

Sharing Space with Other Animals: Early Childhood Education, Engaged Philosophical Inquiry, and Sustainability

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INTRODUCTION

Collaborative research between UniverCity Child Care at Simon Fraser University and a philosopher in residence has yielded promising research in an understudied interdisciplinary undertaking: early childhood education, engaged philosophical inquiry, and sustainability. The goal of our work has been to better understand how Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) can be used with young children (age 4 and 5) on topics related to our local forest environment as part of our centre's foundation curriculum on sustainability (MacDonald, 2015). Our guiding research questions include: What are children's beliefs, ideas and concepts related to sustainability? And, how can we contribute to children (and adults) deeper understandings of sustainability by challenging our human centric thinking?

Pedagogical Methods

Engaged Philosophical Inquiry is an approach that honours children's natural curiosity and our quest to understand and make connections in the world around us. Different from philosophical discussions with the goal of developing logic and argumentation (Gardner, 2009), EPI stresses development of the capacity to listen and take into account the perspectives of others within a democratic participatory community of learners (Lipman, 2003, 2009; Cam, 1998, 2000; Dewey, 1954; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This pedagogical method employs principles and practices of Philosophy for Children (P4C) in order to facilitate critical discussions among children and adults related to our curriculum on sustainability (MacDonald, 2015).

Our EPI sessions were conducted once per week over a six-month period. During this time the content was negotiated and developed by the children and our philosopher in residence, Warren Bowen, using a conversational approach in a group setting with 8 children. During this project, one of the main discussion threads was human management of non-human populations. Questions discussed in depth included: Are dangerous animals real? What should we do with dangerous animals? How should we share space with other animals? Are humans animals? Do humans need to be managed? Is it acceptable to trap and kill frightening or dangerous animals?

We endeavour to live by an ethos of joy and wonder in our pedagogical encounters with children, believing in working from a strong image of children's capabilities as a starting place for our pedagogical practices and EPI sessions (Malaguzzi, 1994). Our embodied holistic view of learning sets out to optimize both experience *and* thought by gently introducing critical cognitive challenges to children's thinking and ideas. For this approach to be successful we try to link the discussion to the learning context by introducing activities, experiences and naturally occurring events while the children are visiting the forest. Later we are able to draw on and refer to these events in the discussions that follow.

We tried to create a flow in our EPI sessions and found that in the forest we could engage with the children optimally by having the sensory benefit of the natural environment

at a time when we were discussing nature and our environment (MacDonald & Bowen, 2015). In this way the questions were meaningful to the children after having just played a related game or having participated in a related activity (i.e. building a house for dragons and then discussing whether or not dragons are dangerous, or asking about the value of trapping animals after a child has caught a mosquito).

During the discussions, when statements were presented by members of the EPI circle (i.e. Warren, the teachers or the children) Warren would often ask the children if they held the same view or a contrary view. This created rich opportunities to deepen thinking and the opportunity to gain the advantage of multiple opinions and perspectives on a topic of interest. From our transcripts of the discussion and reflections on the EPI circles propositions were identified that led to our understanding of the children's arguments and, importantly, also formed the basis of our next lesson. In this way, as we reviewed and debriefed we could build on the children's current understandings as well as any emerging ideas that they may have had. Each week was connected to the last by a re-current game or activity that was familiar. Warren also built on the children's memories of the previous week's discussion by reminding the children of conversations or statements made or bringing in objects related to the prior discussion (i.e. pictures of animals in the zoo when the previous week's discussion had been about capturing wild animals).

Methodology

Methodologically we used ethnographic techniques (Charmaz, 2006) to systematically collect and analyse our weekly EPI sessions. In this study, our collection includes digital video, photographic and audio recordings of the children's forest play sessions, and the children's group time discussions with our Philosopher in Residence. These digital traces were collected, transcribed and reviewed for content related to the questions posed and as discussed above the children's thinking and propositions around being in the world. To do this, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and initially reviewed using in vivo coding (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify key words reflecting the children's references to topics of interest and emotions. We also reviewed the transcripts for 'cognitive knots' in the children's thinking, where emerging ideas were contradictory or in the process of being developed (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012). To optimize and deepen thinking we introduced 'gentle critical cognitive challenges'. This was done to challenge the children to think in different ways. For example, when the theme of human management over non-human populations emerged from the transcripts we further reviewed the transcripts and video recordings during the play sessions to determine the way the children saw themselves in relation to pretence in play, the forest, animals and their own being and becoming during play and questioned them during the EPI sessions (for example to determine if the children's statements were believed to be true across different circumstances or conditions i.e. 'What if it was a baby animal? Would it be alright to put a baby animal in a cage?')

Findings: The Threats of Wild Animals

The major contention discussed during our EPI session was whether or not we can live peaceably with wild animals given they can scratch, bite, and eat us, or whether we ought to cage, kill, or otherwise train and punish them for posing perceived threats that were frightening to the children. In the following, section excerpts from the transcripts are shared to demonstrate the children's thinking in relation to this area of sustainability. Often the children would recall and reference being hurt by or frightened by animals such as bees, bears and other wild animals. For most of the discussion this fear lead to a desire to cage or trap wild animals as well as pets.

As the session with the children went on, their reasoning about what to do with animals perceived to be dangerous changed. Originally we focused on building a dragon nest for dragons that might be living in the forest. Later the children became increasingly concerned with threats posed by dragons to bodily integrity, safe space, and their lives. As their intent and concerns shifted so did their beliefs about what kind of structure to build for an animal as dangerous as a dragon. The children's ideas changed from building a nest, to a tower (that could shoot them), to a cage to contain them.

Their reasons for caging other animals also changed and become more refined as the months passed. In the earlier months, caging was seen as a convenience for interaction, and even as homes for animals: "He can go in the cage and we can pet him whenever we want," (I) "But that's [the cage] her home," (A). Cages could mean that cats could be pet at any time and that they would have their own home.

Eventually, however, with the introduction of plastic toy props (animals and cages), the children were asked whether we ought to trap animals like lions, wolves, elephants, and bears. In part influenced by their reasoning about the dangers of dragons, the children began to advocate for caging as pre-emptive measures against the perceived potential for violence. So when asked why we ought to trap various animals, the children responded:

A: We have to trap him [the mosquito] so he won't suck our blood.

I: Because they bite each other!

A: Wolves are bad because they will eat people. I saw a snake eat a bad guy.

J: Because they [elephants] can smash people in the face with their nose.

S: Because they [elephants] can spray you in your face and then you will get soaking wet.

I: They might push you to the ground. And eat you.

G: I'm a little bit nervous, I am scared, because lions are not actually in cages. They can jump over.

A: A lion will just bite you with its big mouth and then so bad and then your head and they you're going to have no bones, you'll have no bones and then your skeleton is going to be there and then you to have your red, red, red body.

A: And he's going to throw our bones in the air.

Every regular participant advocated for the caging of animals during our sessions, using strikingly similar reasons. The children for the most part expressed here and elsewhere concern for their own safety and worry about violence against them. They often imaged these possibilities in graphic detail. For the children, the fear and possibility of being bitten, pushed, hit, and even eaten was real. Being small animals themselves, the threat of even domesticated cats proved real enough to justify caging.

It became apparent early in our discussions that alongside concerns about safety and bodily integrity were also concerns about power:

A: Nooo! We can bring kitty and then we can bite them--

Warren: You want to bite them?!

A: Yeah!

G: Yeah, so that I can kill it!

Caged animals soon became recipients of the children's expression of power and domination. Importantly, almost all of the children voiced the desire to bite the tail of one animal or another (a wolf, a lion, a cat, a snake). This might be seen as a display of human-nonhuman power relations and the children's emerging understandings of their limits against others of superior strength and agility. Some children also expressed amusement at the thought of caged animals. In a vignette offered by one of the teachers about seeing caged bears the children were asked how they felt.

Warren: [D]o you think it's sad, or how do you feel?

A: I think it's sad.

A: Funny.

Warren: Ok, so why do you think it's funny, A?

A: Because they eat us.

J: I think it's funny, too.

Warren: Why do you think it's funny, J?

J: Because we can catch them so they don't run away.

Gentle Critical Cognitive Challenges

As we reasoned together, important terms were introduced by the children to refine their position and better explain their beliefs. Wildness was one such term. As J explained, "Wild kitties are bad... Because wild kitties have no food to eat and then they get grumpy and they bite people." Wildness was a term adopted by the children to describe the kind of animal that will bite, scratch, and devour. J introduced it for the first time during a discussion about caging domesticated cats in order to draw a distinction between cats that are not violent, and those that behave the same way as wolves, lions, and bears.

'Wildness' became especially important in our discussion of what to do with a baby lion (represented by a plastic figurine). While the children offered many reasons to trap the adult lion, they were less sure about what to do with the baby. As A succinctly put the matter, trapping an adult is okay but trapping a baby is not "[b]ecause big animals are not cute for us." Further complicating the argument and building on J's distinction of wildness, A added, "[b]ecause if one goes wild, then the other goes wild and follows it." That is, wildness begets wildness; if an adult is permitted freedom with her baby, the baby will turn wild and pose the same kind of threat as the adult.

Some children did offer reasoned dissent against caging. Another child suggested that, "[b]ecause some will get angry at you, and try to get to you, eat you," [if we attempt to cage wild animals]. As mentioned above, cuteness was a consideration against trapping an animal. S also felt concern for the separation of parent and child "[b]ecause the lion wants his baby." In the final two sessions with the children, Warren introduced a flying squirrel hand puppet, named Peanut, in order to confront the children about some of their beliefs about trapping, caging, and killing wild animals. We felt this offered something to both the children and facilitator: the children were able to take responsibility for their beliefs about the Other in the presence of the Other, and the facilitator was able to be more forceful in objecting to the positions of the children without feeling neutrality was compromised, since objections came from Peanut.

Peanut: Well hold on. I have something to say to J and to A: are you guys just joking [about what you want to do with wild animals]?

A and J: No.

Peanut: See? They're serious. They really do want to trap. So you want to trap me?

A: We want to trap you!

J: I want to bite you!

Peanut: A, why do you want to trap me A?

A: Because you want to scratch us and [inaudible] spray you with water.

J: And I put you in my washer, and put you in the toilet.

A: I want to put it in the jail.

G: I want to trap you in a cage.

J: I'll eat every friend of yours.

We came to learn that the motivating force behind the desire for extreme punitive measures against not only Peanut, but, as we have already seen, all potentially dangerous wild animals, was the fear of being eaten, bitten, or scratched: "Because [they] scratch us. Because [they] scratch all of us," (A). Some children were uncomfortable with these measures, calling them "sad," and subsequently changed their minds about their own positions regarding the treatment of other wild animals. However, at least one child also recognized that the intentions of A and J seemed reasonable, "I guess J and A think he'll do bad stuff to us, so they [A & J] want to save us," (S).

This line of inquiry led to Peanut asking whether it is acceptable to trap children who bite and scratch. Two separate discussions followed. The first was that because children are not animals, it was unacceptable to trap them:

M: Because there won't be any more humans.

A: Or kids!

I: No, then I'll never get to eat again.

J: I'll give you food and water though.

Peanut: A, do you want to put I in a cage?

A: No, I want to put small animals.

When Peanut responded that I is a small animal, and so meets A's criterion for caging eligibility, some children objected that humans are not animals. While reasons were not offered for this position, some children contended that humans are animals because "some of us really hurt people," because the "one song said people are animals," and because of quasi-evolutionary reasons:

Peanut: A long, long time, humans were monkeys? What does that mean?

A: My dad tell me.

Peanut: Ohhh. Did you guys hear what A said? He said a long, long time ago humans were monkeys.

J: Yeah, you're right, and then they turned into people.

Peanut: So does that mean that humans are animals?

J: No, not anymore.

I: I'm still a monkey because I'm just born.

Interestingly, there did not seem to be a correspondence in thinking between those who believed humans were animals and what ought to be done about animals, as J and M and S believed humans and animals were different, and A and A, Ar, and I believed humans are a type of animal.

The second discussion that followed related to the acceptability of caging children who scratch or bite explored asymmetrical punishments for humans and nonhumans. When asked what should happen to children who bite or scratch, the children suggested to “throw them out of daycare,” or “just give them a timeout.” But when Peanut asked what should happen to her if she bit or scratched the children they suggested to “throw you out and kill you!” (J) “[p]ut you in the fire,” (A) or “kill you and [your] friends!” (I). Objecting to this disparity, Peanut sought to explain the rationale behind wild animals attacking humans: fear of being hurt. To this M and A replied,

M: Yeah. I don't think you should go in the garbage or [be] lit on fire.

A: Yeah, you just want to defend yourself to be safe.

The children were left, then, having expressed different beliefs on the subject of how to treat a potentially dangerous wild animal. A and J were strong defenders of extreme punitive measures, including shooting, igniting, caging, and biting the offender, and devouring the offender's friends. A, A, S, I, and M objected to these measures, instead opting for a more empathetic approach to wild animal behaviour and critical self-reflection of their own “wildness”, and eventually repudiating their own positions about caging animals. S noted, however, that the motivations of A and J were for the sake of protecting the children, and all seemed reluctant to criticize the two directly.

Analysis

Adopting an ‘ethic of resistance’ (Lenz Taguchi, 2010; 2011) toward assumptions and taken for granted notions in early childhood education discourses, in this analysis we turn our attention to promising explanations of the children’s statements based on their own experience of feeling the need for protection against cruel aspects of the world. Rather than focusing on the children’s inability to take the perspective of the animals (for discussions on perspective taking see Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). We can view their stance as a natural extension of their current knowing and sensibility around safety and security and perhaps what could be considered a realistic view of vulnerability within the world. In their short tenure (4 years) as humans on earth, these children have learned a great deal about their own power (or lack of power) and fears within the world. Their sympathies for the baby animals and their consideration that caging the animals could assist them in getting to know them potentially without being hurt by them reveals promising notions of attending to others with care and adopting a gaze or understanding based on the mutual need for protection. Rather than looking at these children’s power fantasies as naïve or cruel, it might be fruitful to examine the potential that their comments hold for extending their understanding, and nudging their thinking toward other complex ideas including species interdependence and alternative perspectives on freedom, safety, contact and cohabitation.

So many of the messages children receive are confusing and contradict species interdependence. For example, we often encourage children to clean up after themselves and perhaps have even begun to work on habits of recycling and reducing or critically considering our consumption of resources in our attempt to move children toward stewardship and green

actions and thinking. However, at the same time children are bombarded with other messages promoting material consumption. This creates confusing and contradictory images of ways of being and becoming within the world. For adults to understand and work through these ideas with children we ourselves must identify and critically deconstruct the contradictory and confusing ways that the world is or may appear to be with respect to human consumption, place and power. For example, we tend to valorise high density urban habitation as a solution to global population growth knowing that this creates economies of scale in urban areas and the potential to preserve and protect natural habitat. However, we rarely discuss human encroachment on bear, wolf, coyote and/or the habitat of other species that are displaced or are marginally co-existing within city or suburban limits. We are also remiss in our focus and discussion of care and release of unwanted “pets” like fish and rabbits and the role that we (human’s) play in the stewardship of the ‘unwanted’. Release of non-domestic species has created ecosystem imbalances in urban areas along with countless other pollutants that effect insect and microbial populations in the remaining wooded and riparian zones. To adequately support children’s actions and thinking adults have to also begin to act and reflect on these topics.

Considering again the children’s experience of being cared for and protected, the idea of caging and confining S’s cat so that they could encounter it safely can be seen as an extension of their curious and inquiring gaze rather than a position of superiority. In this way we can examine these exchanges from the perspective of species interdependence or what Donna Haraway (2008) terms ‘worlding’, where species meet, respond and learn to pay attention to ‘other’ (Kindle edition, location 399). As Haraway notes,

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many. (Kindle edition location 157)

CONCLUSION

During the EPI sessions it was necessary for Warren to unpack the children’s ideas, and he did so by drawing out the children’s thinking and challenging them using a variety of analytic techniques such as: 1) Asking who, when, where, what, how much, and why questions, 2) Making comparisons to look for similarities and differences, and 3) Using what Strauss and Corbin (1990) call a ‘Flip flop technique’ where the concept is wrestled with cognitively and turned inside out or upside down, imagining the very opposite, comparing extremes to bring out qualities and properties under different conditions (example, does it hold true if...when...), and 4) Drawing on personal experiences.

We also found it necessary to deepen the children’s perspectives by gently nudging their thinking forward. Analysing the transcripts for children’s understandings and assertions we found was a valuable way to further their thinking. By bringing ideas forward week to week from the children’s previous discussions we were able to introduce alternative perspectives, including (through Peanut) the perspective of the animals the children wanted to cage.

We also found that the discussion was assisted by the forest context. In this environment we were able to create a flow in the dialogue and a confluence between the games and activities taking place in the forest, the children, Warren and the topic of discussion. This coming together of elements reminds us of Deleuze and Parnet’s (2007)

writing on conversation, lines of flight, flow and how timing creates a phenomenon. As stated:

Movement does not go from one point to another-rather it happens between two levels as in a difference of potential. A difference of intensity produces a phenomenon, releases or ejects it, sends it into space. (p. 31)

The moments we experienced in conversation with the children in a sense represent such lines of flight and movement as our conversations created an awareness and deepened our experience of the children's understanding. Barad (2007) refers to as an 'agentic realist encounter' where a bounded reality comes into existence and becomes agentic through an entanglement of human and non-human agencies in the moment of the encounter. Our encounter during the EPI sessions with the children created an agency that was the product of all elements of the encounter within that moment of conversational flow. Using technology (digital video, audio, photographs) to capture aspects of that agentic moment and bringing them forward to our next session with the children, or to our joint awareness in a research dialogue between the teachers and researchers, added another dimension to the phenomenon by creating a record of it in time and for the purposes of analysis. Taken together we found that EPI with the children in the forest on the topic of animals helped to deepen our understandings of children's perspectives on sustainability and in particular their reaction to and treatment of animals they felt threatened by. As we analysed the work we took into consideration the contradictory messages received by children around cohabitation and environmental stewardship. To make these discussions meaningful and sufficiently complex we must ourselves consider the various environmental contradictions we live by and with and the way we might present these to children to gently nudge both their and our own thinking forward in favourable ways. We believe that the educational importance of this research lies in its previously understudied method of engaging critical inquiry with young children around topics of sustainability. While this method need not be limited to sustainability, the collaboration between the philosopher in residence and the childcare centre, whose foundational curriculum is based on sustainable practice, proved a fruitful line of interdisciplinary early childhood educational research. We hope our work here will provide a useful starting point for other educators interested in critical inquiry with young children in the hopes of interrogating beliefs, fostering participation, and promoting democratic and sustainable lines of inquiry.

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