

A Love for the Natural World

Living well with humans and non-humans in a complex world

Protagonists- Children and Educators of SFUCC UCC North

By Susan Wang

Introduction

It is important to build relationships and connect with both humans and non-humans because our existence collides with the natural environment such as the forest, The forest is not only a natural space for children to explore, but it is filled with a multitude of more-than human entities that are capable of generating knowledge and provides opportunities for children to learn and think with the place and each other (Argent, Vintimilla, Lee & Wapenaar, 2017). . As Pacini-Ketchabaw explains, it is important to “think with forests” (p. 337) and make meaning through the intra-actions that are present (Harwood, Collier, 2017). In relation to humans, intra-actions involves recognizing that materials in the ‘more-than’ human worlds are an active agent capable of shaping different things and as Barad describes, agency has many possibilities for reshaping the connections between humans and non-humans. It is about mutual response within each other and thus, humans and non-humans are constantly affecting each other (Moss, 2019).

The ‘more than’ human worlds are composed of many elements and is defined as “things, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms, physical forces, spiritual entities, and humans” (Moss, 2019, p. 143). Humans are no longer the centre of the universe as we now share the world with other inhabitants of the Earth (Prout as cited by Moss, 2019), and this is known as common worlds.

Common Worlds

Humans have always been positioned at the top of the hierarchical scale. However, this is being reconceptualized and there is now the idea of common worlds. This explains that humans and the more-than human entities, both living and non-living, are able to develop relationships with each other (Taylor as stated by Moss, 2019). This common world's theory helps us move beyond the humanist perspective and enables us to understand that humans and non-humans are inseparable and share the world as a collective group (Harwood & Collier, 2017). For many, this thinking with the more-than humans may be hard to grasp, as humans are used to thinking that they are the only producers of knowledge and the objects of our learning are the non-humans (Taylor, 2017). In contrast to this thinking, both humans and non-humans act as a "performative agent" capable of generating knowledge, which is always shared with others (Harwood & Collier, 2017, p. 1449). In order for humans to think and learn with the more-than humans, it is important to be attuned to what is going on in the world, which requires practice so that humans can be fully in the moment and present with the different entities (Taylor, 2017). Once a connection and relationship to the more-than humans is developed, we will be more eager to protect the environment and preserve all life on Earth.

The process: *The story of the unfolding project*

“Every child deserves to know the pulsing, cycling life of the Earth through simple intimacies and daily encounters. Every child deserves a world beyond walls” (Pelo, 2013, p. 44). From the time children are born, they have an innate sense of wonder and curiosity so therefore, it is important that children get to experience and explore what the world has to offer because real life experiences matter (Pelo, 2013). Throughout this inquiry, I will be thinking with the common world framework which suggests that this world is not only for humans, but a collective of both humans and non-humans capable of developing relations in a world of diversity. Therefore, I am interested in how children engage with the materials and with their peers in the forest, and how it may contribute to a wider society. In the process of meaning making, I hope to discover and find new materials with children, such as natural charcoal. My starting points for this inquiry involve first gathering the children and reading a story because I believe that it opens up conversations and understandings about a particular subject. I am curious to see: *How do we live together with others? What does it mean to be in the forest? How do we situate and ground ourselves in this place with other entities? What happens when we encounter with Forest?*

As this curriculum progresses, my goal for the children is to develop an awareness for others including the more-than humans in the forest, and know that as humans, everything we do in the environment matters and affects all life. I would love for this inquiry to be more spontaneous as the forest can provide many surprise encounters. However, some of my initial guiding questions to the children include:

- **Who lives in this forest?**
- **Does the forest have a sound? When you listen closely to the trees (for example), does it have a voice?**
- **What does the entities feel like? (Such as grass, bark, plants, etc.)**
- **How does the entities (grass) move?**
- **What do you notice when you come into the forest?**



From November 2019 until March 2020, 7-8 children and an educator from the North side of UniverCity (UCC) at SFU, along with me, have been exploring the forest every week. In getting to know Forest, children have been using all their senses; touch, smell, taste, hear and sight to actively participate in nature, and they have been using their whole bodies to experience different encounters. Every time we go into the forest, something new and unexpected is bound to occur, which draws curiosity and wonder, and children are able to construct new theories and make meaning. Throughout the explorations, I wondered what does the forest invite children to do? What shapes children's experiences, and how do we think with 'more-than' humans?

At the beginning, children were interested in searching for materials in Forest such as Sticks and Mushrooms, and they noticed many intricate features of Trees and Logs. In understanding the intricacies of Trees and Logs and in relation to children's curiosity of finding materials, they were invited to find charcoal, since natural charcoal can be found in nature. At first, many children thought that charcoal only comes from classrooms, but upon closer observation and discussions, children noticed that charcoal also comes from Forest. As soon as we set off to find charcoal in Forest, many theories emerged, and children were keen to experiment with this natural material. With papers laid out, children began experiencing with what natural charcoal can do. Since the children were more familiar with man-made charcoals, I was curious to see the difference between mixing man-made charcoals and natural charcoals into the classroom. This allows children to realize that we are surrounded by nature as we experimented with a part of Forest inside.

Additionally, when children experience different materials in nature, it allows them to have a deeper connection and awareness of Forest; and know that we are living in this world together. Forest can bring many surprises including unexpected weather, as the weather in Vancouver can change rapidly. Along with our presence in Forest, Rain, Snow, and Fog came to greet us.

Different weather invited children to do different things in Forest as children explored and made discoveries. As children explored, Trees seemed to be a popular topic amongst the group as they would notice many features of the tree and the children also gave them human qualities such as a “belly button”. I wondered; how would children respond to the emotions of trees? Then one day, Forest was covered in snow and the sun was shining down. However, it looked like there were snow falling inside the forest as there were snow falling from the trees. Other children noticed this, and curiosity was evident amongst the group as they wondered why the sky was not snowing, but instead there were snow falling inside the forest. Then I asked a child if it was snowing inside the forest. I was surprised when she said that it was not snowing, but instead the trees were crying. This opened up the conversation of how we should be careful of the trees and other non-human beings as they have feelings, just like humans. Once this was conveyed and shared amongst the group, the other children were more careful and aware of trees and interacted with them in a way that shows love and compassion.

I thought, if trees have feelings and emotions, are they able to talk and listen to us? This question was brought to the group and while others said they don't talk, others said they do talk. It was interesting to listen to all the different ideas that children had as we greeted the tree. This shows me how diverse and imaginative children are, and they are capable of contributing to their learning by sharing knowledge with their peers. As educators and children co-construct knowledges together, relationships can develop, which can promote children's well-being and belonging, and enhance children's confidence. The Early Learning Framework (2019) states, this confidence is necessary for children as they explore their ability as "family members, friends, thinkers, citizens, and discover their connections to the natural environment" (p. 67). When children connect with Forest and the natural environment around them, they will start to care and help protect it, just like we do when we develop relationships with humans. The topic of Trees continued in our explorations. Not only do Trees exist in Forest, but they are everywhere in the environment, and they are important because they provide shelter for animals and oxygen for us.

After exploring Trees in Forest, we decided to explore Trees back at UCC, as there are lots of Trees in the yard and children are more familiar with that space. Since there was construction going on, this influenced how we interacted with Trees as children noticed that a Tree was hurt. This continued the conversation of how Trees have feelings and through the discussions, a family of Trees was established. I was curious and wondered how children categorize the family members? Since Trees also have a family, what does it mean in terms of how we interact with them? Would there be a difference? I was amazed by the way children worked together to establish a bond with Trees.

Conceptual Essay

Children are born knowing that they are part of the Earth; they are naturally curious and have a sense of wonder. However, this sense of wonder is often short lived and gone before adulthood. In order for children to keep that sense of wonder alive, it is important for adults to share the same excitement and wonderment that children have about the world (Carson, 1956). Carson states that for the early years, it is more important to feel than to know. He illustrates this by imagining that if knowledge is the seed and emotions are the soil, we must first nurture and strengthen the soil for the seeds to grow (Carson, 1956). With children's limitless imagination and sense of adventure, they will be the future leaders and innovators who will acquire and re-build civilization (Early Learning Framework, 2019). The world is still in a constant state of becoming, and as a result of that, everything, both humans and non-humans, can influence each other by collectively coming together and forming lively groups (Moss, 2019).

Throughout history, there has always been a human and nonhuman divide, as humans have always been perceived as the sole producers of knowledge. This is being reconceptualized, and there is now the notion of Common Worlds. Common Worlds is defined as humans sharing and co-existing in the world with 'more than' humans, and developing unexpected relationships (Moss, 2019).

Through the Common Worlds Framework, humans and non-humans exist together, can both influence each other, and have agency. As Barad describes, agency is the ability to respond to something, as well as the possibility for shared response (Moss, 2019). This will help us expand inclusiveness, relationships and belonging (Harwood, Collier, 2017). It will also introduce children to the “real, messy, imperfect, and undivided natural and cultural worlds they [and we] inherit and inhabit” (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw as stated by the Early Learning Framework, p. 101), Even though this is an unsettling topic, it can help bring human and nature together as we examine the potentialities of living collectively with each other (Argent, Vintimilla, Lee & Wapenaar, 2017). It is important to realize that as a result of living in a world full of multispecies, humans are entangled with natural forces and “the fate of one determines the fate of the other” (Zalasiewicz et al., as cited by Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015, p. 510).

Additionally, the Common Worlds Framework seeks to engage in discussions, in which it creates new ways of being and it embraces the complexities of the world between humans and non-humans (Early Learning Framework, 2019). In de-centering the human, forests are perceived to be the holders of knowledge and a living being considered to have hopes and desires (Argent, Vintimilla, Lee & Wapenaar, 2017). Not only does the forest provide opportunities for children to engage and connect with the ‘more-than’ humans such as sticks, mushrooms, trees, etc., but it allows children to develop an ecological identity and be in connection with nature.

An ecological identity enables children to establish a deeper connection and admiration for the Earth, which will open up new possibilities of living in the 21st century (Pelo, as cited by Bigelow & Swinehart, 2015). As Pelo explains, in order for children to develop a close relationship to the forest and the place, it is important to understand the histories and stories, just like we do with people and for young children, their imaginations are as valuable as facts (Pelo, as cited by Bigelow & Swinehart, 2015).

Kathleen Dean Moore writes that “Loving isn’t just a state of being, it’s a way of acting” (p. 47), and to love someone or a place is to enhance and care for its well-being (Bigelow & Swinehart, 2015). In order to foster love for the Earth we live in, it is important to “situate our bodies, hearts and our minds” in the place (Pelo as cited by Bigelow & Swinehart, 2015, p. 44). This allows children to help protect and care for the environment (Taylor, 2017), and to be conscious of the world (Pelo, 2013), as British Columbia is now faced with many problems including climate change, extinction of species, etc. (Early Learning Framework, 2019).

All children have a right to be informed about issues surrounding their environment and engage with decision making processes towards a better future. Children are capable of many understandings, and when they are involved, it allows them to have a voice and an opportunity to show their skills (Mackay, 2012).

As children engage with materials, their environment, other children, adults and the community, they are constantly making meaning and constructing knowledge. As much as children are learning from adults, adults are learning from children. Our daily more-than human encounters in nature can also contribute to our knowledge-making process as we all are interdependent on one another (Harwood & Collier, 2017). Children are diverse in many ways, and when adults provide them the time and space to explore, they can generate new ideas, problem solve, construct theories and inquire about new encounters (Early Learning Framework, 2019). When children are supported by a positive community that enhances their self image and identity, they become confident individuals who can contribute to their well-being and the well-being of others (B.C Ministry of Education as stated in the Early Childhood Framework, 2019).

A group of children in winter gear walking through a forest path. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an overcast day. The children are wearing colorful jackets and hoods, and are walking away from the camera on a path lined with trees and bare branches. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and twigs. The overall atmosphere is quiet and exploratory.

Surprises and Discoveries of Forest

Something was emerging from Log as it was sitting near the edge of the forest. What was it exactly? It looked like logs were steaming as a clear puff of smoke arose from the Log. Justice (An educator) was first to notice that steam was coming out of the log and called the children over. The children excitedly gathered together around the log. In order to make sense and understand more, children explored their surroundings by climbing inside or walking along the edge of the log to see what they can find. This hands-on experience not only gives children the opportunity to see what nature has to offer, but allows them to connect with different materials.

The children all had wonderful ideas when Justice asked the question, **“Why do you think the log is steaming?”**. The sun was beaming that day so Anna answered, **“Maybe it’s the Sun”**, and then Zion added **“The Wind”**. Children were discovering and finding many aspects of the log. Zion was amongst the first to say, **“I found something”**, and then Justice asked what he found and Zion said, **“A killer ant!”** Jayden also found something and he said, **“A belly button.”** Intrigued by the question, Justice asked, **“Do trees have belly buttons”** and Jayden was quick to add, **“Yeah!”** Children were keen to find if other logs were smoking too and just then, Anna enthusiastically shouted, **“There’s smoke over here!”** Followed by the remark, Justice asked, **“Can you catch the smoke?”** Emma answered, **“I’m going to catch it with my stick”**.

As children explored the log using their whole bodies, they were constructing new theories while socially interacting with their peers and looking for new discoveries. Additionally, we learn best through our bodies. Once children found something, they would enthusiastically call out to the other children. It was amazing to see children actively engaging with the log and others. As I observed, I noticed children were great at utilizing their environment and since Emma was finding sticks, she said she can catch the smoke with her stick. This showed me that children can think in creative ways of making use of their findings. To the child's viewpoint, the stick is alive and an active agent in their play, and according to Bennet, the stick is more than a tool for playing, it has vibrancy and invites the child to act in certain ways (As cited by Harwood & Collier, 2017).



According to the magazine, “Look, Don’t touch” by David Sobel, when children explore the forest using their whole bodies, it allows them to have a connectivity to materials in nature and to the land, and it is a natural way for them to develop their own beliefs and attitudes towards the environment. Way too often, adults use the ‘Look but don’t touch’ approach when walking in the woods with children. This approach minimizes and cuts children off from the essence of nature and it teaches them that “nature is boring and fraught with danger” (Sobel, 2014, p. 3). Children should experience the joy of the natural environment and get to explore on their own terms. In this way, children will develop a connectivity to nature and get to discover what the world has to offer (Sobel, 2014).



The Search for Mushrooms

As Forest provides many surprise encounters, children were keen to search and investigate for entities that live in nature such as Mushrooms. Children searched high and low, and all around the forest for mushrooms. It was like a game of “hide and seek”. Even though Mushrooms were hard to find, the children didn’t give up. They kept looking and finally, Mushrooms emerged and greeted them. Logan was finding lots of Mushrooms and he would always share it with others. He called to the other children to come by enthusiastically saying, **“We found a mushroom!”**. As soon as the children came, many wanted to pick it up, but Logan was hesitant, because he thought the Mushroom could be poisonous, so he told others, **“No, no. It’s poisonous.”**

I wondered, how did Logan know it was poisonous? Was it the appearance of the mushroom? Even though the children wanted to pick it up, they listened to Logan as they found alternative ways to pick up the mushroom by using sticks.

Once Logan found the mushroom, he wasn't hesitant to share it with their peers as he thought that the other children might be interested in mushrooms too. This was indeed true as Logan and his peers joined together to find more mushrooms. I couldn't help but wonder, what excites children to search and investigate things? Perhaps it is the excitement of finding something new? Maybe it is the surprise of an encounter? Additionally, it was nice to see how gentle the children were being with the mushrooms.



The desire to search for things in Forest progressed over the next couple of months and through different encounters, children are able to construct meaning. As soon as the children went in the forest, they were quick to point out there was a big mushroom laying under a log. While others thought it was a huge mushroom, others had their own ideas of what it could be. The children all shouted, **“Look, a mushroom!”**. Roan joined the group for the first time, and she commented, **“It’s not a mushroom, it’s connecting bark.”** I wondered, was it because the mushroom was camouflaged that looked like it was part of the log? Perhaps the texture played a part?




What else emerged in Forest?

In addition to finding Mushrooms and other entities in nature, there was something new that emerged. On the snow-covered ground, Nathan was amongst the first to notice a carrot as he eagerly shouted, **“A Carrot!”**. I was surprised by his find as it was my first time seeing a carrot in Forest, so I asked Nathan, **“How do you think the carrot got here?”** The children at UCC have been interested at making snowman and therefore, Nathan responded by saying, **“The snowman dropped it. The carrots dead now. Its stuck to the snow”**. I was intrigued by his comment as I wondered how children make connections between if something is dead or alive.



The children explored the forest individually for a few weeks to develop a sense of connectivity to materials present in nature and to get to know Forest. Through different encounters and hands-on interactions with nature, children are able to make meaning and allows them to have a better understanding of their environment, in which Dewey refers to this as an act of “consciousness” (p. 3, as cited by Jørgensen, 2016). Additionally, Merleau-Ponty defines consciousness as something that is established by lived experiences, which assists us in the knowledge-making process (As cited by Jørgensen, 2016). Therefore, it is important for children to explore their environment and be in the moment with all the entities.

Intrigued by children’s desire to search for things. I wondered what materials can we find in Forest that can make a mark? According to the Early Learning Framework as stated by Kind, “Materials live in the world in multiple ways. They can evoke memories, narrate stories, invite actions and communicate meanings” (Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 23). As I observed children exploring Forest, I noticed that many of the times they were experimenting with Logs and Trees, and I thought, what if the children and I searched for natural charcoal in Forest as I noticed blackened Trees and Logs. The children were first invited to experiment with man-made charcoals in the classroom and then we explored charcoal in the natural environment.



Experimentations with Man-made and
Natural Charcoals

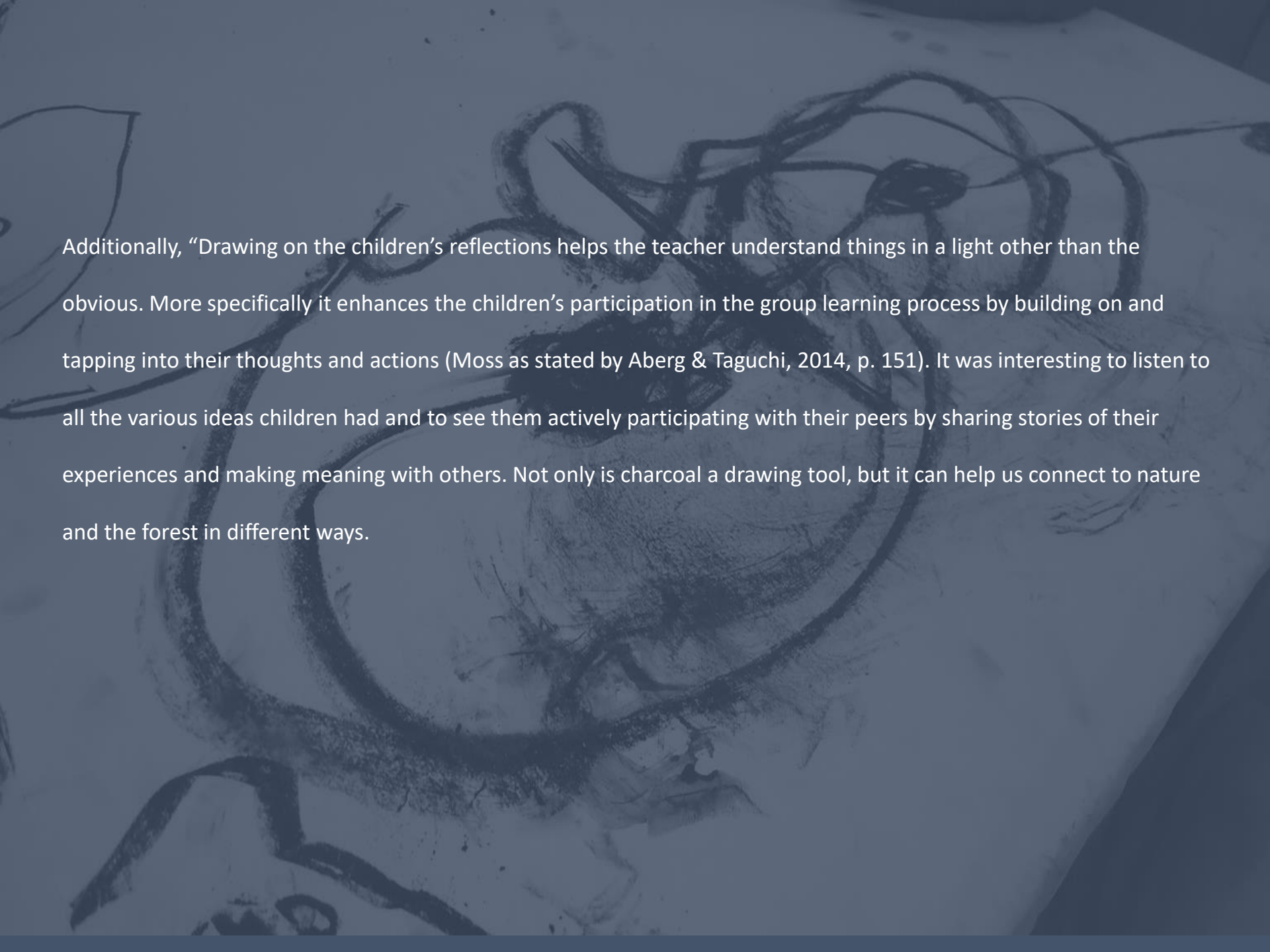
What's in Forest?

In getting to know the material, the children were invited to draw with man-made charcoal in the classroom. Since the children got to experience the forest for a few weeks now, we had a conversation about what they remember and love to do in the forest. Elena started to draw her own forest. Elena actively said, **“This is a forest!”**. I asked her, **“what’s in your forest?”**, and she said, **“Pinecones, leaves, and cats!”**. I was filled with wonderment as she said cats so I clarified with her by asking, **“And cats?”**. Elena agreed and she added, **“And mushrooms.”** I commented, **“Wow, there are a lot of things in your forest!”**. Then, Logan glanced over at Elena’s drawing, pointed out and said, **“Trees, trees, trees.”** Elena then corrected Logan by saying, **“That’s not a tree, that’s a pinecone.”**



As children drew, a conversation about cheetahs emerged as Elena said, **“Remember I saw a cheetah in the forest? I saw a cheetah with grandpa and dada”**. I commented, **“Oh you saw a cheetah, was that scary”**? Elena responded by saying, **“No, cheetah have paw”**. Logan listened to Elena and he said, **“And cheetah bites people.”** Jayden then said, **“I saw one cheetah at my house forest.”** I wondered if Elena was referring to cheetahs when she said that there was a cat in her forest. I was intrigued by the children’s conversations and was curious by the way they categorize animals. Drawing not only encompasses freedom and creativity, but it “creates a space of gathering together, sharing ideas and fragments of stories, and giving insight into the things that matters to each of us” (Kind & Neves, 2016, p. 27). Children are able to construct new understandings by observing and listening to others.



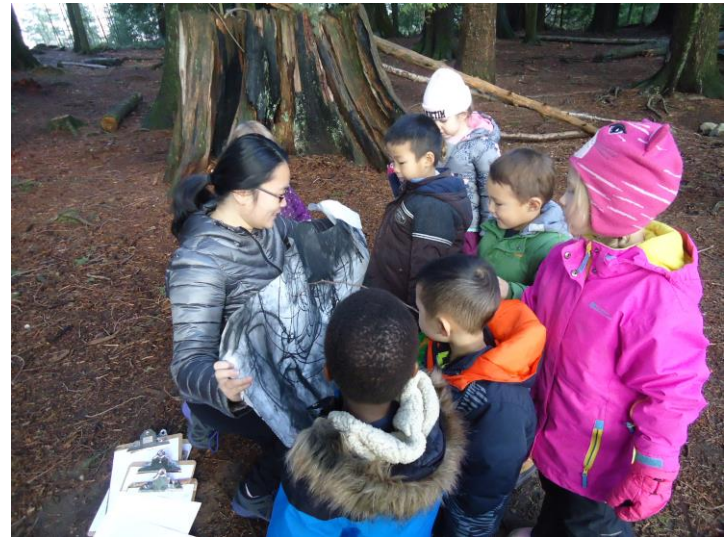


Additionally, “Drawing on the children’s reflections helps the teacher understand things in a light other than the obvious. More specifically it enhances the children’s participation in the group learning process by building on and tapping into their thoughts and actions (Moss as stated by Aberg & Taguchi, 2014, p. 151). It was interesting to listen to all the various ideas children had and to see them actively participating with their peers by sharing stories of their experiences and making meaning with others. Not only is charcoal a drawing tool, but it can help us connect to nature and the forest in different ways.

After exploring with man-made charcoals, the children noticed that their hands were blackened and dark from the charcoal as Jayden commented, **“My hands are really dark! I’m going to wash my hands outside.”** Since it was raining outside, I asked, **“Are you going to wash it in the rain?”** Jayden then enthusiastically responded by saying, **“Yeah!”** However, Zion responded, **“No, that’s going to be too muddy”** The environment can influence how children act and they are observant of what’s occurring around them.



The children and I revisited their charcoal drawings the following week, but instead of having a discussion inside, we conversed in nature. As we discussed, I wanted to see how the different environments influenced the children's actions. With a wide open space, children have freedom to express their ideas by collectively gathering with their peers, surrounded by multitudes of various materials. The children excitedly huddled around the large collaborative piece of paper and they remembered their charcoal drawings in which they eagerly shared with their peers. Children were more familiar with drawing in the classroom with man-made charcoals, so I wondered what would happen if children found their own materials? What would be the difference of exploring with charcoal outside



The Search for Charcoal

The children and I gathered together to discuss their charcoal drawings and then they were invited to find charcoal in the forest. I asked, **Where do you think we find charcoal?**". At first, many children said, **"In the classroom."**, and then Jayden said, **"In the high trees."**. Not only does materials invite dialogue with others but "They live, speak, gesture, and call to us" (Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 23). This demonstrates that materials are alive, active and can communicate to us, so therefore, it is crucial that we listen and attend to it.



As stated in chapter 3 of the book, “Encounters with materials in early childhood education”, charcoal is more than a drawing tool, it holds stories of the past, the present, and it provides many opportunities for new possibilities and therefore, humans and non-humans can come together in “spaces of difference” (p. 34). Spaces of difference means being open to unpredictability and being accepting of the other. Additionally, the chapter states that in an encounter with materials, it is a moment of meeting and in order to meet, we must first touch the material by reaching towards it, attending to it by noticing our surroundings, being open to explore by allowing us to be ‘undone’ which enables us to go beyond our limits, and respond to the material by moving and acting with it (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, Kocher, 2016).



After our discussion, the children and I quickly set off for our adventure in finding natural charcoal to bring back to the classroom. A hollow log was calling to us as we saw blackened bark. Justice (An educator) was the first to ask, **“What does charcoal look like?”** Many children said, **“It’s black.”** Since the children were familiar with the charcoal in the classroom, I wondered if they remembered that the charcoal back at UCC was black so they thought natural charcoal has to be black too? Perhaps they have seen natural charcoal in the forest before? Logan also responded by saying **“Rocks.”** Justice then asked the question, **“How did charcoal get in the forest?”** Jayden responded by saying, **“Someone threw it.”** Anna thought for a while and she said, **“A dragon shot fire.”** She then picked up a piece of charcoal and excitedly commented, **“It’s real charcoal!”**



“Learning is not an individual act but happens in relationship with people, materials and place. All aspects of children’s learning and growing are interconnected and overlapping” (Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 65). As children construct theories and communicate with others, they are constantly making meaning and generating new knowledges about the world. After the children found their forest charcoals, they began to utilize their materials. With paper and clipboards laid out, children started to draw and make a mark. However, there weren’t enough clipboards for every child to use so instead, children made use of their environment by drawing on logs or the ground as they waited for their turn.



I was intrigued by Anna's theory of how a dragon shot fire to make charcoal in the forest. I wanted to see what other children think of this so we had a conversation as a group. As we discussed, Paisley was the first to say, **"A dragon shot fire onto a roof and charcoal came into here."** Logan then added and said, **"Maybe the dragon had a gun in his hand"** Anna then said, **"Or maybe the dragon has charcoal power"**. "Revisiting can support children's attempts to make sense of their theories and to deal with assumptions that with extra inspection" (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012, p. 276).



Mixing Forest with the classroom

What is the difference between man-made charcoals and natural charcoal? The children seemed to enjoy drawing with the charcoal in the forest so what if, we brought a piece of the forest inside? In the studio, a large collaborative piece of paper was laid out and both the natural and man-made charcoals were scattered. As the children and I had a discussion around where the charcoal came from, excitement filled the room as we hurried towards the studio. Children were more used to the man-made charcoals as they all grabbed it, but some drew with natural charcoals. However, there were some challenges.

Natural charcoal weren't as dark as the man-made charcoal and it made it hard to draw. Despite the challenges, children thought of clever ways of making the natural charcoal darker, such as drawing on the "stick-like" natural charcoal with the man-made charcoals to make it darker. When faced with a problem or a challenge, children are capable of thinking of new ways to solve it and can work collaboratively with others.





As the children and I discussed the forest and what they remembered experiencing, many children noticed that there were two types of charcoal on the table; the natural charcoal from the forest and the man-made charcoals from the classroom. There were some children who picked up the man-made charcoal and some picked up the natural charcoal. I wondered, how did children decide on which charcoal to pick up? In an effort to connect charcoal to the forest, I asked children, **“What do you all remember about the forest?”** Since the children had a desire to search for things and were familiar with mushrooms, Jayden was the first to respond by enthusiastically saying, **“Mushrooms!”** After children were finished drawing, Paisley noticed that there were still lots of natural charcoal on the table. Therefore, she inquired by asking, **“Are we going to bring the charcoal back to the forest?”**



I was inspired by Paisley's question as it was brought back to the whole group. I wondered, if we took something from the forest, when should we bring it back? Even though some children said we should bring it back, others said we shouldn't. This brought up the conversation of even though the forest provides natural charcoal for us, where should the charcoal stay and if we should bring it back to the forest. In understanding the different materials in Forest, we can better respond with the world as active participants.



Who listens in the forest?

Paisley- **"I put my charcoal back."**

Jayden- **"I'm bringing my charcoal home."**

Logan- **"We're going to find more charcoal."**

Paisley- **"Thank you forest!"**

Georgia (Educator at UCC)- **"Who do you think listens in the forest?"**

Paisley- **"The trees and the bushes listen."**





Communicating with Forest

An Act of Noticing

I was touched by the way Paisley thanked the forest for providing the charcoal for us and commented that the trees and bushes listen. I wondered if they listen, do they also talk to us? This question was brought back to the whole group as we gathered together to read a story and share our insights.

Susan- **“What do you notice when you come into the forest?”**

Logan- **“People, Trees”**

Paisley- **“To say hello to the pet trees”**

Susan- **“Do the trees talk to us?”**

Paisley- **“No.”**

Susan- **“Why don’t the trees talk to us?”**

Everleigh- **“Because it doesn’t have a mouth”**

Susan- **“Then, how do the trees communicate with us?”**

Anna- **“With it’s eyes”**

Emma- **“The trees talk quietly so we can’t hear them.”**

Everleigh- **“But if you go inside the tree, there’s a mouth inside and then it can talk to you.”**



Children were noticing many intricate features of the tree. When Paisley said we should say “hello” to the trees, it made me wonder if trees and other entities listen to us. Our conversations continued and the perspective of every child was different. Children are so diverse and it was amazing to hear the views of everyone. Additionally, it was lovely to see the patience of everyone in taking turns to convey their ideas to the whole group. When children said that Trees communicate with us in different ways such as with their eyes, they challenge us with the problem of crossing the human-nonhuman divide, and how to become more intimate with the relations between the ‘more than’ humans. Furthermore, when we stay with the problem of communication, who to talk and who listens, it forces us to think in various ways about our co-habitants (Vintimilla, Lee, Wapenaar, 2017).



There was a tree with a big hole split down the middle as the children and I glanced towards it. As we noticed, I wondered, how did the hole emerge? Could there be something living inside? In this way of noticing, children were very observant of their surroundings as we slowed down from the busyness of everyday life. As Jardine (2008) states, “Understanding begins when something addresses us” (p. 6), and in this case, Trees called to us. When we’re not in a hurry and are attuned to our surroundings, we remember much more and our memory starts to double (Jardine, 2008). Everleigh was the first to get close and greet the tree as she said, **“There’s a big, big hole and you can go in.”** I was curious of what children would say so I asked, **“Do the trees like it when you go in?”** Just then, Logan came up to the tree and responded, **“But if you go inside, the trees hurt.”** This comment made me wonder, what hurts the trees? In relation to humans, do trees have likes and dislikes?




Revisiting

In an effort to remember the children's last dialogue and experience in the forest, we as a whole group, revisited the conversations we had. However, this was not done in the forest, but in the yard at UCC. Even though this was a different setting, the children remembered their experiences in the forest and as they were shown a picture of the tree with a hole, new thoughts emerged as they were not hesitant to tell their peers. There were many other children from the centre who joined and it was great to share the stories of the forest, what we have been noticing, and welcoming new ideas and insights. As we were discussing, I asked Everleigh, **“Do you remember you said that trees doesn't have mouths so they can't talk to us?”** Everleigh then responded by saying, **“But If you go inside the tree, there's a mouth inside and then it can talk to you. It's very loud and it's saying HELP!!”**

This response made me wonder, why is the tree saying help and what does it mean for us to communicate with the tree? The other children were actively listening and I was admired by the way children took turns speaking and listening. “Listening to thought is about being able to hear the ideas and theories of the Other, and to treat them with respect, neither ignoring them nor dismissing them for providing the right answer” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 99). When listening to others, it is important to be attuned and listen attentively without any judgements as new knowledges can be constructed about the world.

As we revisit the documentations, new theories emerge from the children as they are able to build on their previous understandings. Additionally, the new children who joined are able to listen to the perspective of their peers about the forest, which is amazing to see. It was also great that the children and I can come together in a safe space to reflect on our processes and explorations. “Although making learning visible through documentation can be reinforcing to a child who sees his or her work valued though the process, the use of documentation is aimed at helping the child to reflect, revisit experiences, or self access, not to shape his or her inclination to repeat such behavior or work” (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012, p. 276). When we gather together, children are able to construct new understandings with their peers, and their voices will be heard and valued.



A child wearing a purple winter jacket and pink mittens is hugging a large tree trunk in a snowy park. The child is sitting on the snow, leaning against the tree. The background shows a chain-link fence, a building, and other trees. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an overcast day.

Emotions and Feelings of Trees

How do Trees feel?

It was a sunny day but Forest was still covered in snow. Children noticed that even though the sun was out, snow was still falling from Trees. I asked Emma, **“Look in the trees, is it snowing?”**. Emma quickly added, **“The tree is crying and the tears are falling down”**. I then asked, **why do you think the tree is crying?”**, and Emma responded by saying, **“The trees are crying because we’re here. We have to make the trees happy again.** I was intrigued by this comment and I asked, **“How do we make the trees happy again?”**. Emma answered by saying, **“We have to go for it to be happy again”**. Emma then thought of an alternative to make Trees happy again and eagerly said, **“It’s always crying. We have to help him. I have to hug him.”** Without any hesitation, Emma hugged and greeted many Trees. I was in awe of this idea of how Trees, just like humans have emotions and feelings.



Hugs are very special and it symbolizes friendship and togetherness. Just like when Humans are sad and need cheering up, Trees have feelings too and sometimes they need cheering up. Emma realized this and was determined to help Trees feel better. During our weekly visits to Forest, this idea stuck and Emma was noticing that Trees were crying a lot. When Brandon saw leaves falling off Trees he looked concerned as he said, **“Oh no, the leaves are falling!”**. Emma saw Brandon and she commented, **“The trees are crying”**. I asked, **“Are the trees crying because the leaves fell onto the ground?”** Emma thought for a moment and this time, she thought of a different way to make Trees feel better as she said, **“I have to give the tree a treat. It’s gum. Now it’s chewing it.”** Emma then found a rock on the forest floor and pretended that it was gum for the tree. I wondered if a treat such as gum makes Emma and others feel better when they’re sad.



On a rainy and thundering day, Emma noticed the trees were crying again and said, **“When it’s raining the trees cry. The tree is sleepy so that’s why its crying, I want to cry.”** I asked Emma, **“Oh so when the trees cry, it makes you want to cry?”** Emma then said, **“I’m snuggling it”**. This moment showed me that Emma is beginning to develop relationships with Trees and when she went to snuggle it, it made me think of how a kind gesture can travel a long way. When humans hug humans, it can make you feel better. Even the ‘more-than’ human entities , such as Trees can feel sad from time to time. Therefore, all they need sometimes is a hug.



Weather Patterns

Over the weeks, we have noticed different weather patterns in Forest and this impacts the way children act and influences their experiences. After greeting the forest by saying “Hii”, Emma noticed that it was foggy as she said, **“It’s foggy!”** I asked, **“Where do you think the fog comes from?”** Emma commented **“Steam”** and Logan followed by responding, **“From scary creatures.”** I asked, **“What kind of creatures?”** Paisley thought for a moment and then she said, **“From scary unicorns that has really bad powers.”** Additionally she said, **“And a smoking, smoking volcano.”**



As Fog encompassed the whole forest, children had different ideas of where it came from. Through our explorations, I've noticed that children have been interested in animals and creatures, and it was great to hear their imaginations come alive. As I've mentioned before, young children's imaginations are just as important as facts. When Emma commented that it's foggy, this demonstrates that children are observant of their surroundings and with the changes of the weather, this can instill wonder. Nature can be unpredictable and weather can change rapidly. In Vancouver, it is like we are living in a rainforest, but many children do not know what type of environment they live in because they don't get to experience the outdoors as much. Therefore, it is important for adults to give children the opportunity to explore their environment and be situated in the place to truly get to know their surroundings.



After many weeks of rain and sunshine, it started to snow again. The forest was once again covered in snow. Anna and Elena went around the forest and knocked snow off of Trees and Leaves. Even though they cannot quite reach the young Trees yet, they thought of a solution. They each found long sticks, high enough to reach the tops and started to shake the snow off. I noticed Anna and Elena and I was curious of what they were doing so I approached them and said, **“I remember last time Emma said that the trees were crying, when you shake the snow off, do the trees cry?”** Elena said, **“No, the trees doesn’t have eyes or mouth,”** and then Anna added, **“Only people cry.”** This made me wonder that if something doesn’t have eyes or mouths, do they still have feelings and show their emotions?



According to the “Hundred Languages of Children”, listening requires us to be open to different points of view and to value the idea’s of others. This is important as it allows us to learn with others and enhance our knowledge about the world. Children are the greatest listeners as they listen to life in all its forms, and to other humans beings. From the very beginning of life, young children demonstrate that they have a voice, they know how to listen and want to be listened to by others (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 2012). Just as much as you want others to attentively listen to what you are saying, others want the same respect.



After discussing the trees with the whole group, Paisley commented, **“The trees have to die in a certain number”**. I was curious about her response so I asked, **“Oh really!? How do you know when they die?”** To my surprise, Paisley said, **“In 50 trillion billion years. Then they have to get chopped down.”** I wondered, how did Paisley think of such a big number and know what will happen to the trees in the future? Perhaps, she witnessed Trees getting cut down before or something in her environment changed? I was curious to see how other children will respond to this so I intend to bring this back to the whole group.



Meaning making

In getting to know the place, children have been walking, running and having direct-hands on interactions with Forest, which is a form of meaning making. This is important as it allows children to be develop a strong sense of place and according to Dovey, not only does having a strong sense of place encompass a feeling of commonality, comfort and belonging, but it also helps us “stabilize our identities” (as cited by Duhn, 2012, p. 101). Additionally, walking the place is a process of “coming to know” (de Certeau, Hall, Pink, Pink et al, Vergunst, as cited by Hackett, 2014, p. 11). This empowers children to construct new knowledges and enables them to find their place in the world by the experiences they encounter (de Certeau, Ingold, Vergunst, as cited by Hackett, 2014).



A Raccoon ripped it!

The place changed today as we stayed at UCC (UniverCity) and looked at Trees in the yard. Even though Forest has lots of Trees, a nice change is refreshing and different. After the children and I said “hello” to the trees, we had a conversation about how the trees are feeling today. Logan was quick to notice that something was not right as he said, **“Look at that!”** A small tear was evident on one of the trees. Everleigh also noticed the tear by saying, **“This is broken.”** Logan added, **“Something cut it down,”** and Everleigh said **“Something ripped it.”** I was curious so I asked, **“Who ripped it?”** Everleigh remembered that there were many raccoon’s at SFU’S childcare centre so she was quick to comment, **“A raccoon ripped it!”**



How do we save the trees?

Susan- **“What happens when it gets ripped like that?”**

Logan- **“It can fall down”**

Susan- **“I remember Paisley said that trees die after a certain time. What happens when they die?”**

Logan- **“When raccoons cut it and then they die, the dragons come and eat them.”**

Susan- **“Oh the dragons come? Where are the dragons now?”**

Everleigh- **“They’re hiding”**

Logan- **“In the construction. And we’re going to fight them with sticks. People are bigger then dragons and we’re going to cut them down like a fire-blade”**

Susan- **“How do we save the trees from the dragons?”**

Everleigh- **“We cut it down like dinosaurs”**

Logan- **“Because dinosaurs are bigger than dragons”**

Susan- **“What happens to the trees if we cut it down?”**

Everleigh- **“No, cut the dragons down”**

Logan- **“We can save the trees”**



As Everleigh and Logan thought of ways to defeat the dragons and ultimately save the trees, they imagined that they were big as dinosaurs and they were going to fight the dragons with sticks to help save the trees. I couldn't help but wonder if their everyday play had a factor in Everleigh and Logan's encounter with the trees in knowing that dinosaurs can defeat dragons. According to the Early Learning Framework, "Play is an approach to inquiry, a way to research about the world" (p. 24), and as Argent explains, "We are in an ongoing state of becoming. Clay, paper, materials, children, educators, objects, music... are all powerful forces and they bring forth movement, history, and multiple layers of meaning" (Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 25).

Since the environment changed from the forest to the yard at UCC, does it have an influence on children's understanding? Perhaps the children's previous experiences with the tree was a factor in their encounter? Although it is necessary for children to learn how to better protect the environment, Pelo (2014) explains that it should not be the main focus for children, but the focus of adults. The work of children should be to learn what the Earth has to offer by developing a relation to the place they live in and according to Mackay (2012), young children should have a right to be an active participant in their environment and be informed about the issues surrounding the world today, which does not mean that children should be weighed down with all the problems that the world is currently facing.

With Everleigh and Logan's remark of how dragons are hiding in the construction, we continued our discussion. I was curious of what children will say in regards to the construction outside and I wondered about the trees like and dislikes so I asked, **"The construction is really loud today. Do you think the trees like it when there's construction outside?"** Everleigh then said, **"No because the trees might break"**. This moment shows me that Everleigh was aware of the construction and thought that it might hurt the trees. As the construction have been at SFU for a while now, I wonder how it affects children's experiences outside?



A big family

Susan- **“Does it hurt the trees? What does it say?”**

Logan- **“It has a mouth in it so it can cry”**

Everleigh- **“And then it gets mad”**

Susan- **“What happens when they get sad and mad?”**

Logan- **“They tell their mommies”**

Everleigh- **“And their grandpas and aunties”**

Susan- **“Where’s their mommies and daddies?”**

Logan- **“Right over there”**

Susan- **“Oh so they have a big family?”**



Since there were many trees lined up, Everleigh and Logan had a conversation about which ones are which family members and showed me who's who. Everleigh started off by asking Logan, **"This is the baby tree right?"** Logan agreed and said, **"Yeah this is the baby tree"**, then he added, **"This is the mommy tree and the grandpa tree."** Afterwards, Everleigh went to a tree with lots of branches, pointed out and asked Logan, **"This is the mommy tree, this is the daddy tree, this is the grandpa tree, this is the grandma tree right?"** Logan then corrected Everleigh by saying, **"No, no this is the mommy one, this is the grandpa one, this is the brother one."** Everleigh then asked, **"Where's the daddy one then?"** Nestled within a tree branch, Logan then pointed out, **"This is the daddy tree."**

I was fascinated by the way Logan and Everleigh worked together to categorize family members of trees. This shows how we should be careful and cautious of trees as they are a living entity who are part of of a family. I was curious if the family structure of trees, in which Logan and Everleigh categorized, resonates with their own family structure. As Everleigh asked and checked with Logan about the family members, this demonstrates a partnership and mindfulness for others in their environment.

Developing an awareness for others, both humans and non-humans in the environment is important as it not only helps with relationship building, but it also promotes a healthy self-image and research has shown that collaboration- involving parents, educators and children- strengthens the outcome for action on the environment and it encourages children's voices to be heard and respected (Mackey, 2012). Mackey also explains that a child can contribute to the environment by their desire to search for knowledge, such as discussing important issues with others. This allows children to express their ideas by having a choice and being able to take achievable action (2012).

Even though humans have permanently altered the world by influencing the sustainability of the earth such as global warming, landscapes and oceans (Malone, 2012), Pelo (2013) gives us hope that the world will one day change for the better as she states, "An ecological identity offers an antidote to the displacement that makes possible the wounding and wrecking of the planet" (p. 50). Therefore, it is important that adults help children strengthen their sense of wonder, compassion, and humbleness for the planet (Pelo, 2013), and in order to do so, adults must share the same curiosity and wonder that children have.

Children were invited back to use charcoal again to make sense of their understandings, and to illustrate their own interpretations of the forest. Individual pieces of white paper were laid out and black charcoal was given to each child. I asked the children to draw what the forest looks like to them. Logan was first to point out, **“I’m making a trail”**, and then Jayden followed by saying, **‘I’m making a boy monkey’**. Since the children and I have been focusing on trees in the forest, I asked Jayden if they live on the trees and he responded by saying, **“Yeah”**, and continued to say that there were three monkeys. Everleigh saw Jayden’s drawing, and she started to draw monkeys too as she said, **“It’s swinging on the trees.”** While drawing, children were constructing a narrative about how the monkeys likes to swing and play, while living on the trees. This shows me that children can comprehend that trees are an essential entity and can provide homes for animals. Therefore, it is important to be caring and kind to both living and non-living entities in nature.



This conversation influenced other children as they started to draw trees and what matters to them. As soon as she approached Emma's drawing, she enthusiastically said, **"Look a tree with hair"**. I wondered if she was relating this to humans, or if she wanted trees to have a human-like quality? I also wondered what it means for the tree to have hair? Perhaps, Emma wanted the trees to show their identity? In the previous conversations of trees having feelings, I saw Nathan's drawing and asked him if the trees were happy and he said, **"No it's sad"**. I inquired by asking, **"Why is it sad?"** Nathan responded by saying, **"Because it misses the squirrels."**



Trees are able to feel sad and have different emotions for a variety of things, such as missing squirrels. In relation to greeting and meeting Trees in Forest, squirrels have also come to greet us in which a connection was made. I was moved by this as I thought about how more-than human beings are also capable of connecting to one another and if we remove something from nature, it affects the livelihood of all species. Therefore, it is important to consider all lives and In order to do so, we must re-establish non-humans within morality (Gibson, Rose & Fincher, as cited by Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015).

For that reason, it is important to encourage children to connect ethically with multi-species, and to help them learn about species that are not easily identified and adored (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). I've noticed that different settings also play a factor in what children choose to focus and draw their attention to. For instance, squirrels seem to be a popular non-human entity in the forest and back at UCC, raccoons are common. I am interested and curious to see what other species are dominant in a new place and environment.

Conclusion

Even though the children and I have been noticing and experimenting with many 'more-than' human beings in nature such as logs, trees, mushrooms, sticks, natural charcoal, the weather, etc., it is important to realize that "Our pedagogical intention is not to examine nature as a separate subject or as something humans should look to as an educational benefit or cure, but rather as an interconnected network of relationships. It is from our social, cultural and geographic locations that we begin to re-envision new pedagogical practices and modes of thinking that are designed to respond to a time of ecological crisis (Argent, Vinitimilla, Lee & Wapenaar as cited by the Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 88).

In this way, humans and non-humans can work together and develop relationships by co-existing in the world together. However, there is still the assumption that nature is pure which is problematic. Therefore, it is important to address these critical issues by changing the narratives towards understanding the complexities of the forest (Harwood & Collier, 2017). Once a connection to the non-humans is developed, we will be more eager to protect the environment and preserve all life on Earth.

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This was an amazing experience and I learned so much. This exploration has given me new insights about learning and teaching with children that I will remember throughout my years as an early childhood educator. Even though at the beginning I felt nervous about inquiring with the children, I felt a sense of comfortability and relief after a few months as I got to know the children, and as they got to know me.

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