CHAPTER 5

GROWING IN THE MIDST OF THINGS

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Into the middle

Speeds changed. Intensity, connection came and went. Breath was audible, then silent and calls were made. Sometimes these were responded to, sometimes not. Sometimes echoed somewhere else in time, later – rhythm, beats, refrains (the hum, the whistle) ... Waiting for something to erupt. Wanting to channel an energy. Toes used to catch the plastic cones. Trying to stand without using hands, arms. As movement moves through bodies, bodies became interesting to themselves. Bodies had 'things' of their own to explore. As concentration and focus moved from material 'things' to matter as 'things', each-others' bodies came into relief. Amanda using her feet to help Anna stand without her hands. A kind of bodily puppetry or aural/oral ventriloquism erupted as noises from Amanda's mouth moved Anna's hand movements. Sound touched, muscles listened, mouth followed.

(fieldnote from movement workshop 1)

This fieldnote is taken from one of three movement workshops led by screen dance artist and scholar Anna Macdonald,[1] with Amanda Ravetz. The workshops were attempts to communicate, in an ongoing and open-ended way, research experiences in which anomalous

events in an early-years classroom are treated as signs not of otherness but of middleness and, following Joseph Valente and Gail Boldt (2015: 568), 'groupness, alliance, and relationality…calling forth new, multiple, and heteronymous ways of being'. The workshops set out to offer felt experience and sensation to educational professionals, as a counter-actualisation and 'intensification of intentional engagement in the world (Shults 2014: 135).

This chapter seeks to enter in-between experiences of difference, so as to stay with the complexity and experimentation made possible by being in the middle of things where everything happens. 'Traditionally repressed by the system of linearity', as An Yountae (2014: 288) writes, the middle 'cancels out the teleological idea of a definite beginning and end'. We aim to resist research habits and practices that so often structure and predetermine the means available to see, interpret, understand and communicate the experience of fieldwork in educational research. Instead, we move in and through the middles of multiple things: a movement workshop, spectres of past projects, the politics of difference, early-years and Key Stage 1 school classrooms, post-qualitative debates, resistance to humanism and method; all of them at once central and peripheral.

We move around in the middle, stirring and staying with these and other things, as we orient our research in a school constrained, like most schools in the UK, by neoliberal policies and regimes of monitoring and surveillance. We draw on 18 months of research conducted in partnership with Alma Park Primary School, chosen for the diversity of its staff and pupils and of the communities from which they come, and for its longstanding commitment to the traditions and practices of inclusion. This chapter attends to two moments in two different classrooms, one in the Foundation Stage, the other in Key Stage 1 (KS1). These were moments that, in their unfamiliarity, slowed us down in our eagerness to reason and explain, and helped us keep in the middle of things. We finally return to the movement workshop from which we began, seeing it not as an end but as an entry into further thinking-feeling (Massumi 2015) that challenges predominant understandings of schooling and the ways it organizes bodies, experiences, institutions and pedagogic practice.

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The Odd project

> The hegemony of 'the normal child' – his or her looks, behaviors, and aptitudes – subordinates and glosses over any heterogeneous experiences that children may have, spurning designations of deviance and dissidence in relation to those children who do not fit, but who are yet expected to live up to and to embody the image of 'the normal child' against which they are being measured. (Bohlmann 2016: xiv)

Our ongoing research with Alma Park, *Odd: Feeling Different in the World of Education* (2017-21),[2] involves an interdisciplinary team of artists, educational researchers and a visual anthropologist to address the question of how to 'go along with difference' (MacLure 2013) as movement, change, and emergence in the setting of primary education, without attributing responsibility for normative deviance solely to individual children and

their assessed pathologies. With an interest in why some children do not find it easy to fit in at school, the research team engages with *oddness* as an ethical necessity, a way to tackle the idea of difference which is responsive to the daily struggles some children face in a stifling school culture 'where bodies, spaces, and things are continually disciplined, managed, marginalized, and even erased,... where students are surveilled, policed, and inevitably punished for their "failures" to conform' (Dernikos et al. 2020: 10). We take a creative journey into the concept of oddness, recognizing how critical odd things are to life. From the peculiar feeling triggered deep inside the gut to the jolt of the uncanny object, oddness is a fascinating part of the entangled stuff of the world. But within the context of education in general, and primary education specifically, oddness can cause a lot of trouble, not just for children against whom difference is weaponised but also and especially for institutional structures, in its capacity to erode the boundaries that divide what is normal from what is anomalous.

UK schooling is exhausted by forms of thought that 'lend order and regularity to the things we encounter' (Ingold 2017: 14). Undergirded by linear models of child development, schools are scaffolded by age-related curriculum structures, built around knowledge that seeks 'to fix things within the concepts and categories of thought, to hold them to account, and to make them to some degree predictable' (Ingold 2018: 9). The gradation of pedagogy by age, horizontal class organisation, standardised testing, progress tracking, the collection of predictive and performance data, an emphasis on quantifiable outcomes, inspection, regulation and certainty, as well as a belief in catch-up plans to redress widening 'gaps' in attainment – accentuated by pandemic-induced interruptions to schooling – perpetuate ideals associated with developmental norms.

Despite the order and regularity built into the fabric of schooling, however, it is also a site alive with clandestine transgressions, new thought, productive discomfort, quirks and oddness. As Mary Douglas has observed (2003: 48), all systems of classification give rise to anomalies which they cannot ignore. The Odd project enters this milieu of nonconformity and dissemblance, in which tendencies towards normalization and idiosyncrasy rub up against one another, deeply affecting the children caught up in their forces.

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The power of 'normal'

Educational values and identities are shaped by the normative and individualising discourses that filter down from systems of reason embodied in educational policy (Lindblad and Popkewitz 2001), pathologizing difference and collectively excluding those who fail to conform to expected standards. Children, their parents and carers, as well as school staff – including teachers, teaching assistants, and senior leaders – are subjected to, and affected by, these values and identities. All involved in the education system are scrutinised and managed according to processes that, for some, render school an institutional 'scene of constraint' (Butler, in McMullen, 2016), while marginalising those who cannot, or will not, conform in ways asked of them. Accounts from a range of sources[3] amply testify to the experience that many children have of feeling 'out of place', or of being a 'misfit', 'loner' or

the 'odd one out'. This experience comes from the normalising pressures exerted on children by those around them, including teachers, parents and each other, and by the wider cultural and institutional processes in which both parenting and schooling are embedded.

> Childhood normalcy ... involves a developmental teleology *up* to adulthood... to maximize the possibility that children grow up 'normal' and 'normally', adults tend to (their) children with a vigilant eye/I, ensuring that the telos of developmental growth fits. (Bohlmann 2016: xiv).

Many studies have documented how the dichotomising processes that define normality in terms of its opposite (abnormality or oddness) determine some children as 'outcastes' or 'misfits'. Here are just a few examples: the child whose body is 'out of tune' (Dernikos et al. 2020: 4); the child-nomad who sees himself as 'a member of the *Outlaw Collective*, not really a criminal, but not "normal" / normalised either' (Leafgren 2013: 286); the learning disabled child (Ryan 2006); the gender non-conforming child (Gerouki 2010; Biegel 2010); children in-between cultures (Eekelaar 2004); the gifted and talented child (Geake and Gross 2008); children with 'attention deficit' (Harwood and Allan 2014), and so on. Some are identified as both lacking in some essential capacity and, simultaneously, too prodigal in others (Bohlmann 2016).

Some children are held responsible for behaviours that are seen to be 'odd', with the expectation that they know what they are doing, that they are in a position to alter these behaviours at will, or that they can explain themselves so as to render their behaviours more intelligible. A child's possibly enduring experience of being 'odded-out' typically begins from the point at which they do not, cannot, or will not comply with or conform to the demands imposed by schooling. For relatively privileged children, as Bessie Dernikos and her colleagues observe, the affective milieu of the classroom affords a degree of openness and flexibility. But for others, it is experienced as a stickiness that holds them down (Dernikos et al. 2020: 9). The phenomenon of labelling reflects how particular psy-trends[4] readily construct some children as 'disorderly/disordered', revealing the eugenic undertones (Slee 2018: 26) that accompany such practices. The challenge for children is how to keep within the tolerated limits of 'straight' oddness (MacLure, Pahl and Pool 2019), how to discern the tipping point where 'enough' becomes at once 'too much' and 'lacking', whether in volition or self-conscious deliberation.

In their professional training, educational psychologists are taught to promote strategies, and teachers are trained to use interventions, designed to 'include' children who otherwise struggle to access the curriculum, or to manage their behaviours, all in the interests of 'treatment' or 'rehabilitation', with hopes of eventual 'cure' (Wolff 1995). This remedial attitude to difference, however, reveals a society that is fixed in its ways and ill-equipped for change (Runswick-Cole 2008). As Mary Douglas (2003: 46) observes, we are inclined to ignore or distort uncomfortable facts, so as not to disturb established assumptions. This leaves the structures of our educational institutions largely intact, with enduring consequences for children who do not achieve 'normality' (Watson 2016). Isabelle Stengers (2005: 995) reminds us that including 'the other' should not mean

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reinforcing worldly routines or placing a moratorium on thought. It should rather cause us to hesitate, giving pause to reflect.

In order to investigate the affective forces of regulation and peculiarity that surge through primary education, we adopt an approach that treats oddness not as an inherent attribute of individual children but as a form of 'thinking-feeling' (Massumi 2015) that is relational, distributed and affective, circulating through and connecting bodies at pre-conscious and pre-individual levels beyond the reach of words alone. This means our research pays visceral attention to our own, iterative and contingent entanglements with the 'body' of the school, comprising both its architecture and its people. This is to take in the school in its entirety and at a range of scales, from the intimacy of eye contact to the structures of policy and curriculum that shape its spatial and temporal architectures. We are concerned with how these things, manifesting at different scales and moving at different speeds, flow through each other and continually transform each other's identities. We understand the school, thus, as a mélange of face-to-face relations, genealogies, politics and policy, community, wider societal and global forces, playing out in settings that are at once microscopic and macroscopic, architectural, physical, spatial, geological, and ecological.

Our perspectives come from fields of education, anthropology and art. The role of art, for Tim Ingold (2018: 129), is 'to reawaken our senses, allowing knowledge to grow from the inside of being in the unfolding of life'. This is what we have tried to do with the Odd project. The project pushes beyond boundaries of language, rhetoric and discourse into ways of knowing *with* children's embodied experiences, so as to discover how oddness or being 'out of place' actually *feels*. The complexity, sensitivity and ethical demands of the task call for an arts-based engagement that risks touching 'the meniscus' of other's lives (Kaprow 1993), without abandoning concern for, or commitment to, children's wellbeing. By inhabiting feelings of isolation, loneliness and being on the outside, our research invites the entire school to interrogate the generative idea of oddness: what it means, what its value is, why it matters, and what it reveals about ordinary, everyday encounters between people, places and things.

In the following sections we describe two separate moments in which teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) use well established strategies to regulate children's behaviour. We acknowledge that teachers work under immense pressures, for example to 'socialise' the children in their charge to a level acceptable for their age, or to ensure that they achieve satisfactory test results. As researchers, we were privileged with the time to linger in moments of oddness in ways that teaching staff are seldom able to do. Our aim is not to criticise their practice but to think about how ways of thinking-feeling, drawn from odd moments, could open up to fresh conversations and possibilities.

The out of place body

The early years classroom in which I (Amanda) am spending a week is an open plan, largely self-directed environment, with indoor and outdoor areas used for climbing, running, sand

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and water play, dressing up, as well as more curriculum-specific spaces such as the reading corner and number area. I am taking up the 'position of a child' for the duration of the research, treated by the adults as a pupil and joining in with the children, using an approach that Weig (2020) describes as 'participant sensation'. The class includes several children who have come pre-diagnosed, bearing such labels as 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder'. Matthew is one of these pre-labelled children.

At different times of 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. The collective of bodies doesn't all quite fit onto the carpet, with some children loitering on the edges, resisting sitting. Some make for the central regions; others are eager to sit near the teacher's legs. While the children are gathered on the carpet, and asked to sit down, crossed-legged, bottoms on the floor, Matthew nevertheless remains standing, next to the cream-coloured wall, a variety of expressions running across his face – pouted lips, widened eyes, wagging tongue. Asked again by the teacher to sit down, Matthew stares at her, holding her gaze. She returns his look and gives her command again. Sit on your bottom please! Her voice, coming from above, has a slight edge to it now. Most of us continue with what we are doing. I am looking at the sparkly pieces in the carpet with my friend, interlacing my fingers to make patterns, and whispering. I am aware of the sound of Matthew's green jumper rubbing against the wall and of his shoes squeaking on the floor, as he moves up and down, to and fro.

The teacher, several yards away, leans towards him without leaving her chair. We turn to see what is happening. He bends his knees, and slowly slides his back down the glossy wall, with an exaggerated bounce at the bottom. Rocking on his haunches, he moves his chin in delicate circles, giving him a dreamy, insolent feel. As the teacher straightens up, Matthew pushes into his haunches and slides back up again. He is invited one final time to do the right thing and sit on his bottom. He wriggles more ostentatiously. Suddenly, in a few strides, our teacher is standing over him, hand on his arm. He squirms but is led several yards away. A large plastic hourglass is placed on the floor and he is instructed to sit still for the time it takes for the sand to run through the plastic tube from top to bottom. He sits quietly for a minute or two and then starts to hoot like an owl. He is ignored and the teacher continues with what she was saying. The sand trickles little by little through the scratched transparent plastic.

Poisonous pencil

The KS1 classroom is a base for 31 children. It is one of two parallel year-groups. In addition to the teacher in the class where I (Rachel) have been spending a day a week, there is a Teaching Assistant (TA), deployed to support a number of children who, at times, struggle to cope with tasks. The TA's primary focus, however is to support Sam, a boy who over the past few months has presented increasingly unpredictable behaviour. My own participation consists in attending to specific moments in the classroom, reaching for a kind of immanent

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sensing of the intensities that compose these momentary events (MacLure and Rousell 2019).

Children are sitting on the carpet in the classroom. Tables are neat and tidy, anticipating the flurry of work ahead. Sam is wandering around the room with his coat and hat on, reading a book, humming to himself. The teacher glances over towards Sam but allows him to continue reading as he wanders. In his own time, he joins the class on the carpet. The teacher introduces the activities for the day and then invites the children to go and sit in their handwriting places. Sam stands up and meanders for a moment. With a sudden jolt of his body, he reaches across the table to grab a pencil from a pot, grips it tightly in his fist, and points it outwards towards the class, grimacing as he shouts loudly, 'You all better watch out! This has got poison in the end'.

A quietness descends like a heavy blanket over the room, but scattered and muffled sounds of fidgeting, whispering, rummaging in trays, shuffling on chairs, throat clearing, and occasional sniffing break through the atmospheric tension. The teacher, with a slightly sterner voice, asks Sam to sit down in his place, 'or you can choose to go and do your work next door' (the teacher has an arrangement with the teacher of the parallel KS1 year-group, in case Sam refuses to co-operate in this class). Some eyes glance at friends, others are lowered to the floor. My eyes scan the room and then flick over to Sam as he turns to face the teacher, his body stiffening as he approaches him. He jabs the pencil towards the teacher's body, repeating that he'd better watch out as it has poison in it. Sam moves his face closer to the teacher's, exaggerating his grimace; whilst gripping the pencil with both hands clenched around it, he tries to snap it in half. There is an extended pause that somehow holds the air still, opening up and slowing down time as we all seem to hold our breath, awaiting the teacher's response. The teacher stays quiet.

The TA turns to Sam and asks him where he wants to go to do his handwriting, 'in here or next door?' Sam replies emphatically, 'Nowhere!' 'Okay, come on then, we'll go next door', replies the TA. She holds Sam's arm and steers him towards the door. Sam's body resists, pulling back initially but then seeming to give in to the direction of the door. On the way out, Sam suddenly pulls his arm away from the TA to grab a worksheet from the table. He bites off a corner and spits it out onto the floor. Then he rips up the remaining paper into pieces (KS1 classroom observation, 26.6.19).

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Ontological participation

These two moments are recounted from different positions, circumstances and perspectives. Both incursions into the sensate or haptic middle lean towards Laura Cull's (2011: 80) idea of 'ontological participation', or what Allan Kaprow (1966: 169) calls 'constant metamorphosis'. Although we did things differently, we both participated in what felt like a world of perpetual variation, or provisionality, resisting the more habitual representational thinking which begins with 'fixed essences' and 'static concepts' (Bond 2007: 3) In the midst of thought and matter, in the physical and spatial milieus of the two classrooms, we set aside disembodied watching in favour of attuning to the implications of

our own existence in the milieu, whilst recognising that 'it's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it and you'll see that everything changes' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 23). According to Cull (2011: 80), Kaprow, Bergson and, to an extent, Deleuze all emphasise 'attending more closely' as a condition for ontological participation. Attuning to ways of being in, and starting from, the milieu – whether understood as atmosphere, movement, perception, poison, or perspiration – takes us towards what we might more typically have overlooked.

Brian Massumi (in Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xvii) notes there are three aspects to milieu: 'surroundings', 'medium' and 'middle'. These aspects are intimately connected in school environments, always folding into and out of one another. The *surroundings* or immediate material and environmental conditions of the classroom include the structure of school building, its external and internal walls, the carpeted and linoleum floor areas, glass windows and playgrounds, spidery drains and cracked tarmac, the sounds of trains on nearby tracks, bird song in grassy woodlands, the pumping and surging of underground heating and water systems. The classroom's *medium* includes its internal components and regulatory principles: the tables arranged in groups of three, chairs with tennis balls on each leg to prevent the sound of scraping metal on hard ground, the technologies including the smart board and the room's sound field, the classroom rules, practices and procedures, and equipment such as pencils, worksheets and rulers, books and plastic counting cubes, all of which regulate pedagogy, learning and behaviours. But the medium also embraces the pencil stock that houses its graphite core, and the bodies of the children, which are just as much part of the classroom, with their arteries, blood cells, muscles, organs, hormones, enzymes, nervous, digestive and other bodily systems.

The classroom *middle* is where materials pass through and between surroundings and medium. This middle includes respiration, perception and response. According to Arjen Kleinherenbrink (2015: 213), 'even though milieus provide constancy and coherence, the third aspect of the milieu ensures that there is, by definition, a hazardous element of chance and contingency and that no milieu is ever fully closed'. There is no better example of this than the trails of graphite left by flowing pencil points, always meandering in response to local contingencies, and finding their way through without end. Thinking more about how classroom irruptions occur, what they feel like to those who experience them, depending on how and where they are in the milieu, and why they matter in encountering and responding to difference in school, we are interested in how we attune to unfolding things and relations *from* the middle. Rather than standing back to interpret the role of the milieu in an otherwise unfathomable sea of habitual classroom movements, both the body out of place in the early-years classroom and the poisonous pencil in KS1 immerse us in Kaprow's sense of ontological participation as 'lived change'. From the middle, the flow of the room is unsettled, as we sense the more-than-one (Manning 2013), becoming physically involved in a collective stuttering, and feeling the bodily sensation of what Dernikos and her colleagues call the 'scratch', which reorients our attention:

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> The scratch is a frequency: a cut or vibration that momentarily slips out of groove and exceeds capture in language...it can leave a mark, scrape away, skit across the surface, wound, or tear open. We feel it as a ...jolt that extends into us, the scratch impacts our agency ... and, by doing so, reminds us that we are never truly alone... It also tunes us into the vibrations and capacities of nonhuman bodies. (Dernikos et al. 2020: 4)

Participating with difference

From the position of a child, Amanda attunes to her own bodily experiences, as a researcher, as well as to those of the children whose class she has temporarily joined. This moving, sensing immersion feels different from adult life. It involves a daily reorientation of awareness from head and vision to stomach, touch and movement – a reorientation underscored by the transition Amanda notices on leaving the classroom to readopt her 'head-led' life. This takes time and requires a temporary protective space, whether pouring out her day to Rachel who is leading the research, or sitting quietly before cycling home. Two contrasting experiences present themselves. In the position of child, being 'me' is leaky; 'I' extend into and tangle with 'my' surroundings – the metaphor Amanda uses for this experience is falling into water. In head-led life, to the contrary, 'I' am a separate entity that has to make a continual effort to connect to things and persons, relying on speech as the predominant channel of connection. Being in the watery middle with children resonates more with Jane Bennett's description of vegetal consciousness, a movement away 'from cognitive judgment and toward a non-discriminating equanimity', and 'a mode of receptivity that acknowledges without rushing to judge, that listens without filtering the sounds through conventional standards of good and bad' (Bennett 2020: 93).

As a researcher in KS1, Rachel attunes in school to what might be described as living change. Her adult body experiences participation as a way of leaking into the different, yet connected milieus of the school's shifting, teeming assemblages. In the classroom, a sudden jolt carries her attention into the jab of the poisonous pencil as the altered atmosphere sweeps through the room. Always incipiently out of joint, she is dragged into a million tiny concurrences, her sense of the classroom consumed by the story of the poisonous pencil as it unfolds, and by changes to the room's atmospheric intensity. Potential relations of all sorts seem to rise to the surface. Other bodies, although still in movement as they shuffle, whisper and rummage, are diminished and muffled. Their collective noise, into which their individual identities dissolve, is the murmuring cacophony of an indiscernible substance that lubricates the otherwise dry and intensive atmosphere.

Leaky bodies, dry order

As milieus curl, mutate, and leak from to one another, we begin to pay attention to how, in the middle of these moments, territories and bodies relate and find expression:

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> a territory is built from [parts of] milieus and rhythms that have become expressive... a territory is an intense centre in which living beings act out interrelated patterns of behaviour and as such is something that *happens*. A territory is therefore primarily an act or set of acts. (Kleinherenbrink 2015: 218)

Around school, children mark precarious territories using bodily movement and sonorous refrains such as running, glancing and humming. Running around the play area on the first day, holding hands with three children who have volunteered to look after Amanda, the sensory and kinetic intensity is particularly clear to her when, on the first evening, only scratch drawings emerge as she makes fieldnotes, indicating the location of objects and landscape features physically crisscrossed in the course of the afternoon, suggesting the speed with which territory and bodies intra-act, embracing the 'affective elements that are at play in becoming-child (MacLure 2016: 174).

At certain times and for certain bodies, it is possible to disappear from the purview of the teacher on the nursery carpet. Although the carpet is a regulated space, when the teacher does not require a definite or explicit response – such as when telling a story, taking the register, or waiting for another adult to fetch something – 'upward' alertness can be subdued in favour of a swampy sensory consciousness. Noticing tiny details in the synthetic carpet pile, looking at other classmates, exchanging looks, twisting fingers into shapes, feeling skin on skin, has resonance as a rhyming activity, forming a pleasant pattern.

In the KS1 classroom, Sam, absorbed in his humming, wanders as he reads, joining others in his own time, meandering for a moment, milling around, and later producing a moment that stills the air, opening up and slowing down time, before he moves to the door. At times his body assembles with children, teacher and TA, together with materials, equipment and furniture, habitually instituting kinships and becoming part of a collective atmosphere. At other times, his body seems almost lost as it hums in perpetual motion around the classroom, a refrain that 'accomplishes a "holding together" of heterogeneous elements' (MacLure 2016: 173).

Across the broader school environment, verbal utterances and bodily movements combine to compel pupils to conform, producing certain kinds of subject-pupils. This register of language and movement, which is built into the classroom matrix, potentially enhances or restricts children's actions (Cole 2013). In the two moments we are attending to, the early-years teacher in one case, and the KS1 teacher and TA in the other, momentarily adopt this register of language, bodily posture, gesture and facial expression, as they ask Matthew and Sam, respectively, to choose between compliance with the requested behaviour, or the alternative, separation from the class collective in the form of 'time out'.

Adults' use of instructional order corresponds with Deleuze's conceptualisation of 'order-words' that, as Cole (2013: 95) reminds us, '"flow" around places of learning like the routing of electricity in plasterboard walls, and present a means to explain how disciplinary triggers are shared communally and linguistically'. From their experiences as school pupils, to training courses absorbed by becoming-teachers, to their involvement in school settings

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with established practices, teachers and other school staff are on the receiving end of all kinds of regulatory mechanisms designed to protect children's learning and wellbeing and to curtail certain forms of classroom disorder.

Significantly, Sam and Matthew make use of this same register. Matthew uses movement and gesture to challenge the order of the early-years classroom. He remains standing when asked to sit down, holds the teacher's gaze, and when asked to sit still for the time it takes for the sand to run through the plastic tube, he makes hooting sounds. In the KS1 classroom Sam emphatically and disconcertingly announces 'Nowhere!' as his preferred place to complete the handwriting task. In that moment Rachel reaches for a more attuned sensitivity to classroom movement. Rather than only seeing an individual boy who is lashing out, she feels herself caught up along with him, and indeed with everybody and everything else, in intensities that cut through the matrix of the classroom. The appropriation of this register of instructional order by the two boys produces a collective discomfort, exposing the customary asymmetrical roles of adults and pupils in the classroom which is there to maintain the status quo (MacLure et al. 2012), and momentarily re-routing the circulation of power in the milieu.

Bodily-imprinted learning is a large part of early years pedagogy. It is often imparted through the carpet. The carpet is used as a pedagogical device for listening, singing, with or without scripted movements, invited contributions from children, and various kinds of storytelling. Associated with the carpet are predictable routines and rituals that are different in quality and feel from both 'good learning' (that is, play with minimal adult intervention) and formal pedagogical instruction. What is rewarded on the carpet is listening, facing the front, being in your assigned place, legs crossed, bottoms on the floor, hands still, no talking with neighbours. But there is a territory below the adult sight line that swarms and teems with things that can appear distant or be overlooked from above. Matthew moves with an erratic unpredictability that pulls on the collective of everyone on the carpet. There is a precarity in the ordering of this more-than-oneness, for example when the teacher has to leave her chair to get something and, after taking only six steps away – as Sheri Leafgren observed in a similar situation – 'the spaces between children disintegrated and the rows collapsed into piles and bundles' (Leafgren 2009: 192).

A cut or vibration that slips out of time

In the early-years classroom, Matthew's refusal to sit down starts as a small shift in atmospherics. The changing current causes the liquid medium in which everything is suspended to churn. So long as the adult tone of voice and movements remain unagitated, the ecology of the carpet continues relatively undisturbed. But the forward movement of teacher's body signals a change of velocity and intention, and a charge ripples outward. Children turn to look, amplifying this further. The teacher's reaction marks a forceful incursion into carpet life, which evokes something more watchful and alert, a collecting point of attention. The touch of the teacher's hand on Matthew's arm goes beyond the two of them.

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Once Matthew is seated away from the group, with the hourglass, enforced regulatory time returns. Most of the collective on the carpet can see the sand running through. Here, a substance that in play is lively and companionable, with qualities of impersonal intimacy, is converted into something else altogether: contained, proscribed, and abstracting. The carpet with its overflows is reconfirmed as a demarcated territory from which Matthew has been exiled, dispossessed. The class is partially dismembered, and difference is asserted through an atmospheric and temporal hostility to anomalous behaviour. Matthew sits at other coordinates; the soupy mix of interlaced hands and stars of glittering colour and whispered words and playful movements is torn open.

In the KS1 classroom, changes to Sam's bodily state vibrate, scratching across the skin of the classroom milieu as these scratches cut deeply into his body. As the surrounding materials and medium interact, a hazardous wild element erupts into the classroom. Sam's muscles become taut as his body stiffens, with a sudden jolt he grips the pencil tightly in his fist, grimacing, he jabs the pencil and with both hands clenched, Sam's body resists, pulling back and pulling away. The muscular effort of clenching his fist intensifies as it courses through his fibrous body. At the same time, however, he marks his territory, finding ways of communicating his presence to the others; he physically grabs and grips onto, bites off, spits out and rips up, vibrating, stifled, suffocated, and threatening. The bristly reception, the laboured stares, the heavy pause, and deep anticipation of children and staff reek of inimicality. As Canguilhem (1991) points out, anomaly becomes abnormality only in a milieu that is hostile to difference.

The poisonous pencil momentarily pierces the regulation of linear time, deep in the gullies that etch the horizontal plane of the classroom, opening the field to a zigzag world, creating 'a world of flux without horizon, a rhythmic oscillation' (Woodman 2004). With its poison, the pencil is vitalised in pulsing vibration, escaping what we expect of it, and tilting at other possibilities. It becomes 'a pivot point at which a recognizable image is no longer apparent and a new image is produced' (Richardson 2013: 91). The capacity of the pencil that menacingly drips its poison seems to broker a temporal milieu, 'an enlargement of the threshold of the now, to intensify the body's subject-constituting experience of its own vitality … expand[ing] the thickness of the present that comprises the very ground for experience' (Hansen 2004: 589). I (Rachel) felt the now of this affective moment, as guts grip in anticipation. Time seemed dislocated from its assumed linearity; it thickened, slowed down and opened out to accommodate a swell of intensities that capacitated and incapacitated bodies differently in the room (Dernikos et al. 2020: 15). As Brunner (2013) proposes, following Deleuze (1989: 81), it was as though the process of perception was unfolding over time and through time but never *in* time.

From my brusque assessment of the teacher as I glanced over at him, he seemed unscathed by the sudden change in classroom milieu, still regulated by the need to 'get on' with things. The teacher's urgency to re-turn the classroom from the brink of a contingent openness, forced by the irruption of a hazardous element, put order-words to work in the business of restoring constancy and coherency. To borrow from Leafgren (2013: 279, citing Marcussen 2008), the teacher was 'organizing to fend off chaos... to

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consolidate a certain state of affairs'. An always present 'body out of tune' (Dernikos et al. 2020: 4) made possible a moment in and out of time, when its nomadic inventions were transformed to allow the teacher, the TA, and the children to consolidate their recognition of themselves in their difference. Sam was cast as an anomaly, a way to momentarily glimpse the scope of variability, or sense an openness to transformation always present in the world. In his later recollections of the event, however, the teacher would bring me back to the scarring of the scratch, 'a constant reminder that something always lingers, remains, leaving a humming in our bodies we're left to wonder about' (Dernikos et al. 2020: 15). He described how he was feeling at a loss, struggling to know how he might better communicate the boundaries to Sam so he could learn to participate more effectively in class life.

If the pencil brokered an enlargement of the threshold of the now via the mark it traced as it momentarily slipped out of groove, the cut or scratch opened up the internal workings and contradictions of the classroom milieu to what escapes it. The pencil's irruption had both creative and destructive capacities in this instance; it could have opened the classroom milieu to new possibilities, or it could have pulled the classroom assemblage apart from the inside. The teacher's recourse – to send Sam to another class – was an attempt to remove the threat to the room's milieu, and to restabilise it by reviving its coherence, sealing its edges and repossessing its atmosphere. Yet in Sam's absence, the poison would linger, still disrupting any easy sense of order and territorial integrity, leaving a potent aftertaste and trailing its promise to threaten, as well as its urging to flee.

Theory *with* practice

As a diverse and inclusive school, with for xample a special facility for deaf pupils, Alma Park organises its classroom milieu around an ambition to enable all to live equitably in the presence of others (Masschelein and Verstraete 2012). In most schools, parallel and vertical year-groups are segregated, but here, a different part of the same classroom in the early-years class, and a parallel class in KS1, were used to absorb the unsettling irruptions and the otherness and difference that lingered in their wake. How then can attuning to the middle of things, as described in this chapter, contribute to the work of this school and others in trying to create the circumstances that enable all those involved to live in the presence of difference?

We suggest that instead of trying to explain moments of irruption in terms of individual psychology, teachers, educational psychologists, TAs and others involved in education should be encouraged and supported to go along with what, from the viewpoint of current educational policy and strategy, appears threatening and out of place. Rather than attributing responsibility for normative deviance to individual children and to the pathologies attributed to them through retrospective assessment (Leafgren 2013), this means starting from the midst of what the system considers anomalous, and possibly

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even reframing what difference can be. For folded inside the milieu, children no longer appear fixed in their differences.

In the three workshops led by Anna Macdonald with which we began this chapter, attendees including teachers, educational psychologists and researchers were invited to discover, in ongoing and open-ended ways, how being in the midst of things could give a different *feel* to education. Participants explored sensations of lying on the floor, playing with their feet and hands, crawling on surfaces, moving in odd positions and at different speeds and intensities. They might 'flock' in a group, or be alternately flung to the edges and pulled into the middle; they might play self-generated games in which small pieces of equipment were spontaneously picked up, pulled, thrown or worn. For Amanda, her experiences in nursery – the soupy consciousness of carpet time, having or not having friends, intensities of sitting on the carpet, running across the playground, sliding down surfaces and becoming unexpectedly impacted by classroom irruptions – were diffracted through these movements. The conversation that followed each workshop highlighted moments of reflection that included intense absorption, prohibition, inhibition, shyness, a desire to hold things, and resistance to being pulled involuntarily out of powerful experiences of material and somatic absorption.

These reflections, and the critiques of pedagogical regulation they imply, are not new. Many educational researchers have made them before (for example, Fenwick and Edwards 2010; Bergen 2010; Wallin 2010, 2013; Ball 2015), but the significance of the workshop lay in how it brought non-representational somatic knowledge to the surface, suggesting ways to fold it back into daily practices of research and education. For teaching to orient to oddness in new ways, qualities of *immanence* in teaching will matter. Teaching (and thinking-feeling) from the inside or the middle allows for relational encounters with 'potentials and powers not our own' (Colebrook 2005: 3).

> Such ontological participation does not involve a dissolution of the material self in order to become the adequate vessel for the passage of a dematerialised thought. On the contrary, it involves paying attention to our capacity to change and be changed by other material bodies, and an experience of 'growing in the midst of things' rather than being irrevocably separated from them. (Cull 2011: 18)

Children have little choice but to become and grow in the midst of things. Primary education however, in the UK as in many other countries, thinks of and regulates pedagogical practice as something applied to children, coming from a source separate from them, and that aims in its turn to separate. This forecloses the pedagogical impulse to tune into that which circulates through and connects bodies. By placing a blanket over the potentials and powers of the classroom, it partially smothers these creative openings. Our aim in this chapter has been to suggest what might be possible, if only these potentials and powers could be released.

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[1] http://www.annamacdonaldart.co.uk

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[3] ESRC-funded project *Becoming a Problem: How and Why Children Acquire a Reputation as 'Naughty' in the Earliest Years at School*, ESRC/RES/062230105; Childline.org.uk; Nationalautismassociation.org.uk; Theguardian.com; Mumsnet.com

[4] 'Psy-trends' is a blanket term for the psychiatrization, medicalization and psychologization of children and childhood, and the associated processes of identification, assessment and labelling, typically used in schools and by educators (Barker and Mills 2018).

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