

A more-than-social movement: The post-human condition of quality in the early years

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Abstract

This article explores quality in early childhood education by de-elevating the importance of the human subject and experience, and heightening instead a focus on and tensions with the post-human. The argument traces the intricate web of ‘qualities’ woven throughout entanglements of subjects, objects and things that constitute what is referred to as ‘the early years sector’. The strike through the social in this post-human condition exposes critical concerns about the ‘problem’ of quality, and foregrounds the urgency of rupturing the status quo. Dislodged from the perceived comfort and safety of human control and determination, quality in the speculative state of the more-than-social movement can expect no conclusion. Instead, the (re)configuration of the early years sector as a more-than-social movement compels a rethinking of the dominance of human-centric philosophies. By repositioning Kristeva’s semiotic subject-in-process and Havel’s subject positionings within automatism, this analysis inserts ‘non-human-being’ and ‘multiple beings-times’ into the ‘problem with quality’. In the early childhood sector, these ruptures create generative possibilities of quality entanglements with and beyond the human.

Keywords

Early childhood education, post-humanism, professionalism, quality, social movements

Introduction

The ultimate goal, for Deleuze and Guattari, is neither to redefine, misapply, or strategically exaggerate a category, nor even invent a new identity. Their aim is to destroy categorical gridding altogether, to push the apparatus of identity beyond the threshold of sameness. (Massumi, 1992: 88)

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As in this opening quote by Massumi, this article pushes the deconstruction of quality to further limits. In pushing the apparatus of quality ‘beyond the threshold of sameness’, this article engages in a productive response through the conception of ‘*sœial* movements’. Merging the competing discourses of shifts and movements that govern education in the early years and their multilayered, seemingly insatiable quests for ‘quality’, we (re)position the early years sector itself simultaneously as and as not a *sœial* movement. By ‘striking through’ *sœial* in this condition, we de-elevate the importance of the human subject and experience, and heighten instead a focus on and tensions with the post-human. Our aim is to shed fresh light on thinking about the intricate web of qualities woven throughout entanglements of subjects, objects and things that constitute what we refer to as ‘the early years sector’ and, as Jones et al. (2014) argue, the movements already within the sector. In this sense, we are inspired by scholars who test and blur the boundaries of the human subject, subjectivity and autonomy (Barad, 2015; Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Butler, 2005; Haraway, 2007; Latour, 2011), and others who work within these tensions, as we continue the multi-species, subject<=>object dialogue by (re)thinking and (re)configuring conceptual understandings and theoretical assemblages of ‘quality’.

To begin with, we conceptualise the early years sector as a *sœial* movement, on account of its ‘loosely organized but sustained campaign in support of a [*sœial*] goal’ that aims to influence ‘society’s structure or values’ and that is ‘essentially collective’ (Killian, 2013). Through this lens we question what this ‘loose organization’ and such an ‘essentially collective’ movement means in relation to ‘quality’ in the early years sector. Using this lens, we argue, offers a space in which to re-vision the sector and to destabilise the common drive for quality, which elevates critical, yet often marginalised, sidelined or disregarded entanglements and relationships. We build our argument on the groundbreaking work of Dahlberg et al. (2013) and Moss and Dahlberg (2008), in which they reposition quality as ‘meaning-making’ amongst other (re)conceptions that disturb the universalised, homogenising expectations of quality. In Havel’s (1985:) thinking, they, and others who continue this work (e.g. Duhn, 2015; Jones et al., 2014; Osgood and Giugni, 2015), have created ‘a crack in the panorama of everyday life’.

Our intention is to deepen this ‘crack’ in a further experimental rupture of shifts in conceptions of quality in early years education. Drawing on Lather’s (2009) argument that telling others’ stories is impossible, we position universal expectations and quality benchmarks as ethically fraught and violent. Our exploration of theoretical and philosophical relationships and ruptures captures this violence. In an interplay of the examination of the early years sector as a *sœial* movement, this analysis draws on a conception of subjectivities as infinitely in construction, and on their positioning in relationship with their context and environment (Havel, 1985; Kristeva, 1984, 2008). These philosophical musings provide unexpected bridges that usefully connect conceptions of the human-focused subject-in-process to think through a post- and more-than-human lens. They add what we see as a crucial opening to what Taylor (2005: 9) calls an ‘ethical enmeshment’ of the human Other with the non-, more-than and other-than-human Other. Such a philosophical rupturing decentres the human subject from its reified pedestal in dominant quality and wider educational epistemes in order to (re)focus what is thought of as quality in an onto-epistemological ethics and politics (Barad, 2007), involving complex subject<=>object positionings and agency (Bennett, 2010; Duhn, 2015).

This article itself is thus shifting and complex, and represents a troubled ‘self’ in the early years sector. Through its conceptual (re)weaving of the sector, it (re)imagines the shift from human-centric to post-human quality debates. These theoretical ruptures embed the multiplicities of the early years sector in an orientational shift in ways of being and knowing, and, following Latour (2011), recognise that a long and slow process of redefining relationships and relationship-building is required. This process arises, then, not only in epistemological and ontological ‘truths’ and

variables, but also in the ethics of human and more-than-human subject<=>object encounters, and in their politics. The fresh spaces in which we envisage post-human conceptualisations of quality attempt to dislodge the certainty and simplicity with which it remains reified in the dominant local and global political arena (Osgood and Giugni, 2015). The early years *social* movement exists in this infinitely intertwined ‘multiverse’ or ‘pluriverse’, as Latour (2011) suggests, and has critical and urgent implications for the human and non-human elements in the ‘loosely organized’ and ‘essentially collective’ movement.

The ‘problem with quality’

As argued in the introduction, the concerns about the ‘problem’ of quality foreground the urgency of rupturing the status quo. Moss and Dahlberg (2008: 5) remind us that quality ‘is neither neutral nor self-evident, but saturated with values and assumptions’, and that it is imbued with very particular meanings, beliefs and values. They argue that the very idea of a concept of quality is a powerful and multipurpose *human* technology, and that, as such, the expectation that it can fit with more than one place, or even more than one situation within one place, becomes a ‘technology of normalisation’ (Moss and Dahlberg, 2008: 4) – or the violence of which Lather cautions above. In this article, we disturb and contribute to this thinking in order to dispute the human subject’s elevation in the ontological hierarchy by subjugating it to possibilities for post-humanist perspectives.

A brief insight into the contemporary early years landscape may be useful to set the scene for this panorama. In the dominant early years discourse, policies seek solutions to internationally publicised problems, underachievements and pressures, through aims and practices that conform with global benchmarks and achievement levels. Such standardisation and ongoing colonising, through universal goals (UNICEF, 2008; Viruru, 2006) and measurement tools (Siraj, 2008), remain common technologies of normalisation, as Moss and Dahlberg (2008) point out, and also technologies of distance. Implemented across distance, anywhere, anytime, these tools and rules are designed to achieve quality outcomes, which are promised not only as the key to children’s educational success, but also as prerequisites to qualify for funding, licensing and membership benefits. The benchmarks and tools normalise by offering a global solution to the problem of quality.

How can post-human tinkering subvert the mono-focused simplicity of such universal global normalisations? And do they even matter? Our (re-)elevation of critical influences on and in the early years *social* movement engages in these questions through a ‘materiality of imagining together with the imaginative capacities of materiality’ (Barad, 2015: 388). We must emphasise that we see the early years *social* movement as already oozing with interrelating matter, energy, noise, people, spaces/places, times and things, with ‘agential capacities for imaginative, desiring, and affectively charged forms of bodily engagements’ (Barad, 2015: 388). Our attempt, then, is to subvert the current mono-focused human-centric drive, where universal benchmarks for so-called quality pose a very real risk of reducing the sector to the opposite: a void or nothingness, or, as Barad (2015: 394) helps to position it, a ‘complete ontological insensibility’.

The ‘ontological insensibility’ of contemporary early years localities can be seen to arise in the face of these global goals and requirements. Often leading to further short-sighted economic and political decisions (Bauman, 2009), this situation is perhaps epitomised in Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, in the rapid increase in privatisation and commercialisation in early years governance (Duhn, 2010; Mitchell, 2014; Whyte, 2015). The unprecedented expansion of the sector, increased marketisation, and changing family and cultural demographics (May, 2013; Tesar, 2015) entangle the sector in New Zealand in complex human-subject-centric ‘citizen-consumers, social markets

and cultures of consumption' (Peters, 2013: 313). The neo-liberal early years marketplace pushes to the margins any efforts for political advocacy for freedoms, identities, and relational, particularising ethics and quality, following instead the global recipe for measurable outcomes and financial (and shareholder) profits (Arndt, 2014; Mitchell and Brooking, 2007).

An uneasy alliance has become evident in the competitive early years marketplace between private, public, for-profit and not-for-profit providers, clamouring to achieve markers of quality within the same space (Johnston, 2015; Mitchell, 2014). The sector appears paralysed in a human-centric approach to quality, and an unrelenting desire to tame the entire natureculture, post-human episteme into a dominant measurement- and rating-scales-driven focus on attainability and comparability (Osgood and Giugni, 2015). Such a marketplace unsettles human subject identities, as Bauman (2009) claims, through a 'liquid modern' state of uncertainty, short-term solutions and temporary commitments. Those in the early years *sœcial* movement might question how their own non-singular performances fit within the extrinsically designed and implementable measurement tools.

The global ontological and epistemological traditions and expectations create a tumultuous separation of the sector from what Taylor (2005, 2013) sees as ethical and political commonworlds ways of being, where the human absolutely must be recognised. However, the critical and urgent importance lies in thinking beyond the 'I', to the more-than-human (Barad, 2015; Butler, 2005) and interspecies entanglements (Haraway, 2003, 2007). As long as professional codes and expectations maintain their strong (strangle?)hold, safeguarding human identities within specific standards and commitments, they add to the panorama of ontological insensibilities within the early years *sœcial* movement.

Troubling the social world

The early years sector encompasses multiple localities and realities. Its particular dynamics and vital, unstatic and constantly changing nature as a *sœcial* movement call for urgent recognition of the complexities of these dynamics in the more-than-human subjects-in-relation-with-each-other, rather than for global taming by comparable instruments (Jones et al., 2014; Osgood and Giugni, 2015). Particular concerns have been raised in this time of the Anthropocene (Latour, 2014; Taylor, 2013), implicating entanglements of a more-than-human nature in a wider troubling that affects the very nature of educational debates (Duhn, 2012). The importance of explicating this troubling in the open, public realm responds to what Latour (2011) refers to as cosmopolitics – an ethical and political recognition of the interdependency of natural (scientific), cultural and political environments. It involves actors and actants (Latour, 2004), human and non-human acting and interacting beings and forces. Actants can be reflected in the affective energy that is added, for example, by Barad's (2015) focus on the 'matter with matter' and its energy and life-giving qualities; Bennett's (2010) elevation of the vibrancy of that matter, and of things, and the material in our environments; and Braidotti's (2013) critical post-human perspective. The affective energies that emerge from elevating such subject<=>object relations have strong implications for the early years *sœcial* movement. They compel us to make a critical shift in our positioning of the movement – to one that is more-than-*sœcial*. Quality then works within the sector in indeterminate connecting ways, beyond the control and measurement of humans and the human world, but instead, as Jones et al. (2014) and Duhn (2014) argue, in a wider worldly transformation.

Reimagining the early years world as more-than-*sœcial* creates the potential to free the focus of the sector from 'solutions', 'problems', 'outcomes' and measurability, to conceptions of quality that push beyond the human subject. Responding to Duhn's (2015: 922) assertion that contemporary human-centric scholarship is 'one of the most persistent continuities of Western histories of the

present', our position (re)values those who are Othered by this dominance. Subjects, more-than-human subjects and objects in the more-than-*sœial* early years movement become recognised as always on trial, speculative and incomplete, in contrast to the definitive standards of quality indicators. Connectedness, meaning and life-giving energies, we suggest, engage more-than-*sœial* actants (Barad, 2003, 2015; Braidotti, 2009, 2013), both within and surrounding the sector. The early years movement then becomes constantly called into question, renegotiating and (re)writing its history, its project, its direction, its natureculture, politics, things, subjects, objects and matter. This compels us, following Duhn (2015: 923), 'in a time and place that cries out for imaginings of possible futures', to urgently seek the complexity and multiplicity that arise in an ongoing rewriting of quality from a more-than-*sœial* perspective.

Quality in a movement-in-process

Our explication of the more-than-*sœial* as a process of becoming (re)territorialises and (de)territorialises quality in the early years through shifts and movements of assemblages of discrete pieces or elements (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In this vein, we play with Kristeva's treatment of the subject-in-process and apply the concept to the more-than-*sœial* movement. For Kristeva (1991, 2008), the conscious and unconscious in the infinitely evolving construction of the subject blurs the boundaries of conscious and unconscious subject<=>subject relations and the more-than-*sœial* world. Conceptualised through this lens, the known and unknown aspects in the shifts and uncertainties in the early years movement can be seen as a space in which to insert entanglements with the wider ecologies of other-than-human and subject<=>object relations, in order to no longer reside solely in/with the human subject (Kristeva, 1991). Kristeva's work hints at the possibility of such a blurring, as she sees the subject as constituted through his or her pre-existing self and conditions, and, as Stone (2004: 126) adds, 'subjectivity is never achieved once and for all'.

In the early years movement-in-process, this lens also implicates quality in the more-than-*sœial* relations with the sector as deeply rooted in and arising from its (localised and global) histories and ecologies. Such ecologies play out in global environmental physical and scientific influences, and are impacted, for example, by melting ice caps, drought and multiple diverse phenomena (Latour, 2011). Their interdependency with the more-than-*sœial* movement becomes closely entangled through what Kristeva (1984) terms the semiotic. The semiotic is that which adds meaning, energy and life to the dominant symbolic rules and order (Kristeva, 1984). In the early years more-than-*sœial* movement, the semiotic could create a space for the uniqueness of meaning in each early years setting, for example. In our endeavour to shift conceptualisations of quality beyond the human subject, it allows for a (re-)elevation of matter and the unseen, but crucial, energy and forces that drive and occur inside these ecologies (Barad, 2015). Thus, the semiotic can be read as creating that vital space for meaning-making through inter- and intra-relationships as the life-giving elements of the more-than-*sœial* movement. Kristeva's semiotic adds a poetic, affective element – a musicality (Kristeva, 2000; Moi, 1986) – which assists our ongoing destabilisation of the human-centric focus through a more-than-*sœial* movement that is forever in-process.

Applied to our (re)imaginings of the early years more-than-*sœial*, more-than-human movement-in-process, Kristeva's (1984) semiotic is useful in several more ways. Alongside the governing symbolic – that is the regulatory, legislative, professional structures of the sector – the semiotic element in this movement draws wider more-than-human energies, forces and discourses into daily sensual, lived, felt, smelt and enmeshed realities. This includes its actants and actors, children, teachers, environments, things and communities. It implicates how the rules and structures affect encounters with and in the early years places and spaces, including the humanly made and the natural environment, the local and the global, on which subject<=>object encounters, entanglements

and existence depend (Barad, 2003; Latour, 2011). Recognising the semiotic, then, also offers a critical elevation of the diversity, uncertainty and unknowability of needs, desires and belief systems that become enmeshed in and affect the more-than-social movement's episto-onto-ethical constructions of quality. In doing so, the semiotic exposes conflicting positions and ethical dilemmas, in questions of equity and justice, by validating the inseparable vitality and sensitivity arising in these multiple subject<=>object relations. The dominant conception of quality as achievable and measurable by the human subject and its various subject positions becomes further ruptured by the semiotic and the openings it creates in the imaginary of a construction of quality as more-than-human within the more-than-social movement.

Finally, the semiotic elevates the tentative, speculative aspect of quality. It not only exists alongside, but also counters the homogeneity of the symbolic governing structure (Kristeva, 1984; Stone, 2004) by contesting its knowability. It thus counters 'Western histories of the present', as Duhn (2015: 922) urges, since the semiotic also pre-exists the subject (Kristeva, 1984). In this sense, the semiotic of the more-than-social movement also recognises all that pre-exists the movement itself. This challenges the marginalising hierarchies and positions the semiotic to re-elevate the more-than-human and other-than-human actants' status through ontological and epistemological histories that pre-exist the movement itself. The relational energies within the early years more-than-social movement, then, arise from elements, forces and energies that already existed in perhaps unknown and unknowable ways, interweaving new meaning into their intimate, delicate, nuanced and therefore also often unconscious and hidden relationships. The cultural, geographic, sociological and scientific histories that pre-existed the movement, Latour (2011) stresses, continue to affect and threaten contemporary social and political life. Furthermore, since matter, as Barad (2015: 411) claims, 'is an imaginative material exploration of non/being', which is transformative, and 'a condensation of dispersed and multiple beings-times, where the future and past are diffracted into now', (re)constructing human conceptions of quality becomes humbly relegated to a tentative, risky threshold of uncertainty. Valuing the importance of human, non-human and more-than-human actors/actants in conceptions of quality continues to become more and more urgent.

Vital, subversive, non-static actants

In this urgency, we further our confrontation of quality as dependent on the actants in the early years more-than-social movement by drawing on Havel's (1985) construct of subjects as victims and supporters, and on the concept of 'automatisms'. In this positioning, as in Kristeva's (1984, 1991) subject-in-process, actors in the early years sector are seen as constantly evolving in multiple ways in relation to forces – the actants – in their wider environment. Havel's (1985) ideas of subjects as victims and supporters of the governing system, and their further positioning as rebels (Tesar, 2014), operate through automatisms. Automatisms are how the lives of subjects – in this instance, early years actors (children, teachers, parents and communities) – present and are lived in public. Following Taylor (2005), these subjects might also be seen as more-than-human species, and other objects (Bennett, 2010), similarly entangled in early years settings.

For Havel, automatisms are the predictable, expected answers to everyday questions that these actors are 'asked' by everyday life. In the neo-liberal society, subjects work, learn, behave and live their life, for example, with these automatisms determining their subject positions in the public sphere. They are governed and bound by these automatisms: they cannot remove themselves from the system and they demonstrate their public approval of the system by maintaining the power relations that hold it together, while their private lives are lived in whispers, trusting no one. They must publicly behave as if they believe in and actually care about the system, and other subjects observe

this facade. By doing so, subjects accept the social contract and, as Havel (1985: 31) argues, they do not need to believe in it – they merely need to accept that it exists and know that they have agreed to live within it. Havel (1985: 31) therefore claims that the subjects ‘confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, *are* the system’ (original emphasis). Applied to the early years quality discourse, automatisms illustrate that its actors do not need to believe in the discourse. Rather, it is enough for them to operate (teach, plan, assess, evaluate, etc.) within it in order to be both victims and supporters – and, by subverting it, also rebels – of the system.

This Havelian subject positioning and Kristeva’s symbolic rules and structures become part of the ritual, the automatism, and can be seen as bridging elements between the human-centred and the more-than-social early years movement. When human subjects accept the rules of the quality game by supporting the governing ideology, their actions become part of the actants that shape the structures which constitute the system. The ideology – in this instance, dominant conceptions of quality – according to Havel (1985: 31), becomes an indispensable, active power component in the system: ‘It is a principal instrument of ritual communication *within* the system of power’ (original emphasis). Inserting post-human perspectives represents a disturbance of these power structures and relations, and decentres the human-centric, limited and even dangerous constructs of quality. The power in the neo-liberal system is shaped by the ontology, the epistemology, and the ethics and politics of subject–subject relations between every subject contributing to the system. Its structure and ideology provide a ‘legitimacy and an inner coherence’ (Havel, 1985: 32), which the rebel subjects disturb. The ritualistic automatism is what Havel frames as a subject positioning towards the system, within which each subject has ‘agreed’ to participate. The foundations of the human-centred system’s stability rely on the subject positions of victims and supporters and rebels, and are successful only if the automatism remains intact and all subjects remain locked in these subject–subject power relations.

Kristeva and Havel enable a (re)configuration of understandings of the actants on, in and beyond the more-than-social movement. Recognising the power and influence of their vibrancy, unseen energies and forces (Barad, 2015; Bennett, 2010) might liberate the quality debate from its dominant focus on subjects and subject positionings. It might even shift the public realm from its presumption that education exists to satisfy the need for efficient human capital, and from its disregard of more-than-social, more-than-human and subject<=>object dialogues. This elevation emphasises actants and entanglements, and stands strongly in the face of dominant societal automatisms. It engages a beyond, for example, that challenges and provides an alternative to understandings of quality within the dominant economic order and, as Duhn (2015: 928) urges, argues for ‘encounters with vibrant matter, with the world’.

‘Encounters with vibrant matter’: concluding comments

Moss and Dahlberg (2008) set a utopian moral and ethical goal for the early years sector to continue to question the notion of quality, and to move beyond it. The ‘multiverse’ or ‘pluriverse’ (Latour, 2011) of the sector deeply embeds it in far more than dominant, knowable and subject-driven anthropocentric indicators and tools of quality. The more-than-social movement implicates it instead in something more dangerous and more fluid. Our contestation and questioning of this multiple space has woven fresh philosophical warps and wefts around questions of quality, which encompass sustainable human, other-than-human and more-than-human things, matter and forces. A crowd of ‘people’ who form a social movement are said to have more problem-solving power than individual experts (Surowiecki, 2004), and, in this article, we have sought to think beyond the ‘early years human crowd’, beyond the social subject–subject relations, and through a ‘crowd’ of inter- and intra-related vibrant and potent materialities, energies, things and places.

Dislodged from the perceived comfort and safety of human control and determination, quality in the speculative state of the more-than-social movement can expect no conclusion. Instead, the (re)configuration of the early years sector as a more-than-social movement compels a rethinking of the dominance of human-centric philosophies through a repositioning of Kristeva's semiotic subject-in-process and Havel's subject positionings within automatisms. Havel's automatisms reinforce the intense power of dominant governing ideologies over those tasked with thinking about – or beyond – quality and for making it happen in everyday realities in early years settings. In addition, Havel's (1985: 33) argument that 'theory itself, ritual itself, ideology itself, makes decisions that affect people' stresses the importance of such a philosophical (re)conceptualisation of quality in an attempt to shift beyond dominant positionings.

What would happen to the contemporary neo-liberal frenzy for predetermined quality measures, and the performative terrors (Osgood, 2006) evoked by demands on professionalism and practice, if quality became reimagined as subject<=>object multi-logues within multiple and openly inter-dependent more-than-social movements? What forces could disrupt the subject–subject relations and the public–private, supportive–subversive dialectic dependencies and relationships to shift the lens on quality to a different sphere? Could the quality debate open up to critical questioning of who/who≈what are the actants in each local, felt, lived, related natureculture assemblage?

This reweaving of human-centric philosophical perspectives has attempted to destabilise their own focus. It calls for quality debates to foreground entanglements of more-than-social, more-than-human actants. The complex urgency that we acknowledge throughout this article critically introduces the vibrant forces of the material, the 'matter with matter' (Barad, 2015; Bennett, 2010), inter-species and other-than-human relationships (Haraway, 2007), and the cosmopolitical and ecological concerns that Latour (2004, 2011, 2014) has explicated and situated in this time of the Anthropocene. The nuanced insights opened up in the philosophical rereadings have revealed an already tangled inter- and intra-dependent web with and beyond human actors (Butler, 2005). We have (re)imagined these thing/energy/natureculture connections in their messy, multidirectional, unpredictable performances of early years more-than-social histories, projects and realities. The meanings and energy inherent and produced in the philosophical musings have exposed unexpected onto-epistemological connections of human and beyond-human relationships with multiple wider worlds. Finally, reconfiguring the early years sector as a more-than-social movement has inserted 'non-human-being' and 'multiple beings-times' into Moss and Dahlberg's 'problem with quality'. It has diffracted the future and the past to suggest, returning one final time to Barad (2015: 411), that, like this theorisation, quality depends on 'each moment being creatively regenerative'. What a future-past non-being creation that will be.

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