



Peer-reviewed paper

Working conceptually with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy in relation to children's artwork

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This paper will be looking at the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and conceptual formation in artwork. These philosophical concepts require an act of imagination in the reading, as the child is seen being-in-the-world, which implies a thinking, sensing person responding to people and their environment in ways that are not explainable yet commonly felt. While some philosophical concepts are quite straightforward to comprehend, others require effort. Yet Deleuze and Guattari's work, as employed in early childhood, envisions the child and the teacher in a dynamic fashion to reveal alternative and powerful ways to think of the child and teacher and to enhance the experience of being for both. This paper explores how children's engagement with art can become so much more than representation of what already is.

Introduction

During my postgraduate studies, I conducted a research project employing Deleuzian philosophy in early childhood education. I found that Deleuze implicates educators to look for the 'what else' supporting practice, which, in some cases, might lead to teachers working quite differently with children. While there is no such thing as only one 'correct' way to 'be' a teacher, I believe a shift from developmental theory towards a Deleuzian understanding of engaging with children can be beneficial for teachers and students. My own Deleuzian studies, as well as the work of people who have inspired me, inform this article.

In *What is Philosophy (1994)* Deleuze and Guattari see philosophy as conceptual formation that arises from chaos or chaosmos. Deleuzian concepts are not seen as having an ordering effect, however. On the contrary, concepts are regarded as multiplicitous, encouraging generative thinking and movement, not as 'right and wrong' but as 'difference'. This characterises teaching practice as children's exploration, without the teacher 'leading' the way in an assumed correct direction. Rather, the teacher takes the role of provocateur, seeing children's play as always different, happening under new circumstances, something being omitted or added. Children's work/play becomes eventful and non-hierarchical, where teachers and children enjoy affective spaces and moments, allowing for potentialities of all those engaged.

While our comprehension of Deleuze is now more widespread in education, globally, education is increasingly ordered and controlled, with an emphasis on measurement of children's learning (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Such a limited approach to/of education is commented on by Lines (2007), who sees education as increasingly 'machinic', referring to strictly defined policy and curriculum guidelines. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) reject the idea of unification and centralization, and I would argue the 'education machine' that does not differentiate between context, culture and the teacher-child-community relations. In effect, the emphasis on a very narrow perception leads to the situation where there is little or no place for the arts as an explorative space, where the arts are "limited to a set of repetitive tasks" (Mansfield, 2002, p. 189) As Grierson (2011) explains, in the current educational climate, the arts are linked to "innovative entrepreneurship situated in a place of economic value" (p. 339). The arts, rather than being a source of joy, inspiration and expression, lead to children focusing on 'production art'. Art as exploration or expression of self within a community can be lost, leaving little room for child-led exploration 'with' the teacher.



Developmental theory and Deleuze in the arts

Following the current trend of seeing art as an acquisition of skills and competencies (Berk, 2013) characterises children as lacking in abilities and skills and in need of help from an adult, supporting the child in reaching a preconceived milestone. Such an adult removes the child's own potentiality from their continuous becoming, in building knowledge and understanding of the world through collaboration with peers and teachers. This view of the child as 'lacking' is countered by recognising children in the light of their potentialities (Whyte & Naughton, 2014). Seeing children's potentialities, for example, as children becoming-artist, becoming-dancer and always becoming something else. Plows (2014) discusses the importance of "the careful observation and documentation of young children's art making" (p. 51). Alongside this, Whyte et al. (2014) helpfully acknowledge that observations can be interpreted in many different ways, thus recognising a multi-layeredness. Accepting that what teachers observe is only one of many ways of 'seeing' affords teachers and children a space, an assemblage they can enter together. In order to share such an assemblage, teachers might have to let go of practice that renders education to a "transmission and reproductive imitation" (Olsson, 2009, p. 7). A "do with me" (Naughton, et al., 2014, p. 57) pedagogy, without the expectation that children reproduce what has been presented to them, supports children to create through the arts. Such collaboration between children and teacher can occur spontaneously or from a provocation set up by the teacher.

Wright (2012) believes: "Representing the world, or capturing reality through experience, is a significant component of the arts" (p. 3). However, seeing children's work as representation, rather than seeing it as an exploration of their worlds, puts a limit on where children's art making can 'go'. Some teachers might ask, "What is this?" when a child presents them with their artwork. Such a defining moment may oversimplify a child's work and suggest that art should always represent something specific. When a teacher invites a child, "Tell me about your picture", stories could be told by the child as they unfold. Some children might not want to explain their art, which is acknowledged by Knight (2013), who believes that allowing children's art to be "mysterious and abstract, and their meanings as sometimes closed to the gaze of the audience" (p. 257) ensures that children's artwork retains its purpose as art.

Smooth and striated art engagement

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) discuss in *A Thousand Plateaus* spaces that can be understood as either open (smooth) or closed (striated). These spaces only exist in combination, moving from the smooth to the striated. In art education, the striated could be understood as a provocation set up by a teacher, from where the children can explore freely, thus entering a smooth space from where they return to the 'safety' of the striated space whenever they feel inclined. In this reading, striations are not necessarily negative, but provide security, a resting place for children (and adults), before the next venture into the smooth begins.

Where art is bound to a particular physical space, for example, the 'art area', and limited to some teacher chosen art utensils and materials, children's explorations may be too striated. As Lines (2007) observes, the arts have been pushed to the periphery of education and are often tied to a certain time and place, limiting what and how children can get involved. Added to these striations are parental requests for keeping children clean, the worry about children making 'a mess', the supervision of children while they are engaged in art and, in some cases, the cost of resources. All the time, teachers have to be mindful that their own art experiences and understanding of what art can be does not take over children's own explorations, thus striating the children's experiences in another way. This resonates with Lenz Taguchi (2010), who portrays the binary divide between theory and practice as a striation in education. Where theoretical knowledge, for example of colour, composition and perspectives, have a higher value than the lived experience of art explorations, the interdependency of the practical and the intellectual becomes



lost. Through working within an inter-disciplinary approach to education, students and teachers can "...go across stratifying thinking and habits of doing, into creation and invention of something new" (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 123). This supports a shared art experience between children, their peers and their teachers.

Embracing difference moves teachers away from negative thinking, in terms of what it is not, to celebrating "deviations from the norm" (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 58) as a way of become/teach/being "interbeing, *intermezzo*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). Art education as a way of exploring the world calls for letting go of the known, of stability, which allows us to see what there is in terms of difference, rather than a fixed identity; "difference is behind everything, but behind difference there is nothing" (Deleuze, as cited in May, 2015, p. 19). This might not always be obvious; however, this can be understood as children problematise without heading towards a definite answer, a finishing line or an end product. Acknowledging the process, rather than the end product, is acknowledged by Olsson (2009), who writes, "one needs to focus on process rather than position" (p. 31). Emphasising the process without having a product can become a dynamic and ongoing progression and can often be observed in children's art engagement. Many teachers will have seen children paint one 'picture' on top of the previous one until the whole page is a sea of brown. While visually there might not be a lot to 'see', children share the story of their creation with the teacher, opening insights into the children's world and ways of thinking.

Lines of flight and rhizomatic unfoldings

Where children have the opportunity to explore through the arts, children enter smooth spaces and take what Deleuze refers to as 'lines of flight'. In 'lines of flight', children cut across what there is, deterritorialising current knowing, before reterritorialising and formalising something new. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) qualify lines of flight as an "abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialisation" (p. 9). Sellers (2013) adds that lines of flight can be understood as "mo(ve)ments of change" (p. 17). Attributing lines of flight as a creative force, they produce linkages as lines interconnect, thus allowing for separate games or engagement to become more, an 'and...and...and' with infinitive possibilities (Sellers, 2013). To support children, teachers need to avoid and be aware of restrictions, for example, that art can only be 'done' in the 'art area', as well as assumptions of what art is. Only where teachers look closely at the relationships between assumed separateness can lines of flight become, hence encouraging teachers to let go of habitual routines. Creating an environment in which children are encouraged to take lines of flight supports children to learn rhizomatically. Just as lines of flight bring something new, rhizomes are more than a simple connection between two "points or positions" (Sellers, 2013, p. 21).

It is the movement, the unfolding of rhizomes, derived from interlocking root systems, that are of interest. Rhizomes do not follow a predetermined pattern, but make multiple new connections, which allow for unpredictable direction in children's play. Such an unforeseeable way of engagement might seem chaotic, though, as Naughton et al., (2014) explain: "What may be seen as chaos makes sense to those in the activity itself, while not having a right or predictable answer or outcome and seemingly going in all directions at once" (p. 59). This implies that teachers become part of the rhizomatic, unfolding process, a challenge, no doubt, as teachers must provide enough guidance to keep the engagement safe and flowing, without shutting down possibilities. Such an engagement differs from the teacher leading with questions, hindering the unfolding process, not leaving space for children taking the initiative. Knight (2008) supports a teacher's participation in children's (art) engagement, "collaborating through a rotating exchange of leadership, to forge a deeper mutual understanding" (p. 309). Therefore, teachers should not be afraid to become part of children's art engagements, but be mindful of the role they are playing and see the back and forth of being the leader/follower as a dance with two (or more) partners.



Art as becoming in an affective space

Lines of flight occur in affective moments. Affect, once more, is something that moves us, something that drives us “and represents nothing” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 259) but itself. Åkervall (2008) adds that affect can be felt - an understanding I find fitting not only for working with children, where verbalising what is happening might sometimes be impossible, but also for an engagement with the arts, which might, at times, be guided more by ‘sense’ than by rational thought.

Working in this affective rhizomatic way creates a disruption to theories that conceive the child as hierarchically structured, singular and moving towards a pre-conceived goal. Advocating for learning as becoming, Olsson (2009) sees a fluidity and an ongoing search for the ‘and...and...and’ in children’s encounters with the world. This processual play, assuming that it is in open-ended play, is where children have opportunities to experience learning as becoming-painter, becoming-sculptor, becoming-dancer, becoming-actor! Becoming something else links to Deleuzian lines of flight, where de- and reterritorialisation occur. For example, when children work with clay and tell each other what they are creating - a cat, a loaf of bread, a snail - often those creations turn into something else in an instant. Children might choose to leave the clay behind and in an affective, igniting/disrupting moment, and move on to play elsewhere. Some teachers might interpret such behaviour as children simply losing interest. Olsson (2013) believes that it is through such intra-actions, through merging interrelations of children and materials, that children work in “an affective way” (p. 250).

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write; “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what it’s affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body” (p. 257). What could affective engagement with the arts look like? Olsson (2013) and Lenz Taguchi (2010) report affective engagement as a shift, a movement, where materials and children or groups of children affect each other, opening possibilities for new becomings to emerge and simultaneously merge. In contrast to such an affective emergence, full of potentialities, children can be viewed only in terms of their ‘artistic dispositions’. This view implies that only some children, those with observable artistic dispositions, could be artists, rather than seeing every child as becoming-artist, with boundless artistic potentialities. Furthermore, where judgment on children’s art making is passed based simply on a teacher’s visual perception of the children’s artwork, one might wonder whose creativity or ‘imaginary’ is wanting.

Imagination and imaginary

Having ‘great imagination’ is a term often used to describe children with regards to their ideas. However, in a Deleuzian sense, imagination is insignificant, as it is “legislated and authorized by constructed notions of taste” (Knight, 2013, p. 255). This means that what we see as ‘tasteful’ is often influenced by what we find beautiful or interesting. Knight (2013) writes that Deleuze offers the imaginary as something that “does not exist in its own right” (p. 255), but as a non-defining reflection of many things at once. Working with imaginary finds what children think, experience, or encounter, “at the moment the drawing begins rather than scanning their contents for evidence of schema” (Knight, 2013, p. 257). Schema can be understood as hierarchical stages the child has moved through in his/her ‘art development’. The inclusiveness of the circumstances under which the child’s art was produced embraces the “contingent, [in that] it responds to conditions and events of the moment” (Knight, 2013, p. 256). Such conditions and events could include the presence of a teacher, a parent, the weather, a group of children playing nearby, a conversation the child has while recalling a conversation the child had in the past. Engaging with children at the time of their art making supports children and teachers to read children’s art work. Giving thought to the imaginary brings teachers to be forever mindful that their presence, as well as the most careful and well thought out questions, influence children’s work.



Assemblage, an inevitable responsibility

As mentioned earlier, it is through entering an assemblage with children that teachers work *with* children. Deleuzian assemblages are constituted in many ways, having no discernable beginning or end (Olsson, 2009). Also, they are “constantly subject to transformation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 82) and include the organic and inorganic environment. As teachers are part of children’s lives, teachers inevitably enter an assemblage with children. As Knight (2008) reminds teachers, being engaged in children’s work and working with children is a “departure from a firmly entrenched mantra, at least in Australian early childhood settings, of ‘hands off children’s art’” (p. 306). I would suggest that, over the years, the ‘hands on’, ‘hands off’ debate has swung back and forth like a pendulum. Knight (2008) and Naughton et al. (2014) see teachers granting their own permissions to enter (art) engagements with children.

Working with event

Supporting children to become/work with assemblages of desire leads to children working with what could be understood as ‘open ended’ play, which does not have a stipulated outcome or goal in mind, but is free to go wherever the children/child take the play. Acknowledging all parts of an assemblage moves us to the realisation that teachers are part of the assemblage and thus have an influence on what and how children might engage (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Teachers could support children’s engagement and explorations by encouraging the Deleuzian concept of event.

Working with event in education perceives play with pre-conceived learning outcomes or fixed goals that children are expected to achieve as redundant. Event encourages children to engage in “intense, vital, and undomesticated experimental processes of learning” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 90). For example, during my research, I observed children noticing and playing with their own shadows, which grew into discussions about how shadows are cast, why shadows move, how we can touch objects with our shadow limbs, onto the solar system and on from there to yoga poses and circus play. Those child led explorations supported children to move from one ‘topic’ to another, building on eachothers’ knowledge as their thoughts and ideas came into being, intra-connecting the various lines of flight. This approach to building knowledge is in stark contrast to the project described by Wright (2007), where children are encouraged to draw a picture regarding a particular theme. The questions asked by the observing adult bring the children back to the original ‘topic’, thus locking the event in the confines of what the adult thinks the children are exploring and expressing.

Knight (2008) sees drawing with children as an opportunity to reflect on and research our work as teachers. Collaborative drawing is where both teacher and child are engaged in creating a shared piece of art (Knight, 2008). An important point Knight (2008) makes is that “collaborative drawing is not necessarily concerned with the aesthetic” (p. 309) but with communication, expression and exploration of the children’s and teachers’ worlds. Where Wright (2007) offers the children a topic to which the children create their picture, Knight (2008) advocates for a ‘stimulus’ or a departing point from where the children can move in any direction they like, deploying lines of flight. By making use of the Deleuzian concept ‘event’, we view children’s processual artwork as an ongoing journey. For example, Knight (2008) describes a child who collaboratively drew a picture with an adult, before covering the work with ‘scribbles’, and warns teachers of falling into the trap of judging children’s work based on an ‘age appropriate art development stages’ in children. From such a view point, the ‘scribbles’ would simply become an indicator for representational ability. Affording opportunities for children to “eventicize” (Olsson, 2012) their work turns children’s art making into a “meaning - making tool” (Olsson, 2012), moving children’s art away from being a mere representational device.



Conclusion

The striated characteristics of current thinking in education that leans heavily on developmental theories such as those of Piaget and Vygotsky formulate the child as a 'lack', whereas Deleuzian concepts see children in the light of their potentialities. Working with potentialities raises the status of the child from a person who is 'needy' to person who is becoming something/someone else, unfolding with/through rhizome.

Wright (2007; 2012) describes children's art as a representation, which allows teachers only an interpretative glimpse into children's worlds, while art engagement that is not focused on an end product happens through affect. While skills based artwork provides little spontaneity, working with affect produces something unforeseeable as children, teachers, spaces and materials intra-act (Wright, 2007; 2012). Where children have the freedom to eventicise, create problems and pose questions, different understandings of the world are made. In an environment that acknowledges children as thoughtful rhizomatic beings, eventive enquiry can occur unbounded by striating 'topics'.

Working with 'difference', creates a space where children are not simply afforded opportunities to take lines of flight, but are actively encouraged to do so. For example, by asking 'what if' questions and encouraging children's curiosity and sense of adventure. I am by no means implying that this is an easy task for any teacher; supporting children's own eventive process is much more than a simple letting go of fixed routines and structures. Conversations with colleagues, parents and education leaders are necessary to create and support an environment in which children can explore, take the lead, take lines of flight. I believe that the effort is more than worthwhile in creating new opportunities to unfold and for multiple connections to be made.

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