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Masticating ‘quality’ and spitting the bits out

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Abstract

This paper considers what the repercussions are when the concept of ‘quality’ is examined within the epistemological and ontological theoretical shifts that are afforded by posthumanism. In particular, Braidotti’s (2006) configuring of thinking as ‘nomadic activity’, and the need for *process ontology* (Braidotti, 2006) together with Massumi’s (2011) ideas relating to *activist philosophy* create the necessary conceptual space for thinking differently. The paper takes as a point of departure ethnographic data that has emerged from the twin locations of Norway and England that broadly centres on some of the practices, habits and mundanities that are associated with Norwegian and English children (aged between 2 and 4 years) eating food whilst attending their barnehagene or preschool setting. It is within the milieu of eating that we take up the challenge of confronting ‘quality’ where we question whether it is possible to put to one side a universal standard so as to consider other potentialities. Inevitably, we conclude with more questions than answers.

Introduction

This paper considers what the repercussions are when the concept of quality is examined within the epistemological and ontological theoretical shifts that are afforded by posthumanism. In particular, Braidotti’s (2006) configuring of thinking as ‘nomadic activity’, and the need for *process ontology* (Braidotti, 2006) together with Massumi’s (2011) ideas relating to *activist philosophy* create the necessary conceptual space for thinking differently. The paper takes as a point of departure ethnographic data that has emerged from the twin locations of Norway and England, that broadly centres on some of the practices, habits and mundanities that are associated with Norwegian and English children (aged between 2 and 4 years) eating food whilst attending their barnehagene or preschool setting. It is within the milieu of eating that we take up the challenge of thinking differently, including thinking differently about a concept of quality where we question whether it is possible to put to one side a universal standard so as to consider other potentialities. Inevitably, we conclude with more questions than answers.

The paper is divided into four interlinking sections. The first section focuses on why there is a necessity to ‘think differently’ both in broad terms as well as more specifically in relation to ‘quality’. We try to make clear why this is especially difficult for each of the authors given their affiliation to the field of early years education. In the second section we present some of the conceptual tools that we have an on-going engagement with, which in addition to nomadic activity, process ontology and activist philosophy, also includes ‘becoming’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) and ‘event’ (Deleuze, 1990). In the third section we focus on some of the mundanities of eating and use it as a conduit for rethinking the concept, ‘quality’. And in the fourth we ask further questions which work in directing attention at other ways of (re)thinking quality. Through each section we struggle, Sisyphus-like, with the problematic burden of ‘quality’.

Thinking differently

In both Norway and England the students that we have responsibility for will leave their respective universities in Oslo and Manchester in order to become teachers in a field that has been and will continue to be subjected to a political gaze. In both geographical contexts it is a gaze that has similar vision where ‘quality’ is implicated in an agenda that is directed at raising educational standards both nationally and globally, engendering stable society and securing economic stability. Within both countries, barnehagenes and preschools will exist within structural mechanisms including policies (e.g. Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, White Paper No 41, 2008, 2009; Department for Education (DfE, UK), 2015a, 2015b) curriculum guidelines (Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum, DfE, UK, 2012; Steinnes et al., 2013) as well as inspection regimes (OfSTED, 2010; Waldegrave, 2013; Lekhal et al., 2013) that are targeted at ensuring that the teaching, learning and other services that settings provide are of ‘good quality’ (Taguma et al., 2013; Trippestad, 2009; Ball 2003; 2008, UNICEF, 2000). Our students will, by necessity, become implicated in numerous technologies aimed at securing ‘quality’ education. They will be involved in making judgments against a normalized standard of what does and

does not constitute quality. Such rationalist approaches to both conceptualizing and materializing quality are endemic within early childhood education globally.

It is a notion of progress that has its roots in Modernity, where Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant (1784) perceived the use of reason as a move from immaturity to maturity. “The development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationality of myth, religion, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of human natures” (Harvey, 1989: 12-27). As Kellner and Lewis (no date given) highlight, “Kant’s liberal humanism is encapsulated and articulated within his theory of freedom”. They continue, “Kant believed that pre-enlightenment superstition, cruelty, and ignorance would be replaced by both individual liberty and universal peace” (pp. 1-2). It is possible to appreciate how Kant perceived the project of Enlightenment developmentally, within a linear trajectory. In his essay, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’ (originally published in 1784) he writes:

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance. They are the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor. If I have a book that thinks for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on-then I have no need to exert myself. I have no need to think.

In order to affect this move where irrational immaturity gives way to the rational, thinking subject the educating of children has and continues to be managed and governed. There is then a substantial history both within England and Norway where the management of children including their health, welfare and education has been linked to an overarching narrative of rational, social betterment, where the discourse of liberal humanism permeates everyday practices. Where what it means, for example, ‘to be kind’ or ‘to be fair’ are universally assumed, habitually practiced and manifested in what is known as and referred to as ‘common sense’.

The possibilities of thinking differently about ‘quality’ are made especially difficult because it is closely aligned with an overly rationalist perception of education that can be measured, procuring quantifiable results that can then represent ‘quality’. This has direct repercussions for our students once they are practicing where they will teach within the shadow of these results including those that emanate from tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The recent PISA results, which is a global measure used to test mathematics, reading and science attainments of fifteen year olds was perceived by the right wing governments of both Norway and England as disappointing. The fall out of these results have repercussions in terms of early years teaching, curriculum and children’s learning where there is the rationalist view that getting it ‘right’ in the early years will ensure subsequent success (Calman and Tarr-Whelan, 2005). As noted in an open letter sent from sixty academics from around the world to the OECD’s director of the PISA programme:

By emphasising a narrow range of measurable aspects of education, PISA takes attention away from the less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives like physical, moral, civic and artistic development, thereby dangerously narrowing our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about.

The letter continues:

As an organisation of economic development, OECD is naturally biased in favour of the economic role of public [state] schools. But preparing young men and women for gainful employment is not the only, and not even the main goal of public education, which has to prepare students for participation in democratic self-government, moral action and a life of personal development, growth and wellbeing (*The Guardian*, May 6th, 2014).

It is within and against this context where we find ourselves tethered to Modernity’s legacy but where we also seek exits from its tenacious hold. Previously, we have turned to theoretical approaches including poststructuralism, feminist poststructuralism, deconstruction and queer theory so as to think

differently. Such approaches set their sights on eroding the foundations of Enlightenment logic. Yet as Braidotti remarks, “in spite of the sustained efforts of many radical critics, the mental habits of linearity and objectivity persist in their hegemonic hold over our thinking” (Braidotti, 2001: 1).

Similarly, our work does permeate programmes of study where, in both Oslo and Manchester, students are encouraged, for example, to put pressure on particular constructions of the child. They are invited to move away from and actively resist universal notions of what constitutes ‘the child’. Where the question of ‘who is the child?’ (Dahlberg et al., 1999) is a recurring, reflexive question. Nevertheless, we question whether reflexivity is a sufficient antidote - both for the students and for ourselves - to the fall-out of neo liberalism.

If, as was suggested previously, the effects of ascertaining what qualifies as ‘quality education’ results in “a narrow range of measurable aspects of education” then we have to first, re-engage with the concept, ‘quality’ and second we have to use our “collective imagination” to think differently. We argue that in order to do this there is a necessity to engage with a different logic, a different way of thinking. We will go on to argue that it is only by engaging with a different logic that it becomes possible to foreground “immeasurable educational objectives”. We will also argue that it is in and amongst the immeasurable stuff of education that we might glimpse ways of rethinking ‘quality’.

Working within a different logic: conceptual tools that make a difference

In this section we both attempt to define *process ontology* as well as *activist philosophy* whilst also begin to work with both.

In general terms, ‘process ontology’ is based on the premise that being is dynamic and that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive philosophical account of reality and our place within it. This emphasis on the dynamic nature of being is important to Rosie Braidotti. She uses

it as an opening in which to interrogate the slash that has traditionally been placed between nature and culture. She argues that the boundaries between the categories of the natural and the cultural have been displaced and to a large extent blurred by the effects of scientific and technological advances. She notes that whilst, for example, genetically modified food, advanced prosthetics, robotics and reproductive technologies are familiar facets of our globally linked and technologically mediated world, they do nevertheless call into question what is real, natural, cultural, artificial and so on (Braidotti, 2013). “The very notion of ‘the human’ is not only de-stabilized by technologically mediated social relations in a globally connected world, but it is also thrown open to contradictory re-definitions of what exactly counts as human” (Braidotti, 2006: 197). What begins to emerge is a vision or an idea of the individual as a “relational process” (Braidotti, 2013: 41). Braidotti, whilst wanting to highlight movement as encapsulated within the notion of ‘dynamic’ rejects the term ‘being’ favouring instead the concept of ‘becoming’. As she notes, “I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity” (2013: 49). Braidotti understands ‘becoming(s)’ “as a pragmatic philosophy that stresses the need to act, to experiment with different modes of constituting subjectivity and different ways of inhabiting our corporeality” (2006: 133). Following Deleuze and Guattari (1988) she summons ‘nomadic thought’ as a resistance to thinking that is underpinned by the rational Cartesian subject. However, she is at pains to stress that nomadic thought is not a replacement or a development of a new ‘master theory’. Rather, it is about “multiple micro-political modes of daily activism” (2006: 133).

Nomadic thought directly challenges what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) refer to as an *arborescent* model of thought, where thinking is marked by its insistence on totalizing principles, binary thinking and dualism. MacLure (2011) clarifies further:

It [arborescent thought] organises life in terms of genus and species, categories and instances, and can only cope with difference through relations of identity, similarity, analogy or

opposition: that is, relations based on resemblance or difference among already-formed entities (2011: 997).

An *arborescent* model of thought includes representation, which, as MacLure explains, “doesn’t just refer to the mediation of reality by language” (2011: 998). She continues:

Representation is the entire logic of static hierarchy. ... Within the schema of representation, things are frozen in the places allotted to them by the structure that comprehends them, and are not able to deviate and divide from themselves to form anything new (2011: 998).

Whilst letting Braidotti’s *process ontology* seep into, enfold, agitate and disassemble our customary practices of thinking, representing, ordering, structuring etc we also want to take up a further challenge of engaging with Brian Massumi’s *activist philosophy*. It is a philosophy that *actively* displaces cognition to ‘pure experience’. He writes, “The displacement from cognition...to the messy middling goings-on of pure experience in all its potential and complexity, has far reaching pragmatic consequences” (Massumi, 2011: 11). One specific consequence centres on both the mind/body as well as subject/object dichotomies. Massumi argues that these binaries are hailed both as ways of knowing and from there “into a hierarchy between modes of practice”. In brief, “activist philosophy refuses to recognize these divisions as fundamental or to accept the hierarchy they propagate” (Massumi, 2011: 12). Because Deleuze and Guattari influence both Braidotti and Massumi it is possible to spot similarities in their work. Yet there are also differences. Brian Massumi argues “ontological” doesn’t fit activist philosophy. He writes, “Process is only perishingly about being. But it is everywhere and always-about powers of existence in becoming. The concerns of activist philosophy are ontogenetic more than ontological” (Massumi, 2011: 13). Massumi, thus places emphasis on the endeavour, that is the practice or the doing of thinking differently. Here the task is to foster and inflect rather than trying to master. It is also an ethical endeavour

since it is to ally oneself with change allowing for an ethics of emergence. Massumi isn't therefore interested in forms of critical thinking which he feels has become reduced to identifying points on a stable map of the always already known (Massumi 2002: 12). In his view, interpretation through the overlaying of this map can only capture certain moments and certain experiences, which will invariably reflect the framework they are interpreted through. For Massumi, such critical impoverishment means that cultural theorists consistently miss both the matter of bodies and the unceasing movement that constitutes the process of becoming. And without this investment in movement between states and bodies, Massumi asks, "how do we account for let alone encourage, change?" (2002: 3)

The milieu of eating:



This photograph, taken in 2015, is an extract of ethnographic data drawn from a doctoral study that is currently being undertaken by one of the authors, Thekla Anastasiou. The aim of doctorate is to understand children's relations with food so as to appreciate the emotional and affective engagement children have with food. Such an appreciation may contribute to understanding why some children may enjoy the experience of eating food when in their preschool whilst for others it might be a situation that is fraught with tension, anxiety and frustration. The fieldwork was undertaken in a preschool centre that is located in an area of Manchester, England that has relatively high levels of poverty, where the majority of the children attending the preschool are entitled to a free mid-day meal. Lunch,

which is served everyday at 12, is offered to the children, who are aged between 3-4 years old.

Data collection methods included written field notes, videoing and photographs. Intensive time was spent during a six-month period observing, where lunch-time conversations and bodily interactions between the children and/or between the practitioners and the children were documented; body language movements were also carefully documented where filmed footage and photographs served to compliment and generally thicken ethnographic field notes (Gertz, 1973; Pink, 2001).

Becoming

If we are to work with nomadic processes and to practice activism what kinds of work might be undertaken with the photograph? How do we refuse returning to the comfort of the aborescent model of the photograph as representation, the stable map where we identify and discuss what is already known? In what way can this data help us envision new possibilities for a concept such as quality?

In order to address these questions we want to begin by suggesting that what is framed above within the photograph is “a commotion of relational activity” (Manning and Massumi, 2014: 12). That is, adult and children together with food, plates, cutlery, water and so on will be in dynamic relation with one another. The photograph is a documentation of lived qualities as they are occurring. And of course, whilst we cannot actually perceive these qualities, they will nevertheless be happening. Food, lips, hands, eyes and nose will be in molecular relation to one another. Taste, smells, and colour will be in turmoil generating sensation. Non-human matter as well as human, indeed everything that smells will be giving off light volatile chemicals that float in to air, then into the nose. Vegetables, meat, gravy, as well as the odors emanating from the rubber wire lying across the floor,

the bacteria, molds and fungi colonies flourishing all over the wood, metal and glass surfaces, the stale smell of drying paint and old play dough, the children and adults all will be generating affect, intensities and forces. Matter will be combining with other matter including culture, history, politics, economics and ideology.

The school meal is, in Deleuze's (1990) terms, an 'event'. The meal as event is never constructed from several or multiple elements, but always from a multiplicity of matter that moves together in a continuous flow. As event this meal involves the knife AND the fork AND the table AND the adult AND the children AND the temperature of the room AND talking AND fingers in mouths AND frowns AND cleanliness AND policy AND culture AND ideology AND AND AND... "It is impossible to determine where the event stops" (Dolphijn, 2004: 24).

And yet despite, and because of the complexities, movements, forces and instabilities that circulate within the milieu of eating there is, we think, a persistence in perceiving and understanding the school lunch as a space of containment where categories of perception and assessment will be evoked. These categorizations help practitioners to decide, for example, how the child in the foreground of the photograph above could be understood as a 'good eater' whilst the child looking intensely at the food, frowning, using her cupped hands to stop the plate of food coming any closer to her body, might be described as 'fussy'. It is where the child who finds some sort of relational comfort in holding her fork in one way might be encouraged to hold it 'correctly'. It is where children will learn to keep in check their immediate bodily aversion to certain tastes or sensations. It is where they will say "thank you" to food that they have no appetite for. It is where they have to tolerate the close physical proximity of the adult, her body, her warm breath, her odor and her touch. To learn that such close bodily encounters, whilst evoking bodily (dis)comfort, (un)ease, tension or anxiety are nevertheless orthodox manifestations of "care" and "kindness".

We want to suggest that children, when eating their school meal have to learn to map themselves “on[to] a stable map of the always already known (Massumi 2002: 12). It is a map that gains its stability through concepts such as quality, because it always and already legitimates what qualifies as ‘quality’ before the event. It has already been assumed, for example, that objects such as a tablecloth, or a plate filled with vegetables are markers of quality.

‘Quality’ both within the context of the school meal and in other areas of early childhood education works at maintaining the status quo. Quality “as a mechanism of control cannot tolerate difference or the threat of difference of that which resists or exceeds meaning” (MacLure, 2011: 998). Nor can it pay attention to the affects of the event to which bodies respond to and in which they participate, and thus it cannot appreciate that these affective flows is a form of thinking, thinking in action (Thrift, 2008) thinking-feeling (Massumi, 2008). Nor can quality recognise that affect is beyond representation. To paraphrase Katz, (2000) speech cannot congeal affect. Talk cannot grasp affect. Affect is a form of expression that is often invisible but on occasions erupts:

Blushes, laughs, crying, and anger emerge on faces and through coverings that usually hide visceral substrata. The doing of emotions is a process of breaking bodily boundaries, of tears spilling out, rage burning up, and as laughter bursts out, the emphatic involvement of guts as a designated source of the involvement (Katz, 2000: 322).

However, could quality be reconfigured, where it could be concerned about and sensitive to the composition of an affective encounter? Where we can understand it as a network of intensities? Where it is produced in and amongst coalescing forces? In other words can we conceptualise ‘quality’ as ‘becoming’, as open? Where body, movement and sensation produces something that warrants both attention and might potentiate different ways of ‘becoming’ quality? As Massumi (2002) highlights , “When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*, and it feels itself moving. Can we think body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation

whereby each immediately summons the other”? (Massumi, p.1. 2002). Is there potential for making a difference to quality within this summoning?

Detouring to Norway

In order to pursue these thoughts further we want to turn to Nina Rossholt’s study that she undertook in her home city of Oslo, Norway. Nina also undertook an ethnographic study in two preschools (barnehagenes) for children aged between two to five years. She spent twelve months undertaking fieldwork where her principle aim was to appreciate how discourses of gender, age and the material produces subjects (Rossholt, 2009, 2012a, 2012b). In this paper we are focusing on an example of her data where the children are eating their mid-day lunch that has been prepared in the barnehagene.

Sohaila, a girl aged two, touches the soup with her spoon. Green spinach soup is lifted up in the direction of the mouth. The hand lifting the spoon with the green soup changes direction, and the green spinach soup drips onto the red sweater and her white bib; one spoonful in the mouth and one down the sweater. Sohaila looks at me while trying to get the spoon in the ‘right’ position. Green, red and white begin to merge. Soup touches Sohaila’s skin as well as touching her stomach. Sohaila takes a piece of the bread and butter and she licks the butter off with her tongue. A boy, Einar, also aged two sits next to Sohaila. He too has a bowl of green spinach soup. He has eaten a piece of bread but the soup remains untouched. After a while, he pushes the soup away from him. He looks at the others eating and his gaze settles on the plate of bread of butter which is on the table. He looks down, He says, “Einar bread”. The practitioner asks, “Have you tasted the soup yet? Einar looks down, his mouth closed. The bread is only twenty centimeters away but he does not touch it. Sohaila continues to practice eating soup. She tries out different positions with her right hand but most of the soup goes in the wrong direction. Einar, it seems, is waiting for permission to eat a second piece of bread and butter. The practitioner tells me that she really wants to give Einar a second piece but that she doesn’t dare. “I will get a scolding from the other practitioner” she says. The staff have talked about Einar’s eating habits, and they have drawn up strict rules about how to react to him during meal times. Einar has to taste all the various foods that are on the table, and not just the bread and butter. Einar’s best friends have eaten two bowls of spinach soup. They eat fast. The spoons enter the bowl again and again: smiling faces, drinking glasses lifted, a composition of different sounds mingling with the sound of: ‘No, you have to wait. You haven’t tasted the soup yet.’ After a while, Kari, the practitioner gives Einar a piece of bread. (Field notes, 24.11. 2010)

O'Sullivan makes the point that "There is no denying, or deferring, affects. They are what make up life . . . Affects are . . . the stuff that goes on beneath, beyond, even parallel to signification". O'Sullivan then asks: " But what can one say about affects? Indeed, what needs to be said about them? . . . You cannot read affects, you can only experience them" (O'Sullivan 2001: 126). Can we say anything about affect? Can we talk about affect or theorise it in ways that will assist us in our endeavour to rethink quality? If, as we shall go on to suggest, affect flows through Nina's observation does this matter? And in what way does it matter? If, as O'Sullivan points out, affect can't be read what purpose will be served by paying attention to it?

We would argue that what Nina Rossholt's observation manages to capture are pre-linguistic and/or extra-linguistic forces that emerge through continual configurations between human and non-human. Where spinach soup, its colour, texture, smell and taste triggers pleasure, desire and abhorrence. Where the non-human (e.g. spoons, soup, colour, smell, texture, spinach, bowls, noise as well as culture, ethnicity, ideology and so on) together with Einar, Kari, and the other children are caught within alliances, relationships, intensities and forces.

However, as the observation indicates this relational encounter has already been mapped with pre-given rules. For example, it would seem that the staff have adopted the common sense practice of encouraging children to try other foodstuffs so as to extend their repertoire of food preferences. Discursive practices are also at work at the micro and meta level; Kari will get a scolding and Einar wont be able to eat bread and butter – practices directed at rendering both of them as 'docile' (Foucault, 1977). Additionally, the practitioners in Einar's setting (as well as practitioners in the UK) will be working within policy guidelines that are targeted at developing healthy eating habits so as to ward off the perils of obesity and chronic disease. The limiting of the bread and butter stems from a healthy eating discourse that restricts the consumption of 'bad' foods whilst encouraging the

consumption of ‘good’ foods (Public Health, England, 2014; Barnardo’s UK, 2004; Hooper et al, 2012). Thus the practitioners’ ‘strict rules’ are bound up in structures that are aimed at enhancing the quality of his life.

Similarly, the processual relationship between hand, arm, soup and spoon that is being played out in the observation although messy is countenanced because of an expected outcome. A conceptual overlay pre-exists this moment because there is a ‘right’ way of holding the spoon. There is a common, logical outcome and, as Massumi notes, when a common logical outcome is followed “product and process appear as versions of each other: copies. Production coincides with reproduction.” He goes on to note, “any potential the process may have had of leading to a significantly different product is lost in the overlay of what is already is” (Massumi, 1990: 14). In policing her own body Sohaila “does not express the system, she “is an expression of the system” where “the system expresses itself in its subjects’ every “chosen” deed and mystified word – in its very form of life (its habitus, as Pierre Bourdieu would say)” (Massumi, 2002: 15). Massumi then goes on to ask a significant question: “Where, in the conformity and correspondence between the life form of the subject and the system of power that is produced, has the potential for change gone?”

The potential for change?

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that words such as ‘quality’ constitute what they describe as ‘order words’, which in turn are a ‘death sentence’ (1988: 118). They assert that even when ‘softened’ order words bring death. “Order words bring immediate death to those who receive the order or potential death if they do not obey, or a death they must themselves inflict, take elsewhere” (1988: 118). If we turn back to the observation it becomes possible to see Kari struggling between the ‘strict rules’ that are caught up with issues relating to eating/quality but where she is also affected by Einar. It is possible to understand Kari reaching what Braidotti describes as a ‘threshold of sustainability’. She elaborates further, “Your body will tell you if and when you have reached a threshold or limit. The warning

can take the form of opposing resistance, falling ill, feeling nauseous or it can take other somatic manifestations” (Braidotti, 2006: 138). A threshold, in Braidotti’s terms, is a “corporeal warning” or a “boundary marker” that express a clear message: ‘too much!’” (ibid, p. 139).

Caught within the swirling relations that are manifested within this particular encounter Kari suspends what she ‘should do’ and allows Einar another slice of bread. The pre-imposed judgments of eat this first, then that serves to create a dichotomy. Either Kari obeys the death sentence. Or she acts clandestinely. What she is currently unable to do is take cognizance of the bodily affects that swirl in and around her and to use this bodily knowledge for rethinking thinking. Where quality is a way of living. Where as a concept it can change within the encounter of bodies being touched, bodies feeling. Where, in the space between the child and the material, the new can be created.

The problem is, as Nina Rossholt (2009) has pointed out, we often define the new with old definitions and thus lose the potency of the new.

Currently this whole encounter is overshadowed by rationalist linear logic. However, following both Braidotti and Massumi we would like to suggest that a concept like ‘quality’ could be made useful when it is not tied to an expected success or outcome. This effectively places the ‘quality’ in the present. Situating quality in the present means that in every situation, including meal times, the way that all the different elements, interrelate will be so complex, that we will not be able to immediately comprehend the situation or the event. As Massumi (2002: 214) notes in an interview with Mary Zournazi (2002), “There’s always a sort of vagueness surrounding the situation, an uncertainty about where you might be able to go and what you might be able to do once you exit that particular context” (ibid, 214). Like Massumi, we perceive this uncertainty as providing a measure or margin of maneuverability and it is here that it becomes possible to (re)think ‘quality’. It is in the space of uncertainty that the concept of quality can become an “an opening to experiment” (Massumi, 2002: 214). By thinking of the concept

of quality as an experiment it becomes possible to ask: “what could be the next experimental step?” As Massumi notes, “focusing on the next experimental step rather than the big utopian picture isn’t really settling for less. It’s not exactly going for more, either. It’s more like being right where you are — more *intensely*” (Massumi, 2002: 215, author’s emphasis).

Yet there is cause for pause. We are haunted by the following observation and remark, where Kari *tells me [Nina] that she really wants to give Einar a second piece but that she doesn’t dare. “I will get a scolding from the other practitioner.”* Such an observation and statement is a timely reminder of how individuals invest in and are motivated by forms of desire and power, which help to maintain and reproduce forms of thinking, including common sense. We are therefore left hoping, in the first instance, that the intensity that Massumi references could characterise new modes of ethical behaviour which will take us beyond frameworks of established protocols and sets of rules and guidelines in relation to quality. And that secondly, it will be amongst the movements of intense experimentation where the contingent, the overlapping and the contradictory can be synthesized “but without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging” (Massumi, in Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: xiii). Following Deleuze and Guattari (1988 : xiii), we ask: does the concept of ‘quality’ have to be used or implicated in building the courthouse of reason? Or, can it be thrown through the window and in so doing call forth a future form?

Concluding remarks

This paper has used two examples of ethnographic data concerning meal times as a conduit for rethinking thought so as to (re)consider the concept, ‘quality’. In foregrounding the work of Braidotti, Massumi, Deleuze, and Guattari we have attempted to situate the event of eating within a logic of thought that resists anthropocentric tendencies and in so doing we have become more raw to the effects and potential of affect. Being mindful of affect raises two possibilities in relation to the concept of ‘quality’. First, we might begin to consider

(re)modifying 'quality' where it is understood as an experiment that unfolds and responds to the events of schooling. Corrupting Patton (2005) but with good intentions, we want to consider whether the concept of quality could give expression to events of schooling whilst simultaneously being 'betrayed' by historical and contemporary existing forms of the concept (Patton, 2005: 404). Might this process open up what Connolly describes as 'productive tensions' (Connolly, 2002: 172) where issues relating to quality can countenance "practical affective politics"? (Thrift, 2008: 214). But if we are to countenance a "practical affective politics" then schools and schooling have to become places where human and non-human relations are embedded in ethical, haptic cartographies of affect. Within such networks Kari would not have to resort to smuggling bread and butter to Einar. Rather her affected body could in turn affect 'others', including the human and the non-human, and in this way a transition, however slight, could happen. She would have stepped across the threshold. The question is, are we brave enough to take affective steps so that the concept of quality can be breached?

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