

Using engaged philosophical inquiry to deepen young children’s understanding of environmental sustainability: Being, becoming and belonging

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Abstract

This research paper shares findings related to our use of Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) with a group of young children (aged 3-4) as a pedagogical method taken up to extend young children’s thinking about human use of forest parkland and to determine the children’s ontological positions related to environmental sustainability. The study was conducted in a forested area adjoining a ‘living building’ childcare centre. Here researchers, along with a core group of 9-13 children, their teachers, and a Philosopher-in-Residence (Warren Bowen) visited the forest environment on a fortnightly basis over a four-month period from January to May 2016 to explore the forested area, play games and discuss issues related to forest use and human habitation. Video records of the EPI sessions were transcribed and analysed to determine the children’s propositions and related ontological stance(s) across sessions. Findings from this study include: (1) evidence that young children’s views on stewardship are situated within socio-material manifestations of belonging, ownership, and entitlement within the forest; and (2) that absurdities, along with other more traditional EPI and P4C strategies, can be used successfully to playfully challenge young children’s thinking about the rigour of their propositions and to provoke deeper thoughts related to belonging and care.

Key words

belonging, dialogue, ontology, P4C, philosophical inquiry, stewardship, sustainability, young children

Introduction

To determine if and how Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) can be used to broaden and challenge anthropocentric thinking about the environment, the following study addresses the question: How do young children (aged 3-4) philosophically engage with concepts related to environmental sustainability and stewardship? This study was undertaken at a 'living building' childcare centre as part of a project-based curriculum designed to explore features of the environment and teach children about sustainability and stewardship (MacDonald 2015). Our belief is that stewardship and the value of sustainability should be addressed through an authentic philosophical inquiry related to ontology (ours as researchers, as well as the children's and teachers'). Once we have situated and challenged our thoughts and actions within the ontological framework that has informed and contributed to our current environmental positions and ways of being in the world we can begin to understand our actions and next steps toward stewardship. Engaged Philosophical Inquiry allows a deep questioning of the arguments that these positions rest on.

In this study and in other EPI research we have conducted (MacDonald & Bowen 2015; MacDonald & Bowen 2016) we work from the premise that an authentic community of inquiry grows out of a joint intellectual restlessness and interest in the world around us. Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI) like Philosophy for Children (P4C) (Lipman 2003, 2009) values an openness toward joint and emergent dialogue that proceeds in a flexible rather than a prescribed way (Webber & Vadeboncoeur 2015). During our fortnightly EPI sessions, we endeavored to develop the children's capacity to listen and take into account the perspectives of others within a democratic participatory community of learners (Cam 1998, 2000; Dewey 1954; Dahlberg & Moss 2005; Dahlberg Moss & Pence 1999; Malaguzzi 1994). In addition, we were sensitive to building upon the interest in the forest environment the children shared with us and we used the most engaging and controversial topics raised by our facilitator (Warren Bowen) from the previous session(s) to further and deepen our inquiry.

During our meetings, Warren would guide the children's use of logic and

argumentation (Gardner 2009), however our overall purpose was to develop and sustain conversations that were related to the children's current understandings of themselves and their interests within the forest. This was done by encouraging active listening among participants; engaging with what others said rather than participating in parallel speech; using sustained solicitation of reasons for statements; asking others what they thought of those reasons; and introducing counter-examples and thought experiments during moments of wide consensus to achieve in-depth exploration (MacDonald & Bowen 2015). Our decision to use the term EPI, rather than P4C, in reference to our Community of Inquiry rests on our wish to stress inquiry and wonder (Dewey 1954; Malaguzzi 1994) as a starting point rather than any books or lessons associated with P4C. Here, we feel that the term EPI provides more scope and is less historically rooted in curricular materials than is P4C.

Our theoretical framework

We define EPI as both the process and product of our coming together democratically; our being and becoming within a posthuman world. This definition acknowledges the unique features of any community of inquiry by recognising the power of collective agency and elements (human and non-human) that make up those learning moments, (including our use of technology to inform our understanding), and the setting itself (taking place in our adjoining forest area) as well as the adult facilitators and the children participating. Theoretically our research draws on the work of Rosi Braidotti (2011) and her nomadic vision of philosophical thinking where 'rhizomatic thinking empowers subjectivity as a multiplicity and along multiple axes' (p. 283) and thus allows philosophy to pursue difference through repetition. Applying Braidotti's (2013) posthuman notion, which proposes 'an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or "earth" others' (pp. 49-50), to EPI is powerful in that novel assemblages within the community include not only the children but also other aspects of the material world. This creates the potential for new ways of thinking and being.

Theoretically we see the forest itself as another active member of our community of inquiry contributing to our understanding by providing rich intra-actions (Barad 2007) that support our collective sense of wonder, experience and discovery. Using Braidotti's vision of nomadic theory, we can shift away from our human-centred structures to

create an environmentally-based, embodied and embedded symbiosis that ‘activates a nomadic subject into sustainable processes of transformation’ (p. 224). As material configurations are continuously assembling and disassembling, stabilising and destabilising, subjectivity and thought are viewed as fluid, shifting, and thus ‘nomadic’. This process of decentering contests sameness and reliance on social constructivism and opens up space for entry into new knowledge-making practices that form novel connections between self and other, including the forest setting. Here we suggest that our participation in EPI opens pathways for rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987) and dynamic thinking processes (p. 225) where rather than a hierarchical or linear chain of knowing based on age and privilege or objective truth, thought can move fluidly and rhizomatically as it enters into new areas and grows in multiplicities. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987/2005) a rhizome is akin to a *map* with multiple entry points and diverse potentialities, as opposed to a *tracing*, which is representational and results in producing more of the same. ‘What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 12). As Braidotti explains, nomadic thought involves ‘a commitment to process ontology and to tracking the qualitative variations in the actualization of forces, forms and relations’ (p. 225). This work is also informed by the complementary work of Karen Barad (2007) and her discussions of agentic realist encounters, where a bounded reality comes into existence and becomes agentic through an entanglement of human and non-human agencies (p. 183).

Also integral to our theoretical framework is the childcare centre’s philosophical underpinnings, its form and function, and the surrounding environment. The children participating in the study attend a childcare where the pedagogy is inspired by Reggio Emilia (Berrisford 2014). Inspiration for curriculum has also come from the building design. This childcare is the first building of its kind to meet the ‘Living Building Challenge’ (see Jason McLennan of the International Living Future Institute <https://living-future.org/lbc>). As such, it is carbon neutral and environmentally self-sustaining. Some of its many green features include geothermal heating and a bioreactor for on-site sewage processing into grey water for irrigation. The building materials, furniture and toys are also carbon neutral and sourced locally using environmentally sustainable materials, processes and – where possible – re-claimed or re-purposed materials (e.g. the beams and some of the paneling were harvested and processed from wood infested by spruce beetles. While still structurally sound the

wood's grey-blue marks make it less desirable for other markets and applications). The childcare centre building design incorporates several Reggio Emilia-inspired learning principles related to community building and exploration (Berrisford 2014). The unique eco-sensitive features of the building, in combination with Reggio-inspired and play-based holistic principles, catalysed the teachers and a member of the faculty of education (Margaret MacDonald) to create the centre's curriculum foundation document outlining potential areas for inquiry related to the buildings and grounds, gardening and composting, recycling and the local forest environment (MacDonald 2015). In keeping with this document and the curricular focus at the centre, we made use of the local forest environment and an adjoining park as 'evocative materials' for our EPI.

The forest (or on one occasion the park), Warren as moderator of the sessions, the children, Margaret and the teachers collectively had agency as an assemblage. As discussed by Bennett (2010):

Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory for impact of the group. The effects generated by the assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in their ability to make something happen (a newly infected materialism, a black out [in Bennett's discussion of an electrical grid as an assemblage], a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the some of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. (p. 24)

In her discussion of assemblages, Bennett draws on the work of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari. In particular, Bennett references Spinoza's 'affective bodies' as being in continual social relationship with each other effecting and being affected by elements within the assemblage. As cited by Bennett, Spinoza uses the word 'conative' from the root 'conatus' to describe a stubbornness that persists within a complex body, 'to maintain the specific relationship of "movement and rest"' (p. 22). In our assemblage comprised of teacher researchers and EPI moderators, children, classroom teachers, the forest, the blue tarp (which we sat on to stay dry or sometimes huddled under in extreme weather), our wills, and our interests in sustainability and the forest environment. These all came together and were calibrated at times to our success (as teachers and researchers) in part by the skill of the moderator or teachers and interests of the children and their comments; at other times the activities seemed to devolve into

chaos when the collective agency was at cross purposes with our research and/or pedagogical goals. In these latter cases we would often disassemble the EPI in favour of another game in the forest or return to the childcare building if entropy happened near the end of our scheduled time together.

Methodology

This research is situated within the participatory paradigm (Heron & Reason 1997), and involved the intentional, disciplined study of our own pedagogical practices (Cochran Smith & Lytle 2009; Malaguzzi 1994; Edwards, Gandini & Forman 2012). We were trying to better understand the children's propositions and related ontological stance, while simultaneously attempting to broaden and challenge their anthropocentric thinking about the environment, and develop our pedagogy in this regard. As Heron and Reason (1997) contend, 'We learn more profoundly about our worlds when we are more interested in enhancing them with the excellence of action than in learning about them' (p. 280). Within this paradigm, pedagogical practices and research practices are one and the same and inevitably intertwined. As teacher-researchers, the EPI topics related to sustainability were negotiated between and among the children, moderator and teachers, but not always through dialogue. Often curricular threads were understood through our observations of the children's choices, comments and their focus and interest during games, activities and exploration. This information, while not strictly driving our research, did overlap with our coding and analysis (discussed below) and in combination, both were used to determine the emerging themes, cognitive knots, children's curiosities and theoretical propositions across sessions.

Our approach was collaborative, respectful and responsive, and involved a negotiated curriculum, in which the interests of the children were the primary focus of our dialogues. Individual contributions were not judged but rather examined and challenged. The dialogue was democratic as in the EPI and P4C traditions, allowing children to come to their own sense of what is moral, right, ethical and just. Our practices of negotiating the curriculum were consistent with the ethos of the childcare centre and guided by a Reggio philosophy in which in-process documentation is used to support emergent and/or negotiated curriculum development. In-process documentation is a collection of teacher or teacher-researcher selected photographs accompanied by narratives. These pictures and narratives capture the children's voice

and actions and are generally used for the purposes of verification or elaboration of meaning and to gain deeper perspectives. In this study, in-process documentation in the form of a story was brought back to the whole group at the beginning of each new meeting. This was done to scaffold the children's memory of previous EPI sessions and to deliberately reflect as a group upon the interests, questions and comments from previous sessions. These documents also informed parents and other teachers about the children's thinking and experiences. From these processes (pedagogical documentation and our analysis and debriefing of transcripts and videos), we were able to determine our next pedagogical steps including ways we could challenge the children's thinking through other EPI and P4C devices, such as the use of evocative objects, counter-examples, scenarios, games and activities, and the like.

Our research at the childcare centre was initially reviewed and approved by our funding body, the Canada Foundation for Innovations. Subsequently our research has also been reviewed annually and approved by the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University. Photo and video permission is obtained at the time the children register at the centre and parents are aware of the ongoing research partnership we have with the teachers. During the EPI sessions, the children are free to leave the discussion or activities at any time and are not required to participate unless they wish to. We are very sensitive to power issues associated with research and young children (Clark 2003, 2005; Clark & Moss 2004; Hatch 2007; Dahlberg & Moss 2005; Mazzei, 2007) and continually checked with the teachers upon each visit to see which of the core group of children would be joining us on that day.

Our coding processes were primarily linguistic and representational and made use of our own dialogue about the EPI sessions as a way to ensure multiple perspectives were reflected in our analysis of this work, and as a form of triangulation (Guba 1981). Following each video and audio recorded session we transcribed and analyzed the dialogue and interactions that took place fortnightly among a core group of 13-16 children aged 3-4, and our Philosopher in Residence (Warren Bowen) to determine how Warren, the children and occasionally their teachers were engaging with the questions raised and the concepts introduced. After each session, Margaret and Warren reviewed the transcripts, identifying cognitive knots, suppositions, assumptions and gaps in understanding, as well as reoccurring and dominant discourses. Ways to provoke further thinking were then discussed, such as reframing arguments, use of persistent questioning and introducing counter-examples consistent with P4C. In addition, novel

artifacts were also introduced (such as figurines, puppets, books, saplings, toys and the in-process documentation), and contexts were shifted (e.g. daycare, forest and playground) to deepen, provoke and sustain dialogue.

During our EPI sessions, the questions discussed in depth included: Who does the forest belong to? Who do we belong to? Can trees think or feel? Is it acceptable to cut trees down, and under what conditions? Are trees part of a family? Why can we cut down trees that belong to us, but cannot cut down animals or children who belong to us? If you plant a tree does that mean it belongs to you? What are you permitted to do to trees, animals or people who belong to you? Why are we allowed to take things like trees, rocks, or pine cones from the forest family, but not animals or children from their families? How does something come to belong to us, or we to someone? Is a child belonging to her mother the same as a tree belonging to one of us? Themes of belonging and ownership were reoccurring and appeared to hold much energy within the community of inquiry. We supported the children in engaging in sustained inquiry in this regard, honouring their abilities to continuously interrogate collective understandings of ownership and belonging within the human and more than human worlds.

Findings: Belonging, ownership and entitlement

Collectively, the themes that were evident across all transcripts include the children's notions of belonging, ownership, responsibility and entitlement based on different rationalisations including; creation (God, trees and humans as creators and therefore owners); location (where the tree is located determined the nature of the relationship between humans and trees); animism (the rock is inanimate, cannot walk or talk and therefore does not belong to a family and therefore can be possessed); and instrumentalism (humans' need for paper/toys produced from trees, and birds' need for a place to rest/nest in trees, implied ownership and entitlement to them for their own purposes). We found this to be consistent with a view of human domination over the forest environment and demonstrated a consistent view of forest or park use for human health, comfort, enjoyment and habitation.

The topic of belonging emerged in our first EPI session early in January, following an activity when the children were asked to look around the forest and find something interesting that they would like to talk about and share with the group. One child found

a detached old Christmas tree and brought it back to the EPI circle. Several children wanted to decorate it and bring it back to the child care centre because they had already taken their Christmas tree down. This opened up an interesting discussion thread related to belonging and ownership which emerged again throughout Sessions 4-9. During Session 1, when asked to vote on whether or not to take the tree back to the centre, most children wanted to do so but not the teachers. The teachers (Dawn and Irene) wanted the tree to stay in the forest and they used the following arguments to convince the children to leave it behind:

Dawn: I think [leave it here] because the children found it here, because it's part of nature, that it should stay here in the process of deteriorating, of feeding animals and becoming homes, maybe. I think it should be part of nature and we should leave it here for the nature.

Warren: And Irene what were you thinking?

Irene: I'm thinking to leave the tree here, because another group of friends [can] come to the forest and they can also look at this Christmas tree.

Dawn's argument rests on preserving the natural forest environment while Irene's argument is socially oriented; wanting others to experience what this group of children had enjoyed.

The children conceded and left the Christmas tree in the forest however, based on the discussion thread that followed throughout Sessions 4-9, for the most part they continued to view the forest as serving human needs and felt a sense of ownership over aspects of the forest, particularly smaller trees, rocks, pinecones and sticks. One of the most complex discussions on this topic emerged in Session 5:

Warren: We were talking about who the trees belong to, right? So it sounds to me like if we were allowed to cut the trees out to make paper out of or to make toys out of them, it sounds to me like the trees belong to us. Is that right? What do people think?

K: They belong to all of us. It belongs to all of the people even not at the daycare centre.

Warren: Okay so it belongs to all of us, even the other kids? Okay. What do other people think? Who do the trees belong to? Does everyone agree with K?

R: No.

Warren: You think no R? So what do you think? Who do the trees belong to?

R: [long pause] I don't know.

Warren: *You don't know?*

A: *H said it belongs to the forest.*

Warren: *So H you say that the trees belong to the forest? So what does that mean? Can we cut them down if they belong to the forest? Okay so this is a really interesting idea because earlier we were talking about maybe it's okay to cut down trees if they're wobbly or if we need paper toys but now H's saying that the trees don't belong to any of us, she disagrees with K, she's saying that the trees belong to the forest. Do you think that the trees belong to all of us or to the forest?*

K: *To all of us.*

Warren: *So O what do you think?*

O: *They belong to the forest.*

Warren: *You think that the trees belong to the forest? So does this mean, O, that we can cut them down to make toys for ourselves? Or are we not allowed to do that if they belong to the forest?*

O: *[inaudible].*

Dawn: *[repeating what O said]: It's not okay to cut them.*

Initially the children's argument rested in the current epoch where 'ownership' was defined in a human-centred way, based primarily on use by children or adults in the neighbourhood. Here ownership warrants were based on 'adverse possession'. Later H contributed the idea that the forest itself owned the trees. This was later probed by one child (S) who introduced acceptable conditions under which to cut down trees in the forest (i.e. if they were small, diseased (had bad oxygen) or dangerous (wobbly)). This same child then introduced an argument based on social and temporal considerations when asked who the trees belonged to:

Warren: *Okay so [its ok to cut trees down] if they're already damaged or if they have bad air. And who do you think the trees belong to, S?*

S: *Romans.*

Warren: *The Romans?! Okay interesting. So what does that mean, that the trees belong to the Romans?*

S: *The Romans were the people who lived here 1000 years ago. The Romans might've built*

the forest.

Warren: *Okay interesting, so you think the Romans might've built the forest so that maybe they own the trees, the trees belong to them? That's actually a really interesting idea. So S's saying that maybe this forest was made by people a long, long, long time ago and maybe they own the trees, not us or the forest. That's really interesting idea. What do people think about S's idea?*

H: *Disagree.*

Warren: *H you disagree? So why do you disagree?*

H: *People can't make trees, they have to grow.*

Warren: *People can't make trees. The trees grow by themselves? Okay interesting. R what do you think? Do you think that the trees belong to us or do you think that the trees belong to the forest? Or that maybe the trees belong to people who put them here a long time ago?*

R: *They belong to people who put them here a long time ago.*

Warren: *Okay so you agree with S?*

S: *Yeah because the people who lived here long time ago, maybe they were the people who planted the trees.*

Warren: *Okay so does that mean if I plant a tree that tree belongs to me?*

Child: *Yeah.*

Later in this session, Warren provided the children with some information about tree propagation to further the children's thinking. Here he stated factually,

Warren: *So if I plant the tree, like let's say that I had a little tree seed and I put it in the dirt and gave it water every day and took care of it and grew into a big tree, can I say that it was my tree and only my tree?*

Children say yes.

Warren: *So could I do to that tree anything I wanted to?*

Children say yes.

Warren: *Do you think that sometimes trees plant other trees?*

Children: *No way!*

Warren: *So think about it like this: so these trees, they have seeds, right? And sometimes*

they drop their seeds on the ground and sometimes those seeds grow to trees. So doesn't that mean that those trees planted those other trees? What do you think? Yes or no? What do you think, R, I haven't heard from you in a while. What do you think about this, do you think that the tree can belong to another tree?

R: Yes.

Warren: *You think yes? So why do you think yes?*

R: *I think because trees are families.*

Warren: *You think because the trees are families? Interesting. So do the families belong to us or do they belong to themselves?*

R: *Belong to themselves.*

Warren: *Oh. So that's kind of interesting because you also think that we can cut trees down right? Don't you? So R why can we cut trees down if the trees belong to themselves and belong to their families?*

R: *That's because trees can be too old and die.*

Warren: *So trees can be too old? And they can die. So maybe we're like helping them? If we cut them down? To help them die? That's an interesting idea. Does anybody agree with R that the trees belong to themselves and to their family or do they only belong to us?*

S: [the same child who earlier had stated that the Romans owned the forest] *They belong to their family.*

Warren: *So S you think that the trees belong to the families?*

S: *They belong to the forest. And then the forest will be a huge forest.*

In this discussion the children's arguments were based on a sense of belonging based on origin. Self-propagating trees could belong to a family and 'belong to themselves', however, if we (or the Romans) planted the trees we would have ownership rights. In subsequent discussions children articulated their beliefs that the trees belonged to God who created the trees, or the birds who needed them to rest and nest. Interestingly, the children's thoughts on cutting down the trees didn't change for the most part. Cutting tall healthy trees that didn't pose any danger was not sanctioned (in general) by this group and over the course of the EPI, based on the argument that if they were cut down they would be dead and people (ourselves and others who we know and/or might not know) would be upset and couldn't use the forest.

Children felt particularly entitled to cut down trees if they ‘belonged’ to them. In Session 8, we continued this thread of inquiry by asking the children if they thought it was possible for a tree to be part of their family. While the children again found this amusing, they were able to offer reasons for denying the possibility. H and another child claimed it was because we needed trees for paper or wood, while K suggested that a tree must be beside your house for it to belong to one’s family. This and other moments highlighted the difficulty of teasing apart ‘belonging’ from ‘ownership’: it seemed obvious for the children to ‘belong’ to their parents in a way more closely related to personal identity, but conveyed that trees ‘belong’ to them in a context of ownership. However, E and another child argued that if one plants a trees on one’s property it belongs to their family, and it could not be cut down because, ‘if you plant a tree you keep it forever’. The precise meaning of ‘belonging’, however, could again be interpreted as one of ownership rather than belonging in the sense of kinship or familial connections.

In these sessions, both here and in prior excerpts, some children suggest that because we need to use trees – for wood, paper, and air – this precludes them from familial considerations and sets trees apart from other animals. For some of these children, the fact that we make use of trees means that they cannot belong to our families except in a sense of ownership. This appears different from how animals which are our pets might be understood, since the counter example of cutting down a dog like a tree elicited strong negative reactions from the children. Seeing animals (dogs and pets) as precious and knowing that a loss would occur where if you cut it down you might want it again and not have it. Here the notion of something being seen as precious is different than a use value or seeing trees as a resource for human uses.

Findings: The use of absurdities in Engaged Philosophical Inquiry with young children

In this section we examine our second overall finding, the use of absurdities with young children as an EPI device designed to shift thinking in a playful and provocative way.

Absurdity featured strongly in our EPI sessions as an accidental rhizomatic method for soliciting the children’s fundamental beliefs about, and attitudes towards, their relationship to the forest, particularly trees and which, in some cases, appeared to serve as a catalyst that shifted the thinking of the children. Thomas Nagel (1971) writes of the

absurd that, '[i]n ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality' (p. 718). In the following transcript excerpts, we found that there were several important moments in the sessions where such discrepancies between something proposed by the moderator deeply conflicted with the children's understanding of reality. Confrontations with the absurd often produced visceral reactions: raucous laughter, shouting and screaming. And while initially accidental, we came to adopt absurdity as a method in our EPI sessions in order to approach fundamental beliefs with the children.

The first instance of absurdity was during our fourth session where we spent time discussing whether trees could think and had brains. This led the children to anthropomorphise the trees and engage with a kind of animism. Some of the children suggested that the trees had birthday parties, and that they were wet from the rain because they were unclothed. When asked further about whether trees could wear clothes, the children found the idea absurd and amusing because trees had no arms and legs. During Session 7, this amusement reached a pinnacle when we discussed who we and who trees belong to and Warren asked if he could be the parent of a seedling. During this discussion Warren brought in a small seedling as an 'evocative object' to help distinguish ownership and responsibilities around care and belonging. During the discussion the children stated that because Warren brought the tree in it belonged to everyone and that when the tree grew up they could do anything they wanted to it (including cutting it down). Later, Warren reminded the children that they had said they belong to their parents and that their parents, as guardians, do things for them (such as give them treats and offer them comfort when they're frightened). At this point Warren asked the children what obligations we might have to trees like this seedling that belonged to us. This led to another confrontation with the absurd:

Warren: Okay so you go to your parents' bed [when you're frightened]. They take care of you, they comfort you. Don't you think we should do the same thing with this tree that belongs to us?

Children give mixed answers of yes and no.

Warren: But you're saying that if we planted this tree we can do anything we want to it? You're saying we can cut it down. Could your parents cut you down?

Children all scream no.

Child: No way!

Warren: *You're saying no way! So your parents have to treat you with respect right? But why are we allowed to cut down this tree? How come we can treat this tree like that if it belongs to us?*

E: *Because we want to.*

Warren: *Okay, so E's saying we can do something if we want to. Is that a good reason to do something?*

Children all say no.

Warren: *If I wanted to cut down this tree [points to a tall tree in the forest] because I want to am I allowed?*

Children all scream no.

Warren: *If I planted this tree [points to the sapling] and I wanted to cut it down, am I allowed?*

Children give mixed screams of yes and no.

Warren: *If you think no put your hand up. And if you think yes put your hand up. Okay interesting, so we have some different opinions here. C why do you think yes? Why am I allowed to cut this tree down if I plant it?*

C: *Because it's yours.*

Warren: *Because it's mine? Do you think it's like my baby if I plant it?*

Children scream with laughter.

Warren: *Why is that so funny? What's so funny about that idea? R why is that idea so funny?*

R: *Because it's crazy.*

Warren: *Why is it crazy to say that this tree would be like my baby if I plant it?*

Children start screaming with laughter again.

Warren: *What's so funny? You don't think it can be like my baby, like I can take care of it?*

Children keep laughing.

Warren: *The reason I ask that is because all of you say that this tree would belong to me if*

I plant it, but you also say that you belong to your parents. So I guess I'm wondering if I would be like this tree's mom or dad.

Children start laughing again.

Warren: *But you think no? You think no? So H why do you think no?*

H: *Because trees are not a person so it can't be a baby.*

Later Warren adds: *I guess I'm a little bit confused though. You belong to your parents and your parents give you treats, they make you feel safe, they give you a home, they cook for you, they give you videogames, they take care of you. But you're saying that if this tree belongs to us we can do whatever we want to it. We could cut it down. But your parents aren't allowed to cut you down.*

Children laugh.

Warren: *So my question is why are we allowed to cut this tree down if it belongs to us but our parents have to treat us with respect if we belong to them? Why is it so different?*

Child: [jesting] *Because you're its mommy!*

H: *The tree's mommy!*

Warren: *So if I'm the tree's mommy am I allowed to cut it down?*

Children give mixed answers of yes and no.

Warren: *Yes?! You think yes, M? You think if I'm the tree's mommy I'm allowed to cut it down?*

M: *Yes!*

Warren: *Is your mommy allowed to cut you down?*

Children all shout no.

Warren: *So why is it different?*

M: *I don't know.*

Warren: *Does anybody know why it's different? Z why is it different?*

Z: *Because you're growing from your mommy and the tree's made of seeds.*

Warren: *Okay, so Z's saying it's different because you're born from your mom and the trees need seeds. So maybe that's an important difference. Is there any other important*

difference is that the only difference?

R: *Because trees can't eat.*

For the children, this line of inquiry exposed a discrepancy between the pretension that Warren could have a parent-child relationship with the tree and the children's observations that trees are fundamentally different from humans. Once the initial shock of the incongruity was overcome, the children were able to explain why the pretension and their observations were so fundamentally at odds: H stated that trees are not persons and so cannot be babies; Z stated that it's because we grow from our mothers, whereas trees grow from seeds; and R stated that it's because trees cannot eat, and so presumably cannot be offered the same kind of care a parent would give to a child.

What is especially interesting about this thread of inquiry is that at other points during our EPI sessions the children analogised the growth of a tree from a seed and human birth and becoming. At another point, some children claimed that the trees are like a family to each other, and that some trees can belong to others. It seems, then, that while trees cannot be family to us, trees can provide metaphors to understand how we belong to our mothers, and can be family to each other. The absurdity seems to lie in an inter-kingdom understanding of familial relations between plants and animals, trees and people.

As the discussion shifted to cutting down trees, the children were again confronted by the absurd by analogising their claims when Warren introduced pet animals:

Warren: *Does anybody have a dog at their house? Do you think that that dog is part of your family? Okay interesting. Okay so your dog is part of your family, are you allowed to cut your dog down?*

Children all scream no.

Child: *That's silly!*

Warren: *And if this bunny was part of my family am I allowed to cut this bunny down?*

Children all shout no.

Warren: *Why?*

Child: *If you cut your only dog down that means that the dog would die.*

Warren: *Yeah the dog will be dead if you cut the dog down. And that's not how you treat your family members right? But some of you are saying that you have trees in your family*

that belong to you but that it's okay to cut them down. So why is it okay to cut the tree down if it belongs to you but not a bunny or a dog or a cat? Why is it different? What is so different about trees and animals?

D: Because the animals are precious to you.

Warren: What does that mean D?

D: If you cut it down you might want it again and you might remember, oh no I cut it down.

Warren: Okay so you think that about you dog your cat, what about the tree? You think that about the tree?

D: No.

Warren: What's different?

D: ... Because we need them for air.

In our ninth session, Warren used the absurd by more deeply interrogating the ambiguity of the word 'belong' in terms of personal identity and ownership and contrasted this to a sense of family belonging. After being asked to collect something from the forest they thought belonged to them (mostly rocks, sticks, and pine cones), the children inquired as to how things we pick up come to 'belong' to us:

Warren: So you think that the sticks belong to the forest too? They don't belong to you?

K: If you pick them that means they belong to you.

W: Oh interesting. So K's saying if you pick something it belongs to you. So for example if I pick up H does she belong to me? [Warren picks up H].

Children laugh and say no.

Warren: No? Why not? I picked her.

Child: I don't agree.

C: She lives with her parents!

Warren: What if I found H, like when we were playing a game? Does that mean H belongs to me then?

Children laugh and say no.

Warren: Why not?

C: *Because that would be kidnapping*

Teachers laugh.

Warren: *So it would be kidnapping if I took H, but isn't it 'rocknapping' if you take the rock?*

Children giggle and say yeah hesitatingly.

Warren: *Isn't it? Because aren't you just taking the rock away from the forest?*

Child: *The animals gave it to us.*

Warren: *The animals gave it to you? But couldn't the animals give me H?*

Children all shout no.

Warren: *Why?*

K: *Because she belongs to her family.*

Again, because trees and the forest cannot in any strong sense unequivocally belong to each other or to people in the way the children can to their families, ownership and property rights over objects in the forest became easy to justify. Ultimately what protected H from belonging to Warren was that she already belonged to her family, and what permitted the taking of rocks, sticks, and pine cones from the forest is that there was no sense of familial relations. While at various points during our time together some children claimed the trees were part of a forest family, when confronted by absurd counter-examples their fundamental beliefs around what kinds of beings can belong in a non-ownership way reflected their own familial contexts and understandings around personal identity.

Discussion

Throughout the dialogue, the children's conceptualisations emerged through their entanglements with various material artefacts, producing 'agential cuts,' as Barad (2007) would say. Onto-epistemological separations are reduced and re/configured to produce, as well as to hierarchically re/order, material bodies. Typically, there was a predominant hierarchy of humans and animals, then live trees, then dead, sick or small trees, followed by sticks and rocks within the community. EPI, and in particular 'absurd' lines of questioning, however, appeared to catalyse onto-epistemological shifts

for the children within those discussion assemblages. For example, in Session 8, H initially asserted that she could cut down a tree if it belonged to her because humans (not God) created trees. During the absurd conversation in which Warren questioned if it was OK to chop down bunnies, she reworked the boundaries between trees and animals, at least to some extent. By the end of the conversation, H agreed that if the forest belongs to the community they would need to take care of it. When Warren asked what this would look like she volunteered, 'give it water and bury it with the dirt', thus extending a more caring conceptualisation of 'belonging' to the forest. This is a stark contrast to the sense of entitlement and ownership over trees that she initially asserted. The assemblages that gave rise to these onto-ethico-epistemological shifts, however, appeared to be unstable and the effects were often short-lived.

EPI and the use of the absurd, while initially accidental, offered a fruitful means by which to conduct inquiry with the children about issues of belonging in the forest context. These absurdities included: the discrepancy between the pretension of clothing trees and observations of a physical difference between ourselves and the forest; the pretension of parent-child human-tree relations and observations of human and tree differences; the pretension of trees belonging to our families and an instrumental use of trees; the pretension of equivocating how 'belonging' is applied to us and to trees, and the reality of 'belonging' as both ownership and personal identity in different contexts. In this project, the use of the absurd was also valued as a nomadic approach to EPI with young children as the absurdities relied on a fluid movement between conceptual boundaries, such as whether a human man can be a mother to a tree. Absurd nomadism offered a creative, fun and engaging way to provoke the children's thinking at certain moments, in keeping with the philosophical tradition of *reductio ad absurdum* – the attempt to logically demonstrate absurdity in an argument – and offered a break from judgemental attempts to reduce an 'opponent's' argument to absurdity. While traditional philosophical inquiry with adults can often employ rigorous, logically-based standards of rejection, this approach offered a more playful means to explore an argument or belief without judgement – something we believe is important for a community of young inquirers.

Conclusion

To date, our work has resulted in several new understandings related to the use of

activities, context and the role of the moderator in EPI (MacDonald & Bowen 2015), as well as understanding children's fears of other animals and expressed wishes to capture and control them (MacDonald & Bowen in press). Building on these past studies, our findings from this research project include: (1) evidence that young children's views on stewardship are situated within socio-material manifestations of belonging, ownership, and entitlement within the forest. In particular we have noted that the children's understanding of ownership carries with it entitlement to use or possess trees, rocks and other less animate aspects of nature, but that their understandings of belonging and ownership are emergent and transitory and can be shaped and shifted within different contexts and when different theoretical propositions are introduced (for example, a tree being part of a family or being self-propagating). We also found that (2) absurdities (along with other more traditional P4C and EPI strategies) can be used successfully to playfully challenge young children's thinking about the rigour of their propositions and to provoke deeper thoughts on belonging and care. Overall both these findings are significant in expanding our understandings of children's ontological propositions and, although the children's sympathies toward 'family' and belonging to a family produced strong warrants related to human care and respect, these didn't necessarily extend to stewardship of the forest, particularly when it came to needing trees as resources or when trees lost their use-value (had bad air) or became dangerous (too wobbly, old and dying). The human/non-human boundary was transcended in our discussions through the use of absurdities and, in particular, anthropomorphising trees (trees with brains, wearing clothing and being cared for by a human mother). Although the children laughed openly at these ideas and at times appeared off topic, we felt that these exchanges were not only valuable but essential ways of entering EPI with children of this age to interrogate belonging, entitlement/possession and cutting down trees or taking things away from the forest. This was particularly important to keep the children's engagement and maintain a tone that was philosophically playful with 3-4 year olds. The children's deep understanding of care in the context of family can be leveraged (to some extent) and extended to care of and respect for intra-species systems and the needs that animals (in particular) have for the forest. The children's belief that the forest belongs to itself and to many people and animals (including those we may not even know) created a stronger sense of potential stewardship and sustainable relationships across time compared to their beliefs about care of a single tree where ownership was more akin to possession.

Importantly we noted that the children, although in awe of the power and size of the grand trees, had very little sympathy for their loss under conditions where they may benefit (like putting in a new playground or, in the case of one child, if houses were needed). They did however relate to playing in and spending time in the forest (which they love) and the idea of preserving a place like our forest for themselves and other people. Overall, we felt that the use of the forest context was also essential in this EPI discussion for both interrogating ideas as they emerged and to develop a stronger kinship with the forest in order to both experience it and gain an intra-species perspective on its use and care. It should be noted however, that this work can also be conducted in environmental contexts that are far less expansive than the forest that is adjacent to our child care center, such as inner city schools in which contexts stewardship may include attending to plants growing through cracks in cement, bugs on the concrete, birds nests in rafters, and the like. As Barad (2007) contends, all practices are onto-ethico-epistemological in that they involve particular ways of knowing and being that have ethical consequences. We see these practices as having the potential to reconfigure children's hierarchical ordering of organic bodies and deepen their understanding of environmental sustainability. In the future, we hope to further these ideas by looking for ways to introduce and understand how scientific facts, issues like forest propagation and human use, including our stewardship practices such as tree harvesting and tree planting, can be woven into these discussions as a way to further the children's discussions on care and preservation and to challenge the children's understandings of trees as inanimate. This may allow a stronger sense of a bounded human-non-human intra-agency that may further the children's awareness of being, belonging and becoming.

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