

The Affective Overflow of Putting Data to Work

*- A Study of School Leaders and their Affective Appropriation of Data
Instructed to Promote Quality in Education*



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Affektive 'omsætninger' af data – et studie af skoleledere og deres arbejde med at fremme kvalitet ved brug af data

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Preface

Crucial to the production of most products or outcomes is the collaborative efforts of many forces and agencies working together, concocting a whole to which each and all components are unique but nevertheless difficult to distinguish as they are ‘pulled’ into oneness and emerge as something altogether different. The dissertation at hand is no exception from this mode of production as it is ‘made’ on the grounds of many people, events, insights, and structures, all providing varying forms of input and opportunity that have been formative to the so-called end-result. Mindful of this circumstance, I would like to thank the following:

Initially, I would like to thank the PhD Council in Educational Research for granting me the opportunity to pursue the overarching interest around which this study is centred, namely the intermingling between state of data, leadership, and affect. It has been a privilege to be able to pursue this one interest for such an extended amount of time. Moreover, I would like to thank my main and co-supervisor, Dorthe Staunæs and Nana Vaaben, who have both been key in assisting my efforts. Specifically, my main supervisor and the continuous curiosity with which she has always approached this study has allowed me to know about my research ‘object’ and its multi-layered constitution in ways I could not have achieved on my own. And also, my co-supervisor and the constant pragmatism with which she has greeted my confusion has been hugely instrumental to my way of dealing with some of the tasks I at times felt insurmountable. For that, and more, their joint efforts cannot be understated.

In addition to this, I would also like to thank the important scholarly input coming from Britta Timm Knudsen (AU), Eva Bendix (RUC), Justine Grønæk Pors (CBS) and Katja Brøgger (AU), who have all participated in my two work-in-progress seminars, each offering their unique take on excerpts of my work and as such affording me the occasion to learn and extrapolate from their astute viewpoints. On that note, I would also like to thank the two research-environments at Aarhus University and University College Capital. Both have welcomed me with open arms and have constantly encouraged me to take part in their ongoing presentations and discussions, which - over time - has helped me grapple with the complexity characteristic of most research processes as well as the difficulties associated with communicating (clearly) about them and the insights they afford.

Furthermore, I am immensely grateful for the way in which Sølvi Mausethagen (OsloMet) and Sam Sellar (MMU) have both gone above and beyond, initially making my study-abroad at respectively Oslo Metropolitan University and Manchester Metropolitan University possible, and subsequently making it more productive than I could have hoped for. The forthcomingness with which they have opened their doors is remarkable and I will try to ‘pay it forward’ when/if the opportunity to do so presents itself. In a similar vein, I would also like to thank the two municipalities

that hosted my fieldwork, so to speak, for 'letting me in' and get a sense of how their schools and leaders approached the task of working with data for purposes of promoting quality. Judging from the amount of phone calls I had to make, it is fair to say that not many were inclined to do so.

Finally, I would like to thank everybody acting behind the scenes, meaning the network of people I have turned to for a second opinion, advice, solace, and everything in between. This includes colleagues/friends and fellow PhD students, with whom I have been able to share my thoughts and turbulations. In specific, it includes Bettina Holm, Elvi Weinreich, Signe Piil, and Thomas Binderup. Moreover, it includes my immediate family, my husband and children, who have always afforded me a soft place to fall. The drive that comes from having such a place is unmistakable. And lastly, it includes my parents and their steady flow of practical assistance and moral support, which they never held back on even though the studiousness required of me to accomplish this study runs counter to especially my mother's zest for life and the carefreeness with which she continuously has encouraged me to live.



Chapter 1:

Introducing the Study at Hand

The Imbrication of Affect

During an interview conducted as a part of the study at hand one of the school leaders included in the fieldwork passingly commented:

“I can’t imagine doing this without data”.

And despite the passing way in which the comment was made, it points to how key data have become when it comes to exercising leadership today. Obviously, there are many forces and agencies working together in creating the conditions for this current lay of the land, but one of the major ‘players’ in this respect is indeed the longstanding political interest in promoting the quality of education. In the sense that this interest, typically captured in policy mandated programmes or systems falling under the rubric of Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE), has instilled the production and deployment of data quantitatively measuring student learning and wellbeing as the grounds based on which quality may be achieved. And as such, it has been crucial in accelerating the practical employment of the kind of data that the leader in question refers to. Mindful of this circumstance, it is therefore hugely relevant, I claim, to assist more comprehensive understanding of the components working to secure the current establishment of this QAE mandate, specifically in schools. And given the fact that data are so central to this effort, employed as the primary grounds for both working with quality and accounting for it, it is especially relevant to look closer at how they are appropriated in practice by the leaders expected to function as front-rummers in the ‘making’ of quality.

In seeking to do so, I turn to an emerging field of research that builds on the seminal work of Foucault (1990) by cultivating an affective responsiveness to the ‘instalment’ of more or less specified political objectives (Brøgger & Staunæs, 2016; Duffy, 2017a; Finn, 2016; Lindgren & Rönnberg, 2018; Sellar, 2015). In brief, this responsiveness is fuelled by an overarching interest in adding affect to what is generally known as governmentality studies, focusing on the processes acting upon and instrumentalising the self-regulation propensities of individuals as a means of allying them with socio-political objectives (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 28). In a way relying on varying ‘acts’ of self-regulation (Ball, 2009; Ozga, 2009), by which subjects themselves work to align attitudes and practices with the political objectives being ordered – becoming what Ball (2009) refers to as *willing subjects*. To explain in more detail what it means to ‘add’ affect to this research interest probing the intricates workings of governing imperatives, it may be helpful to think of Hegel and his proposition that Westerners are romantics in their private lives and rationalists in public. It is helpful because the motive for ‘adding’ affect, is essentially to illustrate how and why this Hegelian distinction between romanticism and rationalism is, if not false, then at least more blurred than generally believed, seeing that in the practicalities of life romanticism and rationalism are inextricably intertwined.

So, as means of studying the workings of political objects, this emerging field of research argues, it is not 'sufficient' to attend to the rules, directives, and legally binding orders based on which they are regulated and thus sought implemented. This is not to say, that it is wrong to do so, or that it is not important to account for these aspects. Rather, it is to just suggest that new insights may be stimulated from also examining the role played by affect in relation to the instalment of more or less specified objectives (Staunæs & Bjerg, 2011). In 'applying' this argument to the overarching instruction to promote quality in schools and elsewhere, it thus seems paramount, I argue, to somehow 'account' for the presence of affect, focusing on how and why it comes into play in practice and as such may nurture the hegemony with which the QAE mandate presently manifests. Therefore, the aim of the study at hand is to explore the imbrication of affect as school leaders, in a manner of speaking, put data to work as part of their varying efforts to 'adhere' to the QAE mandate. And in the end, informed by the insights afforded from this exploration, I thus hope to 'unfold' the more tacit 'movements' of what may broadly be referred to as data-work, in a way sustaining the productivity of the overriding political 'push' to promote quality.

An Idea in the Making

The underlying idea, or inspiration perhaps, for this study came by chance while attending a follow-up meeting on behalf of a colleague. Broadly speaking, follow-up meetings are authorized by *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, a standard QAE programme introduced and implemented in 2014 in all Danish schools. The overriding purpose of the meetings is to make sure that municipalities take on a (more) active role in supporting local school leaders' way of utilising data that demonstrates results or outcomes as basis for promoting quality. This means that municipalities are expected to assist a practice in which local leaders utilise data pertaining to student learning and wellbeing as basis for qualifying their day-to-day decision-making as well as their long-term strategic planning. New to this instructive role, the head of division of a large municipality, had asked my colleague to sit in on a couple of follow-up meetings, hoping that, based on her observations, she might be able to provide some feedback on how better to manage this role and the responsibility it calls for. Keen on the idea, but pressured for time, my colleague asked me to step in and attend one meeting on her behalf. I agreed not knowing what to expect, and not long after I found myself sitting in on a follow-up meeting that made a lasting impression, sparking an interest that later led to the study at hand – at least this is how I understand it in retrospect.

Present at the meeting were two local department heads, one school leader, and three municipal representatives, one of whom was the aforementioned head of division, in charge of child and youth services. They were seated opposite each other at a long rectangular table – the school

leadership team on one side and the municipal representatives on the other. I sat at the end of the table and from there I could observe both sides equally well. Everybody, except me, had their own copy of the school's quality report lying in front of them, thus signaling that the school's annual results in the form of data describing levels of student learning and wellbeing were top of the agenda. After a short round of introductions, the meeting started, and not long into the initial exchange, I began to sense what may be described as tension – a tension which seemed to intensify whenever the focus was directed towards what one might call 'ominous' data, meaning data showing regression, scoring below the official target goals, or somehow deviating from the district average. To some extent, the following excerpt, featuring an exchange in which one of the municipal representatives rather persistently urges the school leader to act on data showing decline, may serve as an example of the kind of dialogue and relational dynamic I saw as contributing to this tension.

Municipal representative (MR): “Okay, let’s leave that aside [here referring to a previous talk about the use of mentors at the school] and get back to the results. The report clearly states that your reading results amongst the 6th graders are not good. They are actually significantly worse than they were two years ago []. And the share of poor readers has increased quite dramatically. By contrast, the results in the other grades are much better. What are your thoughts on this?”

School Leader (SL): “Yeah, well obviously this is something we need to address...”

MR: “Yes, but what are your concrete plans on the matter? What do you plan on doing?”

SL: “Hmm, yeah I see what you mean... but... we... ahhh...”

MR: [Interrupts] “Do you have a systematic practice of looking at national test scores?”

SL: “No, not really.”

MR: “Okay. What do you think is causing these results, what do you think is going on?”

SL: “As we talked about earlier, we have had a high turnover rate amongst the faculty. Close to a quarter of our staff are new to the school.”

MR: “Yes, we discussed that. But, aside from the teachers, why do you think the share of poor readers have increased?”

SL: “Well, our share of bilingual students [common Danish term for children

with minority background] has increased and many of them are dealing with multiple social issues.”

MR: “Oh, so you think it is the students’ fault [chuckles and smiles]. No, but I mean that is true for all the schools in our area, that is just how it is. [Pauses and sighs]. If anything is going to change then it is up to you guys. The ball is in your court; it is your responsibility. We would like to see a focused action-plan explaining how you intend to follow up on this.”

In total, the follow-up meeting lasted a little more than two hours, and the tension I sensed surfaced at varying degrees, depending on what the data showed and how they were discussed. Obviously, I only have my own observations to go by in terms of ‘estimating’ the feel of the meeting. But the final comment made by the school leader suggests that he also picked up on some of the tension I felt hanging thick in the air, because shortly after he had walked the representatives out the door, he re-entered the meeting room and said out loud:

SL: “Woah, what was that all about? It kind of felt like they were going for the jugular just now. That was quite intense!”

(At this point, I think, both the two heads of departments and the school leader had forgotten about my presence as I had not moved from my seat, unsure what to do with myself). As mentioned, I did not know what to expect prior to my participation in the meeting, but on account of the impression it made, I started to speculate about the role played by data, seeing that they seemed so central, and therefore I set out to find out more about *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and its instruction to employ data in an effort to promote quality in Danish schools.

In brief, it is a national QAE programme and, as noted, it was introduced and implemented in 2014 in the wake of an overall political ambition to promote quality in schools in Denmark. Essentially, the programme instructs all schools across the country to track and monitor their results based on data, documenting mainly student learning and wellbeing. These data, also known as output data, are then collected and later encompassed in an annual quality report, unique to each school, which both local management and the governing body at the municipal level are required to address. And if the national target goals are not met, local management is, as a first step, required to outline and implement a plan of action seeking to ‘remedy’ the situation, and, as a next step, they are subjected to outside supervision. As such, *The Quality Report 2.0* functions as a standard QAE programme, canonising data as the main point of departure for systematically accessing results and successively adjusting practices. In effect, data are framed as key to the production and control of quality and thus positioned as vital to the national governing imperative instructing schools to promote quality. In view of this programme ‘declaration’, I remember being somewhat

puzzled by the kind of almost hyper rational logic being used to reason and legitimise the instruction to use data as a basis for promoting quality.

I was puzzled, I think, because this logic somehow seemed off considering the situation unfolding at the follow-up meeting. In the sense that data in many ways seemed to operate beyond the primarily technical role formally assigned onto them, as they initially seemed to be read as something more than ‘just’ demonstrations of reading proficiency amongst 6th graders, meaning as implicitly expressive of all the aspirations vested into data and their actual employment. Secondly, while being discussed, data in some ways appeared to contribute to the tension I felt embroiled in, impacting the overall feel of working with the QAE mandate and the kind of data it orders. And finally, in reference to the school leader’s comment about the intensity of what had just passed, data seemed to register as an expression of his ability to perform, leaving him in battle with the kind of simple and readily available ‘assessment’ that always follows the quantitative measure of ‘things’. And to that effect, it thus appeared as if the local leaders did not work with data *only* based on a rational process in which they were used as grounds for reflecting on present practises and making decisions about future initiatives. Rather, a broad range of affective reactions, for lack of a better word, *also* seemed to mark the concrete enactment of data and thus the work done in response to the requirements outlined by the QAE mandate.

Mindful of these observations, it began to dawn on me that the striking plea for a rational approach toward quality production in schools, so steadfastly advocated by *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, is perhaps not fully reflective of the way in which data are taken up in practice, given that the official ‘sanctioning’ of the QAE mandate does not leave much room for understanding the complexity involved with the concrete enactment of data. Before my experience at the follow-up meeting, I was of course aware of the fact that data are not always appropriated in ways that are only rational, but I did not have a clear idea of what this meant in practise. Leaving the meeting that day, however, I was convinced that I had just had a first-hand ‘demonstration’ of data being put to work in ways that seemed highly imbued with affect. And in that sense, it was this first-hand ‘demonstration’ that prompted me to pursue a more complex understanding of how and why data-work may emerge based on multiple affective ‘predicaments’. Causing me to ponder the following questions: What is missed by accepting the rational logic used to argue and sanction the use of QAE data? And what may be gleaned from disturbing this logic by trying to ‘illustrate’ the role played by affect in relation to the enactment of these data?

The Object of Scrutiny

So, in pursuit of a more complex understanding of the ‘components’ constituting the practice of working with data, I propose a study designed to

explore the QAE mandate presently implemented in education by attending to what may effectively be referred to as its affective means and reach. And due to the centrality of data, making quality both a mandatable and manageable objective for schools and particularly their leaders to pursue, I specifically propose to attend to data in relation to their affective qualities. To clarify, what this entails, I briefly turn to Spinoza (1677), foregrounding the point that affect always emerges through processes of affecting and being affected (Spinoza & Curley, 1985), meaning that the active and the receptive are inseparable in relation to the ways in which affect is woven into most aspects of life (Mühlhoff, 2017). Informed by this overarching way of thinking about affect, expressed as a capacity to affect and be affected, I argue that researching data in relation to their affective qualities may be explained as an endeavour to explore the constant unfolding of affective dynamics emerging in the wake of the actual employment of data, while continuously keeping a watchful eye out for the contextual, situational, and relational conditions marking it.

Prompted by this proposal to attend to data in relation to their affective qualities, I thus seek to develop an approach well-suited to scrutinise the more elusive, affective modalities inherent to the enactment of data by essentially staying close to the empirical. Thus, ‘sticking to’ Gilford Geertz’s (1973) and his general stance on *thick descriptions* being the result of careful analysis of the intricate, complex, and distinct aspects related to the empirical phenomena in focus. In more specific terms, this means that I aim for an approach making it possible to pay close attention to the concrete, empirical sites in which the QAE mandate and the data it orders, are played out. Moreover, it means that I am ‘restricting’ my exploration of data and their capacity to affect and be affected to an actual case study of one concrete QAE programme, namely *The Quality Report 2.0*. I do so, because in combination, this may allow for a level of detail that is necessary to ‘get a hold of’ the rather elusive and convoluted ways in which affect are implicated in the task of putting data to work in practice. And following from this ‘hold’, it may be possible to promote new insights pertaining to the affective ‘circuits’ put in motion as school leaders, for example, work with data, while still being reflective of the contextual, situational, and relational circumstances marking the varying forms of enactment unfolding in practice.

Thus, guided by the ambition to stay close to the empirical, I propose a study seeking to research data in relation to their affective qualities by following their production and deployment alongside three separate entry points. First, by attending to data and the ways in which they are discursively reasoned by official agents and subsequently taken up by leaders as a means of communicating about practices directed at promoting quality. Secondly, by attending to data based on the way they are included in follow-up practices, and as such contribute to the atmosphere surrounding these practices. And thirdly, by attending to data as they are read as measures of quality

and thus as implicit measures of leadership, prompting the presence of a more performance-oriented awareness within those whose capabilities they implicitly are assumed to measure. In sum, this means that I set out to follow data as they are initially ‘made’ by the political mandate ordering them, subsequently placed in the midst of practices securing follow-up procedures, and finally, register affectively amongst school leaders, first in line to put the QAE mandate into practice. As such, I propose a study designed to attend to the specific affective forces and intensities at play in relation to the practical employment of data based on three interrelated yet separate practices and selected instances, each marked by different relational, situational, and goal-specific circumstances.

Going forward, I thus seek to explore the following three research questions:

- How does data impact the task of communicating about quality?
- How does data mark the atmosphere enveloping follow-up practices?
- How does data ‘bring out’ the performative in leadership?

‘Knowing’ about Attachment

In many ways, the political authorisation of quality is firmly couched within a rhetoric of positivity, in the sense that it mandates nothing more than the happily benign, seeking only prosperity on behalf of all students as well as society at large. Empowered, in part, by this seemingly altruistic ambition, the use of QAE programmes or systems have increased over the last decades and presently they feature as a permanent fixture in transnational policy making – so much so that the data they order have become the lifeblood of education today (Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm, & Simola, 2011). In response to this trajectory, critics have lamented the increasing standardisation, measurability, and accountability brought in by this powerful QAE mandate (Krejsler, 2012; Lawn, 2011; Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Ozga et al., 2011; N. S. Rose & Miller, 2009). The key concerns expressed by these critics relate to the loss of professional autonomy, the narrowing of curricula, and the (unhealthy) performativity caused by the employment of the QAE mandate and its use of data. But despite considerable time and resources spent researching and red-flagging these concerns, QAE programmes or systems are still extensively represented in education, and consequently, the influx of data measuring and assessing quality has never been more pervasive.

Sympathetic to these concerns, the study at hand, however, seeks a different route for grappling with the QAE mandate, in the sense that it is not directly interested in its so-called side-effects. Rather, it is curious about the affective forces and dynamics supporting its effectiveness or produc-

tivity, as I tend to term it. The inclination to pursue this alternative route, purposefully not trying to critique the QAE mandate but instead trying to understand the dynamics contributing to its prevalence, stems from Lauren Berlant (1997; 2011) and her way of thinking about attachment. Specifically, it stems from the parts of her work in which she addresses the potency that may come from subjects attaching to objects, ideas, or compromised conditions of possibility and their inherent promise. To clarify the dynamics of this form of potency it may be useful to reference novelist Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and his iconic book *The Wisdom of Sands* (published posthumously in French as *Citadele* in 1948). Briefly, this book depicts a journey in which a young ruler-to-be learns to recognise those aspects of civilisation that serve to strengthen an empire as well as those that assist its decline. Essentially, touching on the grandeur of ‘men’ and the means by which they may be led, giving rise to the following expression:

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea”.

Obviously, this expression relates the specificities of building an empire, and as such does not concern itself with the potential productivity of political goals or mandates. Nevertheless, it offers a relevant image for understanding how labouring subjects may in fact work more ardently towards a specified goal if they experience a sense of yearning, or attachment as Berlant would phrase it, for that which lies ahead, meaning that which may be achieved once the specified goal is realised. And as such, it may come across as a rather gentle technique for promoting the realisation of certain goals. Yet, it is important, Berlant cautions, not to lose sight of the potential cruelty that is inherent to most forms of attachment. More often than not, people tend to hold on to their attachments, since letting go of them usually registers as a threat to the familiar, thus suggesting that attachments are not easily discarded, even in instances where they stand in the way of one’s own flourishing (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, fear of change often causes subjects to embrace the conditions shaping their way of living, even if they fail to live up to their promises. So, by attending to attachment in relation to the overriding ambition of promoting quality and all the good that it campaigns, meaning all the abstract notions of order, equity, and overall betterment it assures to ‘deliver’, it may be possible to promote a more intimate understanding of the kind of productivity assisting the stronghold of QAE in education today.

In keeping with this line of thinking, this study seeks to ‘unfold’ lines of attachment, i.e., what may essentially be thought of as the formation of attachment, as means of understanding the affective forces and intensities assisting the current ‘pull’ towards the QAE mandate. In order to do so, I look towards studies and academic positions commonly related to *the turn to affect* (Clough & Halley, 2007) as a basis for exploring what may very well

be termed an ‘affective impasse’ that draws educators – here in the form of school leaders – in by encouraging them to attach to quality and that which it pledges. In doing so, I attend specifically to the kinds of affective reception, sensorial experiences, and embodied states of being related to the practical employment of data. Instinctively, the power of such an ‘impasse’ may seem less brutal than that of a concrete policy induced order, instructing the instalment of a specific form of practice. Still, as noted just now, attachment to varying objectives, ideas, or certain modes of living may in fact function as a highly animating force, propelling the tacit drive towards new horizons. So, informed by this study and its underpinning ambition to ‘know’ about the radically non-disciplinary modes of stimulation potentially serving to sustain the productivity of the current QAE mandate, I ultimately hope to provoke a broader debate concerning the more immaterial, corporal, and social workings of the political instruction to promote quality in education.

The Steps to Come

In the following, I list and explicate the steps I take to ‘achieve’ the study at hand, thus offering some overview of how I proceed with researching data in relation to their affective qualities. In chapter two, I outline the overarching ins and outs of the kind of research I propose as means of promoting insights pertaining to QAE data and their affective intake. As part of this effort, I initially highlight the type of scholarly thinking I extrapolate from as a basis for identifying my research ‘object’. As such, I briefly outline a small selection of scholars who each either dismiss, challenge, and/or merely question the justification of the underlying world-view assumptions inherent to the QAE mandate and the kind of data it orders. But in extending from Lauren Berlant (1997, 2011), debunking the ‘purity’ officially attributed data and their ability to ‘truthfully’ measure ‘things’ may in some sense impede my determination to assist more detailed understanding of the affective intensities sponsoring the survivability of the current QAE mandate. Informed by this stance, I thus try to focus on what may broadly be referred to as the ‘up-side’ of the QAE mandate and the rewards thought to follow in its wake, attending to how attachment may emerge as the data that it orders are employed in practice. Next, I explain how I use this ‘up-side’-focus as guide for exploring the more embodied, somatic ways of appropriating data and making sense of them as a way of attending to the central phenomenon of interest, namely the intermingling of data, affect, and leadership.

Following from this, I then move on to situate the study at hand in relation to an existing ecology of research. More specifically, in relation to an emerging field of research, stressing that theories of affectivity are essential in terms of promoting a more intimate understanding of how political modes of living, generally speaking, may come about. I do so because against the contours of this emerging field of research, it becomes

possible to position this study based on how, on the one hand, it employs this field of research as a source of inspiration, and, on the other hand, also aims to contribute to it, as it essentially proposes to explore data at the nexus of both their political instruction and their practical, affective appropriation. And as such, it seeks to combine an interest in the conceptual and instrumental trajectories marking the political backdrop for instructing the QAE mandate and the kind of data it orders with an interest in ‘knowing’ about the co-evolution of affect in relation to the practical appropriation of these data. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, I highlight the overriding methodological reflections from which I seek ‘direction’ in terms of establishing my research ‘object’ as well as my approach to ‘knowing’ about it, essentially specifying the underlying ways of thinking and theorising informing my mode of producing insights.

The aim of specifying these more underlying ways of thinking and theorising is not to diminish the importance a more comprehensive account of the methodological approach employed in each of the three entry points included in this study. Rather, it is to outline the more foundational premises for asking questions, for producing empirical material, and for producing knowledge guiding the study at hand. So, in seeking to do so, I first detail the stance that the method for researching affect varies depending on how this ‘substance’ is conceived. Secondly, I detail the stance that most efforts directed at generating knowledge about affect usually involve the researchers’ bodily sensibilities for sensing affected bodies, responding to the contextual circumstances and relations they move in and out of, be it the researcher’s own and/or those of the ‘researched’. And in ‘staying with’ this tradition for ‘locating’ affect through embodied/emotive ways of registering the world, I turn to *Sensory Ethnography* (Pink, 2015), utilising this as onset for more stringently relying on my own capacity for sensing. In a way drawing from phenomenology as a resource for producing empirical material and studying affect by simply attending to how bodies are marked by the context inhabiting them (Ahmed, 2006). And lastly, I detail the stance that the process of making sense must reflect the translation of affect being scrutinised, which I ‘apply’ to the study at hand first by specifying the mediation of affect that I focus on, and subsequently by developing an affect-sensitive approach, geared specifically to attend to it.

In the wake of this chapter, clarifying, positioning, and reasoning the study at hand, I then embark on Entry One, Two, and Three, within which I address the following separate, yet related, research questions: 1) how does data impact the task of communicating about quality? 2) how does data mark the atmosphere enveloping follow-up practices? 3) And does data ‘bring out’ the performative in leadership? Each of which are assigned their ‘own’ chapter, and, in overview, they are scaffolded around the same set-up, starting out with a short introduction that leads to a specification of the research question at the centre of the respective entry points. Next, the method section outlines first the mediation of affect being employed, then

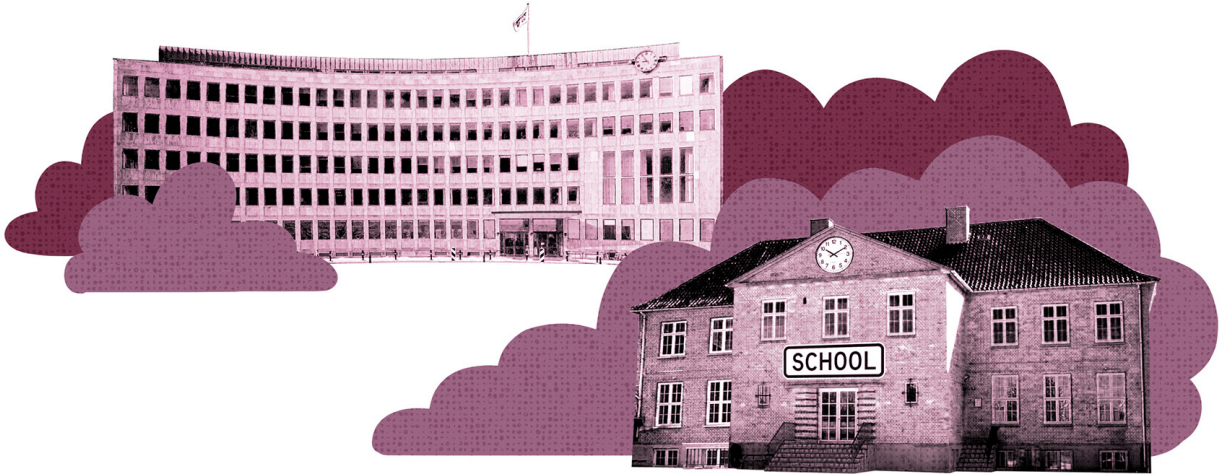
the circumstances surrounding the production of the empirical material, and lastly the mode of sense-making being ‘applied’. As such, the overarching method for researching data in relation to their affective qualities is tweaked to ‘accommodate’ the fact that the production and deployment of QAE data involves the active participation of many agents and agendas that cater to both national, municipal, and local needs and objectives. Which cannot help but impact the way in which data are taken up in practice. Therefore, I attend to data and their enactment alongside three different instances or modes of practice that are key to the ‘instalment’ of the QAE mandate, namely the production of mandatory quality reports featuring annual results, the implementation of follow-up meetings, and the daily ‘execution’ of leadership working to promote quality.

In some ways, this way of structuring the study at hand allows for the three Entry Points to function as separate contributions, ‘dealing’ only with their ‘own’ research question, followed by an independently developed methodological approach, sensitive to the contextual, social, and relational circumstances that are relevant to the kind of data-work being scrutinised. The purpose of doing so, however, is not to suggest that the different forms of data-work at stake in fact are separate. Rather, it is to more carefully consider the circumstances and objectives around which the QAE mandate and the data it orders is played out in practice, and as such offer a more detailed account of the diverse nature of data-work and the affective forces and intensities inherent to its manifestation. So, by attending to this diversity the idea is to allow for a better grasp of the varying embodied experiences and thus in a way the different kinds of attachments that seemingly emerge as a part of the instances in which leaders work with data as part of their daily efforts to promote quality. Especially, seeing that these instances feature in so many different aspects of the same practice, and as such, potentially may gain momentum by feeding off each other.

In chapter six, the last chapter, I first sum up the detailed insights afforded from the three entry points, meaning that I briefly touch on the queries they attend to and the conclusions they draw. And based on this summation, I argue that in all the instances where the leaders included in the fieldwork employ data as part of their daily practices, they do so in ways that stand out as imbued with affect. So, in considering the joint insights made possible by this study and its exploration of the intermingling between data, leadership, and affect, it may thus be argued that the concrete task of putting data to work comes across as more than ‘just’ an intellectual, technical ‘manoeuvre’, seeing it seems suffused with an affective overflow, that transpires as an interrelated and interdependent feature immanent to varying forms of data-work. And by extrapolating from Berlant and parts of her work stressing the survivability of most societal orders and/or modes of living as intimately connected to subjects and their affective attachments to what is promised by these orders and/or modes of living, I propose that this affective overflow is not ‘just’ an

interesting facet pertaining to the ‘movements’ of data-work. In the sense that it may in fact aid the productivity of the QAE mandate by prompting leaders to (more) efficiently pursue the promotion of quality on account of the more sensorial, embodied responses that emerge as they negotiate the circumstances surrounding their practices, in particular the political rush to promote quality and thus overall betterment.

Finally, I bring the study at hand to a close initially by presenting an opening to discuss the imbrication of affect in relation to data-work more widely, and secondly by addressing the potential ‘applicational’ value of broadening traditional ways of understanding the notion of data-work. As a way of motivating this opening, I restate the point, that in judging from the various official statements, policy texts, and guideline material instructing the QAE mandate, data are ‘coded’ rather narrowly, meaning that they are generally thought of as disconnected from more embodied, relational, contextual, and experienced oriented ways of knowing and practicing. And therefore, I propose to read the study at hand as catalyst for speculating differently about data, so as to allow for conversations about data-work that does not primarily refer to it as a detached, mainly rational undertaking, un-marked by more affect and sense-informed ways of ‘knowing’, taking ‘things’ in and making sense. And as a way of reasoning the ‘applicational’ value afforded from the study at hand and the insights it affords, I argue that by reconfiguring more generally accepted ways of viewing data-work, practitioners, e.g., school leaders, may effectively be allowed more opportunity to reflect on their own efforts along a different set of coordinates than the ones presently being both offered and lauded. More specifically, along coordinates that actually include the co-evolvement of affect.



Chapter 2:

The Ins and Outs of the Research at Stake

Clarifying, Positioning, and Reasoning

As is the case with most ‘activities’, research may take on a number of forms, depending on the methodological tradition and the discipline it pertains to. And due to this ‘flexible’ constitution, it is custom for (emerging) research to take on the task of mapping its roots and connections, meaning the surrounding fields of study and established methodologies from which it extends and seeks to contribute to. In keeping with this custom, the purpose of the following chapter is to demonstrate the ins and outs of the kind of research featuring in the study at hand, firstly by *clarifying* the theoretical backdrop it builds from, secondly by *positioning* it within a larger ecology of research, and finally, by *reasoning* the way in which it ultimately seeks to produce insight in response to existing modes of knowledge production. So, in order to proceed with this, I start by highlighting the line of scholarly thinking that this study utilises as footing for constructing its research ‘object’. Secondly, I outline the way in which this study attends to both the realm of the political and that of affect, thus relating and connecting it to an emerging field of research seeking to promote new insight on how the political and the affective, broadly speaking, overlap. And lastly, I introduce the study’s overarching mode of ‘knowing’, stressing the methodology reflections it ‘borrows’ from in terms of determining its ‘object’ and ways in which it seeks to produce insight about the intermingled state of data, leadership and affect. In sum, I thus hope to make the process sustaining the study at hand more visible and thereby more accessible to ‘outsiders’.

Clarifying the Theoretical Footing Marking the ‘Object’

As described previously, the idea for the study at hand was in a way prompted by an event that made me think differently about data. Initially, however, I was not able to specify this idea further, I just knew that my common-sense understanding of data as nothing more than ‘plain’ quantitative measures and numbers did not add up. So, as a way of facing this ‘short-coming’, I began to investigate a vast body of literature attending to numbers and quantification, prompting me to broaden my understanding of the processes based on which data become data, proliferated out into most corners of present-day society. Essentially enabling me to specify my research ‘object’ more clearly. In the following I go over the insights allowing for this ‘clarity’. I start by illustrating the theoretical stance that data are never *just* data, but in fact are tightly connected to implicit ways of thinking from which a form of worlding is afforded. Informed by this stance, I then outline some of the underlying assumptions informing the current QAE mandate and the data it orders to briefly outline the kind of worlding they, in turn, seem to afford. But to gain some distance from this form of worlding, seeing that my original sense was that there was something incomplete about the way in which data are officially sanctioned, I go over a selection of scholars that, broadly speaking, are critical of the so-called official stance on what QAE are and thus can do. And from these critical voices, I find stimulus to seek out new ways of viewing QAE data, and therefore I finally draw

from some of Laurent Berlant's work as means of arguing my proposal to consider QAE data in relation to their affective qualities, attending to the way in which they are taken up in practice by school leaders.

In much of his work, Ben Williamson (2015) examines the vast proliferation of data in education today. In short, he emphasises that the kind of data spreading within education are made available through a range of digital technologies, also known as software. In and of itself, this may seem a trivial thing to linger on as it is well known and thus not very controversial. But to Williamson, it is key, seeing that it is the utilisation of software that essentially facilitates the collection, visualisation, and communication of data. Ultimately, making them function as a form of social product, instructed by code. Usually, this technical process of manufacturing data is not widely considered, but the importance of code in relation to data must not be downplayed, he argues, because the underpinning systems of thought, or worldviews perhaps, upon which the use of software always builds, effectively models certain ways of thinking, seeing, and doing when data are circulated in practice (Ibid., p. 85). And to that effect, Williamson's work gives cause to attend to the kind of code instructing data as it can be said to shape certain modes of being within education. In extrapolating from this body of work, it is clear that data, contrary to most routine understanding, are never *just* data. They always *come* from somewhere and this somewhere is crucial to the kind of worlding they afford and, in some sense, also promote.

In many ways, Williamson's work aligns with an established, yet still growing, scholarly interest in numbers and their underlying ontology and epistemology. Number studies have, for example, featured in anthropology since the end of the nineteenth century and in the 1970s it spread to positions within STS (Lippert & Verran, 2018). Moreover, within (post)critical positions a branch of research termed *Cultural Studies of Numeracy* (Lather, 2016) has begun to surface. And finally, rooted in medical sociology Deborah Lupton (2016; 2019) has spearheaded growing awareness of the fact that more and more spheres of both societal and personal life have become quantifiably adapted and in effect are sought controlled and optimised. Thus, reducing or catapulting, depending on temperament, 21st-century humans to function as *data creatures*, because data, human bodies, and 'selves' have increasingly become inextricably entwined through the daily enactment of the quantitative measures that is so characteristic of modern life. Of course, these varying avenues of research cater to their own traditions and specific interests, but in a way they all seem to circle the same type of question: what happens to (human) life when it is made measurable? And what are the components assisting the construction of numbers and the form of aggregated quantification they permit? And finally, what is the purpose of numbering? Who benefits from it? And as such, most scholarly interest in numbers seem keen on challenging the traditional distinctions between subjective/objective, human/technical, material/immaterial, and

cultural/scientific that are common-sense to ‘normal’ ways of understanding numbers and thereby also the kind of quantitative data at the heart of this study.

As I see it, all the examples of scholarly interest in numbers and numbering mentioned above are hugely relevant, in the sense that they all seem to point to the fact that data do not exist independently of assumptions about what is in the world and how it may be possible to know about it. I say this because by pointing to this fact, it is ultimately inferred that data are connected to certain ways of inhabiting the world, meaning that data are connected to that which I here refer to as worlding. In short, worlding may be defined as “[] an embodied and enacted process – a way of being in the world – consisting of an individual’s whole-person act of attending to the world” (Palmer & Hunter, 2018). And by extrapolating from this definition, I maintain, it may be argued that QAE data actually function in ways that involve more agency than is commonly considered. Or put differently, it may be argued that QAE data not only impact educators’, including school leaders’, *being* in the world, they also mark their *doing* in it. Mindful of this agentic capacity, impacting subjects and their *whole-person act of attending to the world*, I find, it is important to attend more closely to what may generally be termed the underpinning worldview assumptions vital to the instruction of QAE data. In the following, I therefore go over these assumptions as a way of hinting at the kind of worlding potentially afforded on account of the production and deployment of the kind of data in question.

To begin the task of outlining the worldview assumptions related to the production and deployment of QAE data, it makes sense, I reckon, to start by highlighting the contours of the neoliberal movement out of which the ambition to quantify education, in part, arises. In essence, the term ‘neoliberal’ captures the establishment of markets and competition as the foundational principals for enabling the realisation of a ‘market society’ (Polanyi, 2001). Typically, a ‘market society’ is characterised by the circumstance that the boundaries between market and state are blurred, which, in effect, stimulates promises of optimisation and growth to be adopted into the political engine also known as state-development. Within what may largely be branded the Global North, the enactment of the ‘market society’ has emerged over the past four to five decades through what may essentially be thought of as neoliberal ways of governing. In general, this form of governing is ‘realised’ by first setting clear institutional goals and subsequently enforcing them via varying systems of accountability. And furthermore, by instilling a more competitive mode of doing things, for example, via practices of benchmarking and a more customer-oriented approaches to public service.

Historically, this neoliberal way of ‘doing things’ has, in overview, been coded as an (male) impartial and rational mode of operation (Penz & Sauer,

2019, p. 5). But the specific details of its reach are not always clear-cut and may take on a range of different contextually informed expressions. Within education, however, most agree that the current QAE mandate serves a rather clear demonstration of how the neoliberal way-of-doing-things successfully has prompted education to adapt to a market society. To illustrate what this entails, QAE systems and programmes, for example, are often held responsible for constructing quality in ways that enable *regimes of visibility* and *grids of codeability* (Lingard et al., 2013, p. 542), thereby instilling a more outspoken focus on goals and the degree to which they are attained. In a manner of speaking, there is nothing surprising about the fact that QAE systems and programmes are thought to facilitate and thus foster a more competitive way of viewing and approaching things, seeing that the raise of the neoliberal within education has been well documented over the last two to three decades. But the fact that it is well documented does not change the fact that what is usually termed a neoliberal mode of thinking still acts as a strong underlying worldview assumption, informing the QAE mandate and its instruction to use data as means of promoting quality.

Also key to the QAE mandate and its instruction of data is the overarching principles generally associated with the natural and/or quantitative sciences, e.g. the *sciences which prove things* as they are teasingly labelled by Isabelle Stengers (2018). To a large extent, these principles profess to the belief that it is indeed possible to measure most phenomena in the world metrically via the use of indicators. In strict terms, an indicator refers to a 'unit' that only measures what it declares to measure; it is objective, neutral, and value-free, independent of external influence, traceable over time, sensitive to change, and it is also verifiable and replicable (Franceschini, Galetto, & Maisano, 2007; Hoornweg, 2009). Mostly, however, this strict definition does not apply, seeing that indicators often are indirect in nature, meaning that the underlying phenomena of interest are intangible or not directly observable, which is generally the case in education. Therefore, indicators are deployed as proxies, making complex and intangible phenomena such as learning and wellbeing tangible, or commensurate, and thus quantifiable, allowing them to be made measurable and subsequently comparable across different contexts. This is not to imply, that anyone, not even the sciences mentioned above, believe that metrical measures represent the only way of coming to terms with what is, in a manner of speaking, in the world. But nevertheless, insight afforded from what may simply be termed a calculative rationality is often considered superior to other forms of insight.

To illustrate, in short, how this superiority may be expressed within education, and perhaps used as source of empowerment, I shall parenthetically refer to Andreas Schleicher, the director of Education and Skills at OECD, who on numerous occasions has been known to argue for the reasonability of data on the basis of the following proclamation: "Without data, you are **just** another person with an opinion" (Wilby, 2013, Novem-

ber 26). Surely, this proclamation is somewhat caricatural, meaning that perhaps it is not meant to be taken as literally as it is expressed. Even so, it rather accurately captures how many high-level politicians, legislators, and policymakers tend to think and speak about quantitative data. The key point being that data are what makes the difference between knowing based on science or seeming to know *only* on the basis of opinion. At least, this is the case when it comes to the official statements campaigning the use of data as grounds for securing more and better quality in education. So, while drawing upon the explanatory power coming from the so-called 'hard' sciences along with their calculative reasoning, data are, in effect, attributed the authority of being able to prove the quantitative longitude and latitude, so to speak, of 'things', including the presence or absence of quality. As such, data are in many instances used politically to emphasise the legality of moving education away from its predominantly fluffy and imprecise measures and modes of evaluation, away from its traditional anecdotal bearing, towards more reliable ways of accounting (Moos, Krejsler, & Hjort, 2005).

In sum, this means that the underlying assumptions from which the QAE mandate builds, is heavily influenced by a neoliberal way of reasoning as well as a highly calculative rationality, stemming from specific domains of science. And to that effect, it may be said that the kind of data ordered by this mandate are intimately related to the kind of worldviews, meaning views about what is in the world and how it may be possible to know about it, commonly associated with realism, essentialism, and principles of measurability, with their surrounding theories about facts and evidence. Thus, indicating that QAE data are 'nourished' by the overarching idea that most phenomena, such as, for example, student learning and wellbeing, in some sense already exist in the world, independently of the way in which they are captured and represented. Ultimately, making it possible to think and speak of QAE data as tools from which more objective, or pure ways of becoming insightful may be afforded, so that concrete practices of decision-making may be informed by *factual* measures of what is *actually* produced. To that effect, these underlying assumptions informing the production and deployment of QAE data do not only impact ways of *being* in the world but also ways of *doing* it, and as such, they do in fact pave the way for certain modes of worlding.

Yet, given the circumstance that these underlying assumptions are so inherent to widely appreciated ways of conceptualising QAE data, they have become almost naturalised to a point where it is difficult to imagine data differently, as 'un-informed' by these implicit ways of thinking about what is in the world and how to know about it. Therefore, as a way of gaining some distance, I turn to a selection of scholars that each in their own way demonstrate how and why the underlying assumptions outlined above, especially the overarching principles originally stemming from the natural and/or quantitative sciences, are, to put it diplomatically, off the

mark. Obviously, it is not possible to cover the full spectrum of the work done by these scholars and the rather diverse traditions they are anchored in. Yet, even when only scratching the surface, it is not difficult to pinpoint the line of reasoning they use, more or less purposefully, to debunk the underlying worldview assumptions, described above. Thus, either dismissing, challenging, and/or merely questioning the foundational idea that with data it is not only possible but also favourable to *factually* measure objects *actually* out there in the ‘outside’ world. To exemplify and learn from this (critical) body of work, I shall briefly outline the primary arguments offered by the scholars in question, focusing specifically on the trepidations they express towards common hold notions of quantitative data.

The first scholar is Theodore M. Porter (1986, 1996). Working within the undefinable space between history and sociology, he uses a range of historical examples to argue that our existing and pervasive trust in numbers (in data) is made plausible because of specific social and cultural settings – settings in which the need for security, transparency, and trust seems at home in the ontological and epistemological reasoning offered by numbers and quantification. Adding to Porter’s foundational work, it has more recently been claimed that our present trust in numbers is also forwarded by a long record of a culturally specific distrust in language. As noted by Hansen (2015, p. 206), for example, this distrust traces back to Wittgenstein and his concept of *language games*, as he convincingly makes the point that it is impossible to achieve a purified state of observation through language, seeing that humans are always, already entangled in language networks. Informed, in part, by this point, Hacking (2007), and other thinkers associated with the linguistic turn, have later argued that language does not merely represent but also constitutes reality, and by that token, they claim, any notion of pristine, linguistic representation is unwarranted. And on account of this massively influential work, the distrust in language as representation has been able to spread.

Yet, as it has later been noted by Hansen and Porter (2012), numbers are in fact not much different from language in this respect, meaning that they too are just as constructed. Most conventional thinking, however, does not see it that way, because numbers have a distinct ability to compound, organise, and structure observations in ways that are entirely different from what can be done with words. Without going into detail, this ability, or feature perhaps, is formed on the basis of that which is termed numerical operations, which involve mobility, stability, combinability, order, and precision (ibid. p. 208). And seeing that most of us are accustomed to thinking about numbers in close connection to these operations, it may seem a common-place thing to emphasise, but according to Hansen and Porter (2012, p., 209) it is largely on account of these operations that numbers, in a way, become “conveyers of ‘facts’, while the heterogeneous actor-networks that constitute the production of them are largely obscured”. In sum, this means that Porter and his work has paved the way for the stance that numbers,

despite being culturally conceptualised as instruments for objective, pure representation, are just as constructed as language.

The second scholar, Rob Kitchin (2014), generally disputes the idea that numbers and thus data are unspoiled. Speaking from a position within human geography, Kitchin, Lauriault, & McArdle (2015) focus on the current impact of data in relation cities and their development. In short, they demonstrate how data today continuously are used to measure aspects like inner-city pollution, openness to innovation, functionality of public transportation, etc., which are later weaved together and visualised on large scale data-dashboards, thereby allowing for the complexities of what makes a city to be visualised via metrics. Beyond the marketing potential following from this, these data are generally used to inform policy formation and regulatory practices for the purpose of more systematic and efficient city planning. And to a large extent, Kitchin et al. take issue with this kind of data use, arguing that these data are never raw but always cooked (Bowker, 2005 as cited in Kitchin et al., 2015), functioning as “complex socio-technical systems that do not simply reflect the world, but actively produce it” (Kitchin et al., 2015, p. 16). Therefore, Kitchin et al. argue, data must not be understood independently of ideology, but rather as grounds for privileging and advancing specific ways of knowing. Effectively, arguing the need to address the following questions more widely: “Through which socio-technical ‘operations’ are data made possible? Who considers data ‘necessary’ and why? And what are the potential consequences of what my largely be termed data-use, considering the instrumental rationality it promotes?”

The third scholar does not directly attend to numbers and quantification but to the importance of the physical manifestation of signs. Rooted in anthropology, Inger Sjørnslev (2015) writes about *The Magic of the Gestalt*. To put it very briefly, she explores the importance of gestalts in relation to what is broadly known as methods of science. In the process of doing so, she demonstrates how visual representations are crucial to methods related to both magic and science, suggesting that the distinctions between the two are more distorted than commonly believed. To exemplify this point, she mentions the inkblots in the Rorschach test, stating that this test and the *scientificity* it expresses, only works when the *outside* description of the inkblots is believed to mirror the *inside* of a patient, conveying a clear correspondence between the sign in question and that which it signifies. Based on numerous other examples, Sjørnslev concludes: “The fact that science has become accessible by way of gestalts has made it possible to look at beliefs in science along the same lines as beliefs in magic” (ibid. p. 151). This is not meant to discredit methods of science. Rather, it is meant as a reminder of the circumstance that the success of science has been and still is closely related to its ability to make convincing links between certain gestalts and that which they represent. Extrapolating from this line of work, it may thus be argued that the credibility of any worldviews, including

those informing the QAE mandate, is related to its use of gestalts, meaning that the materiality of data, in the form of graphs, charts etc. is vital, because without them the link to students and their capabilities cannot be established.

In judging from the gist of the scholarly work just outlined, it is clear that it collectively addresses the orthodoxy of common, idealised notions of data, typically considering them to be universal, value-free and objective measurements of various phenomena in the world. It does so by initially arguing that data are marked by cultural specificity and as such, like language, are constructed, sensitive to the context they are meant to engage. Secondly, by arguing that data always operate under the influence of socio-technical factors, and for that reason should not be considered independently of ideology. And lastly, by arguing that the legitimacy of data depends on concrete manifestations or gestalts to convey credible relations to that which are perceived to represent. As such, this body of scholarly work ultimately proposes that data are *entangled* with cultural idiosyncrasies, *influenced* by socio-technical specifics and ideology, and *celebrated* primarily on account of their ability to uphold plausible relations between their visual materiality and that which they signify. And even though it does not as such attend to data authorised by the QAE mandate, it does in fact express reservations towards the worldviews on the basis of which these data are instructed. Thus, offering a more complex, or brutal rather, view of them.

Mindful of this added complexity, it is obvious that the line of work outlined here may be taken up as encouragement to promote a more multidimensional outlook on the process allowing for data to be conceived as *conveyers of facts* to restate Hansen and Porters way of terming it. In fact, it may even be taken up as encouragement for disrupting the political reasoning that is presently used to sanction QAE data, championing them as clear-cut measurements of the produced output given their capacity for producing 'pure' knowledge about phenomena like learning and wellbeing. But despite the circumstance that it is arguably relevant to promote disruption of this 'purified' notion of data, I find that the most valuable provocation that I can take from the scholars in question and their work is the implicit message that seems to underpin their collective efforts, namely that there are more stories to be told about data than the ones currently being 'shouted out' by the governing officials. So, to that effect, I seek to draw from the insights detailed above by approaching data from yet another angle, in the sense that I seek to attend more closely to the underlying ideal that the QAE mandate envisions on behalf of data. Not to identify the way in which it may be flawed, but to better understand the implicit allure that this in effect may extend to data.

The inkling for this somewhat alternative approach is in a way extracted from Laurent Berlant and her work encompassed in *The Queen of Ameri-*

ca goes to *Washington City: essays on sex and citizenship* and *Cruel Optimism*. Amongst the many insights conveyed in this corpus of work, I am especially drawn to the way in which it in combination connects experiences nourished by consumption and the capacity of attachment to promote certain ways of acting. In the former work, *The Queen of America goes to Washington City*, Berlant attends to various forms of politically idealised citizenship by contouring what seemingly marks ‘the American way of life’. In short, she finds that it is closely imbricated with capitalism and its cultural marketing of identity as a property, as “something you can purchase, or purchase a relation to” (Berlant, 1997, p. 17). And on the basis of this observation, she states that the cultural ethos deriving from a capitalistic regime effectively promotes a social, societal order in which identity ‘needs’ to be communicated through the consumption of goods, in the sense that products are believed to articulate who we are or perhaps who we want to be. Which is why, most of us, even when unsettled by the advocacy of consumption, typically experience some form of joy or delight when buying a new sweater or a couch, seeing that the consumption of such products typically registers (affectively) as a way of expressing who we are or perhaps want to be.

As such, affective states of being and modes of self-expression, Berlant cautions, are vital to the functioning of a capitalistic society. And even though, as of late, there has been a growing critique of consumerism and the kind of culture it imposes, most of us are still susceptible to the idea of identity as ‘buyable’, making us gravitate towards the potential affirmation that may be conjured when taking part in a practice, a mode of being, that is culturally appraised. In that respect, the invocation of certain types of affective responses may essentially empower the domain of capitalism in its purest form on account of their ability to strengthen rather than challenge the social order of consumerism. As I understand Berlant, this is essentially the dynamic she refers to when speaking of affects assisting the hegemony of certain ways of living. In the latter work, *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant attends more directly to attachment. While referring to the stance that life is experienced affectively before being understood in other ways, Berlant sets out to explore how “optimism manifests in attachments and in their desire to sustain them” (Berlant, 2011, p. 13). She reasons in this direction by noting that attachments are not made by an act of will, but rather by an intelligence prompting subjects to run after certain ideals or objects (ibid, p. 125). And following from this recursive dynamic between the formation of attachment and the acts they may prompt, Berlant argues that any scrutiny of the political and its potential survivability must include a focus on bodies trying to negotiate the world in which they are enmeshed, which, to her, involves studying the emergence of attachments and their potential performative effects.

Informed by this line of work, it makes sense, I argue, to attend to the political authorisation or instruction to promote quality in education by examining how this authorisation or instruction, in a more immedi-

ate sense, is affectively experienced. I argue this because by exploring the possible affective responses invoked in the upshot of this order, it may in fact, despite the elusive formation of such potential responses, be possible to achieve a better understanding of the impulses serving to strengthen QAE work in practice. Or, in other words, achieve better understanding of how attachment to what the QAE mandates vows potentially plays into its sustainability. So, by attending to the affective responses potentially conjured in response to the enactment of QAE data, I propose to seek out the kind of worlding they afford as a way of grappling with how attachment may emerge on account the QAE mandate and its insistence on the rewards following from employing data in practice. Effectively, following data and their affective in-take as a way of ‘illustrating’ what may generally be termed the allure of data and thus their ability to encourage attachment to the overriding idea of quality. Therefore, I ultimately propose to research QAE data in relation to their affective qualities by exploring how school leaders respond to them in practice. Thus, locating the intermingling of data, affect, and leadership as the central phenomenon of interest pertaining to the study at hand.

Positioning the Study within an Ecology of Research

In view of the fact that the study at hand seeks to explore the kind of data produced and deployed on account of the politically championed QAE mandate, it is obviously marked by an interest in the political aspect of the current presence of data in education today. But given its interest in the affective intake of these data, it is correspondingly marked by an interest in the affective, to state it very simply. Mindful of this dual interest, I therefore seek to position the study at hand by placing it in relation to surrounding fields of study similarly concerned with intersections between the realm of the political and that of the affective, broadly speaking. I do so by first zooming in on the QAE mandate featuring at the centre of this study; initially attending to its underlying conceptual and instrumental trajectories and subsequently to how it is sought ‘installed’ through legislation and policy regulations as well as more incentive-based modes of operation. Informed by this illustration, I then establish the overall research ‘objective’ as one that attends to data at the nexus of both their political instruction and their practical, affective appropriation. With this in place, I then turn to an emerging field of research, proposing that theories of affectivity are key in terms of promoting a more intimate understanding of what the political, in its most general sense, is about. And against the contours of this proposition, it thus becomes possible to position the study at hand within an ecology of research by outlining how it both finds incentive to pursue the ‘objective’ in question from this ecology and how it down the line also hopes to contribute to it.

In many ways, the QAE mandate operates as a concrete manifestation of the overall political instruction to ensure and promote the quality ‘delivered’

by universities, colleges, vocational training institutions, and especially schools. And as a way of identifying this mandate and the underlying conceptual as well as instrumental trajectories informing it, it is necessary to sketch out the notion of quality and the standard-based way of thinking it subscribes to. In starting with the notion of quality, it is clearly relative in nature, because more than anything it stands out as a floating, or rather empty, signifier, functioning primarily as a vehicle for absorbing meanings imposed on it (Fowler, Fowler, & Sykes, 1976). And due to this relative feature, as noted by Peter Dahler-Larsen (2008, p. 11), quality commonly presents itself as a phenomenon to which no one objects. But when used to specify a goal and/or a political objective, however, quality takes on a rather specific meaning. The circumstances causing this specificity traces back to the time of the industrial revolution, because prior to this quality typically meant something rare or refined, e.g., something that stood out due to its beautiful or sublime feature(s), or exception to the ordinary. But following the revolution and its new modes of production, heavily influenced by Frederick Taylor (1919) and his promotion of *scientific management*, quality increasingly translated into something abstract, assessed and defined in relation to other things of a similar kind.

Nourished by the backdrop of this conceptual development, quality has thus, over time, evolved into a contingency of systematic efforts, put into action with the intent to assure and develop the feature of a service or a practice. And in the wake of this development, quality is presently made applicable on the basis of 'how-to-prescriptions', that are able to "travel from organisation to organisation []" (Power, 2003). The many and intricate paths leading up to this state of affairs is obviously long ended and complex, but the rule instilled by the principles of New Public Management (NPM) in public administration is generally thought of as a major 'driver'. Briefly, NPM terms a collective mode of thinking that is operationalised into a way of managing and organising public institutions, including institutions within education. And prompted by this mode of thinking, quality has, for more than three decades, been promoted as something measurable, statistical, and standard-based (Ozga et al., 2011, p. 3). In other words, promoted as something that may in fact be controlled and known by scientific measures. To that effect, the instalment of NPM has been and to some extent still is critical in shaping the dominant discourse on what quality is and how it may be obtained.

To fully appreciate the apparent success of NPM, it must be noted that the rise of reflexive modernity and its vast enrolment of what Dahler-Larsen (2011) calls *the evaluation society* has played an important role in assisting its capacity for defining what may be recognised as quality. In the sense that reflexive modernity, while working the ruins of the big absolutes, has been very effective in canonising evaluation as the better half of quality assurance by arguing the need for a retrospective attitude. In short, evaluation may be defined as "a careful retrospective assessment of merit, worth, and

value of administration, output and outcome of government interventions, which is intended to play a role in future, practical situations” (Vedung, 2017). And on account of this ability to look back and thus make (stable) assessments, evaluation has been entrusted to offer a highly sought-after certainty that essentially supports the notion of quality as something to be attained through planning and implementation of administrative routines, meaning as something ‘managed’ and ‘organisationalised’. Informed by this overarching societal development, evaluation is therefore positioned as an inherent aspect of the current political instruction to promote quality in education. So, as a result of the administrative rule following from NPM and its ‘search’ for stable assessments in an era marked by a ‘lack’ of big absolutes, the QAE mandate essentially conceptualises quality as a ‘thing’ that may be produced by adhering to pre-scribed modes of managing and organising on the basis of a retrospective outlook.

In addition to this conceptual translation of quality, however, it must also be noted that QAE in practice promotes quality based on a rather fixed and almost generic standard upon which most QAE systems or programmes draw. Essentially, establishing quality as an objective that may be achieved through conformity to standards (Ozga et al., 2011, p. 2). Basically, this standard involves four steps, where the first step entails defining goals and setting objectives; the second includes collecting data based on indicators matching pre-set objectives; the third step involves evaluating and discussing the results reflected in the accumulated data; and finally, the fourth step consists of making aggregated assessments based on the results achieved, possibly followed by a change of practice. At least, this is more or less the QAE standard advocated by the *Standard and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* backed by The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). Surely, there are many ways of viewing this standard, but across the different positions respectively lamenting or welcoming it, most agree that the QAE mandate have rapidly accelerated the production and deployment of quantitative data used to measure and assess quality in education. So, as a form of standard based instrument, the QAE mandate is essential in enabling what is commonly referred to as the ‘audit turn’ (Grek, Lawn, Lingard, & Varjo, 2009), marking a shift from culture to numbers, based on which schools, for example, are constructed and extended as spaces to be governed mainly by numbers, as noted by Nicolas Rose (1991) nearly two decades ago.

But to fully understand the instrumentational development assisting the QAE mandate to function in this manner, it is necessary to be aware of the more incentive-based forces and agents also putting the QAE mandate into motion, so to speak. Typically, these ‘supplements’ to the official parliamentary steering chain, work by making practices and results comparable across different contexts as a way of enabling more exchange between diverse governing agents and generally incentivising a more competitive outlook between both nation states as well as more local ‘units’.

This is, for example, the case with the EU's Open Method of Coordination (OMC) forum in which member states voluntarily co-opt for purposes of enabling international comparison and benchmarking as well as learning through an exchange of so-called best practices (European Commission)¹. Effectively, this means that the workings of the QAE mandate is indeed encouraged by a range of self-imposed practices that are often accelerated through processes of naming, shaming, and faming (Brøgger, 2016). Thus, suggesting that the political imperative to promote quality in education, more than anything, manifests as a mix of both 'hard' and 'soft' modes of governance. 'Soft' in the sense of creating spaces and/or objectives to which actors are drawn and thus willing to move towards, and 'hard' in the sense of being supported by a backbone of official directives and policies. Which is essentially why Jenny Ozga et al. (2011) maintain that most QAE efforts across Europe today come about as a result of multiple and complex processes, involving many agents and agencies, and as such function as an expression of governance.

In some sense, the term governance is difficult to pin down as it carries multiple meanings. Klijn (2008), however, provides an overview that is useful in terms of better understanding the complexity it terms. In short, he argues that governance does not necessarily 'happen' at one fixed point, but rather emerges from many different points of origin, thus suggesting that its strength, generally speaking, is more contextual and entrepreneurial than constitutional and legislative (Pierre et al., 2000, p. 194). And therefore, it makes sense to think of governance as something that indexes the different agents constituting the emergence of modern states, including specific political objectives, expressive of the many multi-layered/faceted processes functioning to that effect. In addition to this, Klijn also specifies that there is little or no reason to distinguish between the terms 'governance' and 'network governance', because they essentially mean the same thing (Klijn, 2008, p. 510). To that effect, governance may therefore be understood as a *process* that takes place within *networks*, operating both at the local, national and trans-national level as well as through multiple spaces and intermediaries, typically co-ordinating efforts between relatively dependent actors for the purpose of solving a societal problem (Klijn, 2008). To name the QAE mandate an expression of governance, therefore suggests that it functions as a process-based and network-oriented effort and not as some simple act or mandate, circulated as an act of top-down governmental/state power.

All things considered, this means that the current establishment of the QAE mandate manifests on the basis of a longed trajectory that involves

¹ The EU explains the need for the OMC in the following manner (European Commission): "The OMC creates a common forum for understanding problems, helping member states to build consensus on solutions and their practical implementation. Through exchange of good practices, it contributes to improving the design and implementation of policies, without regulatory instruments".

the joint enrolment of many agents and forces working together. On the one hand, it involves an overarching conceptual and instrumental development, promoting quality as reflective of a systematic effort and thus as a 'managed' or 'organisationalised' feature that can be quantitatively measured. Ultimately, progressing quality as a standard against which institutions can be held accountable. And on the other hand, it involves the instalment of legislation and national policies as well as many 'supplementary' voluntary initiatives, jointly enforcing the QAE mandate and providing clear guidelines for how to secure quality in education. As I see it, it is important to stay alert to this many-sided establishment as it is key to the production and deployment of data in practice. Therefore, I seek to take it into consideration by attending closely to the circumstances and objectives guiding their practical employment, focusing keenly on the situational specificity characteristic of the way in which data are utilised for purposes of promoting quality. But seeing that I also seek to research the data in question in relation to their affective qualities, I thus propose a study in which I explore QAE data at the nexus of both their political instruction and their affective enactment. Thus, considering both the contextual and regulatory circumstances out of which they originate as well as the ways in which they are taken up in practice.

Effectively, the study at hand relates to an emerging field of research seeking to draw upon theories of affectivity as means of cultivating new dimensions to the study of governance, meaning the efforts set in motion to promote more or less well specified political objectives. In general, this affective add-on, or inclusion of affect perhaps, is not meant as a corrective to established studies attending to various expressions of governance. Rather, it is meant as a way of looking for new insights into connections between affectivity and the way in which formal and informal agencies may seek to govern practices in alignment with certain objectives (Staunæs & Bjerg, 2011, p. 139). Ultimately, arguing that the realm of the political is intimately connected to that of the affective and thus suggesting to research what may be broadly termed the political in prolongation of attending to affect. And by doing so, the idea propelling this field of research is, broadly speaking, to assist the development of optics and vocabularies that are well-equipped to highlight how the affective may play into the ordering as well as the enactment of political objectives. But to better understand how the study at hand actually relates to this field of research, it is necessary to provide a bit more context to the theoretical basis from which this field springs and the kind of studies it features.

For years now, there has been a vast number of studies across the social sciences and humanities driven by growing dissatisfaction with post-structuralist approaches, insisting on discourse and social structures as the main 'instigators' of subject formation and contemporary culture (Hemmings, 2005). And prompted by this dissatisfaction, a new, or renewed (depending on whom you ask), interest in affect has come about.

Commonly, this surge of interest is referred to as *the turn to affect* (Clough & Halley, 2007). It should be noted, however, that the extent to which the term ‘turn’ is warranted is still up for debate. Ann Cvetkovich (2012, p. 4), for example, is not convinced. She expresses her thoughts on the matter in the following manner: “I am somewhat reluctant to use the term ‘affective turn’ because it implies that there is something new about the study of affect when in fact this work has been going on for some time”. Also, Anu Koivunen (2010) stipulates that *feminist criticism* has a long history of engaging in affect, exploring conceptual links between women, bodies, and emotions, and for that reason she argues there is something not right about the term ‘turn’ as it tends not to recognise the long and disbursed history of relevant work on this issue. Nonetheless, for purposes of establishing a quick overview, it is feasible, I find, to use the turn to affect as an overriding label for a broad range of scholarly positions united by a shared interest in scrutinising the presence of affect as basis for promoting insights about people, relations, spaces, and culture. In other words, as basis for better understanding “the real conditions under which encounters, relations and events emerge” (Sedgwick, 2003 as cited in Anderson 2016).

But despite this shared interest in affect, it must be noted that these varying positions do not subscribe to a unified notion of what affect is. Far from it actually, seeing that the notion of affect is rather contested and does not mean one thing to everyone. In fact, affect is known to describe a wide range of varied phenomena, such as “depression, moments of intense and focused involvement such as euphoria, immediate visceral responses of shame or hate, shared atmospheres of hope or panic, eruptions of passion, lifelong dedications of love, fleeting feelings of boredom, societal moods such as anxiety or fear, neurological bodily transitions such as a feeling of aliveness, waves of feeling... amongst much else” (Anderson, 2016, p. 5). In some sense, this diversity traces back to the different disciplines picking up on affect. Within certain domains of psychology, for example, the term affect is typically used to describe emotional states and the distinctive distress they cause in the body and mind. And in philosophy, affect is often thought of as something prior to and/or outside consciousness, coming into existence as experiences of intensity and/or moments of unformed and unstructured potential. Thus, characterising affect as the human body’s response to the many stimuli that continuously impinge upon and enfold it, registering as non-conscious and unformed intensity (Massumi, 2002).

Consequently, this means that the term ‘affect’ is coined by rather diversified ‘sources’, and as such is also taken up as means of exploring rather contrasting interests. For some scholarly positions, turning to affect is a way of expanding the scope of social investigation, bringing the sensorial, the energetic, and the dramatic back into social analysis. For others, the interest in affect involves more than adding emotions to the inventory of social research topics. For them the turn to affect becomes a decisive shift away from the current conventions of critical theory, away from research based

on discourse and disembodied talk and texts, and towards more vitalist, *post human* and process-based perspectives (Wetherell, 2012). In response to these diverse interests, considerable effort has been and still is being put into constructing affect as an object of study with clear boundaries between what is recognized as in-determinate, trans-personal, and pre-conscious bodily forces and what is recognized as determinate, subjective, conscious, and verbally fixed emotions. The positions in favour of these boundaries usually find them relevant as they equate affect to an excessive force adhering to a fundamentally different logic than that of emotions, and as such, too abstract to be fully realised in language (Massumi, 2002). Consequently, research attending to affect is often marked by a rudimentary distinction between the capacity to become versus the stability of being, stereotypically thought of as either attending to movement, intensity, and change, on the one hand, or to closure, domestication, and containment on the other (For further overview see for example Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).

Lamenting this inscription of affect as either signified or as anything but signified is Sara Ahmed (2014, p. 206), for example. She finds these boundaries problematic as they imply if not false then at least unproductive dichotomies between mind and matter, body and cognition, biology and culture, and the physical and the psychological. Moreover, she reckons, these dichotomies also imply a privileging of affect over emotion as the preferred object of research. Therefore, Ahmed proclaims, she is not interested in pursuing distinctions between affect and emotion. Instead she seeks to re-theorise emotions in ways that include an analysis of those processes that others have used the term 'affect' to describe, one of her central claims being that emotions do in fact "involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected' [] because they 'are a matter of how we come into contact with objects and others" (Ahmed, 2014a, p. 208). Ahmed, however, recognises that there generally is a need to make distinctions as a way of sorting things out, even though they often give the impression that 'things' actually are separate. To explain, she stipulates the following: "The activity of separating affect from emotion could be understood as rather like breaking an egg in order to separate the yolk from the white. We can separate different parts of a thing even if they are contiguous, even if they are, as it were, in a sticky relation. We might have different methods for performing the action of separation. But we have to separate the yolk from the white **because** they are not separate" (Ahmed, 2014a, p. 210, bold in original).

Considering the apparent differences sketched out above, it is not possible to pin down the theoretical grounding distinctive of research attending to affect once and for all. And to that effect, it is correspondingly impossible, once and for all, to sketch out the disbursed rooting, informing the emerging field of research in question and therefore it comes across as somewhat eclectic. As a way of 'sorting out' this eclectic composition, Slaby & Bens (2019) suggest to distinguish between its two main areas of

interest. One that attends to *affect and the political*, seeking to highlight the relation between the sphere of the political and that of the affective, and another that attends to *affects in politics*, seeking to probe the role played by affect and emotion in relation to routines and practices broadly recognised as political. To some, making this distinction, at least from an analytical perspective, is deemed fruitful. To others it stands out as more dubious seeing that it in some sense inserts unwarranted separateness between two areas that continuously feed off each other. With or without this distinction, however, the eclectic ‘constitution’ of this field of research remains, and therefore it makes sense, I claim, to think of it as an ecology, loosely coupled by an overarching interest in exploring how the so-called personal is intimately related to what is commonly perceived as political and vice versa. In other words, as an ecology of research generally supportive of the idea of investigating varying forms of political life through the lens of affect as a way of promoting a more fine-grained appreciation of affects and their place in most corners of what may broadly be thought of as politically informed ways of living.

With this overview of the theoretical backdrop influencing this ecology of research in place, I now seek to specify it a bit further by turning to some of the studies and research interests constituting it. In the following, I therefore pass in review a small selection of concrete examples demonstrating these studies and their interests:

- In her work encompassed in *Impossible Governance*, Shona Hunter (2015) makes the point that state-making is always relational as it takes form on the basis of subjects negotiating how collective forms of living can and should emerge. Following from this point, Hunter argues that intersubjective emotional dynamics, in effect, may be understood as political, given that such dynamics ultimately are what allows for politics, in the most general sense, to come into expression.
- In *Governing Affects*, Otto Penz and Birgit Sauer (2019) scrutinise the affective technologies that constitute state power; focusing specifically on what they term the neo-liberal rule of the public sector. In concrete, they look at civil servants and public employees, highlighting how their conduct is regulated by the establishment of norms, achieved through means that are best described as affective. To that effect, they find “the intertwining of entrepreneurialism and affectivity [to be] a dominant mode of neo-liberal governance” (ibid. p. 4).
- In principle, Deirdre Duffy (2017b) argues for the thesis that affective modes of governance work through “pre-reflexive and preconscious [] embodied encounters that influence the capacity of the mind and body to act” (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017, as

cited in Duffy 2017). Anchored by this stance, she demonstrates how subjects, primarily young adults, are compelled to connect to specific emotional states of being recognised as ‘happy-making’, through various processes of self-regulation. In some sense, such states of being are constituted individually, based on the unique psychological profile of the subjects in question. Yet, when viewed from a broader perspective, Duffy suggests, these emotional states of being also come about on account of the present political ethos and its constant praise of happiness.

As part of a larger body of work in *Affective Societies*, Jan Slaby and Jonas Bens (2019, p. 345) maintain that the creation of political subjects is closely linked to processes of affective attachment. In specific, they argue that individuals and/or collectives are stimulated to attach to certain political causes and/or to peers by embodying specific values and norms. Thus, prompting Slaby and Bens to conclude that the affective dynamics enabling such forms of attachments are absolutely necessary in terms of mobilising ‘members’ and enforcing compliance for political purposes, which is ultimately vital to the ‘making’ of political subjects.

- Attending specifically to circumstances within education, Katja Brøgger (2015; 2018) highlights how practices of voluntary co-opting, to a large extent, work by persuading agents to *want* to do what they *have* to do. As such, she highlights how agents are impelled to absorb practices of measuring, monitoring, and comparing educational output, partly on account of the affective circulation of, for example, the kind of shame associated with not being able to demonstrate progress in alignment with politically mandated goals that typically are nationally as well as transnationally applauded.
- Also attending to practices relevant to education, Sam Sellar (2015) examines the rise of governance through numbers/ data, making the argument that the efficacy of the numbers/ data in question involve a process in which both conscious interpretation and affective sense-making play a role. And to the extent that processes of affective sense-making enable educators to ‘add’ meaning to the abstract nature of numbers, this relation between data and affect does in fact function as an important mechanism, allowing for the mobilisation and support of the policies circulating as the backbone of the aforementioned rise.
- In a somewhat similar vein, Staunæs & Pors (2011; 2015) find that by applying an affective framework to current understandings of policy formation, it becomes possible to see how test-data and international comparison-data do not only communicate quantitative measures, giving cause to what

may in some sense be termed rational deliberation. These data also register affectively upon their reception, and as such provoke rather dramatic political reactions. Prompted by these reactions, typically crying out the need to secure better results, the affective reception of data often becomes the starting point for more than isolated headlines as it may effectively influence the instalment of future regulations and policies.

- And lastly, while attending specifically to schools, Staunæs, Juelskjær, Bjerg, and Olesen (2021) stress the fact that data measuring results have become an unavoidable presence and as such *do* more than they show, meaning that they have become so essential in representing schools that they effectively shape commonly held ideas of what essentially constitutes them. Mindful of this dynamic, Staunæs, Juelskjær, Bjerg, and Olesen argue the case that in ‘handling’ data, school leaders not only exercise what it usually known as data literacy, they also rely on more sense-informed or affect sensitive ways of qualifying their decision making. Thus, emphasising that the affective, in a matter speaking, function as a vital aspect of the combined efforts put into place to make schools (more) viable.

Even though the selection of concrete examples surveyed above is rather small, it nevertheless offers an overview of how scholarly interest in both affect and what is generally thought to subside within the political can take form. And in that respect, it gives some ‘body’ to the ecology of research I seek to specify as a way of positioning the study at hand. I propose this ‘position’ because in many ways the study at hand is designed to employ a more affect-informed approach as basis for examining the political instruction to promote quality in education. Essentially, seeking to allow for insights pertaining to the role of affect in relation to the concrete enactment of one specific QAE programme by attending to how educators, school leaders in particular, affectively engage or appropriate the kind of data mandated by this programme and in the process of doing so attach to it and the potential benefits it wows. Thus, coupling an interest in the political instruction to promote quality with an interest in affect and the way in which the affective seems to implicitly sustain this instruction. And in view of this ‘application’, the study at hand, I reckon, does in fact relate to the ecology of research just outlined as it initially utilises it as a source of inspiration or provocation to examine political objectives by attending to their co-evolvement with affect. And moreover, it relates in the sense that it ultimately hopes to contribute to this ecology on basis of the insights it seeks to stimulate.

Reasoning the Overarching Mode of ‘Knowing’

Informed by the fact that the study at hand in a way enlists an underpinning

interest in affect as means of grappling with QAE data and their concrete enactment, I am faced with the task of highlighting the methodological reflections informing my approach towards this 'object' of scrutiny. I am, in other words, faced with the task of outlining the type of overarching methodology I seek to learn from as ground for researching the imbrication of affect in relation to the instruction to secure and promote quality in education. Therefore, as a way of doing so, I start by first going over some of the interrelated ways of thinking and theorising that are characteristic of most types of research attending to affect. In the wake of this overview, I then direct my attention towards the actual method employed in the study at hand by outlining the way in which it is scaffolded. First, by outlining the methodological injunctions informing my own way of asking questions about affect. Secondly, by explicating the mode of production related to the kind of empirical material that I find conducive for probing the type of questions I ask. And lastly, by highlighting how I propose to make sense of such inquiry and thus produce insight pertaining to the intermingling of affect, data, and leadership. Thus, accounting for what counts as 'object', subject, and knowledge-production in relation to the study at hand and its ambition to research data in relation to their affective qualities.

Following the publication *The Affective Turn* (Clough & Halley, 2007), contributions stemming from research exploring various forms of affect have become more numerous. And side by side with this increase, different strategies for empirically exploring affect have been more widely discussed (Knudsen & Stage, 2015; Ringrose & Coleman, 2013; Vachhani, 2013). Prompted by these discussions, some key features have begun to emerge across positions within cultural studies, human geography, philosophy, and certain areas of psychology; just to mention some of the more prominent ones. Features that collectively reflect some foundational modes of thinking and theorising in relation to research on affect. Obviously, these foundational ways of thinking and theorising are tightly interwoven, yet for communicative purposes, it makes sense, I argue, to present the following overview as a way of detailing them. I start by highlighting the underpinning assumptions commonly related to constructing a research 'object' that involves varying expressions of affect. Secondly, I outline the idea that when attending to affect the researcher never works from an 'external' position. And thirdly, I convey the most prevalent modes of knowledge production that are considered relevant when doing research seeking to explore the realm of affect.

1) *The blurred state of the research 'object'*

Based in the transdisciplinary field of affect studies, Lisa Blackman (2012) argues that most research attending to affect entails exploring entities such as matter, energy, processes and practices that are difficult to see, understand, and investigate. Blackman (2007, 2015) elaborates on this stance by naming affect as something disclosed in atmospheres, gut feelings, and embodied reactions as well as felt intensities and sensations. Consequently,

she concludes, it makes no sense to capture affect as either an 'it' or a 'thing'. Instead, she specifies that affect, at least for her, refers to an entangled process (Ibid p. 40), thus implying that there is an affective composition surrounding and marking most phenomena in the world. In a similar vein, Ben Anderson (2016), speaking from a position within human geography, also states that affect is not *one* thing, but rather an overriding term describing a range of heterogeneous phenomena and their varied forms of expressions. As a way of recognising this multiplicity, Anderson suggests specifying the many 'shapes' related to affect. To that end, Anderson employs a pragmatic-contextual distinction, designed to attend to the multiple configurations, compounded into what is commonly and indiscriminately known simply as affect. Ideally this pragmatic-contextual distinction, allows for greater awareness of the different mediations through which the complexity and multiplicity of affective life is expressed. 'Mediation' here names the processes that involve constant (dis)-connections between affect and the complex mixtures that make up ways of life (Anderson, 2016, p. 13).

Without going into further detail, the reflections provided here by both Blackman and Anderson, each in their own way, point to two circumstances. One is that research on affect typically reflects the fact that affect is not a 'thing' in and by itself, but instead features as entangled in the knotted and complex process associated with life in general. Another is that research on affect is often sensitive to the fact that affect is diversely mediated and thus comes into existence as extended and innumerable. Conjoined these two points suggest that the research on affect in some sense is 'obliged' to account for the enigmatic configuration under investigation. Or, to put it differently, it must account for the always-already entangled state in which affect operates as an intrinsic part of the processual, bodily, relational, material, situational, and continuous happening of life. Given this obligation, traditional boundaries between 'object', subject, and the empirical often stand out as somewhat blurred. And for that reason, it is not always easy to specify what counts as 'object' when seeking to 'know' about affect. In turn, this ultimately suggests that any and all efforts directed at exploring affect empirically are faced with the challenge of balancing between the analytical need for defining what is being researched and the ambition to reflect the fluidity, the in-betweenness, the flow, and the excess characteristic of the 'object' in question.

2) *Researching from a position of sensing and being in touch*

In many ways, research attending to affect is influenced by the same trajectories mushrooming in and across the human, the natural, and the social sciences, emphasising a more complex, relational, processual, indeterminate, contingent, and non-linear understanding of the world and the way in which it manifests. And in the wake of this more dynamic understanding of what constitutes the becoming of the world, it is generally argued that research is not a process through which facts about the world, preexisting like frozen statues in time, may be uncovered, since both the researcher

and the research process is always part of the world's differential becoming (Shotter, 2016). In short, this means that the researched and the researchers conducting the research constantly shape one another. Therefore, most scholars who are curious about affect usually consider the sensibilities of the *researcher-body* as an important resource for grasping the affective qualities of the empirical material being explored. In fact, it is generally argued that “research questions about affect become increasingly answerable if they are linked to specific bodies, for example the researcher’s own body” (Knudsen & Stage, 2015, p. 5). As such, the researcher’s body is often referred to as a kind of medium for approximating the presence of affect.

This is not to say that this ‘medium’ always is employed in the same way and as such allow for the same understanding of affect. Rather, it is to underscore that when attending to affect the researcher’s body and the insights produced are closely related. So, when attending to affect, it is important to consider this closeness between the researcher and the research process (the ‘method’ applied). To understand this way of thinking about the researcher and the researched, Knudsen & Stage (2015 p. 5, 6), referring to Haraway, term research on affect as something that is practically ‘performed’. In the sense that it does not present itself as an investigation of the ‘outside’ world, but rather as a form of conversation in which researchers participate. And to that effect, they are typically thought of as deeply entangled with the very ‘object’ being researched. Ultimately, this means that research seeking to promote insight into the affective fullness of life features as a style of research where the researcher is not considered a separate ‘entity’, working as a detached or external ‘observer’ while approaching the world and, in turn, ‘un-packing’ it. On the contrary, the researcher is in fact celebrated for being able to sense *what is around* and thus be in touch with the research(ed) ‘object’ – an ability that, more than anything, is considered a resource and not something to be worked around or downplayed.

3) *Modes of making sense and making things ‘known’*

Seen from a distance, research attending to affect sets itself apart from more realist-oriented forms of research due to the entangled state of the ‘object’ it pursues and the involvement of the researcher(s) it promotes. In effect, this type of research, in a way, works from a repertoire of rather eclectic methodologies, in the sense that it tends to stand out as composed by varying modes of seeking out knowledge. And to that effect, affective research methodologies do not, in principle, promote any one, fixed line of inquiry by means of which affect may be known or made sense of. Rather they promote to work in ways that are finely tuned and sensitive with regard to the slippery constitution of the phenomenon being researched, meaning that they continuously seek to develop new ways of enabling “*the happening of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness – to be investigated*” (Lury & Wakeford, 2012, italics in original). Or as Blackman (2007, 2015, p. 27) phrases it with reference to

her own research, it is a matter of always contemplating how to give ‘form’ to processes that are dispersed and distributed across space and time, while continuously relying on many different types of eyes, ears, and bodies.

In view of this characteristic, research attending to affect is typically associated with a certain methodological latitude, meaning that there is no overall guiding principle dictating how affect may be ‘known’. Having said that, however, amidst this latitude there still is some consensus around the idea that the body functions as a highly valuable source of knowing, intrinsically entrusted with a capacity for picking up on embodied ways of knowing and/or experiencing. And therefore, research on affect often promotes ways of attending and noticing that cultivate a bodily capacity for attuning to affectively saturated sites, relations, and processes as a way of making sense of affect and thus making affect ‘known’. To that effect, this type of research often employs methodological approaches based on which it may be possible to bear ‘witness’ to the more fluid than fixed, the always multiple and never autonomous, and the representational as well as the non-representational where the body, based on its capacity to affect and be affected, functions as either ‘object’ or tool or indeed both.

In sum, the overview presented here demonstrates some of the interrelated ways of thinking and theorising characteristic of research on affect. And jointly, they convey a collection of stances that describe some of the core assumptions concerning the nature of the research ‘object’ at stake, the position from which this kind of research is conducted, and the ways in which knowledge production is considered to take place. By most standards, these stances are not very specific, but this follows from the fact that there is no one right path or method for researching affect and one must therefore ‘make do’, to put it somewhat polemically, with the general overview made possible by presenting the paths and methods mentioned here. To that effect, academic interest in ‘knowing’ affect may broadly, in the words of Berlant (2017), be defined as “a training in paying attention; at its best a way of describing the overdetermining forces that make a scene (like the historical present) complicated, overwhelming, and in movement”. To a large extent, the study at hand ‘sanctions’ the stances outlined above, and as such, they serve as a productive canvas for me to go into more detail about the actual ‘object’ I pursue, how I propose approach it, and why I find this particular way of approaching viable in relation to the research questions central to the study at hand.

As a way of working out with these details, I consult the work of Knudsen and Stage (2015, p. 1) as basis for outlining the methodological reflections I use to construct the concrete research design guiding the study at hand. In essence, Knudsen and Stage suggest that empirically grounded research on affect must develop innovative strategies for (1) asking research questions and formulating research agendas relating to affective processes, (2) collecting and producing embodied data, and (3) making sense of this data

in order to produce academic knowledge. These strategies are not intended to function as a fixed or script-like method but are instead meant to provide some principal steps that may be creatively reinterpreted as grounds for engaging with the immaterial and affective processes of social life (Ibid. p. 1). To me, this three-fold strategy and the principal steps it promotes, stand out as an accessible strategy, enabling me to both develop my own line of inquiry and retrospectively sort out my approach to researching data in relation to affective qualities. In the following, I therefore go over the steps suggested by Knudsen and Stage while at the same time reflecting on how I seek to employ them as means of scaffolding the study at hand.

Step 1: asking research questions. As was touched on earlier, the affective turn is marked by varying, and to some extent contested, notions of affect. Primarily two factions attribute to this variance. One faction, compromised, for example, by scholars like Brian Massumi, Nigel Thrift, and Patricia Clough that tend to focus on affect as an outside stimulation, somehow hitting the body first and then subsequently reaching the cognitive apparatus (Knudsen & Stage, 2015, p. 4). This faction is often ‘accused’ of ‘bodying’ affect, considering it a form of excess, only coming into being through non-representational formations. The other faction, compromised, for example, by scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Ruth Leys, Margaret Wetherell, and Lisa Blackman usually take issue with this notion of affect as it entails, they argue, unproductive dichotomies between mind and matter, body and cognition (discourse), the physical and the psychological, and between biology and culture (Ibid.). In view of this heterogeneity, it is therefore important to be aware of the fact that the method used for researching affect varies depending on how the ‘object’ is conceived. To explain this reciprocity, Knudsen & Stage (Ibid.) state the following:

“[For some] affect is beyond language categorisation, and therefore, any analytical strategy must focus on semantics and semiotics as distorted traces of affect, not a medium for it. [For others], language would be considered capable of expressing affects, as there would be no inherent contradiction between the categories of language and the categories taking part in the social shaping of bodies []”.

And for that reason, they claim, asking questions about affect always involves specifying the notion of affect at play.

Extrapolating from this claim, it may generally be said that the study at hand understands affect as entangled and intertwined with numerous ‘media’, finding an initial premise in Eve Sedgwick’s (2003) thesis that it is difficult to think of an arena of life not suffused with affect. A stance that Sedgwick elaborates on this by comparing affects to free radicals capable of attaching themselves to almost anything: “Affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects” (ibid. p.

19). Informed, in part, by this premise, I tend to think of affect as a form of presence, allowing for the incommensurate elements of life to hinge together in ways that are not always easy to discern, operating as a form of intensity allowing for both the mundane and spectacular movements of life to be felt. Some may view this indexing as too broad, finding it difficult to track something so elusive for the purposes of research. Or, put differently, deeming it too difficult to ‘unpack’ such an unspecified presence in a way where it makes sense to research it and ultimately critically reflect on its potential impact. Others may view it the other way around, arguing that such breadth is indeed what makes it possible to grasp affect in its varied multiplicity, its entangled mode of expression. As I see it, there is something to be said about both viewpoints. And as such, it may be argued that I take my cue from Ben Anderson (2016, p. 17) and the kind of middle-ground position he subscribes to. I say this because by applying this position to the study at hand, this notion that there is no general model for how affective life is mediated, organised and thereafter takes place, it makes sense to attend to different mediations of affect, pending on the situational ‘set-up’ based on which I seek to explore data and their affective intake.

I have already briefly mentioned how and why Anderson reasons that affect is not *one* thing. But given my use of what I term his middle ground position, it is necessary to explain this position a bit more. In short, Anderson argues:

“If we begin from multiple partially connected translations of the term affect, then we find that we cannot base a theory of affect on one principle or form of mediation. On the contrary, we should trace multiple processes whereby affective life is mediated and understand how those processes, various as they may be, come into relation” (ibid.).

Therefore, he organises his thinking around three mediations or translations of affect, suggesting that they must be probed separately, on the basis of the following questions:

- How does affective life function as an object-target for specific and multiple forms of power?
- How do bodily capacities form in the midst of encounters, contouring what we know as living?
- How do affects take place so that they become part of the conditions for life?

In this way, Anderson argues, it becomes possible to better appreciate the fact that there are multiple ways of ordering affect and multiple processes of mediation through which affects are imbricated with other processes. And ultimately this appreciation correlates with the premise that affect

does not subsist in one domain of life, neatly separated from others, but rather features as radically open and connected to its surroundings. Consequently, Anderson advocates a methodological approach that recognises the multiple processes through which affective life is mediated, reflective of the specific translation or mediation of affect at stake. So, with this advocacy in mind, I have sought to tweak my line of inquiry to 'fit' the distinct mediation of affect at play, pending on the contextual premises surrounding and informing the kind of data-work I attend to.

Moreover, Knudsen and Stage stipulate that when asking questions about affect, it is also relevant to allow for strong situational specificity as a way of empirically grounding the exploration of affect. They emphasise this stipulation while referring not only to the affective closeness or proximity it may promote, but also to the kind of knowledge production it may enable. This is not to suggest that situational specificity grants a 'purer account' of affect. Instead, the point is that in post-positivist approaches researchers do not *either* discover the world or create it, but carefully zigzag back and forth between doing both, investigating and performing the world as an integrated part of the research process. So, as a way of promoting such situational specificity pertaining to the study at hand, I propose to scrutinise the affective forces and intensities marking the politically mandated instruction to promote quality by focusing on one concrete case study in which I, on the basis of empirical fieldwork, scrutinise one standard QAE programme, namely *The Quality Report 2.0*. And given the key role played by data in relation to this programme, I focus specifically on data as onset for exploring the imbrication of affect. Therefore, I seek to explore data in relation to their affective qualities by constructing a study where I follow the data ordered by this QAE programme alongside three different empirical sites relevant to their production and deployment.

To some extent, the motivation for converting this preference for situational specificity into an actual ambition directed at following data through different empirical sites can be traced back to Bruno Latour (1987) and his general methodological injunction to follow the 'actor'. Briefly, this injunction instructs researchers to map and trace the messy circulations and connections (the networks of connected actors or actants) that constitute a phenomenon or a reality (Latour, 2005). But because the study at hand is not as such interested in networks but in affect, I inflect this injunction by adding affect to it, meaning that I propose to map and trace the diverse ways in which affect may be imbricated in the instances where data are taken up in practice by leaders bound to QAE mandate. As such, I attend to data in relation to their affective qualities in close proximity to the varying purposes and contexts marking their enactment. Thus, seeking to explore data alongside three specific entry points relevant to the implementation of the QAE mandate and the kind of data-work it orders. First, by exploring the official discourse on data while trying to understand how it impacts the task of producing annual quality reports and as such the task of com-

municating about quality ‘in the making’. Secondly, by attending to the atmosphere enveloping the mandatory follow-up meetings as means of grappling with the more sensorial feel of working with data for purposes of quality production. And finally, by examining how data registers affectively amongst the leaders whose practices they are thought to measure and thus reflect, focusing on the performative awareness this potentially enlists.

Step two: producing embodied data. According to Knudsen and Stage (2015), it is characteristic of most efforts directed at generating academic insight about affect that they all seem to rely on, or work on the basis of, some form of embodied empirical material. In general, this type of material can be divided into two subcategories or a mix of the two (Ibid. p. 8), where one category consists of first-hand material generated by the affected body, and the other consists of second-hand material generated through an ‘outside’ observation of bodily affectivity. Both of which usually involve the researchers’ bodily sensibilities for becoming attuned to affected bodies responding to the discursive and material setting as well as to the social and affective relations they move in and out of, be it their own and/or that of others. Informed by this general description of efforts directed at producing embodied data, I turn to Sara Pink (2015) and her work encompassed in *Sensory Ethnography*, as it provides a constructive hands-on approach for how to actually to go about this step in the research process. In this body of work, Pink initially suggests that there is no standard way of thinking about and doing sensory ethnography. To that effect, she states: “[]it is open to multiple ways of knowing and to the exploration of and reflection on new routes to knowledge” (Pink, 2015, p. 7). As such, it is best defined through its practice and not through how-to prescriptions.

Beyond this general ‘estimate’, however, Pink stresses that sensory ethnography generally stands out as a research practice that invites the researcher to re-think of both established and new participatory and collaborative ethnographic research techniques as linked to sensory perception. Moreover, she stresses, it is a form of research that calls on the researcher to self-consciously and reflectively attend to the senses throughout the research process, including during processes of planning and reviewing, as well as while doing fieldwork, analysing empirical data, and communicating about ‘results’ (Pink, 2015, p. 7). And lastly, she stresses, sensory ethnography considers the notion of perception a multi sensorial process informed by many ways of registering. In arguing this position, Pink generally refers to a body of work seeking to ‘capitalise’ on more sense informed ways of registering and, in particular, she references the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, based in sensory geography, and his take on the importance of sense. In short, Tuan stresses the following: “An object or place first achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is through all senses as well as the active and reflective mind” (Tuan, 1977, p. 18 as cited in Pink, 2015). So, by drawing on this type of work as well as on ideas stemming from

social anthropology, Pink ultimately determines that appreciation of ‘things’ always is accomplished through a multi sensorial process, often with one or more sense(s) moving in and out of dominance.

In view of this body of work, Pink clearly is not the only scholar underscoring the role of sense. In fact, she relates to a larger interdisciplinary ethnographic movement promoting a more full-bodied understanding of culture and experience. And for that reason, her work may be seen as testimony to the fact that “the senses have come to fore in the work of many contemporary academics” (Pink, 2015, p. 24). With this circumstance in place, Pink then moves on to carve out what she terms the guiding principles for doing sensory ethnography. The first principle argues that embodied and emplaced sense are vital to leaning/knowing about other people’s worlds; that is, getting a sense of how they perceive, experience, and imagine the world to be. In terms of ‘doing’ ethnography, this than means that the *whole* experiencing body may be considered a vital resource for all forms of knowing and learning. But more specifically, in relation to sensory ethnography, Pink underscores that the *whole* experiencing body not only connotes the integration of the (biological) body and the (intellectual) mind, such as the whole notion of embodiment favours, but also that of emplacement, meaning the emplaced body of both the researcher and the researched. Thus, stipulating that embodied sense as well as emplaced sense are important when ‘accounting’ for the relationship between bodies, minds, *and* the materiality and sensoriality of the environment in which they ‘operate’.

The second principle holds that the multi-sensorial is central to what is commonly known as perception. This principle is partly informed by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the many others who have reiterated the implications of his seminal work. To briefly recapitulate, Merleau-Ponty places sensation at the centre of human perception. In brief, he states: “My body is not a collection of adjacent organs but a synergic system, all of the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 234). In extrapolating from this observation, sensory ethnography tends to view distinctions between, for example, observing, listening, and touching, or being touched to be exact, as primarily analytical, in the sense that they for all practical purposes function as facets of the same activity, namely that of being in the world and sensing it. To some, this thesis in turn is used to argue that with sensory perception researchers are effectively granted a purer access to the world. Pink, however, cautions that any form of sensory perception is always shaped by culture and the social value system it connects to, seeing that “[]our sensory perception is inextricable from the cultural categories that we use to give meaning to sensory experience []” (Pink, 2015, p. 32). To that effect, it is important to note that sensory ethnography does not enable more immediate or unbiased ways of generating knowledge.

Finally, the last principle indicates that knowing and learning by ‘doing’ sensory ethnography is essentially achieved by making sense of embodied and emplaced experience. With reference to this principle, Pink initially turns to different scholarly traditions for speaking of knowledge-production as a product of transmission and/or learning. Among these traditions, she notes, there is a mutual recognition of knowledge-production as a dynamic process arising from the always present relation between minds, bodies, and situated environments. Informed by this unifying, overriding discernment, Pink argues that sensory ways of learning and knowing are produced through participation in the world, “[]through a person’s engagement with the social, sensory, and material environment of which the researcher is a part” (Ibid. p. 47). And based on this stance, the kind of knowing and learning afforded by sensory ethnography features as inherently processual as well as emplaced and bounded by the researcher’s engagement, sensory involvement, and movement in relation to that of ‘the researched’. What is commonly known as knowledge-production is therefore essentially expressed as a product of active (sensory) involvement and engagement. (A stance that in many ways resonates with notions of knowing and learning that derive from a line of research widely known as auto-ethnography).

As a way of relating this third and final principle more directly to affect, Sara Ahmed and her engagement with phenomenology comes to mind. To a large extent, this engagement, she explains, stems from her indebtedness to a range of feminist scholars working creatively and critically with phenomenology, prompting her to think of social differences as “effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 544). From a phenomenological perspective, affect may be understood as an encompassing phenomenon that connects body, self, and world (Fuchs, 2013). Thus, suggesting that by studying affect we may learn how bodies are marked by what is around, meaning marked by both history in general as well as the specific situational present. So, while drawing from phenomenology as resource for understanding the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and their orientations, Ahmed stresses the need for attending to the lived experience of inhabiting a body, or that which Edmund Husserl, she notes, refers to as *the living body* (Ahmed, 2006, p. 544). Informed by this way of engaging with phenomenology as backdrop for examining the emotional and affective ‘pressures’ of life, Ahmed, as I understand her, seeks to take the embodied experience into account as basis for doing do justice to the complexity of how different ‘things’ cohere (Ahmed, 2008). And as such, Ahmed and her engagement with phenomenology, I find, serves as an incentive for focusing on the affective side of ‘things’, when working with sensory ethnography, meaning when exploring the dynamic relation between minds, bodies, and situated environments, as basis for producing knowledge.

In sum, this means that in following Knudsen and Stage’s ‘advice’ to produce or generate embodied empirical material as basis for allowing for

insights about affect, I turn specifically to the method or approach perhaps stemming from sensory ethnography, along with the specific translation I add to it while extending from Ahmed and her way of employing a phenomenological backdrop to the exploration of affect in relation to complex compositions. I do so because, as I see it, this method/approach seems well suited to appreciate, or capture, if you will, the affective and sensory constitution of being, to put it in broad terms. Thus, offering a valuable provocation for developing my own approach to explore the embodied experience of working with data for purposes of quality production. In the sense that this mode of research provides a line of inquiry that welcomes the researcher's capacity for initially sensing the empirical material he/she works from and subsequently for generating knowledge alert to the sensorial ways of experiencing and being in the world, so to speak. And by adapting such a line of inquiry to the study at hand, I find, it becomes possible to approximate those dimensions of data-work that are not explicitly (out) spoken or directly observable, but rather are affective and sensorial.

Step three: making sense of the empirical. As a last step, Knudsen and Stage suggest that while conducting empirically grounded research on affect it is necessary to develop a strategy for how to make sense of the empirical material and produce insight pertaining to affect. The overarching purpose for doing so, they argue, is to outline the concrete steps taken as a basis for promoting understanding of affect. But mindful of the variant ways affect can be expressed, Knudsen and Stage do not advocate one way of making sense. Instead, they point to how different analytical strategies may be employed to trace different forms of affective presence, stressing that the employed analytical 'tactic' must reflect the specific translation of affect being scrutinised. And in addition to this, they also mention that any analysis must evolve in relation to the actual research interest as well as the character of the empirical material. So, in an attempt to develop my own analytical approach, I propose to track the kind of data mandated by *The Quality Report 2.0* programme alongside three different empirical sites, or entry points as I term them, relevant to their production and deployment as a way of attending more closely to the different forms of affective appropriation at stake. To that effect, I have chosen to conduct my fieldwork in two Danish municipalities, following a total of ten schools. And as part of this fieldwork, I essentially seek to explore how each of the schools and their leaders 'adhere' to the instructions ordered by *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, following the concrete employment of data as it varies pending on the circumstances and objectives surrounding it.

In more specific terms, this means that I attend to situations based on which it may be possible to examine what happens when data 1) are used to communicate about the efforts and practices directed at promoting quality, 2) are placed at the centre of follow-up meetings enforced to assist the full 'instalment' of QAE in practice and 3) are taken up by 'end users', here in the form of the school leaders, registering (affectively) as measures of

their own performances. All situations that are key to the employment of QAE data and thus feature as relevant entry points for exploring the kinds of forces and intensities that seem intimately linked to the way in which data-work emerges in practice. Alert to this situational specificity, I have therefore developed an analytical strategy that is geared to attend to this variation. In the sense that it is tweaked to fit the premises surrounding the different modes of data-work that follow the instalment of the QAE mandate. In brief, this entails that I first state the underpinning interest prompting the three separate yet related research question I seek to examine in the study at hand. Secondly, that I define the mediation of affect I work from as means of exploring these varying interests. Thirdly, that I detail the production of the empirical material related to each of the three selected entry points, and finally, that I reason my approach towards making sense and producing knowledge as part of my overriding ambition of ‘knowing’ about QAE data and their affective intake. So, in order to demonstrate how I actually tweak my analytical strategy to fit each of the three entry points, I shall provide a more detailed account this in the following.

In *Entry One*, I am guided by an interest in exploring the ways in which QAE data seem to come into being as entities full of expressivity, encouraging their enactment as more than ‘dead’ numbers. In pursuit of this interest, I ask the following research question:

How does data impact the task of communicating about quality?

In view of this interest, I work from a mediation of affect that essentially understands the realm of affect as closely intertwined with that of the discursive. Informed by this understanding, I then compose a collection of empirical resources that encompasses policy documents, official statements, and guideline material as well as concrete quality reports concocted by the ten schools included in my fieldwork. And lastly, I seek to make sense of the resources at stake by carefully attuning myself to how data are first discursively envisioned and secondly utilised in concrete quality reports. In specific, this means that I initially seek to explore data by attending to their expressive components, meaning the kind of hope and potential that is affectively vested in them and their deployment as part of their political instruction. Moreover, it means that I seek to explore how this affective ‘investment’ translates into the way in which school leaders communicate about and thus make sense of their efforts to promote quality at their respective schools. And informed by these two modes of exploration, I ultimately seek to ‘know’ about the potential relationship between what is affectively vested in QAE data and their practical enactment as grounds for better understanding how data and their expressiveness may influence the way in which leaders communicate about and thus in a way work with quality in practice.

In *Entry Two*, I am guided by an interest in exploring how data may

attribute to the atmosphere surrounding the follow-up initiatives in which data and thus results are discussed. In pursuit of this interest, I ask the following research question:

How does data mark the atmosphere enveloping follow-up practices?

Informed by this interest, I work from a mediation of affect that basically views people, things, sites, and encounters as enveloped by affective atmospheres, suggesting that 'the affective' is both diffused in the air and relationally contingent, and as such is capable of impacting the feel of particular spaces and/or the experience of certain encounters. With this mediation in mind, I then 'collect' my empirical material by participating in the follow-up meetings that are ordered by the QAE mandate as grounds for school leaders and municipal representatives to collectively support a practice in which data are utilised systematically to promote quality. In concrete, this means that I sit in on the follow-up meetings held at each of the ten schools included in the fieldwork. And finally, to make sense of the voice-recordings and field notes accumulated during these meetings, I seek to attune myself to both that which is diffusely dispersed 'out-there' as well as palpably sensed by me. Following from this sensory involvement with the 'object', I thus seek to 'know' about the atmospheric envelopment marking the meetings as basis for essentially 'un-packing' how this envelopment may condition the experience of working with QAE data and thus potentially prompt the participating school leaders to mirror what is atmospherically conveyed while 'negotiating' data as part of their daily practices.

In *Entry Three*, I am guided by an interest in exploring how data showcasing results register amongst school leaders whose performances or capabilities they are implicitly thought to measure. In pursuit of this interest, I ask the following research question:

How does data 'bring out' the performative in leadership?

Prompted by this interest, I work from a mediation of affect that views most 'things' as imbricated with affect and vice versa, essentially arguing the case that affect is *not* autonomous. Extrapolating from this mediation, I then seek to produce my empirical material based on interviews with the leaders and their teams from each of the schools featuring in my fieldwork, probing how they think about data and actually work with them in practice. Based on these concrete accounts or reflections as I prefer to term them, I then seek to make sense of the interviews by trying to sense the leaders and their sensorial response to data disclosed in their reflections pertaining to their day-to-day with data. To that effect, I thus seek to 'know' about the way in which data register affectively and as such are affectively appropriated as a way of understanding how the leaders are encouraged to come to terms with their own efforts, their own attributions, by rely-

ing more readily on what may be referred to as a performative awareness. Effectively tapping into an already existing cultural inclination to subject most phenomena in the world to a quantifiable form of readability.

In view of the outline presented above, it is clear that on the basis of Entry Point One to Three, I seek to make sense of the intermingling between data, leadership, and affect by employing an analytical strategy specifically designed to attend to different expressions of affect, reflective of the empirical circumstances in which they are played out. In principle, I employ this strategy as I extract from Knudsen and Stage and their already mentioned stance that empirically grounded research on affect must develop from an analysis that is responsive to the nature of the 'object' being scrutinised and the character of the empirical material in which it is sought explored. But in addition to this, it is also clear that I work within a methodological framework that 'allows' me to enrol my own researcher-body and its sensorial capacities as a basis for 'knowing' about affect, or more precisely, as basis for getting in contact with the forces and intensities that are imbricated with the concrete task of working with data. Ultimately, hoping to 'unfold' the lived embodied experience spurred by these forces and intensities. So, as means of grasping data-work not only as an intellectual effort, but as something that also involves a sensorial aspect, I enlist my own sensibilities, so to speak, as grounds for developing what I term an affect-sensitive approach to the concrete appropriation of data emerging in response to the QAE mandate in education today.

In many ways, I have already detailed the kind of thinking and world-view assumptions typically associated with this sense-based approach in the previous sub-section, where I go over the principles of sensory ethnography. Still, seeing that I enlist my own 'capacity' for sensing not only in relation to producing an embodied collection of empirical materials, but also in relation to making sense and thus 'knowing' about data and their affective intake, I find myself contemplating that the ability to sense others and their way of 'appreciating' their surroundings seems to feature as a prerequisite to this mode of research. I say so because guided by the overall aim of 'knowing' about affect-informed ways of taking data in, I essentially seek to get a sense of how others, here in the form of school leaders, may perceive, experience, and/or imagine the world in which they live and work. Thus, working in ways that may be thought of as both collaborative and participatory. Collaborative in the sense of inviting the perspective of the researched 'inside', and participatory in the sense of engaging the 'object' rather than objectifying it (Pink, 2015; Ahmed, 2008). Mindful of this mode of working, I am effectively faced with the task of representing 'the other' as part of my attempt to make sense of and promote insight pertaining to the 'object' in question.

In dealing with this task, however, there are no clear 'rules'. As researcher one is 'left' to develop a form of ethical compass based on which

big and small decisions concerning representation may be made. Beyond the widely accepted ‘charter’ for respecting and not doing harm, this means that I must find a way to represent ‘the other’, fitted to the approach from which I work. And due to the circumstance that I rely so heavily on my own sensorial apparatus for getting a sense, it is essential, I find, to first and foremost exercise care and consideration in terms of how I, based on my sense of the data-work taking place, represent the school leaders included in the study at hand. And in an attempt to do so, I try to be aware of my own ‘additions’ and not write myself out of the process of representing and ultimately knowing about the researched. So, as means of incorporating a mode of care and consideration for my ‘object’, I consciously seek to explicate and detail my way of being aware of the world of others, my own way of registering it, and the combined representation this affords². Not that this in itself serves as a safeguard for actually being caring and considerate, but at minimum it offers a form of transparency to the process of making sense and producing knowledge, prompting me to reflect on the efforts made in order to ‘know’ about the intermingled state of data, leadership and affect.

To a large extent, the enlistment of my own ‘capacity’ for sensing as part of my efforts to make sense and produce knowledge is uncontroversial. Yet, it must be noted that not all types of research paradigms either recognise or welcome the sensory contribution to the production of knowledge. This relates to the circumstance that the worth of scholarship traditionally has been, and in some ways still is, estimated on the basis of its ‘instalment’ of a dichotomy between mind and body, as is the case with much modern western thought. To Pink and many others, however, this lack of recognition of sense-informed ways of researching does not make much sense, seeing that abstract thought and rational inquiry are not exempt from being both embodied and emplaced. And despite the fact that researchers typically tend to abstract, isolate, or rationalise embodied knowing, focusing primarily on emphasizing their theoretical perspectives and their ‘function’ in the research process, they still, Pink argues, remain embodied beings interacting with the sensorial environments around them: “We [researchers] do not simply retreat into our minds to write theoretical texts, but we create discourses and narratives that are themselves entangled with materiality and sensoriality []” (Pink, 2015, pp. 47, 48). As such, Pink generally objects to the kind of binary thinking based on which sense-informed ways of knowing are viewed as divorced from (more intellectual) scholarly ways of knowing. They intertwine and both have a role to play in academia, she concludes. Which is ultimately also the stance implicitly promoted by the study at hand.

² In reference to the study at hand, the notion of representation should not be misread as a striving for representativity. In seeking to explore the concrete enactment of data, I do not work from a position of distance and detachment, such as more positivistic modes of research perhaps would aspire to. Rather, I ‘adjust’ to the ‘object’ as a way of approximating what working with QAE data may feel like, to put it plainly, and therefore I am not interested in representativity as such, but in sound and transparent ways of representing.



Chapter 3:

Entry One

- Data Coming into Being

Data as anything but ‘dead’

Looking back on the follow-up meeting described in the introduction, I initially had the distinct feeling that the data being discussed in and of themselves were conceived as something more than just numbers, meaning that the leaders and the representatives present at the meeting seemed to ‘deal’ with the data featured in the quality report as if they were representations of something beyond their immediate numeric format. It was as if these data were not just numbers merely conveying results of student learning and wellbeing, but representations of the overall quality of the school and thus of all the potential good this is assumed to allow for. As such, data seemed to function as anything but ‘dead’ in the sense that they seemed to be employed as a perceptual shorthand for something more than just quantitative measurements, something in excess of their stale, metric capture. Curious about the dynamics contributing to this aspect of data-work, this form of data enactment, I turn to a way of thinking and theorising about phenomena based on which it becomes plausible to think of the kind of data ordered by the QAE mandate not only as numbers, but rather as entities coming into being on account of multiple ‘forces’ working together. In other words, I turn to the notion of assemblage. But given this notion’s multi-layered composition, some clarifications are required before it makes sense to learn from the insight it affords.

The notion of assemblage, or rather a form of assemblage thinking as Müller and Schurr (2016) put it, generally is used to refer to complex processes of becoming, and its origin is often attributed to the joint writings of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980/1997). Despite the broad dissemination of this work, there remains some ‘confusion’ as to what the notion of assemblage means. According to Manuel DeLanda, this connects to fact that there are some implicit incoherencies and ‘rough edges’ in the scattered thinking encompassed in *A Thousand Plateaus*. DeLanda puts it this way: “[]the concept is given half a dozen different definitions by its creators. Each definition connects the concept to a separate aspect of their philosophy, using the term that is relevant for that aspect, so when taken in isolation the different definitions do not seem to yield a coherent notion” (2016, p. 1). Despite this incoherence, there tends to be some partially connected features, fixing and upholding a shared understanding of what defines an assemblage and its associated ways of reasoning. Briefly, this shared understanding emphasises that an assemblage may be defined by its heterogeneous elements, both human and non-human, organic and inorganic, technical and natural – full of emergence, multiplicity and indeterminacy. And on account of its distributed agencies, as assemblage functions as a cacophony of (desiring) forces moving and arresting, colliding and connecting as they intersect in complex and unfolding arrangements. In addition to this overriding understanding, however, an assemblage may be defined by means of the following three approximations.

The first approximation refers to stability and movement. This relates to the fact that *agencement*, the original French term (which is generally translated as *assemblage*) refers both to the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer*), as well as the result of such action (DeLanda, 2016, p. 1). But this double meaning does not immediately come across in English, because, when stripped to its core, *assemblage* means a collection or gathering of things or people (Fowler et al., 1976). Therefore, it is necessary to underscore the fact that the concept in question refers to a *product* as much as it does a *process*, speaking of both that which has the stability of form and that which changes or moves. Or, as Buchanan (2015, p. 390) terms it, an *assemblage* is a productive intersection of content (actions, bodies and things) and of expression (affects, words and ideas), bound by its ability to ‘work’ or produce. In a similar vein, DeLanda asserts that an *assemblage* is premised on two axes or dimensions that operate simultaneously but encompass different ‘movements’. The first (bearing in mind that each dimension is like a different side of the same coin) captures the role that different component of an *assemblage* may play, a role that can be either material or expressive; and the second axis or dimension captures the fluctuating identity of the *assemblage*, evoked by various processes of stabilization and destabilization, also known as processes of territorialisation and de-territorialisation (DeLanda, 2006). In sum, this means that an *assemblage* reflects an intersection of both material components (e.g., bodies, physical objects, spaces, and technologies) and expressive components (e.g., relations, affects, and desires), connecting and colliding while assuming the form of a nervous fixture that is not easily depicted, either semantically or visually.

The second approximation refers to multiplicity and the virtual. In an iconic quote from *Dialogues II* in Deleuze and Parnet (2002), Deleuze himself touches on this approximation:

“What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes, and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind”.

This means that an *assemblage*, distilled to its most simple expression, essentially functions as a multiplicity of co-functioning components actively relating to each other. According to DeLanda (2016, p. 2), this means that the parts in an *assemblage* are not uniform in nature or origin, but are fitted together through relations and alliances as opposed to filiations. To that effect, an *assemblage* offers a way of envisioning the virtual, meaning that which is *real*, but not necessarily *actual*. In the previous quotation, this envisioning is communicated both through the general impression of what is expressed and through the concrete words used. “Terms such as ‘conta-

gions', 'epidemics' and 'the wind' hint at the fluidity and ephemerality of assemblages and at their unpredictability, while 'sympathy' and 'symbiosis' suggest that there is a vital, affective quality to them" (Müller & Schurr, 2016, p. 219). With this definition, Deleuze foregrounds an assemblage as a multiplicity of parts/components fitted together as well as an establishment of relations emerging through alliances. He thereby underscores the idea that concept connotes the gathering of heterogeneous components as well as the presence of the virtual, speaking of that which is as much as that which may *emerge*.

Finally, the third approximation refers to that which is termed desire. To understand what desire refers to within this framework, it may initially be fruitful to note that Deleuze and Guattari do not think of desire as a 'feeling' aroused due to a lack of something; nor do they conceive of it as a state of coveting. Rather, they view desire as production, intrinsically linked to the productive forces of intensities connecting and disconnecting. Given this framework, Deleuze's interest in desire is centred around exploring questions like: "How does desire work, and for whom does it work" (Deleuze, 1995 as cited in Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 88). This understanding of desire goes back to *Anti-Oedipus* where Deleuze and Guattari introduce the notion of the desiring machine that is made up of a hub of connections, without centre and subjectivity, only constituted by forces, flows and intensities, allowing for transformation, proliferation and becoming. Building on this early conceptualisation, Deleuze and Guattari later refer to the desiring machine as an assemblage of intensities. They explain the connection between desire and assemblage in the following manner:

"Assemblages are passionate, they are compositions of desire. [] The rationality, the efficiency, of an assemblage does not exist without the passions the assemblage brings into play, without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them" (Guattari, 1987, p. 399).

To that effect, "desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p. 6), thus 'acting' as both a stabilizing and destabilising force in the assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 59). As such, assemblages, essentially, are expressions of desire (Deleuze, 2006, p. 125); operating through the material and expressive components' ability to affect and to be affected, fitting and pulling the components together and apart, and therefore always changing.

These three approximations jointly demonstrate the dynamic and complex processes in which socio-material-discursive-affective human and non-human relations constitute being and becoming in the world, forming a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. To that effect, there are a number of important overlaps between the concept of assemblage and those of other partially connected concepts, and their associated ways of

rationalising, such as dispositive (or apparatus) in (Foucault, 1977) entanglement (Barad, 2007), mangle (Hekmann, 2010) and actor-network (Latour, 2007) (MacLure, 2013, p. 660; Price-Robertson & Duff, 2016, pp. 61-62). But the degrees to which they overlap is generally contested. On the one side, John Law (2009, p. 147), for example, argues that there is little difference between Deleuze's agencement and the term 'actor-network'. On the other hand, Graham Harman (2009, p. 30) maintains that the notion of assemblage and actor-network, represents irreconcilable opposites, given the former's interest in flux and flow (and the virtual) and the latter's almost total lack of interest in such matters. (For further discussion of conjunctions, disjunctions, and possible cross-fertilisations between assemblage thinking and actor-network theory, see Müller & Schurr (2016)). Most scholars, however, agree that there is some common ground connecting the notion of assemblage to that of the aforementioned concepts as they all, in one way or the other, seem to stress the complex processes on the basis of which the world can be said to emerge.

Informed by this multi-dimensional and open-ended way of regarding phenomena as constantly being and becoming in the world, I claim, it ultimately becomes possible to think and theorise about the kind of data relevant to the study at hand as being something more than only stale numbers. In the sense that with this way of thinking about how phenomena may come into existence, it seems plausible to conceive of QAE data as entities made up of intersections of both form and content. Or intersections of both matter and affect, as I prefer to term it, emerging from both material and expressive components. In view of this theoretical model, it therefore makes sense, I find, to view QAE data as consisting of material components, like the technologies that process them into numbers and graphs as well as the reports in which they feature and obtain their tangible thingness. As well as expressive components constructed out of all the immaterial ambitions, to put it briefly, that have been vested in their production and deployment. So, in order to identify the ways in which data may emerge as entities full of expressivity, encouraging their enactment as anything but 'dead' numbers, as anything but *just* quantitative measurements, I ask the following research question as a basis for the exploration encompassed in Entry One:

How does data impact the task of communicating about quality?

With this research question as my underpinning reference point, I proceed with Entry One, in the following manner. First, I carve out the line of inquiry guiding my overall approach to data. This entails detailing the way in which I think about affect, meaning the mediation of affect I work from. Secondly, it entails laying out how and why I compose a collection of empirical resources out of policies, official statements, and guidelines as well as concrete quality reports. And finally, it entails highlighting how I plan to approach and make sense of the compounded empirical material

by carefully attuning myself to how data are discursively envisioned and utilised. Informed by this line of inquiry, I then go on to the actual analysis in which I first set out to explore data based on the hope and potential that is affectively vested in them. And secondly, I seek to detail how this hope and potential is taken up in the communicative practices encompassed in mandatory quality reports. Prompted by these two ‘movements’, I then redirect my attention back to the research question as basis for making some concluding remarks on how data and their expressiveness seems to play into the mandatory task of demonstrating results and reflecting on the efforts undertaken for purposes of quality production. And finally, I try to consider the wider impact of the conclusions I draw, reflecting on how data in effect may serve as grounds for encouraging school leaders to more rigorously align their practice with those prescribed by the QAE mandate.

Line of Inquiry – Sensing Data Composed with Expressivity

In view of the stated research question, the aim of Entry One, in brief, is to explore how data potentially may impact the task of communicating about quality. To ‘execute’ this exploration, it is necessary, I find, to look towards an empirical practice in which data on the one hand are being politically ordered and on the other are being employed in response to this political, policy induced order. More specifically, this means getting ‘close’ to the actual resources and agencies instructing the QAE mandate as well as the annual quality reports, demonstrating how this instruction is translated by actual schools and their leaders. As such, this essentially means getting ‘close’ to the concrete circumstances surrounding the production and deployment of QAE data. In the following, I therefore set out to develop a line of inquiry that is sensitive to the official sanctioning of *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and the way in which it is taken aboard in practice. I start by specifying the kind of understanding or mediation of affect that I draw from, allowing me to think of affect and discourse as intermingled. Next, I outline the reflections guiding the production of the empirical material I propose to utilise as grounds for the analysis. And finally, I highlight my way of making sense of the empirical material, detailing the steps I use as grounds for ‘knowing’ about the expressive components inherent to QAE data and role they play in terms of communicating about quality in the making.

Viewing Affect as Intertwined with Discourse

As basis for exploring data as something constituted by both material and expressive or affective components, and thus as basis for exploring data as more than ‘just’ instrumental numbers, there is good reason, I claim, to work with a mediation of affect that proposes to think of affect and

discourse as tightly connected. Thus, allowing for better understanding of the discursive dimension implicitly related to ordering and working with QAE in practice. For that reason, I turn to Margaret Wetherell (2012) and her stance on the intertwined state of affect and discourse. In brief, she arrives at this stance by entering what she herself terms “the deeply murky territory of moving beyond the bodying of affect in an effort to dismantle some established distinctions between affect and discourse” (Ibid., 2012, p. 52). More specifically, Wetherell develops her intertwined line of thinking by stating that not only is the complexity of affect evident, so is the complexity of discourse, because, as she sees it, the term ‘discourse’ in fact refers to multiple ‘things’. Sometimes it indexes the formal structures of language found in, for example, encyclopaedic formats, and at other times it catalogues everyday language practices (social practices). And finally, at times it also terms different forms of social meaning-making practices, or processes of signification, including a wide spectrum of sensory modalities, including facial expressions and other verbal and non-verbal utterances.

Going forward, Wetherell therefore advances the following definition of discourse: “By discourse [] I mean the practical (formal and informal) realm of language in action – talk and texts, words, utterances, conversations, stories, speeches, lectures, television programmes, web pages, messages on message boards, books etc., patterned within the everyday activities of social life” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987 as cited in Wetherell, 2012, p. 52). In many ways, this definition, stemming from her earlier work, aligns with the more dynamic “account of discourse in action long available in social psychology and in discourse studies outside post-structuralist theory” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 76). Wetherell therefore concludes that the complexity associated with discourse is no less than that of affect, and, in turn, this suggests that there is no consensus when it comes to classifying the relationship between the two. With this emphasis on the complexity of both affect and discourse, Wetherell effectively takes issue with many of the scholarly positions for whom “[] the most interesting thing about affect is that it is **not** discourse” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 52). In short, these positions consider affect, first and foremost, to be embodied intensity, meaning un-signified, un-conscious and non-representational, which leaves discourse to encompass all that which is fixed, conscious, and overtly planned. Taken to its extreme, Wetherell continues, these positions maintain that discourse in some sense both tames and codifies affect (Lingis, 1991; Massumi, 1996 as cited in Wetherell, 2012, p. 52)³.

Following this marking off of the territory, Wetherell goes on to outline the details of her own position by stating that affect and discourse may have

³ In making this observation, Wetherell refers to positions on affect spearheaded by Patricia Clough, Nigel Thrift, and Brian Massumi, as well as those forwarded by William Reddy. Mainly, she uses these positions as backdrop for clarifying how her own work opposes many of the stances they propose. For further detail see (Wetherell, 2012)

multiple definitions, depending on their practical, situated, and relational basis. And following from this in a way more pragmatic position that allows for a more complementary understanding, she characterises the relationship between affect and discourse as interwoven and not restricted by clear boundaries. More precisely, she explains her position by stating: “Affect and discourse intertwine in [the patterning of everyday life] to varying extents and in varying ways. The discursive elements may move in and out of prominence as the flow of practice plays out. Sometimes they are very dominant and sometimes more peripheral” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 52). This means that instead of specifying the exact relationship between affect and discourse, she argues that the focus should be directed towards investigating the full range and entire patterning of the many affective practices at play in everyday life. To that effect, Wetherell’s position ultimately attends to affect by approaching what she terms processes of affective sense making or affective practices.

To exemplify how the aforementioned patterning may take form, Wetherell calls attention to Roland Barthes (1979) and his analysis of contemporary Western romantic relationships. In this analysis, it is stipulated that romantic relationships are expressed based on of what Barthes terms *figurations* that sometimes entail a slight glance, a smile and/or a tone, and at other times involve words and written communication. And such figurations are capable of prompting spiralling affective, discursive loops as they are narrated, communicated, shared, intensified, dispersed, modified and sometimes re-awakened even decades later. To Wetherell, these figurations, illustrating how romantic relationships are expressed, effectively serve as ‘evidence’ of the practically and socially intertwined patterning, characteristic of the relation between affect and discourse. In view of this ‘evidence’, she argues, it is necessary to focus on how affect is accomplished and ordered, instead of adjudicating abstractly the exact relation between bodies and discourse, or feelings and words (2012, pp. 52, 53). Consequently, Wetherell essentially implies that commonly held distinctions between cognitive and non-cognitive, representational and non-representational, conscious and non-conscious, language and embodiment are not straightforward and to speak of them as such, she cautions, is far from productive.

In conclusion, it seems evident that Wetherell’s aim of moving beyond the bodying of affect brings her to a conceptualisation of affect that is inclusive of the realm of discourse. This subsequently prompts her to advocate an affective practices approach, promoting both the affective and discursive as the object of scrutiny when attending to affect. In her own words, she justifies this *affective practices approach* in the following manner:

“Bodies and sense-making are like two sides of the same paper. So let’s study the whole sheets of paper – the affective-discursive practices and the affective orders of social life – and take these interwoven phenomena as our units of analysis” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 53).

So, by turning to Wetherell and her affective practice approach, much is gained, I reckon, because by ‘accepting’ this stance, it becomes possible to explore the multi-formatted presence of affect within what may be termed the practicalities of life. Or put differently, it becomes possible to view most social practices as a sort of patterning in which both affect and discourse are interwoven, respectively moving in and out of dominance, to paraphrase Wetherell. Consequently, by drawing on this intertwined view of affect I am ultimately afforded some leeway, so to speak, based on which it makes sense to explore the realm of discourse in the form of written text, for example, as a basis for exploring expressions of affect. In relation to the previously proposed research question, I therefore find it relevant to work with a mediation of affect that ‘allows’ me to consider the affective dimension intrinsic to discourse, in the broadest sense of the term.

Composing Discourse on Data as the Empirical Site

With the line of thinking afforded from the notion of assemblage, it makes sense, as mentioned, to conceive of various phenomena in the world, like data, as entities made up by intersections of both matter and affect, emerging from both material and expressive components. So, while attempting to seek out the circumstances assisting data to function as more than just isolated numbers, it therefore seems relevant, I find, to examine the expressive components related to QAE data. As I see it, these components are to a large extent constituted by the way in which QAE data discursively envisioned as key to quality production in schools. First in the sense of being attributed a lot of potential for enabling ordered practices, which in turn are considered inherent to making quality ‘happen’, and secondly in the sense of being taken up as grounds for communicating about school quality, for making it known to be exact. For that reason, I turn to a broad range of discursive materials reflective of this overall hopeful and positive expressivity as a basis for composing an empirical site well-suited for exploring the research question encompassed in Entry One. To some, this type of discursive material may seem at odds with the overriding ambition of wanting to explore data in relation to their affective qualities. In reference to Wetherell’s intertwined view of affect, however, I maintain that what is largely known as discourse may very well function as a relevant point of departure for exploring what is largely known as affect.

So, as grounds for gathering this type of material, I first look towards the kind of broad potential for enabling ordered practices and thus quality intrinsically linked to the official stance on what data are and, in effect, can do, meaning that I specifically look towards the main policy instructing *The Quality Report 2.0* programme as well as the ministerial statements and national guidelines that follow from this instruction. At first glance, these types of material may seem somewhat sterile, or boring even, as they are very nondescript in their way of communicating legislation, directives, and assumptions about causality. But inherent to the formulation of any policy

is an underpinning set of aspirations directed at constructing meaning, setting norms, and regulating, preventing and/or solving both big and small societal problems. And to that effect, there is more to policies and their official reasoning than the ‘clean exterior’ they are commonly known by. In the sense that policies, as shrewdly noted by Barnett (1999), are always “armed with notions of progress”, and as such are full of “ideas of how to create a better life”, implicitly functioning as the great missionaries of our time. In view of this missionary capacity, I claim, the policy in question and its associated statements and guidelines may therefore serve as an abundant empirical basis for approximating some of the expressive components constituting QAE data, namely the components attributing to them with potential for enabling the promotion of quality and thus also with more or less vague aspirations for other and better tomorrows.

With these considerations in mind, I compose the first part of my empirical material by going through a broad collection of textual resources that, in one way or the other, implicitly envision data as necessary to the overarching political imperative to promote quality in Danish schools. As such, I turn towards policy documents, ministerial directives, official guidelines, formal notices, instruction-reports, and various forms of press releases and statements, all of which express the positive prospects associated with *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, meaning all the good it is assumed to ensure to put it rather soberly. As a result of this somewhat open-ended process, I end up generating a collection of empirical resources that either communicate or argue strong convictions in relation to the production and deployment of data; convictions that ultimately trust data to be part and parcel of the combined effort to promote quality in schools. In total, I settle on the following resources, divided into three overall themes:

- **Made to Carry the Weight of Great Promise**
The resources belonging to this theme build on the national policy document and its directives authorising *The Quality Report 2.0* programme as well as various official statements made by the Ministry of Education, all arguing in favour of the expected prospects of the programme in question.
- **Entrusted to Make Quality Manageable**
The resources related to this theme deals with guidelines suggesting how to work with data to promote quality. These resources are produced by Local Government Denmark as a way of furthering the implementation of the programme and its recommended practices.
- **Imbued with a Mode of Leaning in and Leading Forward**
The resources constituting this theme draws from a combination of communiqués and practical suggestions made by the Ministry of Education. In essence, they speak of the importance

of leadership, especially leadership informed by data.

As means of composing the latter part of my empirical material, I turn to the mandatory quality reports that every school across the country are obliged to produce in order to highlight their annual results and their ways of working with data as basis for promoting quality. In many ways, these reports are essential to *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, because they function as the main document based on which results are tracked and monitored. But in addition to this, they are also central, I find, because they reflect the kind of professional practices employed as means of not only adhering to the official QAE instruction, but also coming to terms with the potential that is attributed data as an inherent part of this instruction. And as such, the reports may be deemed reflective of how the expressive components constituting QAE data implicitly translates into school leaders'/ management's ways of making sense of quality production in practice. For that reason, concrete quality reports, I argue, may function as a relevant empirical basis for exploring how data are taken up by schools and their leaders as basis for communicating about quality and the efforts they put into this aspect of their practice, implicitly illustrating their awareness of what is affectively vested in data and their employment. Therefore, I utilise the following resources, captured in one overriding theme:

- **Expressing Practices Aimed at Promoting Quality**

The resources linked to this theme are compiled in ten unique quality reports, originating from the case schools located in both the Northern and Southern municipality included in my fieldwork. In compliance with *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, these reports encompass attained results as well as depictions of how and why data are used by management as grounds for promoting quality.

Knowing about Data from Sensorial Exploration

In an effort to establish a viable line of inquiry related to the previously introduced research question, I now face the task of developing an analytical approach well-tailored to the scrutinise the expressive, affective components contributing to the composition of QAE data and the role they potentially play in relation to leaders and their practice of communicating about quality. In the following, I therefore start by specifying the way in which I intend to approach what may generally be referred to as the discursive, meaning the collection of purely textual resources I construct as my empirical site. Effectively, applying the already mentioned mediation of affect rendering it possible to consider affect as closely connected to or even interwoven with discourse and vice versa. Next, I specify my proposition to make sense of the empirical by relying on my sensorial capacity for sensing what is affectively communicated in the official texts and quality reports I work with. Essentially, employing this capacity as grounds for 'accessing' how

data may be received sensorially, in view of the kind of expressive components with which they in a way come into being. As such, I ultimately hope to illustrate how I seek to 'know' first about data and their affective saturation, to put it somewhat suggestively, and secondly about how this saturation potentially may impact the communicative practices that are inherent to mandatory production of annual quality reports.

As a way of assisting my efforts to develop such an analytical approach, I first turn to Christoffer Kølvråa (2015) for inspiration as he grapples with 'concerns' similar to mine. In his study of affect and the rhetoric of politicians on the Far Right, Kølvråa analyses statements voiced by Far-Right politicians as they speak of Muslim minorities and their alleged cultural norms. The aim of his study is to examine the affective dimension of political attitudes as they are made and circulated via textual/linguistic statements while still working *within* a familiar methodological framework of reading and analysing discourse. As a way of specifying the approach employed in the study, Kølvråa reflects on the following two intimately related questions:

- "If affect is understood as that which escapes discursive domestication, then how can it be analysed as a dimension of political struggles for hegemony, when the latter is still conceptualized as the institution of forms of control involving discursive closure?"
- "Put in terms of methodology, if affect is at odds with signifying practices and cannot be fully captured discursively, then where and how can one 'read for affect' – if at all?"

In short, the first question highlights the puzzle that may follow from analysing how the presence of affect may inform practices of discursive signification while still thinking of affect as something that escapes discursive domestication. And secondly, the latter question addresses the possible dilemmas that may arise from utilising discursive resources when researching affect. In response to these two questions, Kølvråa points out that he essentially thinks of affect and signification or affect and emotion, here referring to Massumi (2002) and Shavero (2009), as functioning on different planes. (As such, Kølvråa's notion of affect differs a little bit from that of Wetherell, leaning more towards the Massumi's stance on affect as a dimension that eludes processes of sense making). Kølvråa, however, is not interested in privileging one plane over the other; rather, he argues, this distinction, more than anything, challenges him to find ways of linking a focus on affect to the analysis of textual statements, "*without reducing affect to a straightforward effect of linguistic signification*" (Kølvråa, 2015 p. 184). So, while trying to confront this challenge, Kølvråa seeks to develop a method that allows him to analyse text without (inadvertently) diminishing the radical openness he associates with affect. And consequently, he arrives at a method he labels *reading for affect*.

In essence, this method examines how affect *retained* in discourse, e.g., in a written text, may be scrutinised by approaching textual statements with the intent of capturing or appreciating the affective intensity that is not necessarily stated in their literal content, but quietly lingers in the excess of their manifest meaning. When reading for affect, the analysis of discourse must therefore focus on articulating the plane of signification as well as that of affect. As such, Kølvråa, in a way, seeks to move away from more traditional and well-known modes of discourse analysis. Broadly speaking, he argues that such modes of analysis are premised on the notion of *in the true*, meaning that traditional discourse analysis typically considers statements as articulations of a signifying practice inherent to a wider ideological matrix. And for that reason, it generally seeks to understand the “horizon of meaning in which this statement is meaningful, in which it is *in the true*” (Foucault, 1972, as cited in Kølvråa, p. 188). To that effect, most forms of discourse analysis are ‘geared’ to understand the horizon in which statements are made to become *true* and as such serve as a relevant method for unfolding the influence of signifying practices on social life and world-making. But in the process of doing so, the analytical process is usually restricted or bound to the literal message of the statements being analysed, operating without an eye for that which Baudrillard (1990) has coined as the *seduction of discourse*, speaking to the “charm’ and ‘appearance’ of signs at their surface” (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 54).

To Kølvråa, this seductive facet, which he views as akin to the affective dimension of text and language, is important, because by taking it into consideration, the analytical focus is potentially freed from the ‘straitjacket’ of trying to scrape away deeper latent layers in order to reveal the ‘real’ meaning of the discourse being analysed. Moreover, Kølvråa argues, since affect never can be fully captured by the signifying practice of language, “the only language of affect, operating with any modicum of success is that which does not seek to speak any version of (literal) truth” (Kølvråa, 2015, p. 188). Given this emphasis on the affective dimension of language, the method of reading for affect entails approaching statements as if they are not automatically meant to be – or received as being – true in any literal sense (Kølvråa, 2015, p. 188). To exemplify, Kølvråa demonstrates how a statement via humour, for example, may distance itself from being ‘in the true’, which in effect works as a ‘technique’ for transmitting what he terms the affective investment of what is expressed. To that effect, insincere or playful statements may have an affective impact of their own and thus function as a vehicle for affective contagion (Kølvråa, 2015, p. 191). So, by focusing on such vehicles of contagion, embedded in different forms textual sources, researchers are afforded a broader appreciation of what draws us in, meaning that which, in a way, is not written but is nevertheless communicated. With an approach based on reading for affect, Kølvråa argues, it thus becomes possible to tease out the ‘discourse induced’ contagion, meaning the affective investment or intensity, stirred up by the discursive such as text and language.

To assist the development of my analytical approach one step further, I briefly turn to Kathleen Stewart (2007) and her way of attending to phenomena not so much in relation to their immediate representation, but more in relation to the qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements that inhabit them. In her work entitled *Ordinary Affects*, she captures a range of ‘scenes’ through which she portrays everyday life as being full of both monotony and swelling tension. In each of these ‘scenes’, she minutely details the intensity and texture that come together, making the ‘scene’ come to life, focusing on small details, meaning that which is not necessarily spelled out, but primarily operates under the surface of routine movements. In combination, these ‘scenes’, or more precisely brief vignettes combined with storytelling, essentially demonstrate a form of poetic insight into how affects are encompassed in the ordinary, mundane life of contemporary America. In principle, the aim of this body of work is not to attend to overarching systems like globalisation or neoliberalism or capitalism and their ability to shape individual lives. Rather, it is to attend to that which Stewart herself terms the fleeting quality of passing events in ordinary existence.

In theory, it easy to justify this aim of attending to the fleeting qualities of ordinary life, but to actually do it in ways that are methodologically within reach often presents itself as a bit of challenge. As a way of grappling with this challenge Stewart herself resorts to *close ethnographic attention*, enabling her to attend to pressure points and forms of attention and attachment (Stewart, 2007, p. 5). And based on this form of attention, she thus traces how the affective forces, immanent to most things, are both flighty and unsteady, while still palpably felt (Ibid.). In a later line of work, Stewart refers to a novel by Ian McEwan, where he describes a woman, stuck in bed due to constant migraines. “What to others would have been a muffling was to her alert senses, which were fine-tuned like the cat’s whiskers [], an almost unbearable amplification. She lay in the dark and knew everything” (Stewart, 2011, p. 448). Stewart uses this literary snippet to stress the almost tentacle awareness that is necessary for taking stock of that which, in essence, is ephemeral. In the sense that it is through a detailing of the routine movements of everyday life that she, in her own work, is able to convey how *something* can come to feel like it is marked by the ‘bigger picture’, for example, the complex and social dynamics of a politicised world. To that effect, Stewart’s ethnographic work, ultimately illustrates what can come from paying close attention to ordinary affects.

In many ways, I find instrumental merit in both Kølvrå’s idea of a discourse-induced contagion of affect and Stewart’s close ethnographic attention, demonstrating how small things can come to feel like *something*. And in applying this merit, I initially find stimulus to focus on the seductive, e.g., the affective, dimension of text and language. And secondly, I find stimulus to attend to the intensity and texture of something as mundane as ‘clean’, official texts and reports speaking of QAE data and their role in

quality production. Even though neither of these two scholars speak of affect and discourse as intertwined in quite the same manner as Wetherell does, it is not contradictory, I claim, to understand aspects of their work as offering specific points of inspiration for the cultivation of an approach well-suited for approaching and making sense of the kind of empirical material I work from. Therefore, I loosely draw from Kølvrå's and Stewart's work as grounds for developing an approach specifically geared to explore the official discourse on data and the quality reports utilising it, to put very simply, by trying to approximate the implicit expressiveness of this discourse and its practical translation. Or, to paraphrase Stewart's way of wording it, by trying to attend (sensorially) to the affective forces that inhabit the kind of mundane text I examine.

In sum, this means that the first step of my analysis entails approaching the collected empirical resources with the overall intention of finding a balance between what is communicated via representation and language (discourse) and the intensity operating beyond the matter-of-factness or flatness perhaps that is characteristic of them. Effectively oscillating between the representational and the non-representational, and thus, in a way, following Wetherell's recommendation to consider both the discursive and the affective as the unit of analysis. I then try to make sense of the empirical material by first outlining the way in which data are discursively envisioned to promote quality and thus function as basis for enabling better tomorrows. As a way of pursuing this aim, I purposefully try not to be critical, but rather stay open to the official ways in which data are envisioned a key to promoting quality. As such, I basically seek to employ a form of sensorial appreciation of that which is discursively implied by highlighting the affective residue of the textual sources I draw from. A residue that is not necessarily signified in actual utterances but is nonetheless felt and registered as it drifts in the surplus of what is discursively stated. Informed by this embodied effort, I then turn to the quality reports as basis for exploring the role potentially played by the expressive components contributing to the affective saturation of data. As such, I ultimately seek to 'know' about the impact of what may in some ways be thought of as the charge immanent to data.

Detecting what is Vested in and Expressed with Data

As specified in the presentation of the line of inquiry pursued in Entry One, the empirical material related to the following analysis, has a total of four overall themes. The material relevant to the first three themes consists of policy documents, ministerial directives, official guidelines, formal notices and instructions, reports and various forms of press releases and statements. All of which formulate the positive prospects that are thought to come from *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and its instruction to employ data for purposes of quality production. The material relevant to the fourth and last theme consists of ten unique quality reports stemming from each of

the case schools included in the field work undertaken as part of the study at hand. In sum, these reports convey the results attained by the schools and the work undertaken as a part of the overall aim of promoting quality. As a way of approaching this collection of empirical material, I start by simply reflecting what is stated in the texts relevant to the first three themes, highlighting the expressions based on which data are discursively envisioned and thus affectively saturated as key enablers of all the positive prospects related to implementation of the QAE mandate. Merely detailing the expressive components seemingly contributing to this saturation, lingering in excess of what is stated in the official discourse on data and their role in relation to promoting quality. Next, in view of the ten quality reports I set out to explore how this discursive ‘celebration’ is taken up in practice by schools and their leaders as they communicate about their work with QAE. And lastly, I use these practical examples as basis for reflecting on how data is used to express quality and the work it entails.

Made to Carry the Weight of Great Promise

In extension of an earlier QAE notice from 2009, *The Quality Report 2.0* programme was introduced to all Danish schools in August 2014. The official premises and instalments comprising this programme are captured in the main policy mandating it. In the following, I address this policy and the various political statements, national directories, and authorised announcements accompanying it. Primarily these statements are circulated by the Danish Ministry of Education and, in one way or the other, they all contribute to the official authorisation of *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and the main policy specifying it. In essence, this policy orders that “the governing body at the municipal level are obliged to assess each school and their level of performance based on the following results [all listed in the quality report, unique to each school in the municipality]” (Retsinformation, 20. juni 2014, my translation):

1) Grades, including socioeconomic reference⁴

This requirement stipulates that the report must demonstrate grade point averages from final exams in Danish and math and highlight the share of students scoring two or above in these main subject matters.

2) National tests scores in Danish and math

This requirement stipulates that the report must reflect national test scores pertaining to reading proficiency and math, indicating the percentage of students falling within the categories: high,

⁴ Socioeconomic reference is a statistical expression linking students’ academic performance to their gender, ethnicity, and parents’ educational background making it possible to compare students to other students from the same or similar socioeconomic background. The aim of such comparisons is to assess the extent to which schools promote the academic achievement of specific categories of students.

average, and poor.

3) Transition to youth education and vocational training programs

This requirement stipulates that the report must detail the percentage of students who commenced further education after 3 and 15 months upon finishing the 9th grade as well as the percentage of students expected to earn a degree in youth education within 6 years of finishing the 9th grade.

4) Results from the mandatory survey on student wellbeing

This requirement stipulates that the report must account for the outcome of the national survey that annually probes student wellbeing.

(In addition to these minimum requirements, the municipal level may order supplementary results to be included in the report). The policy does not dictate the report format, as this is typically subject to local discretion, catering to different municipal investments and circumstances. It does, however, specify the overall aim of *The Quality Report 2.0* programme in the following manner: “The quality report must demonstrate how the municipality as a whole and its schools adhere to politically authorised goals []. [As such], it must demonstrate the level of performance in relation to national as well as local goals” (Undervisningsministeriet, my translation).

I read the policy in full in many times, and every time I do so I stumble on the simplicity of its instruction. In specific, I stumble upon instructions stating that *the governing body...must assess the level of performance* and that *the quality report must demonstrate how schools adhere to authorised goals*. As I see it, these statements testify to the fact that the ministry discursively conceptualises data measuring and monitoring results as rather straightforward representations of students’ learning and wellbeing. And by that token, I claim, they implicitly envision data as both vital and unproblematic instruments based on which what is broadly known as school ‘output’ can and should be assessed and demonstrated for purposes of quality production. No more, no less. As I reflect on this assessment, I am reminded of the fact that this kind of representational conceptualisation, where quantitative data are thought to ‘innocently’ mirror schools and their achievements, in many instances has been vastly criticised. In his extensive work examining the history of statistics and *the politics of large numbers* Alain Desrosières (1998), for example, argue that the success of modern policy mandates is in fact correlated with the false, but nevertheless commonly held idea that numbers are *fully* representative of what is being measured.

Surly, the ministry is aware that promoting quality is not as simple as it is ‘laid out’ in the policy text, meaning that the ministry is of course not oblivious to the circumstance that measuring schools and their output is a

complex endeavour. And consequently, it requires a lengthy orchestration for which there are no guaranties, only numerous variables that all mark, and sometimes obstruct, the task of promoting quality. Such nuance or ambiguity perhaps, however, is clearly taken out of the equation, so to speak, as the policy text only emphasises and champions a somewhat straightforward vision, in which data are constructed and conceptualised as that which allows for tangible ways of both measuring and thus managing quality. Therefore, I deliberately stay with this straightforward vision for a while, letting its rather simple, linear, and unproblematic conceptualisation of data and the task of promoting quality imprint itself as a way of sensorially ‘adjusting’ myself to the vision operating beyond the literal specifications I examine. And as I open up to what is affectively vested onto data, what stands out is the certainty it bargains, in the sense that it implicitly makes data stand out as a form of ‘technology’ based on which the task of doing QAE may be carried out with a comfortable level of certainty.

Next, I turn to the official communication following in the wake of this main policy. In general, it is comprised by statements and directives voiced by the Ministry of Education. In abbreviated form, the short excerpts listed below reflect the official authorisation of quality reports:

“[] The quality report is a tool for steering towards goals and results...The quality report serves as confirmation of the implementation of politically mandated goals...The quality report must feature as the basis for municipal (regional) inspection...The quality report should be formatted so that the municipal level may deploy it as a basis for management and steering initiatives...The quality report must utilise the data made available by the Ministry... The quality report must highlight the level of performance and assess this in reference to the local and national goals...And finally, the quality report must allow for the governing body at the municipal level to evaluate each school and its academic performance, followed by instructions on how to revise practice” (Undervisningsministeriet, my translation).

I carefully read these statements and directives. Collectively they seem to advocate the same stance over and over; namely the thesis that data from unique quality report can and must function as ground for furthering school output and in effect are rendered key to all efforts aimed at assuring and promoting quality. Overall, these official communiqués, as I see it, illustrate how the ministry discursively proposes to utilise data first as onset for *steering towards goals and results* and later as grounds for informing *instructions on how to revise practice*. And in the process of doing so, these official pronouncements effectively envision a positive link between the (correct) use of data and more and better school quality.

On the one hand, it is rather apparent that these statements and directories express a very clear and explicit technical or administrative perhaps approach to QAE and the data it orders. Effectively, demonstrating the kind

of *calculative rationality* that has increasingly emerged in education and in common held views on what it means to promote quality (Ozga, 2009). But on the other hand, they do more than that because beyond what is literally communicated, they also implicitly instill a somewhat confident image of schools empowered almost to promote quality, guided by data as onset for steering and managing with a clear focus on results and goals. And as I attend to this discursively instilled image, taking in it, it seems that the immediate ease that follows from this image is somehow bestowed onto data. Mainly, of course, this image reflects a rational abstraction that is more or less insensitive to the messy, pragmatic, and ‘flawed’ modes of enactment typically following the utilisation of data and most efforts directed at adhering to the QAE mandate. Yet, as I take it in, sensorially speaking, it is in a way capable of bypassing all the nuances and challenges commonly related to working with data for purposes of quality production by implicitly attributing a sense of ease to their practical utilisation.

Lastly, I turn to www.emu.dk, a portal hosted by the Danish Ministry of Education. The purpose of this portal, broadly speaking, is to provide hands-on, accessible guidance for various practitioners working with quality assurance and development in education. In the following, I zoom in on four excerpts from four different texts, each addressing specific aspects of QAE work in schools. The first excerpt is taken from a text conveying how quality management, with a continued focus on data and thus on results, can provide a framework in which students can reach their full potential. The text in question opens by stating the following:

“All students must have the opportunity to learn. To provide such an opportunity, attention must be directed towards professional progress and wellbeing. For all schools this means focusing on goals and data as well as on an analysis aimed at demonstrating the link between teaching and learning” (Læringsportal, my translation, my emphasis).

The next excerpt, stemming from a related text, states the following:

“Schools must be managed based on knowledge [data] documenting the effects of teaching. A stronger focus on results-based-management [] may strengthen the untapped steering potential afforded by data measuring and monitoring how schools, e.g. their students, are performing” (Læringsportal, my translation, my emphasis).

A third excerpt, which is a text specifically targeting data on student wellbeing. It makes the following proclamation:

“Data from the annual survey measuring student wellbeing serve as a sound basis for implementing targeted practices aimed at further progress of student wellbeing. The survey results may also be used to track and monitor development in wellbe-

ing over time” (Læringsportal, my translation, my emphasis).

And finally, a fourth excerpt is taken from what is best termed a resource-text, explaining the purpose of Beregneren (translated literally ‘The Calculator’, which is a tool provided by the ministry enabling schools to monitor student performance based on national test-scores. Essentially, the calculator makes it possible for schools to track individual students and their progress in reading proficiency and math).

“Schools may use this tool to track and monitor individual students and their progress in reading proficiency and math. In order to document progress with this tool it is necessary that the students be tested annually. Progress in learning is about the improvement and development made by each student”. (Læringsportal, my translation, my emphasis).

Taken together the selected texts from the EMU portal speak very keenly of working with data as part of a professional practise directed at serving the students and their overall progress. In short, one text stresses the need to focus on goals and data as a way of affording the best learning opportunities. Another text mentions the untapped steering potential that may come from an increased managerial focus on results (data). Yet another text refers to how data measuring wellbeing can provide a solid basis for promoting social development. And finally, another text emphasises The Calculator and its capacity for both tracking and furthering the progress of individual students. Prompted by this enthusiastic discourse, the ministry effectively frames data as clear-cut instruments for enabling both professional as well as social progress. Thus, depicting data as inherent to working professionally with quality for the common good of all students. And as I try to come to terms with the discursively outlined bright-future beacon drifting in the surplus of the hands-on instructions featured on the portal, it is clear that data both as a concrete tool and an underlying premise for working with QAE become infused with this implicit ambition to secure progress on behalf of all students.

In sum, it seems clear that in mandating *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, the main policy document and its associated political statements and national directives all position data ordered for purposes of quality production as practical steppingstones for achieving the kind of high-minded goals and ideals that everybody is comfortable with. Specifically, they do so as they initially *conceptualise* data as a form of gauge representing student learning and wellbeing, on the basis of which the quality of schools may be demonstrated. And secondly, they do so as they advocate the *utilisation* of data as a sound basis for governing and managing with a stronger focus on effects or outcomes. And finally, they do so as they *potentialize* data as clear-cut instruments, capable of serving students and their overall progress. As such, the official governing body, generally speaking, emphasise data as highly productive, vital to the kind of quality production that is

ultimately thought to allow for better tomorrows, to formulate it with the assistance of Barnett (1999) and his previously mentioned claim about policies, and thus also the political agencies promoting them, functioning as modern-day missionaries. In view of this discursive portrayal, it seems that data, expressively speaking, are made to carry the weight of great promise. And to that effect, I find it plausible that the expressive qualities thus attributed data by these official texts and their stance on what they are thought or hoped capable of potentially may play into the intricate processes of coming to terms with and making sense of data in practice.

Entrusted to Make Quality Manageable

Local Government Denmark is an organisation dedicated to safeguarding the common interest of Danish municipalities. It services a total of 98 municipalities that have voluntarily signed up as members of the organisation. In 2014, shortly after the announcement of *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, Local Government Denmark, in their capacity of offering assistance and consultancy, put out a comprehensive publication targeting all senior stakeholders expected to implement the QAE programme. In brief, the publication functions as a form of guide, meant to serve as a source of inspiration for municipalities and school leaders expected to implement *The Quality Report 2.0* programme. In the following analysis, I focus on this publication, attending specifically to how Local Government Denmark envisions the concrete task of ensuring and promoting quality in schools. At the outset, the publication states:

“The school reform emphasises that all municipalities must closely monitor students’ learning and wellbeing. This emphasis must be reflected in the principles for political and municipal governance as well as in the administration and implementation of follow-up procedures” (Denmark, 2014, pp. 3, my translation).

A few paragraphs down, the following utterance is stated:

“Moving forward, co-operation between the municipal administration and the school leaders must be based on data indicating the extent to which political goals are met and the extent to which specific practices create the wanted results” (Denmark, 2014, pp. 4, my translation).

And on the next page the purpose of data featured in quality reports is explained in the following manner:

“The quality report accounts for the results achieved by the school. As such, the report reflects whether or not goals have been met, and thus function as the basis on which the quality of schools in the municipality may be assessed” (Denmark, 2014, pp. 5, my translation)

Finally, the publication frames the overall function of the quality report:

“[The quality report] functions as a simple and accessible tool, conducive to systematic evaluation and practices that aim a follow-up on results” (Denmark, 2014, pp. 6, my translation).

Throughout the publication, these claims about the function related to data are continuously repeated, and consequently the use of *systematic evaluations* and *follow-ups on results* stands out as essential to the ‘success’ of the quality report. In a subsection dealing with the use of action-plans, for example, the following is stated:

“The production of action-plans is typically fostered in dialogue between municipalities and school leadership teams. This can ensure that [management] initiatives are rooted in what is collectively known as results. In effect, initiatives based on hunches and bad-practices may be countered” (Denmark, 2014, pp. 6, my translation).

Jointly, the many passages highlighted here ultimately exemplify the kind of practice that Local Government Denmark prescribes as the basis for promoting quality in schools. This is a practice in which data are initially used to measure and monitor student learning and wellbeing, then reported in annual quality reports so that schools may be evaluated and assessed, and lastly used by local school management as a basis for developing or revising practices. As a way of adding a human touch and thus some approachability to these clearly prescribed steps, the publication also offers a handful of short quotes from selected school leaders, voicing some first-hand experiences of what it means to work with and, in a way, operate ‘under’ *The Quality Report 2.0* programme. One leader expresses his experience this way:

“The use of target goals helps increase quality in schools. I am confident that they enable us to focus on certain things. They make sure that we are held accountable; so that we do not get bogged down with other things. So much goes on in our world these days. It is good that there is a common focus []” (Denmark, 2014, p. 5).

And another leader emphasises the following:

“In the development plan for the school, we write our target goals, and we describe which actions or initiatives we must implement to achieve these goals. We also describe what practice looks like when we are on the right track and the premises from which we base our judgment/evaluation []” (Denmark, 2014, p. 27).

And lastly, a third leader shares her take on how to ensure a match between the intentions inherent to the QAE mandate and the practices established at ‘her’ school:

“The political target goals have been incorporated into my contract. I present this contract to the staff in order to create a red line from the political level to our everyday practices[]” (Denmark, 2014, p. 28).

In sum, these quotes speak of goals, result-oriented management, and upholding a red line between political intensions and everyday practices. And in view of the message they effectively convey, it seems as if they align well with the officially sanctioned guidelines and recommendations for working with quality. With this publication, Local Government Denmark thereby promotes and in some sense pushes, a practical guide for how to ensure and develop quality in schools more or less in the manner prescribed by the main policy instruction outlined in the previous subsection. And in the process of so doing, they stress data as devices through which the production of quality comes across as very adaptable, as a set of practical steps to be followed and systematically enforced. Plain and simple. To that effect, Local Government Denmark is proposing a rather accessible ‘roadmap’ for how to implement the present QAE mandate and thus for how to work with the data it instructs. And as I carefully go through this guideline material, what strikes me is the manageability of it all as well as the lightness and ease with which especially the first-hand experiences speak of data. It is as if they speak of data as merely functioning as productive means of making order in an otherwise disorderly world, and as such hinting at the destination to which the employment of data may lead.

For a while I go back and forth in relation to this discursive portrayal of how to implement QAE and thus employ data as basis for leading and managing in practice. As I see it, there is something to be said about the overall manageability of working with QAE and data so strongly emphasised in the guideline material. I realise that to some degree it indirectly stresses the inability to promote quality as a something that neither schools nor municipalities can or should accept as a legitimate outcome. And as such, potentially serve as a stressor in terms of the overall sensorially appreciation of data. But that is in a way obscured or forgotten because of the way the guideline material effectively stresses quality as a tall order that is in fact manageable and thus ‘doable’. Therefore, on account of this discursive scenario subtly lingering in the many hands-on examples, data are in a way affectively entrusted to make quality manageable and thus saturated as means of making the ambition of overall betterment feel within reach. Not in the sense that data intentionally are thought of as such on account of the advocated ‘roadmap’, but in the sense that this expressiveness is indirectly added onto them. And to the extent that this add-on does not go unnoticed, it is in turn likely to impact the ways in which data are taken up in practice while grappling with the QAE mandate and the data-work it necessitates.

Imbued with a Mode of Learning in and Leading Forward

As mentioned, *The Quality Report 2.0* programme was introduced in 2014.

And as is the case with most events, they emerge on the basis of a complex trajectory, and therefore it is not possible to identify all the intricate details of the trajectory related this specific QAE programme. But there are two circumstance that must be mentioned as they, each in their own way, mark the emergence of the programme and in particular its way of discursively reasoning its instruction to employ data as an absolutely vital part of promoting quality. The first circumstance pertains to a large scale, national school reform also introduced in 2014. The overall aim of the reform is by its own accord to foster schools in which all students, regardless of social background, are allowed to realise their academic potential – while at the same time thriving in relation to their overall wellbeing (D. M. o. Education, 2014). Therefore *The Quality Report 2.0* programme is essentially designed to function as a goal and results based steering tool in order to provision the reform in question (Denmark, 2014) and the strong political focus on student learning and wellbeing it symbolises. And the second circumstance stems from international research on school leadership as well as more broadly dispersed research on organisation and management, both of which suggest that efficient leadership is not possible without data, when seeking to promoting learning and wellbeing for *all* students. Therefore, *The Quality Report 2.0* programme is also made to encourage more data-informed leadership in Danish schools.

Rooted in these two major trajectories informing the construction and introduction of *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, the Ministry of Education soon after initiated a report on leadership. In brief, the purpose of the report is to detail and highlight the kind of skills that are known to be important in relation to ‘running’ schools and fostering professional learning environments capable of promoting student learning and wellbeing. In more detail, the report states that accomplished management and leadership are known for their skills pertaining to seven different target areas (T. D. M. o. Education, 2015). And for that reason, the report attends to each of these seven target areas, focusing explicitly and separately on the skillset necessary to lead and manage successfully and efficiently in relation to each of them. In target area three, termed *Leading Schools based on Knowledge and Results with the intent to Promote Student Learning and Wellbeing*, for example, the report identifies the ability to work systematically with knowledge demonstrating learning-effects and progress in student leaning as a vital skillset for leading and organising schools (T. D. M. o. Education, 2015). To underscore the importance of this identified skillset, a box referring broadly to an area of study commonly known as *school efficiency research*, is included. It states:

Research shows ...

- In schools where the school management continuously follow-up on results, students prosper significantly more compared to students in schools where such follow-up routines are not established.
- Teaching practices and the professional progress of students improve when school management stress learning-goals, follow-up on results and encourage a culture in which evaluation is an integrated part of teaching.
- Municipalities with high performing schools oversee the progress made by these schools and provide them with feedback on their efforts, allowing for them to develop the data from which they work and the ways in which they work with them [] (T. D. M. o. Education, 2015).

Included in the chapter are also a handful of reflection-questions, one of which asks: “How do you make sure the school is managed and organised productively utilising systematic knowledge demonstrating learning-effects and progress in student leaning?” (T. D. M. o. Education (2015). As I read this chapter, carefully reflecting on its statements, I notice that even though it does not necessarily specify how to use data as grounds for promoting quality, the role that data are expected to play in relation to the overall aim of the QAE mandate is nevertheless very present. In the box quoted above, for example, it is stated that leadership informed by data is sure to make students prosperous. And throughout the chapter, this strongly asserted connection between data, leadership, and prosperous students is brought to the fore as it is argued that in the absence of data demonstrating the effects of schooling, the kind of leadership it suggests and recommends is not possible. To that effect, the report ultimately envisions data as synonymous with leadership leaning in and leading forward, meaning the kind of leadership capable of making a difference for all students, and as such data in some sense seem imbued with this potent mode of leadership.

In an attempt to ‘digest’ the ministerial report on school leadership and its way of discursively arguing the benefits of data, it is clear to see how it conveys a very convincing illustration of how and why data must assist leaders to led in ways that are ‘proven’ likely to assist students to realise their academic potential. And for that reason, it seems almost unreasonable to argue against or critique the overall message being conveyed. Especially because the illustration at stake and its way of bringing student prosperity to the fore of what data-work is all about tends to come off as

rather engaging as it continuously argues the efforts it proposes in relation to the end goal, namely the students. On the backdrop of this discourse, data in a way stop being ‘just’ numbers and results as they implicitly become affectively linked to students and the circumstances promoting or hampering their prosperity. Again, this is not to say that this link is always consciously made as data are taken up in practice as basis for promoting quality. It is more a question of it quietly manoeuvring its way into the more sense informed ways based on which subjects may add meaning to their practice while working, for example, with data. To some ears, this may not seem as much, but these sense informed ways of making sense are nevertheless vital in coming to terms with the affective forces that inhabit most phenomena in the world, to phrase it in reference to Stewart and her way of understanding how a political system, for example, is capable of shaping the formation of individual lives.

Expressing Practices Aimed at Promoting Quality

As mentioned earlier, *The Quality Report 2.0* programme demands that all schools assess their level of performance based on results documenting grades, test scores, transition to youth education, and results from the mandatory survey on student wellbeing. These results, reflected in data generated over the course of approximately twelve months, must subsequently be collected and demonstrated in an annual quality report, unique to the school it portrays. The purpose of this demand is twofold. First it is to provide schools and their leaders a platform to express the way in which they integrate and/or work with the QAE mandate to which there are bound. And secondly, it is to allow for external, municipal evaluation of all schools across the country and their attained results. In the following, I turn to the quality reports produced by the schools included in my fieldwork. In total, I examine ten reports; six from the schools located in the northern municipality and four from the schools located in the southern municipality. Beyond the slight differences added by each school as they address issues specific to their faculty, student body and/or particular school events, all the reports are produced in keeping with the same national instructions, and as such, they stand out as very similar. Therefore, I approach all the reports with the intent to explore and approximate how the schools in question and their leaders tend to use the platform they are afforded to convey how they in practice make sense of and work with data for purposes of promoting student learning and wellbeing.

I begin by looking collectively at the reports from the six northern schools. I refer to these schools using the letters A to F. Catering to a pre-set municipal content format, these reports include additional information detailing faculty turnover rates, sick leave stats and strategies for the use of digital solutions, amongst other things. Moreover, the reports also detail the status of initiatives to promote inclusion and guided feedback, for example. As such, these reports produce a comprehensive ‘mapping’ of

each of the schools. Still, as already mentioned, they primarily demonstrate the results obtained, followed by comments and reflections on how management makes sense of these results and how they intend to act on them. The quotes given below, stemming from a selection of the northern schools' reports, illustrate some of this content:

“Based on national test scores illustrating reading proficiency in our primary classes, it is apparent that our school demonstrates results that are above the national average, aligning with the municipal average. The results reflecting our middle-school classes, however, are not satisfactory, given that their average is above the national, but not the municipal, average. [] Therefore, we have decided to implement a focused strategy for improving reading proficiency in all classes at our school” (Northern School A, p. 5).

“On a scale from 1-5 the social wellbeing of the students at our school is rated at 4,1 in 2016/17. This aligns with the national average. In 2015/16 the score was the same. The academic wellbeing is rated at 3,8 on the same scale. This also aligns with the national average. Compared to 2015/16 this result demonstrates a 0,1-point drop. [] The municipal ambition is to promote both social and academic wellbeing. We therefore seek to address the overall wellbeing of our students in the coming school-year, hoping to correct for this year's decline” (Northern School A, p. 15).

Finally, the report from school A goes into more detail stating the following objective:

“The number of students who have finished at our school with the mark 2 or below is significantly lower than the national average. Yet, we have four students for whom we have not succeed in providing the kind of support system that is rightfully to be expected. Prompted by this circumstance, moving forward we will work towards deploying a more rigorous support system, specifically targeting the students who are challenged the most’ (Northern School A, p. 18).

At school B they sum up their efforts and reflections in the following manner:

“This year we have set aside a whole day to provide all members of staff the opportunity to really study the data available to us. Over the course of this day, we have cross-referenced data from The Calculator and from the national wellbeing survey with the specific knowledge we have about each student. Based on this effort we have developed an action-plan for each class and in some cases for individual students, specifying how we intend to work with their learning and wellbeing in the coming year” (Northern School B, p. 7).

And at school E, they meticulously outline the grades reflecting marks in

biology, geography, physics, and chemistry from 2015-2017. Based on this insight, the school details how they intend to focus on supporting students and their academic development in relation to these subject areas:

“We have worked with this focus area in the following manner:

- All the teachers teaching biology, geography, physics and chemistry have worked with instructional coaches for the purpose of developing and implementing new practices pertaining to the final exams.*
- All students have completed the optional national tests in the four subject areas*
- Colleagues and members of the management team have observed classroom-teaching with the intention of supporting and developing existing teaching practices” (Northern School E, p. 13).*

I now turn my attention to the four reports from the southern schools, designated by the letters G to J. In many ways, they are very comparable to the northern reports in the sense that they also cater to or adopt a pre-set municipal format and also include additional information, ‘mapping’ some of the activities characteristic to each school. But mainly they too depict attained results, accompanied by reflections on how to utilise them as a way to begin to implement various initiatives. Again, the following quotes are selected with the intention of exemplifying this principal aspect of these quality reports. The first report from school G stands out a little because of its somewhat decisive reflections on data and how to utilise them. The statements reflected below demonstrate some of the views encompassed in G’ report:

- “The results speak for themselves. They are not satisfactory but seem to progress as can be expected.*
- Based on the generated data, we clearly have a few overriding challenges on our hands.*
- The graph plainly demonstrates that the initiative to improve language acquisition has been successful.*
- We hope to educate ourselves about cause-and-effect relations in order to learn more about what we can do to improve on results that are not presently satisfactory” (Southern School G, p. 4, 5, 18 and 29).*

Specific to School H is the fact that its student body sets it apart from the other schools in the municipality. This fact is mentioned in the report on many occasions. At the outset, for example, it is stated:

“We are acutely aware that many of our children [sic] and their families are in need of special academic support and care” (Southern School H, p. 1).

In a later section, the report speaks of the final grades obtained by the students compared to the other schools in the municipality and at the na-

tional level. The average in School H, in this respect, is significantly lower on all points of comparison. In dealing with this issue, the report states:

“Over the last couple of years, our grade point average has generally increased. As such, it looks like our focus on academic development has had a positive effect on academic achievements, thus increasing the options granted our students later in life. We are proud of that. We expect the increase in grades to continue, in fact, we expect to reach an average of 6,0 within 2-4 years” (Southern School H, p. 8).

In reference to wellbeing, the report speaks of this issue in the following manner:

“The share of students pleased with being a part of their class are on the rise. The numbers, however, show that we are still below the municipal average. Therefore, we have initiated a project focusing on classroom management with the help of X [the name of Danish researcher]. And the teachers have focused on encouraging students to feel ownership towards ‘their’ class. Moreover, classes have been encouraged to arrange potlucks, common after school activities, and friendship classes, also involving the parents” (Southern School H, p. 14).

The report from school I addresses what they themselves term ‘mixed’ results and while discussing the circumstances influencing this status, the report concludes that the grades and test scores in math do not meet the target goals. As a way of dealing with this, the report speaks of this issue in the following manner:

“By introducing the following initiatives, we hope to respond to these negative results with a more positive development. [Three initiatives are then listed]. In addition to this, we expect our new instructional leader to implement a more systematic practice, supporting the progress of our students and thus providing them with the opportunity to realise their academic potential” (Southern School I, p. 5).

Finally, I turn to the report from school J. Largely, it seems to be somewhat standard. In the context of assessment of their results on reading proficiency the report states:

“Generally, we detect a positive development based on the share of students who are rated good readers. However, the results show that this share decreases when the students reach middle school. [] This indicates that, in the coming years, we must support the transition to middle school more diligently, making sure that the teachers from the respective classes work better together” (Southern School J, p. 2).

In view of these statements, it is clear that the reports from both munic-

ipalities address the many specific challenges and/or conditions that occupy each of the respective schools as an intrinsic part of working with data and QAE in general. Across these specificities, however, these statements also demonstrate how the schools and their leaders generally speak of data in ways that seemingly 'abide' by the idea that what is measured can and must serve as the basis of leadership. Thus, hinting at a practice in which data are first employed as the main source of 'knowing' the school and subsequently as the principle onset for leading the school. Of course, it is important to be mindful of the fact that quality reports are mandatory and therefore not a matter of choice, should the schools and their leaders find them redundant or unproductive. To that effect, it is not surprising that the statements reflected above demonstrate how the schools in question seek to adhere to this requirement and the objectives it instils, thereby mirroring the official discourse on what data are and thus can do, at least within the format afforded by the quality report. But in addition to this, I claim, the statements also demonstrate how the expressive components with which data come into being, so to speak, are capable of in some sense morphing their way into this concrete mandatory communicative practice of making results the object of evaluation and the basis for future practices.

As I see it, this form of morphing takes place in the instance where one report, for example, states how the average marks are not acceptable, because they, by the schools own account, reflect the fact that not all students have been provided the support system that they are right to expect. Or in the instance where another report expresses management's wish to become more educated about cause-and-effect relations for purposes of being able to improve results that are presently not satisfactory. Wright or wrong, this is not to problematise this way of reflecting on results and/or plan ahead. Rather, it is to point out that such ways of wording the practice of working with QAE and making sense of it is in some sense informed by the promise with which data are saddled on account of the main policy instructing the QAE mandate. More specifically, informed by the ways in which data are discursively attributed the ability to convey the quality of education, to function as a sound basis for managing more result-oriented, and to operate as a clear-cut instrument for making *all* students count. Again, as stated in the analysis of the official text related to the QAE mandate, it is not that the expressiveness of this promise is taken in as a result of deliberate consideration. It is more a question of the discursive championing of data and their abilities implicitly finding their way into practice by way of serving as useful and appealing basis for leaders to portray their work with data and make sense of their (mundane) day-to-day practice of leading in correspondence with the QAE instruction.

Moreover, the type of morphing mentioned here also takes place, I find, in the instance where, yet another report optimistically depicts how management have learned from data and for that reason have developed an action-plan specifying the tasks that must be secured in the year to

come. And in the instance where first one report expresses hope based on a newly implemented initiative that seeks to allow students to realise their academic potential, and later where another report speaks of feeling proud due to having increased the options granted their students later in life. In relation to those instances, as I see it, the official discourse on data again seem to provide a productive canvas against which it makes sense to narrate the daily efforts directed at promoting quality in this manner. Think, for example, of the guideline material in which data are discursively framed and thus saturated as an important 'asset', affording quality to the thought of as truly manageable task. Or the ministerial report, discursively bringing the students to the fore of what data-work is about by emphasising data as means of safeguarding students and their access to learning and wellbeing. Not to suggest that either of these ways of framing data are directly used as basis for arguing the points made in the respective reports. But rather that they subtly seem to provide a wider horizon of more affectively potent ways of reasoning data from which the reports at stake implicitly draw as grounds for adding meaning to their daily dealings with data.

In looking more broadly at all the quality reports, beyond their immediate address of specific circumstance related to the QAE work being described, I thus find that they in many ways express a rather fine-tuned alertness to what is affectively vested in data and their employment. In the sense that while sizing up the respective schools, the reports implicitly seem to instil a continuum at the ends of which leadership is either practiced purely from situation to situation, based on a mixture of personal beliefs, practical experience, and professional judgement. Or practiced based on a systematic use of data, allowing for more professional and objective modes of practising, given data's assumed independence of ideology, political interests, and personal bias. This continuum is not necessarily instilled because the leaders producing the reports find it neither warranted nor productive, but when communicating about the task of working with data for purposes of promoting quality, it is as if they draw from a mix of all the expressive components mentioned earlier as stimulus to portray and make sense of how they themselves practice leadership. And while doing so, they somehow identify with the kind of leadership featuring at the latter end of the continuum as is thought to be more in touch with the official discourse on data, affectively saturated with the capacity for allowing a more professional (rational) mode of leadership. So, when communicating about data and their role in leadership, it seems that schools and their leaders are neither oblivious nor unsusceptible to the overriding hope and potential inhabiting the QAE mandate and the data it orders.

Concluding Remarks on Data being Enacted Affectively

Informed by the notion of assemblage and its multi-dimensional and open-ended way of thinking about phenomena being and becoming the in world, it makes sense, as argued in the introduction to Entry One, to

conceive of QAE data as entities composed of both material and expressive components. And by exploring the latter it thus becomes possible, I claim, to tap into the affective forces and intensities contributing to the more expressive constitution, so to speak, pertaining to these data. Mindful of this stipulation, I have effectively sought to 'know' about this expressiveness and its potential impact by looking at how data are discursively envisioned and taken up in practice as part of the QAE mandate, more specifically as part of *The Quality Report 2.0* programme. In the analysis encompassed above, I therefore attend initially to the expressive components related to data by examining a range of official texts, all speaking of the positive prospects of employing data for purposes of quality production. And secondly, I attend to these components by exploring the way in which schools and their leaders tend to respond to them as part of their effort to make sense of data and use them for communicative purposes. In the following, I briefly list the insights afforded from this analysis as basis for making some concluding remarks on the kind of expressiveness, I find, immanent to QAE data.

First, I attend to the main policy outlining the premises of *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and a selection of political statements and directives put out by the Danish Ministry of Education, all discursively envisioning data as crucial in terms of promoting quality in schools. Initially by *conceptualising* data as a form of gauge representing student learning and wellbeing and thus as a gauge representing quality. Secondly, by advocating the *utilisation* of data as a sound basis for leading schools with a stronger focus on effects and results. And thirdly, by *potentializing* data as instruments capable of serving students and their academic as well as social progress. And in view of this discursive 'campaigning' tacitly oozing from this collection of official texts, I reckon, data are implicitly made to carry the weight of great promise. Secondly, I attend to a guideline publication put out by Local Government Denmark. In brief, it discursively portrays data a means of making order, effectively stressing the manageability of working with data as the primary basis for pursuing quality, and on account of this discursive portrayal lingering in excess of the guideline material, I claim, data are affectively entrusted as means of making quality stand out as 'doable'.

Finally, I attend to a report on leadership commissioned by the Ministry of Education, compellingly proposing the benefits of employing data as means of practising leadership, and thus discursively narrating data as the basis leaders can and must use in order to assist students to realise their academic potential. And by following the surplus of this discursive narration, data effectively become affectively linked to the potential prosperity of all students. In considering all these official textual resources collectively, it is clear that the discourse on data not only says something about what data are thought or hoped capable of, it also attributes data with a form of expressiveness, reflective of what is affectively vested in them and as such marking their affective 'constitution'. Mindful of this affectively saturated

composition, I then turn to the ten quality report produced by the schools encompassed in the field work conducted in relation to the study at hand. And based on the way these schools and their leaders use the quality reports as a platform to illustrate attained results and reflect on how they use and make sense of data as part of their efforts to promote quality, I sense a certain alertness to the affective 'constitution' identified earlier. Ultimately, suggesting that school leaders in practice are not indifferent to the underlying affective components assisting the emergence of data instructed for purposes of quality production.

In view of the insight thus afforded from this exploration first of the discursive reasoning of data and then the communicative practices of conveying about the efforts undertaken to promote quality, I now turn to the research question proposed in the introduction to Entry One:

How does data impact the task of communicating about quality?

To some extent, the answer to this question is rather simple, seeing that by extrapolating from the analysis of the official texts discursively reasoning data and the quality reports demonstrating how they are taken up in practice, it seems that data are not received and made sense of separately from the expressive components contributing to their affective constitution. Or put differently, it seems that data are not appropriated free of what is affectively vested in them while being ordered as key to the realisation of quality in schools. This is not to say that these 'investments' are taken up directly by the leaders included in the study at hand, it is more a matter of them providing a horizon of meaning or a tacit logic perhaps based on which the leaders tend to add value and direction to their practice when reflecting on data and how to 'apply' them as part of their work with QAE. And by that token, it may be said that the abstract data featuring in the quality reports are 'bent' into meaning informed by the expressiveness discursively attributed data. And to that effect, it seems that the hope and potential with which data come into being is capable of subtlety marking the way in which schools and their leaders communicate about their efforts to promote quality.

Given the subtlety with which this process takes places, however, the role played by the expressiveness attributed data is commonly overlooked. Instead, it is often emphasised that practitioners do not necessarily sanction the inherently rational and highly idealised discourse with which data are reasoned. In fact, they often express critique by questioning the political reasoning of data as a mostly positive and relevant basis for advancing student learning and wellbeing. I recognise the presence of this critique and the agency it may afford as leaders actively add meaning to their way of working with data. Yet, as I see it, the leaders in question, just like the rest of us, are hugely influenced by the kind of rational logic characteristic of the surrounding society, in the sense that they are implicitly familiar-

ised with the stance that data are both necessary and valuable as means of realising the kind of orderly and knowledge-informed practices that are linked to the promotion of quality. And seeing that this kind of familiarity tends to translate into a form of culturally induced susceptibility, it seems that the leaders are prone to mirror the official and thus positive outlook on what data are and can do while communicating about their efforts to promote quality. Thus, pointing to an almost recursive relationship between what is affectively vested in data and the way in which they are enacted in practice. Consequently, it may be argued that the expressiveness immanent to data is what allows for them to be taken up in practice beyond their seemingly 'dead' numeric format, and as such mark the communicative practices related to the mandatory production of quality reports.

Urged by the Connections Made

So far, the exploration of how and why there may be more to said about data and their way of 'working' than commonly assumed points to the fact that what is discursively envisioned on behalf of QAE data makes a difference. It does so because on account of being discursively envisioned as vital to the promotion of quality in Danish schools, data are implicitly linked to a range of capabilities for ensuring and developing specific forms of practicing. And as a result of this linking, to put it in simple terms, data are effectively saturated with the potential for making good on all that which QAE is believed to accomplish, which, in short, means moving 'things', students in particular, in the right direction by enabling more orderly and knowledge informed practices. In reference to this previously stated point, I claim, data in practice seem to function as entities to which a certain expressiveness and thus a certain charge is immanent. And in view of this claim and the overall interest guiding the study at hand, there is good reason to probe the impact, or perhaps the performative effects, of this immanent feature. Therefore, I bring Entry One to a close by opening the insights arising from the analysis up to a wider debate by attending to how attachment to the potential attributed to data may in fact serve as an impulse heightening the productivity of the QAE mandate in education.

In many ways, the stakes are high when it comes to ensuring the best possible quality education for all students in Denmark, partly because quality in this respect is viewed as a core aspect of the contractual relation between nation states and their citizens. Briefly, this relation stipulates, that citizens, through taxation, make public schooling available, and in turn the governing body safeguards the quality of the schooling that is offered. Given the profound implications of this relation, a lot of resources, prestige, and political pull are put into putting the QAE mandate in place and having it be sanctioned as the best available instrument for nation states to uphold their end of the 'bargain'. With this underlying premise surrounding the political instruction to implement QAE in schools, the whole process of employing data for purposes of quality production seems to go further

than merely pursuing a stronger focus on results, in the sense that the QAE mandate and its employment of data is also thought to enable and promote equity, prosperity, and overall societal betterment. As such, the instruction to pursue quality is generally thought of as a rather reasonable undertaking, morally correct even, and on the backdrop of this line of thinking, the official agencies ordering the QAE mandate are obviously inclined to stress the overall positive effects expected to follow in the wake of this mandate.

Prompted by this inclination, it is therefore only to be expected that the political agencies authorising the QAE mandate circulate, so to speak, a rather positive and productive connection between data and overall betterment through the official discourse used to ‘campaign’ data and their attendant qualities. Yet, the circulation of this connection, I reckon, does more than just reflect the official stance on what data are and can do. It also impacts the way in which so-called end-users in schools, for example school leaders, tend to make sense of data as part of their efforts to ‘adhere’ to the QAE mandate. I say this because in the analysis introduced in the previous sub-section it is essentially argued that data are not appropriated in isolation from what is discursively envisioned on their behalf, and by extrapolating from this stance, I find that this underpinning connection between data and betterment operates as a form of affective coating that adds a certain expressiveness or charge to data. In some sense, this connection may be thought of as nothing more than wishful thinking as it mostly expresses what is hoped to come from achieving a particular level of quality and as such it lacks any ‘real’ power. But as data are taken up in practice, the leaders mandated to work with QAE somehow seem urged by this connection between data and overall betterment as they in a way adopt it into their way of reporting about quality. And in the process of doing so, I claim, they are likely to so attach affectively to the idea of promoting quality.

As stated earlier by Berlant, attachment to ideas can serve as a potent formula for promoting certain way of living and practicing (2011). And by adopting this stance into the study at hand, it may thus be argued that attachment to the idea of overall betterment afforded by the production and deployment of data does in fact play an important role in bolstering the QAE mandate. The reason for this is related to the circumstance that with such forms of attachment established, not necessarily as a matter of choice, but rather as a way of striving for the idea of quality and that which it is thought to promote, it seems that practicing in accordance with the QAE mandate may be experienced as a form of affirmation of the common good as well as the various rewards that are assumed to follow from it. Therefore, the current discourse on QAE data should not be dismissed or overlooked, because to the extent that this discourse is capable of marking the way in which data are enacted in practice, it may in a way assist the formation of attachment to the overall idea of quality and thus tacitly prompt school

leaders, for example, to align their way of thinking and working with data with those prescribed by the QAE mandate. In view of this way of coupling attachment to modes of practising, there is ample reason, I find, to welcome further inquiry into the overarching discourse on data conveyed primarily by official stakeholders. Not to critique it for being in the wrong or based on faulty assumptions, as has been done for what seems like decades. But to better understand how it seemingly nourishes various forms of attachment, capable of marking the way in which data are used to conceive of and demonstrate quality in the making.



Chapter 4:

Entry Two

- Data Being Played Out

Data as Anchor Points

As I remember it, the air was full of tension at the follow-up meeting mentioned in the introduction to this study. One of the things spurring this tension, I found, was the presence of what I term ‘ominous data’ indicating a decline with regard to student learning and wellbeing. I refer to these data as ‘ominous’ because every time these kinds of data were discussed, or rather, every time the municipal representatives questioned the local school leadership team about them, the air filling the room would gradually become more and more tense, leaving me feeling palpably uncomfortable. Sitting in my chair, cringing and without knowing where to fix my gaze. During the meeting, of course, I did my best to ignore what was going on inside me so as to stay alert to the proceedings unfolding. But I distinctly recall leaving the meeting curious about what had just taken place, thinking that the tension I had picked up on, this indeterminate, elusive ‘thing’ hanging in the air, somehow seemed important, not only to understanding the event that had just taken place, but also, more generally, to grasping how the feel of follow-up meetings may influence how school leaders, for example, approach the QAE mandate and everything it prescribes and promises. Therefore, I propose to explore the spaces to which school leaders and municipalities are summoned for purposes of promoting quality in schools, focusing specifically on the role played by data and the QAE mandate in relation to what unfolds when school leaders and municipal representatives follow up on results.

To explore this in more detail, I initially turn to the concept of atmosphere. This is a commonly known concept, in the sense that most people have an idea of what an atmosphere is and what it feels like. To chart its exact meaning, however, is not easy, as it is inherently slippery and embraces seeming opposites. But in overview there are some distinct features by which this concept may be known. In a strict etymological sense, *atmos* refers to the gaseous vapor surrounding the earth, and *sphere* refers to a globe or ball-like object (Barnhart, Steinmetz, & Wilson, 1988). Informed by this backdrop, the term ‘atmosphere’ tends to refer to what surrounds an object or a situation at a specific place and time, essentially naming the spaces we inhabit and the moments we experience. And often, at least in an everyday sense, ‘ambience’, ‘mood’, and ‘feeling’ are used as synonyms for atmosphere. In view of these features, the term atmosphere is therefore, in broad, used to name the ways in which humans experience the world, and, in effect, are (affectively) impacted by ‘what is around’. As such, much of the academic work done on atmosphere may generally be said to focus on the in-betweenness of objects and subjects to which emotional and sensorial impressions are central, exploring the following queries: where and when do atmospheres begin and end? How do they materialise? What constitutes them? And to which extent do they have an impact on the way in which lives are lived, individually as well as collectively?

In a strict philosophical sense, the notion of atmosphere is frequently

connected to two philosophers. One is Martin Heidegger (1962), speaking of a *Stimmung* or pre-reflexive mood as what allows humans to constitute the world as meaningful, seeing that it is essentially grasped through the specificity of a certain mood (Trigg, 2020, p. 6). Another is Hermann Schmitz (2005), who understands atmospheres as meaningful situations, spatially extended as non-subjective feelings (Riedel, 2019, p. 85). Building on these principal stances, Gernot Böhme (2017) broadly defines atmosphere as the quality of space. In more detail, he focuses on both the creation and perception of atmospheres (ibid. p. 88), arguing that atmosphere pertains to “the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived” (ibid. p. 20), located between the subject and object. As such, he considers atmosphere as immanently emanating or radiating the delights or perils of things, underscoring that without this immanent ‘quality’ things would not come across as *something*. Or, perhaps more precisely, they would not stand out to the perceiver in the manner that they do (ibid. p. 183 as cited in Riedel, 2019). To that effect, things and their presence are intimately connected to the way they qualitatively and sensorially stand out in and of themselves (Böhme, 1993). In sum, Böhme considers atmosphere, presence, and materiality as being closely connected, and he states that the properties of an atmosphere essentially relate to the quality of a situation, which is constituted by varying constellations of subject/object, perceiver/perceived.

Over time, the interest in atmosphere has branched out. In recent years it has, for example, been employed to understand how what resides in between objects and subjects may come to matter in social life, broadly speaking. And on account of this ‘expansion’, a growing number of scholars have taken up atmosphere for purposes of sociological and political inquiry. Within human geography, for example, the work of Ben Anderson (2009), Derek McCormack (2008), and Nigel Thrift (2008) are instances of this trend. And within cultural studies, Sara Ahmed’s (2014b) work on moods develops the idea of the sociality of emotions. And lastly, within anthropology/ethnography Kathleen Stewart’s (2011) work on forces of expressivity also extends from the notion of what is ‘out there’ matters to bodily states of being. Even though it lies beyond the scope of this brief survey to go into more detail regarding this extensive body of work, it must be noted, that the aforementioned scholars generally do not consider atmosphere to be an exclusively psychological phenomena, as in purely a state-of-mind-thing. Nor do they consider atmosphere to be only an ‘object’ or a ‘thing out there’, equivalent to what is usually thought of as the milieu. Rather they typically think of atmosphere as a phenomenon, located both within the realm of experience and the environment, relevant to the time and place to which it is bound (Bille, 2020 p. 4).

In view of this ‘location’, it is typically argued that the concept of atmosphere effectively integrates a range of binary distinctions such as inner and outer world, medium and content, meaning and matter, individual and collective, body and mind, subject and object (Riedel, 2000 p. 86). Or to

paraphrase Stewart (2011), it integrates what is palpable yet unconstrained, material yet abstract. As such, this concept ultimately brings together what is commonly indexed as existing neither within the external nor the internal realm of life, but in between them. In sum, atmosphere may thus be understood as a presence or a force, allowing for an experience to be felt, originating not only from one's inner self, but also from the nature of the space surrounding the experience in question. Informed by this understanding of atmosphere, it may very well be argued that an atmosphere, in effect, operates as a kind of force, conditioning the way in which things (objects) and events are experienced, meaning that an atmosphere surrounding an encounter, event, or a social exchange effectively can come to condition or mark the way in which it is experienced. And therefore, the ability to construct a particular atmospheric feel may be viewed as a rather potent source of power.

Obviously, such conditioning may find its momentum from multiple sources. Dylan Trigg (2020), for example, highlights that the 'fabrication' of shared emotion and human connectivity under the right circumstances may give cause to certain atmospheres which in turn serve as vital to the integrative togetherness by which individuals tacitly recognise and/or feel themselves as members of a plural whole. And in that sense, an atmosphere can in fact hold sway over groups of people by "providing a diffused anchor point, in and around which group cohesion is based" (ibid., p. 6). And Friedlind Riedel, who examines atmospheres in relation to religious transformation, argues that atmospheres 'work' by erasing inconsistencies; attaching a unifying significance onto elements that might otherwise have remained unrelated. Effectively, functioning as a technology of power, modulating situations and groups into consistent and thereby unified wholes (Riedel, 2019, p. 90). And finally, based on an examination of various examples of mundane social life, Bille et al. (2015) maintain that atmospheres in many instances foster the grounds for the sensorial and emotional feel of a place, and by that token may be viewed as constructs that mark people's experience of the world in ways that are similar to what is somewhat harshly known as manipulations.

In total, these examples of scholarly work demonstrate how atmospheres may be staged or modulated to more or less purposefully serve a specific objective that can either be purely commercial or more decisively ideological. While serving mainly commercial interests, atmospheres are typically staged for the purpose of marketing, organised with the intention of luring potential consumers into buying something they might otherwise not have bought, (e.g. getting them to spend money at particular vendor) (Bille, 2015, p. 10). (In marketing, this is considered hugely important because the atmosphere surrounding the purchase situation is often more influential than the product itself (Kotler, 1974 as cited in Bille, 2015))⁵. And

⁵ Shopping malls, for example, are typically designed to construct or evoke a merchant

while serving more blurred and less openly expressed ideological interests, atmospheres are often staged with the intention of achieving specific social, cultural, political, or economic goals through the invocation of people's affective connection to them. But despite the nature of the objective at stake, it is important to stress the fact that to the extent that atmospheres are successfully staged, combining objects, bodies, and spaces in 'productive' ways, they may in fact be vital to achieving certain goals. And as such, there is a sense of agency to atmospheres given their capacity for conditioning the way in which things and events are experienced.

In some sense, this agentic capacity operates as a rather abstract feature. This is the case because in spite of its unmistakable sensorial feel, it typically comes into play in ways that are tacit, fragile to the slightest counter move, not necessarily agreed upon beforehand and consistently emerging and morphing. Think, for example, of the communal buzz overflowing from a music festival or the mutual rage surrounding a protest rally, and then imagine pinpointing the exact ways in which it is manifested both in terms of its unstable and complex establishment and its sudden eruption into something altogether different. But regardless of this inherent fragility, once on the move, there is something unmistakable about an atmosphere, meaning there is something about its presence that is not easily ignored. Take for example the follow-up meeting in which I was (accidentally) drawn into a form of tension I could not necessarily specify, but which nevertheless registered in a very palpable manner, bringing the uncomfortable feeling of the situation to the fore of my senses. So, in reference to the thesis that atmospheres have agency to the extent that they are capable of conditioning, or marking perhaps, the experience of things and events, I find, it makes sense to explore the atmospheric component of follow-up meetings, in order to better understand the agency this potentially allows for.

In brief, *The Quality Report 2.0* programme demands follow-up meetings as a core and compulsory element related to the overall effort of promoting quality in Danish schools. As part of this effort, the governing body at the municipal level is entrusted with the responsibility of initiating these meetings, instructed to support local management to develop and further practices in which data from the quality reports are continuously used as grounds for (a) tracking and monitoring results and (b) making day to day decisions as well as engaging in more long-term strategic planning. To that effect, the municipal level is expected both to audit the production of quality by following on attained results and more generally support the implementation of the QAE mandate on the basis of these officially mandated meetings. In effect, data are 'arranged' as vital anchor points allowing for these objectives to be secured. Positioned as points of reference to which

ambiance or atmosphere (Thibaud, 2015, p. 5). This is achieved by carefully controlling the lighting, the constant average temperature, strict rules of behaviour etc., so as to produce an 'involuntary vulnerability' through which shoppers are lulled into a state of distraction and ultimately cajoled into spending (Healy, 2014).

the work directed at overseeing and promoting quality must both draw on from and strive towards. 'Draw on' in the sense that leaders, ideally, are expected to make decisions informed by data; and 'strive towards' in the sense that the 'level' of quality attained is documented and monitored over time with data. In sum, this means that the role formally assigned to data in relation to follow-up meetings is rather straight forward; they must document results and guide processes of decision-making also known as processes of practicing leadership.

What is less straight forward, however, is the ways in which this role is played out in practice and how it potentially assists in creating a specific atmospheric feel to accompany the actual proceedings of follow-up meetings. Obviously, this is not something that can be addressed hypothetically, so to speak, seeing that all atmospheres, in principle, are specific to concrete and actual objects, bodies, and spaces. To probe data, follow-up meetings, and the atmospheric feel that is characteristic of them, I therefore suggest to empirically explore how *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and the data ordered in its wake collectively are 'taken on board' by local school leaders and municipal representatives as they convene to discuss the quality report belonging to the school being scrutinised. Specifically, I suggest focusing on how data and the underpinning logic associated with the QAE mandate potentially factor into the 'air' filling the rooms hosting the meetings in question. By doing so, empirically probing a phenomenon like atmosphere, so inherently elusive, yet tangibly felt, in the specific context of follow-up meetings, it may thus be possible, I claim, to learn more about the experience of working with QAE data, meaning learn about how practitioners, school leaders in particular, experience the work associated with following up on data for purposes of quality production.

So, prompted by this turn to the concept of atmosphere and the stances explicated above, I thus raise the following research question as a basis for the query encompassed in Entry Two:

How does data mark the atmosphere enveloping follow-up practices?

To address this query, I start by formally outlining the line of inquiry employed in Entry Two. This entails once again highlighting the kind of mediation of affect I use as point of reference. Moreover, it entails specifying how I construct my empirical resources as well as detailing the way in which I propose to approach them in an effort to make sense of them and subsequently employ them as grounds for 'knowing' about the atmosphere characteristic of the follow-up meetings I attend. Guided by this line of inquiry, I then venture into the actual analysis, and in the process of so doing, I essentially try to achieve two things. On the one hand, I try to pin-point the multiple 'things' going on, based on the three overarching analytical distinctions I use to get a hold of selected aspects of the meetings. On the other hand, I also try to attune myself to this multiplicity at stake, relying

on my own sensorial ‘apparatus’ to get a sense of what it evokes in me. As a whole, the analysis ultimately offers insight into what tangibly unfolds within the meetings as well as what is evoked in me as a ‘bystander’ to them. Informed by the combined insights stemming from this work, I then address the research question functioning as the basis of the query related to Entry Three. And lastly, I reflect on the overall implications afforded by discussing how something so inherently intangible as an atmosphere may mark the affective experience of follow-up meetings and in turn potentially occasion attachment to the official mandate to promote quality in schools.

The Line of Inquiry – Apprehending Data Enrolled in Practice

With the stated research question in mind, the overall ambition guiding Entry Two is to promote insights about how data are enrolled in follow-up practices and effectively contribute to the atmosphere surrounding these practices. It is, however, not possible to establish the ‘nature’ of any atmosphere without paying close attention to the events, interactions, and places in relation to which it continuously forms and ‘deforms’. Or, as noted by Trigg (2020, p. 2), in the absence of detailed empirical exploration, the broad range of contextual and situational specificities associated with an atmosphere risk being lost in abstraction. Therefore, I propose a line of inquiry characterised by a strong empirical orientation towards an actual situation, specific to a certain time and place. As a way of doing so, I start by outlining the specific mediation of affect I rely on as grounds for understanding follow-up meetings as something in which an atmosphere may be discerned, and as such, as something that may register affectively. Secondly, I detail how and why I establish the concrete follow-up meetings as an empirical site for exploring the atmospheric feeling potentially overflowing in such formal spaces. And lastly, I highlight the steps I take as a way of making sense of ‘the empirical’ and thus of being able to ‘know’ about the atmosphere enveloping the follow-up meetings I attend. By doing so, I argue, I ultimately construct a line of inquiry well-suited to apprehend data as a form of felt presence, which in turn makes it possible to obtain a better appreciation of the atmospheric component of what is often termed ‘data-work’.

Viewing Affect as an Atmospheric Feature

Guided by the query of exploring QAE data and their contribution to their atmosphere surrounding follow-up meetings, I turn to Ben Anderson (2016) and his notion of affective atmospheres. I do so because this notion, broadly speaking, affords an understanding of affect as something that may be both diffused *in the air*, while still being *relationally* contingent, operating as a collective force shaping encounters or experiences in specific ways. In other words, with this notion I am afforded an understanding of affect as

what, in Anderson's words, *surrounds* and *envelops* people, things, and sites as well as the encounters that take place within the complex arrangements involving these heterogeneous actants. And given my focus on follow-up meetings and the way in which they may be enveloped by the QAE mandate and the data that it employs, this mediation of affect presents itself as a relevant basis for approximating that which resides in between subjects and objects, yet remains bodily and thus sensorially present at the empirical site in question. In the following, I shall therefore specify this conception of affective atmosphere a bit further in order include some its nuances.

While attempting to specify the notion of affective atmospheres, Anderson draws mainly on two phenomenologists: Mikel Dufrenne (1973) and Gernot Böhme (1993), both of whom reflect on atmosphere as an aesthetic concept. In reference to Dufrenne's work, Anderson initially finds a stimulus to conceptualise atmospheres as never being still, static or at rest. More concretely, he states: "What I want to draw from Dufrenne's work is the unfinished qualities of atmospheres. [The qualities of] always forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing" (Anderson, 2016, p. 141). To Dufrenne it is the atmosphere of an aesthetic object that renders it open to (bodily) apprehension, because it elicits a feeling or an emotion in the spectator, viewer, or listener, which in turn 'completes' the object in question and then surpasses it. Dufrenne especially stresses this to be the case in relation to aesthetic works of 'high art' like sculptures, music, and architecture. But generally, he argues that any aesthetic object, on the one hand, can be said to belong to the perceiving subject, because it, in a way, requires the perceiving subject if it is to be completed, so to speak. Yet, on the other hand, the object still belongs to itself, seeing that it, in principle, serves as the origin of the feelings or emotions it may elicit. So, from Dufrenne Anderson 'learns' that it is important to be mindful of this tension between the subjective and the objective as it effectively accounts for the circumstance that atmospheres emanating from objects, as well as people, sites, and things, as Anderson adds (Ibid., p. 146), always emerge and transform while gaining from a plurality of interpretations.

Furthermore, Anderson also turns to Böhme and his emphasis on the spatiality of atmospheres. Like Dufrenne, Böhme recognises the fluctuating nature associated with atmosphere as it continuously emerges and transforms due to the tension between subject and object. Böhme, however, more explicitly stresses the in-between state characteristic of atmospheres, the continuous oscillation between 'belonging' to both the subjective and objective. To explain this in-between state, he argues:

"Atmospheres are neither something objective, that is, qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thinglike, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities – conceived as ecstasies. Nor are atmospheres something subjective, for example, determinations of a psychic state. And yet they are subjectlike, belong-

ing to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space” (Böhme, 1993, p. 122 as cited in Anderson, 2016).

With this explanation, Böhme risks re-instating the much-lamented divide between subject/object. But, as noted by Anderson, he avoids this by categorically underscoring the tension between the subjective and objective, insisting that atmospheres rests on neither ‘side’ of this divide. Given this insistence, Böhme ultimately brings awareness to the ambiguity of atmospheres regarding their location, which is always spatial and diffused within spheres in which it is possible for subjects to get caught.

In reference to Dufrenne’s and Böhme’s work, Anderson concludes that atmospheres may be said to emanate from heterogeneous ensembles of various ‘bodies’, yet he stresses that they are not reducible to them. In view of this conclusion, Anderson in turn finds that any instinct to discern a phenomenon like atmosphere by probing how it may inhabit what it emanates from must be reconciled with the fact that it effectively “becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate out causes from effects” (Anderson, 2016, p. 153). Anderson therefore suggests that attending to the variety of ways in which things and people can affect and be affected by atmospheres requires introducing a more complex way of thinking causality in relation to atmospheres. Briefly, this entails thinking of the composition of atmospheres as both an effect, emanating from a heterogeneous gathering of elements, and a mediating force that actively may change a gathering of elements by enveloping the air surrounding them and thus impacting the many actants that contribute to the gathering at stake. So, by thinking atmospheres along these lines, Anderson argues that it makes sense to envision modes of causality that are less linear and less focused on separating out cause from context but instead are emergent and related to the different ways in which atmospheres are bodily felt or registered (Ibid., p. 156).

Informed by these two sources of inspiration, as well as others that are not detailed given the limits of this overview, Anderson ultimately arrives at the following stance:

“Atmospheres are a kind of indeterminate affective excess through which intensive space-times are created and thus come to envelope specific bodies; sites, objects, people, and so on; all of which may be atmospheric or may feel and be moved by atmospheres” (Anderson, 2016, p. 160).

Consequently, Anderson allows for an understanding of atmospheres according to which they can be said to emanate and envelop a broad range of people, sites, and things, arguing that they are “endlessly being formed and reformed through encounters as they are attuned to and become part of life” (Ibid, p. 145). To that effect, he thereby renders atmospheres a vital

component of what conditions how life is lived and felt, meaning that he effectively thinks of atmospheres as highly affective phenomena, capable of affecting and being affected. And thus, guided by this line of thinking he introduces the notion of affective atmospheres. To me this makes a lot of sense, especially because by applying this way of thinking about affect to the query at hand it becomes possible to think of school leaders (people), follow-up meetings (sites) and data (things) as a heterogeneous ensemble of 'bodies' affecting and being affected by the atmosphere enveloping them. And as such, I find reason to think of data as something that may contribute to the atmosphere enveloping situations or events such as the follow-up meetings in question.

An Empirical Basis Constituted by Follow-up Meetings

As mentioned previously, follow-up meetings between local school management and municipal representatives are officially ordered as a core and mandatory practice inherent to *The Quality Report 2.0* programme. The main purpose of these meetings is to encourage practices in which data are used as grounds for monitoring results and as a basis for local leaders to make decisions relevant to the circumstances of their respective schools. As such, data are central to follow-up meetings, and for that reason I find that they serve as a valuable empirical site for exploring how data potentially can come to influence the atmosphere enveloping this mandatory practice of following up on data demonstrated in quality reports. In the following, I therefore seek to establish these meetings as my empirical site for probing the research question at the centre of Entry Two. To achieve this, I start by briefly outlining the kind of fieldwork I have conducted in two separate municipalities; one northern and one southern as mentioned earlier. As a way of coming to terms with the complex and multi-layered 'nature' typical of these meetings, I turn to a theoretical concept termed *affective arrangement*. I do so because with this concept it becomes possible to understand and account for the multifaceted composition constituting the actual meetings I attend to. And as such, be able to 'capture' the many components actively promoting the emergence of the specific atmospheres that I seek to empirically explore.

In an effort to gain access, simply put, to the kind of follow-up meetings that I am interested in, I found it necessary to make contact at the municipal level, as the municipality is the official agency responsible for hosting follow-up meetings. But, as it turned out, this was easier said than done, seeing that the first handful of municipalities that I contacted were not interested in 'letting me in'. They declined my request, stating that the timing was not right or that they were overloaded and could not commit to any additional 'work' or disturbance that might result from me sitting in on their follow-up meetings. I had no doubt that this was in fact so, but along with these more than reasonable 'rejections', I generally got the feeling that the municipal consultants with whom I communicated were not

very enthusiastic about having some stranger, let alone a doctoral student, come and observe their practice. It was as if they somehow considered the follow-up meetings, officially sanctioned as a forum for addressing the ‘performances’ of local schools and their management, to be private. One municipal consultant actually declined while stating: “We are kind of struggling right now, getting our quality-work on track, and our schools are not performing like they should, so I am afraid that your presence would just cause additional stress”.

Municipalities are officially responsible for initiating follow-up meetings. Therefore, I needed at least one, and preferably two municipal consultants in charge of these meetings to let me get close to their practice of following up on data. Aware of this necessity, I kept knocking on doors, and after some time, I made contact with two consultants from two separate municipalities, both of whom were open to the idea of me participating. They did, however, stress the fact that they considered the meetings to be an important ‘workspace’, and for that reason they could not afford to have them disrupted in any way. My presence, therefore, had to be respectful of this. Before making contact at the municipal level, I had thought that filming the meetings with a two-way camera would be the optimal way to ‘capture’ all the minute gestures and non-verbal communication that is hard to grasp when observing multiple people interacting.⁶ But in reality, it did not seem like a viable option given the consultants’ explicit conditions regarding my presence. Moreover, the consultants were not keen on letting me talk to the local management teams beforehand, and without any preliminary dialogue and building of trust building there was a good chance the local leadership teams would find it intimidating or uncomfortable to have not only me but also a camera be part of their meeting with what is formally their employer as well as their immediate boos. Mindful of these two circumstances, I silently abandoned my original idea of making video recordings. So, while discussing the terms of my participation with the consultants, we came to the agreement that I could sit in on the meetings in the role of observer and that I could make voice recordings.⁷

With this important ‘opening’ squared away, I conducted the first part of my fieldwork in the two municipalities over a time span of approximately

⁶ In fact, while planning my approach to explore data and their enrolment in follow-up practices, I played out many scenarios in my head, contemplating how to get a tangible hold on the intense atmosphere, I had previously experienced. At one point, I even contemplated taking saliva tests of all the participating parties for purposes of measuring their cortisol levels before and after the meeting; naively thinking that that might offer some solid insight on the kind of atmosphere at stake.

⁷ As part of this agreement, I signed a declaration of confidentiality, specifying that all recordings and field notes would only be accessed by me. For purposes of external referencing the municipalities and the schools must be anonymised.

4 months. I attended a total of ten follow-up meetings. Initiated and planned by the municipal consultants, these meetings were scheduled to last three hours at the northern schools and two hours at the southern ones. Present at these meetings were the respective heads of the school division from each of the municipalities as well as one or two consultants from the same division. The local team of school leaders were naturally also present. This team typically consisted of the primary school leader and two to three assistant leaders, each representing their areas of responsibility. The meetings always took place at the schools, either in the primary leader's office or in some adjacent meeting room. Usually, the municipal representatives sat on one side of the table and the local management team on the other. My assigned place was usually on one of those two 'sides' or at end of the table. The agenda was more or less set in advance and roughly divided the meetings into three parts. In the first part, the local leaders were invited to share their thoughts and reflections related to their efforts and/or difficulties with producing the quality report. In the next part, the municipal representatives shared their comments on the results demonstrated in the quality report. And finally, in the last part a forward-looking attitude was imposed, in the sense that the local leaders were called upon to detail their plans for implementing certain practices with the overall intention of promoting quality at their school.

Officially, these follow-up meetings are hemmed in by a highly structured agenda, effectively bracketing a rather formal space for the purpose of following up on data. In practice, however, they were host to a cacophony of social and relational exchanges that ran parallel to this official backbone. The most dominant of these exchanges were the ones that took place between the head of the school division from the municipality and the local school leaders. In many ways, their relationship resembles that of a boss/employee relation, seeing that all the schools operate under the municipal jurisdiction. And therefore, the head of division and the municipal consultants work closely together with the local teams of school leaders, collaborating on the implementation of various directives, and periodically discussing a broad assortment of issues in larger forums. Furthermore, local leaders also sometimes discuss difficult situations with the head of division, often soliciting the head's approval in relation these difficult cases. Given these many points of contact, the follow-up meetings I attended were thick with the internal dynamics following from the day-to-day working relation between the two participating parties. Ultimately, this suggests that the meetings came into expression on the backdrop of both their formal mandate and of the informal social dynamics at play; as such they proved to be multiply layered.

In an attempt to come to grips with this empirical multiplicity, I briefly turn to Jonas Bens (2018) and his way of employing the concept of *affective arrangements*. In short, he defines it as "heterogeneous ensembles of diverse materials forming a local layout that operates as a dynamic formation,

comprising persons, things, artefacts, spaces, discourses, behaviours, and expressions in a characteristic mode of composition and dynamic relatedness” (ibid., p. 8). To that effect, affective arrangements may be described as situations or events in which the surrounding atmosphere is not reduced to either realm of their heterogeneous ensemble. With this theoretically informed concept, it becomes possible, I claim, to reflect the fact that the meetings I attended formally emerged as a direct consequence of a mandatory and pre-structured agenda, set up to cater to a specific purpose at a specific time and place as well as a result of the co-presence of human and non-human bodies (meaning data from the reports), continuously intermingling with and relating to each other through processes of affecting and being affected. Therefore, I use this concept as a way of conceptualising and thus establishing the proceedings related to following up on data as an empirical site composed by the local coalescing of multiple entities whose constant intermingling are essential to the atmosphere surrounding actual follow-up meetings.

With this ‘establishment’, however, it must be noted that it is obviously difficult to analytically grasp and communicate the full range of entities factoring into these meetings and thus into the empirical site I attend to. For that reason, it is necessary to focus on some selected dimensions so as not to get blindsided by trying to account for all these entities, meaning trying to account for the meetings in their entirety. In relation to his study of the affective arrangement marking the courtroom proceedings at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Bens himself ‘limits’ his scrutiny of ‘the empirical’ by focusing ‘only’ on the material and infrastructural, the visual, and the audible aspects of the hearing he follows (Bens, 2018, p. 9). Extrapolating from this need to focus on selected aspects or parts of the affective arrangement I seek to examine, I therefore propose to approach my ten follow-up meetings by focusing on the following dimensions. First, I focus on the way in which the meetings are formally scaffolded, adding a certain structure to the way in which they evolve. Secondly, I focus on the presence of the QAE mandate at the meetings, focusing specifically on how data from the quality report are enrolled. And thirdly, I focus on the social, relational dynamics taking place as the participating parties interact with each other. My construction of the empirical is thus designed to attend specifically to these aspects of the meetings in question.

‘Knowing’ about Data through Attunement

As noted earlier, atmospheres are generally considered in-between phenomena, filling the space between objects and subjects to which an affective, sensorial experience is central. As such, they may be thought of as hybrids in the sense that they, on the one hand, are made up by the sensorial feel of a place or an event, and on the other, are expressed as a spatially diffused ‘thing’ out there. ‘Knowing’ about atmospheres and the way in which they mark things is thus often considered somewhat tricky. Consequently,

much effort has been and is still being put into finding suitable methods for exploring and capturing this ambiguous existence and the complex ‘procedures’ inherent to atmospheres. But despite this effort, there are no clear methodological guidelines for how to tease out the vague and immaterial constitution of atmospheres in order to make them an object to be explored and potentially ‘known’. As a way of navigating in the absence of such guidelines, I am thus faced with the task of developing a method for ‘knowing’ about that which can only be felt, perceived, or experienced, namely the atmosphere surrounding the follow-up meetings in question. So, in an attempt to deal with this task, I start by selecting the analytical distinctions I find relevant for ‘going through’ my empirical material. Then, I highlight my strategy for probing what, with Anderson in mind, may be termed the *affective excess* of the follow-up meetings I attended. And lastly, I outline how I seek to produce insight about the atmosphere at stake by sensorially attuning to it and thus affectively tapping into it as a way of ‘knowing’ about it.

To develop my analytical strategy, I initially size up the empirical material produced as part of my field work in the northern and southern municipalities. This entails getting a preliminary overview of all the voice-recordings and the field notes I made while sitting in on the follow-up meetings in the two localities. But given the myriad of things ‘happening’ in this material, I need to develop a selection of analytical distinctions that are well suited to ‘locate’ the role played by data in relation to the atmosphere marking the meetings. With this ‘need’ in mind, I go back to the selected aspects I use as means of grappling with the empirical complexity characteristic of the affective arrangements that I am, in a way, a part of. In many ways, these selected aspects seem relevant as basis for sorting out and communicating about the situation unfolding during the meetings and thus as basis for getting a better idea of how data plays into it. Therefore, I chose to approach my empirical material while employing the following analytical distinctions:

- **The formally instructed framework**

Going through the material with this aspect in mind, I start by noting the formal scaffolding of the actual meetings. I attend to the way they are set up and detail how the agenda is presented and used to structure the flow of exchanges. In particular, I try to discern the degree to which the meeting ‘spaces’ are seemingly constructed in accordance with the official QAE mandate.

- **The specific use of or references to data**

Going through the material with this aspect in mind, I specifically focus on how data are enrolled in the meetings. This entails paying careful attention to how data are referred to and by whom, tracing the potential shifts in focus, perception, and moods this seems to set into motion.

- **The informal, social interaction**

Going through the material with this aspect in mind, I look at the social, relational dynamics played out in the meetings. I focus on the interaction between the bodies present by trying to get a hold of the ongoing processes of affecting and being affected being played out between the participating parties.

As mentioned previously, Anderson (2016) claims that atmospheres function as a kind of affective excess through which the intensity of a given time and place is created and subsequently envelops bodies, sites, and objects (ibid. p. 160). In principle, this means that a phenomenon like atmosphere may be explored to the degree that this affective excess is made object, to put it in simple terms. Mindful of this reasoning combined with the research interest at hand, I therefore propose to probe the affective excess associated with the follow-up meetings, because by probing or rather attuning myself to this excess, I suggest, it may be possible to offer some insight into the 'nature' of the atmosphere enveloping these meetings. And by focusing specifically on the role played by data in relation to meetings, it may furthermore be possible to get a better understanding of their contribution to the atmospheric composition at stake. Put very plainly, this means that I find myself in pursuit of what may be termed the *excess* of the follow-up meetings I attended. As a means of doing so, I thus seek to get a hold of both that which is diffusely distributed 'out-there' and that which is palpably felt by my sensory apparatus, meaning that I seek to find out about what is vastly diffuse while at the same time registering the ways in which it becomes substantial to me by sensorially attuning to it.

I argue this approach of attunement given the circumstance that the excess, or the atmospheric feel to put it more accessibly, I pursue cannot be seen or quantitatively measured by any traditional scale. In the sense that it may only be recognised by feeling, perceiving, or experiencing it. Therefore, I claim, while researching atmosphere the primary investigatory 'tool' is a bodily capacity for registering the quality of what hangs in the air. In a similar vein, Dylan Trigg (2020) argues that, despite resistance to conventional scientific classification, there is a weight to atmosphere that can be gauged in and through the lived body (Trigg, 2020, p. 3). While making this argument, Trigg, amongst others, refers to Merleau-Ponty, highlighting that our perceptual experience of another person's mood or a specific atmosphere involves incorporating the expressivity of this mood or atmosphere within one's own kinaesthetic awareness or involvement perhaps. And following from this 'ruling', Trigg ultimately underscores the point that atmosphere is not only located in the air but also under our skin (ibid). This essentially suggests that the appreciation of atmosphere cannot help but involve the bodily affectability and resonance of the 'appreciating body', which in relation to the study at hand relates to the researcher 'I'. So, by adding this insight from Trigg to Anderson's notion of affective excess, I come to the conclusion that 'knowing' atmosphere must entail grasping

dynamic formations of heterogeneous ensembles by employing my senses and attuning to what is affectively aroused from my involvement with the 'ensemble' I attend to.

Pure as it may sound, this strategy of employing my senses and attuning to what is around is not, however, an antidote to bias affecting my way of making sense of 'the empirical'. As stipulated by Sara Ahmed, the body is not neutral, in the sense that the body does not encounter, register, or get caught in atmospheres from a neutral position, meaning that atmospheres are not just 'read' or perceived. More precisely, Ahmed states: "So we may walk into the room and 'feel the atmosphere', but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 125). In brief, this means that the apprehension of atmospheres, to put it in rudimentary terms, ultimately depends on one's mood or capacity for apprehending what is at stake. Or, perhaps more precisely, plays together with it, seeing that atmospheres do not pre-exist, but rather feeds of and emerge through what may largely be thought of as encounters. With this specification in mind, it must thus be noted that my capacity for sensorially and thus affectively tapping into the excess I seek to 'know' is hugely impacted by my overriding ambition of remaining purposefully open to the underlying aspirations related to the QAE mandate as a way of exploring the dynamics potentially serving to bolster it. This is not to imply that my way of making sense therefore is faulty. It is just to underscore that this methodological injunction is sure to have a say in that my resolve to be open to what the QAE mandate implicitly vows is sure to influence the 'angel' of my arrival to use Ahmed's terminology.

In terms of developing a method for 'knowing' about atmosphere, I am now confronted with the very last step; specifying my strategy of attunement. So, as a way of specifying this, I shall identify the practical 'measures' based on which I propose to approach my empirical material. First, I start by briefly reminding myself of the in-between quality of atmospheres, a quality that places or categorises atmospheres as something both object-like and subject-like, which Böhme (1993) refers to as the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. And with this quality in mind, I then approach my voice-recordings and my field notes by accounting for both the perceivable world of the meetings and my perception of them. I do so initially by employing my analytical distinctions as a way of gaining or imposing a form of overview over my empirical material. And then, based my take on the perceivable world distinctive of the follow-up meetings, I try to get in touch with my own perception or feel of what is at stake, trying to attune myself to what the meetings arouse in me while detailing how I respond to what is around, namely the in-between space of what is out there in the common space of the meeting rooms and to what is in me, the perceiving subject, the researcher 'I'. As such, I ultimately 'perform' a sort of double movement, attending to what is out there as well as attuning to what is in

me as a way of approaching the excess of the space, I am in a way a part of. Consequently, I claim, I am thus afforded a basis for 'knowing' about data and the way in which they may mark the atmosphere enveloping the ten follow-up meetings included in the fieldwork related to the study at hand.

Attuning to Data and their Contribution

In view of the line of inquiry proposed in the previous section, the aim of the following two subsections is to pursue the overall research interest at the centre of Entry Two by 'performing' an analysis designed to explore how data, with their in-built mandate to promote quality, may contribute to the atmosphere enveloping follow-up meetings. Prompted by this aim, I start by grouping my material based on the format or script based on which these meetings are meant to be realised. Then I depict what I term the 'perceivable' world of these meetings by employing the analytical distinctions outlined above. And lastly, I attend to my (subjective) perception of the perceived world 'out there' by attuning myself to how it sensorially registers in me. Effectively, I activate my bodily affectability as a sort of investigatory 'instrument', while continuously trying to account for how I, in principle, arrive at the empirical site with an already established sensibility, or, perhaps more accurately, with a predisposition to pick up on and be affected by certain aspects of the meetings I attend. And as the very last step included in the analysis at hand, I then set out to 'decipher' the role played by the QAE mandate and the kind of data it sanctions as a way of 'knowing' about QAE data and their impact in relation to the atmosphere surrounding 'my' follow-up meetings and thereby ultimately address the query central to Entry Two.

Spaces of Positive Productivity

In the following, I present an overview of how the complex and multi-layered 'construction' reflective of actual follow-up meetings are expressed in practice. I do so by extrapolating from the previously selected analytical distinctions, in the sense that I create an overview of the affective arrangements that are constitutive of the meetings based on 1) the formal structure scaffolding them, 2) the way in which the quality imperative and data from the quality report are enrolled and 3) the social, relational dynamics played out amongst the participating parties. Generally, the similarities are more dominant than the differences when it comes to the set-up and overall feel of all the meetings I attend as part of the fieldwork from which the study at hand draws. In analyse my material from each municipality separately in an attempt to better appreciate the variations that do in fact come across, mainly on account of the rather distinct personalities or temperaments exhibited by the two heads of division from the northern and the southern municipalities respectively. I start with the six schools from the northern municipality, but because all these meetings are organised

by the same pre-set agenda, I analyse the meetings in pairs to minimize the repetitive aspect of ‘explaining’ each of their formal set-ups. Yet, I still refer to the respective schools when I mention or quote specific statements and/or relational dynamics.

As stated earlier, the follow-up meetings at all the northern schools are scheduled to last approximately three hours. In all instances, it is the municipal consultant who opens the meeting by stating the following:

“For all intents and purposes, we have, as you know, invited ourselves today. This, however, does not change the fact that we are glad to be here, and that we have been looking forward to this meeting”.

After this initial staging, the consultant outlines the pre-set agenda of the meeting at hand. And with the agenda squared away, she moves on to introduce the chart she has prepared beforehand. The chart is centrally placed at the end of the table around which all participating parties are seated. She explains in more detail that the purpose of the chart is to assist the school leadership team in their efforts to stay focused, working systematically towards selected goals. She then explains that based on the upcoming conversation, the leadership team, during the latter part of the meeting, must fill out the chart by selecting two to three target areas they want to work on. Moreover, they must specify the concrete means they mean to employ as a way of promoting the realisation of goals related to the selected target areas. And finally, the consultant points to the left side of the chart where she has portrayed by hand all the members of the school leadership team. She has done so, she says, to symbolise their key role as instigators and overseers of change in terms of promoting quality at the school.

In some sense, the chart seems to serve as a benevolent, socially engaging artefact as the ‘handmade’ portraits almost instinctively instigate quite a bit of friendly banter about how each of the team members are portrayed. One leader, for example, comments: “Oh, so you see me as a fiery red-head?” And another: “Why am I the only bald guy up there?” All of which give rise to smiles, laughter and jokes being passed back and forth across the table. Allowing these exchanges to run their course, the consultant formally ends the introduction. At northern school A, she does so by underscoring that the chart in fact is constructed for the purposes of stressing a forward-looking attitude. More specifically she says:

“The chart is essentially meant as a help to you...I mean as a tool meant to enable you to stick to your guns. [Pause]...We want you to succeed, and we think this chart will help you do so”.

At northern school B, the consultant emphasises that the meeting is conducted, more than anything, for the sake of the school and its local team of school leaders. she says:

“All of this is for your benefit as it, in principle, is meant to develop your practices”. [There is a pause and a member from the leadership comments briefly. She then gets back on track and continues.] “What we do here is supposed to be of assistance to you”.

As I see it, this opening, which is characteristic of all the northern meetings, along with the forthcoming attitude that is continuously expressed, it seems that the municipal consultant as well as the head of department in a way see themselves as agents of the QAE mandate.

As stipulated by the outlined agenda, the leadership teams from schools A and B are then invited to share their thoughts and reflections pertaining to their unique report and the results it depicts. At school A the leader is quick to accept the invitation as he starts to relate how he and the team have worked to integrate data within their everyday practice. Specifically, he highlights an event they have recently initiated. It is called ‘data parties’ and it takes place at the beginning of the school year before classes start. The aim of these parties is to some extent, he says, to give data-work a positive spin. Who would not want to come to a party the leader in question rhetorically asks as a way of underscoring the idea behind the term ‘data parties’. He then continues in a more serious manner, explaining how all members of staff are required to spend a full day scrutinising all available data on each of their students. The outcome of this has so far been that in the case of five students who otherwise would not have caught their attention, action-plans have been put in place. And while on the topic of integrating data into their practice, the leader from school A continues to explain how The Calculator (a tool provided by the Ministry of Education making it possible to monitor individual students and their performances) has helped them identify underperforming students.

Lastly, the leader from school A mentions that data from the annual wellbeing survey has caught his and his team’s attention. He goes on to explain that the school’s data on wellbeing indicate that they have an issue on their hands with regard to student motivation and participation, and therefore they are now in the process of figuring out how to deal with this. And while he shares his initial reflections on how they plan to address the matter at hand, the consultant, and especially the head of division, are relatively quiet, at least compared to their participation in the other meetings. (At the time, I obviously had no basis for making this assessment of the level of municipal engagement, seeing that this was my first meeting, but looking back on it after having attended all the meetings at the northern schools, I find this to be a fair assessment). But the fact that they are not saying much at that moment does not mean they are not conveying anything, because with their demeanor, nods, gestures, and vigorous scribbling on paper they seem to be expressing their acknowledgement of what the leader is explaining. To me it seems that the head of division and the leader in question are on the same page, as if they tacitly agree about how to employ

data with the overall intention of promoting quality. And for that reason, it seems that there is mutual respect between the two.

At school B, the leader is more withdrawn and less vocal about the way in which the leadership team has been working with data from the quality report. She is new to the school and to her role as leader, and somehow her more quiet presence seems to leave a gap or void in the agenda, which, however, is quickly filled in by the municipal head of department. As I see it, the latter stands out as a heavy hitter, as someone who knows his stuff and has a natural command of his surroundings. I know from my initial contact with the consultant that the northern head of department has held his title for more than 20 years and is fuelled by a self-proclaimed interest in promoting the overall attainment levels of all the schools located in the municipality. In filling the 'void' he takes the 'stage' with the following comment:

“Obviously, there is a lot of quality reflected in your quality report. Just look at the overall scores from the final exams. But at the same time, on the whole your data are rather mixed, suggesting that there is too much variation in the teachers’ practices. And this variation is sure to be noticed. In fact, it may translate into something rather problematic, giving cause to ‘small-talk’ in Irma [Branch name for a local supermarket chain], when parents compare their experiences. Moreover, it is impossible to facilitate productive teamwork if the teachers both inside the teams and between the teams work in ways that do not in some sense align”.

The last bit of this rather long comment seems to spur something in the new leader. She promptly responds that she has noticed some profound differences in the approaches to teaching exhibited by the teachers at the school. And because of these differences she worries about the composition of the presently established teacher teams. To put it bluntly, her worry, she says, is that too many of the *change-resistant teachers* have been assigned to the same teams. She does not go into more detail about what sets these 'change resistant' teachers apart from the others, but I get the sense that everybody but me has a pretty good idea of the kind of teachers she is referring to. Later, over the course of the other meetings, I learn that all the school leadership teams in the northern municipality experience what they find to be troubling discrepancies amongst the teachers who are willing to work in keeping with the principles of visible learning and those who are not.⁸ Typically, like the leader in question, they find that the 'change-resistant' teachers stand in the way of moving forward, which in turn makes it necessary for them to take more decisive measures in order to further

⁸ The principles of visible learning are commonly associated with John Hattie and his claim that students achieve better results when they understand what it is they are meant to learn and what it looks like to be successful. On account of this widely crusaded claim, the principles of visible learning are typically promoted by governing agencies in the belief that putting these principles in practice, will improve the educational outcomes of all students.

certain ways of teaching. To the concrete response voiced by the new leader, the head of division diplomatically and somewhat ironically comments:

“Variation may be commendable, but it definitely makes it challenging to promote common, all-around change”.

Throughout the meetings at both school A and B, the municipal consultant has taken on the role of gently pushing the agenda while still making sure that ample time is devoted to filling out the chart introduced at the beginning of the meeting. But approximately ten minutes ahead of ‘closing time’, she signals a change of focus and says out loud:

“We are almost done for today, but before we leave you to your busy schedules, we are curious to know what you think of this meeting. What are your immediate thoughts? [gesturing towards the school leadership team]”.

At school A, all three members of the leadership team quickly and unanimously state that they truly appreciate the disturbance the meeting allows for, here referring to the outside perspective they enable. In many ways, this response is indicative of the relational exchange that I find illustrative of the meeting at school A, seeing that it in many ways nourishes from the circumstance that the primary school leader and the head of division seem to see eye to eye on most issues raised during the meeting and therefore seem to relate to each other as equals. Or more precisely, as equally capable of performing their respective functions. As such, these two ‘agents’ appear to approach the meeting as if it were a forum for what is typically known as professional sparring.

At school B, the response is bit different. Here the assistant leader promptly utters:

“I definitely get the feeling that you guys have come here to help us. But I did not feel like that when you were here two years ago. [Referring to a previous follow-up meeting held at the school]. Back then I felt like, eh...oh, no, we are being controlled”.

At first no one says anything. From what I can gather, the implied link between control and municipal involvement does not sit well with the head of division. Like the rest of the participants around the table, I look towards the head, expecting him to reply. Seconds later, he fumingly retorts:

“If anything, that is on account of the former leadership! [After a few moments of silence, he continues, clearly annoyed]. In my opinion, the staff here have no problem when it comes to being social with one another, but when it comes to working professionally side by side, there still is a long way to go. In effect, the school has become seedbed for a familial-culture as opposed to a professional one”.

At the time, I am not sure I understand what is going on between the assistant leader and the head of division, but as I look back on the meeting as a whole it seems clear that the former leader from school B along with some of the faculty have not always been on the best of terms with the head of division. Yet, the potential conflict lurking underneath this exchange between the assistant leader and the head of division is not pursued further, or perhaps it would be more correct to say that it is, in a way, suppressed by the present leader as she quickly interrupts the exchange by commenting:

“Regardless of what has been, I am confident that this session has made us wiser. It has given us pause to look inward and reflect over how we do things around here, which is good!”

In terms of the overall social, relational dynamics expressed during the meetings at northern schools A and B, I generally find them to be light, pleasant and goodwilled, because, despite the altercation at school B where the assistant leader and the head of division butt heads over some lingering resentment, the municipal representatives are well received by the respective leadership teams. And both the head of division and the consultant seem genuinely interested in what the teams have to say, while trying to find out how they can be of service to the teams and their efforts to ‘implement’ the QAE mandate. At school B, for example, the head of division continuously speak of the challenges facing the leadership team as something *we* must find ways of tackling with, thereby including the municipality as an active partner to whom the local leaders can look for assistance and guidance. So, even though the meetings are set up as a formal forum for evaluating and discussing results reflected by data, the participants on both sides of the table seem to interact in ways that stand out as very relaxed and friendly, as if they already know that the end objective, namely quality production, is best achieved if they work together. Given my previous experience at the infamous meeting mentioned in the introduction to the study at hand, I have undoubtedly entered the meetings in question with an appetite for drama, and therefore I am, if the truth be told, a bit disappointed by the relational dynamic unfolding at schools A and B. But quickly my initial disappointment is replaced by curiosity about this ‘niceness’, for lack of a better word, that seem so unfold during the first two meetings.

Thus, invigorated by this newfound curiosity, I try to put all the perceivable features characteristic of the follow-up meetings at schools A and B together. As I see it, they are initially composed by the highly structured agenda guiding these meetings, because on account of the chart that is introduced by the municipal level, it seems that local management are prompted to approach data from the quality report in ways that align well with the standard for data-work promoted by the official QAE mandate. Moreover, the perceivable features at stake are composed by the way in which data are dealt with as tangible entities, on the one hand allowing school leaders to demonstrate their overall effort to promote quality to

their superiors, and on the other hand, allowing the municipality to comment on the work being done by local management. In brief, I say this mindful of the leader from school A explaining how they, due to a close examination of all available data, have been able to detect five students in need of something more than they have been offered. Also, I say it mindful of the head of division stating that the mixed data depicted in the quality report calls for teachers to adopt a more systematic and consistent way of teaching. Both examples suggesting that data are enrolled in the meetings as a tangible source of information making it possible to discuss results and the potential changes they supposedly warrant. And finally, based on the interest stemming from the municipal representatives and the way it seems to be welcomed, the perceivable qualities of the meetings also are constituted by an overall light, pleasant and goodwilled social, relational dynamic.

Informed by this assessment of the two meetings in question, I now seek to take the next step in the analysis, recounting how the set up that I am a part of, formally as an observer, registers in me as a way of trying to get a sense of the surrounding atmosphere. In other words, I seek to get in touch with the perceiving subject, the researcher 'I' by attuning to what is both out there and felt by me in an effort to determine the affective excess associated with the meetings in question. To do so, I once again go over my empirical material as a point of departure for recalling the way in which the 'arrangements' unfolding register in a more sensorially informed manner. And as I jot down a short list of key words while trying to capture the essence of what is stirred up, I realise that the simple, unfazed way in which the meetings project how quality can and must be promoted leaves me feeling rather enthusiastic. In my field notes, for example, I have noted to myself: "Their smiles are contagious". It is as if the exchanges being played out within the confined space of the meeting rooms allow for quality production to stand out as a rather approachable and thus viable undertaking. I say this prompted by the way in which the chart is presented as nothing more than a practical benevolent artefact that can help secure results, the forthcoming, eager to help attitude exhibited by the municipal representatives, and the smiles, jokes and respectful pleasantries being continuously exchanged on both sides of the table. All of which, I find, allow for an 'air' of enthusiasm that I cannot help but feel somewhat smitten by.

At both northern schools C and D, the initial staging of the follow-up meetings is the same as at schools A and B with the municipal consultant laying out the agenda, presenting the chart and stressing that the overall purpose of the meetings is to enable local management to promote the quality of 'their' respective schools. Against this backdrop, both meetings are set up to start out on the same pleasant, friendly note as is the case at schools A and B. But at school C the meeting is initially disturbed by the fact that the head of division has been called out on a pressing matter at the very last minute, preventing him from attending. I am present in the

meeting room as the municipal consultant enters and delivers the message. It is clear to see that the primary leader is especially disappointed. She has a lot of experience initially as teacher and as of lately also as leader in the same municipality as the head of division. During my subsequent interview with her, she tells me that she and the head have worked close together on many occasions, which is perhaps why she keeps referring to his absence as *so unfortunate*. But beyond the history tying the two together, as far as I can tell, the head of division is widely respected for his professional insight and therefore his opinions and input carry a lot of weight. Given this fact, it seems only natural that the leader in question seems to regret having to go through with the meeting in the absence of the head of division.

The consultant, however, seems impervious to the changed circumstances and plunges right into the agenda as she somewhat insistently states the following:

“At some point we need to address the rather poor exam results presented in the report. Maybe this is something you should put up as one of your target areas? [pointing to a blank space on the chart]”.

The experienced school leader immediately objects, arguing that these results cannot be used to draw any decisive conclusions about the school. In response to this, the consultant says that this only underscores the point she is trying to make. She elaborates:

“I know this is a good school! And I know you are doing a good job! But if this meeting is going to amount to something other than just a bureaucratic measure, then it is up to you as a team to figure out how you want to take action based on what the data are telling you”.

It is impossible to discern the exact impact of this comment, but as far as I can tell it seems to stifle the process of filling out the chart. I say this, in part, in reference to the following entry made in my field notes from school C: “The chart mostly seems to function as a source of confusion...It is as if they [the leadership team] are trying to figure out what she [the consultant] wants, before openly speaking their minds”.

At some point during the meeting at school C, the leadership team is invited to express their thoughts and reflections on the data depicted in their report. While responding to this the leader hesitantly says:

“We sometimes ask ourselves if we actually challenge our students to the full extent of their abilities. [She adds a few comments to this, but then she stops and makes a more decisive comment, almost as a way of deliberately ending her own train of thought]. We are aware that we need to focus on furthering our level of attainment. More students must show top performances”.

At first there is a few seconds of silence, but then the consultant objects. She starts out by joking a little bit, saying that this might not be the right way to phrase it, and then she becomes more serious:

“It is important that we do not narrate what we do here as if we are running the school for the sole purpose of having the biggest share of high performing students”.

In a matter of seconds, the assistant leader jumps in and comments:

“But that is nevertheless the basis on which we are measured...”.

I remember being a bit startled by this somewhat critical comment. To my surprise though, it only serves as a source of laughter and smiles. It seems that everybody around the table appreciate the paradox to which the comment points. Perhaps bolstered by this response, the assistant leader quietly points out:

“It is only funny because it is true”.

Not long after this exchange, it seems that there is a shift to the way the meeting is progresses in the sense that it more and more becomes like a conversation in which the consultant together with the leadership team respectfully address some of the daily challenges and issues confronting the team of leaders at school C. For example, they speak of the diverse student body attending the school, which sets it apart from the other schools in the municipality. And over the course of these detailed discussions, the topic of progress comes up, and while going over the ins and outs of what this entails, it seems that a new level of trust between the municipal level and the local management evolves. It is as if the consultant and the team of leaders find themselves connecting over the fact that, in the grand scheme of things, they are pursuing the same objective; namely enabling each and every student to progress. And towards the end, as the consultant welcomes the team to share their thoughts about the meeting, the other assistant leader quickly replies:

“I am guessing it went well, because if not I am sure that you would tell us otherwise”.

The assistant leader thereby, as I understand it, ‘dares’ to hint at what apparently no one speaks openly about, namely the element of municipal control that is ingrained into the overall premise of follow-up meetings. Surely, the irony with which this comment is delivered offers the assistant leader some latitude. But as I see it the fact that the comment is received with smiles from everybody, including the consultant bears witness to the trust that has evolved over the course of the meeting.

At school D, the initial stages of the meeting also start by going a bit off script. In this case the ‘disturbance’ is caused by an electrical outlet that has caught fire shortly before the meeting is scheduled to start. The fire is quickly put out, but due to heavy smoke the fire alarm has gone off and when I arrive a large group of students are standing outside in front of the school. I am told that the meeting is still on as it is set to take place in a room located in a building cut off from the smoke. Due to the commotion, however, the meeting is a bit delayed. Aware of the time lost, the consultant seems to rush through the introduction. She speaks hastily about the chart, explaining how the leadership team are supposed to fill it out during the next couple of hours. It is all very fast. But then, perhaps sensing that the team is not following the steps she is laying out for them, the consultant she slows down and sort of pushes the chart aside while stating:

“Our primary goal for today is that you benefit from this session... And so, we really want to set the agenda for today to meet your needs”.

Then, as she has also done at the previous meetings, she sort of opens the floor by saying:

“And now we are keen to hear about your thoughts on the latest quality report”.

Picking up on this invitation, the leader at School D starts out with the following, somewhat formal statement:

“One thing that always stays at the centre of how we work as a team is how we thoroughly go over our data while asking ourselves what we can learn from them”.

The primary leader at school D is in the later part of a long professional career and she continues her opening by unapologetically proclaiming:

“And in view of our latest report, it is clear that we are challenged when it comes to our performances in math”.

In response to this comment the head of division opens and inquisitorially asks:

“Have you looked at your share of best performing students?”

The leader replies:

“Yes, and we know that we have a problem on our hands... The data says as much”.

And the assistant leader adds:

“As a way of addressing this issue, we have made class-conferences a priority where we systematically go over all data related to the class in question and their students”.

The head fervently comments on this by stating that such a systematic effort surely will lead to improvements, not only in math, but probably all way around. Judging from his reaction, he seems pleased, as if he recognises such a systematic effort to be the right way for the leadership team to work with data from the quality report.

As the meeting at school D comes to an end, the school leadership team are, as ‘approved’ by the agenda, invited to communicate their immediate impressions of what has just taken place. On the whole, the team generally comments that they are mostly positive and appreciative. The leader, for example, starts out by saying:

“For my part, I can only say that this meeting represents something very meaningful as it gives me, or us rather, the opportunity to really reflect on our daily work, which is a treat seeing that so much of our time is spent putting out fires”.

The fire metaphor instantly spurs several jokes and ironic comments. The vice leader, for example, dryly comments:

“Yeah, well personally I hope that we won’t be- ing putting out fires for a while”.

As the exchanges spurred by this comment settles down, the vice leader continues by proclaiming:

“For me this meeting has afforded a helicopter-like perspective of our school with data as guide... I can’t remember the last time we as a team have spent such an extended amount of time reflecting over our practice and figuring out where we want to take things...”.

Everybody from team openly agrees with this, all voicing similar comments.

Obviously, the concrete exchanges encompassed in the meetings at northern schools C and D are unique to the extent that the topics they discuss relate specifically to each school and their particular profile. When it comes to the overarching perceivable dimensions constituting the meetings, however, they are very alike. In terms of the formal scaffolding guiding the meetings, for example, the municipality at both locations push through with the chart introduced by the consultant. And in both instances, the respective leaders do not seem to object or in any way question this formal scaffold-

ing and its implicit ways of promoting specific ways of working with data. As such, the meetings in question proceed on the basis of a rather tight script that implicitly allows for data to be enrolled in ways that essentially align with the QAE mandate and its prescriptions for how to employ data for purposes of quality production. And in broad, these proceedings are played out within the boundaries of a social dynamic that seems to reflect an underlying willingness to share as well as mutual professional respect. I say this in reference to the level of trust with which the consultant and the leadership team at school C relate to each other and the kind of professional ping-pong that is characteristic of the exchanges between all the participants present at school D.

Informed by this summary pertaining to the perceivable ‘world’ related to the meetings at schools C and D, I yet again go back to my empirical material as a way of jolting my memory of how I felt while present at the two ‘arrangements’ in question. And as I start to write down what comes to mind, I keep stumbling over the term *360-degree feedback*. A 360-degree feedback is commonly known as a feedback format seeking to provide reviewees with a comprehensive collection of input that may serve as grounds for working to improve behaviours and/or performances. In brief, this format is, besides functioning as a tool for improving practices and results, thought capable of promoting a solution-oriented approach and a forward-looking attitude. The reason why I stumble on this term, I think, relates to the fact that during both meetings, I keep picking up on the energy coming from the instances in which the leaders readily resort to solutions or initiatives rather as a way of ‘remedying’ some practice that has been brought to their attention by data. As well as the instances in which the consultant and the head of division more or less gently impose a forward-looking attitude onto the team of local leaders. I pick up on energy from these instances in the sense that I catch myself silently rooting for the leaders as they confidently present how they intend to develop their practice, and moreover, I eagerly take my cue from the municipal level, orienting my focus towards the changes they argue can and must come. So, by attuning myself to what may be recognised as the excess of the meetings, I find, it registers as a form of energy, popping up on account of the instances described above.

The similarities between the meetings held at schools E and F and those held at the other four northern schools are striking. This is not surprising seeing that they all adhere to the same municipal set up, guiding the agenda and the flow of issues being discussed. As a way of undertaking an analysis of these last two meetings, I therefore only highlight the main aspects of what sets them apart and thus also adds a certain specificity to the atmosphere by which they may be ‘known’. As mentioned earlier, the head of division stands out as someone who knows his stuff, to put it in simple terms. He has been working within the municipality for more than 20 years, driven by a self-proclaimed goal of creating a local community of schools, known for their excellence, results, and professionalism. Given

these circumstances, it goes without saying that he plays a vital role in all the meetings at the northern schools, and, as far as I can tell, he does not take this role lightly, coming across as well prepared and readily engaged every time. And as I see it, the most characteristic feature related to the meetings at schools E and F, is the fact that the head during these two instances seems dead set on pressing the following two issues: 1) the level of systematic practices amongst the teachers, and 2) the way in which management can and should assist in scaffolding the teachers work. To specify how this comes about in each of the meetings, I shall briefly outline the exchanges in which the head expresses his views.

At school E the head persistently addresses what he sees as a non-systematic teaching practice. He does so by first pointing to the report available to everybody in the meeting room. He argues that the data it encompasses clearly demonstrates that the same students perform very differently in different subject areas. This discrepancy, he argues, is sure to stem from a lack of systematic practices amongst the teachers, meaning that there is no systematic way in which the teachers work individually and collaboratively. To this the school leader comments:

“I am just not sure why they [the teachers] keep fighting me on this one...I mean, we have talked about it...Ehh, and our primary goal for doing this is essentially to become better together”.

After debating this back and forth for a while, the leader decisively states:

“At any rate, we are so far beyond these ‘private’ ways of practising. It is just not how we do things anymore”.

Based on this decisive statement, it seems obvious that the head and the leader see eye to eye on this matter, meaning they agree that the discrepancy at stake is a result of too much variation to the modes of teaching practiced by the school’s teachers. In response to this the head assumes a rather instructive, or coaching perhaps, role as he minutely details the steps that may allow the team to make their teaching practices more systematic. More specifically, he talks extensively about knowing the dynamics of cause and effect when it comes to certain teaching practices.

At school F the head is very outspoken with regards to how and why he thinks that a clear framework is order as basis for supporting teaching practices. The seed for the debate on this issue is planted at the very beginning of the meeting. As usual, the school leadership team are invited to share their thoughts and reflections pertaining to their latest quality report. In response to this, the school leader begins by saying:

“The hard-core data tells us that we are positioned right at the municipality average, with a small decline, however, in re-

lation to some of our test scores, which is probably related to the fact that the tests were scheduled early this year."

At this point the head intervenes by commenting:

"Yeah, well that is as good an explanation as any!"

It is clear, that he is not convinced by the proposed correlation. Later, the leader mentions a staff meeting in which the teachers have discussed how they often find themselves in a bind, where on the one hand they seek to foster a productive process, allowing the students to learn what they are supposed to learn, and on the other hand they feel the need to press the students, especially the senior ones, to get ready for exams and tests. To this the head replies:

"But you have to have a conversation with the teachers about what quality in teaching is and what it looks like".

He does not say it out loud, but evidently, he does not necessarily acknowledge the stated dilemma. The head then expresses what the teachers can and should do to foster a productive learning process *and* to get students ready for exams, seeing that the two objectives, as he sees it, are not mutually exclusive. And this is where the issue of scaffolding becomes relevant, he argues, while recommending that the leadership team take on the task of helping the teachers to establish a clearer framework to teach from, allowing them to support and oversee both process and product. Finally, as the meeting is about to end, the consultant pushes for the last target area to be filled on to the chart, and the school leader quickly says:

"I think we should add scaffolding as our last target area".

With these distinctive features pertaining to the meetings at schools E and F in the back of my mind, I take a step back and once again look at all my material from these two schools. This time around I am not sure what to make of it. In some ways, I sense that the head of division and his strong convictions about what is needed to promote results and thus quality features as a dominant undercurrent to the meetings. But contrary to my expectations, this undercurrent does not seem to give rise to any tension or pressure. As mentioned earlier, the municipality puts a lot of emphasis on the fact that their objective, first and foremost, is to enable the local leaders to succeed in their efforts to promote quality, thereby stressing that they and the local leaders are essentially in pursuit of the same objective. And throughout the meetings the space between the two sides of the table seems to be marked by this initial 'establishment'. So, at the risk of refusing the assistance being offered as well as potentially undermining the joint ambition to which all participating parties are not only formally bound, but also professionally committed, the leaders from

schools E and F do not seem to be taken aback by the head of division and his advice on how to develop or improve certain aspects of their practices. Surely, there is room for discussion, but it is as if everybody implicitly recognises the 'joint venture', they are immediately engaged in. And so, from my position as bystander to the two meetings in question, the air surrounding me mostly registers as calm, respectful, and non-conflictual, and for that reason I feel as if I am a part of an 'arrangement' set up as a win-win encounter.

Looking back on all six meetings, I tend to set them apart in my head based on the small details I remember them by. When, for example, thinking of school C, I think of the trust emerging over time between the consultant and the leadership team as this trust seemed to allow for a different kind of dialogue to take place as it in a way seemed to welcome the co-existence of different perspectives on the same situation. Or, when thinking of school A, I think of the school leader and the head of division and the synergy coming from these two likeminded professionals, sparring and exchanging 'techniques' on how to boots results. But when thinking of the meetings more generally, it seems that the same atmospheric envelopment is characteristic of them all. Surely, there are some variations seeing that it is mostly in relation to the meetings at school A and B that I am left feeling rather enthusiastic, smitten by the smiles and pleasantries being exchanged as well as the eager-to-help 'tactic' exhibited throughout the meetings. And in relation to the meetings at schools C and D, what stands out is the fact that it is the energy coming from the solution-oriented approaches and the forward-looking attitudes that I pick up on. And finally, in relation to the meetings at schools E and F, I mainly feel surrounded by a non-conflictual air 'rubbing of' the win-win set up which is implicitly sanctioned by all participating parties. But across these specificities relevant to the northern locality, I find that all the meetings in question come across as spaces from which a continuous surge of positive productivity somehow lingers in the flow of exchanges being played out.

Certainly, this spatial feel manifests itself as a complex 'product' involving the 'incorporation' of many elements. Yet, somehow it seems that the data demonstrated in each of the schools' quality reports and more generally, the underpinning presence of the QAE mandate, were highly instrumental in terms of establishing the premises for what unfolds during the meetings. As mentioned already, the QAE mandate and thus also *The Quality Report 2.0* programme ordering the follow-up meetings, argue that it makes sense to track and monitor the results achieved by schools with data, because not only does data in turn make it possible to know the state of each school, they also make it possible to practice leadership based on effects and results. As such, the mandate 'preaches' a form of data-informed leadership that is thought to be key when it comes to promoting student learning and wellbeing. And it is this underlying argument or logic along with its inherent optimistic simplicity about what working with data can

‘accomplish’ that seems to be ‘put to work’ during the northern meetings. I say this seeing that the participating parties, particularly the municipal representatives, seem to have adopted this logic ‘onto’ the way they speak of data and thereby also ‘onto’ the way they discuss how to ‘deal’ with them. And so, with this underlying logic featuring as the underlying premise of how the meetings are managed, or staged if you will, it seems to consequently mark the surrounding space with a form of positive productivity around which it feels easy to gather.

Domains of Togetherness and Cooperation

There are four southern schools in total. Like the northern schools, their follow-up meetings are also structured on the basis of a pre-set agenda imposed by the municipality. But at all four schools this agenda is relatively loosely enforced and does not organise the flow of the follow-up meetings in quite the same strict manner as is the case at the northern schools. Yet, seeing that this ‘loose’ footing is the same for all four of them, it makes sense, I find, to analyse the meetings in pairs again, while still identifying the respective schools when referring to specific statements or dynamics as means of illustrating my take on the event unfolding. To create or perhaps to impose a kind of overview over these meetings, I employ the same analytical distinctions as before. This entails focusing on the formal framework within which the meetings take place, the way data and the QAE mandate ‘find their way’ into the statements being expressed, and the social, relational dynamics manifesting as a part of the complex affective arrangement constituting these meetings. I start with the meetings at the two schools I attended first. In the grand scheme of things, this chronology is not of great significance, but because I remember being a little bit surprised by the mild and somewhat laid-back attitude displayed by the head of division, especially when compared to the attitude expressed by the northern head of division, it seems relevant to mention this order of my attendance as it may have some bearing on my initial ‘reading’ of the exchanges taking place.

The proceedings at schools G and H run shy of two hours. In both instances the head sets the stage for the meetings by outlining their agenda and overall purpose. To some extent, this pre-set agenda builds on the same three-layered-structure employed in the northern schools in the sense that it first allows for the school leadership team to share their reflections pertaining to the data demonstrated in the quality report, then ‘makes room’ for the municipal level to voice their input, and lastly invites or encourages perhaps the local leaders to address future initiatives. The head, however, is very adamant about the fact that the agenda is flexible and if need be things can be shuffled around. He explains this flexible approach by stating that the municipality is still searching for the right ‘formula’ to facilitate follow-up meetings. He puts it this way:

“We are still looking for productive ways to be of assistance to all of ‘our’ schools”.

At this point, my only contact with the municipality has been through the consultant who is also present at the meeting, so I do not have much to go on when it comes to the head of division. But after the meeting at school G, we are introduced and speak briefly. He tells me he is new to his position, but eager to develop the concept of follow-up meetings further. In fact, he welcomes any input I might have as he is curious to know my thoughts on the meetings that I sit in on. I get the sense that he hopes to be able to somehow benefit from my presence at some point. But not long after my field work is completed the head leaves his position, so nothing more comes of the invitation.

After the initial staging is completed, the head points to the consultant (my contact) explaining that she will be taking notes during the meetings and that they will later be made available to the team of leaders present. The purpose of doing so, he says, is to assist the leaders in reflecting on future practices to help them translate the meetings into action, as he phrases it. With this practical matter settled, the meeting at both schools start out with the head inviting the leadership team to comment on two results from the quality report they are happy with and two results they think warrant extra attention. At school G, the leader responds by stating that the process of producing the report has made them pause and reflect on their daily practices, and then goes on to specify that the processing leading up the fabrication of the report has been rewarding. It does not get more specific than that. Mindful of the policy behind the follow-up meetings and of my previous experience with the northern municipality, I have come to expect data to be at the centre of attention in the cases where local leaders and municipal representatives convene to discuss quality reports. Therefore, I am surprised by the vagueness of the exchanges that takes place at school G in the wake of this invitation to comment on results, meaning surprised by the lack of direct focus on data. Not long into the discussion, maybe noticing my bewilderment, the leader turns to me to explain that the school is being audited by the National Agency for Education and Quality.⁹ I interpret this as his way of explaining the context for the discussion taking place and thus also for the absence of a direct focus on data.

Consequently, the first half of the meeting at school G is spent discussing issues related to staff recruitment and a few incidents in which the leadership team has felt openly thwarted by a small group of students and in part also by their parents. But then, after a while, something changes, and

⁹ In cases where schools persistently do not meet the result requirements in terms of final exam scores, national test scores and survey results on wellbeing, the National Agency for Education and Quality steps in and, in a sense, places ‘failing’ schools under their administration, typically stipulating a twelve month period during which certain initiatives have to be implemented to secure a minimum level of quality (UVM).

data are back on menu so to speak. The change is instigated by the head as he almost out of the blue points to a place in the school's quality report where data are particularly 'ominous', to repeat my original terminology for data showing decline. While pointing he says:

"Now, what do you suppose we do about this?"

As I see it, there is no blame or tension being passed around in the wake of this question. Quite on the contrary, seeing that the head mostly seems to raise the question as a way of opening the door to a long line of exchanges that come off as very open, explorative, and considerate of the challenges that the leadership team emphasise as characteristic of their everyday practice. As such, it seems that the ambition to stand out as competent and on top of things in the eyes of the municipality is not hugely important to the leaders at southern school G. Looking back on this line of exchanges, I can see from my field notes that I found it heartening to see how the head, as I saw it, would silently convey a message of 'I hear you, I see you', while the primary leader, for example, would express frustration over the fact that the school is experiencing a situation in which most of their well-functioning and thus better performing students have moved to other schools on account of data not being as they should be as he puts it.

At school H, I sense a similar and predominantly acknowledging and forthcoming attitude coming from the head. But the nature of the exchanges on data are different. Largely because of the primary leader at school H and his zealous way of responding to the invitation to comment on the results from the school's report. He starts by standing up and as the only leader out of the ten included in the empirical material to do so he opens a PowerPoint illustrating the results he finds reason to emphasise:

"Based on these data [points to a slide], we can see that we have increased the share of poor readers significantly, and when it comes to our teaching impact, as documented by CEPOS¹⁰, we deliver above the levels expected. That is only the case of three other schools in this municipality".

It is as if the leader is essentially pitching the school. Also present at the meeting is an additional municipal consultant and towards the end of the leader's 'pitch' this consultant jumps in, commenting that the data on wellbeing featuring in the school's quality report suggests that too many students are experiencing various forms of hazing. The consultant pleads with the team to track this development closely. The head does not seem to react to this plea. In fact, he, in a way, bypasses it by redirecting attention

¹⁰ For purposes of ranking, CEPOS, a conservative/liberal policy institute (think tank), regularly measures the teachings-impact demonstrated by all schools in Denmark. The teaching-impact measures realized grades minus the expected grades based on students' socio-economic background. Based on this measure, schools are then ranked relative to the level they are expected to 'deliver'.

back to the results highlighted by the primary leader. I am not sure what prompts this redirection, but to me the southern head seems uncustomed with the practice of following up on data, which may explain why he does not adopt the same instructional role that the northern head sometimes adopts. And in addition to this, he seems very eager to acknowledge the zealous attempt at using data to show how well the students at school H are in fact performing, and maybe this is what rushes him to 'stay' with the 'portrayal' presented by the primary leader.

In terms of the social, relational dynamics distinctive of both the meetings, it seems that the flexible and somewhat searching approach with which the head of division opens, prompts the emergence of a rather relaxed undercurrent, or perhaps more accurately a *we-are-here-to-share-not-judge* undercurrent. At least this is the overall impression that I am left with on account of the head and his manner of greeting all comments and statements with a continuously open and reaffirming attitude. At school G, for example, the leader expresses worry that he cannot recruit teachers who are both skilled classroom managers and who have the required academic degrees. (This is a problem because schools are instructed to make sure that their teachers are professionally qualified to teach the subjects assigned to them. The degree to which they meet this criterion must be reflected in the quality report.) The head seems a bit unsure about how to tackle this problem, but he nevertheless makes sure to acknowledge the leader's position:

"I can't advise you to do anything different from what you are currently doing. It is a real dilemma. So, keep up the good work."

And at school H, the leader has initiated a practice, whereby senior students are hired to do small maintenance chores, the hope being that this will encourage them to take more responsibility when it comes to keeping the school neat and clean, as well as becoming more responsible of their own academic advancement. The head responds very enthusiastically to this initiative by proposing that it is passed on to the other schools in the municipality at an upcoming seminar.

Of course, these are isolated examples, and as such they do not convey 'the full story'. Still, as I see it, they serve as illustrative examples of the overall presence exhibited by the head at both schools, and as such, they hint at the kind of social dynamics and overall climate characteristic of these meetings, seeing that the exchanges between the participating parties mainly run smoothly and are generally accompanied by an open and non-judgmental attitude, especially on account of the way in which the head of department tends to approach the leaders and the whole set up surrounding the meetings. In some sense, it may be argued that most practicing professionals are fully capable of exhibiting a certain level of civility and respect when working together and therefore I am perhaps

giving ‘credit’ to something that is in no way out of the ordinary when commenting on the social dynamics and overall climate at stake. But in view of the level of responsiveness, attention, and sensitivity exhibited by the head during the meetings, there is something more to it than ‘just’ civility and respect, because to some extent his presence or approach may be conceived of as form of caring. And it is this element of caring that I find goes beyond expectations, and therefore makes the first two southern meetings stand out. At least in comparison to the social dynamics and overall climate manifesting at the northern schools.

Informed by these all these factors, the formal set up, the focus on data, and the social, relational undercurrents, the first two southern meetings generally seem to be marked by an openness to discuss many things, also issues and circumstances not directly related to the data encompassed in the two schools’ quality reports. And as such, the meetings seem to allow for the official objective of following up on data to be mixed with a broader agenda of ‘making room’ for the issues that are relevant to management of the school. Consequently, data and the prescriptive ‘recommendations’ on how to produce quality encompassed in the QAE mandate are not as salient at these meeting as is the case at the northern schools. This is not to suggest that the southern meetings therefore are better or worse, but it does underscore the fact that the apparent differences between the two types of meeting formats, to a large extent, seem to stem from the differences in style, focus, and overall attitude expressed by the two heads of division. There is no way of knowing the exact causes of these differences, but as far as I can tell they seem related to the circumstance that one has more than twenty years of experience, while the other has less than six months. That the former is acutely aware of last year’s results and how he ideally would like to better them, while the latter is more interested in attending to the issues relevant to the leaders in front of him. And finally, that the former is invested in the ‘productivity’ of the meetings, while the latter, more than anything, is almost preoccupied with expressing his acknowledgement of the local management and their situation.

So, with this reading of the perceivable constructs played out at the meetings in southern schools G and H, my next ‘move’ is, as mentioned, to ‘decipher’ their atmospheric component by attuning myself to how they sensorially register in me. Therefore, I once again go back to my empirical material, my voice recordings, and my field notes as grounds for recalling my overall feel of the meetings in question. And soon the word ‘togetherness’ comes to mind. As mentioned, I find that the head generally seems to express an earnest interest in the team and their daily circumstances as if implicitly conveying a message of: *We [the municipality] care about your issues, we are in this together*. And based on the way this interest seems to be taken up by the school leaders, I feel that I am both witness to and part of a kind of integrative togetherness that comes across when the practicing professionals in front of me seem to bond over their mutual interest in the

same issues. Not that this is the case all the time, but over the course of the two-hour long meetings, there are some fleeting moments in which I sense a form of mutually expressed togetherness literally impressing itself on me, almost keeping me captive due to the way it appeals to me; as something it feels good to be a part of. So, in view of this overall sensation, I find 'togetherness' to be a fitting description of the distinctive feel I sense overflowing from the two meetings.

The overall setup characteristic of the meetings at schools I and J in the southern municipality, is more or less the same as that of the meetings at schools G and H, meaning that they also emerge on the basis of an agenda allowing, and in some sense even inviting, a broadening of the formal purpose of looking at and acting on data from the quality report. To that effect, all four southern meetings seem to 'prescribe' a set up in which data are addressed in close relation to the issues and circumstances relevant to each of the schools in question. Moreover, during these last two southern meetings the head of division seems to express the same open and forthcoming attitude as he did at the previous ones. Therefore, to avoid too much overlapping, detailing the tangible constructs related to the meetings at schools I and J, the following analysis of these meetings only describe the opening statements made by each of the respective leaders and gives a short run-through of the issues being addressed at the respective locations. The purpose of doing so is to provide just enough background to demonstrate my experience of the perceivable elements reflective of the meetings in question and thus provide a basis for to outlining the atmospheric feature, meaning the overall spatial quality, I sense to be characteristic of them.

In response to the invitation to speak about the results from the quality report the primary leader at school I opens with a very upbeat and optimistic statement:

"I want to start by noting some of our positive results, but while doing so I am obliged to also mention some of the negative ones as the two are connected. ...So, I want to begin by saying that I am proud of the results demonstrated by our eighth graders. And I am particularly proud of these results knowing that the results from our sixth graders are not equally good. We have seen this pattern before, and this leads me to believe that we are in fact able to foster the progress of our students despite this negative starting point. Which subsequently leads me to think that we can and must do better by our sixth graders. Because if we break that code, who knows how fare we can take things?"

At school J, the leader also makes an opening statement that touches on a 'positive' which, in a way, is assessed in light of a 'negative':

"In some ways I want to say that we are currently in a situation where we are drowning in our own success. The survey data on wellbeing

show that the students really like it here at our school. They especially like it in lower secondary [which in Danish is called indskoling]. And because of this, all the least educated parents send their children here, which then makes it more than difficult for us to do well academically, which, in effect, hampers our chances of attracting other types of students...if you know what I mean!?!?..."

It is not possible to give an exhaustive list of the issues being addressed at the meetings. But to give an idea of what is put on the table, it may be mentioned that at school I, they discuss the challenges of being what the leadership team calls a good school for all students, including the most talented and resourceful ones. Moreover, they discuss co-teaching practices, the use of talent/impact coaches, and data on wellbeing, which in turn leads to a prolonged debate over how to establish a more formalised practice for reviewing and dealing with data on wellbeing in the instance where there is reason to be concerned. All in all, these issues, and others not listed here, are discussed in ways that resemble a form of sparring between equals. And to that effect, both the municipal representatives and the school leadership team seem to express a collective interest in finding the best 'solutions' as they explore the aforementioned issues from different perspectives, trying out a number of 'fits' or scenarios with regard to how these issues may be dealt with. Typically, the team opens the discussion and then the municipal level comments, asks questions, or offers a few suggestions on how to move ahead, often pointing to a municipal consultant that may be able to assist the local leaders in dealing with a specific problem. After having discussed the possibility of implementing a talent programme, the head, for example, says:

"If I am hearing you correctly, you are not interested in any more package courses. What you need is someone who can stay with you on this one? ...I mean an extra set of hands that can help you get things going".

At school J, they also discuss a broad range of issues. But in light of the opening made by the leader, namely, the one about the school drowning in their own success, the discussion of academic skills versus wellbeing takes up quite a bit time, during which the head makes the following remarks:

"I would hate to think that you conceive of your data on wellbeing as a disadvantage...Rather they should challenge you to find ways of capitalising on them. []Perhaps the first step for you is to help your teachers make the connection between high levels of wellbeing and academic progress, help them to think of building relations to the students as necessary in terms of enabling their academic progress, because from my point of view, and this is backed by research, there is a strong correlation between the two".

To point to this correlation between wellbeing and academic progress may

for some come across as a bit patronising, as if one were stating what is perfectly obvious to experienced professionals. The primary leader at school J, however, seems unshaken, perhaps because he chooses to focus on the head's eagerness to be of assistance and not on his lack of experience with the issue he addresses. At any rate, the leader just smiles and comments:

“All right, let's take it from there...Let's discuss how we possible can capitalise on our high levels of wellbeing”.

In view of this brief outline pertaining to the exchanges transpiring during the meetings at schools I and J, I bring my analysis to a close for the last time by attuning myself to what is both in front of as well as inside me while using the full range of my empirical material as a supportive backdrop. This time, however, it is as if I already know that 'collaboration' is the key word I want to go with, as I find it apt in terms of describing what I feel hanging in the air at the last two southern meetings. I say this because the rather flexible approach to data-work, brought on primarily by the head of department, seems to not only welcome a focus on data and the ways they may be employed to assist local management in their efforts to promote quality. It also seems to enable and promote perhaps a shared interest in discussing issues that are not directly related to the officially sanctioned agenda for follow-up meetings. So, on account of this flexible approach, the mandatory data-work ordered by the QAE mandate is thus positioned as equally important as attending to local needs and burning issues. And due to the fact that this dual outlook implicitly guides the agenda and sets the tone played out during the meetings, the participating parties, I find, seem fuelled by what can only be termed a collective spirit. Therefore, while observing the meetings, I at times feel myself enrolled in the synergy coming from the cooperative efforts exhibited by the participating professionals, ultimately prompting me to associate the atmospheric feature with that of a 'collaboration'.

In view of this 'assessment' of the last two meetings in the southern municipality, combined with that from the first two, it thus seems that the ardent attention coming from the municipality directed towards the local leaders and their immediate needs and interests, features a prominent characteristic that cannot help but impact the complex arrangements by which all four meetings come into expression. In fact, this attention, I find, may be perceived as a form of care for the local leaders and their contextual 'moveability'. Surely, this relational characteristic may be thought of as a rather minute aspect to 'get stuck on' while exploring the QAE mandate and its somewhat brutal enforcement of follow-up meetings, ordered to ensure the employment of data along a very 'tight script'. But, as I see it, the kind of care being expressed actually seems capable of modulating the mandatory practice of following up on data into something that reaches beyond the formal task of promoting quality, of promoting student learning and wellbeing. In the sense that it makes it feel as a joint task that is handled

best when both municipalities and local management work together and collaborate as one. To that effect, I claim, the mixed agenda of convening for purposes of quality production while at the same time also attending to more local and immediate issues is central in terms of allowing for all of the southern follow-up meetings to be surrounded with a tenor of *togetherness* and *collaboration*. Ultimately, marking them as domains it feels pleasant to be a part of.

Concluding Remarks on Data Being Played Out

As stated in the introduction to Entry Two, the atmospheric feel associated with things, situations, or encounters cannot be addressed in abstraction given the circumstance that atmospheres are specific to actual objects, bodies, and spaces as well as the intermingled state in which these entities relate to each other. In the analysis presented above, I have therefore sought to empirically explore how *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and more specifically the data it orders are ‘taken on board’ by local school leaders and municipal representatives during the times and places set aside for mandatory follow-up meetings. The purpose of this exploration, in brief, is to promote understanding of how the broad presence of the QAE mandate and the data featuring in quality reports, potentially contribute to the atmosphere enveloping these meetings. I go about this inquiry by first trying to impose some form of overview on what I perceive as the tangible constructs informing the ten follow-up meetings I attend as part of my fieldwork in one northern and one southern municipality. And informed by this overview, I then seek to attune myself to what it evokes in me. Or, to put it more precisely, I seek to attune myself to what the perceivable world associated with the meetings spurs in me, the perceiving subject ‘geared’ to pick up on what ideally is thought possible by ‘implementing’ the QAE mandate in schools. Thus, with this analytical set-up as my guide, I make the following assertions of the atmosphere at play in the follow-up meetings in question.

In general, the meetings at the northern schools, I find, seem to manifest in full compliance, so to speak, with the official agenda enforcing the practice of follow-up meetings. I say this partly in relation to the highly choreographed agenda enforced by the municipal level, and partly in relation to the way in which data are enacted as tangible occasions for discussing student learning and wellbeing and as such used to reason future actions or specific ways of practicing. And combined with the social ‘environment’ in which all this takes place, particularly the eager, forthcoming, and forward-looking approach exhibited by the municipal head of division, it seems apparent that the northern meetings generally are structured in ways that align with the kind of positive, well-intended, and simple logic inherent to the QAE mandate. Align in the sense that the mandate’s way of proposing to put data ‘to work’ for purposes of quality production is seemingly adopted into the way data are discussed and ‘dealt with’ over

the course of meetings. Ultimately, this suggests, I claim, that on the basis of this underlying structure, the meetings seem to be managed, or staged perhaps, in ways that mark the surrounding space with a form of positive productivity around which it feels easy to gather.

In many ways, the meetings at the southern schools unfold in ways similar to the northern ones. However, the loose manner in which the meetings are structured and the ardent interest in local needs expressed by the municipal head of division set the southern meetings somewhat apart, allowing for a more flexible agenda than is the case in the northern municipality. In effect, the southern meetings seem to embrace the formal intention of following up on data while also making room for discussing issues pertinent to local management and their specific circumstances. The purpose of contrasting the two meeting formats with each other is not to assess the extent to which they may or may not incorporate the officially sanctioned way of following up on data. Rather the point is to highlight the fact that the differences between them largely seem to stem from the municipality and their approach to follow-up meetings, seeing that it is the *combined* interest in both adhering to what I term the official sanctioned format for ‘use’ of data and the care for local issues expressed by the head of division which essentially affords for the southern meetings to be marked by a tenor of togetherness and cooperation. Consequently, making them stand out as domains it feels pleasant to be a part of.

In view of this rough sketch of the insights stemming from the analysis of the ten follow-up meetings included in my fieldwork, I now return to the research question proposed in the introduction to Entry Two:

How does data mark the atmosphere enveloping follow-up practices?

To answer this question, it seems productive to start by noting the overall nature of the atmospheres characteristic of the ten follow-up meetings I have attended and then turn to how I view the role played by data while being enrolled in these complex affective arrangements. As already implied by my brief overview of the assertions stemming from the analysis, the northern meetings, I find, generally seem to be enveloped by atmospheres of positive productivity. And the southern meetings, broadly speaking, seem to be enveloped by atmospheres of togetherness and cooperation. In combination, this suggests that the meetings seem to be enveloped by atmospheres that, in one way or the other, may be discerned by using what are typically known as ‘plus’ words. Or to put it differently, they all seem surrounded by an excess, to revert to Anderson’s terminology, that may be described as constructive, up-beat, supportive, and to some extent even caring. And prompted by this excess, a certain expressivity is added to the meetings, ephemeral by nature, but still intensely felt as the experience of taking part in them registers in ways that cannot help but engage the full sensorial apparatus of all parties present.

In principle, atmospheres are expressed on the basis of complex arrangements, involving the presence of multiple heterogeneous ‘bodies’ working together, affecting and being affected by each other, which thus makes it impossible to ‘capture’ the full scope of their expression. So, in a way, it does not make much sense to discern the role of one ‘body’ or element over the other. Yet, on account of the analysis undertaken above, focusing specifically on data and the way in which they are enrolled in the meetings being scrutinised, it is possible, I claim, to identify some characteristics related to the way in which data are ‘taken on board’ in selected follow-up meetings and thus ‘know’ about how they seem to contribute to the atmospheres surrounding them. It is, for example, characteristic of both the northern and the southern meetings that they are orchestrated in ways that resonate well with the officially sanctioned simple, well-intended, and straightforward ‘recipe’ for how to follow up on data for purposes of promoting quality. And on account of this orchestration certain ways of referring to data and ‘dealing’ with them become naturalised and thus more welcomed than others. This might not seem too important, but it is nevertheless worth noting seeing that these specific ways of referring to and dealing with data are key in providing a backdrop against which it becomes easy, or perhaps more precisely, friction-free to constitute the meetings as spaces and domains to which a particular excess is distinctive. An excess that, as noted, essentially comes across as constructive, up-beat, supportive and in some sense also caring. Ultimately, coming across as full of positivity to put it very simply.

As I see it, the display of this kind of orchestration mainly falls back on the municipal level as municipalities are the ones entrusted to execute follow-up practices and they in fact have a lot of leeway to do so in ways they find productive. They can, for example, enforce specific ways of working with data as is the case in the northern municipality where local management are introduced and asked to work with a chart, they have not had any say in. Having said that, however, it is too simple to argue that the atmosphere at stake purely is at the hands of the municipality and thereby imply it to the result of a designed process. It is too simple, because as mentioned by Bille (2019, p. 5), atmospheres may be defined broadly as the quality of a situation, made up by the constellation of people and things present, always in a process of emerging as the constellation in which they are expressed continuously intermingles and therefore changes. Furthermore, as stipulated by Anderson (2016, p. 153), the composition of atmospheres manifests itself both as an effect, emanating from a heterogeneous gathering of elements, and as a mediating force that actively may change a gathering by enveloping what is around, infusing and mixing with the many actants that contribute to its formation and deformation. Therefore, in response to the research question at the centre of Entry Two, it is not as if the municipality and their orchestration of the meetings are single-handedly responsible for the atmospheric envelopment at play. Rather this orchestration, I claim, *fleetingly contributes* to the notes of positivity that I

find characteristic of the atmosphere enveloping the practice of following up on data with.

In some sense, it may seem inconsequential to stress this specification, but when it comes to the discernment of a phenomenon like atmosphere, it is important not to lose sight of both the subtle, precarious, and constantly volatile nature of what one assumes to 'know' (Runkel, 2018, p. 10). Moreover, as already stated and explained, the properties of an atmosphere emerge as an intersection of the perceivable world out there and the perceiving subject; as such, it is also important not to overstate the substance of what I pick up on, seeing that the methodological 'command' of remaining purposefully open to the proposed rewards of working with data and producing quality is sure to impact my 'angled' arrival at the meetings. Nevertheless, it worth noting, I argue, that in my role as observer to follow-up meetings, what I find to be the most distinctive feature is an overriding sense of positivity, meaning that the spaces dedicated to following up on data for purposes of promoting school quality more than anything seem to be marked by this overarching note of positivity. To some, this may seem a somewhat inconsequential or perhaps a harmless reflexion to put it more diplomatically, as it is not directly related to the practical enactment of the QAE mandate and its very specific 'requirements' on how to enforce follow-up practices. But, from where I stand, this kind of atmospheric envelopment is in fact vital as it seems more than capable of conditioning the way in which working with data and more generally with QAE may be experienced. Potentially prompting the school leaders participating in these practices to adapt this overall positivity into their own approach to the kind of data-work ordered by the QAE mandate.

Swayed by Being Caught Up

In the introduction I mention how atmospheres may be considered 'agential' in so far as they are able to hold sway over a group of people by, for example, 'pushing' them to make a purchase they would otherwise not have made, or by mobilising an intense connection to a cause they have no prior stance on. In such cases, atmospheres can be said to operate as an animating force drawing people in, much like an alien power taking possession of their actions, to use the dramatic imagery proposed by Böhme (2013, p. 2). Applying this agential capacity as a springboard for academic inquiry, Edensor and Sumartojo (2015) have recently dedicated a special issue of a journal to the examination of the relationship between designed atmospheres and those cast in their midst. They thereby add to a growing interest in the persuasive capacity of atmospheres, as manifested by research into landscapes, architecture, and homes (Bille et al., 2015), as well as public crowds (Runkel, 2018) and media environments (Massumi, 2010). To mention a few. Informed by this widely distributed interest and the understandings afforded, it makes sense to address the performative effects associated with the atmosphere I find characteristic of follow-up

meetings included in this study. In the following, I therefore seek to open the insights afforded by the analysis presented in the previous section up to a broader discussion of potential connections between the corporally informed experiences of the excess hanging in the air and the political mandate to promote quality.

In brief, the analysis in question suggests that the atmospheres enveloping the follow-up meetings I attend as part of field work, broadly speaking, may be characterised as full of positivity. In more detail, I argue that the northern meetings mainly come across as surrounded by atmospheres of positive productivity, allowing for them to register as spaces it feels easy to gather around. And in reference to the southern meetings, I argue that they primarily stand out as surrounded by atmospheres of togetherness and cooperation, affording them to registers as domains it feels pleasant to be a part of. This is not to say that I, in effect, deem this atmospheric feature a property or a finished 'thing', capable of always instilling certain a sensorial feel, amongst the school leaders, for example. That would be an over-simplification of the point I am trying to make. Rather, my contention is that the all-encompassing positivity reflective of the atmospheric feel of the meetings in question is likely to condition the way the leaders present may experience the practice of following up on data from their quality report, or more generally, the practice of employing data for purposes of promoting school quality. I make this claim mindful of the stance, that atmospheres more than anything function as a formation of energy or intensity, occupying the space in-between the objective and subjective, and as such, conditioning the way in which the world and/or encounters may be experienced.

I realise that my discernment of the overall positivity at stake is made while employing my own sensorial apparatus as a source of 'knowing' about the atmosphere enveloping the meetings I am enrolled in, or the meetings I attend in an observational role, to be more precise. To that effect, there is no automatic correlation between my discernment and the ways in which these meetings may stand out to each of the participating leaders. Still, considering the set-up of the fieldwork, I am present at the meetings *together* with the leaders, meaning that we are, in a way, part of the same specific time and place, part of the same complex, affective arrangement. And given the contagious and thus often collectively felt nature of atmospheres, it is hard to imagine that the underlying notes of positivity, which I find so prominently present, go unnoticed by the participating leaders. So, to the extent that this is in fact the case; that the leaders do register the surrounding atmospheres of the follow-up meetings in ways that are similar to how I register them, picking up on the same undercurrent of positivity, they are likely to be corporally caught up by the ease and pleasantness charactering of the meetings. And not just caught up at random but caught up in ways that are likely to sway them towards the QAE mandate, on account of the way in which they may experience the practice of following up on data.

Therefore, the overall experience of participating in the meetings matters in the sense that it may, for example, prompt the leaders to find themselves more appreciative of the rather standard approach towards the employment of data so eagerly encouraged by the municipality as a way of feeling and thus being in sync with the atmosphere surrounding them. Or perhaps it may cause the leaders to feel drawn to the more recognisable enactments of quality production so as to accede to the responsiveness demonstrated by the municipal representatives as they persistently express an earnest interest in 'being of service' to certain modes of quality production. By that token, I argue, the more or less conscious engendering of the surrounding atmosphere is key, because when being caught up the atmosphere enveloping the meetings, the leaders are potentially swayed to approach the mandatory practice of employing data for purposes of quality production in specific ways. And by that token, the 'thing' not tangibly present, but nevertheless sensorially felt, may be thought of as capable of initially conditioning the experience of what it feels like to work with data in relation to the QAE mandate and subsequently prompting certain ways of thinking of and working towards this politically induced mandate.

So, with reference to the insight afforded by the analysis presented earlier, it is likely, I argue, that the atmospheres enveloping the practices of following up on data may serve as an animating force, guiding the participating leaders to approach the QAE mandate in certain ways. For example, by adjusting their own presence to what hangs in the air and as such to connect or attach to what is generally thought of as the officially sanctioned version of how to promote quality in pursuit of the kind of overall betterment it is thought to ensure. In sum, this suggests that the way in which practicing professionals, e.g., school leaders, potentially experience their participation in the mandatory practice of following up on data, of following up on their results may influence them and their approach towards the QAE mandate. In the sense that the atmosphere at stake may in fact condition how follow-up meetings are experienced, potentially provoking a form of felt connectivity or attachment towards working with data for purposes of promoting quality. And in view of this capacity, I argue, it seems that something so immaterial and flighty as an atmosphere may actually mark how practices of following up on data are experienced by those who participate in them and in turn entice or animate attachment towards the overriding objective of promoting quality, and as such 'feed' the general productivity with which the QAE mandate is taken up in practice.



Chapter 5:

Entry Three

– Data Registering
Affectively

Being Leader in Prolongation of Data

At the by now much mentioned meeting I happened to attend on behalf of a colleague, data seemed to be understood as measurements intimately related to the leaders present. In the sense that, as far as I could tell, both the municipal representatives and the local leadership team seemed to engage with data from the school's quality report as if the state of affairs they are thought to document were somehow expressive of the kind of leadership being practiced at the school in question, meaning that it seemed as if data were read as expressive of the local leader's capacity to assist quality production, generally speaking. And as result of this kind of approach to data, the recursive dynamics associated with assessment of results and processes of self-representation seemed to operate as a lurking presence throughout the meeting. To that effect, it may be argued that to the extent that data measuring results are 'dealt with' as a form of proxy for the capacity to lead, the intermingling of data, leadership, and affect becomes correspondingly relevant; especially, seeing that the influx of these types of data have become increasingly prevalent on account of *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and its imperative to secure and enhance quality. Therefore, I propose to examine the role played by data in relation to practices of leadership, focusing on how school leaders *feel* about data as a basis for addressing how this potentially plays into their approach to working with, or as some may put it, working under the QAE mandate.

As a steppingstone for this examination, I turn to the concept of performativity, or rather the philosophical stance that all phenomena in the world do in fact accomplish 'things' and as such are performative, impacting their surroundings based on the way in which they are taken up in day-to-day life. In principle, the term *performativity* is intrinsically connected to that of *performance* as they both derive from the verb *to perform*. As such, both terms denote the capacity to execute an action in practice (Berns, 2009) as well as the human inclination to make the everyday world visible by, essentially, performing it. To that effect, the notion of performativity captures some of the foundational aspects of human sociality, and for that reason it has attracted the interest of many scholars across a broad range of disciplines. In principle, it emerged from linguistics and the philosophy of language and later it migrated to performance studies as well as ethnology, sociology, and cultural studies amongst others (Berns, 2009). Across these disciplines, however, the work of philosopher John L. Austin (1975) is generally credited for the coupling of performativity and language. Basically, Austin proposes that language is performative in the sense that it does something in the world, meaning that utterances such as promising, swearing, and betting are agentic, in the sense that saying *I do* during a wedding ceremony, for instance, instantly transforms the utterer from being unmarried to being married (Cavanaugh, 2015).

Expanding on this basic proposition, and typically also on the work of Foucault, Althusser, and Lyotard, many scholars have set out to explore the

varying ways language can be said to do things while being employed. Most notably, Judith Butler has engaged the concept of performativity to describe how gender is socially constructed, in part, through commonplace speech acts. In brief, Butler claims performativity to be “the reiterative power of discourse to reproduce the phenomena it regulates and constrains” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). And Karen Barad (2003, p. 810), partly extrapolating from this body of work, professes: “What is needed is a robust account of the materialization of all bodies—‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’—and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked”. As such, Barad offers an elaboration of performativity by illustrating how matter actively participates in the world’s becoming, ultimately stressing how matter matters to practices/ doings/actions (ibid, p. 802). As such, the concept of performativity, broadly speaking, offers a way of thinking of objects and subjects as something that create each other, and it thereby directs attention towards the doings of things, to phrase it rather simply, effectively highlighting how language, rituals, and culture, etc. may be taken up in practice, and in the process of so doing, become constitutive of their own enactment.

In contemplating symbolic interactionist inquiry and the performative aspect involved in all aspects of human existence, Norman Denzin (2016; 2003, 2019), I find, contributes another hugely relevant spin to the overall concept of performativity as he couples it to the neoliberal present and its relentless promotion of data. To argue premises of this coupling, he refers to performativity as the act of *doing* and to performance as the act that is effectively *done*. He thereby emphasizes the tension with which performativity and performance exist in relation to each other, being continuously extended between *doing* something and subsequently appreciating it as *done*. As a way of describing this tension, Denzin (2016) speaks of *the call to performance* as a state of being in which subjects simultaneously are called to perform and view their own performance as part of the same ‘movement’. To explain this state of being, Denzin first refers to Goffman and his way of thinking about the world as a stage:

“All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways on which it isn’t are not easy to specify” (Goffman, 1959, p. 72).

Initially Denzin uses this stance to underscore how the performative functions as an ever-present facet of most if not all aspects of social life. And then he goes on to claim that global capitalism and its neoliberal rule is one reason why this is so (Denzin, 2016). More specifically, he laments the fact that the audit culture following in the wake of this rule is essential to making all things observable through quantitative data, and thus is essential to reconfiguring data as performative (Denzin, 2019).

To explain this a bit further, Denzin also refers to some of the reflections voiced by Augusto Boal (1995), who insists that the essence of theatre is human beings observing themselves, and therefore humans not only ‘make’

theatre but in fact are theatre. And based on the combined insights offered by both Goffman and Boal, as well as Schechner (1998), Denzin concludes that in a world where everything is always already performative, staged, and theatrical, the dividing lines between person and character, performer and actor, stage and setting, performance and performativity disappear. And in applying this premise to the era of neoliberal politics, Denzin suggests that it is currently difficult, and often impossible, to sustain any absolute distinction between appearance and facts, surface and depths, illusion and substance given the performative reconfiguration of quantitative data. Despite the circumstance that Denzin primarily speaks to a North American context where neoliberal politics have attained a particular stronghold in education, for example, there is a lot to be learned from Denzin's stance on the distinction between appearances and actualities, or reality rather, standing out as somewhat blurred, because it points to the fact that in the historical present the process of becoming a subject is accentuated by becoming quantitatively readable. And, as I see it, this accentuated form of subjectivity applies to the Western world at large. Thus, suggesting that this stance may give rise to new ways of understanding the potential influence following from the QAE mandate and the data it orders.

In relation to *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, for example, it is clear that data are established as a yardstick of quality, and thereby data are implicitly required to be assessed in close connection to the ways in which schools are managed or led, depending on the definition being utilised. As such, data are in a way enforced as measurements of both attained results and of forms of leadership. And consequently, the premises for becoming leader become closely related to being or standing out in prolongation of data, in the sense that the specific ways in which this programme uses data to promote quality does indeed advocate a practice of assessing leaders quantitatively. Informed by Denzin's work, it is therefore hugely relevant, I maintain, to attend to how this policy mandate is actually taken up in practice by school leaders, focusing on how they in fact employ data in their everyday practices. This is not to suggest that they uniformly comply to the mandate and to its prescribed use of data. That would be oversimplifying matters as well as disregarding the foundational insight coming from Weick (1995), stipulating that all practitioners tend to enact their policy roles in ways that accommodate their existing practices, previous experiences, professional values, and actual resources. So, in responding the context in which they practice and their particular 'in-take' of it, they continuously mediate between the external requirements and local circumstances particular to their way of practicing, thus acting as what is sometime teasingly referred to as *policy brokers*.

Therefore, it is too simple to think of leaders 'constrained' by policies in relation to their way of employing data. Still, it is important, I argue, not to lose sight of the fact that the QAE policy in question functions as a vital backdrop against which school leaders today are recognised as legitimate professionals by the agents to whom they in a way answer, namely the administrators at the

municipal level. Moreover, the rather instrumental and highly communicative link between certain ways of practicing leadership and data demonstrating results, so adamantly stressed by the current QAE mandate, makes it nearly impossible for leaders to bypass the integration of data into their practice. Obviously, the QAE mandate, as stipulated earlier, reflects a trans-national trend in the way in which education is governed, and as such, this mandate is employed differently according to the context in which it is applied, typically being adapted to suit a long range of local 'needs' and agendas. But at its core, it has been and still is being employed so that leaders are forced to navigate in an environment where quantificational results-oriented measurements are made to count. And to that effect, they are employed so that leaders are impelled to work with data as a basis for making their practice 'known' and thus in a way their professional capabilities. In view of this circumstance, it is hard to overestimate the relevance of probing and discussing the presence of measurements or output data and their way of determining the framework for practicing leadership in schools, as well as in most other institutions dedicated to learning, teaching, training, and so forth, given the fact that data currently exist as a requirement that leaders in education cannot 'duck' their way out of.

On account of the stronghold demonstrated by the QAE mandate, leaders are therefore faced with the 'chore' of making the best out of the fact that data have come to function as a kind of evidence, allowing them, along with the outside world around them, to know about their achievements and as such know their 'worth'. In effect, they are somehow obliged to gravitate towards the politically provisioned, and in a way also, the culturally familiar language based on which they are prompted to perform themselves and their institutions, which in the case of this study, amounts to the schools they represent. In that sense, the introduction of the QAE mandate and its strong 'push' towards data may be viewed as a bit of a game changer when it comes to leaders and the practice of leadership, seeing that QAE data are so very apt in terms of offering leaders a tangible basis for continuously gazing at themselves and their actions. In the sense that data in practice are made to operate as a form of mirror in or before which leaders, in principle, become quantitatively readable to themselves as well as to others, and to that effect are encouraged to perform their practice and professional selves while responding to the mandatory task of putting data to work for purposes of quality production. Thus, prompting the presence of affect as inextricably connected to working with QAE data.

To some extent, the performative and thus also the affective has always been inherent to leadership. History tells us as much. Still, I claim, with the QAE prescribed employment of data, the coupling between performativity and leadership have surely accelerated. In the sense that the kind of data this mandate authorises offers a readily available basis for both expressing and appreciating leadership, because it essentially allows for leaders to be quantitatively viewed, internally as well as externally. And effectively, I claim, the everyday stage and the everyday theatre, originally introduced by Goff-

man decades ago, has become more prominently outspoken in leadership within education, including school leadership. And for that reason, I find, it makes sense to scrutinise the intermingling of data, leadership, and affect more closely, especially considering Denzin's astute observation about the distinctions between *appearance and facts, surface and depth, illusion and substance* being particularly blurred on account of neoliberal politics. I say this because by taking this observation into account, it seems obvious that data measuring the output of any given institution, much like the kind of data encompassed in the quality report, are capable of operating as form of *surface* based on which leaders in practice are appreciated in close relation to their professional *substance*. And ultimately, this type of appreciation prompts the appearance of leadership to blend with its factual practice, or at least it prompts data reflecting results to be 'treated' as such.

Thus, informed by the concept of performativity and in particular Denzin's work stressing the dramaturgical dimension of all social life, including leadership in the neoliberal present, I propose the following research question as grounds for the query to be taken up in Entry Three:

How does data 'bring out' the performative in leadership?

Guided by this research question, I continue with Entry Three by first outlining the line of inquiry I propose as a basis for exploring the intermingling of leadership, data, and affect. And for the third and last time, this entails initially outlining the kind of mediation of affect I work from, tweaked to 'fit' the query at hand. Next, it entails detailing the way in which I compose my empirical material, finding leaders and their reflections on practice to serve as a valuable basis for probing the intermingling I set out to explore. And lastly, the outline of my inquiry entails explaining and arguing my way of approaching and analysing the composed material as a ground for 'knowing' how data potentially registers affectively. Prompted by the premises thus outlined, I then embark on the actual analysis in which I first reference the reflections voiced by the leaders included in the field work, and subsequently use them as grounds for sensing the leaders at hand and their affective engagement with data. Building from the overall insights stemming from this analysis, I then set out more generally to address the research question proposed in the introduction, bringing together my thoughts as to how and why data can be said 'bring out' the performative in leadership. And as a final note, I seek to use the conclusions afforded as a basis for pointing to how the affectively informed intake of data may in fact be instrumental by way of moving school leaders to attach to data and their 'functionality', and thus also to the overall QAE mandate to promote quality.

The Line of Inquiry – Sensing Data being Taken In

With reference to the research question proposed just now, the aim of Entry Three is broadly to explore how data demonstrating results achieved by actual schools are received or taken in by those whose practice they spot-

light. The aim is to try to get a sense of how they may infuse a mode of performativity amongst school leaders. To promote this kind of exploration beyond abstract assertions about data prompting specific sensations based on the highs and/or lows they bring into focus, I seek a line of inquiry making it possible to conduct empirical research into how data are affectively and thus sensorially or perhaps somatically received. Therefore, I seek to establish a line of inquiry attending to the affective repertoire by which data are made to matter as more than just exterior measurements, based on how actual leaders reflect on their own engagement with data in relation to their day-to-day practice. To that end, I first detail the actual mediation of affect I work with as a way grappling with the sensorial reception indicative of the ways in which data in practice register affectively. Secondly, I highlight and argue for the construction of the empirical material, utilising interviews with school leaders and the reflections they voice as a basis for approximating their ‘sensibilities’ concerning data. And finally, I illustrate the approach that is proposed as onset for making sense of the empirical material, effectively giving reason for the outlined analysis as grounds for ‘knowing’ about data and their affective reception. With these three steps, I thereby explicate my way of producing insights pertaining to data and their capacity to register affectively.

Viewing Affect as Disclosed in Reflection

Considering the above-mentioned aim of seeking to scrutinise how data from quality reports register in ways that are performative and thus affective, involving the sensorial apparatus of the perceiving subject, it seems productive, to turn to a mediation of affect that orients towards the continuous connections and disconnections between affects and their minute, patterned involvement or imbrication with life in general. Thus, turning to a way of thinking about affect that considers the affective as intrinsic to all forms of social life. Not by extrapolating from one specific theorist or one specific body of work, but rather by drawing stimulus from the overriding stance that affect is not an autonomous “thing”, shared by many scholars across a wide range of disciplines. In the following, I therefore seek to highlight the implications of this overriding stance by referencing some of the positions advocating it. But in an attempt to offer some context to the positions I refer to here, it is necessary to briefly sketch two contesting viewpoints as to how affect may be researched. The first mainly associates affect with a form of excess that comes into expression through non-representational formations. The other mainly associates affect with entanglement, manifesting itself as an integral feature of other ‘media’ such as bodies, language, events, places, etc. In practice, I find, is not always easy to discern the exact ways in which these viewpoints diverge from each other, but as analytical distinctions they serve as an illustrative map for locating the notion of affect to which I turn while probing the query at hand.

Claire Hemmings (2005), for example, proposes that the realm of affect

is intricately woven into most facets of life. She does so in her renowned article 'Invoking Affect', where she interrogates the renewed interest in affect, which at the time had assigned affect to set post-structuralist approaches free from their repetitive and tired ways of illuminating social determinism. Informed by this interrogation, Hemmings makes the case that she is not convinced by theorists who claim that affect is the key to social transformation. She is not convinced because this claim essentially derives from the premise that affect is what escapes signification and is thereby free from norms, social meanings, and restrictions. That premise that does not make much sense to Hemmings, who holds that all forms of affective attachment take place in a context suffused with social narratives, cultural norms, and power relations (ibid, p. 562). And furthermore, she holds, affective life resonates differently for different individuals (ibid. p. 564). As such, she in a way turns the argument around by suggesting that the emergence of affect within cultural studies is both relevant and necessary due to the fact that affect does not exist outside social meaning. More precisely, she says: 'Instead, affect might in fact be valuable precisely to the extent that is not autonomous'.

In many ways, the work of Lisa Blackman also tends to expand on the basic argument that affect does not exist or operate in and of itself. As mentioned earlier, in highlighting some of the principle assumptions inherent to many studies of affect, Blackman (2007, 2015) finds affect to be disclosed in a range of diverse phenomena such as atmospheres, gut feelings, and embodied reactions as well as felt intensities and sensations. Following from this line of thinking, Blackman goes on to proclaim that affect is not an entity that can be captured as an *it* or a *thing*. In short, she argues: "Affect, for me at least, refers to entangled processes [...]" (Ibid p. 40). In her work on *Immaterial Bodies*, for example, Blackman (2012) elaborates upon this position further. Here she argues that affect should not be understood as an *either or*, as is often done by more the 'clean' positions, the pre-cognitive theorists versus the discursively cognitive theorists, populating affect studies. In explaining her position, Stage (2013) argues that to Blackman affect operates as "a highly complex force, revealing the body as both material and psychological, matter and mind, flesh and cognition, one and many". Thus, arguing the case that bodies are never purely material or cognitive, but rather always both at once, which must always, she argues, be reflected in research attending to affect.

Lastly, Ben Anderson also stands out as someone favouring what may, in short, be termed a complex or integrative outlook on affect. Generally, he does not think of affect as only subsiding in one domain of life, neatly separated from others. Rather, he maintains, affect is deeply connected to the surrounding world. As already detailed in a previous section, Anderson therefore employs a pragmatic-contextual distinction or model of affect as a way of recognising the varied differentiation on the basis of which affective encounters may be encompassed in life. He refers to these differentiations

as the many mediations by which affective life is expressed. In reference to this stance, Anderson suggests that this varied composition must be reflected when researching affect. And one way of doing so, he contends, involves utilising the following starting points as a basis for ‘performing’ an analysis of affect. The first entails premising the analysis on the circumstance that there is no such thing as affect ‘itself’. The second entails thinking of affective life as always already mediated. The third entails taking into account the fact that affect is never autonomous, but continuously imbricated with other dimensions without, however, being reducible to them. And finally, the fourth entails not precluding attention to representations, rather, in its place, paying attention to how representation functions affectively, or is taken up affectively in practice as I prefer to term it, and how affective life is imbued with representation (Anderson, 2016, p. 13, 14). To that end, Anderson, like Blackman and to some extent also Hemmings, promotes a somewhat ‘messy’ view of affect by continuously seeking to highlight its imbrication with other ‘things’.

In principle, Margaret Wetherell (2012) could also be mentioned as a proponent of this ‘messy’ view of affect presented above, seeing that she on the whole apprehends affect as inextricably linked to modes of sense-making. And as such adamantly opposes the dividing line drawn by some theorist between bodies on the one side and talk and texts on the other. In sum, this ultimately suggests that there are quite a few scholarly positions who, each in their own way, argue the overriding stance that affect is not autonomous. And to me, this stance comes across as a productive point of departure for grappling with an empirical practice constituted by leaders working with the QAE mandate and the kind of data-work this entails, making it possible to explore how representations in the form of data are taken up affectively in practice and how the ‘doings’ of leadership is imbued with representations, to phrase it along the insight conveyed by Andersen just now. So, by viewing affect as disclosed in concrete ways of dealing with representations it becomes plausible to think of reflections conveying about practical employment of data as fleeting testimonies to the ways in which data-work, simply put, may be felt and experienced. Or, more precisely, it becomes possible to use reflections on dealings with data as grounds for understanding how both the affective and modes of sense-making offer interpretative meaning to leaders as they engage data as part of their everyday practice.

An Empirical basis Made up of Reflections

As it has been said many times when referring to *The Quality Report 2.0* programme, data function as a central component of the politically authorised production of quality. Consequently, data measuring student learning and wellbeing have become progressively important to school leaders as they are officially instructed to work with these data as a basis for ‘adhering’ to this QAE mandate and consequently also for performatively manifest-

ing their own capabilities. So, as a way of ‘getting’ close to an empirical practice in which the intermingling of data, leadership and affect is played out, I turn to actual school leaders for whom the employment of data is deeply integrated with their professional lives. I do so, because as indicated previously, I seek to ‘know’ about how working with QAE may be felt and experienced in practice. Guided by this interest, I have therefore chosen to interview the leaders of the schools included in my fieldwork as means of probing their views pertaining to the current presence of data and the way in which they work with them in their daily practices. As such, I have chosen to construct my empirical material out of their reflections on this matter. To explain the process of constructing this empirical material in more detail, I shall firstly outline the practical set-up based on which the interviews took place, and secondly outline the kind of thinking informing this way of trying to approximate the felt experience of working with QAE and the kind of data it instructs.

As stated in Entry Two, I came in contact with the ten schools included in my fieldwork through two consultants from one northern and one southern municipality. Due to this circumstance, I had no communication with the leaders in question prior to the follow-up meetings. But subsequently, I contacted the respective leaders and made an official request to interview them. With the ‘approval’ of my contact-consultants, I always made sure to mention the upcoming interview request to the leaders while briefly introducing my study and myself at the beginning of all the follow-up meetings I attended. In this manner, they were in a way warned about the interview request beforehand. Fortunately, it appeared that every single one of them were open to setting aside time for me, willing to accommodate my interest in knowing more about their practice with and around data. However, one leader kept rescheduling and to my last email, suggesting another date for the interview, there was no response. Thinking that this was the leader’s way of declining the ‘chance’ to be interviewed, I did not push the matter any further. In total, I therefore ended up with conducting nine interviews with the leaders from the schools in question, five from the southern municipality and four from the northern one.

The interviews took place at each of the respective schools. In four instances the primary leader proposed that the assistant leaders be included in the interview. I readily welcomed this suggestion, thinking this would allow for more variety in the reflections expressed and potentially would allow the interview situation to emerge more as an exchange of views as opposed to a steady flow of questions and answers. On average the interviews ran for an hour and a half; and with the permission of everyone present, they were recorded and later transcribed verbatim, amounting to approximately 300 pages of transcribed material. I conducted the interviews following a semi-structured interview-guideline, designed to probe the interviewees and their views on data in relation to the following three areas: **1)** the use of data encompassed in the quality report, **2)** the practice of ‘doing’ data

informed leadership, and 3) the possibilities afforded them on account of data. I used this semi-structured guideline as a basis for getting a better sense of their everyday dealings with data from the quality report and thus for conducting the interviews in ways that would allow for these ‘dealings’ to come into focus. Essentially asking the interviewees to stay close to home, so to speak, by describing how they actually work with data from the quality report and by encouraging them to use to concrete examples of how data ‘fits’ into their practice.

After each interview, I wrote down my immediate thoughts. And on the basis of these notes, it is clear to see that I was generally pleased with the open and informal quality of the interviews. While going over the transcripts, however, I could not help but wish that I had done things differently. More specifically, I wish had been ‘brave’ enough to more directly question the interviewees to reflect on how the situations they spoke of made them feel, so as to allow them to provide longer and perhaps more personal stories pertaining to the felt impact of data and thus the more affect-informed aspects of data-work.¹¹ But primarily, I wish I had not been so eager to push things along, because in my eagerness to ‘complete’ all of the interviews, while staying committed to my semi-structured interview guide, I got the sense that I at times cut the leaders off, stopping their train of thoughts so that I could be reassured that all of the aforementioned areas were addressed in the time set aside for the interview. Still, seeing that I did not have the opportunity to build any kind of rapport with the leaders ahead of the interviews, they may not have felt inclined to share more than they already did, even if I had questioned them differently.

At any rate, the fact of the matter is that my field work took place at an early stage in the research process, and at that point I was struggling to get an overview of the many less than unified ways of appreciating and researching affect, still uncertain about how to empirically access something so inherently ephemeral and changing as affect. But in view of Blackman’s stance on affect being disclosed in diverse phenomena, including felt intensities, it early on made sense to me to use interviews as a way of exploring how leaders both bodily and cognitively seem to come to terms with working with QAE data. Moreover, seeing that I set out to probe the everyday practice of someone with whom I had no prior relation, the interview seemed a familiar format, or rather a familiar research method, well-tailored to my objective of ‘getting close’ to the felt experience of practicing leadership in response to the current QAE mandate and the data it authorises. In other words, it seemed like a method that would not raise any flags amongst the leaders due to its

¹¹ In some instances, scholars researching affect opt for more arts-based methods as grounds for ‘getting close’ to their ‘informants’ and the affective world they inhabit. James Burford (2018), for example, works with self-portraits as a means of trying to understand the felt experience of being a doctoral student. More specifically, he uses self-portraits, in the form of drawings and collages, to enhance his understanding of doctoral students and the kinds of lives they live.

longstanding acknowledgement as a 'valid' way of attending to subjects and their way of attaching meaning to their actions. Therefore, I base my work on a constellation of empirical materials, highlighting how selected school leaders collectively reflect on their practice with data and reason about their role in relation to specific situations or tasks.

'Knowing' about Data based on Sense

As noted in the introduction, the concept of performativity, along with the dramaturgical spin added by Denzin, suggests that the appearance of leadership is not just an external feature otherwise unrelated to the actual *doings* of leadership, as appearances in many ways create what they supposedly only mirror. Informed by this line of reasoning, I have therefore sought to develop an analytical strategy based on which it may be possible to 'know' about the intermingled state of data, leadership, and affect by exploring the ways in which data register affectively amongst leaders. To that end, I seek to demonstrate the steps taken to develop this strategy as a way of outlining my way of approaching the empirical material at hand. I start by highlighting how I utilise the reflections expressed by the leaders included in the study as demonstrations of how they engage with data from the quality report. Next, I illustrate my way of translating these demonstrations into expressions of how these 'engagements' are marked by the way in which data register affectively. Mobilising my own capacity for sensing what matters to the leaders in question by paying careful attention to the way in which they tend to add interpretative meaning to the results featured in the reports and as such sensitising myself to approximate their affective appropriation of data.

As explained in the previous subsection, my empirical material consists of interviews in which leaders are invited to reflect on their practice, specifically in relation to their use of data and the role data seemingly play in their mundane day-to-day professional lives. And based on these first-hand and practice informed reflections, I seek to learn more about the ways in which data are taken in affectively. Or put differently, I seek to learn more about the embodied, sensorial experience of working with data. In principle, however, the kind of embodied, sensorial experiences, or engagements perhaps, at stake are not as such directly 'observable'. Therefore, I seek to utilise my empirical material in a way that is mindful of the fact that the reflections voiced by the leaders in a way are constrained as a medium for expressing what it feels like to deal with data from an embodied, sensorial perspective as it often registers in ways that are difficult to fully express with words. Still, considering the earlier argued point about affect being imbricated with or disclosed in most domains of life, reflections about how life is experienced, or more specifically, how practices with data are experienced, may nevertheless, I find, hint at the affective component inherent in such practices and thus serve as a valuable basis for to some extent discerning how the daily engagement with data registers sensorially.

So, rooted in this methodological ‘route’, I set out to engage with the interview transcripts in the following manner. First, I do a quick read-through of all the interviews, attending to them as if they were part of one cohesive material, because even though I interview the leaders and the leadership teams from each school separately, I am not as such interested in making an individual out of every leader included in the study. Rather, I am interested in discerning similarities that highlight how all the interviewees, aside from their particular circumstances, view data and deal with them. Yet, for reference purposes, I have assigned each leader with letters A to I, corresponding to the letters assigned to ‘their’ schools in Entry Two, so that leader A, B, C, D, and E refer to the 5 northern leaders (minus leader F whom I did not interview) and leader G, H, I and J refer to the southern ones. And based on this first rough read-through, I then organise the reflections expressed in the material into four thematic groups based on what data seem to offer the leaders. In the sense that I impose a form of overview of the situations and circumstances reflective of the leaders and their daily practices based on what they, by their own account, get out of using data. In total, I identify the following thematic groups:

- The first group includes reflections on how data are incorporated as valued points of departure for making adjustments to practice, almost rushing the leaders to establish themselves as professionals.
- The second group includes reflections on how data are employed as absolutes pertaining to the state of student learning and wellbeing, in a way urging the leaders to use data as a basis for pursuing more or less strategically defined objectives.
- The third group includes reflections on how data are enrolled as a means of attracting future students, prompting the leaders to engage data as grounds for competing with neighboring schools and ultimately also for funding.
- The fourth group includes reflections on how data are read as expressions of what is accomplished, seemingly calling on the leaders to take them in as reflections of their own efforts or capabilities.

Informed by this division, I then go over the interviews again. On the one hand, I focus on the various statements expressed in the material. But while analysing the reflections voiced by the leaders, I also try to stay alert to how the things said point to the leaders’ more sense-informed or corporal ways of experiencing the employment of data as part of in their daily practices. As such, I seek to analyse my material, my recordings and field notes, by continuously trying to sense how the leader sensorially experience living and working with data, focusing specifically on their positive, hopeful ways of engaging with them. Thus, following up on my Berlant

inspired commitment to explore how what is pledged on account of ‘realising’ quality in education seemingly translates into the leaders’ way of reasoning about data and their concrete employment. Listing the types of justifications, hopes, imaginaries, convictions, ambitions, etc. the leaders implicitly associate with data, relying on the researcher-body and its sensorial sensibility as a resource for picking up on their affect informed engagement with data. As such, I ultimately seek to ‘know’ about the intermingling of data, leadership, and affect by attending to what matters to the leaders I interview as a way of better understanding what it feels like to work with data on a daily basis.

Sensing the Role of Data in Leadership

Following the line of inquiry outlined in the previous sub-section, I now set out to embark on the analysis on the basis of which I seek to address the intermingling of data, leadership, and affect central to Entry Three. I start by briefly introducing the thematic group in focus, outlining the specific use of data it involves. Next, I present some selected reflections expressed by the leaders from both municipalities, positioning them as grounds for trying to get a feel for what matters to the leaders I interview. And informed by these reflections highlighting ways in which data are incorporated in practice, I then seek to approximate how data seem to enable leadership to manifest itself in certain ways by essentially trying to sense the ways in which the leaders sensorially experience living and working with data. As such, I in a way juxtapose the experiences expressed by the leaders and the kind of embodied experience I sense accompanying the reflections being voiced. Informed by this two-folded movement of distilling what is expressed and what I sense to be a more corporally entrenched way of relating to data, I try to identify the ways in which data reflecting attained results seem to register affectively and in turn allow for the performative to intermingle with modes of practicing or *doing* leadership. Finally, I draw together the insights afforded from each thematic group, combining their scattered insight into a more cohesive understanding based on which it may be possible to offer a more integrated account of how data seemingly register in ways that involve both the body and various modes of sense-making.

Standing Out as Professional

At many different points, throughout all the interviews conducted, the leaders speak of how data are intrinsic to their practices, so much so that they almost find it impossible to envision a practise without data. In fact, leader E says as much:

“I can’t imagine doing this without data”.

Generally, they explain this stance by referring to how they continuously employ data as a much needed and valued input to their daily practice,

emphasising them as that which allows them to know about the outcome of certain initiatives, to understand the nature of the issues they face, and/or to seek out a more all-round view of the school, based on results depicting their students' learning and wellbeing. In reference to this all-round view, they especially speak assuredly about how data serve as grounds for them to track the academic development from class to class, from year to year, and thereby make it possible for them to obtain a clear picture of the state of their school. In brief, it may thus be said that the leaders effectively speak of data as a tool for practicing in ways they seem very confident about, in the sense that when they explain themselves to me, they seem convinced that by employing data in the manner they describe they are in turn 'doing the right thing'. The following reflections demonstrate this tool-like practice approach to data.

In the interview with leader J, he makes an important distinction between data as tool and data as measurement. To him this distinction relates to the fact that data in some instances are used primarily for purposes of external use, like in the case of the quality report, where data, in part, are used by the municipality to monitor the results achieved by their respective schools. In other instances, the same data are used internally by leaders as grounds for making informed decisions. He explains these different types of use in the following reflection:

“For example, in the case of our results in math...what the municipality, and the outside world for that matter, care about is what the results show... They just see data as reflections of achievements. But for us [here referring to himself and the rest of leadership team], they are occasions for getting curious about what we must or can do differently...I mean, we use them as grounds for talking to the math counselor, talking to the teachers, figuring out whether we should practice more tests, or whether there are any particular students for whom poor reading skills may be an issue. Also, we try to assess results based on gender, discussing the option of splitting up the class for a while...”.

After explaining this concrete example further, leader J states the following as a way of underscoring the differences between using data internally versus externally, to borrow his own distinction between different ways of using data.

“We are not necessarily fond of using data for show, but it makes sense to lead on the basis of what they tell us”.

As such, he stresses the professional argument for working *internally* with data.

To some extent, leader E touches on a similar way of distinguishing between internal and external uses of data. She puts it like this:

“Take the national tests. Originally, they were meant as a tool for teachers. But whether we like it or not, they are now mostly used as a basis for measuring schools”.

Coming from a different angle, leader B adds to the notion of data as tool, while reflecting on how she uses data as part of her daily practice:

“We are both [referring to the assistant leader also taking part of the interview] very rationally minded people. The kind that likes to put things in boxes...you know. And for us data are not just expressions of what we think or believe to be the case. Rather, we use them as a source for checking our perceptions of things against the reality of what is out there. So, one could say that we use them to get an idea of what is up...”.

Leader C does not necessarily disagree, but is more cautious in her way of ‘trusting’ data as a tool for measuring and thus knowing:

“Some may think that we, that I, measure the state of the students based on data, kind of like how lactic bacteria may be used to measure the state of dairy products. But that is nowhere near the case. Data are temporary, here and now depictions of the students and their achievements. And my job is to use data in combination with many other inputs to make smart decisions and do what is ultimately best for the students”.

And finally, in the interview with leader D, data are referred to as something that may counter the process of making decisions based on what leaders happen to think or feel as opposed to on the basis of what they actually know. This is reflected in an exchange between the two assistant leaders who are also taking part of the interview. The first assistant leader opens by broadly stating:

“Well, the fact of the matter is that there is an enormous complexity to data. They offer insights into so many different areas. So, essentially they make it necessary for us to sit down and figure out which data we want to use and how”.

To this the second assistant leader replies:

“Yeah, because when we look at all the data featured in our report, it just spells out how much we need to work systematically with data...I mean systematically track the impact of the initiatives we go with... That is if we want to benefit from them, and not get lost in them”.

There is a short pause, and then the first assistant leader quietly says:

“But we never do that...”.

The second assistant leader replies:

“No, and that is why our efforts more often than not are...”

The second assistant leader never gets to finish her reply, because the first assistant leader does it in her place:

“...are based on what we feel is right and then we just go ahead and take action because we need to do something...”

As a way of validating this statement, the first assistant ends this exchange by noting:

“You are right. Which is why we need to change what we are doing and instead work more systematically with data”.

In sum, the reflections captured above highlight some of the variations in the ways in which the leaders value data as input to their practice. Some are keen on underscoring the differences between using data externally and internally, as a way of implicitly emphasising the soundness of using data for internal purposes, using them as *occasions for getting curious about what can and must be done differently*, as mentioned by leader J. Others more cautiously value data as something to be used in combination with other inputs, emphasising the professional repertoire for working with data as something that is not as ‘technical’ as it may sound. And lastly, to some the prevalence of data suggests that a more systematic approach is needed, if leaders are to actually benefit from the input they offer. Beyond these variations, however, as I see it, the leaders’ reflections collectively demonstrate how they generally view data as a prominent and positive presence, allowing them to know about the state of ‘their’ schools and the students. And as such, it seems that the leaders, by their own account, view data as grounds for becoming more knowledgeable about the initiatives they implement, the nature of the issues they face, and the all-round state of their school. Or rather, data are taken to be good grounds for getting *an idea of what is up* as stated by leader B.

Considering the volume of all the transcribed interviews (which amounts to just under 300 pages), it is not possible to include all the reflections conveying this view of data. But the ones I have selected and cited above are very similar to others in the transcripts. And as I go over these reflections, I get the sense, as mentioned, that the leaders generally seem rather confident that they are ‘doing the right thing’ by engaging data as tools or instruments for knowing. This is not surprising seeing that this form of engagement is in a way already ‘dictated’ by the QAE mandate itself as well as, more generally, by the culturally ingrained desire to replace uncertainty with the kind of (stable) knowledge seemingly afforded by quantitative data (Krause-Jensen, 2012). To that effect, it may be said that the leaders are not alone in feeling confident about data and their capacity to fill the need for

making things more consistently based on knowledge. Therefore, it is not surprising that they speak of data in the manner they do, accentuating the idea that data are capable of functioning as instruments for knowing. But beyond the immediate legitimacy that may come from speaking of data in ways that are both sanctioned and advocated by the policy mandate currently at play and by the surrounding culture in general, I get the sense that there is more to it than that.

I say this because on some occasions the leaders do share some ambivalence concerning their use of data. When, for example, speaking of the demands introduced by the QAE mandate, they sometimes express doubt over the time spent writing up the report, at times feeling unsure whether it is actually worth the effort. Also, while reflecting on the imperative to promote quality for the sake of the students, they often express hesitation, fearing that it implicitly promotes an unhealthy focus on results amongst themselves, the teachers as well as the students. But when they speak of the internal employment of data, to repeat the distinction proposed by leader J, they express no such doubts. Rather, as mentioned, they seem very confident about their way of utilising data as a basis for addressing issues with wellbeing, for initiating new procedures, for summoning teams of teachers, and/or for tracking the development made by each class and each student. And as I try to sense the affective appropriation at stake in relation to this way of 'dealing' with data, it seems that the leaders in a way engage data as occasions to stand out more clearly as professionals. Appropriating data as instruments for knowing and in turn associating their own way of practicing with the kind of professionalism thus afforded. So, on account of this way of taking data in, the leaders seem almost compelled to practice in ways that are essentially sanctioned as 'right' given their capacity for making 'things' more knowledge informed.

Playing in a Game of Absolutes

At the very first interview I conducted, leader A said to me:

"You of all people should know ... We are past the days where we as leaders can just have opinions about something. That doesn't cut it anymore. If I am to be taken seriously, I have to be able to back up my positions with data".

I was not particularly surprised or taken aback by this statement, because, in many ways, leader A is right to make that assertion. Times have changed, and being a practicing professional today does in some sense involve being able to use data as grounds for assessing many aspects of any given practice. I realise that. The statement, nevertheless, stayed with me for two reasons. First, because of the frequency with which leader A during the interview would point out the small, everyday episodes where the need to *back up his position with data* would arise. Secondly, because of the welcoming attitude

with which leader A spoke of this need. It seemed as if he almost embraced it as a reminder to be on top of his game, so to speak. Over the course of the rest of the interviews, the other leaders also referred to instances where they, like leader A, used data to back up their positions. And to that effect, I claim, using data as means of justifying or supporting the legitimacy of a position, seemed to be a *thing* amongst the leaders included in study. The following reflections demonstrate this way of engaging data, illustrating the concrete incidents in which data are employed to emphasise a particular stance and in turn are used more or less purposefully for purposes of achieving something or convincing someone.

In some of the interviews, the leaders speak of situations where they strategically utilise data in pursuit of specific goals. In the interview with leadership team G, for example, the assistant leader explains a situation where they, in a way, use data to insist on a plan they feel is necessary, fully aware that it will entail major changes to established routines and therefore is at risk for being resisted by the teachers:

“So, last time when the report was presented to the board, there was a lot of... um, let’s say concern over the huge variation in the data demonstrating the levels of wellbeing in each class. And after discussing the matter with some of the teachers, we ended up using these data to purposefully argue for the introduction of a rather radical two-year plan we felt was necessary to turn things around”.

Primary leader B and assistant leader B also refer to a situation in which they use data to secure a practice they feel is productive:

“We are constantly pressured to balance our resources, meaning we need to allocate them where we know they will have an effect. Take for example the resources we have just allocated to the project on reading proficiency. It’s costly, and we are really curious to see it take effect... hopefully sometime after Christmas. And if we get the results we hope for, we can use them to apply for additional funds to prolong the project. So, in that sense we can use data to implement initiatives we see as helpful for our students”.

In a similar vein, leader C touches on the sometimes potent relation between data and funding. In some sense, she sticks out compared to the other leaders as she insists on always taking the questions I raise to the next level, so to speak, by relating them not only to ‘her’ school but also to a broader context. She does so, for example, by making the following comment:

“Well, I have been working with or in some kind of school management since ‘97, so more than 20 years... and as I see it, data has always played a role. We have always used various types of data to inform our decision making. The only difference is, now a day’s data are used as part of a larger political system and for that reason data have come to matter more. I mean the

head of division, for example, sometimes needs good data to show what we have done [here referring to all the schools in the municipality as a whole] and for that particular purpose data demonstrating student learning and wellbeing are crucial. Yes, of course they can be spiced up with a cute anecdote or two. He does that actually. But in the end, it is data showing results that will get him funding to the schools; funding that would otherwise be channelled over to other sectors. I know for a fact actually that one year it was us or the care centres. So, along with this political battle for financial resources, data has become increasingly important, and that is new!”

In view of this comment, it is clear that leader C is fully aware of how data sometimes may be used to obtain additional funds to schools and their allocated budgets (every year school budgets are allocated on the basis of the number of students attending at each school). And by that token she thus hints at how data may come to matter as the head of division, on behalf of the schools, may spin them so as to maintain or add to the existing budgets.

In other instances, the leaders speak of situations where they resolutely use data to satisfy and/or convince parents about matters related to academic achievement. Leader A, for example, refers to a situation in which he ‘needed’ data to specify the status of one student:

“In some sense I need data to qualify my account. Like the other day I had a conversation with Sofie’s dad. He had insisted on meeting up because he was worried that Sofie’s teachers did not see her potential. And during our talk, I had to use data to satisfy him...umm, to tell him that his daughter was doing fine in the sense that she was in fact demonstrating academic progress. Because it wasn’t enough just to say so, I had to show him the data that reflected her results from last year’s math test compared to this year’s test and so forth. He and other parents like him won’t just take my word for it, they have to see where and how their children’s progress takes place”.

At the opposite end of the scale, leader G mentions how he uses data to challenge or perhaps to nuance parents’ views of their children:

“I have more than once had parents in my office because the teachers could not get the message across. In those situations, I use data to illustrate why we, contrary to Hassan’s parents for example, find that there is reason to be concerned. They are not always involved enough to know what is going on, and so I use data to convince them that things are not as peachy as they may think...”¹²

¹² In many ways this reflection is indicative of a large issue related to data and minority students, because in the wake of the constant focus on results imposed by the QAE mandate, poorer achieving students, typically identified as Danish-as-second-language-students, are to some extent considered a liability, seeing that, as will be explained in the coming sub-section, too many poor achieving students are likely to put schools at risk by hampering first their

And finally, leader H speaks of a situation where things got a little heated, to the point where he felt that only data could, in a way, defuse the different outlooks at play:

“We had a case...ahrg, maybe is too harsh to call it a case...Anyway, we had some parents who were sure everything had just gone wrong in this particular class. I spoke with many of them on the phone to reassure them that things were not as bad as they made them out to be. I tried telling them that the teachers were on top of things and that the class as whole was doing ok. But this only led to more talk back and forth, because the parents were being told a different story. This went on for a while and finally we invited all the parents involved to a meeting where I could show them how the whole class meet the results requirements stipulated by the quality report. I also highlighted the national test scores. So, yes...even though the academic profile of the class is not the strongest, every single student had, compared to last year, made progress. And in terms of wellbeing, I could show them how everybody had ticked the box *I have someone to play with*. That kind of underscored what I had already said, and they slowly came around to accepting that maybe things were not as bad as they thought”.

As I followed up on this incident, leader H elaborated on his actions:

“I totally get that the parents’ reality is informed by what their kids tell them, and normally I would not try to overrule this with data, but in that specific situation it was necessary I felt”.

As I see it, it is common to all the reflections mentioned here, that they in one way or other illustrate how the leaders at times resort to employing data as a form of absolutes, drawing on data’s attributed superiority as way of ‘pushing’ a specific agenda, to put it plainly. They illustrate, for example, how the leaders in some instances use data as grounds for arguing the need for implementing new routines or for getting additional funding. They also show how data are used to underscore student achievements in order to add strength to their way of seeing things when communicating with parents. I am sure that this mode of using data as means to an end is closely related to the political mandate to which they are tied, seeing that it so ardently stresses data as a basis for knowing about ‘things’ and for securing certain outcomes. In addition to this, however, it seems that there is also a certain playfulness at stake when it comes this way of engaging with data. I say this because while reflecting on the situations described above, it is as if the leaders recognise and appreciate the strategic aspect of using data to obtain funding or win parents over. Not that they boast about it in any way. In fact, they often offer disclaimers for it. Leader A, for example, says:

results, then their attractability and lastly their economy. The impulse to summon Hassan’s parents may thus originate in concerns other than those attending immediately to him and his situation.

“I know the same data may be used to back up an entirely different viewpoint”.

And leader G says:

“I realise that when using data in such ways we sometimes undermine the kind of complexity we as leaders must never lose sight of”.

Nevertheless, with their eyes fixed on the results and what stands to be gained, the leaders seem to associate this way of employing data as absolutes with the same sense of thrill or excitement that may come from playing games in pursuits of certain ‘rewards’.

To some extent, James Spillane et al. (2002; 2011) make a similar point when it comes to school leadership and their engagement with data. In short, they argue that strategy is a highly salient aspect of the way in which leaders (principals) juggle state and district accountability policies as they make sense of and appropriate these policies by selectively negotiating and ‘resolving’ them to their advantage. This insight obviously, pertains to a different context than that of the present study. Yet, from a general point of view, I reckon, it says something about how leaders typically respond to circumstances and regulations, not just as employees adhering to orders, but also, or rather, as *savvy participants*, mediating between different needs, ideals, and/or purposes (Koyama, 2014). Mindful of this insight, it is perhaps only to be expected that the leaders included in this study, confess to a strategic element when speaking of how they in a way ‘bend’ data to suit certain needs. But, as I see it, this strategic appropriation and/or re- appropriation, is also spurred on by the fact that the kind of data ordered by the QAE mandate function as handmaidens to the present audit culture (Denzin, 2013), promoting practices in which rewards and/or sanctions are based on what is quantitatively measured. I say this reference to the playfulness I pick up on as the leaders reflect on data, suggesting that they in some instances sensorially rework data into absolutes, prompting them to practice as agile, skilled players in a ‘game’ where all eyes are fixed on potential gains. So, by sensorially engaging data in this manner, the leaders thus seem urged to employ data in ways that are flexible to varying strategic objectives.

At the Hands of the Market

It is not a major issue to the leaders, but when it comes up during the interviews, they speak of the stakes as being high in the sense that ever since the effectuation of the law allowing parents to choose freely amongst schools located in the same municipality, school leaders have, to some extent, been catapulted into dealing with the forces of the free market. The law in question was passed in 2005 (UVM), and as such it is not directly related to *The Quality Report 2.0* programme. With the introduction of this QAE pro-

gramme, however, the law has gained renewed momentum, because along with the authorisation of data measuring each school across the country based on results attained, parents are afforded a new and more accessible instrument for assessing schools. So, parallel to the circumstance that data are being used by governing agents like the municipality to track and monitor schools and their development in order to promote quality, parents are also using the same data as grounds for selecting or de-selecting schools. And therefore, school leaders are ultimately required to think of data as a form of currency by which they may be known to the market, or more specifically, known to the parents of potential students. To understand what the leaders mean when referring to this circumstance, it is necessary to briefly sketch out the dynamics of the law in question.

The law, securing parents' right to choose, was, as mentioned, passed in 2005. Its overall objective is to ensure and promote a state of healthy competition between public schools within the same municipality. In principle, all schools are assigned to a district, and residents living within this district are guaranteed admission to the school. But on account of the law from 2005, these residents, meaning the parents of current and future students, are, in addition to this guarantee, given the right to seek admission to any of the schools in the municipality. This measure effectively grants them the option of 'shopping' for a school outside their district. And given the fact that the budget allocated to each school reflects the volume of their student body, schools are generally happy to accept non-district students, should their capacity allow it. Today, fifteen years later, most schools in Denmark have fully incorporated the competitive mode encouraged by the law, meaning they have adopted the practice of marketing themselves and their 'product' to the outside world. Conversely, the outside world in the form of the parents of potential students, have increasingly picked up the habit of exploring their options, prior to selecting a school. And following the production of readily available data, measuring results pertaining to student learning and wellbeing, this habit that has only become more widespread.¹³

The following letter serves as an illustrative example of how one school has chosen to market themselves to potential parents residing within the district assigned to the school in question.

¹³ Critics have argued that the law increases segregation, especially in municipalities with a high percentage of ethnic minorities and/or with large socioeconomic differences, because the schools located in districts with diversified neighbourhoods risk being spurned by Danish majority parents. In response to this critique, municipalities have sometimes resorted to changing the districts and their composition, thus hoping to allow for more diversity in schools located in diversified neighbourhoods. This, however, has not been able to prevent the emergence of ethnically and socioeconomically segregated schools, because often structural, geographical, and practical concerns, such as the number of crossings between a given street, stand in the way of realising most changes to that effect.

Dear parents to [name of the child]

Choosing a school is important

November is when you must choose a school on behalf of your child. This is an important choice, potentially signifying the future of your child. We [name of the school] find ourselves in the midst of a rapidly changing world. Yet, we are firmly rooted in a newly renovated and modern school building, a changed composition of school-districts, and a strong faculty. This enables us to welcome you in the best possible way.

It makes sense to choose [name of the school]

1. The students learn:

We detect the positive professional development of our students in many areas; we detect it in their project-work, their presentations and naturally also in relation to their exams. (See the chart below depicting student grades on exams).

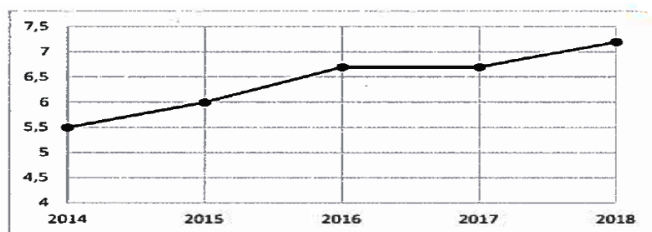


Fig: Udvikling i elevernes eksamenskarakter gennemsnit

2. The students thrive:

At our school, students thrive. Overall, high levels of wellbeing go hand in hand with healthy academic development. Our data on student wellbeing documents above average levels.

3. Variation = motivation:

At [name of the school] the students experience both a varied and a structured school day, encompassing time set aside for contemplation, professional reflection, exercise, and movement as well as alternative teaching – every day. In addition to this, the school year also incorporates various project weeks, feel-good-days, fieldtrips, Christmas bingo and of course the annual summer market.

At [name of the school] we look forward to seeing you, welcoming you to a safe environment, attentive to learning and wellbeing. If you have any questions, please contact [name of the school leader and phone number where the leader may be reached] or find us on Facebook [link to the schools Facebook group].

See you 😊

The letter is sent to prospective parents via e-Boks.¹⁴ In some ways, its message is rather trivial, as it merely seeks to ‘stage’ the school from its best side by briefly sketching out its academic achievements, pedagogical values, and the nature of the activities that take place during the school year, hoping this may convince parents to sign up their children to the school in question instead of other schools. On the one hand, one could easily argue that parents today select and/or de-select schools based on a number of factors, and as such the letter only functions as one out of many ‘stimuli’ informing their decision-making. Moreover, they are probably, like most consumers, fully capable of filtering out the glossy facade typical of most types of info-material. On the other hand, as I see it, there is something rather credible and thus very appealing about the happily benign school being described in the letter. I realise that the data it reflects only shine light onto certain aspects of the school in question and as such do not necessary tell a very ‘rich’ story. Still, guided by my mundane everyday understanding of data, this notion of happily benign school somehow ‘feels’ very convincing given the chart demonstrating a situation in which exam results on average have climbed from 5,5 to 7,2 over a five-year period. To that end, I therefore find the letter to be an illustrative example of how and why schools employ data as part of their combined efforts to attract students.

In sum, this means that the law safeguarding parents right to choose amongst the schools within the same municipality serve as an important backdrop for understanding the following reflection voiced by leader A, as he draws a direct line from data reflecting grades to the market value of ‘his’ school:

“In this municipality grades make a difference. We have parents who on the day of the introduction to our new students openly ask why the final exam grades are better at X [states the name of the neighbouring school fewer than 400 meters away]...and mind you, these are parents whose children have not even been with us for one day!”

As I probe this further, leader A reflects on what he terms the performative versus the professional use of grades. In concluding on his own line of thinking, he says:

“I know that they [grades] are intrinsic to showing who we are and what we do here at this school... putting us on the market, if you will. But we have chosen not to use them so directly for this purpose. Instead, we try to focus on what we can learn from them...it is healthier in the long run”.

¹⁴ e-Boks is where citizens with a Danish CPR number (social security number) receive Digital Post from public authorities. Digital Post may include letters from Health authorities and Danish Tax and Customs Administration (SKAT) as well as information about state education support (SU), housing benefits, childcare, etc.

Yet, moments later he says something running somewhat counter to this:

“No, but I find that they [grades] are productive...I like the fact that they keep us alert, because we know how much depends on them...”

Leader A thereby expresses how ambivalent the thinking around data depicting grades may be, conveying how he and his team seek to counter the long-term effects of using data, to put it very soberly. Yet, parallel to this, he also seeks to cater to their external importance, their marketing value, because whether he likes it or not, parents in his district tend to pick the school that looks best on paper.

At the beginning of the interview, leader D makes a comment similar to leader A's, reflecting on the circumstance that parents sometimes are very sensitive to what they think data says about a school. She explains how data one year may attract new students, but if the final exam scores, for example, are not up to par the following year, there is an immediate decline in students applying to the school. Parents are keen on optimising, she says, they seek out what they know to be the best learning opportunity for their children. Just like the head of division, she continues; he also seeks to optimise when it comes to creating the best schools for all the students. Finally, she draws the following conclusion:

“Yeah, well that is sometimes the harsh reality of being a part of a municipality where ambition is a constant fixture”.

As background to this reflection, it may be noted that the northern municipality, where leader D's school is located, is an affluent one, renowned for its high performing schools. And the optimising attitude she refers to is characteristic of the aspirations, expectations, encouragement, and interest typically invested in education by parents (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005) and the surrounding culture (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008) in such areas.

In a somewhat indirect manner, Leader E also addresses the link between grades/results, data-availability, and processes of selection and de-selection by connecting it to a kind of internal rivalry she finds flourishing between the schools in the northern municipality:

“I am not sure who said it first...I think it was one of the others who said it... we are in competition with each other. Of course, we are. Our budgets are based on students, I mean based on the number of students attending. [Pause]. We are super privileged here at our school. We have ample admissions. We have even been forced to reject potential students due to lack of capacity...and for that reason our economy has been good. In fact, it has been for a while, which I am sure the others experience it as a thorn in their side as they struggle with sparse resources. In that sense there is competition amongst us.”

As I hear it, leader E is not trying to toot her own horn, emphasising herself compared to her fellow leaders. In fact, she more than once underscores how chance and circumstance, as opposed to skilful leadership, determine the data demonstrated in the quality report. But despite the fact that she does not necessarily trust the meritocracy on which the process of school selection and de-selection, at least in theory, is thought to work, she recognises the presence of the competition it instils. And subsequently, she also recognises, all things considered, how being privileged, 'fairly' or not, beats having to make do on a tight budget. As such, leader E hints at the underlying dynamics in play when funding is linked to data and their manifestation of results achieved.

Clearly, there are a lot of factors influencing the budgetary situation of any school. So, to claim that the relatively small number of students seeking admission outside their district is what makes or breaks a budget would be to overstate the matter. But judging from the following reflection expressed by leader G, to disregard the significance of the additional funds that may be gained by admitting just a few students would nonetheless be to overlook something that does in fact keep school leaders up at night:

"It is stressful. We are running a tight ship as it is...And if you can't present a balanced budget...Yeah, then you have to run even faster, because then you have to present a hands-on strategy, stating how you plan to reduce this year's deficit the coming year, and if there is already a deficit from last year that you have not been able to reduce, then...Hmm, I mean, if anything that's the kind of thing that will get you fired. And yeah, that's what I mean about it being stressful, because there is pressure. No doubt about it. You can actually feel it!...In this municipality the turnover rate amongst the school leaders has been rather high. Or to be honest, it has been really high."

In an effort to size-up all the reflections demonstrated here, I find that they ultimately illustrate the underlying premise that schools today and thus also their leaders, to some extent, are obliged to consider the possible consequences following from the circumstance that parents are secured the right to select and de-select schools. And as such, are obliged to cater to parents' perception of their school, fully aware that this perception is often formed on the basis of data reflecting results. The leaders do not directly oppose this circumstance, but they do express concern over some of the ways in which they are impacted by it. One leader, for example, mentions how it pushes him to recognise that his school depends on them [data]. Another emphasises it as part of the harsh reality of being part of a municipality where ambition is a constant fixture. And a third addresses the 'distress' it may promote, leaving some schools to make do with sparse resources. And finally, a fourth leader refers to it as stressful, considering the budgetary difficulties and precarious employment it may involve. And as I myself try to take these varying concerns in, carefully listening to their reflections as

ground for approximating how it feels to work with data in this respect, I get the sense that the leaders, tend to affectively appropriate data as grounds for privileges or instability and worry. And given this more sense-informed way of taking data in, they seem inclined to boost the appearance of their school as a way of practicing at the hands of an ‘outside’ market.

Embodying the Surface

Within the first five minutes, I get the distinct feeling that my interview with leader H is going to be different. He is the leader who proudly referred to CEPOS’s ranking of the school’s teaching-effect during the follow-up meeting, and, in a way, he starts the interview in a similar fashion, pointing to the many charts hanging on the wall in his office while stating:

“As long as I can see that we are getting better based on the parameters on which we are measured, I am happy!”

He then goes on to tell me how proud he felt on the day the numbers from CEPOS were released. I want to be part of a success as much as anyone, he explains. Further into the interview, leader H mentions his military background as way of justifying his attitude towards data and the measurements they allow for. It is not for me to botanize whether or not this has any bearing, but it is clear that leader H welcomes the practice of using data to measure results and as such also the ‘workings’ of leadership as suggested in the previously mentioned ministerial report on how to lead and manage a school ‘successfully’ (T. D. M. o. Education, 2015). And even though the other leaders express themselves differently, on the whole they also seem to welcome this practice. In the following, I have included a broad assortment of reflections illustrating how data in some sense are employed as accessible measures of specific modes of leadership.

Generally, the leaders point to data as a source of recognition, meaning as something that either allows others to recognise their accomplishments or helps the leaders themselves appreciate the fruits of their labour. In an exchange between the two assistant leaders from leadership team D, for example, they touch on this aspect of their engagement with data. The first assistant leader D instigates the exchange:

“If you ask me, we hardly ever celebrate our successes. We never stop to say: Hey...that is great. We are doing a good job here. Instead, we just run from one task to next...”

The other assistant leader replies:

“Yeah, what is up with that...Really!!! It is not that it is X’s fault [the name of the head of division], but if he would just celebrate our successes occasionally, then we might...”

The first assistant leader cuts in while stressing:

“It’s not like he has to do a whole lot...just send us some cake on the days when the results tick in...Or an email...I don’t care. Or let me correct that. I do care, I prefer cake. [Laughing]. Just so we know that someone up there [referring to the municipality] actually pays attention to what we are doing and appreciates it...I am sure it would be motivating for me and the rest of us.”

Despite the implicit irony implied in this exchange, it is clear that the assistant leaders from leadership team D point to the fact that external recognition based on ‘incoming’ data is in fact important.

As implied above, leader H attributes the same importance to external recognition afforded by data. Only, his way of putting it is perhaps a bit more direct. In specific, he says:

“You want to feel proud of your school, and of course there are many things to be proud of. But when this pride correlates with what data shows, then it feels good to celebrate and appreciate what you have achieved. And I think...Ahg,...I don’t know... Hmm, for me at least it is important to be recognised based on the results demonstrated [points to the charts on the wall]. It keeps me going”.

In a similar fashion, leader A also reflects on the animating aspect of being recognised based on results:

*“I mean when they are made available, I can’t wait to take a closer look. I am curious as hell. It is like when the results from the wellbeing survey tick in or the results from the national tests...I put everything else aside and spend hours looking at them.
[]... And sometimes this puts you in a good mood and sometimes it makes you feel kind of low ...”*

Prompted by this statement, leader A then goes explains how he and the team generally put a lot of effort into analysing data, detailing the different steps they take in order ‘to learn from data’ as he puts it. But I redirect his focus by asking him to elaborate on his mention of results and moods. He subtly frowns at my ‘request’ as if to imply that it is a bit of a no-brainer and then he bluntly replies:

“But of course, my mood and everybody else’s is affected. We strive to do our best and if that is not reflected in the results, it gets to you. Like for example with our data on wellbeing. Last year we had the second-best survey results in the country. But this year our results were not as favourable and that was a blow to us. A hard one”.

In some ways, Leader E also touches on this aspect of being ‘struck’ by data. She tells me that before getting involved in management she worked as a teacher, and for that reason, she notes, she always tries to see things from the teacher’s perspective. So, when putting the school’s quality report together, she says, she first and foremost feels happy on behalf of the teachers whose classes have done well.

“I know how they struggle, and I am just happy for them when it pays off.”

Then there is a pause in here tail of thoughts, and she hesitates to continue. I am not sure what to make of it, but I get the feeling that it is difficult for her to express what the data encompassed in the report does to her. But then she says:

“When I look at the results from the final exams and I realise that we are the second poorest performing school in the whole municipality, it triggers something in me. I have to say...I get ah-hrg... it is just like damn! Maybe it is pride...No, I don’t know. I don’t know what it is, but it definitely gets me going.”

Without thinking, I instinctively try to help the leader out of her tangle by saying that I think I know what she is getting at, namely that she in her position as leader cares about the students doing well. And she quickly replies:

“YES! Exactly! That is why we are here, that is why we do this job”.

In a similar vein, primary leader G and the assistant leader also speak passionately about the students and how much they matter. At some point during the interview, I ask them very broadly how they feel about their latest quality report, and the primary quickly and very openly responds by saying:

“I feel very exposed. When I look at the data on our 6’t h graders...I look back and think, ghee, we haven’t done right by them. And yeah, I know I can explain why. Multiple maternity leaves, a no-good math teacher it took us too long to terminate, and I could go on...But, still it is really tough to take in.”

The assistant leader takes over:

“Yeah, it gets to you, because we know how much the students and their futures are impacted by it...I mean in terms of their future education and everything else.”

The primary leader then adds:

“It is crazy to think about it, but most people’s lives and their success goes back to how well they did in school ... It’s scary, how it affects their relations, families and kids. So, yeah last time when the results ticked in, I had to close the door and let them sink in for a while...”

This comment gives cause to some additional exchanges, but then the primary leader seems to put an end to the exchange with the following comment:

“I dare say, if you are not sometimes affected by data, if you never feel the need to just take them in in silence, then maybe you are in the wrong profession. It is not like canned goods that you accidentally drop, and then quickly move on. Data matter, because the students matter.”

And finally, assistant leader B also addresses this aspect of data touching something inside. But her focus is on the way in which data are used for purposes of ranking. She says:

“But it is definitely there, an undertone of having to perform a little bit better every year. Which we, in principle, live up to. It is more in relation to the other schools, if they perform even better. Because even though we generally demonstrate a positive progression every year...sort of calmly and evenly...but then if one of other schools in the municipality really excel in some area, then the value of what we are doing becomes almost invisible. I think that is probably the one thing I find most challenging about this whole data-business. It is these rankings. But there is no stopping them.”

To contextualise this reflection, it must be noted that there are quite a few ethnic minority students enrolled at school B, and as such the school stands out from the others located in the northern municipality. The assistant leader mentions this in an attempt to explain the exam results and national test results demonstrated in the quality report. She does, however, make it clear that all the students demonstrate satisfactory progression rates, but this is not considered, or is downplayed rather, in the instances where the school is compared to the neighbouring schools based on data pertaining to results. And to that effect, she argues, her work is not justly acknowledged, considering the composition of the student body.

But despite the specific contextual aspect related to school B, assistant leader B is not alone in feeling unjustly ‘judged’ on the basis of what data shows and in recognising that there is no escape from it, seeing that data have become inevitable to the practice of measuring schools and the quality they produce. In fact, all the leaders point to this underlying feeling of being bound to data and of continuously being mindful of how one’s practice is quantitatively perceived. Assistant leader E, for example, says:

“I would actually rather have a system where we do not compare

ourselves with others. I mean it is helpful to use data for monitoring students and their development. But beyond that data are not important to me ...I have no interest in knowing where we are ranked compared to others. But...because data are out there... made available to us, we are sort of sucked in by them.”

And on a similar note, Leader B says:

“Once they [data] are out in the public, we are somehow caught... We cannot control how the school is perceived and therefore we are like product managers, making sure our performance looks good, because if we don’t, we may not be taken off the rack ...”

And leader J, the most seasoned of them all, also touches on the inevitability of data:

“Mostly, I think of data as unnuanced. Especially the ones used for ranking. But if I want to keep my job, doing what I love, I have to use them and work with them.”

Finally, leader C, yet again, looking at the bigger picture, states:

“They [data] support a highly linear way of thinking. A thinking that prompts you to believe what you put in, regardless of context, is reflective of what comes out. [] And if you buy into that premise, then of course data matter in terms of how you view your own practice. But I don’t buy it.”

In taking all these reflections in, it is clear that the leaders are committed to results given their care for the students and their progress. Consequently, they tend to approach data as means of reflecting on their own practices. This comes across when leader G, for example, mentions being struck by data and going behind closed doors to digest them, acutely aware of the long-lasting impact schooling often have on students and their future lives. Or when leader E explains how the latest quality report gets her going as it demonstrates how some students are left with the short end of the stick. Or when leader A, frowns at me explaining how he strives to do his best and therefore his mood cannot help but fluctuate pending on results. In general, this connection between results and modes of leadership is widely celebrated by the present cultural ethos, arguing that most modern problems can and should be solved with leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011), and more narrowly by the kind of leadership literature that most school leaders are familiar with.¹⁵ And combined with the stronghold currently

¹⁵ I mention the latter in reference to the circumstance that while interviewing the leaders included in this study, I notice the following book titles centrally positioned in many of their offices: *Making a Difference*, *Better Decision Making in Schools*, *Leaders of Learning*, *School Lead-*

exhibited by the QAE mandate and its quantitative way of reasoning results and thus also in a way leadership, it is not surprising that the leaders in question are disposed to make this connection between their own efforts and the results demonstrated in the quality report, implicitly incorporating it into their way of making sense of data and in prolongation hereof also their professional practice as leaders.

In addition to this, however, as I approach the reflections voiced above as testimonies of the leaders' more sense-informed and corporal ways of experiencing the employment of data, I get the sense that there is something highly animating about their affective intake of data, their somatic reactions to results. More specifically, I get the sense that in the cases where data register as tangible measures of certain accomplishments, they are in a way made to function as that which enables the leaders to feel the fruits of their professional vigour and aspiration more readily, almost as 'events' to get in touch with the commitment and care with which, by their own accord, seek to do 'right' by the students. Like, for example, when leader A experiences a fluctuation of moods in response to incoming results, and as such embodies the surface of what is accomplished, to put it somewhat suggestively. In effect, it seems that the affective appropriation of data from the quality report is vital in terms of affording the leaders a basis for not only measuring and viewing their own performances, but also for sensing them as leader A very illustratively explains: "I spend hours looking at them [data]. And sometimes this puts you in a good mood and sometimes it makes you feel kind of low...". And, as I see it, it is in many ways this sensorial intake of data that seem to prompt the leaders to stay on track, so to speak, in pursuit of the kind of results that, broadly speaking, are 'read' as expressions of quality.

Concluding Remarks on Data Registering Affectively

As argued in the introduction to Entry Three, the presence of affect has become inextricably linked to working with the QAE mandate and the kind of data it orders, seeing that these data implicitly are made to operate as a form of mirror in or before which especially leaders become quantitatively readable to themselves and others. And on account of this mirror effect, there is good reason, I argue, to probe the potential acceleration of the performative aspect in leadership today. Curious about this trajectory and its impact on the premisses for practicing leadership, I have sought to analyse how school leaders think of and employ data as a basis for approximating their more sense-informed ways of experiencing this aspect of their practice. I have done so initially by attending to the reflections expressed by the leaders included in the study, and subsequently by utilising these reflections as grounds for getting close to the way in which the

ership that Works. All of which argue the idea that doing leadership in certain way is crucial to achieving certain objectives.

leaders seem to incorporate data into their daily practices. And based on this 'achieved' closeness, I have tried to sense how data seem to register sensorially, relying on my own capacity for picking up on their affective appropriation, focusing specifically on the performative awareness this seems to propel. Informed by this line of inquiry, I 'arrive' at the following claims about the leaders and their engagement with data authorised by *The Quality Report 2.0* programme.

As a way of imposing some overview of the many and typically interrelated ways in which the leaders employ data, I have divided their reflections into four thematic groups. In the first group, *Standing out as Professional*, I attend to the ways in which the leaders speak of their internal use of data, as one leader words it, meaning the kind of hands-on analysis of data they resort to as a way of both making sense of results and making informed decisions about future initiatives with the intent to promote student learning and wellbeing. In view of these reflections, there is no doubt that the leaders generally emphasise data as a valued, indispensable actually, tool allowing them to become more knowledgeable about the state of their practice, and thus practice in corresponds with the overarching injunction to lead informed by data. But inherent to this way of reflecting on and 'dealing' with data, I claim, it seems that there is more to it than that, because as I try to 'adjust' myself to their thoughts, I get the feeling that the leaders engage data as occasions to stand out more clearly as professionals. That they seem to affectively appropriate data as instruments for knowing and in turn associate their own way of practicing with the kind of professionalism presently linked to such modes of practicing. Thus, seemingly compelled to practice in ways that are essentially sanctioned as 'right'.

In the second group, *Playing in a Game of Absolutes*, I attend to the incidents in which the leaders employ data as grounds for pursuing more or less strategically defined objectives by engaging them as a form of absolutes. While reflecting on them, the leaders, despite renouncing or cautioning their own doings, 'admit' to using data as means of out ruling other ways of viewing certain practices and/or students as a way of securing certain objectives. And as they explain themselves, I pick up on a form playfulness that seems to 'run' parallel to their more reasonable justifications, in the sense that they seem to sensorially rework data into absolutes, which in turn prompts them to practice as agile, skilled players in a 'game' where all eyes are fixed on potential gains. So, following from this way of sensorially responding to data, the leaders effectively seem urged employ data in ways that are flexible to varying strategic objectives. In group three, *At the Hands of the Market*, I attend to the circumstance that schools are selected or de-selected based on their 'profiles', largely, identified on the basis of data. It is not that the leaders are totally consumed by the competition this inevitably fosters. Yet, when reflecting on this premise, they do express a range of concerns afforded from dealing with this particular circumstance. And as I listen to these concerns, I get the sense that the leaders, tend to

affectively appropriate data as that which may either allow for privileges or instability and worry. And given this more sense-informed way of taking data in, they in turn seem inclined to boost the appearance of their school as a way of practicing in relation to the market-based conditions they live by

In the fourth and last group, *Embodying the surface*, I attend to the coupling the leaders themselves make between data and their own way of practicing. In specific, I attend to the fact that the leaders express feeling acknowledged and validated as well as happy, to use the wording conveyed by one leader, in the instances where data allow for external recognition. Moreover, I attend to the fact that they also profess to going behind closed doors to digest the feeling of not being able to 'do right' by the students in the instances where data are less favourable. Given the widely distributed notion that leadership is key to the achievement of results, it is not surprising that the leaders tend to incorporate this link between what is quantitatively measured and their own accomplishments into their way of making sense of data and thus their mode of practicing. But, as I carefully go over the many somatic reactions they mention as a way of explaining this element of their practice, I am prone to think that they in some ways affectively appropriate data as 'events' for sensing the fruits of their own efforts more readily. And by embodying the surface, meaning that which is quantitatively demonstrated, in this manner, the leaders seem motivated to keep themselves on track, to put it very simply, in pursuit of the kind of results that, broadly speaking, may be 'read' as expressions of quality.

In view of these four thematic groups and the totality of the analysis encompassed in the previous sub-sections, it is obvious that data are absolutely central to the leaders and their daily practices. Full of varying 'needs' that must be catered to and considered while seeking to promote the overall quality of 'their' schools. But contrary to the instrumentality with which the practice of employing data for purposes of quality production is often associated, the reflections conveyed by the leaders suggest that the work they do pertaining to this particular task stands out as more than 'just' an intellectual, technical exercise. In fact, as I 'hear' the leaders speak of their practice and their way in which they approach data and incorporate them into their 'chores', I get the sense that their way of living and working with data is deeply imbricated with affect, in the sense that all their efforts directed at coming to terms with the measures reflecting their practices seem to involve some form of affective appropriation. In the sense that they cannot make sense of them separate from how they register affectively. And as such, this affective 'component' functions as an inherent aspect of what is put into motion, so to speak, as leaders work to 'adhere' by the instructions following from the QAE mandate.

Thus, informed by the insight afforded from the analysis, I now return to the research question proposed in the introduction to Entry Three:

How does data 'bring out' the performative in leadership?

In some sense, it is not possible to answer this question once and for all, because, if anything, it is clear that the sensorial intake of data varies, depending on the purpose or the agenda guiding the leaders and their concrete engagement with data. In some instances, for example, I get the sense that the leaders seem to affectively engage data as 'occasions' to stand out more clearly as professionals. In other instances, I pick up on a form of playfulness suggesting that data are sensorially converted into absolutes, eligible to be 'played' for purposes of certain gains, and in response to this 'conversion' the leaders seem urged to use data in pursuit of more strategic objectives. Moreover, on some occasions I sense that data are appropriated as either sources of privilege or instability and worry, prompting the leaders to rather carefully mind the 'appearances' of their schools. And finally, at times I reckon that the somatic reactions at stake indicate how data in some ways register affectively as 'events' for the leaders to sense their own practice, their own capabilities, ultimately encouraging them to stay on track, in pursuit of what is commonly accepted as expressions of quality.

Across these varying forms of affective appropriation, however, data seem to accentuate a form of performative undertone. Or rather, they seem to 'bring out' a performative awareness amongst the leaders, in the sense that the leaders implicitly seem to engage data as invitations to perform. For example, as means of standing out in certain ways, or expressing strategic strength, or caring about the 'outside' appearances of the school, and/or getting in touch with their own capacity to 'demonstrate' quality. Not that this is the sole purpose of their engagement with data. That is not how I 'hear' their reflections and the affective responses to data disclosed in them. Still, the performative seems to operate as an implicit aspect of how they 'filter' data into their practices while coming to terms with the overarching imperative of promoting quality in 'their' schools. To some, this may sound far fetched, as too dramatic perhaps, but mindful of Denzin's point about the world being always-already performative, staged, and theatrical, especially on account of the neoliberal present, it is in a way only natural that the leaders express some form of performative awareness as part of their way of navigating and making sense of their efforts. So, on account of being bound to a quantitative watch world in which data are made to count as main basis for measuring and assessing, it seems that leaders, in some ways, cannot help but engage data as mediums for both performing their practice and for viewing their 'achievements' performatively as is the case with the leaders included in the study at hand.

Sucked in by Quantitative Readability

In the introduction to Entry Three, I argue that the intermingling of data, leadership, and affect has accelerated in the wake of the current QAE mandate and its stronghold in education, partly on account of its way of

approximating quality as a quantitative measure. And in the analysis subsequently encompassed in Entry Three, I demonstrate how the performative, manifesting itself as an active part of this intermingling, is played out in practice in reference to one specific QAE programme, namely, *The Quality Report 2.0*. As a way of affording a broader understanding of the insights stemming from this analysis and potentially also deepening the awareness of how attachment may emerge and contribute to the overall productivity of the QAE mandate in question, it is necessary to take a step back and recount the arena, or stage (to maintain the dramaturgical note introduced in the opening to Entry Three), that the QAE mandate establishes. In the following, I therefore present a brief overview of the kind of foundational thinking that inform the political imperative to promote quality. Then, I attend to its mode of expression and making ‘things’ known in a world already heavily influenced by input stemming from what may generally be referred to as a quantificational way of reasoning. And lastly, I point to how attachment to the QAE mandate may emerge in response to its distribution of data, continuously tracking and monitoring the output produced.

Briefly, the QAE mandate and its implicit logic takes its cue from a form of quantificational way of thinking, a way that I have previously referred to as technical and calculative, seeing that it essentially advocates the quantitative measurability of most ‘things’, including such intangible phenomena as student learning and wellbeing. And given the scientific grounds informing, and in some ways legitimising, this way of thinking, ‘things’ measured quantitatively are culturally prone to stand out as more both ‘factual’ and ‘real’ compared to ‘things’ more qualitatively expressed. Therefore, data employed by the QAE mandate are in a way allowed to function as expressive instruments for *actually* knowing about the state of schools, for example. In addition to this, the logic inherent to the QAE mandate also links the notion of quality to data measuring results, converting quality into a standard based on which institutions are increasingly assessed and held accountable, prompting quality to feature as a calculable, comparable, and thus (more) governable or manageable undertaking. And based on the clear guidelines enforced as part of this undertaking, quality is ultimately made to function as a reflection of how well institutions are managed. To that effect, leaders and managers of institutions, much like the school leaders targeted in this study, are not only instructed to employ data as a way of promoting quality; their practices are also, in effect, made more visible on account of this instruction.

In sum, this means that the quantificational way of thinking characteristic of the QAE mandate has assisted in quantifying schools and their ‘output’ as well as the leaders leading them by in some sense converting their contributions into something that can and should be addressed on the basis of quantitative data. In many ways, the QAE mandate thereby promotes a way of being leader that taps into the kind of quantitative way of living with which many of us have become broadly familiar if not

indeed comfortable. I say this mindful of Lupton (2016) and her stance on data and contemporary human 'selves' being inextricably entwined. As mentioned earlier, Lupton essentially argues that more and more aspects of human life have become quantifiably adapted, and in effect 21st-century humans are nudged into functioning as *data creatures* as she terms it, where data used for self-tracking purposes, for example, are appreciated as superior to other forms of (somatic) input communicating the state of the body. And by extracting from this stance, it seems plausible that on account of the kind of data following in the wake of the QAE mandate, leaders are afforded a form of language or medium that in some sense allows for their contributions to ring 'truer' than would otherwise be case. In other words, given the circumstance that data are presently thought of as a form superior 'intelligence', leaders are effectively afforded a certain form of readability that is well-tailored to the conditions they work under, in a manner of speaking.

To that effect, it seems that data are key in making the leaders more readily readable to themselves as well as to the outside world, when and if data measuring results are connected to them and the way in which they practice. And seeing that leaders today cannot see themselves out of this quantitative adaptation of their practice, it is likely that they in some sense may get sucked in by the readability afforded from data, enabling results and thus in a way their performances to come across as 'truer'. Ultimately, the quantitative readability afforded from data may thus serve as a booster to the productivity of the QAE mandate by 'causing' the leaders to attach to it. Not so much on account of its 'ideology', but more on account of the familiar way of living it offers and the more readable forms of performativity it affords. There are of course many critical voices, also amongst school leaders, acutely aware of the potential downsides following from this aspect of the strong presence of data in education. Downsides that the school leaders during the interviews, for example, refer to as stressful. In fact, one leader touches on the precarious employment that sometimes accompany the 'instalment' of the QAE mandate as it continuously quantifies their efforts. Nevertheless, informed by the quantitative present and the modes of living it promotes, I argue, it is probably easier in theory to critique the readability afforded by data than it is to detach from it in practice. In part, because as noted by Berlant (2011), threats to the familiar are not always easy to handle, even in the event where potential flaws or downsides are widely recognised.



Chapter 6:

The Implications of Data-work Imbued with Affect

Reviewing the Steps Taken and Looking Ahead

As noted earlier, Berlant attends to patterns of living informed by what may essentially be thought of as political and social norms or ideals, focusing on how subjects tend to respond to them, struggling to stretch their own existence in chorus with the ‘coordinates’ being passed on. In seeking to extrapolate from this line of work, I have conducted a study in which I explore data in relation to their affective qualities as a way of affording new insights concerning the potential links between the stronghold currently imposed by the QAE mandate and the way in which subjects, e.g., school leaders, respond to the kind of data it orders. In brief, this means that I have undertaken a study in which I employ an affect-sensitive approach as means of exploring how QAE data are taken up by leaders officially instructed to incorporate them into their daily practice. Thus, attending to the practicalities of working and living with data, of practising leadership in response to the political instruction to promote quality. In the following and concluding section, I first sum up the insights afforded from this exploration and point to the overall insights afforded. Then, I sketch out how these insights hopefully may be read as an opening to discuss the imbrication of affect in relation to data-work more broadly. And lastly, I stress the potential ‘applicational’ value of broadening traditional ways of understanding the notion of data-work, arguing that it may in fact allow for leaders to view their own efforts along a different set of coordinates than the ones presently being both offered and lauded.

Summing up the Insights Afforded

As a way of empirically researching data in relation to their affective qualities, I conducted a fieldwork study in which I explored selected ways of working with data in practice. Attending specifically to how ten schools and their respective leaders from two separate municipalities seemed to respond more or less directly to the current QAE mandate, *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and its instruction to use data as means of promoting quality. Given the fact, however, that the data-work brought about by this mandate emerges as a rather a complex series of undertakings, all marked by varying ‘ambitions’, I followed data alongside three different empirical ‘sites’, or entry points as I term them, essential to the production and deployment of QAE data in practice. As such, I attended to three different modes of data-work, hoping these in combination would offer a more detailed outlook for ‘knowing’ about data and the ways in which they are enacted against the diverging purposes and circumstances relevant to each of the practices ‘covered’ in the three entry points. In the following, I sum up the overarching insights afforded from this exploration. First highlighting the varying forces and intensities immanent to the concrete task of putting data to work, and then sketching out how they come together as interrelated and interdependent features that continuously feed off each other as they gain momentum from the synergy afforded from employing data for different purposes as part of the same practice.

In Entry One, I explored data as they were taken up by school leaders in relation to the production of mandatory quality reports, focusing on their ability to impact the task of communicating about quality. Guided by this focus, the exploration in Entry One turned to the notion of assemblage, making it possible to think of data as entities consisting of both material and expressive components, coming into being based on multi-dimensional agencies and/or forces continuously colliding and connecting. And with this line of thinking in place, I started to attend to the way in which data are discursively sanctioned by the policies and official statements instructing *The Quality Report 2.0* programme as a way of identifying the expressive components assisting the emergence of QAE data. Thus, mindful of the added expressiveness following from this positive, to put it very simply, discourse on what data are and thus can do, I then attended to the quality reports produced by the ten schools included in the fieldwork. I did so as a basis for exploring how data were taken up in practice, focusing specifically on how data were used to communicate about the work being done to promote quality. And based on this exploration, I found that while communicating about their practice, the leaders more or less explicitly tended to ‘borrow’ from the expressiveness with which data emerge as means of making sense of their own way of working with data and quality production.

To that effect, data did not seem to be appropriated in practice – and thus in a way made sense of – separate from their expressive components, i.e., separate from all the hope and potential politically vested in their concrete employment. Not that this expressiveness was taken up directly, it was more a matter of it functioning as a sort of ‘soundboard’ based on which the leaders would extract meaning and direction while reflecting on the results depicted in the reports. To that effect, it may be said that the expressiveness immanent to data did not seem to go unnoticed, because the leaders bound to ‘implement’ the QAE mandate implicitly seemed to draw from the officially sanctioned discourse on data as a basis for understanding and communicating about their own way of working with data. This, for example, seemed to be case in the instances where the reports stated how some average marks were not acceptable as they demonstrated how the school had failed to make the right kind of support system available to the students. Or, where they expressed an earnest wish to become more educated about cause-and-effect relations in order to be able to improve results that were not presently satisfactory. Or moreover, where they argued the positive changes expected to come from closely monitoring and working with data showing decline in certain areas. Thus, in a way, mirroring the underlying message reflected in policies and statements ‘pushing’ the QAE mandate, namely that with data it is possible to work in ways that are conducive for promoting quality.

As I saw it, it thus seemed as if all the ‘good’ with which data are affectively saturated, registered sensorially before being subjected to more critical reflection, and as such found its way into the reports, shaping them

into small echoes of a policy induced notion of data. To that effect, I concluded that the official discourse on data seemed to provide a wider horizon of inherently positive and more affectively potent ways of framing as data key to the realisation of the QAE mandate. And while communicating about their practice, the leaders writing up the reports seemed to not only approve this horizon, but also breathe life into it, effectively pointing to an almost recursive relationship between what is affectively vested in data and their concrete appropriation. In some respects, one could of course argue that there is no 'harm' done by the positive expressiveness added to data on account of the official discourse sanctioning them. Still, it is worth noting, that this expressiveness did in fact seem to impact the ways in which the leaders tended to make sense of the instruction to promote quality and thus also of the general betterment with which it is associated. And informed by this impact, they seem compelled to practice in close proximity to the ways formally prescribed by the QAE mandate as means of affirming the common good that is thought to come from furthering quality. Not on account of will per se, but more as a result of subtly being urged to aspire to that which is discursively celebrated.

In Entry Two, I explored the way in which data were discussed at compulsory follow-up meetings, focusing on their capacity for marking the atmosphere surrounding these meetings. Informed by this focus, the exploration in Entry Two turned to the concept of atmosphere, making it possible to conceive of data-work as something informed by more affective, sensorial ways of experiencing and taking 'things' in. And based on this 'turn', I examined the follow-up meetings at which the school leaders and municipal representatives from each of the schools included in the field-work were summoned to discuss the latest quality report and find ways to 'deal' with the data it featured. In seeking to 'estimate' the atmosphere enveloping each of these meetings, I would, on the one hand, try to identify the more tangible constructs of the meetings, meaning their structure and relational interplay, and, on the other hand, I would also try to identify the sensations evoked in me while sitting in on the meetings in question. Thus, considering both what is 'out there' and 'in me' as way of 'capturing' the in-betweenness characteristic of any given atmosphere, made up not only from subjects and their experiences, but also from the composition of the space surrounding these experiences. Throughout the meetings, however, I tried specifically to identify the contributions stemming more or less directly from the continuous enrolment of the QAE mandate and the kind of data-employment it sanctions.

Following from this 'identification', I found that the atmospheres enveloping the meetings in both the northern and southern municipalities mostly came across as constructive, up-beat, supportive, and to some extent even caring. The northern meetings, for example, registered as spaces marked mainly by positive productivity, and as such I got the sense that they were easy to gather around. Moreover, the southern meetings typi-

cally came across as if they were surrounded by a tenor of togetherness and collaboration, and for that reason they stood out as domains that felt pleasant to be a part of. Obviously, this somewhat fleetingly atmospheric feel was expressed on the basis of complex arrangements, involving the presence of many multiple heterogeneous 'bodies' working together, always in a process of either forming or deforming in accordance with its powerful and precarious nature. Still, as I saw it, the kind of simple, well-intended and straightforward 'recipe' for how to use data as means of promoting quality advocated by both the QAE mandate and the municipal representatives seemed key in orchestrating the meetings so that they would in a way duplicate the tone of this 'recipe'. In the sense that by positioning data as anchor points, it became possible for the atmosphere surrounding the practices of following up results to mirror the same lightness that is characteristic of this 'recipe'. Ultimately, allowing for the meetings stand out in the way they did – as spaces that felt easy to gather around and/or pleasant to be a part of.

To that effect, the practices of following up on data seemed engendered to condition the sensorial experience of following up on data in specific ways. And even though it does not make much sense to try to pinpoint the direct relation between the experience of following up on data during a two-hour-long meeting and the daily practices in which leaders continuously employ data to ensure progress on behalf of their students, I nevertheless got the sense that the leaders, given their participation in the meetings, seemed very accepting of the QAE mandate and its eager 'sponsorship' of using data to promote quality. To explain this dynamic in more detail, it must be mentioned that the atmosphere surrounding encounters, events, and/or situations generally is considered agentic, capable of prompting subjects to act in specific ways on account of how they experience them. And in extrapolating from this capacity inherent to most atmospheres, I found that the constructive, up-beat, supportive, and somewhat caring atmosphere enveloping the follow-up meetings seemed to inspire the leaders to align themselves and their outlook on data with this intangible, yet powerful, 'thing' hanging in the air. Not that they did so intentionally, it is more that it came about as an effect of the atmospheric envelopment at stake, translating into an inclination to be or feel in sync with the underlying notes of the meetings they were part of.

In Entry Three, I explored how data seemed to register affectively, focusing on their ability to 'bring out' the performative in relation to the ways in which leaders work with data as part of their daily practices. Following this focus, the exploration in Entry Three turned to the concept of performativity and its emphasis on the intimate relation between surface and depth, allowing for a more fine-grained understanding of the performative outlook afforded on account of data and the quantitative watch world they make possible. Guided by this emphasis, I then interviewed the school leaders included in the fieldwork about the ins and outs of their

daily 'dealings' with QAE data, seeking to get 'close' to their way of thinking of them and working with them in practice. And as a way of doing so, I approached their reflections pertaining to their own practices while trying to stay alert to how the things said seemed to hint at their more sense-informed or corporal ways of taking data in. As such, I relied on the leaders to convey both what it actually entails to work with data for purposes of quality production and on my own capacity for sensing how they, in the process of doing so, seemed to engage data affectively, appropriating them in ways that seemed to instil a performative awareness 'into' their way of practicing.

In view of this exploration, the kind of data-work prompted by the QAE mandate, thus came across as more than 'just' an intellectual, technical exercise. In fact, it seemed deeply imbricated with affect in the sense that the leaders did not make sense of data and employ them into their practices separate from their more affective appropriation of them. In the sense that many small tell-tales signs weaved into the reflections conveyed by the leaders hinted at the confidence, playfulness, worry, and/or pride, for example, that seemed to accompany the way in which they would respond to data as they used them to strength certain outlooks, to consider the appearance of 'their' schools, or to get in touch with their own contributions to the students and their overall learning and wellbeing. Of course, the concrete appropriation of data would vary depending on the many different 'needs' against which they were employed, but generally I got the sense that the leaders implicitly enacted data as invitations to perform their practices, engaging them as grounds for viewing themselves and their practices performatively. Not that this performative 'orientation' was descriptive of the full spectrum of their engagement with data, but sporadically it seemed to accompany their combined and varied efforts to promote quality at their respective schools.

Therefore, I argued that the instruction to promote quality in education, with its in-built quantitative logic, seemed to promote an underlying performative awareness amongst the leaders formally ordered to install this instruction. In some sense, this is not surprising considering the fact that the introduction of the neoliberal 'movement' in education is known to have accelerated a certain mode of performativity due to its capacity for making 'things' more measurable. In applying the 'lessons learned' from the interviews, however, it seemed that the performative awareness at play was very much fuelled by the way in which leaders on a daily basis tended to take data in. Again, this is not to say that this type of in-take came about intentionally, rather it seemed to tacitly emerge under the impression of the quantitative present in which leaders today live and work, seeing that it has been so instrumental in making data function as a form of superior input for making 'things' known to oneself as well as the 'outside' world. The performative awareness the leaders sometimes would hint at thus seems to come with the territory of working with data as they effectively offer a

familiar 'language' based on which contributions may stand out as 'truer' compared to the contributions or results that are not quantifiably adapted, to put it very plainly.

In sum, the exploration encompassed in each of the three entry points suggests that the concrete appropriation of data is imbued affect, in the sense that the school leaders expected to 'implement' the QAE mandate do so, in part, informed by their way of affectively relating to the data it instructs. Or, to put it more precisely, it suggests that the leaders put data to work in response to the hope and potential embedded in the official discourse on data, the overall positive atmosphere 'hanging in the air' during follow-up meetings, and the readability afforded from being quantitatively adapted. But in addition to this 'identification', the exploration also suggests that the imbrication of affect does in a way serve as a form of stimulus for the leaders to deal with the overarching task of promoting quality in specific ways. In Entry One, for example, I argue that while grappling with the discursive sanctioning of data, the leaders seem to mirror what is officially vested in data as means of communicating about their own practices. In Entry Two, I argue that following the atmospheric envelopment of the follow-up meetings, the leaders seem to exhibit an openness towards the official 'recipe' for promoting quality that implicitly translates into their way of working with data in practice. And finally, in Entry Three I argue that while coming to terms with data and 'fitting' them to meet local 'needs', the leaders seem drawn to the quantitative readability they afford, providing them incentive to, on occasion, engage data performatively.

As mentioned, this way of appropriating data affectively is not necessarily a result of an intentional way of 'implementing' and making sense of the instruction to work with data for purposes of promoting quality. Rather, it is informed or influenced maybe by the way in which the leaders seem to affectively attach to the abstract notions of order, equity, and overall betterment, more or less subtlety promised by the QAE mandate and the official agencies instructing it for the good of individual students as well as society more broadly. In the sense that these notions play an important role to the more affective and sensorial ways of making sense of the mandate at large and thus also the data it orders. In effect, the formation of attachment to what lies ahead of the instalment of the QAE mandate may mark the way in which data are taken up in practice. And given the fact that leaders today work with data in some many aspects of their daily efforts, their varying ways of appropriating them cannot help but feed of each other, and as such they come across as formative to their ways of leading and managing. Therefore, the imbrication of affect in relation to data-work, I argue, is in a way related to the overall productivity of the QAE mandate, impacting how leaders 'adjust' themselves and their work around the objectives to which they are bound. Often in ways that seem more profound to the concrete enactment of data than the formal instructions at stake. Thus, indicating that these more affective and sensorial ways of

coming to terms with data in some sense function as a form of engine for leaders to practice (more) efficiently in pursuit of promoting quality – as prescribed.

Consequently, it may be argued that the sensorial in-take of data is not ‘just’ a fun fact about data and the workings of their enactment, seeing that it may in fact assist the productivity of the political instruction to promote quality in schools. In making this argument, I build from Berlant and parts of her work, especially her stance on affects being vital to the hegemony of societal orders and thus various modes of living. In brief, Berlant notes that the affective register with which subjects experience the world and relate to it is crucial to the formation of attachment, and therefore it is relevant, she argues, to study the ‘efficiency’ of politically mandated objectives by attending to the way in which subjects adapt to them, in part by attaching to the end goals or modes of living they promise to make possible. While doing so, however, it is important to be aware that such forms of attachment are not made by choice, but rather emerge as subjects negotiate the conventions and circumstances in which they are enmeshed (Berlant, 2011). So, by extrapolating from this way of thinking about affects and the hegemony of ‘things’, it becomes possible to connect the dots between the affective appropriation of data and the ‘efficiency’, or productivity as I term it, of the QAE mandate. In the sense that it becomes possible to understand how the formation of attachment to the promises of overall betterment sponsored by this mandate may be considered productive as it is capable of marking the appropriation of data, and as such serve as a driver for leaders to implicitly orient their way of working towards realising what is promised.

An Opening to Discuss the Imbrication of Affect

As mentioned in the introduction, the study at hand essentially attends to the intermingled state of data, leadership, and affect, and based on its exploration of the varying ways in which school leaders respond to and enact data it concludes that the mandatory data-work brought on by the QAE mandate is intimately related to more affect-informed ways of experiencing and relating to the world and the patterned set of expectations and conventions holding it together. Which in the case of Danish schools and their leaders includes *The Quality Report 2.0* programme and its stipulations on how quality can and should be ‘made’ for purposes of overall betterment. So, by researching data produced and deployed on account to this QAE programme in relation to their affective qualities, the study offers concrete ‘illustrations’ of instances in which the affective overflow of putting data to work comes across as integral to the efforts undertaken by leaders while seeking to ‘adhere’ to the QAE mandate, effectively impacting the overall productivity of the political instruction to promote quality. And as such, it ultimately proposes to (re)think data beyond their often-assumed separateness from affect and more sense-informed ways of

'knowing', of taking 'things' in and making sense of them given the fact that what is stereotypically thought of as more rationally informed ways of knowing and being in the world and more affect informed ones stand out as rather blurred in practice.

In view of this outline, it is clear that the study at hand follows in the footsteps of a broad collection of studies and scholars seeking to assist a more robust outlook on the role currently played by data in most corners of education today. Examining, for example, how data are also made through aesthetic practices that, in part, rely on statisticians' experience with data and their embodied knowledge of software (Ratner & Ruppert, 2019), or how more affectively driven responses to PISA have become influential in policy making (Sellar & Lingard, 2018; Staunæs & Pors, 2015), or how data visualisations function as grounds for affective modes of governing (Brøgger, 2018), or how embodied interpretations may accelerate the way in which policies are standardized (Brøgger & Staunæs, 2016), or how affective atmospheres are used to create and maintain a felt sense of 'progress' as students and faculty use data to 'locate' their achievements (Finn, 2016), or how data use is not only qualified by a capacity for data literacy but also more sense-informed modes of decision making (Staunæs et al., 2021). And generally, across the different research interests at play, these studies and scholars are propelled by an underlying ambition to address familiar dichotomies between individual/social, private/public, self/other, mind/body, etc. – arguing that both 'ends' are worth considering when it comes to understanding the premises for 'constructing' data as well as the components marking their employment.

This ambition, however, does not 'sit well' with the way in which the QAE mandate tends to think of data. In the sense that it typically emphasises data as grounds for providing a more (and much needed) knowledge informed stimulus for leaders to work with in order to promote quality, almost optioning to 'free' leaders from the kind of emotionally and/or ideological informed inputs that it considers 'flawed'. Thus, extrapolating from a somewhat vulgarised version of the scientific logic from which the idea of making 'things' measurable originally stems. As touched on earlier, this way of 'coding' data and the opposites between subjective/objective, human/technical, material/immaterial, and cultural/scientific that it infers, has of course been made the target of mounting critique (Williamson, 2015; Lippert & Verran, 2018; Lather, 2016; Lupton, 2016, 2019, Hansen & Porter, 2012; Kitchen, 2014). But in judging from the various official statements, policy texts, and guideline material instructing the QAE mandate, data are still being conceptualised rather 'narrowly', meaning they are still thought to function as a form of antidote for more embodied, relational, contextual, and experienced oriented ways of knowing and practicing.

Mindful of this circumstance, I thus hope that the study at hand may be read as an opening to discuss the imbrication of affect in relation to

data-work. Or, to put more precisely, I hope that it may serve as a catalyst for speculating about data beyond the somewhat 'limited' role they are formally assigned, so as to allow for conversations about data-work that does not more or less directly refer to it as a detached, rational undertaking, and thus un-marked by more affect and sense-informed ways of 'knowing', of taking 'things' in and making sense. Especially because, such discussions or speculations are vital in identifying the non-disciplinary modes of stimulation that implicitly sustain the efficiency of the political instruction to promote quality in education. And given the fact that this instruction has become so hegemonic to the way in which schools, for example, are led and managed today, it seems highly relevant to attend specifically to the affective appropriation of the kind of data that are so key to 'quality-making' as a way of coming to terms with the 'forces' sustaining it. Effectively, focusing on the co-evolvement of affect in relation to data-work as basis for getting a better sense of the possible 'pull' it affords, tacitly prompting leaders to align their own attitudes and practices with the political objectives and end-goals currently being championed by the QAE mandate.

The Value of Broadening the Notion of Data-work

As stated in the introduction, one of the school leaders passingly made the following comment during an interview conducted as a part of the fieldwork included in this study:

"I can't imagine doing this without data".

And besides pointing to both the strong presences of data and the potential efficacy following their enactment, this comment also, I find, says something very fundamental about the conditions for practicing leadership in schools today. Meaning that it underscores how practicing leadership has become so immersed with data that leaders no longer can imagine doing what they do without somehow enrolling data as means of continuously measuring and monitoring the efforts and results of microcosmoses of students, faculty and management working together to achieve certain goals, certain outcomes. And considering the fact that the capacity for working and reasoning informed by what is generally known as knowledge, is framed as a rather important skill for most practicing professionals (Krause-Jensen, 2012), the inability to imagine oneself practicing without data is perhaps not so surprising. To that effect, the comment is in some sense indicative of how the politically 'rushed' influx of data has been instrumental in stretching the *doings* of leadership along a very specific set of coordinates, allowing for the ability to led rationally informed by data to stand out as an important aspect of being recognised as professional.

Surely, this is a lot to extract from this one comment, but in extending from all of the interviews I conducted, I got the sense that the leaders in many ways were very aware of this politically and to some extent also

culturally championed way of linking the capacity for working with data to the likelihood of being recognised as a legitimate professional, seeing that they on numerous occasions would point out that the age of gut-feelings and attitudes was no more.¹⁶ It was simply not how they ‘did things’ anymore, they said, which I understood as their way of explaining how and why they used data as an integrated part of their practice and thus as their way of implicitly underscoring the professionalism with which they worked. Without going into the nuances of this way of framing data-work, expressed by both governing officials and educationalists, here in the form of school leaders, it is clear that it somehow runs counter to the basic idea that affect is key to the way in which leaders in practice tend to work with data. So, by pointing to highly intermingled state of data, leadership and affect, it effectively makes little or no sense to think about data-work in the manner that currently seems to be very prevalent in education and elsewhere.

Therefore, ‘the applicational value’, to put it very rudimentary terms, of the study at hand essentially relates to its way of making a more affect-sensitive re-configuration of what working with data entails possible. In the sense that by affording insights concerning the imbrication of affect in relation to data-work it becomes possible to conceptualise the task of being leader in a datafied present differently. To some this may seem a rather distant and un-concrete way of ‘applying’ the study and its insights, but by stressing and thus giving voice to the co-evolution of affect as an important aspect of the complex process of putting data to work, practicing professionals, e.g., school leaders, are effectively afforded opportunity to view and debate the kind of data-work that is so prominent to their daily efforts in ways that differ from the ones made available to them through more official ‘sources’. And as such, they are in a way empowered to negotiate the structures and instructions surrounding their practices while being more aware of or perhaps sensitive to the groundswell of affect that is always part of the ‘equation’. So, by broadening the notion of data-work, by allowing for the role played by affect in putting data to work to be more widely recognised, it may in some sense become easier for leaders to view their own practice along a set of coordinates that do not subscribe to the idea of a disembodied intellect being cornerstone of how schools can and should be managed.

Summary

¹⁶ While speaking in Danish, the leaders used the term ‘synsninger’. In brief, it refers to the kind of opinions, convictions and pragmatic-reasoning that are used as basis for making assessments and decisions in practice. Typically, the term is used to contrast different modes of leadership: one that is primarily based on ‘synsninger’ as opposed to one that is informed mostly by (research-based) knowledge and data. And as such, the term connotes a ‘thing of the past’ that not many like to see themselves associated with. There is no English word for ‘synsninger’, but gut-feelings and attitudes are here used as approximates.

Summary

For decades the quality of education has been the target of an unwavering political interest, and over time this interest has prompted the emergence of a string of policy mandated programmes or systems, falling under the rubric of Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE). In brief, this QAE mandate orders the production and deployment of data as means of measuring and monitoring student learning and wellbeing while specifying how these data can and must be employed as a basis for promoting quality for purposes of overall betterment - on behalf of individual students as well as society as whole. Following the introduction of this quest for quality, the grounds for practising school leadership have been radically impacted by more quantitative ways of processing. In the sense that it has become increasingly difficult to practice leadership without continuously utilising the kind of data that are thought to demonstrate the output being produced. Mindful of this circumstance the study at hand is designed to explore, how leaders today tend to work with the data in question as part of their efforts to 'adhere' to the QAE mandate, attending specifically to the role played by affect as data are put to work in practice. Thus, seeking to 'unfold' the intermingling of data, leadership, and affect as it manifests in schools 'rushed' by the overarching imperative to continuously secure and promote quality.

Guided by this query, the study extrapolates from the theoretical tenets of what is commonly known as the *turn to affect* as a way of grappling with the so-called affective features of working with data for purposes of promoting quality. But given the fact that there are so many varying purposes, situations, and relational 'circumstances' marking this type of work, the study seeks to consider these variances by attending to selected aspects of what it entails to actually work with data in practice. Therefore, the study first turns to Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1997) and their version of the concept of *assemblage*. Thus, seeking to extend from the stance that most phenomena are in fact fitted together by both material and immaterial components, as a way of thinking of data as more than 'dead' numbers. Secondly, the study looks to Ben Anderson (2016) and his work related to *atmosphere*. It does so in an attempt to 'capture' data-work as something which may be marked by more affective, sensorial ways of experiencing and taking 'things' in. And thirdly, the study attends to Norman Denzin (2016, 2019) and his take on *performativity*. Ultimately, seeking to 'borrow' from its emphasis on the mutual constitution of surface and depth as means of stimulating a more finely tuned sensibility towards the performative 'orientations' associated with data and the expressiveness they allow for.

Empirically, the study builds from fieldwork conducted in one northern

and one southern municipality, following the daily practices of ten schools and their leaders. In concrete, it examines how these schools, and their leaders tackle the QAE mandate, focusing primarily on, how they appropriate data from *The Quality Report 2.0* - a standard national QAE programme introduced to all Danish schools in 2014. As a way of doing so, it examines three instances, in which data are employed in practice as part of the overall task of working to secure and promote quality. And as such, the study at hand is constituted by three separate entry points that follow distinct lines of inquiry based on the varying forms of data enactment being explored. Methodologically, however, they all extend from the same affect-sensitive approach, geared to bring the more affective and sensorially informed modes of data-work into focus. Specifically, this approach entails a mix between document-analysis and affective reading of policy-texts and mandatory quality reports as means of exploring first the official discourse on, what data are and can do, and secondly the way in which it resonates with the leaders, as they make sense of their own data while communicating externally about annual results. Next, it entails observations of compulsory follow-up meetings between municipal representatives and school leaders as grounds for exploring the atmosphere at stake, and the way in which it seems to orchestrate the experience of actually working with data and QAE more generally. And thirdly, it entails interviewing the school leaders, probing how they tend to think of and work with data, as basis for approximating the way in which data seem to register affectively.

Obviously, the kind of data-work exhibited in these three instances vary, but across the characteristics specific to each of them, the study at hand points to the same overall conclusion, namely that the concrete task of working with data in an effort to promote quality stands out as imbued with affect. In Entry One, for example, the study argues, that the leaders implicitly seem drawn to the hope and potential embedded in the official discourse on data, and to that effect they tend to adopt it into their own way of making sense of data and thus their own work. In Entry Two, the study argues, that the all-around positive atmosphere surrounding the follow-up meetings allow for the leaders to experience them as easy to gather around and/or pleasant be a part of and while marked by that experience, they seem prone to embrace the officially lauded 'recipe' for promoting quality. And lastly, in Entry Three the study argues, that in the process of coming to terms with data and 'fitting' them to meet local 'needs', the leaders seem sucked in by the readability afforded by quantitative measures, and on that note they seem inclined to take data on board in ways that enlist a heightened sense of performativity. So, in considering all these insights, the study essentially argues that the concrete task of putting data to work comes across as more than 'just' an intellectual, technical 'manoeuvre'. Rather, it seems suffused with an affective overflow, that surfaces and festers in many different aspects of the same practice.

Following from this conclusion concerning the imbrication of affect in rela-

tion to data-work, the study argues, that it is worth noting the productivity it allows for. In making this 'assessment', the study extrapolates from Lauren Berlant (1997, 2011) and her work underscoring, that the survivability of most societal orders and/or modes of living corresponds with subjects and their affective attachments to the promise of 'what lies ahead' of these orders and/or modes of living. And by applying the insights afforded from Berlant to the current stronghold of the QAE mandate in schools, it seems that the way in which data are affectively appropriated by the leaders expected to work with them, is particularly apt in terms of cultivating varying forms of attachment to the underlying promises of betterment sponsored by the political instruction to promote quality. To that effect, the study proposes, that the affective appropriation of data may in fact function as a form of engine to the QAE mandate, seemingly encouraging leaders to practice (more) efficiently in pursuit of promoting quality along the lines formally advocated. And therefore, it ultimately suggests to (re)think data beyond their often-assumed separateness from affect and more sense-informed ways of 'knowing', of taking 'things' in, and of making sense. Especially, given the circumstance that this separateness is so key to the official and more widely accepted ways of 'coding' data, stressing them as grounds for enabling a more 'pure', rational, and thus professional mode of leading, informed mainly by what is broadly referred to as knowledge.

Resume

Med henblik på at understøtte et bredt kvalitetsløft til gavn for både den enkelte såvel som samfundet mere generelt har man fra politisk hold indført en række kvalitetssikrings- og udviklingssystemer/programmer på skoleområdet og til dels også på dagtilbudsområdet. Kort fortalt formidler disse systemer/programmer nogle standardiserede anvisninger for, hvordan data, primært i form af kvantitative målinger af elevers læring og trivsel, kan og skal bruges som afsæt for arbejdet med at fremme kvalitet i bred forstand. De afledte effekter heraf er mange og vidtforgrene, blandt andet har implementeringen af disse systemer/programmer medvirket til, at det i dag nærmest er umuligt at tale om skoler og deres virke uden samtidigt at referere til de data via hvilke de bliver målt og dermed synliggjort. Men det er især skoleledere og deres praksis, som er blevet 'ramt' af data, fordi det er dem som i første omgang bliver afkrævet at skulle levere på det udefrakommende krav om kvalitet. Set i lyset den udvikling søger nærværende afhandling at undersøge, hvordan skoleledere i praksis arbejder med data som et led i deres bestræbelser på at fremme kvalitet i de lokale sammenhænge, de befinder sig i. Herunder afdække hvordan affekt manifesterer sig som en del af det at læse, indoptage, bruge og i det hele taget forholde sig ledelsesmæssigt til tal og kvantitative målinger. Ambitionen er altså at skabe viden om, hvorledes spændingsfeltet mellem data, ledelse og affekt udspiller sig i skoler mærket af den nutidens higen efter kvalitet.

Med denne ambition som ledetråd orienterer afhandlingen sig mod et teoriunivers, der almindeligvis kendes som den affektive vending (Clough & Halley, 2007). Det gør den i forsøget på at få greb om de affektive strømninger, der på forskellig vis indgår i skolelederes måde at 'omsætte' data på i praksis. Men eftersom det konkrete arbejde med data og kvalitetsudvikling er indrammet af varierende dagsordner og kontekstafhængige betingelser, fokuserer afhandlingen på nogle udvalgte aspekter ved at søge svar på tre selvstændigt afgrænset forskningsspørgsmål, som hver især undersøger forskellige dele af ledelsesarbejdet med data. Derfor trækker afhandlingen i første omgang på Deleuze & Guattari's (1980/1997) *assemblage* begreb og deres forståelse af fænomener, som noget der bliver til i mødet mellem materielle og immaterielle komponenter, for således at muliggøre en forståelse af data som andet og mere end 'døde' tal. Dernæst trækker den på Ben Anderson (2016) og hans måde at udlægge begrebet *atmosfære*, for derved at skabe rum for at indfange arbejdet med data som noget der i visse sammenhænge er påvirket af affektivt mættede sansninger og oplevelser. Og endeligt trækker den på Norman Denzin (2016, 2019) og hans 'take' på begrebet *performativitet* som afsæt for at undersøge gensidigheden mellem repræsentation og substans og dermed skærpe synet på de dynamikker,

som implicit understøtter en performativ omgang med data.

Empirisk er afhandlingen baseret på feltarbejde i to forskellige kommuner, hvor den følger ti skoleledelsesteams og deres arbejde med de data, der produceres og anvendes i forlængelse af *Kvalitetsrapporten 2.0*; et kvalitetssikrings- og udviklingsprogram som blev introduceret i 2014 på alle skoler i Danmark. Konkret betyder det, at afhandlingen følger data på deres vej igennem kvalitetsmaskineriet, sådan som de bliver brugt i praksis af de ti berørte ledelsesteam, således at den med afsæt i tre separate nedslag undersøger forskellige aspekter af det mangefacetteret arbejde med data. Men på tværs af de separate nedslag, anvender afhandlingen den samme affekt-sensitive metodiske tilgang, som den bruger til at få 'greb om' tilstedeværelsen af affekt i arbejdet med data. I korte træk indebærer det, at afhandlingen først arbejder med dokumentanalyse og affektiv tekstlæsning af policy-tekster og kvalitetsrapporter som afsæt for at belyse dels den officielle, politisk-anviste diskurs om hvad data er og kan, og dels de respektive lederes måde at forholde sig til denne diskurs, når de kommunikerer om deres eget arbejde med løfte kvaliteten på 'deres' skole. Herefter arbejder den med observationer og sanse registreringer som basis for at 'indfange' den atmosfære, der omgrænser de obligatoriske opfølgingsmøder mellem forvaltningen og ledelsesteamsene. Og endeligt arbejder den med interviews som grundlag for at komme 'tættere på' ledernes eget syn på og tanker om data, særligt er fokus på det affektive register, som de trækker på i forhold til at skabe mening med dem.

Samlet set peger indsigterne fra hver af afhandlingens tre nedslag på, at den praktiske 'omsætning' af data er tæt forbundet med ledernes affektivt informerede måder at forholde sig til dem. I nedslag ét, for eksempel, peger afhandlingen på, at det håb og den potentialitet der skrives frem i den officielle diskurs om data, har det med at 'snige' sig ind i ledernes måde at forstå deres egen praksis. Forstået på den måde, at de ligesom tager den politiske fremskrivning af kvalitetsarbejdet og det håbefulde fremtidsscenario den ridser op til sig, i den forstand at de duplikerer ind i deres årlige kvalitetsrapporter. I nedslag to peger afhandlingen på, at den positive, konstruktive og næsten omsorgsfulde atmosfære, der omgrænser opfølgingsmøderne, gør at de opleves som nemme, eller ligefrem behagelige at være en del af, og 'guidet' af den oplevelse fremstår lederne meget imødekommende overfor den noget standard-tro tilgang til arbejdet med kvalitet, som forvaltningsniveauet genkender og anerkender som farbar. Og i nedslag tre peger afhandlingen på, at ledernes refleksioner over data vidner om en vis tiltrækning af den synlighed, som data giver adgang til, og med den som trædesten er det som om, at lederne i visse situationer næsten ikke kan lade være med at læse, forstå og bruge data performativt. Det vil sige, at indsigterne fra hvert af nedslagene godtgør på, at arbejdet med data i praksis ikke kun sker på foranledning af 'kølige' rationelle overvejelser, det sker også på foranledning af mere affekt-informerede eller affekt-mættede måder at mærke og bevæge sig i verden på.

Med henvisning til dette standpunkt argumenter afhandlingen afslutningsvist for, at der er god grund til at forstå arbejdet med data, som noget der rækker ud over den form for rationelle gøre og laden, der ofte fremskrives som endemålet for indførelsen af data. Eller sagt på en anden måde, så plæderer den for, at det konkrete arbejde med data er tæt forbundet med lige præcis de affektive og sanser-informerede måder at forholde sig til og være i verden på, som indførelsen af kvantitative målinger traditionelt set har været tænkt som et bolværk imod. Med henvisning til Lauren Berlant (1997, 2011) og hendes arbejde omkring affekt og forskellige styreformers hegemoni argumenterer afhandlingen ydermere for, at denne forbundethed mellem data, ledelse og affekt på mange måder er med til at understøtte produktiviteten af nutidens kvalitetsregime. Kort fortalt påpeger Berlant, at produktiviteten af et hvilket som helst system er betinget af subjekters affektive tilknytning til det de lover. Og hvis man 'applicerer' denne indsigt til afhandlingens genstandsfelt, så bliver det muligt at få øje på det produktivitetspotentiale, der knytter sig til de mere affektive, sanser-informerede måder at vide, forstå og skabe mening med data, idet man hjælpes til at begribe, hvordan disse måder er i stand til at understøtte ledernes affektive tilknytning til ambitionen om kvalitet og de forbedringer den stiller i udsigt. Som for eksempel når lederne tager kvalitetsdagsordens håbefulde fremtidsscenario 'til sig', eller bliver 'grebet' af den gode stemning ved opfølgingsmøderne, eller 'drages' af muligheden for at kunne stå frem på bestemte måder, så bliver det klart, at det i høj grad er disse affektive 'omsætning' af data, som er med til at give kvalitetsarbejdet ben at gå på. Forstået på den måde, at de er med til at nære det man med Berlants terminologi kan kalde for tilknytning og dermed er de er i stand til at 'gøde' arbejdet med kvalitet, idet de betinger ledernes måde at gå til det og den ildhu hvormed de gør det.

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