**North West school Tree Planting**

**7th March 2023**

**Geographer’s notes**

The first session started in the classroom. I was overheating in the many layers I’d put on for such a cold day and wondered if the children were – they were dressed in coats, all-in-one waterproofs, hats, gloves and had their outdoor boots ready to go in plastic carrier bags. The contrast with the warm classroom (so warm that the windows were open) and the hit of cold air on walking outside was marked. In fact, the weather – cold, clear, but with strong early March sunshine – and the contrast with the classroom was for me one of the key constituents of the day.

After introducing the session we walked outside where the children spent several minutes putting on boots, lining up, and then being rearranged into a semicircle around [people from the tree-planting organisation]. The various ways the children moved as a group or groups during each of the sessions was striking. The teachers each had their different ways of managing their classes – a long line, rows of children, taking out or moving individual children who were not listening or were ‘misbehaving’…yet I was struck by how the whole event of being outside made the children both more attentive to certain instructions/rules (like the order in which the tree planting process took place) and less so to others (the lines of children were often ragged, but it transpired that this really didn’t matter; most of the children jumped on the spades with two feet or left them with the blade up, despite being told not to…again this didn’t really seem to matter in the end).

As [the] class began the process felt energised and slightly overwhelming. The strong sun, and our location in front of the school, protected from the cold wind, made digging hot work for the children. The sound of the road was constant, intruding into conversations, instructions, and[artist’s] attempts to film the children…one of the groups I worked with counted the ambulances driving past, lights and sirens blaring.

Each of the groups experimented with the spades in different ways. Although ‘child-sized’, the children struggled to get the blades to cut through the roots of the grass. Some jumped with two feet. Others tried hacking at the ground. In[the] class, children lent against the school railings in an effort to maintain the force on the blade. Children attempted to jump on either side of the spade in pairs – crushing toes in wellies, tangling limbs and, occasionally, falling over in a heap.

We became fascinated by the roots under the surface – several metres from the nearest trees and shrubs. A pair of boys attempted to find ways to cut through the roots with the spade, worried that they might kill the tree to which the roots belonged. As soon as the roots were extracted, they became ‘sticks’ – they placed them against the school railings for later, unsure what to do with them (I suspect they are still there).

Talking with several groups in [the] class, they all enjoyed the tree planting…the most fun (‘satisfying’ was the word used repeatedly) elements were the digging and removal of the Minecraft-style clods of earth, topped with grass. They also enjoyed experimenting with different ways to loosen the earth from the clods – there was something about the physicality of using gloved hands to knead, break up and replace the soil in the holes that was attractive. Others used spades for this process and – as with the other classes – the children very quickly became adept and skilled at working out what was the best process for breaking up the soil and then planting the trees (such that they became quicker and quicker). I noticed how they became attentive to the properties of the soil in their patch of the school grounds – the worm content, the properties of the soil itself and how it could be worked (subject to the children’s own capacities for digging or breaking up the soil, which also varied), and, in the final class, the presence of several stones in just one of the holes. These forms of attentiveness and skill-ing reminded me of how Sophie Hadfield-Hill and Cristiana Zara write about children ‘becoming geological subjects’ in their work in India.

The rhythms and organisation of the second class (second class) were quite different. Moving to the back of the school, we were no longer planting a hedge. [The] class had constantly to be careful of the previous trees/shrubs they had planted, often working in very close proximity to one another, since hedges need to be dense. By comparison,[second class] were planting a corridor of trees spaced much further apart. The whole session seemed more expansive – the children spaced out; running backwards and forwards to get the next sapling (often one of a pair would send their partner off to get another tree whilst they got on with the digging); the views out of the grounds to the neighbouring fields and houses, the motorway just visible beyond, and the tops of the moors in the distance; the gentle but biting wind making us feel exposed and colder.

During [forester’s] demonstration, this question-and-answer rhythm of his discussion with the children took place alongside philosopher and I discussing the vagaries of new and speculative materialism, hope, and what it means to take responsibility for a place.

Two of the boys started naming their trees. Their first – a tiny sapling – they called ‘Gnomeo’ (I wasn’t sure if this was a reference to the film Gnomeo and Juliet, although the film is quite old…but it was a reference to the diminutive size of the sapling and, apparently, a picture of a gnome on the sign telling us what species the tree was).

Other children found resonances with trees they already knew. Some were quite knowledgeable about species – one girl told me in great detail about a cherry tree that she had in her garden, and its beautiful blossom, and that she had instantly recognised the trees in the bucket. This led on to a long conversation about gardening and planning fruit and vegetables.

The final session, with [third] class was fascinating. I remember saying to [philosopher] that I was feeling a little tired at this stage and that the repetition of the activities over three sessions could make it difficult to remember and process what had happened with each group. But this group’s energy was again quite different, as was the organisation of the group. The children were quietly determined, highly engaged, and committed to the activity in perhaps the broadest sense of any group (although first class had been doing the worm art, which I’m sure ethnographer will say more about!).

Initially I confess to being a little worried that the teacher had organised them into a tightly-clustered group in front of [forester] before the tree-planting demonstration, knowing that the children all needed to be able to see his feet. But they fanned out so that they could see and hear the demonstration. During this time, artist, philosopher and I talked quietly about the kinds of knowledges that children bring with them about trees and the ‘scientism’ of environmental learning – the ease with which children recounted facts about trees’ capacities to absorb carbon dioxide and to produce oxygen, for instance, which was the first response from at least two groups when [forester] simply asked the children what trees do.

Once again I was aware of the combination of the weather, the rhythm of the children’s embodied movements and efforts, and the organisation/location of the activity. Although just a hundred metres or so from the site of the second tree-planting, this site was somehow more protected, and, being the afternoon, the weather was a little warmer and the sun seemed stronger. Several children stripped off coats and all-in-ones (often asking if it was OK to do so first). Planting a hedge again, we were all closer together. Some of the children even accidentally stepped on saplings that had been planted already.

Somehow, the children seemed even more engaged in and engrossed with the activity – but in diverse ways. One pair – a boy and a girl – managed to plant 19 trees during the session. Most of these were planted in just 25 minutes, as the pair became increasingly skilled in the rhythm, routine and practice of tree planting. Even though Andy began trying to wrap up (‘make this your last tree’) at 2:30, the children just wanted to keep going – on to 3:30.

One girl sat quietly next to other children planting trees, seemingly talking into a Dictaphone for several minutes.

Others walked around with the iPads, video-ing and taking pictures.

The children were also keen to write and draw – in fact I don’t think we had enough notebooks, such was their interest in doing so

In the car to [name of] station, philosopher and I discussed how the different technologies – iPads, dictaphones, spades, notebooks – were all enrolled into the tree planting in different ways in the different groups (I recall a notebook becoming the backdrop for the worm art!). This in stark contrast to the ways in which technologies are either totally excluded from attempts to educate children about or reconnect them with natures – or are only admitted in very particular ways (e.g. to help with species identification or to prop up learning about natures). Rather, technologies became enrolled in ways that enabled the children to make sense of (or not), witness, enjoy and accompany the tree planting in ways that seemed to work for them (both in the moment and in terms of their interests – some children were for instance already keen to draw when we introduced the activity back in the classroom)

Philosopher and I talked about how the notion of ‘alliances’ (from Bloch) might be helpful here – perhaps enabling something slightly different from ‘assemblages’ as it may infer some kind of ethical, perhaps political, perhaps emotional imperative (i.e. an alliance might be directed at or for something ‘good’, ‘better’, ‘fun’, or ‘vital’)