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Re-conceptualising agency in social work as socio-material, relational entanglements

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1   Introduction

The concept of agency has been integral in the historical development of social work and its theory and practice. Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, social work provided a means for the state to enact "a compromise between the liberal vision of unhindered private philanthropy and the socialist vision of the all pervasive state which would take responsibility for everyone's needs and hence undermine individual initiative and family responsibility" (Parton, 2000, p. 456). Aided by critical and ecological perspectives the concept of agency was built into social work's theoretical foundation. From a critical realist perspective, agency is defined as an individual's thoughts and actions which are influenced by social structures including legislation and policies, organisations, family and community arrangements (Oliver, 2012). From this vantage, agency and structure exist on different ontological levels and possess distinct properties with social structures pre-existing agential actions but humans are able to exert an influence and change "relatively enduring but emergent structures" (Scott, 2005 as cited by Oliver, 2012, p. 11). Likewise, social work's ecological and person-in-environment frameworks centre on humans in relationship with their environments recognising this configuration as an interactive process where the "environment determines the person but the person determines the environment" (Brekke, 2012, as cited by Parsell et al., 2017, p. 239). Essentially, agency is understood as an attribute or characteristic belonging to human beings, who are conceived of as having the capacity to affect their actions on the world and their own lives.

A growing body of social work scholarship (Tudor & Barraclough, 2022; Bell, 2020; Bozalek, 2016; Bozalek & Pease, 2020; Webb, 2020) challenges the humanistic view of agency which for so long has defined the profession's mandate. This work has been aided by posthumanist and feminist new materialist theories which disrupt the representation of humans as bounded entities, distinct from nonhumans and other forms of life. Posthumanism critiques humanism's representation of Man as the "universal measure of all things" (Braidotti, 2019, as cited by Bozalek & Pease, 2020, p. 8), which within liberalism affirms an idealised "male, white, heterosexual, young and able-bodied … distinguished from other 'lesser' humans as well as from other animals and nature" (Bozalek & Pease, 2020, p. 8). Feminist new materialism offers ways to understand and engage with the vitalities that emerge with and through human-nonhuman relations (Lupton, 2019). Central to this perspective is the view of materiality or matter, not as inert or passive, but rather, as lively, innovative and self-organising. Posthumanist and feminist new materialist social work dismisses the representation of humans as disembodied, autonomous entities who can be separated from their natural environment (Bozalek & Pease, 2020). It challenges humanistic conflation of agency and subjectivity which, as Webb (2020) discusses, results in a propensity

to think of the service user "in terms of their motivations, perceptions, voices and lived experiences" (p. 28). Favouring a relational ontology where entities "come into being through relationships" (Bozalek & Pease, 2020, p. 4), agency is re- configured as a force which emerges from the mutually entangled relations between service users, social workers and other human and non-human subjects and objects.

Despite the development of posthuman and new materialist perspectives in social work, there is a tendency to conceive the approaches as focussed on human-animal relations and ecological concerns. This means, as Bell (2020) argues, conventional social work continues to inadequately respond to the intersecting impacts of modernism on human, non-human and more-than-human relations. In this paper we seek to address this oversight.   We engage with school social work, a government funded, national programme in Aotearoa New Zealand, to consider what it can become when attention to human capacities and motivations is displaced to attend to material matters.   Drawing on Barad's (2007, 2014) agential realist framework which positions agency as a force that emerges from ongoing processes of entanglement, and utilising vignettes as a method we seek to affirm alternate social work relations. In the following section we discuss Barad's agential realist framework before outlining the context of school social work and our method for creating performative vignettes derived from interviews with school social workers. We then present three vignettes, which we interpret and discuss drawing on Barad's concepts of intra-action and response-ability. Finally, we consider some implications of these knowledge-practice enactments for social work.

2   Thinking with Barad's agential realism: intra-action and response-ability

A part of what has been variously termed the "onto-ethical" (Rosiek & Gleason, 2017) or ontological turn (Lather, 2016), the material turn (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008), and post-qualitative inquiry (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), Barad's framework offers concepts which enable us to think differently about school social work practice. Barad (2007) draws on insights from some of the "best scientific and social theories, including quantum physics, science studies, the philosophy of physics, feminist theory, critical race theory, post-colonial theory, (post)-Marxist theory and post-structuralist theory" (p. 25) in order to rethink crucial notions of causality, agency, power, identity, and embodiment. A primary concern of Barad's work calls into question the very nature of the 'self', the location of identity and the unitary status of the subject. We make use of these considerations in this paper.

As a physicist, Barad turned to quantum mechanics and the work of Niels Bohr, a physicist, who made significant contributions to the long historical debate of the wave/particle duality paradox, which evidences that light, and matter, appear under different experimental conditions to exhibit features of either particles or waves, which are mutually exclusive states. One significant interpretation to this was that there was no inherent essence or reality to light or matter, but rather, the features they exhibited were dependent upon the surrounding conditions with which they interacted. In this way, observations cannot claim to refer to objects of an independent reality. Bohr refers to this inseparability of knowledge and observation method as "quantum wholeness", or the lack of an inherent/Cartesian distinction between the "object" and the "agencies of observation"", with particular instances of this referred to as a "phenomenon" (Barad, 1996, p. 170). Thus, accounts of a phenomenon must include a description of all relevant features of the experimental arrangement - any meaning made is inseparable from the particular (material and discursive) conditions in which the effects occurred. As a result, says Barad (1996) "method, measurement, description, interpretation, epistemology, and ontology are not separable considerations" (p. 173). These

ideas underpin Barad's ethico-onto-epistemological framework of agential realism, where the most basic unit of life is not things, rather it is phenomena (things in in-separable relation).

Thinking about social work phenomena, from Barad's perspective must therefore take account of not just individuals, but the very nature of the entangled relations through which individuals, and meaning, are made and unmade. Taken for granted, rational and autonomous, notions of self, identity and agency are reconfigured as entangled processes of becoming. Identities and agencies are an in-separable, dynamic relation of multiple (human and non-human) matters, times and spaces. Barad refers to this as a process of 'intra-action', in contrast to the usual interaction. Intra-action delineates the non-dualistic nature of intra-acting forces, objects, and humans, where the emergence of boundaries and meaning is an encounter of entangled relations, not an individual acting on, and in, the world. Humans, in this framework, are dynamic processes, not "fully formed, pre-existing subjects but (as) subjects intra-actively co-constituted through the material-discursive practices that they engage in" (Barad, 2007, p. 168). How this happens is important. While we, humans, do not determine, or will, or have pure agency (or cause) in the determining of the world, neither are we pure effect. We are not simply receivers of, or spectators to, its unfolding, in and around us. According to agential realism, "through our advances, we participate in bringing forth the world in its specificity, including ourselves. We have to meet the universe halfway, to move toward what may come to be in ways that are accountable for our part in the world's differential becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. 353).

Barad's theory encompasses a particular posthuman form of performativity, examining the practices through which differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized, whether in the formation of knowledge, the materialisation of bodies (human and non-human) or the agentic production of the subject. Agency in this framework, entails an ethics of responsibility, not as either aligned with human intentionality or merely distributed over human and non-human forms. Rather agency is an enactment of a material-discursive practice, of specific materializations, not that we choose or determine, but which we participate in enacting. While agency is a matter of intra-acting, it is also crucially a matter of "changing possibilities of change" (Barad, 2007, p. 178), in our research practices and in our professional practice. Such practices are open to change at every moment. It is in these differing possibilities that Barad (2007) says lies an ethical responsibility for the world's becoming, "to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (p. 178). We participate in practices with a 'response-ability' (Haraway, 2006) to go beyond performative accounts of social practices and human bodies. Termed an 'ethics of mattering', Barad's (2007) agential realism seeks to contribute a new materialist understanding of power relations, which includes accounting for nature, technology, and the more-than human in our social-material accounts of the world in its radical and dynamic vitality. Such response-ability and accountability is a political project, an undoing and redoing of material and discursive power relations, aimed at always attending to agential possibilities for change in reconfiguring the social-material relations of in/justice.

3   The context: School social work in post-earthquake Christchurch, New Zealand
This paper draws on data from an explorative study into school social work practice in the aftermath of two significant earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand. The two earthquakes occurred in 2010 and 2011 with the latter resulting in the loss of 182 lives and significant widespread damage to homes, community facilities and infrastructure. The provision of school social workers was extended after the earthquakes due to increased concerns for the wellbeing of children. Social workers had been involved in schools in Aotearoa New Zealand

since 1999, with the specifications for this role remaining to this day focussed on early interventions with vulnerable children and their families to improve their safety, wellbeing and educational outcomes (Oranga Tamariki/Ministry of Social Development, 2021). In the aftermath of the earthquakes, there was an increased emphasis on school-based support primarily to enhance the wellbeing of children. The New Zealand Red Cross (NZRC) set up various grants and programmes to assist school children exhibiting "earthquake-related anxiety or behavioural problems, and those whose access to activities and resources has been limited by earthquake-related financial hardship" (NZRC, 2014, p. 14).

The focus on protecting children reflects notions of vulnerability which has been influential in the disaster recovery and educational literature. Since the 1980s vulnerability theory has assisted to recognise the unequal effects of disasters on disadvantaged populations who are often more adversely impacted and have less resources to cope. Vulnerability discourse presumes children are more susceptible to adversity, "through both their physical and other perceived immaturities" (Frankenberg et al., 2000, p. 588). Vulnerable representations of disaster-affected children are aided by human development discourse which has been a dominant understanding of children's educational needs since the nineteenth century actively guiding the school curriculum, teacher training and the perceived effectiveness of educational outcomes (Baker, 2010, p. 245). Developmentalism assumes that a child's development is an 'inbuilt', progressive process that needs to be successfully navigated if they are to reach maturation (Baker, 2010). Ensuring this potentiality effectively inscribes the vulnerable child as a site for interventions by professional experts (Baker, 2010, p. 252) and is associated with a range of efforts to protect and guide children, including school social work. However, whilst child-centred as Mutch and Gawith (2014) note these practices position children in passive roles, as in need of re-mediation and under-acknowledge their engagement within the environment.

The school social work role is not without challenges. Located with the socio-political contexts of schools, constituted by educational norms and professional power relations, the school social worker can experience themselves as outsiders. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, school social workers are employed by social service agencies rather than schools and can be perceived as peripheral to the core teaching team (Beddoe et al., 2018; Belgrave et al., 2002). As is the case internationally, social workers are out-numbered by teachers in schools, who tend to prioritise educational outcomes with the role of the social worker primarily oriented towards individualised interventions for addressing the social and emotional factors adversely impacting on children's learning (Beddoe et al., 2018 Sherman, 2016). School social workers often need to defend their role and expertise in schools with other professionals who do not always understand or value their input (Beddoe et al., 2018; Belgrave et al., 2002).

School social workers are discursively positioned within power-inducing binaries of teacher/non-teacher and insider/outsider within the institutional contexts of schools. Through the discourse of disaster vulnerability, human development, and notions of professional expertise children have been positioned as incomplete human beings in need of education, guidance and support from more knowledgeable adults (see Tudor, 2019). Barad (2007) recognises that the workings of power are not limited to the social domain and emphasises the processes of becoming are ongoing and dynamic, entailing the "materialisation of all bodies – 'human', 'nonhuman' – including the agential contributions of all material forces (both 'social' and 'natural')" (p. 66). In this paper, taking up Barad's entangled notion of becoming and agency means working "inbetween in/determinate human and nonhuman subjects and

objects" (Murris & Bozalek, 2019, p. 1505). In the following section we outline the process we took to generate material-discursive vignettes of school social work practice.

4   Vignettes as method

In seeking to create opportunities for enacting an intra-active configuration of agency in school social work practice, we utilised vignettes as the analytical method. Specifically, we take up Jenkins et al's (2021) analytical method of vignettes which they propose as "lively assemblages of enunciation" which can be used to "observe complex and immanent relations of language, action and intracorporeal transformation in the creation of difference and how it matters" (pp. 985-986). This approach is distinguishable from conventional qualitative research aims for using vignettes which tend to situate them as "compact sketches . . . used to introduce characters, foreshadow events and analysis to come, highlight particular findings, or summarise a particular theme or issue in analysis and interpretation' (Ely et al., as cited by Jenkins et al, 2021, p. 986). Barad (2007) emphasises, representation involves the researcher standing back at a distance from a phenomenon and as such does little to enact "the very condition for knowledge's possibility" (p. 88). Within a posthumanist approach, rather than a method to represent "the inner worlds of researchers and their participants, or the social environments that actors inhabit" (Jenkins et al, 2021, p. 985), vignettes become a catalyst for bringing forth possibilities which foreground materiality and open up different agential capacities to those offered by humanism.

We seek to bring forth alternate readings of relationality in school social work practice, where agency is not presupposed as a feat of individual accomplishment but as an entangled material-discursive phenomenon. Barad (2007) proposes a diffractive methodology which seeks to dislocate the humanist association of agency "with issues of subjectivity and intentionality" (p. 214). We take up this approach in an effort to disrupt and resist the constraints of humanist discourses which position children's and social workers' identities as fixed, stable and coherent and to bring materiality to the fore. Methodologically, this involves producing vignettes which undo power-producing binaries, attend to what gets included and excluded, traces human and nonhuman intra-actions, and creating new innovations and alternate practices (Murris & Bozalek, 2019).

The three vignettes presented in the next section were created from interviews conducted by Raewyn with school social workers during 2013, over a four-month timeframe. In all, 12 school social worker participants were interviewed about their work in schools following the earthquakes. Using a semi-structed interview schedule, the participants were asked about the context of their work, the influence of earthquakes on their professional activities, their practice priorities and responses. They were also invited to discuss the highlights and challenges of their work in schools using examples. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. This data forms the content for the vignettes, which were created and analysed by both authors using a 'thinking with concepts' approach proposed by Jackson and Mazzei (2011). Some of the interview data has been presented in previous works (Tudor, 2019, 2020, 2022). We re-visit the data, following Murris and Bozalek's (2019) encouragement to re-turn "again and again to the 'same' text, creating 'thicker' understandings" (p. 1510) to offer new insights of school social work agential practices. As a process this involved Raewyn reading through the transcripts repeatedly, noting where there were connections between the participants' accounts of their own or childrens' actions to resist normalising discourses and/or limiting power relations with material bodies, objects, places and spaces. Then utilising Barad's concept of intra-action Raewyn developed preliminary vignettes which enacted agency as a force emerging from human-nonhuman and

material-discursive entanglements imbued in the participants' accounts. This process involved actively "attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter" (Barad, 2007, p. 71). For example, in the third vignette, discussed in the following section, Raewyn noted that William's practices of resistance seemed to be mediated by school spaces and places and she constructed a vignette that disrupted notions of the autonomous human agent, opening up the practice encounter to engage with the agential capacities invoked within the materialities of the school environment. In the final part of the analytical process, Shanee read through the vignettes in an iterative (re)making process, before they were edited and reassembled by both authors.

Engaging with the agency of non-human entities through a secondary reading of human accounts is not without challenges. Within a diffractive methodology "there will always be some agencies standing out more than others according to which apparatus, phenomena and which intra-actions they are part of" (Petersen, 2014, p. 42). The vignettes we present reflect the human-centred, language-based parameters of the interview method and transcripts. However, following Jackson and Mazzei (2011) we understand the interviewee's accounts as "enactments rather than descriptions" which means we "re-think the voice, and data, and the subject not as a separation of the theoretical from the material, but as an enactment, as a performative practice… of how participants account for what they tell us and how we view their tellings" (p. 127). Further, taking up intra-action means we recognise our own researcher selves not as separate from the methods of analysis. We are entangled and embodied in/through the knowledge making processes, which, as Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) elaborate, we engage our "whole bodyminds to try to read the flows and passages where life continuously emerges in an immanent flow of potentialities and becomings" (p. 537).

Whilst not representations of participants' accounts, the vignettes do incorporate direct quotes from participants. Where wording has been changed it has been done to alter past/present tenses, shift the point of view from first to third person (or vice versa), or improve the grammatical sense of a sentence. All names of participants, school children and the schools in which they were based were de-identified and pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity.

5   Vignettes of school social work practice

The following three vignettes in different ways cut across the usual boundaries in social work of person/environment and agency/structure, and in line with Barad's concepts of intra-action, highlight how agency does not belong to any one subject, object or place.

5.1 Becoming girl with books

None of the schools Erin was based in at the time of the interview had the involvement of a school social worker prior to the earthquakes. Over time she had established a role for herself as a mentor for the school children referring to herself as "someone who is there for the kids to talk to, to listen". Although she found some of the referrals she received from teachers confusing. They could be written in such a way that there seemed to be an underlying "perception of what is normal and what isn't". Erin read "things like "is shy"" and thought to herself "that's not an issue", "we're all shy sometimes". She understood that "when you get to know the child they're not shy". But at some schools, unless the child can make "eye contact to adults", "shake hands", 'say hello when you see them", or "hi my name's..." and "go(ing) up to other children" then "there's something wrong". Once she met with the child, she'd often re-read the referral "over and think that's kind of not what I'm seeing". Erin described working with a girl at one of the schools for which the referral was "a little bit bizarre". Written by the girl's

classroom teacher, the referral stated the girl had been "isolating herself and not putting in the effort with friendships". A birth defect was also noted, the girl had been born with one leg shorter than the other and was small compared to other children of a similar age. When Erin first met her, the girl was in a wheelchair, having just had an operation on her leg, which was in a cast. Erin found her a bit sad at first but as time went on this changed. The cast came off, she was walking and had been fitted with orthopaedic boots to improve her balance. During one interaction in particular Erin had a realisation about the girl that changed the nature of their work together. It occurred when Erin was talking with her about connecting more with her classmates. The girl did not think she could because "the other girls play netball and she couldn't play netball because she was too fragile after her surgery". Erin suggests the girl act as the referee for the netball games. Although not able to remember specifically what the girl said in response, Erin changes track, asking the girl what she did at lunchtime that day. The girl said "oh I read in the classroom". At which point, Erin "kind of got it" and began to appreciate that the girl "loves to read, she's extremely intelligent, loves to read". She had this "huge confidence in herself and in her abilities" – she could "explain her strengths and write them down". Erin doubts whether the girl was depressed or isolated at all, wondering "what am I doing with you then?" She went back to the referring teacher and advised her that the girl's love of books was not a problem but rather who she was as a person, reinforcing the girl would "rather be reading book after book after book" than doing anything else.

The girl within this vignette is initially constructed by her classroom teacher as being in need of social work input, for 'isolating herself and not putting effort into friendships'. This particular school social work role has developed into one of individual mentoring, hence, the girl is constructed within the school context, and between teacher and social worker, as acting in ways which need individual remediation. Such ways of acting are construed as deficit in relation to the norms of schooling and girlhood. The girl is co-constituted within discourses of 'normal' and 'successful' girlhood that have been increasingly shaped by neoliberal ideology underpinning education and its role in producing successful, productive citizens (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Being active, outgoing, friendly, 'making eye contact', and initiating interactions are key signifiers of successful girlhoods, not shyness, stillness, or preferences for less social interaction. While Erin, the social worker recognises referrals such as these as 'confusing' and 'bizarre', she is nevertheless called to respond in individualising-remediating ways through the established norms of the post-earthquake school social work context. However, we can begin to see there are multiple forces enacting the agential im/possibilities (for both social worker and girl) in this social-worker-school-girl encounter. Turning to Barad's agential-realist concept of intra-action enables a theorising of this entanglement beyond humanistic, autonomous individuals and solely discursive explanations. Instead, thinking with intra-action invites an orientation to the intra-active material-discursive relations immanent to the agential im/possibilities within this ever expanding 'girl-wheelchair-netball-social-worker-school-book…' encounter.

These are not additive, but simultaneous, intra-active power relations, which become productive together. For example, the teacher also notes the girl's physical characteristics - a 'birth defect' in relation to one leg being shorter than the other and being smaller than others her age - alongside her description of the girl 'isolating herself'. Erin then encounters the girl whilst she is using a wheelchair and subsequently wearing orthopaedic boots. Such bodily and other-than-human materiality's matter, they are always already both, inseparably, material and discursive. Kuppers (2009), a disability culture activist and academic, proposes a rhizomatic model of disability, which acknowledges both the social model and the medical model of

disability, both the discursive and the very real physical, lived experience of disability. However, again this is not in an additive way, but she says, "to slip from one to the other, to allow oneself to occupy both spaces: that is the crip dance. Make one into the other, the other into the first one" (p. 231). Erin's 'disability' is noted through a medical model lens, in comparison to what is 'normal' for other girls her age, in relation with discourses of deficit and vulnerability. However, Erin challenges this deficit model by suggesting the girl act as a netball referee. This complex interplay of the social and material, matter and meaning, become practices by which meanings, boundaries, and bodies are produced. Finally, becoming-girl is co-constituted in relation with the pleasure and love produced with and through reading books. Erin's response-ability, is evident throughout the vignette, not least when she returns to the teacher, stating 'the girl would "rather be reading book after book after book" than doing anything else.' The im/possibilities of girlhood confidence are iteratively reconfigured through a 'girl-disability-book-social-worker-school…' entanglement, and in this dynamic process, an affirmative and just moment of agential possibility is opened up, both for this particular girl and for girlhoods more generally.

5.2 (Mis)behavioural re-negotiated

Vivienne worked in schools that were located in neighbourhoods with low socio-economic status. In developing her role, Vivienne sought to establish herself as "part of the fabric" of the schools. To do this she got involved in "lots of different activities". She finds her work easier if she gets "a teacher on board" through a process of "grovelling a bit", doing "a bit of a dance around them" and listening to them "when they're having a good old moan". These practices have enabled her to gain traction in the schools to build up "relationships with kids" and work collaboratively with teachers with a "lot of buy-in" for "long-term work". One of the schools Vivienne works in received Red Cross funding after the earthquakes and the school principal, requested Vivienne develop a programme for a group of boys who were "out there with their behaviour, pushing the boundaries, pushing the limits" in the classroom and playground. The aim of the group was to give the boys an opportunity "to reflect on their own decision making and manage their relationships with others". Vivienne had met one of the boys in this group previously when she had been in his classroom, reading a story. She found him to be a "very aggressive, unpleasant little boy" who had interrupted her by saying "I'm not listening to your fucking story". This same boy, however, became the focus of a positive account Vivienne gave of the boys' group. On this day, there were six boys present and she and her co-worker had focussed the session on the topic of "managing our emotions". The session was not going well, the boys were not listening and were "climbing over the furniture". Vivienne, although "thinking this is not working" continued with her co-facilitator to try to engage the boys. Then all of a sudden, just when it was "not looking too good", the boy, who had been really challenging previously, said "what about your mingle?" Vivienne said "Do you mean your amygdala?" to which he replied affirmatively and elaborated "what you do is you put your emotions in your mingle and then you use this part, your thinking box to process it". Relieved to be getting somewhere and pleased with the boy's quirky insight, Vivienne recalls she may have actually "said to him, I love you or something". Vivienne surmised this "wonderful moment" emerged from chaos of the group session and reinforced her view that "children are magnificent".

In this vignette, the boy's mingle (amygdala), the part of his brain responsible for processing environmental stimuli and bodily cues, operates as an intra-active force which invites him into the group space - he feels the emotional intensity, experiences body language and facial expressions and senses the chaos in the space (Tudor, 2022). These feeling-thinking processes

are not just in his head, they are bodily - working against Cartesian thinking that supposes a split between an inner mental event and its outer behavioural expression (Krueger & Szanto, 2016). As much feminist work elaborates, mind/body dualisms are hierarchical, aiding gender divisions which situate the 'rational subject' as the optimal mode of being (Coffey, 2012, p. 5). Attending to what the mingle does in the vignette enables us to disrupt masculine discourse which positions thinking over feeling processes especially in the context of a group premised on educating 'problematic' boys to better manage their behaviours. The boy's mingle enables him to feel, think and act differently, contributing to a brief moment where he speaks up and rather than an "aggressive, unpleasant" boy with faulty regulatory abilities, he becomes an emotional-thinking expert. The boy is inspired to act in response to the materialities of the space – the setup and atmosphere of the room and the furniture with the boys' bodies climbing on it. Non-human objects and material spaces acquire agency when they incite others to do things (Despret, 2013). This material-affective relation also induces a connection between the boy and Vivienne who responds when he says 'the right thing at the right time', with joy and affirmation. Not only does this intra-action enable the boy's becoming as an insightful child educator, he becomes an ally with Vivienne, who emerges within the chaos of the moment as purposeful, capable and responsive. These ontological becomings in social work practice are relational (Bozalek & Pease, 2020) and cannot be separated out from the encounter of brains, boys' bodies climbing with furniture, professional identities and chaos – a material-discursive-affective "entangled state of agencies" (Barad, 2007, p. 23).

5.3 In/out of school places

William worked in three schools in lower socioeconomic areas in Christchurch. He worked mainly with families of children referred by individual school staff or at a pastoral care meeting within which a "pastoral care register" is discussed. The register identifies children requiring "extra analysis of their needs" including those with challenging behaviour and "mental illness or health issues". He finds "when teachers refer or say something (about a particular child) they want the child fixed, they want to see action and most of the time they want immediate results". William, however, considered the children's concerns are as a result of "basic needs which are unmet and then the presenting problems that come from being unable to meet basic needs". He focusses a lot on "educating and supporting the parents" seeing this work as child-centred - it "drips down to best supporting the kid". William spent a lot of time working on the relationships he has with families. He considers "90% of the worth that you have is just your relationship". Adding it's the "vehicle through which he does an intervention with the family" and the intervention itself is "secondary to the relationship". The relationship emerges from "shared experience" such that he found when "you're able to relate or share an experience with someone, it's quite meaningful and then potentially it's powerful to create change". William practiced relationally by paying attention to the school spaces in which he conducted his work. He avoided sitting in the school staff room during break times and did not engage on a personal level with teaching staff "chatting and sharing his personal life" or "sharing the stories that they share in the staffroom". Initially, when he first started working in the schools he spent time in the staffroom but found "some of the black humour" uncomfortable and because it is "a personal space for the teachers" he felt could not challenge it. He decided to "maintain some separation", choosing to have a presence "more in the playground" and talk to teachers "when they're on duty" and in the classroom. On a number of occasions, he has had parents who have expressed to him that they "don't like the way the teacher talks to me -they make me feel dumb". He has organised a meeting with the parent, the teacher and himself in the classroom and would "sit there

while they tell the teacher, you actually make me feel dumb in the way that you're talking to me or the way that you're interacting with me."

In this final vignette, William's agency is dis/enabled within school places in distinct ways. The school staffroom space acts as a deterrence for William being able to talk to teachers about concerns. Parks' (2017) research on school staffrooms highlights how these spaces often function as domiciles for teachers – a place of rest and refuge during their non-contact time. In Goffman's (1959) terms, the staffroom provides a 'backstage' area offering physical, mental and emotional space from the stress of teaching and "letting off steam" (Parks, 2017, p. 92). Staffrooms do not allow student entry and most are set up with a kitchen and seating areas, where preparing, eating and sharing food and having conversations provides an impetus for individuals to share ideas, thoughts and feelings and reinforce their bonds (Parks, 2017, p. 98). The lack of private spaces in the physical layout and function of the staffroom also contributes to the necessity for collegiality. When William is in the staffroom, it seems that the physical, social and emotional set up of it as a backstage place of refuge gains agency, in ways that reinforce the power relations which demarcate him as a 'peripheral' social worker. Intra-acting with these material-affective-discursive forces of the staffroom, William's capacity to speak his mind is constrained. But he finds the classroom and playground as areas where teachers are more likely to be open to feedback. Classrooms are also more familiar to children and parents, and they also have physical properties which can generate inclusive experiences. For example, classrooms are furnished with child-oriented furniture and interior elements. When these spaces enable children and parents to share their distressing experiences with teachers, it provides truth-telling opportunities to make a difference- agential possibilities that would not have been possible otherwise. For William, classroom places enable a material closeness which challenge hierarchical power relations in ways not available within the staffroom. Although, these environmental elements are not inert facilities that William uses to make relationships happen; they are agential configurations which actively work with other forces to deter and enable specific kinds of relations to emerge.

Consistent with Webb's (2020) point that empowerment is not just a consequence of individuals' actions and desires, the vignette brings forth how the intra-actions of human relationships, personal and institutional change processes, are not just situated, but constituted with/in school places, which co-create the conditions for agency and William's response-ability. Further, as Barad (2007) argues "the space of possibilities does not represent a fixed event horizon within which the social location of knowers can be mapped, nor does it represent a homogenous, fixed, uniform container of choices" (p. 246). The vignette disrupts ecological nested system configurations which locate spatial properties at different levels, producing connectivity not as linkages between pre-existing micro-mezzo-macro scales but in terms of how William, families, the teachers, the rooms, the playground and the school "enfold through one and another" (Barad, 2007, p. 245) - an active process which re-configures them as subjects and structures.

6   Discussion

The rendition of agency proposed in this paper has been brought into play through destabilising the boundaries between affect, cognition, embodied subjects, material objects and places. The children and social workers featured in the vignettes did not start as fully-formed individuals but rather their abilities to think, feel and act emerged through their embodied relations with each other, other humans and the material world. These intra-acting social work matters are also ethical practices, which "come into being through their entanglements and intra-actions – we are ethically entangled and engaged in all that we do as

humans and as social workers" (Bozalek, 2016, p. 82). Barad's (2007) dynamic concepts of intra-action and response-ability extend and open up social workers to the ontological inseparability of their practices within the material world and the always-shifting possibilities for change. Intra-acting onto-ethically enabled the school social workers to resist the pressure to see children as broken and tune into differences in affirmative ways.

Utilizing Barad's (1996, 2007, 2014) insights to reconceptualise agency as socio-material entanglements in social work, fosters attention to the ways in which everyday objects and places in/exclude certain bodies and dis/encourage opportunities to make differences that matter in institutional contexts such as schools. There are already shifts in social work to recognise the embodied, material complexities of practice (Scholar, 2017; Sodhi & Cohen, 2011). These understandings orient social work to creative practices such as those that involve art, music, movement and object-based interventions and the opportunities they offer for generating situated, embodied knowledge and affective relations. In the context of child protection, Ferguson (2016) discusses how choosing to be based in children's spaces and using material objects such as such as toys, games, books, and pictures enables social workers to connect with children's experiences and develop relationships with them. The challenge, however, is to put these situated, material practices to work in enacting response-able intra-actions with matters of concern so to disrupt normalising power relations. The places of practice discussed in this paper were marked by gender, 'ableness' and class norms which influenced the ways children came to know themselves as subjects in need of improvement. Attending closely to how normalising practices are enacted with/in places enables social workers to explore changes that can transform how material-discursive practices come to matter for service users. As Barad (2007) emphasizes, connective, attentive and responsive practices come about through "being open and alive to each meeting, to each intra-action so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly" (p. x). Investing in intra-active and response-able practices entails social workers actively engaging with/in human, nonhuman and more-than-human relationships with openness to affirming unusual, complex and unpredictable ways of living.

7   Conclusion

In this paper we have re-turned to data generated through interviews with social workers about their work in schools following one city's experience of a swarm of devastating earthquakes. In turning over the data, we attempted to decentre a humanistic focus on individuals, their thoughts, motivations, and actions and instead attend to materiality (including human bodies) and more-than-human aspects of social work practice. We did this in order to consider the ways in which agency might be reconfigured in social work practice if we were to think with the, not insignificant, body of onto-epistemological work urging an incorporation of the materiality of the world and a reconceptualising of its inseparability with humans, time, space and other matter. Drawing on vignettes as method enabled us to map the intra-active encounters of social work practice, and attend to the ways in which social workers' and service users' agency is made to matter. We argue that taking an approach which decentres the human exceptionalism of humanism's long history and orients us instead to the entangled, mutual, relationalities through which the world, and humans, come into being offers the field of social work necessary tools for engaging with material-discursive dimensions of practice. Taking up this challenge requires a willingness to experiment, to take risks and to re-imagine ourselves in new ways in these processes of knowledge making and response-ability. Not simply a matter of 'adding' on the influence of 'things' in social work

practices; taking response-ability requires attention to the dynamic, shifting agential forces that flow through practice encounters. We contend that this is, however, exciting and worthy work for a field premised on creating the conditions for a more socially just world. Reconfiguring notions of agency as always already entangled with practices of ethics, accountability and response-ability to the 'other', challenges us all to re-consider the role we play within the entangled relations of which we are all a part.

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