

Wilding, Part 1, Amanda Ravetz

Abstract: What can we know as adults about what it feels like to be part of a cohort of nursery or reception class children? How can we fully value the many varieties of being human - including difference and what we might judge to be 'too wild' for a classroom setting? In Part 1, Amanda will discuss her research in the nursery and reception classes of Alma Park school in 2018, as part of the Odd project, an immersive and at times overwhelming experience of moving from head-led consciousness to something more 'vegetal' or body-centred. In Part 2, Anna will describe a movement workshop she devised to help communicate Amanda's experiences and insights to groups of educational psychologists, teachers, and university students. This seminar will prompt you to think more about how young people use different ways to gather bodily knowledge in their experiencing of, and relationship with each other and school.

1. Introduction

Thank you for coming to this session in which we will share our research with 3-4 year olds at Alma Park primary school in South Manchester. As researchers in the Odd project we were interested in finding ways to tune into 'the affect' of the classroom (Amanda) and how to communicate that to other people working in schools (Anna).

Our presentation is going to look at

- what affect is and why it matters
- examples of affect in the lives of young people from my research, their use of bodily knowledge in experiencing and relating to each other and school
- why we think affect is relevant to those working with young people in schools
- Anna's use of movement to communicate experiences of affect in school

2. Affect and why it matters

Brian Massumi, the translator of Deleuze and Guattari's 1000 plateaus, defines AFFECT/AFFECTION as

"a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act."

Each such state is considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body, where body is taken in its broadest possible sense to include "mental" or ideal bodies.

In the chapter *On Learning to Stay in the Room*, Gail Boldt, a professor of early years education and part time play therapist, unpicks Massumi's explanation of affect in a helpful way:

- Pre-personal capacity to affect and be affected: **use of pre-personal refers to affect as something that goes beyond the singular person and beyond personal emotion – it is not just you who can sense it or be moved by it; it never happens to only one actor in the classroom.**

- something that may or may not be brought to consciousness, but that is still registered **we might not put affect into words, or pay active attention to it, or even be able to identify it, but at some level it is always working in/on us**
- may move the body to faster or slower, greater or lesser, old or new actions **it works on and through (our) bodies, and it may re-entrench existing habit energies, but equally it can lead to new possibilities**
- includes the ways human and nonhuman bodies are affected by movement, speed, properties, other living beings, objects, spaces, materials, ideas, fantasies, histories, and culture **affect gets into and works through many things beyond human beings /actors – it moves through ideas, desires, objects too. You might like to think of an example from your own experience of this – being on the moors, hearing skylarks, shifting a low-lying sense of anxiety to an opening up of my body and consciousness into spaciousness.**

We were interested in affect in the Odd project because of its presence in the lives of children and also because of how it challenges dominant theories of personhood in UK education which tend to work towards ideals of well-adjusted self-possession and individuality as marks of maturation and citizenship. Oddness and difference are often defined in counterpoint – we might judge ourselves and others on occasions as bring too dependent, too self-contained, too active, too passive and so on.

As adults' some of our strongest memories/experiences of childhood and school involve affect, even though the word is rarely used. Remembering the smells of school, the feeling of being loomed over by adults, the sounds of playtime can help us see what a powerful force affect is in all lives and one that children may be especially open, (and vulnerable) to, due to the fact that control and power tends to lie with adults in families and schools. The light or heavy atmosphere in a classroom, the sense of safety or lack of it, the attraction or aversion to certain adults and children, may all be part of what children feel and do,

...and I guess if there is one message from this talk, it has to do with finding ways to tune into what is happening affect-wise, between and around us and children, in bodily rather than only conceptual or functional ways.

We don't necessarily get taught how to listen and respond to affect in our own lives, in our relationships with children, and we struggle to talk about it or identify it, to put our fingers on it, finding it hard to articulate, or validate it - and this can mean we censor or repress this knowledge and the potential skills linked to it.

3. Examples of affect in Amanda's experiential research

3.1 Getting into PoC

Near the beginning of the Odd project I was immersed for a week in the nursery class through something I came to call PoC. A week is a short time in the life of an

adult, but PoC had a profound impact on my senses, ways of being with others, experiences of nursery environment, and perhaps most profoundly of time.

To help my immersion, the research team and school staff agreed that I would:

- wear school uniform;
- be brought to school each morning and picked up in the afternoon by Rachel in position of carer;
- join in all activities;
- be addressed by all staff who came into contact with me as they would address a new child.

I also had my own rules:

- not to speak in a child-like voice;
- not to distort basic facts when asked things about myself such as how old I was;
- to be led by children, rather than initiate interactions;
- not to ask children any questions about home or school life.

On the first day I was given a tray, a name label, a book bag, a reading book and brain builder activities. The Teacher and TAs checked in with me regularly, asking whether I was having a good day. They said my name frequently which made me feel I was seen and which seemed to help children recognise me, say my name and approach me. I was offered help and prompts if I looked lost, confused, or didn't follow an instruction about what to do or where to go.

Despite this attentiveness, and my long experience of being an adult, being in position of child was far more disorientating than I had imagined it would be. It was like being pushed into water without knowing whether or not I could swim.

3.2 Being in PoC

What I'm going to do now is read a couple of pages of writing in which I amalgamate different events into one 'day' to try and distil some of the experience of spending this week in PoC.

*

Taking up Position of Child needs bouyancy. Not being bubbly and socialable, but something like the imperative to breathe, not drown. Some of the children are bobbing exuberantly, others clinging to a teaching assistant or each other. A few go alone to the conical wooden structures in the outdoor play area. I sense we are all immersed un-limitless moisture, with no choice to be or live a different way.

The teacher asks who wants to take care of me as I am new to nursery. Three girls, friends, volunteer. They take me to the play area outside, holding my hands, authoritatively. 'Shall we run?' I nod, and they pull me along, faster and faster. We run and we run and we run and we run. There is comfort and pain in this running. I am part of something bigger, swept up and along, no longer floating unanchored in the moisture; but after a long time of being pulled and directed and moved in a reverberating line, I have an overwhelming desire to break away. When they are

preoccupied with something, I let go their hands and ignoring their calls, and my fear, that I will be left without friends, feeling different from everyone else in the class, I turn and go.

I head to the sandpit. I am immediately calmed by the texture of the sand and the silent play already happening there – because the sand is alive, I know it, as it moves through my hands. A boy starts playing with my hair, and comments that I can't be a child because my hair is "too long". Another, seemingly resisting the idea that I can't be a child, says he can see my baby hair beneath my long hair. When I ask what colour my baby hair is, he says it is grey.

The nursery classroom is an open plan, largely self-directed environment, with discrete indoor and outdoor areas used for climbing, running, scooting, messy play, sand and water, dressing up. There are some more curriculum-specific activities such as the reading corner and number area. At particular times each day, the teacher gathers us together to sit on a small carpeted area near to her desk, sometimes to listen to a story, or to talk about plans for the day or week, while she takes the register.

From my adult position, when I visited last week, the classroom seemed orderly, functional, a little sterile even. But from PoC there is a real sense of wildness I experience now, of unpredictable peaks and troughs, of energies, moods and bodies that interact.

On the carpet, the teacher is talking but her voice, is almost indistinguishable, drifting away - something about a surprise visitor and sports day. My attention is swampy. I am no longer in my head, where I mostly live as an adult and academic. My "I" is porous, vegetal, dispersed into everything around me. The child next to me is interlacing their fingers while my attention falls into the tiny lines of thread, edges of grit and stars of colour amongst the carpet's pile.

To my right, a child remains standing close to the wall, resisting the teacher's instruction to sit down. I can feel this resistance in the pit of my stomach as it ripples across the room. The child, intent on the children's and teacher's reactions, on the atmosphere in the room, leans against the wall and slowly, jerkily, provocatively, slides down it, arriving on haunches, crouching on the floor.

The room seems to hold its breath as the teacher asks for compliance a few more times and then in one sudden movement crosses the room, takes hold of the child by the arm and places them away from the rest of the class, on their own. They sit with a large plastic sand timer in front of them and they begin to make owl-like hooting sounds.

At lunch I join the other packed lunch children. We move in a snaking line to the small building in the year six playground. Several tables are set out with small chairs and I choose one. A new friend who I have been drawing with, sits next to me. We eat in the watchful silence that falls over the room.

A boy on the other side of the table opens his lunchbox, looks into it and starts sobbing. He hangs his head low to hide this. I am moved to reach across the table

and touch his arm very lightly. "I need my Mum!" he says whilst sobbing. I can feel his Mum in his lunchbox, amongst the sandwiches, hands wrapping the soft bread in cling film with familiar gestures. The lunchtime assistant squats down next to him, taking out each small nutritional item one by one 'oh look, Wow! Oh, wow!' her voice a gentle whooshing.

Without warning a wave of emotion rises in my throat and eyes and I am crying too. Silent tears stream down my face. I need my Mum I say inwardly, but she has died recently, and the force of this feeling confirms that I will never see her again. Exposed, I try very hard to think about something else.

My state of upset is witnessed by the other children around the table though. I can see them observing me. The sadness of losing that which I am intimately anchored to comes in waves. But I don't want to draw the assistant's attention, because I fear that would bring out my difference more, my oddness for all to see, so I work hard to swallow the feelings as they rise and fall. My friend places her hand so gently on my arm and leaves it resting there. Another child directly across the table from me, holds me in his gaze, tender in its neutrality.

After lunch we stand in a line. 'Why are you too big?' asks the boy in front of me as he tries to see past to the end of the line. In the outside play area, I go to sit next to someone in the shadow of the rabbit house, but they indicate they want to be alone so I move away.

I am still feeling emotional so I go to the sand again as a way to be with others, not necessarily interacting, but not isolated, or completely alone. A small group gathers and someone offers to help me put sand in a bowl.

Later, on the carpet again, the boy who sat by me earlier, sits next to me again. Our nursery teacher is talking but I am not concentrating on what she is saying. My friend puts his finger and thumb to his mouth and moves the spit around in his hand, stretching its slippery elasticity into a bouncing string. The substance pools into bubbly globs that slide and shake along an ever-thinning line. He holds my eyes with his gaze, dispassionately, but with such steadiness it feels conspiratorial. His eyes flick towards our teacher, then return to me. He does not draw attention to himself.

The spit and his gaze pull us together. In the public space of the carpet, we are hiding in plain sight, not invisible, but in a kind of half-light. We are contravening the classroom rules. If noticed, the string of planets, the dilation of time, will end, and he will be sent to the bathroom to wash his hands and reseal his bounded body.

At the end of the day, I try to write my fieldnotes but find I can only draw. I have sensory overload. The bow on the dress of one of the girls who I ran with keeps appearing in front of me as an afterimage; and I discover with surprise as I draw that my body already knows a great deal about the nursery's shapes and volumes, its geographies.

*

Being immersed in the affective intensities of the carpet, the sandpit, lunchtimes, threw into profile for me, my habitual embrace of possessive individualism and adult privilege; affect brought me to a temporary experience of something different – young children’s companionship, their sensitivity to affective intensities, resistance to being a single person, but also the hardening of relational knowing into what Gail Boldt calls ‘repetitive territorialised responses’ that for both adults and children are perhaps adopted because they make situations feel more predictable, even when for children this involves being reprimanded, separated, othered, and for adults feeling their responses and strategies are becoming hardened and entrenched.

The companionship that was so palpable in my time in the classroom in PoC challenged my sense of individual sovereignty, as something accessible to all, desired by all; it made me question why being in complete possession of ourselves as distinct beings is held up as such a prize, and it blurred the differences that I and others make between human and non-human beings. The children in nurse’s at three and four years old were deeply interlaced with each other, with the sand, the spit, the carpet and so on.

Experiencing PoC attuned me to many things that never came into speech. I became part of the rhythm, speeds, textures, sounds and felt possibilities of the classroom, and this revealed to me the bodily knowledge at play in children’s relationships with each other, with adults and with the materialities of the school environment.

4. How and why affect might be relevant to people working in schools - Locating my approach with Gail Boldt’s

Boldt is professor of education and women’s studies at Penn State College of Education in the U.S. and part time play therapist in the Appalachian mountains. She has a 2020 chapter in a book called Mapping the Affective Turn, which is an account of play therapy, and how she has used her experience in these one to one situations to inform her work training classroom teachers. She writes that she used to see play as a ‘way to bring forth [children’s] implicit content’ and translate it into conscious language. She explains how her initial focus on this meant that she was unable to pay attention to the rich flow of affective intensities in the play therapy room. She describes her shift towards those things that never come into speech, in the midst of an educational and therapeutic climate dominated by visible, named, quantifiable results, and she shows how she comes to see that what her work is really about is ‘staying in the room’, registering affect and learning to be moved with and through it.

She writes that by “paying attention to the rich flow of affective intensities” her aim is to work with “relational schema that have hardened into repetitive or territorialized responses that are alert to danger but not to context, that are not flexible, and that have little room for creativity, experimentation, or improvisation.”

To do this Boldt has to negotiate being in the affective flow *with* the child whilst holding a safe enough space, through which, in time, a child’s responses which are, for example, alert to danger might become more flexible.

She has to use her own body to do this, and describes how her supervisor in talking over her one-to-one sessions with a child called Alexis, asks what is going on in her

body when Alexis wields the toy knife, or screams at her; what feels alive and what feels dead in their play; and what variations are there in the speed and motion of play? Learning to be in the affective flow, rather than rely on pre-set strategies, which reads to me something like descriptions of jazz improvisation, Boldt reflects on Alexis' relief when Boldt helps her to "slow down her play and experience her excitement and pleasure in ways that do not take her over." And that do not lead Alexis to lash out in ways that bring some passing relief because they are familiar, but simultaneously constrain her.

Boldt suggests that change can happen in indirect and non-verbal ways. Bridging this non verbal affective work in play therapy into the classroom, she tells her teacher trainees to think of the classroom as

"a site where things happen that we don't have words for but that profoundly matter and are hard to account for."

And that "through our surprise, as we experience one another as different than what we expected, we begin to find a shared reality that reflects our actual relationship rather than patterns of expectation and reaction based upon past experience we each bring to the room."

Through PoC I also felt something 'other than what I expected' – a vegetal wildness in which children were 'more than one', and where those who carried various labels including the label "ODD" - oppositional defiant disorder' - appeared very different to me in PoC than they did from above, children who were noting and responding to events in the wild place that Fred Moten calls the undercommons in helpful and compassionate ways that were hard to register from an adult perspective.

Of course, what made PoC possible for me was the holding of space by the adults. And this raises the question of what degree of attunement to affect is needed by the adults to make a difference, and how realistic this is? I want to suggest in response that from the outside at least, the degree of re-attunement needed may be quite small.

One of the teachers working at the school had a habit of not wearing shoes in class. This small bodily act seemed part of an atmosphere in her classroom, that children who had struggled previously, appeared much calmer in. And this emblem of bodily and affective sensitivity is what 'd like to leave you with as I hand over now to Anna..

References

Boldt, Gail. (2020) 'On learning to stay in the room: notes from the classroom and clinic'. In *Mapping the affective turn in education: theory, research and pedagogies*. Eds. Bessie P. Dernikos, Nancy Lesko, Stephanie D. McCall, and Alyssa D. Niccolini. London: Routledge.