

More-than-gender? Moving beyond gendered expectations of divergent learners in early childhood education

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Citation:

CHURCHILL DOWER, Ruth and HOGARTH, Hannah (2026). More-than-gender? Moving beyond gendered expectations of divergent learners in early childhood education. British Educational Research Journal. [Article]

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More-than-gender? Moving beyond gendered expectations of divergent learners in early childhood education

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore how neurodivergent ways of being in early education are often gendered. The intersectionalities of gender and neurodivergence often lead to fixed expectations that perpetuate binary interpretations, pathologisations, missed diagnoses and a lack of curated support. Girls tend to be schooled from a young age in performing socially acceptable roles that delineate them as 'good' girls. Yet normative expectations can be highly challenging for girls' bodies and brains labelled 'neurodivergent' because they function differently. We argue that all divergent bodies desire/require space for sensory-kinaesthetic-movement-haptic-cognitive experiences to function well. The paper shares two stories of young girls in UK settings who don't speak. Each 'neurodivergent' storying resists expectations of how a body should be within oppressive learning systems that regulate according to gendered rules. Extending our PhD research, we trouble traditional figurations of 'girl' and suggest alternative ways educators might teach-care for them. We think-with how relational arts-based methodologies and pedagogies can improvise, transform and activate encounters of alterity that sense the productivities of what a (girl's) differently functioning body can do. We wonder how educational environments might move beyond gendered models of divergence and conclude with a proposal for 'more-than' early childhood pedagogies.

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KEYWORDS

early childhood, intra-sectionality, more-than gender, neurodiversity

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

The paper argues that neurodivergence and gender are closely intertwined in early childhood education. Traditional educational systems often rely on gendered expectations, which can make neurodivergent girls invisible, misunderstood, or unsupported. The authors challenge the idea that there is a single “normal” way for children to learn, communicate, or participate.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This research advocates for inclusive, arts-based, sensory-rich pedagogies that recognise and support diverse ways of being, learning, and communicating. Introducing the notion of “more-than gender”, the authors call for moving beyond binary, deficit-based understandings of gender and neurodiversity in educational environments by developing creative early childhood pedagogies that nurture difference.

INTRODUCTION

Neurodivergent ways of being in early education are often gendered, judged and disciplined. We suggest that the intersectionality of gender and neurodivergence can lead to fixed expectations for certain behaviours that perpetuate binary interpretations (e.g., boy/girl, neurotypical/neurodivergent, brain/body) (Murriss, 2016), pathologisations and misunderstandings (Bailey, 2023). This can lead to missed diagnoses especially for girls and a lack of curated support that could make a big difference in terms of access to learning (Douglas et al., 2019; Duvekot et al., 2017). Furthermore, neurodivergent diagnoses are measured against a baseline of neurotypicality shaped by a universal developmental model. As such, divergent bodies are always othered by default and policed according to class, gender, race, ability and culture (Manning, 2016). Storying two postdevelopmental divergent bodyings, we explore how given identities can be reframed as dynamic, more-than-human relational encounters that refuse containment and resist such fixities. We suggest alternative taxonomies that honour the indeterminacies of gender-divergent becomings while acknowledging the challenge of any taxonomy to be truly open to fluidity. But thinking-with these divergent bodyings, we find ourselves moved, changed and drawn towards what black transfeminist scholar, Marquis Bey calls ‘sites of exquisite rebellion [that are] testament to how we could move differently, think differently, en- and ungender differently in proximity to unsanctioned imaginaries’ (Bey, 2023). This has implications across the fields of gender, disability and neurodevelopmental studies as well as for educational policy and practice.

Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality recognises the connections across social categories and identity differentiations. We diffract¹ this with Barad's onto-epistemology² that frames all matter (and discourse) as being in continual relational transformation and

we adopt the term 'intra-sectionality' as a way to acknowledge the porosity and instability of boundaries around identities. While the oppression of nonconforming bodies often works to determine and perpetuate social classifications, the universalisation of intersectional connectivities can serve to fix and reinforce their distinctions. This invisibilises the complexities of the indeterminate existences bodies may inhabit and thus retain the imbalances of power that oppress in the first place (Leppänen & Tiainen, 2018). Following Barad (2007), Leppänen and Tiainen (2018) promote thinking-with intra-sectionality in research, emphasising Puar's (2012) focus on 'the constantly temporal, situation-bound, and multidimensional dynamism of modes of being [...] which take shape in relation to one another during a given occasion' (2018, p.1). This shape-shifting makes identities irreducible to biological, cultural or historical assignments of gender, neurotype, race or other defining characteristics that are used to limit the more-than-human potentiality of bodies-in-relation.

Drawing on our research in early childhood arts and environmental education, we have noticed that early years settings promoting inclusivity agendas tend to focus on the boundaries around identity/subject in order to secure the rights of the individual. This can be problematic in diminishing the multiplicity and fluidity of identities, othering difference and maintaining human-centred power hierarchies (Watson et al., 2020). Well-intentioned, many inclusivity policies serve to promote *becoming-other* as a generative— even joyful— journey, without acknowledging the political, economic and cultural forces acting on and oppressing bodies of difference. Developmental models dominate education and particularly in Western early childhood curricula, pedagogy and assessment which follow the identification of key milestones that measure whether a child is 'developing' at a rate that is considered 'normal' (see for example, Department for Education, 2023). This focus on developmental milestones means there is less room for diversity and complexity in methodological and pedagogical approaches (Moss, 2015, p.229). reducing ways and possibilities for living differently in the world.

Nonetheless, in drawing attention to ableist and gendered policies, we recognise the struggles of managing curriculum, policy and practice demands. With these insights, we explore how pedagogies might be capable of *becoming-with* divergence within these contexts (Haraway, 2016). We engage the relational ontologies of posthuman feminist materialisms that position divergence as being *more-than* neurology, biology, psychology, pathology or genetics and recognise the everyday burdens of teaching-care carried by education professionals who are looking for alternative approaches to the homogenous definitions of inclusion policies (Taylor & Giugni, 2012).

Sharing stories of divergence from two young girls who don't speak, we investigate how their resistance to the gender-normative expectations of how a body *should behave* offers insights into new ways of teaching-caring-relating with them. We unfold stories of entangled relations that defy the maskings of normativity and push the borders of being into unpredictable, unknowable and uncommon shapes. We exemplify scholarship and practices that work differently with these shapes in early education where the awkwardnesses and dishumanities of divergent bodies can be understood as productive (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016; Lorimer, 2014). Far from policing and regulating, we argue that divergent bodies desire/require space for sensory-kinaesthetic-movement-haptic-cognitive experiences to function well, and educational practices that support an ethics of care for becoming-with and responding differently (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Such practices require moving beyond gendered rules and 'neurotypical' developmental understandings.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to unfasten the constructed boundaries of neurotypicality and disrupt developmental gendered classifications that become more complex for divergent ways of learning. We ask how educational environments could be reshaped to foster intra-sectionality, assuming identities are more-than-human processes of becoming (Barad, 2007; Leppänen & Tiainen, 2018).

Dismantling the homogeneity in 'neuro', 'typical', 'divergent' 'bodies'

In order to discuss the challenges of a gendered neurodivergent education, we need to begin by exploring understandings of 'neuro' 'typical' 'divergent' 'bodies'. Throughout this paper, we refer to divergent bodies that include the brain. Within the term 'bodies' we also include the skeletal, muscular, visceral, digestive, respiratory, cognitive, sensory, hormonal (endocrine), nervous, neuronal, limbic, cerebral and other systems that contribute towards functioning in-relation-with environments whose elements work through, on, in and against bodies. In support of Haraway's challenge, 'why should bodies end at the skin?' (Haraway, 1991, p. 178), we also include bodies of air, water, bacteria, affects and other molecules or micro-organisms that are entangled within, and beyond, the boundaries of the skin. With Barad (2007), Haraway (1991, 2016) and Manning (2009), we posit that bodies and environments are co-constitutive, working beyond the bounds of human, natural, physical, social, cultural or political, and continually intra-acting, with radical effects. Manning explains:

'When the skin becomes not a container but a multi-dimensioned topological surface that folds in, through and across spacetimes of experience, what emerges is not a self but the dynamic form of a worlding that refuses categorization. Beyond the human, beyond the sense of touch or vision, beyond the object, what emerges is relation'

(Manning, 2009, p.42).

Foregrounding more-than-human bodies in this way, we seek to disrupt the dominant narrative of the cognitive brain embedded in much neurodivergence literature which does not account for entangled ways of relating and becoming.

Nick Walker (2021) suggests using the terms 'neurodivergent' or 'neurodivergence' to refer to people who identify as functioning and processing information 'in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of "normal"' (2021, p.38). He confirms that neurodivergence is not synonymous with autism, neither is it the same as neurodiversity which relates to the diverse characteristics of *any* group. We use the term *divergence*, as in *nonconforming*, que(e)rying the normative, homogenous, oppressive classifications of different 'neurotypes'. Walker holds that 'neurotypicality' is not a synonym for 'the norm', but an acknowledgement that normative types and roles are socially and culturally constructed. Humans are trained to perform *neuronormativity* (the dominant cultural perception of how a 'normal' person thinks, looks and behaves). Therefore, Walker argues, neurotypicality is a useful term to describe how someone might 'live, act, and experience the world in a way that consistently falls within the boundaries of neuronormativity – i.e., what the prevailing culture *imagines* a person with a 'normal mind' to be like. That's quite different from saying that a person actually *has* a normal mind or a normal brain' (2021, p.58).

While appreciating the nuanced intersecting of neurodivergence with social and political forces, we suggest this argument remains problematic from the perspective that 'typical' still perpetuates the concept of normality being a universalised type, biologically and socially.³ Yet, as research is increasingly revealing the unboundedness and intra-dependence of all species and types,⁴ we find the suggestion that a single neurotype might exist for autism (or any divergent constellation) to be highly problematic. Such a fixed, developmentalist classification assumes a biological essentialism and a 'homogeneous cognitive profile' (Hollin, 2017) across all neuro-atypical progression, which is now highly contested (Hassall, 2016; Walker, 2021), yet it continues to pervade scientific research into 'neuro' divergent modes.

Much of the early research into autism, especially by developmental psychology scholars, Simon Baron-Cohen and Uta Frith, suggests a neurotype for autism based on a theory of

mind⁵ deficit (Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019). Verhoeff (2012) described this as science's "tenacious search for autism's essence" (in Hassall, 2016, p.63) – to identify a characteristic that determines an autistic type that differs from non-autistics – which has dominated research in this field since the early 1940s. Furthermore, many pathology- or psychology-based scholars claim a growing evidence base for a female 'phenotype' for autism, which is also highly contested (Hassall, 2016; Rippon, 2024). Baron-Cohen's tests to find the causes and cure for autism, for instance, initially mapped a pathological notion of a normative brain, mind and body across a small sample size of mostly white, English, autistic boys, which he claimed represented a universal type for biologically male brains and that the rarity of autistic girls being diagnosed was caused by an oversupply of testosterone. However, these tests have never since been replicable or generalisable (Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019; Hassall, 2016). In fact, contemporary autism scholars such as Richard Hassall (2016) confirm that, 'there appears to be no *single* distinctive psychological or neurodevelopmental disorder represented by the concept of 'autism' (2016, p.49). We seek to move beyond pathological and medical models that place neurodivergence as a singular disability and a problem of the individual that needs to be cured.

A sense of neurodivergent situations⁶ being other-than 'the norm' pervades cultural structures through ableist languages, developmental education models and ongoing pathologising research (Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019), especially for girls. Goodley & Runswick-Cole (2016) and Goodley et al. (2016) emphasise that the last eight decades of normalising 'neurotypicality' in academic research 'is closely connected to real, symbolic, structural and systemic violence in the lives of people labelled with autism' (2016b, p. 317), acknowledging that using labels reinforces deficit categorisations of 'us' and 'them' which serve to 'violently mark our children, peers, friends and allies' (2016a, p. 1). Therefore, in our quest to resist 'marginalising and homogenising discourses around dis/abilities and inclusion practices that isolate children diverging from normative standards [...] potentially making this research complicit in *othering* practices' (Churchill Dower, 2025, p.260), we challenge the status quo of normative lingual assumptions which constitute the other as Other, or, 'Difference as apartheid' (Barad, 2014, p. 170). We subvert conventional naming protocols around neurodivergent situations by referring to divergent bodyminds without defining their borders, knowing that this does not undo histories and futures of oppression, but attempts to think about difference differently.

Queer(y)ing and moving beyond norms to the more-than...

We use *beyond* to signal a move away from developmentalism as a normative, standardising framework, encouraging readers to attend to alternative forms of expression and communication, and to recognise bodies as always intra-acting rather than discrete, deficient subjects. Our aim is not to go *beyond autism* as a diagnostic category, which both burdens individuals with claims of developmental lack and simultaneously grants access to support that enables bodies of difference to function in the world. Instead, *beyond* marks a limiting boundary—one that invites movement past deficit-based interpretations of autism and the tools that measure it.

We understand neurodivergence as *more-than* what can be captured in words—exceeding the boundaries that artificially separate bodies of difference while still acknowledging the bodies involved. The notion of *more-than* also recognises the histories, politics, cultures, environments and wider forces that shape bodies of difference. Although moving *beyond* words (or the absence of words) still involves their effects, some sensory or affective experiences may resist being articulated, or even grasped at, through any other modality than the

sensual (Manning, 2020). For this reason, we maintain that pedagogies *beyond* words hold value both in this paper and in practice.

We draw on Manning's notion of *excess* to reconceptualise *more-than* sensations, highlighting the intensified sensing practices common in neurodivergent bodies—sensations that exceed neurotypical experiences. As Manning (2020) notes, attending to the *more-than* 'amplifies the qualities of expression that exceed normative human interaction, allowing the interplay to be in excess of cause–effect. More than the sum of its parts.' (p. 60). Such excess of feeling is often framed as an excess of being: bodies that 'sense too much' (p. 249) to articulate separation from the world's touch. Electricity continues to be felt coursing beneath the skin after the lights have been switched off; momentum persists in the organs long after motion has stopped; nearby and distant sounds blur in frequency, volume and meaning. Sensations overlap, become blurred, irreducible to individual senses or bodies and at times become overwhelming.

Yergeau (2018) and Walker (2021) draw attention to neuroqueering as a useful 'practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously' (2021, p.160). Throughout this paper, we extend this concept to include the idea of 'que(e)rying' (Churchill Dower, 2025, p.33) to emphasise the importance of always being curious and never assumptive in queering practices. Walker emphasises that neuroqueer is not a synonym for neurodivergence or gender identity, but a generative process that 'points to a horizon of creative possibility' (2021, p.176) which resists the fixed essentialisms of neuro- and heteronormativity. This is strengthened by Hassall's proposition that 'the lack of any broadly agreed theory about a common underlying deficit, coupled with the failure to find any neurological or genetic explanation for the condition, must raise doubts about whether the term 'autism' actually refers to any stable and unique entity at all' (2016, p.63). Thus, intra-sectional neuroqueering seems to us to be an important project to translate into practice, and we begin to consider how, as follows.

The consequences of gendered diagnoses in education

One of the consequences of marginalising and homogenising discourses arises in the social training towards gender roles, based on the shape of genitalia at birth (Walker, 2021), which reinforces the continued gendering of neurodevelopmental models in education. Thus research is dominated by gendered diagnoses for neurodivergent 'conditions', which are increasing at such a rate that figures are likely to be grossly inaccurate, although they are helpful for revealing diagnosis trends. Autism diagnoses⁷ alone increased by 787% between 1998 and 2018 (Russell et al., 2022) and, despite the assessment tools developed from research based on predominantly male samples mean girls and women 'need to be struggling more than male peers to get a diagnosis, and on average it takes 2-3 years longer' (Wassell & Burke, 2022, p.5), we find that gender plays a significant role in neurodivergent diagnoses and affects how girls are taught.

Girls remain underrepresented in autism⁸ and ADHD diagnoses by 4:1 (boy: girl). Autistic and ADHD 'traits'⁹ in girls are less likely to be identified, diagnoses less likely to be sought and clinics may be under-identifying autistic girls during diagnostic processes, hence often being diagnosed at a much later age than boys (Duvekot et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2022). Yet, the age at which parents first have concerns and the number of visits to healthcare professionals during the diagnosis period are similar for both boys and girls (Begeer et al., 2013; Siklos & Kerns, 2007). Mattila et al. (2011) conducted a population-based study that attempted to gain a better understanding of the prevalence of autism and found that the gender ratio fell to as low as 1.8:1 (boys: girls). This supports our concern that, while diagnoses appear to be quite gendered in ascertaining the 'causes' and 'treatments' for different neurodivergent

situations, there are many intra-sectional influences on assessments, including the cultural bias of assessors which differ hugely across locations (Latif, 2016; Rippon, 2024).

We argue that misconceptions arise because the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5* (DSM 5) (APA, 2013) was founded on early research from a small sample size of boys whose behavioural expectations were different from those of girls, thus establishing a diagnostic bias towards white, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-male subjects (Çelik, 2017; Rippon, 2024). This exclusion of females from autism research creates layers of adverse effects beginning in the early years, such as poor mental health, depression and anxiety, an increase in bullying and marginalisation, increased sensory sensitivities, meltdowns, shutdowns and mutism (Wassell & Burke, 2022). These situations are not identified in the diagnostic criteria for autism and, as a result, the divergent bodily expressions that can arise sometimes lead to misdiagnoses. It also means not only that diagnostic criteria do not change to reflect girls' complex social expressions but that diagnoses give permission for health and education professionals to interpret 'nonconforming' behaviours in deficit ways. Diagnostic labels become aligned with what bodies cannot do and lever negative expectations on bodies that are seen as unproductive and inefficient (Lorimer, 2014). It gives educators the power to determine who has the right to receive support and of what kind, ultimately giving them 'the power to affect how individuals are perceived in the long term, both by others and by themselves' (Hassall, 2016, p.64).

Scholars have suggested many reasons for the under/mis/late diagnosis of women and girls yet many of these are doubly problematic in perpetuating gender stereotypes. Too often, girls tend to be schooled from a young age in performing socially acceptable roles that delineate them as a 'good girl' (Hackett et al., 2024; MacLure et al., 2012). This encultured gender difference, often presented through coping strategies such as masking and camouflaging (Wassell & Burke, 2022), carries through to nursery and school settings where divergent girls and boys experience different responses from teachers, reinforcing binary gendered expectations that consider biology as the only marker of gender. Yet normative expectations can be highly challenging for divergent bodies whose social, cultural and lingual expressions may function in complex, unpredictable and ungendered ways (Bey, 2023). For instance, while the social skills of non-autistic people may not feel intuitive or make sense to some autistic girls, they may be highly skilled at observing and copying peers' behaviours in masking techniques that pass as non-autistic. The consequence of this, however, is the simultaneous regulation and repression of behaviours that do feel intuitive (such as stimming or expressing strong opinions) so as not to stand out (Wassell & Burke, 2022).

We wonder, do our current educational practices make girls feel more pressure than boys to conform to a non-divergent stereotype: to perform neuronormativity? And is the domination of pathologised research tropes in educational inclusion policies making it harder for children and young people to explore and reclaim more-than-gendered, neuroqueer possibilities?

There is a dearth of neurodivergence research focussing on gender-diverse people, partly because conventional research often pathologises gender diversity as a dysphoria and/or neurodevelopmental disorder. The majority of the literature in the intersection of gender and neurodiversity studies adopts binary terms to describe and research boys and girls, ignoring the complexities around sex and gender assignation. This is particularly concerning due to the higher rates of neurodivergent people who identify as gender-fluid (Wassell & Burke, 2022) and/or gender diverse (George & Stokes, 2018) and experience increased marginalisation as a result of not 'fitting' into gender stereotypes or 'acceptable' categorisations (Hassall, 2016).

As a result of being mis- or undiagnosed, girls and gender-diverse people have been continually seen as a problem, described as non-communicative, difficult or being broken

and in need of 'fixing' (Goodley et al., 2016). While behavioural 'treatments' are offered to fix divergent bodies, they can never offer a 'cure' to what is more-than biological or neurological and what, we propose, is not a mental or physical 'condition' but a way of *doing worldly relations differently*, indefinable by discrete categories (Fletcher-Watson, 2022). A broader understanding of environmental influences within divergent functioning/responses is required in pedagogical practices, particularly in relation to the vital sensory learning that takes place in the nervous, gut microbial, endocrine, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic and synaesthetic systems before cognitive understanding or verbal articulation can even take place (Massumi, 2002). Recognising this complexity is vital to becoming-with divergent modes of expression beyond traditional gender-based assumptions. In a generative, fluid worlding where human-nonhuman environments continually diverge in-relation, what matters is aspiring towards educational processes where difference isn't othered.

The following section shares two stories where girls relate-with fluid worldings that are always, already more-than-gender. We think of data as being both a story and a continual process, i.e. processual. This is quite different to narrative stories in that these data aren't complete stories. They are ongoing tellings and re-tellings that exist in many different forms in many different bodies, minds, timescales and environments. Our stories (or 'storyings' to emphasise their active nature) draw from research-creation methodologies (Manning, 2016) that emerged during our PhD research, one exploring the possibilities of movement for non-lingual young children in the north of England (Churchill Dower, 2022, 2025) and the other exploring possibilities of childhoodnature play and nature relations in an urban forest school in London, UK (Hogarth, 2024a, 2024b; Hogarth et al., 2024). While these data emerged during our PhDs, we have both re-turned and re-composed our thinking-with data, influenced by Barad (2007), Tsing (2015) and Haraway's (2016) considerations of the more nuanced entanglements of data's multiple identities, which are storied as follows.

Storying more-than-human bodies

In an art gallery, among tents and cushions and sticks and legs, wiggles a long line of masking tape (Figure 1). We are trying out different ways of moving along wiggly, wavy lines; twirling, crawling, jumping, skipping, rolling and sliding. Inspired by the children's imaginations for new movements, I spend a lot of time moving on my belly, hands, knees and back along this expansive floor, sensing its dimensionalities differently, relating with it through outstretched shapes and close proximities I had never felt before. Like the go-pro cameras fixed to the floor, I begin to see things upwards, to sense new dimensions to the space. Looking down from our lofty adult height seems to flatten everything. Looking up opens the vertical as well as the horizontal horizons, movement pushing beyond the boundaries of furniture and walls, out through the skylights to the sky beyond. Now closer to my eyeline, short legs become tall, darting feet are prolific, little limbs multiply in speed and frequency, and many squeals, squawks and vocal gestures are transmitted in the soundwaves hanging way above my head.

As well as horizons becoming fluid, this is a movement of scales. I need to recalibrate everything since the familiar measuring of my position (and everyone else's) against a fixed axis is not possible with any certainty upside down. Gone is the floor's flatness, unwavering steadiness and solidity. I stop looking and thinking with my eyes and instead, slither along on my back with them closed. Immediately the resonance of the floor merges with my nervous and sensory systems, every jump or skip stimulating a plethora of tiny responses from my muscles. Every quiet slide of tiptoes balancing a small body along the line becomes an increasingly loud scratching as they get closer to my head. The rhythmic tapping of two big sticks along the floor in unison with a little boy's forward jumps re-shapes my internal



FIGURE 1 Mapping movement, lines, legs and spaces. Image by Ruth Churchill Dower.

soundscape, the *clod-thud-clod-thud-clod-thud* of stick-sock landings resonating as visceral invitations. The line is calling our bodies in many ways, on many levels, in many languages. A conversation of movements, vibrations and frequencies flows around multiple dimensions, sensations and conjunctions that seem to compel our bodyminds to change shape and interact differently. These transcorporeal intra-actions seem to be felt by all in that space, responding with, and inviting the moving curvatures of the line to dance with them accordingly.

Other than the initial introduction to invite limbs and lines to move as they wish, no voices are raised or interpretations offered, simply an absorption in experimentation. Silent curiosities become embodied – *What might happen if...? Could we move like this...? How does this feel...? Shall we try this...?* – as little and big bodies, lines and spaces, move together. Barad (2014) urges us to focus on the quantum multiplicity and in/determinacies enacted by agential cuts such as these when cutting together-apart (2014, p.177). The multiplicity of lines, jumps, sticks, balances, squeals, spaces and young bodies brings new opportunities for knowing and learning when perspectives are inverted. Despite the social signals from dinosaur shorts and flowery dresses, in this space these bodies are neither girl nor boy, but an embodiment of vital resonances, forces, frequencies and expressions connecting through different lines of movement (Manning, 2016). Their divergences are neither gendered nor limited to normative boundaries; rather, their synaesthetic, kinesthetic and neurological qualities are invited through an open, sense-based environment.

While bodies improvise with movement and connection, it is not entirely unplanned. Careful thought precedes the curation of the space in order to identify and prevent factors that might limit divergent, non-speaking relations wherever possible – instructions, interpretations, exposure, judgements and so on. In this space, the affective, atmospheric frequencies are keenly felt and my researcher bodymind works hard to keep normative expectations

at bay so that we might be open to be moved by the affective waves upon our bodies. This is not just about setting up a classroom space for embodied learning; it is a political move that creates space to move-with the multiple identities, influences and memories within and around our bodies.

After the fieldwork, I consider how Barad describes such multiplicities as an 'indeterminacy'—an ongoing iteration of movements that are 'a holding together of the disparate within' (Barad, 2014, p.177). I take this to mean there can never be a molecular separation between disparate movements, bodyminds, affects and sensations, which are always already touched by, and entangled with, divergent and normative, gendered and non-gendered phenomena. These are not binary effects but a constellation of movements moving each other, just as divergence is a constellation of affective relations across bodies and environments, histories and cultures. It is through these sensorial experiences that educators can become in touch (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p.98) with other possibilities for learning; activating 'the not-yet already alive in the interstices and mak[ing] it reverberate' (Manning, 2020, p.123).

From this, I diffract an image (see Figure 1) of these encounters using photo editing software. I improvise with making familiar expectations unfamiliar. It is an ethico-political move to make strange the sight of legs running across thin air, the unpredictable movements of jumping and balancing, the invisible line cutting off human heads, and the distorted scales of miniaturised bodies against enlarged play tents. It draws viewers to look closely and, like a 'Where's Wally?' image, try to sort out the unfamiliar, yet strangely familiar, sense of what they are seeing, because '[s]ense and nonsense walk together hand in hand' (Olsson, 2009, p.5). It challenges preconceptions of gendered, divergent learners because, '[t]hrough these unfamiliar perspectives, movement improvisation invites relations and sensations through touch, not necessarily between humans, but through a congealing of material-discursive agencies reconfiguring boundaries and re-mapping a more-than-bodily transit' (Churchill Dower, 2025, p.211). This fluidity of boundaries and scales suggests a dynamic indeterminacy, where '[t]here is no absolute outside; the outside is always already inside. In/determinacy is an always already opening up-to-come. In/determinacy is the surprise, the interruption, by the stranger (within) re-turning unannounced' (Barad, 2014, p.178).

In an ethics of care, (Figure 1) the above image decentres the children and focuses on relations between the sticks, lines, shapes and sizes, bashing out rhythms along the floor, jumping, balancing, running, feeling, rolling, clodding— all generative aspects of what young bodies do in their diverging ways. Changing the scale changes the way we think about more-than-human and more-than-gendered bodies-in-relation, prompting questions about how we view children's bodies, the ways they move differently and their relations with spaces.

More-than-brown-girls paint and bodies

Newspaper is dipped into the oozy, jelly-like glue and mixed until its fibres start to fall apart. Fingers prod and stir and rub and scoop. Dollops of sludge are placed on the board and smeared around.

We are creating a model of our forest school site to think about space. As we do so, we think/mould/move/remember/talk about forest school, and the children say where they like to play and what they were doing when we were there the day before.

"Eating bread cooked on the [camp]fire".

"Mine got burned".

"Tying a rope around Stickman's feet!"

"Yeah!"

I am so engrossed in the conversation that I had not noticed that Fatima next to me is painting her arms with brown paint. Fatima (a self-chosen pseudonym), paint brush and



FIGURE 2 Shaking up mud and pedagogies. Image by Hannah Hogarth with art work and collaging by Hannah Hogarth, Fatima, Stickman and Miss Jasmine (all names are self-chosen pseudonyms by the child co-researchers).

brown paint are playing together. I panic as I see the paint getting close to her red school jumper, sleeves rolled up. I am a researcher but not a teacher and I think about what her parents might say. I suggest putting the paintbrush down and she does but immediately dips her hands in the tray of paint and then smears the paint up and down her forearms with her palms. The paint is squeezed between her fingers as she clenches her palms together and watches, fascinated as the paint emerges in the gaps.

A teaching assistant steps behind Fatima and holds her elbows at the end of her jumper and guides her to the sink where she puts Fatima's arms under the taps and washes the paint off. It is gently done but Fatima still lets out a shriek and wriggles and sways. Brown, watery paint is splashed against the tiles and splattered on the floor. I find myself apologising.

Back at forest school, a glass jar is dipped into a muddy puddle to scoop up mud and water (Figure 2). A leaf is dropped by small fingers and a lid attached. Glass is shaken and mud starts to settle at the bottom. Glass is placed under Fatima's arms and carried around the park.

Sitting down to write these moments into my thesis, I wonder how I might write with Fatima and mud and glass jars and oozy paint on arms and in palms? How can we write in ways that do not reduce or pathologise? How might we think-with and become-with these moments not to view Fatima as lacking or diverging but as Fatima-in-relation, Fatima-paint-texture-worlding. How might I meet the world each day with Fatima's openness? To explore the textures of the world? Without trying to work out where Fatima ends and the world begins? How might, as Barad (2007) argues, the 'undoing of the very idea of an inherent nature-culture boundary [become] a useful tool, if not a prerequisite for destabilizing sexism, racism and homophobia and other social ills that are propped up by this dualism?' (2007, p.368–9).

Storying as a divergent approach to education

In wondering how gendered education has created *and* resisted difference-making in our research, we explored how relational arts-based methodologies and pedagogies offered an

important key to decentring the human-adult-teacher-expert in lieu of privileging the more-than processes of *becoming-with* (Haraway, 2016) (as opposed to *becoming-other*). We found that an arts-based approach incited a position of vulnerability whereby a teacher could improvise, transform and activate encounters of alterity that sensed the productivities of what a differently gendered, differently functioning body could do (Spinoza, 1949).

As we storied, we moved with the ongoing sensations, affects, environments and situations emerging from each divergent situation. The more we practiced diversity in our pedagogies, spaces and institutions, the more the participants and educators flexed to seek non-neurotypical ways of communicating, playing, teaching, learning, being in outside spaces and setting up classrooms differently; thinking otherwise with costumes, props, materials and resources to actively prevent perpetuating normative and oppressive gender- or divergent-based identity 'types'. Positioning ourselves not to observe for particular behaviours but to be open to more-than happenings that defy conventional judgements meant being ready to experience the otherwise ways in which divergent learning continued to affect, move, challenge, cause tensions and find alternative pathways. We felt challenged to imbue and embed moving-agenting-changing approaches to teaching and learning, to find ways of doing education differently with all bodyminds, within the everyday realities of slowly changing systems that were not yet fit for purpose.

Our storyings revealed how arts-based pedagogies enacted a movement away from neurodivergent diagnoses as solely aligned with the brain/person/body and considered how, by associating divergence with dynamic environments, educators can foster an ethics of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) that resists the pathologisation of differently animated bodies. Assumptions that children's development can be separated into several domains including social, cognitive, physical, emotional and that development within these domains tends to follow predetermined, standardised, linear trajectories almost exactly mirrors the traditional conceptualisations of neuronormativity.

The idea that a child's biological development is central to the development of the person can be dated back to Ancient Greece where developmental figurations view children as incomplete, unknowing, irrational and immature (Murriss, 2016) and move through a standard sequence of biological stages that lead to maturity. Western government agendas to boost certain economies have increasingly shaped early childhood education through the colonised, gendered, ableist and racialised values of humanism, capitalism and individualism which have dominated systems and institutions (Hollin, 2017). Therefore, we have drawn on the figuration of the posthuman, postdevelopmental child to 'articulate the empirical fact that child is always already in relation and does not exist prior to these relations' and is 'conceptualised and performed as more than a bounded body' (Murriss & Osgood, 2022, p. 210).

Throughout our storyings, we have resisted the temptation to interpret the event or analyse the outcomes for the girls. Instead, we have attempted to become-with the relations co-created through the storying, acknowledging how gendered approaches to divergence affect bodies '(l)iving on borders and in margins [where] keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element' (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.19). We are not outside these stories. These stories are not so much tellings as listenings. They are entangled practicings of being in the world. We do not seek to explain the event but to story-with it and to let these stories story us. Tsing suggests that:

'To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge? Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis is the indeterminate encounter'

(2015, p. 37).

The indeterminate encounters we share in this paper cannot be 'neatly summed up' because the scales draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos (Tsing, 2015, p. 37). Our storyings illicit more stories, possibilities and divergences and this is the 'rush of stories' that Tsing describes. As we think-feel-write our storyings, new questions emerge.

Alternative ways of languaging divergences

Key among our que(e)rying is the question of how we animate, materialise or articulate the multiplicities of languages around divergence without othering particular bodies or relations? How do we invite vulnerability, or co-create a different kind of knowledge which is more like a not-knowing, a not-fixing of categories for doing learning differently? Since '(k)nowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. "Knowing" is painful because after "it" happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before' (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.70). Badwan (2021) offers the notion of 'languaging' to encompass the intra-sectionality of bodies-in-relation.

'Moving from language to languaging emphasises language as a doing rather than a thing – a doing that is constantly in motion and lively in the world. [...] What are the moments when language seeks urgently to pass on a fixed meaning, and when language is about the kind of connection that does not rely on fixed, definite meanings? How do we value, acknowledge, and welcome all of this in our work with children?'

(Hackett et al., 2025, p.160).

We (as adults/educators/researchers) think-with languaging to un-fix and make un-fixable educational languages in everyday use, such as, moving from 'F smeared paint on her arms and on her jumper – so sorry!' Towards 'brown arms feeling-with brown paint moving-with the squelching of the forest'. Or, from 'Help! Children's legs jumping loudly near my head on the floor!' towards, 'bouncy-jumps on a wriggly line moving-with new horizons that lift the floor'. We resist knowing what Fatima or jumping children are learning in these moments, allowing ourselves to touch, and be touched by, the movements and divergences taking place without deficit interpretations. We move from asking 'what learning is happening here and how can we measure it?', to, 'what relationalities are becoming possible here, and how can we move within and alongside these encounters?' Languaging motivates us to consider the multiplicities of body-environment-cultural languages taking place through non-speaking, sensory and kin-aesthetic modalities. This can reveal what bodies-in-relation are becoming, not what they are lacking nor what gender/typicality their bodies 'represent' (Churchill Dower, 2025). As Olsson reminds us, 'rather than working with trivial universals, [this way of working] harbours a more complex, deep and creative approach to learning' (2009, p.18).

Our storyings include divergent situations of girls that are not presented as a gendered binary but give force to the complex relations experienced by divergent bodies (Hollin, 2017). In this way, these stories attempt to refuse neuro- and gender-reductionism. Through languaging, we consider some of the alternative ways of complicating the pathologised languages of intra-sectional experiences, including the possibilities of bodies becoming multiple, neuroqueer or more-than-gender.

Here, we re-turn to indigenous languages such as Anishinaabe¹⁰ which celebrate a constellation of gender terms, considering bodies as nuanced and having the nature or spirit of diverse genders, which are in relation with specific cultural situations. Such fluid and open languages offer important ways of being divergent from normative oppressions which re-shape, regulate and invisibilise cultures of difference.

Exploring the oppressions of White, first world movements, languages and identities that shaped her own Chicana feminist roots, Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) expresses her theory of the Borderland, 'a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants [...] those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal" ' (1999, p.25). She goes on to describe how, in the Borderland, '(w)omen are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants [...] The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human' (1999, p.40). Through Anzaldúa's Borderland theory, we find significant resonances with the oppressions experienced by divergent bodies, particularly those for whom gendered inclusion policies serve only to exclude their fluid multiplicities. Such experiences are eloquently animated in Anzaldúa's recounting of a young woman, excluded and labelled by the village folk as *mita' y mita'* – half and half – 'neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrified, a work of nature inverted' (1999, p.41). Anzaldúa challenges the psychiatric tenets that describe this male–female body as a confusion of sexual identity or gender, clarifying that '(w)hat we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. [...] But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.' (1999, p.41). We wonder how our storyings can bring together these opposite qualities within.

Many indigenous communities have adopted the term 'Two Spirit' to express the multi-gendered situations grounded in specific spiritual beliefs and native cultures and to address the 'problem of naming' across native and non-native cultures alike. Two-Spirit identifying is an example of how intra-sectional practices can challenge Western pejorative understandings of native diversities, and the colonialist violence that has accompanied these understandings for millennia.¹¹ Such practices give us a way of starting 'in the middle by going forward to the past – not in order to recount what once was, but by way of re-turning, turning it over and over again, tasting the rich soil from which ideas spring, and opening up again to the uncountable gifts given that still give, to proceed to the place from which we never left/leave'. (Barad, 2014, p.184).

We find that our storyings are not easy to animate using early childhood (developmentalist) languaging. Therefore we re-turn to the middle in search of languaging that attends to how divergent bodies become-with many environments. Recognising that the intra-sections of gender and neurodivergence are complex, this requires a careful approach. Shannon (2021) proposes the concept of A/autisms as an orientation towards the multiplicities of neurodivergence. Using a capital 'A' alongside a lower case 'a' in the plural is a way of acknowledging both the 'invisible disabilities that doubly erase those living at the intersection of racializing, gendering and disabling logics' and the 'fabulous neuroqueer/neurodivergent counter-identities' that disrupt pathologising labels (2021, p.3). A multiplicitous understanding of A/autisms resists the stability of identity based in normative, binary concepts of abled/disabled, boy/girl, neurodivergent/neurotypical that are repeatedly stuck on bodies without choice. In following Shannon's concept, our storyings unsettle the notion of a normative (and supposedly unambiguous) body, brain or identity often perpetuated through behavioural or gender-stereotyped checklists in educational activities. We suggest this trope of neurotypicality reinforces the idealism of a 'cognitive child(hood)' that all young brains should aspire to.

Through storying-with these multiplicities, we que(e)ry how we should classify or discuss divergent bodies without assuming certain (gendered, ableist) competences and 'without closing down A/autisms' intrinsic capaciousness' (Shannon, 2021, p.6). Rather than teaching with neurodivergence in mind, we advocate divergent approaches to education that

remove the burden of responsibility from the individual and enable teaching to become more 'response-abling', enacting 'the ability to respond to the other' (Barad, 2007, p.392). Can educational resources become fluid-sensorial-material experiences, learning by relating-with rather than didactic pedagogies on how to define our bodies by gender, ability or race? Our storyings animate the multiple happenings in early childhood places and spaces. They suggest that alternative approaches, where knowledge creation takes place in-between bodies (human and non-human) outside traditional educational settings, offer potential for divergent early childhood education. For instance, mud-urban park-glass jar-gallery floor-tents-sticks-jumping offer openings for relating differently in the world. We are not asking how these events change an individual child, as severed from the world, but how the multiple relations matter in each moment. This is different to identifying causes and effects that lead to binarised judgements of educational competence. Instead, it stays with the indeterminacy of an educational encounter and values its immediate potentiality and not what it has the potential to become in terms of societal or economic value. Valuing immediate potentiality means loosening the limiting boundaries around educational experiences so that they become 'open to transformation by the potentializing force of what courses through the event, even when it cannot be fully actualized', (Manning, 2020, p.21).

Languaging with intra-sectionality, we think beyond the subject/categories of naming that serve to other difference and sustain a colonialist, capitalist conformity. Rather than a focus on 'types', identification becomes a process-in-motion where '[i]dentities are multi-causal, multi-directional, liminal; traces aren't always self-evident... [a] "becoming of intersectionality"' (Puar, 2012, p.383). Our storyings offer a neuroque(e)rying of heteronormative educational practices.

We argue that, like A/autisms and other (neuro)divergences, a gender-nuanced education needs to move away from individual identities and shift towards focussing on multiples and relations. We can't think about neurodivergence without considering bodies, environments, atmospheres and affects across the more-than-human elements that make up educational assemblages. By continually que(e)rying the relations becoming in each moment in our storyings, we challenge ourselves to perceive divergent 'behaviours' as openings to relational encounters, different ways of sensing and feeling the world beyond observing and making judgements. This happens through resisting the pressure to trace divergences using behavioural checklists 'with such woolly borders that most people could probably identify something autistic about themselves at some point' (Shannon, 2021, p.5). Resisting labelling from observations and moving instead towards intra-sectional sensing practices allows us to become open to ours and others' sensing capacities beyond words, feeling what emerges from bodies and environments that is unspoken, unseen and often misunderstood. Attuning to this 'leaky sense of self' (Manning, 2009) is how we 'think about the leakage by which nobody is absolutely (neuro) typical' (Shannon, 2021, p.5).

A more-than-gendered, more-than-divergent future for early childhood education?

Our storyings invite us to consider what the implications might be for early childhood education if, as a sector, it were to move beyond accommodating neurodivergence as an inclusion policy that *others* 'neurominorities' (Walker, 2021, p.25). We have set out the case for how divergent bodies are often gendered in educational settings and, using 'more-than' concepts within a dynamic form of languaging, we have argued that divergent ways of learning are more than biological, neurological, psychological, social or genetic. Acknowledging that divergent bodies are always already intra-sectional becomes even more important in resisting

the continual claims to the pathological, medical or developmental causes of autism, or any one of a number of divergent constellations, by eminent researchers (Hassall, 2016; Silberman & Sacks, 2016).

Of the many hundreds of causal claims made by academics over the past eight decades (Rippon, 2024), not one has been substantiated in replicable research. In other words, there is no single way of evidencing or describing a universal difference across all (neuro)divergent bodies, as if bodies were individual (human) identities that can be accommodated or regulated to make living a normative life easier. And yet the global commodification of autism (and other situations) is growing at an alarming rate to regulate divergent populations, led by a powerful pharmaceutical industry designed to offer 'cures' based on such claims (Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019; Hassall, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). Divergent bodies are intra-sectional, nonhuman, becomings-with different ways of worlding. They are continually diverging. Labels used to fix and pathologise hold little hope for the becomings of divergences. We suggest that divergent ways of being are part of a much bigger picture of worldly relationalities, of which our experience and understanding is but the tip of the iceberg.

Understanding (neuro)divergence as an a priori social identity aligns with relational ontologies that frame difference as inherently collective rather than individual. Yet Western education remains anchored in individual accountability, where its start and end points continually revolve around the singular subject. How educators might work within these structures while resisting their powerful demands to shape and assess individualised identities, particularly through SEND frameworks, lies beyond the scope of this article. At the same time, the history of autism as a pathology cannot be overlooked without risking a return to its eugenic roots of the Nazi period that determined (earlier categorisations of) autism as a threat to be eliminated. Contemporary policy shifts in the US already echo such thinking, posing significant dangers for autistic children and their families.¹²

As Anzaldúa (1999) notes, divergent bodies inhabiting the Borderlands queer normative modes of knowing and expressing, and their departures from dominant perceptual frames often generate misunderstanding, regulation and discrimination—layering systemic harm into everyday educational practice. In this paper, we remain sensitive to the significance of neurodivergent identities, particularly across gendered experiences, while avoiding forms of extraction or exposure around people for whom oppression is already their inherited and quotidian experience. We ask, with Manning (2020) p.51, how to avoid “re-disenfranchising those very bodies that have historically been denied subjectivity.”

(Neuro)queer(y)ing enables us to question the frames that limit the expression of neurodivergent life and to approach difference as relational rather than oppositional. Yet, we still don't quite know how to think with differences, as Manning reminds us, we lack concepts that carry ‘the force of the non-neurotypical without including the “neuro” as the marker of its difference [...] we need a concept for a diversity in diversity that isn't measured by the standard of typicality’ (Manning, 2020, p.263).

We therefore argue not for normalising neuroqueer(y)ing, but for embedding it in everyday practice. Although the neurodiversity movement¹³ has advanced awareness of autistic experience and the environmental, linguistic and cultural conditions that support neurodivergent bodies, the challenge remains how to *be with* difference—how to live within it rather than cast it as a counterpoint to normativity. The two case studies illustrate this by resisting deficit-based comparisons between neurodivergence and neurotypicality, instead affirming diverse ways of being and their immediate potentialities. This remains difficult within educational systems still governed by developmental models that cannot account for such difference.

Hassall (2016) p.49, leaves us with a seminal question that, if we do not yet know what ‘autism’ actually is, how can we know how to teach/treat/become-with divergence? With this, we re-turn to a key que(e)ry arising from our storyings, that a divergent approach to

education must surely find approaches and languages that become more-than-gendered and more-than-divergent, so as to focus away from the notion of surviving in, being measured against, and conforming to a normative world.

As discussed, we have focussed on processual pedagogies rather than pedagogical or developmental objectives, to harness different ways of keeping stories open and always changing. These are processes that start with the relation rather than the identity. That way, the stereotypical identities that have storied the lives of divergent bodies as lacking for centuries can regain their fluidity, reflecting their changing nature and multiplicities. It is not always easy to take on board the complexity of these theories but the pedagogies can be applied in simpler terms, that is, moving from Vygotskian and Piagetian drivers for developmental pedagogies towards processual / sensing pedagogies; not focussing on individual linear journeys of fixed development but on stories of relations, doings, movements, queer(y)ings, curiosities, minor gestures, everyday noticing and languaging.

The capacities offered here to educators include taking time and space to explore alternative pedagogies that animate and nurture differences. Becoming open to shifting / changing pedagogies, starting with processes rather than objectives, can happen within any curricular framework because it is about the values of teaching and learning. In other words, asking, 'how can everyday differences be noticed, attended to and not othered (mine/ours included)?', or, 'how can I/we teach and learn differently/creatively/processually with this subject/class/environment...', opens up a new storying of alternative processes for learning which can become a magnet for alternative learners. Accessing posthuman theories should not be limited to the privileged; education should include otherwise approaches in accessible and meaningful ways that make learning exciting, relevant and purposeful, recognising that these theories do something important to enable this. In attending to everyday differences, and in making space for the relations at play, we can build more sustained habits of unknowing over time.

Perhaps moving towards more fluid spaces for teaching and learning will allow educational futures to intrasect with healing processes, acknowledging the damages and violences committed through reductive models that have positioned more-than-bodies as less-than for so long. Anzaldúa eloquently sums up why:

'We can no longer camouflage our needs, can no longer let defenses and fences sprout around us. We can no longer withdraw [...] We can no longer blame you, nor disown the white parts, the male parts, the pathological parts, the queer parts, the vulnerable parts [...] On that day, I search for our essential dignity as a people, a people with a sense of purpose—to belong and contribute to something greater than our *pueblo*.'

(Anzaldúa, 1999, p.110).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge their gratitude for the generous time and curious thinking offered by the children, families and early childhood staff members during their respective PhD fieldwork periods at Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Bath.

FUNDING STATEMENT

The authors have nothing to report.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to legal restrictions surrounding the protection of vulnerable research participants.

ETHICS STATEMENT

We confirm that the research presented in this article was carried out with due consideration to all relevant ethics issues and in line with BERA's Ethics Guidelines for Educational Research. The first storying referred to in this article was approved by the Manchester Metropolitan University Education, Research, Ethics and Governance Committee (EthOS Reference Number: 11937) on 07/07/2020. The second storying was created as part of doctoral research approved by the University of Bath Social Science Research Ethics Committee (SSREC) (Reference Number: S21-051) on 06/05/2021.

INFORMED CONSENT

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating.

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Endnotes

¹ Diffraction is a Baradian term (2007) that involves 'reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter' (Barad, 2007, p. 30). In other words, recognising the multiple influences and relations involved in all matter and relinquishing any boundaries that could hold the matter as fixed or attached to an 'original' meaning or truth.

² Barad's hyphenated 'onto-epistemology' (2007) illuminates that knowing and being are intertwined. In this sense, agency is not seen as 'belonging' to one bounded thing but co-constituted by multiple things-in-relation. Therefore, 'intra' replaces 'inter' to acknowledge the lack of discrete entities and informs the relational ontology that animates our work.

³ While typicality is generally understood to encompass a common characteristic or distinctive quality of someone or something, its etymology stems from the 15th century Greek word, *typikos*, meaning 'impression; symbol; emblem; that by which something is symbolized'. This was extended in 1713 to include *type*, as in, a letter or character used to imitate or represent words and meaning in printing presses. By 1837, natural historians adopted *type* as 'a species which most perfectly exhibits the essential characteristics of the family or group' - see: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/typical>.

⁴ See, for example, Scott Gilbert et al.'s fascinating multispecies research in which they assert; 'it is evident that organisms are anatomically, physiologically, developmentally, genetically, and immunologically, multigenomic, and multispecies complexes' without any possibility for 'classic notions of "individual selection"' (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 331).

⁵ 'Theory of mind' is the capacity to identify the thoughts, behaviours, emotions and intentions of another person as being separate to one's own, i.e. being able to attribute mental states to another person's actions - see: Gernsbacher and Yergeau (2019).

⁶ Contrary to the medical model of autism as representing a single neurotype in individual bodyminds, advocacy bodies such as the Neurodiversity Movement (see: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/identity/the-neurodiversity-movement>) consider a constellation of natural variations of bodyminds that incorporate labelled situations such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, aphasia, synaesthesia, situational mutism and other situations.

⁷ By 2023 in the UK, 3% children under 10 years old had received autism diagnoses, rising to 4.7% in 10–19-year-olds when autistic traits were more likely to be picked up at school, equating to 11 million diagnoses by adulthood (O'Nions et al., 2023). But waiting lists for autism or situational mutism assessments are currently between 2 and 5 years; education training is lagging behind current research and funding is simply not available for complex interventions (O'Nions et al., 2023).

⁸Rippon notes that in a survey of 20 years of sex/gender autism brain imaging research, of the 1428 articles, 30% only studied male participants and 0.28% studied only females (p.4). Research rarely reports the near total absence of female participants (Rippon, 2024).

⁹Again, we are uncomfortable with the term 'trait' which suggests a distinguishing quality or characteristic that denotes a difference and reinforces it as Other. As yet, we have not found a more complex, subtle and less differentiating term to replace it, and we even question whether it needs replacing in our bid to experience divergent bodyings differently, not made up of identifiable 'behaviours'.

¹⁰See: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFDyBHQSSs/>.

¹¹See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4IbGzUnE>.

¹²The newly restructured Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC), of whose 31 members now only three identify as autistic, has launched a major US initiative to investigate the so-called 'root causes' of autism. Their aim is to 'cure' autistic people who, according to US Health and Human Services Secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., "will never pay taxes. They'll never hold a job... Many of them will never use a toilet unassisted." (April 2025). The IACC have resurrected previously debunked claims linking vaccines and paracetamol to autism, are promoting a narrative of 'epidemia' and 'contagion', are suggesting redefining autism from a neurodevelopmental difference to a 'chronic disease', have proposed a withdrawal of the rights of disabled students to access appropriate education, are cancelling National Institute of Health autism research with immediate effect, and are dismantling medicare and healthcare support services for many autistic people. See: <https://theconversation.com/uninformed-comments-on-autism-are-resonant-of-dangerous-ideas-about-eugenics-256762>.

¹³See: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/27546330251325973>.

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How to cite this article: Churchill Dower, R. & Hogarth, H. (2026). More-than-gender? Moving beyond gendered expectations of divergent learners in early childhood education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.70241>