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Tracing patterns in entangled worlds: Developing New-Hermetic Materialism for educational research

Kate Dudley, Birmingham Newman University, UK

Email: K.dudley@newman.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper proposes New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM) as a conceptual orientation for educational research, emerging from doctoral work in early childhood studies. Developed through engagement with feminist posthumanism and New Materialist scholarship, particularly the work of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway, NHM also draws on the relational cosmology found in the late antique *Corpus Hermeticum*. While New Materialism has reshaped understandings of vibrant matter, entanglement and distributed agency, Hermetic philosophy offers a way of thinking about transformation and correspondence between lived experience and the wider patterns that shape it, extending new materialist accounts of entanglement by foregrounding the tracing, recognition and ethical reshaping of patterned formations.

Grounded in empirical research while developing a conceptual contribution, the paper traces how NHM emerged through research concerned with children's identity, space and material environments, where questions of gender expression, spatial design and practitioner reflexivity revealed the limits of existing conceptual language. NHM is outlined as an ontological and ethical orientation that informed practices of representation, environmental attentiveness and reflexive decision-making. By bringing together entanglement and transformation, the framework offers a way of understanding educational spaces as active participants in children's becoming rather than neutral backdrops to development. In this way, reflexivity is reframed as entangled with environments, histories and ethical responsibility.

The paper's distinctive contribution lies in extending these approaches through the introduction of correspondence and transformation as concepts for understanding how patterned formations endure, echo across contexts and become available for

conscious recognition and change. Positioned as a situated and evolving proposition rather than a fixed theory, New-Hermetic Materialism invites educational researchers to reconsider how matter, entanglement and transformation shape learning environments, professional practice and the possibilities available to children within them.

Keywords

New-Hermetic Materialism, Early Childhood Studies, Entanglement, New Materialism

Link to article

<https://educationstudies.org.uk/?p=37007>

Introduction

In early childhood studies, a growing body of scholarship has drawn on posthumanism and new materialist perspectives to rethink child development, agency and environment (Nxumalo, 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al.*, 2017; Taylor and Hughes, 2016). Drawing on the work of Barad (2007), Bennett (2010) and Haraway (2016), such approaches challenge human-centred accounts of learning and reposition matter, space and material environments as active participants in educational life. Within early years research, this shift has enabled more complex understandings of how identities emerge through entangled relations between bodies, objects, routines and institutional conditions rather than through linear developmental pathways.

Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action unsettles assumptions of pre-existing individuals, suggesting instead that identities are formed through ongoing relational entanglement. Bennett's (2010) notion of vibrant matter invites attentiveness to the vitality and force of material environments. Haraway's (2016) insistence on situated relationality further foregrounds responsibility within entangled worlds. Together, these perspectives have opened important possibilities for understanding how early years settings participate in children's becoming.

Engaging with this scholarship during my doctoral research on children's gender expression and material environments (Dudley, 2025) was both intellectually generative and personally resonant. The emphasis on entanglement and relational

ontology aligned with the ontological commitments that had long shaped my academic engagement. My approach to research has been informed not only by contemporary theory but also by philosophical traditions that foreground interconnection and transformation, including the late antique *Corpus Hermeticum* (Copenhaver, 1992) and classical Taoist texts such as the Tao Te Ching (Laozi, 1963). The *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of late Greek antique philosophical texts, articulates a relational cosmology in which human experience is understood as part of wider patterns of correspondence and transformation. While historically positioned outside dominant scientific traditions and often associated with esoteric or marginalised forms of knowledge, such texts offer conceptual resources for thinking differently about relationality, temporality and transformation, particularly in ways that resonate with contemporary efforts within new materialist scholarship to re-engage forms of knowledge excluded from Enlightenment epistemologies. While distinct in origin, these traditions share a refusal of strict separations between human and world, emphasising instead an ongoing relational becoming.

Yet, as the research unfolded, I became increasingly attentive to how particular ways of being, organising space and responding to difference seemed to reappear across classrooms, practitioners and settings. These were not isolated incidents, but recurring patterns shaped by cultural histories, professional training and material environments (Dudley, 2025). New materialist concepts of entanglement and intra-action offered vital tools for understanding how matter and meaning emerge together within educational spaces. However, they did not fully articulate how such patterns endure across time, nor how they might be consciously recognised and transformed. Hermetic philosophy, with its emphasis on correspondence and transformation, frames lived experience as connected to wider patterns of relation and becoming. Bringing these perspectives into dialogue enabled me to understand these recurring formations not simply as entangled intra-actions in the present moment, but as patterned configurations moving between personal histories, cultural norms and material conditions, and which remain open to transformation. It was at this intersection that New-Hermetic Materialism began to take shape (Dudley, 2026). The intention of this article is therefore not to position NHM as a replacement for new materialist or posthumanist frameworks, but to articulate how correspondence and transformation extend these approaches by foregrounding the endurance, recognition and ethical reshaping of patterns within educational research.

For readers less familiar with these traditions, NHM can be understood as extending new materialist and posthuman approaches by offering a clearer way of recognising how patterns of experience, expectation and environment endure, echo across contexts, and become available for conscious reflection and transformation within educational practice. As this article is a conceptual proposition rather than a full empirical report, the doctoral study is used here to trace the emergence and application of NHM; full details of participants, ethical processes and methodological design are provided in the original thesis (Dudley, 2025). The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines, with informed consent obtained from participants, appropriate assent processes in place for children, and all participants and settings anonymised in the presentation of findings.

Why I needed another language

Within my doctoral research, I began to recognise that what was unfolding in early years classrooms could not be contained within the immediacy of the setting itself. Drawing on Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action, I understood that identities were not pre-existing attributes located within individual children, but emerged through ongoing relations between bodies, materials, spaces and expectations. A child's choice of clothing, for example, could not be separated from the spatial layout of the classroom, the organisation of resources, or the verbal and non-verbal responses of practitioners. Similarly, the positioning of construction areas, dressing-up corners or book selections did not merely reflect pedagogical decisions; they participated in shaping what forms of gender expression appeared possible, comfortable or contested. In this sense, matter was not background but participant, an idea developed in Bennett's (2010) account of vibrant matter.

Such perspectives have been influential in early childhood scholarship, particularly in challenging developmentalist models that position identity as unfolding solely from within the child (Taylor and Hughes, 2016). Nxumalo (2016) further demonstrates how place, colonial histories and environmental conditions remain entangled with everyday pedagogical practice, complicating assumptions of neutrality within educational space. These theoretical moves enabled me to see classrooms as dense sites of intra-actions rather than stages upon which pre-formed identities were performed. A growing body of research has applied new materialist thinking within early childhood education,

exploring how children's identities, environments and practices emerge through entangled relations. Studies such as Merewether (2019) and Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor (2015) demonstrate how material environments, spatial arrangements and pedagogical practices actively shape children's experiences and expressions. This work has been essential in challenging developmental and human-centred accounts of learning, foregrounding the relational and material complexity of early years settings. However, while these studies richly describe relational emergence, my research suggested the need for additional conceptual language to attend more explicitly to how patterns endure across time and how they might be recognised and transformed within practice.

During data collection, practitioners frequently reflected on how their own childhood experiences shaped the way they engaged with children. One practitioner shared that she had been labelled a 'Tom Boy' throughout her upbringing and had come to recognise how this influenced the ways she showed up in role-play areas. She reflected that her comfort with certain forms of play, and discomfort with others, subtly shaped the range of expressions she modelled and responded to in children. Her account illustrated how generational narratives about gender travel into professional practice. Research on teacher subjectivity has long recognised that educators' biographies shape classroom interactions (Britzman, 2003), while work in early childhood studies highlights how cultural norms around gender are reproduced through everyday pedagogical routines (Blaise, 2005). What became visible in these moments was not only relational emergence, but the movement of inherited expectations into present intra-actions.

These observations prompted a further question. Barad's (2007) account of spacetime-mattering already offers an important intervention here, challenging linear notions of time and emphasising how past, present and future are entangled within ongoing intra-action. While entanglement helped me describe how identities emerge in relation, it did not fully explain why certain relational patterns appeared again and again across different settings. The repetition I was noticing seemed shaped not only by immediate material conditions, but also by longer cultural and generational histories. Scholars such as Walkerdine (1997) and Davies (2003) have shown how gendered subjectivities are sustained through social and cultural repetition. What I was

encountering in early years classrooms echoed this work while also extending into the material arrangements of space and resources. I found myself needing language that could hold together the immediacy of intra-action with the endurance of inherited patterns.

This realisation reshaped my understanding of reflexivity. Within qualitative research, reflexivity is often framed as the researcher's critical awareness of positionality and influence (Finlay, 2002). While such reflection remains important, what I was encountering called for a broader form of attentiveness. Reflexivity, in this context, required recognising how inherited assumptions, embodied memories and material arrangements continue to shape present intra-actions. It meant noticing not only how I was positioned, but how histories and cultural narratives were positioned within the spaces we occupied. Reflexivity, therefore, became less about personal disclosure and more about recognising patterns within entangled relations.

It was here that philosophical traditions concerned with correspondence and transformation became relevant. The Hermetic principle often summarised as 'as above, so below,' articulated in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (Copenhaver, 1992), suggests that patterns echo across domains rather than remaining confined to isolated sites. Read alongside Barad's (2007) account of intra-action, this principle offered a way of thinking about how relational formations might extend beyond immediate interaction without reinstating separations between human and world. Where Barad's spacetime-mattering disrupts linear time by showing how past, present and future are entangled within material relations, Hermetic correspondence adds a further way of tracing how patterns echo across personal, cultural, material and more-than-human domains, becoming available for recognition and transformation. Entanglement illuminated relational emergence in the present; correspondence helped me consider how patterns might reverberate across time and context; transformation opened the possibility that such patterns are not fixed but capable of change.

Thinking with these ideas helped me recognise that what I was observing could not be understood simply as entangled relations within a classroom, but as participation in wider formations that move between personal histories, cultural norms and material conditions. In this sense, the language of entanglement, correspondence and

transformation began to offer a way of articulating what I was encountering in practice. It was through this developing dialogue between ideas that New-Hermetic Materialism began to take shape. Yet as my analysis deepened, I continued to sense that something remained under-articulated. Entanglement offered a powerful account of relational emergence in the present moment, but it did not fully explain why certain configurations seemed to endure. Why did gendered expectations reappear, even in settings committed to inclusion? Why did particular spatial arrangements subtly stabilise the same forms of participation across different contexts? The repetition I was observing appeared shaped not only by immediate intra-actions, but by longer cultural and generational trajectories moving through practice.

Articulating New-Hermetic Materialism

New-Hermetic Materialism understands transformation as both ontological and ethical. From a new materialist perspective, reality is not static but continually in process; being is always becoming through intra-action (Barad, 2007). Change, therefore, is built into existence itself. However, recognising that life unfolds through connection does not automatically produce fairness or inclusion (Braidotti, 2013). Power imbalances and normative assumptions can persist within entangled formations. Change is possible, but it unfolds within inherited configurations that move through generational memory, cultural narrative and material arrangement. NHM brings new materialism and Hermetic philosophy into dialogue through three interrelated propositions.

Life in Entanglement

Human and more-than-human worlds are intra-connected and mutually constitutive. Drawing on Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action, entities do not pre-exist their relations but emerge through them. Meaning is co-created through material-discursive engagements rather than originating within isolated subjects. This proposition aligns with post humanist commitments to decentring the autonomous human and recognising the ethical implications of entangled existence (Haraway, 2016). Life is not composed of separate parts interacting from a distance, but of ongoing intra-connections through which identities and environments take shape.

Matter matters

Matter is vibrant and agentic, influencing identity, expression and possibility within educational spaces. Bennett's (2010) account of vibrant matter foregrounds the capacity of material environments to affect and be affected, while her notion of thing-power unsettles the assumption that agency belongs only to humans. Classrooms are not neutral containers but active participants in shaping children's lived experience. NHM builds on this by asking not only how matter acts, but how material arrangements participate in the endurance and transformation of patterns over time. While Bennett's distributed agency helps recognise the liveliness of matter in the present moment, NHM traces how matter becomes entangled with histories, cultural expectations and institutional habits within educational spaces. Material configurations carry histories; they are shaped by cultural habit and institutional repetition, and in turn shape future possibilities. In this sense, classroom layouts, resources, clothing, outdoor spaces and routines are not only vibrant participants, but part of wider patterned formations that can reproduce or disrupt possibilities for identity and expression.

Becoming as transformation

Identity and expression are not fixed states but dynamic processes of co-creation. Drawing on Hermetic notions of correspondence and alchemy, becoming is understood as patterned transformation across interconnected domains (Copenhaver, 1992; Faivre, 1994). In Hermetic and alchemical traditions, transformation does not imply sudden rupture but the gradual reconfiguration of form through attentive engagement. Read alongside intra-action, this suggests that while relational formations endure, they are never final. Patterns echo across generational, cultural and material formations, yet remain open to reshaping.

Within early years contexts, this carries particular ethical weight. Practitioners participate in shaping children's lived possibilities through everyday intra-actions, spatial organisation and pedagogical response. Barad's (2007) ethico-onto-epistemology insists that knowing, being and doing are inseparable; we are accountable within the worlds we help to constitute. NHM extends this accountability by emphasising that what we bring into intra-action is never neutral. Our responses are shaped by patterns that exceed the immediate moment. Transformation, therefore,

requires recognition. It involves noticing how inherited configurations shape present decisions and consciously participating in their reconfiguration.

Hermetic correspondence provides an additional dimension to this analysis. The *Corpus Hermeticum* describes a cosmology in which human life is understood as part of wider relational orders rather than existing as a separate or isolated domain (Copenhaver, 1992). Scholars of Western esotericism describe correspondence as the idea that patterns in one area of experience may echo or resonate in another (Faivre, 1994). In other words, the ways people think, behave and organise their environments can reflect wider cultural, historical and relational formations. Read alongside Barad's concept of intra-action and Haraway's emphasis on situated relationality (Haraway, 2016), correspondence offers a way of extending relational thinking without abandoning the material focus of new materialist scholarship. It suggests that the intra-actions unfolding within educational settings are not confined to the classroom itself but are shaped by histories, social expectations and environments that extend beyond it. From this perspective, educational spaces are not self-contained sites of learning but part of broader relational fields in which identities, practices and possibilities are continually formed and reformed.

NHM is therefore not a method to be followed but an orientation that can be applied. It directs attention toward intra-connection, patterned endurance and ethical transformation. Crucially, NHM does not assume that practitioners already possess full knowledge of the cultural histories shaping their practice. Instead, it foregrounds the responsibility to remain reflexively attentive to them. Many of the influences shaping educational encounters are subtle, inherited or difficult to name, yet they continue to move through intra-actions, environments and expectations. NHM therefore positions these often-invisible influences as ethically significant: recognising them becomes part of professional responsibility within educational practice.

While articulated here through early years research, the conceptual commitments of NHM are not confined to this field. Wherever human and more-than-human formations participate in patterned configurations, NHM offers a way of recognising how such formations take shape and how they might be thoughtfully reshaped. This is where NHM extends adjacent frameworks: rather than only describing relational

entanglement or reflexive awareness, it foregrounds how patterned formations can be traced across contexts, consciously recognised, and ethically reshaped within practice.

NHM in practice

New-Hermetic Materialism did not emerge as a conceptual overlay imposed upon my doctoral research; rather, it took shape through encounters within it (Dudley, 2025). The study, concerned with children's gender expression and material environments, unfolded across a year, allowing patterns to surface gradually rather than as isolated events. NHM became discernible not through theoretical abstraction, but through moments of recognition in which entanglement alone felt insufficient to account for what was unfolding.

One such moment arose during a reflective conversation with a practitioner who described her experience of abuse within a previous relationship. She explained how her clothing choices and forms of self-expression had once been closely monitored, and how she had learned to minimise visible expressions of femininity as a strategy of safety. Over time, she realised that this history continued to shape her engagement within the classroom. She spoke of hesitating in the 'messy corner,' a space designed for creative experimentation, and of feeling constrained in modelling expansive expressive play. She also reflected on subtle differences in how she offered comfort: nurturing and lingering reassurance with boys, quicker encouragement toward resilience with girls. These were not conscious preferences but patterned responses shaped by lived experience.

Through the lens of intra-action (Barad, 2007), this moment can be understood as relational emergence: practitioner, children, materials and discourse co-constituting one another. Yet NHM widened the frame. What became visible was not only present entanglement but patterned inheritance. Teacher biography research has long recognised that educators' personal histories shape classroom practice (Britzman, 2003), while Blaise (2005) demonstrates how gender norms are reproduced through everyday pedagogical interactions in early childhood settings. NHM allowed these insights to be read not simply as social reproduction, but as patterned formations moving through intra-actions and remaining open to reconfiguration. Once recognised,

the practitioner consciously shifted her engagement. The transformation was gradual but observable in children's increased confidence and creative experimentation. Recognition became the condition of change.

A different layer of patterned formation became visible through attention to space. Children were invited to photograph their favourite places within classrooms and playgrounds, and I conducted sustained observations of their expressions within these spaces (Dudley, 2025). Despite consistent staff efforts to disrupt gendered play, certain areas stabilised familiar patterns of masculinity and femininity. Research in early childhood education has documented how spatial organisation participates in shaping gendered subjectivities (Davies, 2003; Blaise, 2005). NHM did not dispute this; it deepened it.

The shift occurred most clearly during forest school sessions. In wooded environments, children engaged differently. All children climbed trees and gathered sticks, collaborating in building nests. Hide-and-seek required shared confidence and mutual care. Hierarchies softened. A small group of children became fascinated by the age of trees, counting rings and describing trunks as grandparents, new leaves as babies and older leaves as parents. Time, ancestry and growth entered play. From a new materialist perspective, the forest can be read as a vibrant material participant reshaping intra-actions (Bennett, 2010). NHM extends this reading by attending to correspondence: patterns of growth, interdependence and generational continuity in the natural world resonated with children's social organisation. The environment did not determine behaviour, but it opened different patterned possibilities.

The third layer of recognition concerned my own positioning. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe qualitative researchers as occupying a space between insider and outsider. This in-between position resonated with my experience. I was not a member of staff, yet my previous work in early years education meant I recognised institutional rhythms and pedagogical habits. Over time, I became aware of multiple subject positions operating within me: researcher, former practitioner, mother, advocate for equity. These were not neatly separable roles but co-existing orientations that intra-acted within each encounter.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe qualitative researchers as occupying a space between insider and outsider, an in-between position that resonated deeply with my experience. I was not a member of staff within the settings, yet my previous work in early years education meant I recognised institutional rhythms, pedagogical habits and the subtle expectations embedded within daily routines. Over the year-long study (Dudley, 2025), I became increasingly aware that multiple subject positions were operating within me simultaneously: researcher, former practitioner, mother, and advocate for equity. These were not neatly separable identities, but co-existing orientations shaped by biography and professional training. Davies (2000) reminds us that subjectivity is produced through positioning within discourse, while Braidotti (2013) frames subjectivity as nomadic and multiple rather than fixed. Through this lens, multiplicity does not signal fragmentation but layered formation. I began to recognise how these layers intra-acted within moments of observation.

There were instances when I felt a strong pedagogical instinct to intervene, to scaffold a learning moment or to correct behaviour in ways aligned with my training. At other times, maternal impulses shaped my desire to comfort or protect. These responses were not simply personal preferences; they were patterned inheritances shaped by generational narratives of care and institutional expectations. Finlay (2002) describes reflexivity as ongoing critical self-awareness, yet what I was encountering felt more demanding than awareness alone. Barad's (2007) ethico-onto-epistemology insists that knowing, being and doing are inseparable; NHM sharpened this insight by reframing reflexivity as pattern recognition. It required tracing how my conditioning participated in intra-actions rather than imagining that I could stand outside them. Accessibility here matters: NHM did not ask me to remove myself from the research encounter, but to recognise how I was already part of its formation.

This shift altered my analytic practice. Instead of asking only what was happening in a given interaction, I began asking what formations were moving through it. How were generational narratives, spatial histories and material arrangements converging here? How were my own assumptions shaping what I noticed as significant? NHM thus became an orientation toward pattern work. It directed attention to intra-connection, to the endurance of patterned configurations and to the ethical responsibility of recognising and reshaping them. Although articulated through early years research,

this orientation is not field-bound. In any context where human and more-than-human formations participate in patterned arrangements, and where decisions shape the lives of others, NHM offers a way of seeing that foregrounds accountability, inheritance and transformation. It invites practitioners, researchers and leaders to recognise that change is always possible, but that meaningful change begins with noticing the patterns we carry into each moment.

Strengths and tensions of New-Hermetic Materialism

Tensions

One of the first tensions within New-Hermetic Materialism concerns its philosophical scope. NHM brings together new materialist thinking with ideas drawn from Hermetic philosophy and alchemical traditions. This means the approach adopts what might be described as a cosmological orientation. By this I do not mean that educational research should adopt spiritual doctrine or belief systems. Rather, cosmology here refers to a philosophical way of thinking about reality and our place within it. Hermetic writings such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* describe the world as structured through correspondences, where patterns resonate across different aspects of existence (Copenhaver, 1992). Scholars of Western esotericism explain correspondence as the recognition that relationships in one domain may echo patterns found in another (Faivre, 1994). In NHM this idea is not used to claim hidden universal truths or mystical forces. Instead, it functions as an ontological framing that helps us recognise that educational spaces are not sealed environments. What happens within them is shaped by wider cultural histories, generational experiences and material conditions that extend beyond the classroom.

However, drawing on these traditions can raise questions within contemporary educational research. Concepts such as cosmology or alchemy may appear unfamiliar within empirical inquiry, and readers may question whether such language moves research away from evidence-based analysis. Educational research has long emphasised the importance of grounding claims in observable practice and situated interpretation (Haraway, 1988). At the same time, recent scholarship in posthuman and new materialist educational research has argued that strictly human-centred frameworks can limit how researchers understand the complex relations shaping

learning environments (Taylor and Hughes, 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor, 2015). The challenge, therefore, lies in maintaining empirical rigour while expanding the conceptual language available to describe relational worlds. If not carefully articulated, references to Hermetic traditions could be misread as mystical explanation or symbolic metaphor rather than philosophical orientation. NHM must therefore remain precise in how these ideas are mobilised, ensuring that its engagement with Hermetic thought remains historically grounded and analytically purposeful.

A further tension concerns how such ideas can be translated into research practice. New Materialist Theory itself has generated debate about how its concepts can be operationalised within empirical research. Barad (2007) introduced the concept of intra-action to challenge assumptions of independent entities interacting, arguing instead that entities emerge through their relations. Translating this into research practice has prompted methodological discussion about how researchers can document relational emergence without reducing complex phenomena to linear causality. Lather (2007) notes that post-qualitative approaches often unsettle familiar methodological expectations, while Taylor (2016) highlights the challenges researchers face when attempting to work empirically with relational ontologies. NHM extends this methodological conversation by introducing the idea of patterned correspondence. This raises further a question: how can researchers recognise patterns across contexts without simply projecting meaning onto events?

Here the issue of reflexivity becomes central. Reflexive practice is widely recognised as essential in qualitative inquiry, encouraging researchers to critically consider how their positioning shapes interpretation (Finlay, 2002). Yet reflexivity also carries risks. Pillow (2003) warns that reflexivity can sometimes become performative, where researchers foreground their own self-awareness without meaningfully interrogating the structures shaping their interpretations. In such cases, reflection risks becoming a narrative of personal insight rather than an analytic engagement with power, history and context. NHM attempts to address this by reframing reflexivity as pattern recognition linked to ethical accountability. Instead of asking only how the researcher is positioned, the approach asks what historical, cultural and material patterns are moving through the encounter. This shift aligns with Barad's (2007) argument that knowledge production is inseparable from ethical responsibility within intra-action.

Another tension concerns what NHM asks of practitioners and researchers in practice. Central to the approach is what this paper has described as ‘pattern work’. Pattern work refers to the process of noticing how inherited ideas, institutional habits and material arrangements shape the interactions unfolding in each moment. Research in early childhood education has long recognised that educators’ beliefs, biographies and institutional contexts shape practice (Britzman, 2003; Blaise, 2005). NHM builds on these insights by encouraging practitioners to recognise how such influences operate not only through discourse but also through material environments and relational dynamics. Developing this awareness requires time for reflection and dialogue. Yet educational settings are often structured around efficiency, accountability and measurable outcomes (Ball, 2017). Within such conditions, creating space for deeper reflective practice can be challenging. NHM therefore raises practical questions about how institutions might support environments where such pattern recognition can meaningfully occur.

Finally, NHM must guard against being interpreted as a theory that attempts to explain everything. While the approach draws together multiple philosophical traditions, it is not intended as a universal framework capable of accounting for all educational phenomena. Rather, it should be understood as a particular orientation that helps researchers and practitioners notice how entanglement, inheritance and transformation operate together. Haraway (2016) reminds us that knowledge practices must remain situated and accountable to specific contexts. In this sense, NHM is best understood not as a comprehensive explanatory model, but as a conceptual lens that supports careful attention to the patterns shaping human and more-than-human intra-actions.

Strengths

Following the tensions discussed above, it is equally important to recognise the contributions that New-Hermetic Materialism offers to educational research and practice. NHM builds on relational thinking developed within new materialist scholarship while extending this work through philosophical traditions concerned with correspondence and transformation. In doing so, it provides a conceptual and ethical orientation for recognising how patterns move through educational encounters and how those patterns may be reshaped. The approach emerged through the doctoral

research that informed this paper (Dudley, 2025), where sustained engagement with children, practitioners and educational environments highlighted the need for language capable of describing entanglement, inheritance and transformation together. Three principles underpin this orientation: life in entanglement, matter matters and becoming as transformation. Together these principles provide a way of understanding how human and more-than-human worlds participate in shaping identity, practice and possibility within educational contexts.

Life in entanglement: Recognising relational worlds

The first strength of NHM lies in its attention to life in entanglement. New materialist scholarship has challenged the idea that humans act independently of the worlds around them. Barad (2007) describes reality as constituted through intra-action, where entities emerge through their relations rather than existing as separate units that later interact. Within educational research this perspective has encouraged scholars to reconsider how children, practitioners, environments and materials participate in shaping learning encounters (Taylor and Hughes, 2016). Haraway's work on relational worlds further emphasises that human lives are always situated within wider networks of ecological, social and material relations that shape how knowledge and practice unfold (Haraway, 2016).

NHM builds on these insights by drawing attention to how relational worlds carry histories within them. Educational spaces are not isolated environments but sites where generational narratives, institutional traditions and material conditions converge. Research in early childhood education has shown that children's experiences are shaped through complex relational networks involving families, practitioners, policies and environments (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor, 2015). Recognising these entanglements allows practitioners and researchers to see educational encounters not simply as individual interactions but as moments shaped by wider relational formations that influence how identities and practices develop.

Matter matters: The role of material environments

A second strength of NHM lies in its attention to the active role of material environments. Bennett (2010) argues that matter should not be understood as passive

background but as vibrant and capable of influencing events. This idea has influenced growing areas of educational research that examine how spaces, objects and environments participate in shaping children's learning experiences. Studies in early childhood education have demonstrated how classroom design, resource placement and spatial organisation influence how children interact and express identity within educational settings (Blaise, 2005).

NHM reinforces this recognition by emphasising that material environments do not simply host educational activity but participate in shaping what becomes possible within a setting. Research exploring place-based and outdoor learning environments has shown that natural settings can generate different forms of collaboration, exploration and creative play (Nxumalo, 2016). Similarly, work examining relational pedagogies highlights how spatial arrangements and material resources influence the ways children engage with one another and with educators (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor, 2015). By foregrounding the vibrancy of matter, NHM supports practitioners in recognising how environments can reinforce existing patterns or open possibilities for new forms of engagement and expression.

Becoming as transformation: Pattern recognition and change

The third principle underpinning NHM concerns becoming as transformation. New materialist scholarship emphasises that identities and relations are continually in process rather than fixed states (Barad, 2007). NHM extends this understanding by introducing the language of correspondence and transformation drawn from Hermetic philosophy. Historical interpretations of Hermetic texts describe correspondence as the recognition that patterns may echo across different domains of experience (Copenhaver, 1992). Scholars of Western esotericism further explain that such correspondences offer ways of understanding how relationships between people, environments and cultural practices may reflect broader formations (Faivre, 1994).

Within educational contexts, recognising patterned formations can create opportunities for change. Educational research has long recognised the importance of reflective practice in supporting professional learning and improving pedagogical approaches (Finlay, 2002). However, recent scholarship suggests that reflection becomes particularly powerful when practitioners are supported to examine how

institutional expectations, personal histories and social norms shape their responses within educational encounters (Ball, 2017). Research into practitioner wellbeing and professional identity further highlights that opportunities for reflective dialogue can influence how educators respond to challenges related to gender, inclusion and equity in educational environments (Osgood and Giugni, 2015). NHM contributes to this conversation by framing reflection as pattern recognition: an attentive process of noticing how inherited assumptions and relational dynamics shape interactions with children. This orientation has significant implications for children's experiences, practitioner development and the sustainability of the early years workforce, as recognising patterns can create opportunities to reshape practice in ways that support more equitable and responsive environments (Osgood and Robinson, 2021; Murray and Woodrow, 2022).

Ethical orientation: Pattern recognition as responsibility

Together, these principles contribute to a distinctive ethical orientation within NHM. If educational encounters are entangled with wider histories, environments and relational formations, then practitioners and researchers inevitably participate in shaping the world's children inhabit. Barad (2007) argues that knowing, being and acting are inseparable, a position she describes as ethico-onto-epistemology. This perspective suggests that knowledge practices are always ethical practices because they influence how realities are understood and enacted. Haraway (2016) similarly emphasises the importance of recognising the relations we inhabit and taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions within them. In educational contexts, this recognition becomes particularly significant because the decisions made by adults influence the conditions in which children grow, learn and understand themselves.

NHM therefore positions pattern recognition as an ethical practice. The conceptual language it offers helps practitioners and researchers notice how patterns of expectation, institutional practice and material arrangement shape everyday interactions. Recognising these patterns makes it possible to question them, interrupt them and reshape them where they constrain children's opportunities for expression and participation. In this way, NHM provides not simply a theoretical perspective but a practical orientation that supports educators in responding more consciously to the relational worlds they inhabit.

This discussion has outlined both the tensions and strengths of New-Hermetic Materialism as a conceptual and ethical orientation. While the framework raises important questions about interpretation, reflexivity and philosophical scope, it also offers a language for recognising how patterns of relation, environment and history shape educational encounters. These insights are not only theoretical. They have practical implications for how educators, researchers and leaders understand their roles within educational environments. The following section, therefore, considers how NHM may inform practice across different levels of education, beginning with early childhood settings where the framework originally emerged, before extending to wider educational contexts, research methodology and leadership.

Implications

Implications for educational practice

New-Hermetic Materialism emerged from research situated within early childhood education (Dudley, 2025), yet its implications extend across educational contexts. Educational environments are relational spaces where identities, behaviours and expectations are shaped through interactions between practitioners, learners, materials and institutional structures. NHM offers educators a way of recognising how these encounters are influenced not only by immediate circumstances but also by wider cultural patterns, professional histories and environmental conditions.

One implication concerns everyday pedagogical interactions. Research in early childhood education demonstrates how gender expectations and social norms are often reproduced through subtle interactions between adults and children (Blaise, 2005). Studies further show how educators' responses to children's behaviour and play remain shaped by expectations surrounding gender, care and emotional expression (Chapman, 2022; Paechter, 2021). Teachers frequently respond to learners through assumptions formed across their own experiences, training and professional cultures. NHM encourages educators to recognise these influences as they arise within everyday intra-actions. Rather than viewing pedagogical responses as isolated decisions, practitioners are invited to consider how reactions may reflect broader cultural narratives and professional habits. Such recognition can create space

for alternative responses, allowing learners greater freedom to explore identities, interests and forms of participation.

Material environments also shape educational encounters. New materialist scholarship highlights how spaces, objects and environments participate in the formation of learning experiences (Bennett, 2010). Research in early childhood education similarly shows how classroom layouts, resources and outdoor environments influence how children interact with one another and with practitioners (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor, 2015). NHM strengthens this understanding by encouraging educators to consider how environments may reinforce or disrupt patterns of behaviour and participation. Studies exploring place-based learning further demonstrate how natural environments can invite different forms of engagement, collaboration and imagination among learners (Nxumalo, 2016). Recognising the agency of material environments therefore becomes an important aspect of reflective practice.

A further implication concerns the professional lives of educators. Educational work is deeply relational and emotionally demanding, yet practitioners' experiences and identities are not always recognised within discussions of pedagogical practice. Research on teacher professionalism demonstrates that educators' biographies, values and emotional experiences influence how they engage with learners and colleagues (Osgood, 2010; Biesta, 2015). Osgood and Robinson (2021) further show how institutional pressures and policy expectations shape teachers' professional identities and wellbeing (Murray and Woodrow, 2022). These studies highlight the importance of recognising educators as reflective professionals whose experiences participate in shaping educational encounters. NHM contributes to this conversation by encouraging practitioners to remain attentive to how their histories, assumptions and professional contexts move through everyday intra-actions.

Taken together, these implications suggest that NHM supports an approach to education grounded in attentiveness to relationships, environments and histories. Recognising how expectations, experiences and institutional cultures shape educational encounters requires practitioners to have time and space to reflect on their practice. When reflection becomes embedded within professional life, professionals

are better able to recognise the entangled nature of their work and how inherited assumptions influence participation and opportunity.

Implications for research methodology

NHM also contributes to ongoing discussions about research methodology within qualitative and posthuman scholarship. New materialist and posthuman research approaches have increasingly challenged conventional assumptions about the separation between researcher and research context (Barad, 2007). Rather than treating knowledge production as an objective process conducted at a distance, these perspectives emphasise the relational nature of research encounters.

Within this context, NHM reframes reflexivity as pattern recognition. Reflexivity has long been recognised as an important aspect of qualitative research, encouraging scholars to consider how their positions influence interpretation (Finlay, 2002). However, methodological debates have also highlighted the limitations of reflexivity when it focuses primarily on personal disclosure (Pillow, 2003). NHM extends this conversation by encouraging researchers to examine how historical, institutional and material patterns shape research encounters. This orientation aligns with broader developments in post-qualitative inquiry that emphasise relational analysis and ethical accountability within research practices (Lather, 2007; Taylor and Hughes, 2016).

By encouraging researchers to trace patterns across interactions, environments and histories, NHM provides a methodological orientation that supports relational forms of analysis. Rather than isolating individual variables or experiences, researchers are invited to consider how multiple influences converge within educational encounters. In this way, NHM contributes to methodological approaches that seek to understand the complexity of educational life.

Implications for leadership and policy

Finally, NHM has implications for educational leadership and policy contexts. Educational leaders play an important role in shaping the conditions within which reflective and relational practices can occur. Research examining educational systems highlights how policy frameworks and accountability structures influence the priorities and practices of educational institutions (Ball, 2017). Within such environments,

opportunities for sustained reflection can become limited as practitioners focus on meeting externally defined outcomes and performance expectations.

NHM suggests that meaningful transformation within educational practice requires organisational cultures that actively support reflection and collaborative inquiry. Theories of learning organisations emphasise that professional learning occurs most effectively when institutions create environments where staff are encouraged to question assumptions, share experiences and reflect collectively on practice (Senge, 2006). In educational contexts, this means creating cultures in which practitioners are able to examine how their beliefs, experiences and professional habits influence their work with children and families. Research on professional learning communities similarly highlights the importance of collaborative dialogue and shared reflection in developing responsive educational practice (Stoll *et al.*, 2006). When reflective conversations are embedded within everyday professional interactions, they can support deeper understanding of how institutional norms and personal experiences shape practice.

From an NHM perspective, leadership therefore carries an ethical dimension. If educational encounters are shaped by relational patterns involving practitioners, children, environments and institutional cultures, then leaders play a crucial role in shaping the conditions within which those patterns are recognised and reshaped. Educational change research suggests that sustainable improvement is most likely when institutions support collaborative reflection and shared responsibility for practice (Fullan, 2016). Leaders therefore have an ethical responsibility to create environments where practitioners are supported to recognise how their own experiences, assumptions and professional histories influence their interactions with others.

This responsibility extends beyond individual professional development. Pattern recognition is also a workforce issue. When practitioners are given opportunities to reflect collectively on their experiences and values, they are better able to understand how their individual histories and perspectives shape team dynamics within educational settings. Such reflection can strengthen team cohesion, as practitioners develop shared awareness of the relational patterns influencing their work together. This has implications not only for staff wellbeing but also for the environments created

for children and families. Leaders who prioritise reflective dialogue therefore contribute to workplaces where practitioners are supported to engage consciously with the patterns shaping their practice, strengthening both professional relationships and the quality of care and education offered within the setting.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced New-Hermetic Materialism as an ontological and ethical orientation developed through research in early childhood education (Dudley, 2025). Drawing on insights from new materialist scholarship and Hermetic philosophical traditions, NHM offers a language for recognising how educational encounters are shaped through entangled relations between people, environments and inherited patterns of experience. Through the principles of life in entanglement, matter matters and becoming as transformation, the framework highlights how identity and practice emerge through relational intra-actions rather than fixed individual characteristics.

Across the paper, NHM has been articulated through examples from practice and consideration of its conceptual foundations, strengths and tensions. Together, these discussions suggest that recognising patterns within educational environments is not only an analytic task but an ethical one. Practitioners, researchers and leaders participate in shaping the worlds that children inhabit, and attentiveness to the relational and material patterns shaping these encounters can support more reflective and responsive practice.

Within the doctoral study, this was evident in moments where patterns became visible in practice. Noticing how particular spatial arrangements consistently drew gendered patterns of play led to a reconfiguration of resources and layout, creating different possibilities for interaction. Similarly, recognising how practitioner responses were shaped by prior experience prompted reflective dialogue within the team, enabling more conscious and responsive engagement with children. These moments illustrate how NHM operates not as an abstract framework, but as an applied orientation that supports the recognition and reshaping of patterned formations within everyday educational contexts.

Although developed through early childhood research, NHM has relevance across educational contexts. Rather than offering a prescriptive model, it provides an orientation for recognising how relations, environments and histories shape educational experience. In doing so, NHM invites further exploration not only of how patterns can be recognised, but of how this recognition might inform ongoing research, practitioner development and more practitioner-facing applications within educational contexts.

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