**North West fieldnotes 25042023**

**Children’s geographer**

At the start of each session with each class, we spent around fifteen minutes talking with the children about who we were and what we were about to do. It was interesting to see which of us each of the classes remembered – in particular a moment of shared humour where one child essentially asked me and Environmental geographer “So, what do you do?”. For me, as well as us thinking collectively about specific disciplines (like ‘geography’), it was an interesting, if brief, opportunity to reflect on the different kinds of skills and traits that are involved in research. For instance, some of the children remembered very specific interactions (such as the tree dance, which we developed as we were replacing soil around planted trees during our last visit).

As we moved outside with each group, I found myself becoming very protective of the trees we had planted. I couldn’t quite work out what the children’s different relationships were with the newly-planted trees – and especially those that their class had *not* planted. In any case, despite my best instincts, I found myself rather forcefully and directly telling children to avoid the saplings, to the extent that I tried to show them the best path through the trees as we neared the edge of the school playing field where we were doing our activities. This made me think more about *care*, and the different ways in which this might (or might not) be expressed. How many of the children really cared about their trees? Did they care less if they accidentally trod on one, or rolled over one as they were messing about on the ground, pretending to do CPR on each other? Not necessarily…we can care *for* trees even if we live with/act with/interact with trees in highly variegated ways, and in ways that could potentially damage them (not that any trees were damaged during the day).

The discussions with the children about carbon were fascinating. I learned a lot – and I enjoyed the teacher in the final class on at least one occasion pointing out to the children that they were learning ‘fun facts’ about trees… . The initial discussions were fascinating in terms of group dynamics – whole classes pushing forward, some children standing literally next to or even clinging on to Environmental Geographer as he spoke…others, especially the last class, shoving multiple microphones towards his face as he spoke and then running between other adults and children as they spoke, as if in some bizarre, moving press conference. The facts about pencils and diamonds captured the children’s attention and imagination, especially when (as in previous activities here and in other schools) connections were made with Minecraft and Roblox.

The free-flow discussions about ‘fascinating facts’ about trees seemed to work in different ways and with differing degrees of engagement as we broke into small groups. With all three of the groups I talked with, and as per our observations last time, children’s ‘go-to’ responses centred on carbon, oxygen, what trees do for us, and climate change. But, again, we then began to tease out other (small) stories about trees. With the first two groups we spent considerable time looking for insects living on the trees, and for traces of those insects (e.g. spider’s webs), spawning long discussions about who liked holding spiders (it transpired that several of the children had held tarantulas), as well as at what size a spider is ‘cute’ versus ‘scary’. One boy told me a very long and detailed story about how he had been flying a drone in his garden and it had landed in a tall tree; his cousin had then tried to climb up to retrieve it, but had got to the top where the branches were weaker and failed; it eventually fell down in the winter.

With one group, we went on a hunt for mushrooms and fungi in a tree that had been felled, where the logs had been left to rot down (I assume for wildlife). This was the children’s idea – they clearly had a sense of where we might find funghi. Unfortunately, we didn’t find any – but we did look closely at and rub the moss and the lichen on the logs. In some interesting ways this diversion also threw us *off balance* slightly (on reflection) – we were no longer talking about trees (as superheroes) but looking at the details of logs (bits of trees – something that came up in my observations when working with Abi in Rotherham)…and we were literally off balance as we struggled to climb over logs that kept moving, were slippery, and had difficult gaps/holes between them.

With this reflection about being ‘off balance’ in mind (were we really off balance) I also thought about the many moments/acts that took place *around* the activities that were perhaps not about ‘carbon’ or even ‘trees’, but still constituted what we were doing. Some of these might have been playful moments (children pretending to do CPR on one another; collecting piles of small sticks to make a bonfire when they were ‘supposed’ to be listening to Environmental geographer children finding balls and hoops and kicking or throwing or placing these; children apparently losing interest and lying on the ground or doing somersaults). What does it mean to be ‘off balance’ or ‘distracted’ in the context of our collective approach to learning- and being-with trees.

I realised during the final class activity that at the very bottom of the field, next to the forest school, were some older saplings that appeared to have been planted perhaps a few years ago. I asked the children about these and they seemed to have a vague sense that these had been planted ‘by the Year 6s’. When I asked whether they meant *this year’s* Year 6s, they weren’t sure. This made me wonder about ‘waves’ or ‘generations’ of tree planting in the same site. How do we make sense of these? (How) should these be incorporated into current and future waves of tree planting, and maintenance, and of activities where children learn with trees.

During the first break time, when we were still doing an activity, the Year 6s were having their break on the small tarmac playground next to the area where we planted a new hedge with one of the classes in March. They were playing football. I became fascinated with this for a number of reasons. Firstly, I know from research (and my own children), that football causes all kinds of tensions on school playgrounds – from who is involved to how much space it takes up to fights that break out. Secondly, I was interested to see how certain children (particular) boys dominated not only the games but their organisation. Thirdly, although dominated by boys, girls and boys were playing football together (much research on school playgrounds highlights how football at break time is symptomatic of gender divisions and inequalities). Finally, though, I was drawn to the ways in which the ball and the children interacted with the newly-planted hedgerow that bordered their game. This brought me back to wondering about the extent to which children ‘cared’ about the new trees. These children had not planted the hedgerow, nor really been part of our activities. Did this mean they cared less? They were also engrossed with their game – the ball frequently hit the new saplings and on at least two occasions children trod on them when retrieving the ball. Perhaps they didn’t care for those trees in and of that moment, even if they would in other contexts? What does it mean for trees to move in and out of focus (as I write about in my book or our concern, or care? We cannot always be focused on trees or taken-up with them, and trees must also live with the ways in which humans, nonhumans, weather conditions and more are both responsive to and dispassionate about them.

The tree measuring activities worked well and led to some interesting discussions about carbon. But we also began an interesting discussion at lunchtime about how the measurements might have been ‘relevant’ to the children, and about *scale*. For instance, we tried to equate the dry weight of the trees and the carbon within to large cars. The children asked: do you mean SUVs? Do you mean trucks? How many Lamborghinis? At a far smaller scale, we also talked about how carbon dioxide is sucked out of the air and how trees release oxygen. But, as I think Environmental geographer said – is that process still ‘magical’ to children at this age? To what extent should it remain such (thinking of Jane Bennett’s notion of enchantment, and particular her account of how enchantment was such an important aspect of Charles Darwin’s work)? And to what extent should we seek to explain or show or make-relevant or make-accessible those microscopic processes? With one group, we experimented with looking at our own veins and then those in new leaves to try to get a handle on those smaller-scaled processes. Questions of scale – of how we (and especially children) can ‘access’ the massively-differently-scaled processes in which trees are involved (microscopic processes; the sheer weight of an individual tree; the visualisation of treescapes and their role in mitigating air pollution locally/regionally and climate change globally) – are vital as we develop our work and especially any toolkits for schools. Is Timothy Morton’s notion of ‘hyerobjects’ helpful here (objects, like plastics or Styrofoam cups, which we know exist, but which are simultaneously too small and too large for us to deduce or perceive all at once)?

At the end of the day, we presented the video that Artist had made about Forest School, which I thought was really effective. This activity had its own rhythms. There were barely contained responses and emotions (shrieks, laughs, floods of tears) as children watched the video for the first time. Then a period of more intense reflection, where we split the class into groups to ask them what they thought of the video. In my group, the children thought the length was about right, but could have been slightly longer; they liked the ending (‘having fun’); they liked the bit about roasting marshmallows and seeing each other with big sticks, as well as the pond and the tadpoles; they thought the film was trying to say that Forest School is good and is ‘part of the school; but they wanted to see a bit more talking (by them) in the film). Then there was the cat incident, where one child, whose becoming-cat had been briefly shown in the film, was upset that their cat noise was not included…the team and the teachers tried to reassure her and artist is going to explore the possibility of including this and other material in some ‘outtakes’.