specific colours to affective states, such as blue for communication, yellow for personal power, or green for compassion (Judith, 2004). In this research, I did not follow any one system rigidly but instead created a vibrational palette by drawing across multiple traditions. This offered a set of energetic, symbolic, and affective associations for each colour, attuned not only to cultural symbolism but to how colour resonated in the moment of relational encounter (Springgay and Truman, 2018). NHM enabled me to treat these associations not as fixed templates, but as dynamic guides, part of an intuitive, situated process that brought material, discursive, and spiritual elements into alignment. In research with young children, who so often communicate affectively, non-verbally, and energetically, this lens provided a way of staying with data that glowed, trembled, or quietly pulsed (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015).

What NHM offers that conventional frameworks may not is a way of being-with rather than analysing-from-above. It invites the researcher into a mode of presence where knowledge is not extracted but co-composed through relation, affect, and symbolic resonance (de la Bellacasa, 2017). Esoteric traditions, often dismissed in academic discourse as non-scientific, can instead be understood as alternative epistemologies, ones that honour the non-linear, the symbolic, and the more-than-verbal. As Hanegraaff (2012) argues, esotericism can offer a serious engagement with the complexity of being, particularly when approached as a mode of symbolic interpretation rather than dogma. Within NHM, colour becomes a way of listening, a way of attending to presence, vibration, and individuality in more-than-literal ways.

Crucially, this approach allowed affective traces to gather and pattern. In a traditional anonymisation system, much of the tonal language of the data would have been severed, flattened into pseudonyms or participant codes that mute nuance. But here, each colour representation became a small gathering of threads: the child’s gestures and words, the practitioner’s impressions, my own felt sense. This created not a typology, but a palette of relational resonance. Leigh and Brown (2021) describe the ethical importance of attuning to affect in early childhood research, arguing that modes of recognition must move beyond verbal expression and account for the textures and vibrations of relational life. In a study that explores gendered becoming, this attentiveness was vital. Using names may have invited subconscious gendering; using numbers may have reduced affect. Colour let me stay with vibrancy, attuned to the subtle hues of becoming, without presuming to fix them. It allowed for what I have come to think of as a vibrational ethics of anonymity, a term that gestures to the possibility of protecting children’s identities without erasing their presence or vitality (Vecchi, 2010).

This method is not offered as a universal solution, but as one situated attempt to represent with care, curiosity, and attunement. The vibrational ethics of NHM may offer new possibilities for

researchers working in early childhood contexts, especially those attuned to symbolic, sensory, and energetic communication. It asks us not to fix or finalise, but to resonate, correspond, and stay with the shimmer of becoming.

Conclusion: Staying with the colourful trouble

This paper has offered colour not as a final answer, but as an ongoing question, a method of staying with the shimmering, messy, affective business of research with children. In the context of a doctoral inquiry into children's gender expression, colour became more than just a substitute for names. It emerged as a medium of ethical approximation: a way to represent without reducing, to protect without erasing, and to gesture toward presence without claiming to capture it. Staying with the shimmer, as Taylor and Hughes (2016b) describe, means remaining open to uncertainty and relational tension rather than seeking resolution. In this sense, colour was not simply aesthetic, but ontological; it helped hold the complexity of becoming without closure.

From a posthumanist perspective, these shifts matter, they signal a move from extracting meaning to co-composing knowledge with others, human and more-than-human. Mauthner (2019) captures this shift well, suggesting that posthumanist ethics redefine research as world-making rather than world-describing, acknowledging that inquiry participates in generating its subjects' realities. Matters of presence, harmful abstraction, and relational response-ability become central, not peripheral. In this light, colour was more than a research tool, it was a way of being-with research, one that recognizes how symbolic, affective, and ontic processes entangle to shape not just what is known, but who and how we become together.

By drawing from New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM), this work foregrounded colour as relational, symbolic, and vibrational. Here, colour was not a code to be cracked but a correspondence to be felt. It acted as a tonal resonance that emerged from layered data encounters, echoing MacLure's (2013) invitation to follow the "glow" of data that resists categorisation. Unlike pseudonyms or numbers, which often pull us toward classification or abstraction, colour remained soft-edged and dynamic. This mutability is what made it so ethically compelling. In the absence of fixed categories, colour allowed me to stay with what Barad (2007) refers to as the 'ongoingness' of becoming, creating a methodology grounded in responsiveness rather than resolution.

What this offers, I suggest, is a posthuman contribution to the field of childhood research. It signals a commitment to vibrant, non-reductive, and ethically situated practice. In a time when educational systems are increasingly governed by metrics, audits, and performativity (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017), such approaches become vital sites of resistance. Colour, as used here, became a small but deliberate disruption of these systems. It resisted the depersonalising of Participant A or Child 7, instead offering a space where the expressive and the affective could matter.

For researchers working with children or other groups whose ways of communicating may be layered, non-verbal, or relationally mediated, this method may offer a generative starting point. While not a universal strategy, it is an ethical gesture, one that privileges attunement, resonance, and situated care. As Hackett and Rautio (2019) argue, research with children benefits from methods that are lively, multimodal, and responsive to the material and sensory textures of encounter. The use of colour in this study did not replace analysis but repositioned it. It invited me to ask different questions, to follow different cues, and to recognise knowledge not just in what was said, but in what was sensed.

Future research might continue this work by exploring how other symbolic or sensory systems, such as sound, gesture, scent, or rhythm, might also serve as modes of representation that honour affective, embodied, or more-than-verbal communication (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008). NHM

offers a compelling invitation here. By drawing together energetic, esoteric, and material-discursive frameworks, it unsettles binary thinking (Bazzano, 2014) and opens the door for more relational, spiritually curious, and ethically complex methodologies. In early childhood contexts, where meaning often flickers in movement, play, and vibration, these approaches are not only relevant but deeply needed. Scholars such as Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) remind us that to remain with complexity is itself an ethical act, one that avoids flattening the world into what is merely measurable.

This has not been a tidy project. Colour did not smooth the edges or solve the dilemmas. But it allowed me to stay with the colourful trouble, to resist neat anonymisation, and to honour presence without presuming to know it. In each relational stroke of colour, something vibrant lingered (Haraway, 2016). Not data. Not proof. But a shimmer, a pulse, a gesture toward the child's becoming that continues to unfold.

As I closed my notebook for the final time that year, I remember a child brushing past me, leaving behind the faintest scent of glue and handwash, their newly crafted coat trailing rainbow sequins across the floor. It was such a small, ordinary moment. But it pulsed. It shimmered. In that fleeting flicker, I felt everything that had been animating this research: the vitality of presence, the resonance of relation, the impossibility of pinning it all down. The colour I later assigned that child wasn't about capturing them or even naming them at all. It was about staying with that vibrational trace, the energy of that movement, that passing flash of sequinned light and glue-scented breeze.

This is where I believe colour offers something vital: not a system of representation, but a gesture toward presence, toward encounter, toward ethical relation. In a world of data points and school readiness scores, perhaps colour allows us to pause, to remember the hum of being-with, the shimmer of becoming. What I hope this paper has offered is not a new method to be replicated, but a reorientation: a way of thinking-feeling about how we honour the children we research with, and how we might let their presence colour the work, rather than be erased from it.

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