ATTENDING TO AFFECT IN EDUCATION RESEARCH: 
AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF SCHOOLBOY 
(AND TEACHER) IDENTITIES

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Abstract

In this paper, I take up affect to further existing work in education research on identity. Commonly, in this research, the terms affect, emotion and feeling are used interchangeably, and are thought to be personal, following traditional, psychological frames. Social affect theory does not reduce affect in this way; rather, it is understood as what defines and ceaselessly reconstitutes bodies. In the empirical material I work in this auto-ethnographic paper, schoolboy bodies on an international study tour are seen to interact with teachers, bodies of knowledge (both familiar and strange) and embodied practices, such as an Australian game of ‘Squares’ in Paris, at Notre Dame. Affective approaches offer new ways to understand identities as material practices, which may augment existing discursive approaches in education research. Additionally, affect provides a means for educators to further engage with how we, ourselves, are imbricated in identity-making through everyday affective encounters, a continuous process of both affecting, and being affected. Attending to affect can provide the possibility for reconsideration of how identity work is conceptualised in education research through renewed attention to the affective and material, providing for more complex and nuanced understandings of identity.

Introduction

As a teacher/researcher studying how schoolboys enacted identity, one everyday moment of identity-making almost slipped my attention. Losing myself in the emotion (and duty) of my work as a history teacher, as a researcher I nearly missed an opportunity to study a powerful affective encounter which culminated in the making of teacher, student, gendered and national identities. This paper is an analysis of the affective capacity of a schoolyard ball game in relation to the making of schoolboy identities, drawn from my own auto-ethnographic experience as a history teacher leading a school tour of Paris. Research into identity in schools is taking a material turn, engaging with the physicality of being (see for example, de Freitas & Curinga, 2015; Edwards & Clarke, 2002; Mulcahy, 2011), and the ‘more-than-human’ and ‘more-than-representational’ aspects of becoming schooled and educated (for example, Blaise, 2015; Boler, 2016; MacLure, 2013b). Approaches that attend to the materiality of identity and existence, suggesting that bodies are more than mere expressions of discursive meaning, as active constituents in identity-making, have been gaining traction (de Freitas & Curinga, 2015; Ringrose, 2011). In this paper I attempt to further contribute to such work through a focus on affect, and how it works to enact schoolboy identities. Approaching affect through social theory, I understand affect as generated in interactions among bodies, both human and non-human, including objects, space, place, time, concepts, and emotions. Attending to affect affords an engagement with how schoolboy identities might be understood as practices of embodied meaning-making, constituted in the interactions of the social, material and discursive, both in schools and around them.

Drawing on Deleuzian concepts, identities are understood as an assemblage; while human bodies and discourse constitute elements of the assemblage, non-human and material constituents also possess affective capacity. In developing an understanding of affect as it plays out in schoolboy identity formation, I map affects and their capacities relating to matter, discourse and emotion as they flow within and across everyday ‘events of the unnoticed’ ( Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 2). Primarily, this is done through a bouncing rubber ball, boys’ moving bodies, lines scraped into the forecourt of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, emotion, power relations, school, and two countries, Australia and...
France. Identity, here, is understood as fleetingly formed as various social, discursive and material elements come together, and move apart. Through affect, in those encounters, something new emerges, as power shifts between schoolboys and teachers. It is in the everyday flows of affect that social categories coalesce, crystallising with repetition into broader identity formations, such as student, teacher, gender, and nationality.

**What is identity: bodies, assemblages and affects**

For this particular study of identity, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) conceptualisation of the body is perhaps a useful starting point:

> We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions with and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (p. 257)

The notion of the body, as assemblage, provides a means for engaging with identity as a multiple, continuous process, and inter-connected with other bodies and assemblages, including the more-than-human. This way, identity is not an essential state of being, but an ongoing and changing effect of intermingling affective flows. In conceptualising a body in this way, it is clear that bodies hold no inherent essence, or meaning; a body only exists in its connections and affects. Assemblages are made up of the social, material and discursive, as well as the affects that give the assemblage its potential. Müller (2015, p. 36) suggests ‘affect and emotion are the *tertium quid* of the social and the material, making the socio-material hold together or fall apart. They are what pulses through assemblages… and what constitutes their power’. Altogether, affects can be understood as circulating in embodied relationships, they do not reside in individuals (Mulcahy, 2012).

It is important here to discuss what affect might look like, as there are various approaches to studying affect. Described as ‘the affective turn’, feminist research has recently seen a renewed focus on the body, and in the exploration of forces that move between bodies. According to Clough (2007, p. 2), ‘the affective turn’ instigates a shift in critical theory through its configuration of bodies, technology and matter; here affect refers generally to ‘bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body’s capacity to act, to engage, to connect, such that autoaffection is linked to the self-feeling of being alive – that is, aliveness or vitality.’ For Hickey-Moody and Malins (2007), affect is ‘that which is felt before it is thought, it is that which has a visceral impact on the body before it is given subjective or emotive meaning’.

However, affect/assemblage approaches that emphasise the body, can also sever the links between affect and meaning-making, and emotion (Buchanan, 2015; Wetherell, 2012). For Wetherell (2012, p. 79), affect is ‘embodied meaning-making’, a situated affective activity requiring ‘formative background conditions that are social, material and spatial, as well physiological and phenomenological’, as well as ‘collectivities who recognise, endorse and pass on the affective practice’. Wetherell (2012; 2014) proposes ‘affective practice’ as a way to engage with affect, to focus on the emotional as it happens in social life, and try to follow what participants do. In this paper, affect is taken to be embodied meaning-making, characterised by a shift in power, that enables the body to form specific relations by increasing or decreasing its capacity. Here, affect is understood as a social rather than a psychological construct; this said, the psyche is still thought to form a constituent part of affective assemblages.

A focus on affects requires thinking about how assemblages both affect, and are affected. This requires consideration of the various elements that make up the complexity of the assemblage, and how this constantly changing and shifting configuration forms relations not only within itself, but also with other constantly changing and shifting assemblages. As identity is assembled through the meeting of multiple elements, and the embodied meaning-making and emotions formed through affective
encounters, so too are more enduring social identities formed. Referring to this as territorialisation, Deleuze and Guattari describe the process of stabilisation of an assemblage, through crystallisation by repetition. Repeated affective practices have the capacity to produce recognisable social identities, including those under discussion in this paper, such as teachers, students, genders, and nationalities.

**Affect and materiality in education**

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 22-23), assemblages are made up of ‘semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously’, giving the assemblage multiplicity. Additionally, for Deleuze and Guattari (1987), assemblages are in constant variation, themselves constantly subject to transformations. A new materialist framework attempts to move away from an understanding that takes the agency of bodies and material objects to be an effect of power, towards an understanding that attends to both the agency of the cultural upon the material, and the agency of the material upon the cultural (Frost, 2011). In this way, bodies and the components that make up the materiality of existence are both formed by the forces of language, culture and politics, but are also formative in effecting power (Higham, 2015). For new materialists, knowing and being are indistinguishable, or, as referred to by Barad (2007), an ‘onto-epistemology’.

In educational research into identity and subjectivity, for example, assemblages have been constituted through a classroom space, teacher’s chair, a flipchart stand, a student’s t-shirt, and the affective relations between teacher and student bodies (Taylor, 2013); as well as the affective capacities of the relationships between social media, school, and heterosexual bodies (Ringrose, 2011). Space, place, and time, and their affective relationships with subjectivity have also been given attention (Ivinson & Renold, 2013). Emotion too, has been considered as having affective capacity in education (Mulcahy, 2012; Watkins, 2006). Affect has also been used in developing pedagogy, such as art-based pedagogy that engages with sensorial, embodied responses to the aesthetic (Hickey-Moody, 2013; Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015), and the socio-material practices of classroom teaching (Mulcahy, 2010; 2012; 2015). In this paper I focus on identities, specifically how those identities are affectively constituted, and the affects produced by those identities at a particular moment in time. The identities constituted, as shall be seen, are both student and teacher identities, with attention given to both the relationships between them, as well as space, place, objects and emotions, through their situatedness in playing a game on a school tour away from home, in Paris.

**Affective methods: mapping affect in Paris**

In this paper, I am concerned with what schoolboy identities are through detailed consideration of what schoolboys do. In taking up a new materialist ‘onto-epistemology’, knowing and being are indistinguishable. Fox and Alldred (2015) suggest a new material approach to research enables researchers to engage with events in ways which are no longer concerned with the disputed capacity of a human observer to either uncover the real mechanisms that produce the social or natural world, or to offer contextual understandings of it. Instead, researchers, research events, methods, and processes, are taken to be material, relational intra-acting networks that come together to enact knowledge production. The auto-ethnographic data that forms the basis of this affective analysis comes from my own international experience with students as their teacher, from an occasion when we left the familiar surrounds of our Australian school for an extended history/politics excursion to Europe. Maclure (2013a, p. 173) writes of moments that emerge unpredictably in research, surprises when writing papers experienced as ‘intensities of body as well as mind – a kind of glow that, if we were lucky, would continue to develop’. Watkins (2016, p. 80) notes that ‘certain moments in time and space arise that cannot be ignored when the affective provides unique insights into human practice’. My selection of this particular encounter at Notre Dame is itself an example of affective capacity, where not only were schoolboy identities, as well as my own shifting teacher-identity, produced in a collision of disparate elements made up of space, place, ideas, objects and emotions; the memory itself has continued to glow for me as time passes, even if less brightly than in the moment. An experience from
my days as a history teacher, this affective encounter made its way into discussion at my first supervision meeting upon my return from Europe, developed initially into a section of my Master’s thesis, and now further, as a conference paper, to illustrate how affect might look in education research, and emphasising the interplay of the social and the material.

Watkins (2016) suggests that in becoming attuned to affect, an ethnographer must attend closely to detail, with an awareness of various relations, and the affective force they generate. To affectively analyse the practices and processes that constituted schoolboy identities, I attend to the composition of assemblages, non-verbal language and gestures, my own auto-ethnographic experiences of affect, and the intensification or destabilisation of affective energy (Knudsen & Stage, 2015). In keeping with a new materialist focus on ‘affect, force and movement as it travels in all directions’ (van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010, p. 169), I use cartography, or mapping, in attempting to produce knowledge that follows the affects as they play out across different elements of the assemblage. This is done through an elaboration of the game, ‘Squares’, and an account of my own auto-ethnographic experience of this game being played on the history tour I had planned.

**Affective practices**

**School life: Squares**

In a large Australian, metropolitan, Catholic boys’ secondary school, ‘Squares’ was a very popular game. Short for ‘Four Square’, it was played with a rubber ball, bounced across and between squares marked out on the ground. Traditionally, as the name might suggest, this game would be played over four squares, in a 2 x 2 configuration. However, it was a very popular game, and many times there would be more than four players involved, and the configuration would adapt to available space to accommodate this. Boys would take their positions in the squares, bouncing the ball into other boys’ squares. Some occupied higher positions than others. They would attempt to eliminate each other from these squares, moving themselves into higher positions, and allowing new boys to join the game from a waiting queue. Eliminated players would leave the squares, joining the end of the queue of waiting players outside the Squares court.

The game could be encountered all across the school, from the junior school to the middle school to the seniors, essentially anywhere there were lines painted on the ground, or where there were cracks in the concrete. This game was such an entrenched part of school life that boys would even play after the end of the school year during their final examination periods, perhaps recognising this was likely the last time they would ever play, now they had finished school. An iconic part of the school’s experience, one college captain, in his farewell speech reminisced fondly about the game, and how he would forever cherish his memories of playing it.

**The dutiful history teacher**

In my former position as a history teacher, I led twenty-seven senior school boys and three other staff on a two-week history tour of Paris, Moscow, and St Petersburg. I had meticulously planned everything with the tour operator over the twelve months leading up to the event; the boys had even been coming in at my request for weekly lunchtime classes to brush up on the relevant Histories in the term leading up to the tour. As for the itinerary itself, almost every minute of every day was scheduled for some type of activity, aside from an hour free for lunch each day, and most nights, for sleeping (although some activities were night based, including an overnight sleeper train ride through the Russian countryside). I wanted the boys to experience as much as they could in two weeks, about the history of the French and Russian Revolutions, something unavailable to them at home in Australia. I wanted to take them to the very places these momentous events occurred, to bring these subjects to life, from both the folds of time, and the pages of their history textbooks. Having fallen in love with these subjects myself, as a seventeen-year-old Revolutions student, visiting these places was a long
time coming for me, too.

The affective encounter

We strolled back over the river to Notre Dame from the bistro where we had eaten our lunches. We had told the boys to take an hour for lunch, and to meet back in the forecourt outside the cathedral, ready to continue with the next part of the day. Finishing our meals early, we returned fifteen minutes before we had asked the boys to be there, figuring this to be adequate time to be there ahead of them. As free time was scarce, we had fully expected the boys to roam far and wide, taking advantage of every moment.

Arriving back at our meeting place outside Notre Dame, we were surprised by a most familiar sight to anybody who had spent time at the school, though playing out in a very different place: boys were gathered around a space, slightly bent at the waist, intently bouncing around a rubber ball, from one boy to another. On closer inspection, they had scraped lines with their feet into the dirt of the forecourt of cathedral, creating a makeshift Squares court. For me, surprise quickly became anger, as I saw how much of this significant, public, space they were taking up. People were being forced to step around the game, in one of the busiest locations in Paris. It was clear that this game had been going on for a while. They had spent the precious minutes of their lunch break playing Squares, the same game they played every day at school in Australia. Before I could react, the boys invited one of two male teachers to join the game. The man was just as surprised as I was, but quickly gathered himself, and joined the game. I stood there, speechless, rooted to the spot, blood boiling, and silently seething.

Embodied meaning-making

The power of a rubber ball

A rubber ball, alone, is perhaps an innocuous thing, a toy filled with the promise of play. It is only when the ball joins with other elements of an assemblage, that its capacity starts to become realised, through the relationships it forms. In the schoolyard of home, bouncing rubber balls were everywhere. Squares was a well-established territory of the school assemblage. In Paris, if this game had been played back at the hotel, it might be taken as a way of relaxing after a long and busy day. The hotel was a somewhat private space, stepping in for the week as a substitute for home. Yet Notre Dame was a very public place, with its own long history, dating back to the medieval period and featuring in major events throughout French history, including the revolution which formed the focus of our Parisian tour. So significant is the site, that Notre Dame is the location for Paris’ ‘Kilometre Zero’, the point from which all distances in Paris are measured, further symbolising the importance of this place to the city. When that rubber ball bounced across the marked dirt at Notre Dame Cathedral, it was a way to connect the school assemblage of home to that of Paris, to make familiar the unfamiliar. Squares, as an affective practice, brought the routine way in which bodies are moved, and objects are handled, from one country to another. Embodied meaning-making, here, can be found in the act of marking out a Squares court with their feet in the dirt of the cathedral square, a little patch of France was deterritorialised by Australian bodies. In this game, the material practice of bouncing a ball over lines was simultaneously discursive, producing a little piece of familiar Australia, in unfamiliar France, dissolving their discomfort, and perhaps staving off homesickness. Through playing this game, recruiting a strange space into this routine affective practice, the boys made themselves comfortable, changing the space to suit their desires. Though the boys’ bodies were in Paris, when joined with the ball and dirt Squares court, they created a reterritorialised Australian space, differentiating themselves from the surrounding tourist bodies of people gazing up at the spires of the cathedral, and those whose cameras snapped selfies to record their presence at this famous place. The lines in the dirt were clear to those who came near: do not cross. Their bodies moved across the squares with speed, the momentum created by their massive bodies a deterrent to any who considered entering this delineated
space. Bent over their Squares court, facing inwards, away from the sights of Paris towards this game from home, and away from the history for which they were there in the first place, the boys shifted power from being unfamiliar strangers, Australian tourists in France, to bringing Australia to France, creating for themselves a space in which they were evidently more comfortable, a space that materialised feelings of home.

A history teacher deterritorialised

Where the boys found comfort in this game, for me, the Squares game at Notre Dame provoked anger. Ever the passionate history teacher, I had spent so long planning the tour, and half my lifetime anticipating it. As might be hoped for from a teacher who dearly loves their subject, who wanted to share her passion with her students, the space itself had affected me. The previous night I had been brought joyfully to tears on first seeing the grand cathedral. Seated on the pews with the boys for evening Mass, I had looked up at the vaulted ceilings and wondered, how many people over the space of time had sat in that same seat, contemplating the same thing, and who were they? I felt the weight of centuries in that place. When I looked around, casting my teacher’s eyes over the boys, I had been quietly thrilled to see that some of the boys were similarly entranced by the stained glass, and sheer scale of the space, perhaps equally as awestruck by the ancient stone structure, and breathing in the incense of the familiar, but different, Catholic Mass, the familiar rhythms and intonations spoken in unfamiliar French. Though I was outside of my history classroom, by bringing the boys here I could provide them with a more immersive history education, a more fulfilling experience – for me, this was perfection.

So it came to be that on encountering this game, so familiar, and yet so conspicuously out of place, I became angry. This was not part of my envisaged perfect history tour. To my passionate, history teacher’s mind, it was completely inappropriate to play this game here, in this space, in this moment; it was anachronistic. These were 6 ft boys who towered over me, as well as most people forced to move around them. Accustomed to the large open spaces of their Australian home, many of them had already been carelessly taking up space in the narrow streets of Paris, in the Metro, and now in the busy forecourt at Notre Dame. The other female teacher and I had been constantly reminding these boys to be polite, to be mindful of space, and to take note of how local Parisians themselves used public spaces – for instance, to be silent, or even just speak more quietly on the trains in the Metro. As women, we had ourselves experienced masculine occupation of our own personal space in public, we understood. We sympathised with the people who crossed the street to avoid the massive pack of large boys advancing noisily towards them on the pavements, and the other women on the Metro who shrank in their seats away from the boys’ errant elbows and knees. These spatial encroachments were not malicious, nor intentional; rather they were the ignorant acts of strangers in an unfamiliar place, hence eliciting constant reminders from their teachers for cultural sensitivity. The boys moved through Paris blissfully unaware of their own size, or of their material effects on others. But the Squares court was very obviously drawn out, intentionally scraped into the dirt, physically excluding other bodies from this commandeered space; a mindful act. The enlistment of the other teacher into the game was also deliberate. The man occupied a position in the school that vastly outranked my own. By bringing his body into the game, moving him like a chess piece onto the dirt court, powers shifted dramatically. When his body crossed over the dirt lines to join the game, closing ranks with the bodies of the boys to shut out Paris, to shut me out, this familiar practice from home took on new meaning, to send a very clear message to me: no longer could I tell them what to do, to force my perfect history ideals on them; he was now one of them. He approved. While this may not have had the same meaning if it were to happen back at school, in Paris this particular assemblage meant my power was now swept away. My teacher’s authority was deterritorialised, as this very unique game of Squares created a new dynamic. Through connecting the Squares assemblage with the body of the other, more senior teacher, the rising power of the boys, alongside my own waning authority, started to crystallise into something more enduring. This disruptive game set the tone for the rest of the tour.
A teacher-researcher reterritorialised

I almost missed the significance of this event, still angry as I was, weeks later. The flows of anger territorialised my angry-history-teacher-assemblage, and my understanding of those boys, for the rest of the tour. Only much later was I able to grasp what had happened, once I had returned home. I fell back into part-time research, and met with my supervisors. Discussing the events with them enabled me to better understand what had occurred, to contemplate how affect had flowed, converging in that specific socio-material encounter. My angry-teacher-identity was at last deterritorialised through the addition of time and distance to the assemblage, as well as the element of intellectual curiosity, on my return to university studies. The addition of these elements to the assemblage produced further, deeper thinking about the affective flows of this particular encounter, reterritorialising me as both teacher and researcher; the territory of anger left behind as I became an inquiring teacher-researcher once more. Writing itself, is an affective practice, an act of embodied meaning-making; I could look back on what had transpired with an inquisitive, analytic lens, no longer in anger. I perceived things that were not apparent to me in Paris; I had been angry at what I saw to be disrespectful behaviour, conflicting with my own expectations as to what constituted ‘good’ history students, and my ideas about what constituted ‘good’ history teaching. I was caught up in the affective capacity of emotion, first in floating around Paris buoyed by a joyous sense of history, soaking up the past from the streets and buildings, and then disrupted by the anger that resulted from the collision between the game of Squares, and my position as passionate history teacher. With hindsight, I could contemplate. Perhaps these boys had grown tired of being policed, borne of my desire for them to be perfect students on a perfect history study tour. Perhaps the new territory in Paris was too unfamiliar for them, were they homesick? Maybe it was just too much history. Going from four hours of history classes per week, to a two week round the clock History experience is quite a leap for young bodies. Did they even like history? Maybe, they just wanted to have some fun and relax, in the midst of what was, a very full itinerary. The angry-history-teacher-assemblage and the game of Squares at Notre Dame became distant memories, historical events from my past that I have since developed into research into affect, and school identities.

Materialising identities

In mapping the affective capacities of bodies, space, place, time and things through the auto-ethnographic account detailed, I have emphasised that identities are not essential, but rather, they are assembled. As noted by Mulcahy (2010), identity and emotion is constituted through affective encounters of a social and material kind. The assemblage of the dirt Squares court, the ball, placement of bodies came together to constitute schoolboy (and teacher) identities that claimed a little piece of a significant space in Paris as Australian, shifting schoolboys from a position of being outsiders in an unfamiliar place, to being in a familiar place keeping others out. The same convergence resulted in one teacher being drawn in, and others left out, with further implications for the balance of power, which tipped in the boys’ favour. In this paper I have shown how emotion has worked through the boys’ unfamiliarity with Paris, and their desire for the comfort and familiarity of home, and how comfort and familiarity was embedded in an affective practice from their school. I have also shown how emotion was embodied in the boys’ teachers’ surprise at seeing Squares at Notre Dame, in female teachers’ annoyance, and subsequent reprimands, for how the boys occupied public spaces, and through my own passion for history, desire for perfection, and finally, anger. I have illustrated how the social (eg. school practices, national discourses, teacher expectations, gender relations, power relations) and the material (eg. experiencing history education in Paris, boys playing a ball game, boys marking out territory in France) came together at a particular moment in time, and how schoolboy (and teacher) identities emerged in those encounters. Emotion was highlighted throughout, embodied responses, formed through social and material affective interactions. I also attempted to map my own affective capacity as an element of the assemblage, both as a teacher in the actual event, and in the affective capacity of the event with me, and my identity as researcher.
This empirical analysis emphasises identity as an effect of affective practices, and as emergent, over a conceptualisation of identity as fixed, and inherent. Both schoolboy and teacher identities formed through relationships that were both social and material. For educators, thinking about identity as an ongoing, social, material and discursive process illuminates our own entanglement in schooling and identity-making, perhaps encouraging us to think about how situations might play out under different and changing circumstances. What might work in our everyday classroom practice, might need rethinking in a foreign land, on the other side of the planet, as place, space and emotion come together to create new and different experiences for students, and their teachers. As educators, we might ask of our everyday classrooms, what sort of affective practices have become familiar? What are the effects of these territorialising acts over time? What becomes possible, in education, when the various social, material and discursive elements of everyday schooling practices are changed, or when territories are disrupted? What affective encounters are then made possible?

For education research more broadly, there is also potential in understanding identity as assemblage; an affective methodology can provide a means for enriching existing discursive work around identity. Attending to how affect contributes to schoolboy identity formation makes possible different ways of knowing. Through understanding identity as an assemblage, we can move away from a politics of who, towards a politics of what (Mol, 2014). By attending to affect, new material and affective methodologies can enable the material to be given attention in their roles in forming parts of different identity-assemblages, and that can account for the complex and nuanced materiality of everyday school life. Such a conceptualisation contributes to an understanding of identity that accounts for its disparate components as being engaged in an ongoing process of affecting and being affected, and further develops existing discursive approaches to education research, by making it possible for matter to be made to matter.
References


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