"LOOK AT MY LEAVES!":
YOUNG CHILDREN’S ARTISTIC ENTANGLEMENTS WITH THE NATURAL WORLD

A Dissertation in
Art Education

by
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ABSTRACT

Visual art and the natural world are intertwined in the lives of young children. Using a qualitative ethnographically informed approach, I explore what emerges when three- to five-year-old children use art to form relations with the natural world. A focus of this inquiry is on ethical, respectful, and meaningful relationships and researching with both the children and nature. This work includes both an emergent artful inquiry and a deliberate artful inquiry. First, I research the children’s self-initiated spontaneous artmaking during their free play time outdoors. Later, I examine the children’s deliberate artmaking as land artists during planned sessions in the woods. The philosophy of the Reggio Emilia approach and Brent Wilson’s third site pedagogy provide theoretical grounding for this work. Researching with nature and the agency of the natural materials used for artmaking are considered. Central to this understanding is repositioning ourselves within, not separate from, nature. Nature as teacher and nature as art studio are also considered. Artmaking is a meaningful way for children to form relations with the natural world and contribute to their ecological identity. Consistent with the goal of researching with children, the children use cameras to document their own creations in the woods and curate their final art exhibition. Narrative inquiry is used, since the essence of the data collected in this study is best illustrated through the telling of the children’s stories. This dissertation, which focuses on children’s artistic entanglements with the natural world, not only highlights the possibilities of researching with children and with nature, but also unsettles and disrupts the dominant ageist and anthropocentric discourse that surrounds both researching children and researching the natural world.
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As I complete this dissertation and write these acknowledgments in August 2020, I am in a different time and place than when I began this research. It is as though I started this dissertation in a different lifetime. I write these words as clouds hang heavy, both literally and figuratively. We are living through a pivotal moment in history: the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic depression, and civil unrest due to racial injustice.

When I started writing my dissertation, climate change was the number one challenge facing humanity. Now we are living through a global health crisis and climate change has been put on the back burner. For both, when you wait until you can see the exponential consequences, it becomes even more difficult to curb the impacts. The effects of climate change move slower than the pandemic, but by the time the threat feels imminent, it can be too late. Personally, I brought two wondrous lives into the world since I embarked on my doctoral journey. I think about what lies ahead for my sons. I want a promising future not just for them, but for all children. It is my hope that the ideas presented in this dissertation are one, although small, step in that direction.

I need to first and foremost thank the children at Hort Woods who participated in this study and were my collaborators in this work. I hope that I have accurately translated your experiences and shared in this dissertation your intentions and ideas. I also want to deeply thank from the bottom of my heart their classroom teacher, Jennifer Hooven, who provided immense support and her valuable expertise for this project. Working with Jenn and the children in her classroom was an extremely rewarding and extraordinary experience; without which this work would not be possible.
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Without your loving encouragement and support to cross the finish line, this dissertation may never have been completed. I am indebted to my grandfather, W. Lambert Brittain, who never knew I followed in his footsteps, but without whom I may not have found my current path in Art Education. In the preface of *Creative and Mental Growth* (1987) my grandfather wrote, “Children are the essence of this book, but more than that, they are the essence of society. How children are cared for, nourished both physically and psychologically, give an indication of the value society puts upon itself and its future (Lowenfeld & Brittain, p. viii).” Children are also the essence of this dissertation. I dedicate this dissertation to my two sons, Alrik and Magnus.
Chapter 1

Introduction

“Hey! Hey! Don’t whip my decoration!” Alexandra exclaims as two boys bound by her waving a stick that is longer than they are tall. Her concentrated silence is interrupted by the laughs and giggles from the two boys. Alexandra, who is three years old, has begun to create an artwork with leaves on a bare horizontal branch. She quickly and cautiously holds the branch with both hands to guard and steady it. She then releases the branch and walks a few feet away to a shrub to collect more leaves—the boys and the danger have now passed. She returns to her artwork and gingerly places a new leaf on the end of the branch (Figure 1-1).

Figure 1-1. Alexandra adds a leaf to her artwork
Alexandra walks back to the same shrub again and collects another leaf. When she returns, she takes a quick glance up and down her branch to determine the optimal location for her newly plucked leaf. She has been finding little nubs on the branch to support her leaves. Taking her time, she carefully pierces the leaf on the sharp nub—securing it in place (Figure 1-2). It falls off in her hand; she tries again. Laughs and giddy screams from nearby children don’t sway her focus. She fiddles with it some more, but after another unsuccessful attempt the leaf falls to the ground. Her focus then moves to another nub that already has a leaf secured in place. She pushes down on it to reassure its attachment and then walks back over to the shrub to collect another leaf.

Figure 1-2. Alexandra secures a leaf to her branch
Alexandra brings the next leaf back to her branch and returns to the same nub that already has a leaf secured in place, adding the new one on top. She pushes the new leaf down on top of the other leaf repeatedly with her fingers. First, pushing down hard and bending her knees; then, leaning her body over the branch pushing harder in the hope that the force of her body will help keep the little leaf on the branch. The branch bends and bounces with her weight. Her long straight hair now covers her hands from my view as she leans over so I cannot see her fingers at work. Then, apparently satisfied, she stands back up, brushes her hair back with both hands behind her shoulders and returns to the same shrub to acquire another leaf for her artwork. As she is picking a new leaf, Jack runs by and accidently knocks into her branch. My heart skips a beat and I wait for her reaction. The branch sways, but no leaves fall. Completely unfazed, she proceeds to add another leaf to her stack on the branch. Satisfied, she returns to the shrub to select yet another leaf. She chooses this new leaf quickly. Based on the amount of time spent, it seems as though the leaf selection process is not as important as the placement on the branch.

The next leaf she places she delicately rests on the top of her leaf stack; perhaps due to the fact that she has run out of height on the nub. As she returns to her branch with an additional leaf, she notices the two boys, again playing with large sticks swinging in the air, approaching. They are still several feet away from her work, but too close for comfort. She lets them know, “Hey! Don’t ruin my decoration!” Luca, who is also three years old, turns and calmly replies as he walks towards her, “Where’s your decoration?” She points silently to her stack of carefully balanced leaves. He then grabs the branch and shakes it. She squeals, “Noo!” and starts to cry as her leaves float to the ground.
Upset and surprised, she takes a step towards me for security. Jenn, their teacher, who was walking over and saw what happened, intervened and talked with Luca. “How does Alexandra feel?” she asks him. “Sad,” Luca replies. She asks Alexandra, “Why do you feel sad? Can you tell him, Alexandra?” “Because he ruined my decorations,” she replies crying. Jenn then takes Luca’s hand and walks away with him to talk. Alexandra and I are alone again. Alexandra stands in front of her branch still crying. I ask her, “Do you think you can make it again?” She moans. Wanting to help, I squat down and start to pick up her leaves. The bright green leaves are easy to spot on the brown forest floor under the branch. “Here. Here are the leaves;” I hand her some of her fallen leaves. She stops crying and starts to place them back on her branch. After placing the leaves that I handed to her back on the branch, she returns to the shrub to find more. Now, seemingly recovered, she quickly goes back and forth between her branch and the shrub, carefully balancing leaf after leaf (Figure 1-3).
Alexandra’s attention is then drawn elsewhere. Children are calling for others to follow to investigate something they found in the woods. Before following, she takes a photograph of her artwork as other children wait watching (Figure 1-4).

![Figure 1-4. Alexandra’s photograph of the artwork she titled, Branchy Leaves](image)

When she returns Alexandra notices some of the leaves have blown off her branch. She does not appear to be upset. There is still intermittently a strong breeze, but she proceeds to create her artwork for a third time. Again, she carefully layers leaf upon leaf in a delicate balance. Some leaves are placed right side up; others are upside down, providing a lovely contrast between the light and dark greens in her artwork. Tina starts to create an artwork with leaves next to her on a log on the ground. As they tell each other, “I need a few more leaves on mine,” Alexandra starts to bounce and dance a little,
bobbing her arms up over her head and humming happily, adding the final leaves. Alexandra then decides she is finished. In a performative fashion, with legs crossed and arms outstretched pointing to her artwork, palms facing the sky, Alexandra joyfully announces its completion, “Ta-da! Look at my leaves!”

**Project Rationale and Research Overview**

We are— and we must be convinced of this—inside an ecosystem: our earthly journey is a journey we make along with the environment, nature, the universe. Our organism, our morality, our culture, our knowledge, our feelings are connected with the environment, with the universe, with the world. And here we can find the spider web of our life. (The Centro Internazionale Loris Malaguzzi, 2014)

This research is an intersection of the subjects and issues about which I am most passionate: children, art, and the natural world. My mother used to tell me as a child to do what you love so that your work never feels like a chore. I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to pursue my interests in my academic work and combine these interests in my dissertation research. My three passions—children, art, and the natural world—are vital areas worthy of the utmost respect and further study, but, both historically and still today, have been marginalized and have not received the attention they deserve. All three have been mistreated by our society (Higonnet, 1998; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). I believe children, art, and nature provide our society with invaluable
meaning and heart. My research resides in the space where children, art, and the natural world meet; where each is valued and respected not only for their own merit, but for how they are intertwined and support each other.

In this dissertation I consider how the field of art education can evolve and grow so that it can better contribute to the development of a healthier and brighter future for our children and the world. The field of art education is vast and diverse; ultimately, however, its focus is the education of the child. The child can get lost in the discourse; lost in the aims of particular theory, curricula, and pedagogies. The rights of the child and the “image of the child,” which are critical to the discussion, need to be thoughtfully considered (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1990; Malaguzzi, 1994). The Convention on the Rights of the Child was the first international legally binding text that set out the fundamental rights that should be realized for all children. Included in the rights of the child is respect for children’s views and the principle that children’s opinions should be heard and considered, especially on important issues that affect them.

How we view children and what we believe they are capable of influences our research, our interactions, and our teaching. Many educators see children as vessels that they need to fill with knowledge; not as competent, capable children coming to the classroom full of wonder, curiosity, knowledge, and life experiences (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 2005). Children’s views and work, including play and artmaking, should be regarded seriously. The same respect that is given to adults and their artwork should be given to children. Children are not less human than adults, although the rights of the child are still not widely embraced. Children are imaginative and have the
potential to provide original and significant insights. In this dissertation I focus on children’s artmaking, specifically their visual art, and its entanglements with the natural world.

In addition to the rights of the child, the rights of the natural world should also be thoughtfully considered and incorporated in the field of art education and more broadly. In this dissertation, I use the terms natural world, natural environment, and more-than-human interchangeably, to refer to the nonhuman entities of nature, both living and nonliving, on our planet. There is a prevailing view that humans are above and superior to the natural world; that humans are the pinnacle of pyramidal existence on our planet, rather than being nodes in an interconnected web. This anthropocentric attitude affects both people’s conscious and unconscious behaviors toward the more-than-human. These behaviors are seen as justified because of the belief by many adults in the superiority of humans.

As a species, humans have done the most harm to the planet. We are living in an era that scientists have named the Anthropocene, where the effects of humans are so widespread that we have altered Earth’s systems and processes (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). We are currently living through an environmental crisis of our making, including mass species extinction and climate change. However, our very survival as a species depends on the health of the planet. Clean air, fresh water, food, including pollination for crops, are necessary for humans’ continued existence. Even if only in the interest of self-preservation, people should live sustainably with the more-than-human.
Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015) discuss our inheritance and the naming of the Anthropocene:

We want to seize this eventful naming moment as one of transformational opportunity. We therefore take it as a break point for interrupting business-as-usual, radically reimagining what it means to be human, revisiting the crucial question of agency, and risking finding new ways of relating to the world that we inherit and inhabit along with all other species. As educators, we are interested in how we might constructively and creatively implement these transformative opportunities from the earliest years of schooling. (p. 510)

Through this research I strive to unsettle the hierarchical views by researching with the natural world. Hodgins (2019) advocated for research that does not attempt to “resolve the messy, entangled, inequitable 21st century common worlds we live in,” but moves us toward action: “to rethink, redo and question how we are implicated in them, and to do the hard labor of experimenting with methods in order to create opportunities and conditions for exploring our collective and individual responsibilities to the worlds we inherit and bequeath” (p. 13). Through my research I explore these responsibilities in the hopes of a more ethical and sustainable way of researching with.

There are many definitions and interpretations of the word “sustainability.” I use the word in this dissertation to advocate for ecological justice for both the human and more-than-human world. I use the United States Environmental Protection Agency’s (2020) definition: “To pursue sustainability is to create and maintain the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations.” It is important to emphasize however, that the Environmental
Protection Agency, in formulating this definition, is inferring that humans are distinct and independent from nature. I believe that to be able to live sustainably, it is essential to embrace the notion that humans are part of nature; we are not separate or autonomous. I posit that one way to internalize this concept is through the development of an ecological identity. The term ecological identity is used widely with various definitions. Mitchell Thomashow (1995) popularized the term ecological identity in his book, *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist*. Thomasow (1995) defines ecological identity as “all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self,” a relationship from which “nature becomes an object of identification” (p. 3). In this work I describe ecological identity as a feeling of connectivity with the Earth, the sense of self within and part of the larger natural environment, incorporating the natural environment into the sense of self and home—the feeling of belonging to nature. Pelo (2013) discussed ecological identity as a conscious act:

> An ecological identity offers an antidote to the displacement that makes possible the wounding and wrecking of the planet. When we turn toward the Earth with curiosity and sympathy, with humility and wonder, our lives fall into place—we fall into place. The earth, the sky, the water, and their beyond-human beings have our attention, and we begin to behave toward them with propriety. (p. 50)

It is my belief that identity affects behavior and an ecological identity leads to a more sustainable way to live on the planet.

In order to broaden understanding and explore the spaces between and intersecting art, young children, and the natural world, I researched with a class, named
Sky House. This was a class of three- to five-year-old children at The Child Care Center at Hort Woods. The Child Care Center at Hort Woods, located on The Pennsylvania State University’s campus in State College, Pennsylvania, is university affiliated and operates as a laboratory school. There is also a natural area of woods, named Hort Woods, behind the school buildings that is available to the children and was critical for our work together. I view my research as a collaboration with these young children and with their natural world (the Hort Woods), where the agency of both the children and the natural world are recognized and honored. I define our collaboration as working together, with humans (young children and adult) and the more-than-human, through respectful and meaningful relationships. Recognizing that the power dynamics in the relationships between the children and myself are not equal, special care was taken to conduct the research with children and with nature.

This research study is composed of two parts: emergent children’s artmaking that occurred during their outdoor free play time and deliberate children’s artmaking as land artists that took place in the woods behind the outdoor play area. I use the term emergent to describe the artmaking in the first part of the study to emphasize that it was self-initiated and spontaneous and arose from their free play outdoors. I accompanied the children outside for their free play time and when artmaking emerged from their play I documented it. I use the term deliberate to describe the artmaking in the second part of the study, which was structured specifically as an artmaking experience. In this phase we entered the woods with the intention of creating art together. In both the first and second parts of the study the children’s artmaking was both emergent and deliberate as well as both spontaneous and intentional. However, in the first part of the study I use the term
“emergent” as a way to emphasize the mindset of the children and artmaking that naturally came out of their free play and “deliberate” in the second part of the study because even though their art was self initiated, they went into the woods with the understanding that they would be creating art. The focus was on making art outdoors with natural materials in a way that disrupted the traditional ideas of what constitutes artmaking places, spaces, and materials. A qualitative ethnographically informed approach was used to explore young children forming relationships with the natural world through both their emergent and deliberate artmaking.

The first part of the study, which focused on emergent artmaking, took place with the children of the Sky House classroom over a period of an academic year. I visited their classroom as they went outside for their morning outdoor free play time, which typically lasted for a period of 45 minutes. During this time, I both observed the children’s outdoor free play activities, and participated when invited. I focused my attention and research on the spontaneous self-initiated artmaking events that took place during their play outdoors with the various natural materials they encountered. I collected data documenting these various artmaking events through field notes, photographs, and video.

The second part of the study, which focused on deliberate artmaking, took place with three groups of Sky House children over the course of three weeks. The first two groups had six children and the last group had five. Each group was mixed age, three to five years old, with a total of 17 children participating. The children went into the woods behind their outdoor play area with myself, two teachers, and a volunteer, to explore, discover, and create art. In the first part of the study, the artmaking emerged
spontaneously out of their play, whereas in the second part we discussed as a class that we were going into the woods to create “art.” Artmaking in the woods was an intentional outcome and the meaning of “art” was individually interpreted by the children.

While in the woods, we practiced an emergent curriculum, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2. Here, “the teacher’s role is to be a competent listener to the visual language and to the children’s individual and group strategies in order to support the children in a way that is in tune with their autonomous expression” (Vecchi & Giudici, 2004, p. 15). The curriculum is an emergent process that is flexible, informal, and collaborative in nature. Allowing children to work at their own pace with as much time as they need for their inquiries allows exploration and in-depth studies in their work. Wien (2008) discussed, “Motivation fuels learning; it is the positive energy that carries the learner through the curriculum” (p. 16). Focus is put on the learning process and the discovery, not the final product. “Creativity becomes more visible when adults try to be more attentive to the cognitive processes of children than to the results they achieve in various fields of doing and understanding” (Gandini et al., 2005, p. 195). Whereas I did not place emphasis on the children’s final products, documentation was valued and needed for this dissertation. Photography was a way to make children’s learning and ideas visible. Through photography, children were able to communicate and share their ephemeral artwork and ideas. Emphasis was still on the learning process because there was no intended or expected product, except for what each child determined it to be individually. The ephemeral nature of their work necessitated taking photographs in real time. This process, which utilized the cameras, had the benefit of observing not only the joy the children had in taking pictures of their creations, but
also observing them using the cameras to capture images of natural objects and their other interests. In so doing they were also participating in another form of artmaking through photography, as discussed in the body of this dissertation.

During our time in the woods I provided provocations for artmaking, including natural artmaking materials. The first two days the children created with natural materials they encountered; the next day I introduced charcoal; the following day clay; and the last day both charcoal and clay were provided. The children used found natural materials every day and only used the charcoal and clay if they desired. I supplied all of the children with digital cameras so that they could document their ephemeral artworks as well as other interests. Data were collected through photography from both the children and myself, video from the adults, field notes, and informal conversations.

As the culminating event of my research with the children, we organized and installed an art exhibition of their work. The children curated the final art exhibition to share their artwork and inquiries with the other children in their class, their child care center as a whole, their families, and the larger community. In preparation for their art exhibition that would showcase their work in the woods, the students chose their three favorite photographs. These favorites were chosen from photographs that they took of their artwork and experiences. The children discussed and chose the following title for the exhibition, *Nature Love: Building in the Woods*. They also created the signage and provided quotes to accompany one of their photographs. During one of their outdoor play times, they also collected natural objects, such as leaves, acorns, and sticks, to put on display to accompany their work for the show. The art exhibition lasted for approximately one and a half months, and was the culminating event for the children. It
concluded my time with the children and the second part of my research study. Chapter 4 further discusses the methods used in this study and the art exhibition in detail.

This brief overview of the two parts of my research study provides some context to the organization of my dissertation. For my dissertation outline, I continue to give an overview and introduction to this research in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2 I discuss researching *with* children and in Chapter 3 I explore researching *with* nature. Chapter 4 introduces my methodological grounding for this research and provides a more detailed overview of the two parts of this research study. In Chapter 5 I share a sampling of stories from our work together through narrative inquiry. Chapter 6 contains a discussion and implications of this study. Finally, the Appendix highlights the work by the children and is arguably the most significant contribution to this dissertation.

**Young Children and the Natural Environment in Art Education**

In the field of art education there has been interest in further understanding the role of art and art education in addressing ecological and environmental issues. The journal *Art Education* edited a special issue on place in 2010, and *Studies in Art Education*, the premier journal in the field of art education, published two special issues addressing sustainability, in 2007 and 2012. Hicks and King (2007) wrote a moving commentary for the 2007 issue, encouraging art educators to tackle environmental crisis (Hicks & King, 2007):

> Art educators can contribute to this project by making use of art’s ability to communicate ideas, document events, call attention to problems and harms,
remind us of history and our obligations to future generations, and its ability to actively preserve, restore, and make whole. (p. 335)

The research related to environmental issues published in the field of art education employs various approaches and theoretical groundings. Different definitions of nature, sustainability, ecological justice, environmental justice, and place are applied. Many research studies solely focus on justice for humans, and do not address all living and nonliving beings and ecological systems. Most use terminology that separates children from “nature.”

A number of publications have discussed in general terms environmental issues related to art education curricula. Lankford (1997) believes that art educators play an important role in the preservation of our planet, and gives suggestions for projects that could be completed in the general art classroom involving ecological themes. Cohee Manifold (2000) incorporated in their rural art program the importance of community and local artists. Erzin (2005) discussed how art education curricula should place more value on the process and experiential methods of art as opposed to the end products, proposing an environmental aesthetics approach. She discussed her globally meaningful curriculum, developed in Turkey, which focused on environmental values and sensory experiences meant to inspire students to feel the beauty of the world (Erzin, 2005). Erzin (2005) states, “What is important is the cultivation of perceptual faculties and of awareness of self and environment” (p. 185). Blandy and Fenn (2012) argue that sustainability should be incorporated into art education curricula to foster the ability of students to address ecological concerns. Blandy (2011) discusses three sites of theory and practice:
These sites are sustainability, participatory culture, performing democracy, and the socio-political discourse associated with them, will inform our research, shape K-12 curriculum, influence professional standards, encourage debate, stimulate advocacy, and provoke innovation. (p. 243)

Research focused on theory and philosophy, sustainability, and art education curricula are represented by the following examples. Garoian (2012) uses philosophers Deleuze and Guattari and the artists Helen Harrison and Newton Harrison to conceptualize sustainable curricular theory. Jagodzinski (2007) politicizes arts education practice, applying the concepts from Deleuze and Guattari to argue for including “ecological sensitivity into the visual curriculum” (p. 341). Kauppinen (1990) discusses the importance of environmental aesthetics in curricula as does Blandy (2009), who also relates aesthetic philosophies to environmental engagement in art education curriculum.

The use of contemporary artists whose work focuses on sustainability is a common approach to integrate sustainable ideology into an art education curriculum. Blandy, Congdon, and Krug (1998) discuss the importance of contemporary artists in advancing ecological restoration. They encourage art educators and their students to explore ecological theory (Blandy, et al, 1998) and use examples of contemporary artists that promote ecological restoration and connecting to nature. Project examples to foster students’ connections with nature are provided (Blandy et al., 1998). Slivka (2012) uses contemporary artists and artworks, such as Agnes Denes, Dominique Mazeaud, and Stephen Carpenter as examples of “sustainability through gift giving,” whereas Keifer-Boyd (2010) offers valuable web based resources from contemporary artists whose art functions as a form of activism for ecological justice. Song (2009) analyzes and
discusses contemporary artist Lynne Hull’s art, its implications for connecting nature and aesthetic, and gives examples of ways to use ecological art in the science classroom.

Another body of literature focuses on place-based art education curricula. The importance of place in joining art and ecological issues is described by Blandy and Fenn (2012) and Blandy and Hoffman (1993). They discuss engagement with place and encourage art curricula to relate to students’ learning environments. Gradle (2007) wrote, of “Place as a part of a fluid, relational identity within a world that is clearly shaped by the artful actions we undertake” (p. 393). Gradle (2008) discussed place as embodied knowledge which could be used to build community. She proposes that art education curricula include “local craft aesthetic, ecological re-purposing of materials and traditional and indigenous perspectives (to) highlight the social and environmental concerns for a region” (p. 11).

Graham (2007) also emphasizes the importance of place and introduces critical place-based pedagogy as a framework for the merging of art education and ecological issues. He describes challenges to art education and ecological concerns, dividing them into three conditions: human progress that has dominated and devastated nature, standards-based education ‘reform’ in schools that ignores ecological issues, and the marginalization of contemporary artists and visual culture in the art curriculum (Graham, 2007). Graham (2007) discusses the need for art education to address ecology and our relationship with nature and our need for artmaking to become “socially aware, reflective, and transformational” (p. 376). He discusses the ecological crisis and place-based pedagogy as a response to the standard pedagogy that ignores our connection with community, society, and the ecological world. Graham (2007) then combines place-
based pedagogy and critical pedagogy and introduces critical place-based pedagogy, which “generates an approach characterized by blurred boundaries between artmaking, social critique, scientific inquiry, and activism” (p. 379). In terms of art education, it links the activist with the restorative possibilities of art and our relationship with the world. He emphasizes the importance of the having the curriculum closely tie into student interests. It is important for students to be “given opportunities to critically consider the aesthetics, assumptions, and politics that surround art and visual culture” and be “encouraged to make artwork that might make a difference” (Graham, 2007, p. 387).

Anderson and Guyas (2012) address the current environmental crisis and how our relationship with the Earth needs to change. They call for “a reorientation of the idea of self to include an understanding that one is integrally and relationally part of everyone and everything else” (Anderson & Guyas, 2012, p. 223), and introduce Earth Education as a way to reconnect with the world through art education. Ideas of sustainability, place, deep ecology, cultural literacy, social justice, self-realization, and interbeing are discussed in support of implementing Earth Education (Anderson & Guyas, 2012). Nine teaching and learning principles and strategies of interbeing and deep ecology in art education are defined and applied in Earth Education, leading to their proposed practical steps for change: awakening the senses or radical amazement; positive emotional investment; embodying experience; working with metaphors; connecting critical awareness, emotion, and actions; relational learning—recontextualizing self as interbeing; place-based epistemology; animating art knowledge as a model for understanding nature; and pedagogy built on connectedness and engagement (Anderson & Guyas, 2012).
Another area of scholarly work focuses on inclusion of sustainability in art classes in schools and other education settings. Garoian (1998) criticizes the human tendency to see themselves as masters on the Earth, and uses a high-school earth-drawing lesson on landscape metaphors to shift attention to inclusivity. Cornelius, Sherow, and Carpenter (2010) present an instructional resource for grades 9-12 to help create meaningful learning experiences while investigating current environmental issues such as water conservation. Ulbricht (1998) discussed developing conceptual awareness from merely drawing nature to true awareness of nature, offering three experiences: one with an undergraduate class, one high school, and one elementary. Ulbricht (1998) calls for “A socially responsible environmental art education curriculum in which values and aesthetics are combined in an instrumental manner for the benefit of all” (p. 34). Bequet (2007) suggests that P-12 art teachers include Native American artworks as a part of the curriculum to promote sustainable ideology. Coutts and Rusling (2002) discuss their experiences rejuvenating a local Scottish play area through art and design working with an elementary after school group in collaboration with community agencies. Many others have addressed these issues, including discussions of eco-art education (Inwood, 2008), critical place-based art education (Bertling, 2013, 2015), arts-based pedagogies (Davis, 2018), and others.

More recently, Dean and Bertling (2020) discussed how contemporary artists can serve as inspiration for student’s arts-based ecological engagement. Bertling and Moore (2020) studied art teacher preparation in relation to teaching about ecological pedagogies and found that there has been growth in ecological integration, but there is still significant
room for improvement. In addition, there is related literature in the field of early childhood education, some of which is discussed in the following chapters.

To summarize this large body of literature, it is reasonable to conclude that most art education researchers agree that spending time in and connecting with the local natural environment are of the utmost importance. However, overall, there is a paucity of research in the field art education uniting early childhood art and ecological issues. My research aims to help address this deficit in the literature. I hope this research study will increase awareness and visibility to the often overlooked intersection of early childhood art and ecological justice, especially in the field of art education.

**Personal Understandings**

I embrace the idea that the researcher can never truly be separated from their research. I recognize that my personal background, values, and assumptions affect the way I conduct research. Therefore, I believe as a researcher it is important to share and acknowledge my personal understandings.

**My Ecological Identity**

What do you think of when you think of home? Is it the building that you inhabit? Is it a bustling town or city or a smaller area you consider your community? Is it the people you love? Is it the dirt, rocks, trees, grass, or cloudy skies that surround you
Noddings (2002) reminds us that “the self that moves about in the greater world is guided by what it encountered at home” (p. 175).

Experiences dating back to early childhood help shape one’s ecological identity. Thomashow (1995) describes how people from all over the world have similar memories:

They have fond memories of a *special childhood place*, formed through their connections to the earth via some kind of emotional experience, the basis of their bonding with the land or the neighborhood. Typically, these are memories of play experiences, involving exploration, discovery, adventure, even danger, imagination and independence. (p. 9)

The continual creation of an ecological identity throughout childhood contributes to the child’s development and to the values they will eventually embrace as adults.

As a child I spent a significant amount of my free time playing outside, which my parents encouraged. I grew up in a suburb of Syracuse in Upstate New York. Our house was the last one on our street towards the top of the hill; next to our house was a large field. Behind the houses on our street was a small creek that ran through a strip of woods. The creek started behind our backyard with a series of springs. At the edge of the field and the woods, water continuously bubbled up out of the ground. I would squat down in the mud with a long stick in my hand hovering over a spring. Clear, crisp, frigid cold water would percolate up out of small gravelly holes. Small pebbles of different colors surrounded the holes. The pebbles remained after the sediment was filtered and washed away by the water bubbling upward. I would love to put my stick into the holes to watch the crystal clear water get cloudy and then clear up as I removed the stick and the new water emerged. One of my favorite activities was to play in the springs and the
creek. Since the creek started behind our house, my sister and I felt as though we were its guardians. We took great pride to make sure the start of the creek was cleared of sticks, fallen leaves, and debris so that the water would run smoothly. Being creek keepers was frequently part of our outdoor play and one of the many ways we loved playing outside. I was fortunate to have easy access to the outdoors to run, play, and explore. I was able to connect with nature, with the water, the bugs, toads, rocks, chipmunks, worms, trees and anything I happen to discover during my play adventures. My deep respect and appreciation for nature was nurtured by spending so much of my free time playing outside.

My play outdoors was encouraged and supported by my parents. My parents trusted our abilities and allowed my sister and I to explore the field and woods around our home unsupervised. There were rules that we had to follow; however, such as when playing in the field we always had to make sure we could see the shiny metal roof of our barn in our backyard so we could find our way back. My mother also gave us guidelines for climbing trees. As a doctor she had her own names for climbing heights. We were allowed to climb trees as high as the orthopedic level (where if we fell we may break a bone), but were not allowed to climb to the neurosurgeon height (the greater heights where a fall could cause serious brain injury). I am grateful that my parents were not afraid of me getting dirty and understood the importance of bonding with our home that existed outside the walls our house. My experiences in the natural world when I was young helped shape the person I am today.

After high school, I moved to another city in New York, Schenectady, to attend Union College, and then moved back to Syracuse for my first full time job. I then moved
to State College, Pennsylvania to attend The Pennsylvania State University where I received my master’s degree and art teacher certification and next to Maryland where I worked as an elementary school art teacher for the District of Columbia Public Schools for three years. From Maryland my husband and I left the northeast and moved to San Diego in sunny southern California and where we worked for two years. This was the first place I lived where something felt off; the land strange and unfamiliar.

When people asked me what it was like living in San Diego, I would always reply it is like living in vacationland. It’s beautiful, but doesn’t feel like home. Why did it not feel like home? Every other place I lived at one point was also new with different people and an unfamiliar community to get to know. I felt out of place. I missed green. I missed lush trees. I missed the seasons. When October arrived it did not feel like fall. The strong shining sun still warmed the ocean and land. I was not able to take a deep breath and smell the damp fallen autumn leaves. There was no cool, brisk gust of wind lifting the fallen leaves to dance in the sky. The landscape was not composed of beautiful reds, oranges, yellows, and golden browns, but of perky palm trees and manicured bushes. The plants were rigid and unyielding; the grass hard and stiff. I even missed the occasional odd smell after it rained of what I called worms on wet pavement. I especially missed the rain. After we moved to San Diego, the first time it rained, my husband and I got so excited we ran outside just to stand in it and spun around in delight, not caring that our neighbors were watching.

I irrationally tried to make up for the empty hole drought in my autumn heart. I bought almost every type of apple and pumpkin product at Trader Joe’s in an attempt to bring fall home. I incorporated pumpkin into almost every meal, lit pumpkin scented
candles, and even drove two hours away to go apple picking in the mountains. Growing up, we had two apple trees in our front yard that my parents had bought from Cornell University’s orchards in Ithaca where my grandmother lived. Every year I watched the trees change through the seasons, observing the buds, blossoms, and eventually beautiful bright red apples. The apples were on the tart side and when you took a bite into one the flesh was crisp and bright white. Upstate New York was apple country. Julian in California was anything but the orchards I knew. I was not sure what to expect on our drive up, but we had heard the pick-your-own orchards were great fun and the apple pies sold in town were unbelievable. What we encountered on top of the mountain was cooler air, but dry sandy dirt with trees barely taller than ourselves and apples half the size of New York and Pennsylvania apples.

I felt displaced in San Diego. This new place was not part of my identity. Home was somewhere in the northeast. With time I came to love San Diego, although it never truly felt like home. It was enjoyable to learn about the cacti and sage and to smell the perfume of the planted natal plums when I would go for a run in our neighborhood. I greatly enjoyed taking long walks along the beach and hiking in a park up a large hill close to our home dotted with chollas and yuccas that overlooked the ocean. One of our favorite spots was a park on a coastal cliff where we would go after coming home from work. We would bring a picnic or get take out and eat dinner on a blanket watching the surfers as the sun set, hoping to see a dolphin. To many people living in San Diego is the ideal place that they dream of moving to some day. To me, it was indeed beautiful, but something was missing. My heart belonged back in the luscious green soft fields and verdant forests. My ecological identity stood with the trees. I feel as though my
ecological identity could have expanded to include the new land of southern California; however, for me it was a slow process, and one which would have taken longer than the two years I lived there. My ecological identity consisted of the environment where I felt comfortable and at home. Learning about and coming to know the new environment was enjoyable although not a quick process as an adult. This highlights the importance of childhood experiences, and supports the influence of childhood interactions with nature and the formation of an ecological identity.

I was shaped by the natural environment of the northeast where I spent my childhood. That is where my ecological identity was formed. I was connected to and respected the land and all its living and nonliving inhabitants, and in extension, to all natural places. I understand that I am a part of nature. The desire to live sustainably with the land and its inhabitants demonstrates the importance of developing an ecological identity and integrating the natural world into one’s concept of home. My childhood memories remain strong and clearly were important in shaping my ecological identity. My personal research interest involving young children’s development of an ecological identity led to my desire to research with children outdoors—beyond walls.

**My Own Artmaking**

When I consider the artmaking practices of children, I reflect back on my own personal artmaking experiences. As far back as I can remember I have always loved creating art. Art has always been an important part of my life. As a child, drawing and art in general, was a valued and encouraged activity in my family. We had a large, heavy
old wooden library table in our den that was the site of countless artmaking activities. I took Saturday morning art classes as a child and continued to pursue art in high school and as a minor in college. Carla Rinaldi (1999), president and chairwoman of Reggio Children, said, “The image of the competent child… Competent at doing what? At forming relations with the world.” As an elementary school art teacher, I taught art as a tool for life, discovery, and the formation of meaningful relations with the world.

These ideas and values have also shaped my artwork. Creating art with nature has played an important role in my connection with the Earth and is essential to the way I live. The natural world has always been significant in my life. I have had a deep respect and appreciation for the natural environment since I was a young child that was nurtured by spending so much of my free time playing outside. Through exploring both art and nature, I am able to form relations with the world of which I am a part.

In my current body of artwork, I call attention to the (un)noticed, (in)visible, and (extra)ordinary. I focus my subject matter on objects found in nature that people walk right by and disregard, such as sticks and rocks on the ground. To me these objects, stones, branches, leaves, are a part of nature, and thus a part of me. In order to further this understanding, I try to deepen my knowledge of nature. One of the ways I do this is through my art. I draw or paint these objects as a way to bond with nature. Also, by painting or drawing these natural objects, I elevate their status and force viewers to truly see them. I want to encourage people to take the time to look at these products of nature that typically go unnoticed and see their magnificence. If I can get people to see natural objects a little differently, from a different perspective, then they might begin to connect with them in new ways. What happens when the unnoticed becomes noticed, the
invisible becomes visible, and the ordinary becomes extraordinary? My hope is that by “forming relations with the world” (Rinaldi, 1999) through my art, people will develop a furthered respect and appreciation for the environment.

I was a passionate elementary art teacher and I had a real sense of accomplishment with my art teaching. I used art as a tool to empower students, create more critical, creative, self-directed, and independent thinkers, hoping to improve students’ lives. Unfortunately, when I was a teacher, teaching-related activities took up most of my time. I was unable to draw or paint as much as I would have liked. I felt that as an artist, I was unsuccessful and unproductive. Now that I am a doctoral student and have had two children during my studies, I have even less free time. Although I have created small quick artworks, the most recent piece that I have completed in my series, *Stones II*, which I drew before I commenced my doctoral studies, hangs above our bed at home (Figure 1-5). I found these stones while going for a walk in a park with my husband in San Diego, California. Their beauty and uniqueness caught my eye. Spending time studying these stones through my artmaking was a way for me to further understand the natural beauty of my new home in San Diego; a place with which I was still unfamiliar.
Seeing this artwork hanging in our bedroom has become a reminder that having time to create is a true luxury for many adults, but should be an integral part of the lives of children. Children need time to explore and discover the wonders of the natural environment and the time to create through art. They should have ample opportunities to form relationships with the world through both artmaking and outdoor experiences.

**My Assumptions**

As a researcher, it is important for me to share some of my history, personal understandings, as well as my assumptions so that my positionality is acknowledged. One assumption that I made was that the children had a sincere interest in participating in
my research and did not just show interest to please me or others, including their classroom teachers, parents, or classmates. I also assumed, based on our built rapport, the children I worked with talked with me in an honest and candid manner. The experiences discussed in this dissertation are limited to the children with whom I worked at one specific child care center and may not be generalizable to other children and child care settings. Therefore, this research study is limited in scope and therefore in generalizability. However, this study was not intended to provide definitive answers to questions, but to unsettle and disrupt the dominant ageist and anthropocentric discourse that surrounds both researching children and the natural world. It is hoped that my study will stimulate new ideas and future research that will ultimately benefit children and promote sustainability. I see myself as an advocate for children, art, and the natural world and my hope is that this dissertation is a step, although limited in scope, toward that end.

Research Questions

I consider again, “The image of the competent child… Competent at doing what? At forming relations with the world” (Rinaldi, 1999). I consider how the competent child forms relations with the natural world and identifies their place in it. Children learn about who they are in relation to other living and nonliving things around them through interactions with the natural environment. Rinaldi (2003) states that “Children are born searching for and, therefore, researching the meaning of life, the meaning of the self in relation to others and the world” (p. 2). I suggest that artmaking could be a method for
this learning. These questions brought me to the Child Care Center at Hort Woods and my experiences outside with young children creating art. The following research questions guided me as I worked with the children throughout the entirety of this research:

- What emerges when children relate to and engage with nature through art?

- What comes to matter when children use art to form relations with the natural world?
Chapter 2
Researching with Children

“These are my potato eggs.” Taylor tells me as she points with her foot to a grouping of large oval stones she has arranged on the ground in the damp fallen autumn leaves. Taylor, who recently turned five and is the oldest in the class, enjoys playing with the rocks in the outdoor play area at Hort Woods. It had rained all day the previous day and earlier that morning, but the skies cleared for the children of the Sky House classroom to go outside. “Oh, your potato eggs. Nice!” I reply. “We can surprise Tina with them. Make sure she doesn’t see ‘em,” Taylor tells me as she is currently playing by herself. Her use of “we” invites me into her play. Taylor starts to walk away.

“Okay,” I reply as she entrusts me to guard her potato eggs. She turns to tell me, “Gonna be in the kitchen,” in a raised high pitched playful voice. I am sitting on the short fence surrounding the sand pit area made up of a line of vertical narrow logs; my feet in the sand looking over the fence’s edge at the carefully arranged stones on the other side.

Luca, who recently turned three and is the youngest in the class, approaches with a plastic cup filled with rain water from the sand pit. He bends down, picks up a handful of sand to put in his cup. He brushes his hand off on his coat, walks towards me, making eye contact, with his arm outstretched holding the cup as if to show it to me, and then pours it over the fence onto the stones. Luca drops the cup, seeming more interested in what is happening beyond the sand pit. He puts both hands on the fence logs and leans his whole body over the fence to take a closer look at the stones. He starts to say
something, the first part I do not hear, “…get down here.” “Hmm?” I reply. “I wanna get down.” He says it to me almost as if he wants help or permission to climb over the fence. “Mmkay,” I reply. “I think these logs are really big. I can try it out,” Luca says confidently as he swings his foot behind him with his toe touching the top of the log fence, but almost immediately mumbles something to himself and changes his mind, deciding not to go over. He starts to walk away to go around the fence.

Mia, who is four years old, walks over to me from playing in the sand. “Can I sit in your lap?” she asks me. “Sure,” I reply. I help pick her up to get her situated on my lap. Once she is settled, she asks me, “What are you taking a picture of?” “Taylor’s potato eggs,” I tell her as Luca has made his way around the other side of the fence back to us looking down at the stone arrangement. Taylor comes bounding back towards us in a playful voice saying, “Now we have wings! Now that I can fly off and get the babies some worms!” “Ohh,” I reply interested in the potato egg transformation. “To eat,” she explains. “Nice!” I answer as she starts to walk away again. She turns to tell me, “Cause they’re birds.” I ask her if she has found any worms today. “Nope,” she answers and tells me she is going back to the kitchen. Mia chimes in reminding me about the worm that she found earlier that day in the sand. Taylor shouts back at me as she happily runs away, “Make sure they don’t pop up!” “Okay!” I shout back. Mia continues to sit contently on my lap—I, content with her sitting on mine.

In this study I made a conscientious effort to research *with* children. I actively thought of my role as researcher not as researching children, but researching *with* children. I strove to upset the hierarchical top down perspective traditionally used when approaching children as subjects of research. Corsaro (2015) discussed how researching
with children “reflects a direct concern with capturing children's voices, perspectives, interests, and rights as citizens. How exactly these goals are best addressed and accomplished has been much debated and problematized recently in regard to a wide range of issues including age, power, field sites, and types of research methods” (p. 45).

I believe children are the experts on their own lives and a necessary partner in research concerning their own artistic experiences. As I discuss researching with children in this chapter, I consider both my way of being in the presence of the children and also my role as a researcher working with children.

I believe an essential aspect to researching with children is to learn to genuinely know each child and for them to learn to know you, such that they not only feel comfortable with your presence, but also invite you into their play and artmaking. Key elements in building these relationships are that they know that you genuinely respect them and personally care about them and their well-being. These types of relationships can take time to develop. The amount of time can vary. You need to learn about and understand each other, which are functions of both the quantity and quality of time spent together. The cultural and social backgrounds of the researcher and the children, the setting, the ages and numbers of children involved, the experience and personality of the researcher, the amount of time you have together one-on-one or in groups, and whether the time is concentrated or intermittent and spread out can all be contributing factors. It is likely that the differences between being a new (to the child) interested and engaged adult/researcher, and being an adult with another previously defined role such as parent or teacher, can also affect the readiness and willingness of the child to accept the researcher as a collaborator.
There is a continuum for how well researchers are able to get to know the children with whom they are working, but I believe that the stronger and more comfortable a relationship, the better the partnership. However, I do believe researchers can simply be a different kind of adult in children's lives, who is not a teacher or a parent, who they are perfectly ready and willing to accept. My time working as an elementary school art teacher in different settings gave me experience building relationships with new and diverse students each year. I believe relationships with children are the key to success in both teaching and conducting research with children.

I worked with the children of the Sky House classroom for 16 months and over that time I built trusted relationships with them. Glesne (2006) discussed the benefits of being a “trusted person” in a research setting and the importance of “spending time in these places, getting to know people and letting them get to know you, so that they will feel comfortable with you and will welcome you in ‘their’ space” (p. 53).

In researching with the children, I practiced “being there” with children, “observing and documenting, but also interacting with and responding to children” (Thompson, 2009, p. 27). In order to research with children, the researcher cannot be an unnoticed bystander watching the children from afar, but must be present and actively involved. I was not a detached observer, but strove to position myself as an interested adult in the “least adult role” (Mandell, 1988). I did not try to keep my distance from the children, but embraced the notion of investigating together. Since my research was a joint endeavor with the children, our built relationships were essential. I did not want the children to feel as though I was an outsider coming into their space watching and analyzing them, taking notes and photographs. I began my time with the children as an
unknown-to-them but interested adult who fostered over time an open, honest, and real way of “being there” with the children. Schulte (2013) discussed:

For me, to be invested in ways that are real requires that I continually labor to live within the event of young children’s experiences, to linger in the particularities of a given moment, and to occupy the immediate yet incipient relations of its social, cultural, aesthetic, and political vitality. (p. 5)

In my research with the children, I took care to notice, listen, and respect all aspects of our interactions and their potentialities. Thompson (2009) notes that “it is necessary to take time to linger, to live within the situation, in order to see those things that begin to occur or perhaps are noticed only when given enough time to become evident” (p. 27). While I lingered in experiences with the children, it was evident that play and artmaking are serious work. As an interested adult, it was important for me to make sure the children implicitly understood that I believed their play and art were worthwhile and valuable. The children were the authorities of their work and it was my hope that the children felt comfortable enough with me to invite me into their play and artmaking and share their work and thoughts with me. My relationships with the children were the foundation of my research.

During my research I tried to thoughtfully participate in their play, when invited, while maintaining their lead and authority. This allowed for closer observation and insights into their play. Rinaldi (2001) stated, “As children communicate their mental images or theories to others, they also represent them to themselves, developing a more conscious vision” (p. 4). By sharing their ideas and thoughts surrounding their artwork
with me, I not only benefited, but it also helped them develop a deeper understanding of their own work.

Throughout my time researching with the children, I considered how my presence affected the children’s play. I did not consider the impact negative, but instead as a circumstance to be acknowledged. When I modeled my own openness and willingness to play and demonstrated my interest through my participation, I hoped that it showed the children that I thought their play was meaningful and that play as a whole was a worthy endeavor. Rinaldi (2003) stated:

Depth of understanding involves the ability to experience the curiosity, passions, joys, and angers of others with a process of empathy, perception and identification, of human understanding. Always intersubjective, human understanding requires openness, sympathy and generosity. (p. 4)

Through my thoughtful participation with the children in research, I aspired to gain a deeper understanding of their thoughts and experiences.

Building trust and rapport with the children, through our shared experiences and time getting to know each other, was not only necessary for my research, but rewarding. As evidenced by the children’s behavior and the way the children interacted with me, I knew that I had successfully built trusted relationships. The relationships were evident though the mutual joy that we experienced when we spent time together and through invitations into their play and artmaking. For example, when the children were excited to see me when I arrived shouting, “Becca’s here!”, when Jasper asked me to play kick with him, when Sabrina and Mia asked me to play follow the leader with them, Tina asked me to run with her, when numerous children wanted to show me things and gave me natural
objects they found outside as “gifts,” and when Taylor asked me to keep an eye on her prized stones. Requests by the children for physical contact were also evidence that the children were not only comfortable with my presence and accepted me, but valued our relationship. For example, when children ran over to me to give me a hug when I arrived, when numerous children routinely asked to hold my hand as we walked their class both to and from the outdoor play area, and when children asked to sit on my lap.

On a sunny November morning, after joyfully rolling down the hill repeatedly with several other children playing “rescue dogs,” Mia got crushed on the bottom of a pile up. As the other children got up and got off her, she started to cry and I asked her if she is going to be okay. “I wanna sit in your lap,” she tearfully replied. “Okay,” I said in a comforting voice. Sabrina chimed in, “I wanna sit on your lap!” I replied, “Okay. You can both sit on my lap. I have room for two.” It is difficult to truly know how the children felt about me and my presence and what a trusted relationship might mean for them. However, it is encouraging to know that I was someone who was able to comfort them when they were sad and one whose lap they wanted to sit on.

In addition to my approach to being with the children, I took into account children’s agency in various aspects of my research. I see my research with children as a collaborative endeavor. The children are active participants and my co-researchers. Our collaboration was a series of negotiations for each interaction, exchange, and encounter. For example, for the methodology of the second part of my research, I utilized a Reggio Emilia approach and structured our time in the woods as an emergent curriculum, which allowed for the children to take the lead in their own artmaking explorations. When children’s art is self-initiated and emergent from their play, it has great potential to help
the children answer questions and create meaning. They can make whatever they choose, follow whatever idea they want to pursue; follow their chosen line of inquiry making their thoughts visible.

I openly discussed with the children my research and told them that I was interested in their play and the art that they created outside. The research became paths and new directions that we were exploring together. For the first part of my research I talked with the children about my notebook and camera, which I carried with me for documentation purposes. I knew the children felt as though they were researching with me when they asked if they could hold my notebook for me and asked if they could draw in my notebook to document natural objects they had found (Figure 2-1).

Figure 2-1. Tina documents a natural object she holds in her left hand
The children also asked me to take photographs of them for documentation. Towards the beginning of my research experience at Hort Woods the children were getting used to me and my processes, including writing in my notebook and taking pictures with my camera. I would tell them I was interested in what they were interested in when they asked me what I was doing. This led to them showing me their collections and asking me to take photographs of natural objects they found. As a result there are many photographs of the children presenting their discoveries to me and pointing out things they believed were important. Frequently children would come up to me to show me something they found, ask me to take a photograph of it and then request that I show it to them on my camera for their approval (Figure 2-2). Fallen autumn leaves were some of the most popular items to display and request to be photographed (Figure 2-3).

Figure 2-2. Children display their discoveries for a photograph
Not only did the children ask me to take photographs of their natural objects, but they also would ask me to take additional pictures if they did not like the image that was captured. For example, Mia and Emma ask me to take a picture of their “rock babies.” These are smooth oval shaped rocks that the girls carried in their arms like a baby as part of their play. After showing them the photograph, which included images of their heads, Emma informed me that she did not like the photograph of herself. I then took another photograph, of which she approved. The children also had fun playing with and posing for photographs. For example, after coming back inside after their outdoor play, Taylor and Jewel asked me to take a photograph of their acorn top with a found seed they placed
inside (Figure 2-4). They giggled as they played and saw the photographs I had taken and asked me to take more pictures. Having an element of control over the camera, whether it was posing for a photograph or asking for their precious objects to be documented in a picture, augmented the children’s agency in the research process.

![Image of Taylor and Jewel](image1.png)

Figure 2-4. Taylor and Jewel pose for a silly photograph with their acorn top

Not only did it become common practice for the children to ask that I take a photograph of something of interest and then want to see the photograph on my camera, but also to look back at other photographs I had taken. The children also asked if they could use my camera to take their own pictures to assist with documentation. The first child to use the camera was Luca, but he was primarily concerned with the buttons and took a couple pictures of my lap without looking at the screen. The second child to use the camera, Gem, who was four years old, wanted to “Take a picture of all my friends.” After she took a number of photographs she asked, “Can I take another picture of those girls?” She knew how to operate a camera, toggled through the images she took and proceeded to take more pictures (Figure 2-5). Once other children observed Gem taking photographs with my camera and understood that it was an accepted practice, requests by
the children to document with my camera became a frequent occurrence. These exchanges with me and my camera allowed for the children to be part of the researching process and to be able to research and document along with me.

Figure 2-5. Two of the 17 photographs taken by Gem with my camera

For the second part of the study I provided each child with their own camera for their own documentation. When each child had a camera, they were not only able to document their own artmaking in the woods, but they were able to document what they felt was significant. The data for my dissertation were largely provided by the children through hundreds of photographs. The children’s documentation through photography was essential to my researching with children. Providing each child with a camera (not just the adults) gave them the power to be co-researchers. In addition, “It reverses the gaze, enabling children’s own agency and vision” (Kind, 2013, p. 428). As exemplified by a photograph Firetruck took of me, the traditional roles of adult and child in research were relinquished; their pictures revealing their unique perspectives (Figure 2-6). We truly were collaborators.
The culmination of our work together took the form of a final art exhibition, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. The art exhibition honored their hard work and provided an opportunity for them to share their artwork and ideas with others. In order for the children to feel a sense of ownership of the exhibition, the children curated the exhibition of their artwork. As curators, each child chose their favorite three photographs to be on display and titled their works. They also came up with a name for the exhibition, *Nature Love: Building in the Woods*, created their own signage, and collected natural objects, such as leaves, acorns, pinecones, and sticks to include as part of the exhibition.
The artwork was purposefully hung at the children’s eye level on the wall. I also included some quotes from the children about their photographs to accompany their artwork and to insure their voice was present in the exhibition and their ideas visible. The location of the exhibition was where they, their families, and their school community would enjoy it most, which was along the second floor of their child care center where their classroom was located. I purposefully did not have my name anywhere in the exhibition since the artwork displayed was that of the child artists, not myself. I also included some of my own documentation photographs of the children working that I hung from the ceiling to give context to the children’s photographs. These documentation photographs provided a behind the scenes look into the artists’ artmaking processes in the woods and provided additional means to make their investigations visible. To complement the art exhibition, I also included group photographs of the children themselves to further give the children the recognition they deserved, in a section titled “Meet the Artists.”

The children’s process during the creation of their artwork and their art exhibition demonstrated the importance of including children as collaborators by augmenting their agency as artists and curators of their own artwork. I reflected on the children’s agency through each step of my dissertation research. For example, the children also chose their own pseudonyms for my dissertation. I felt it was important that they were able to decide how they wanted to be represented in my writing. However, admittedly, I did steer the children into choosing pseudonyms that were actual names after some children chose names such as Firetruck and Starwars. For example, two boys who wanted their name to be Starwars, evolved to Luke and Han. Firetruck, however, wanted to remain Firetruck.
I tried to augment the children’s agency in my discussion of the data as well. I explained to the children my research interests. I described what I was writing about in both the first and second parts of my study, including how we made art in the woods. I asked them what they thought was important for other people to know about our time in the woods together and what I should make sure to include when I wrote this dissertation. By communicating their thoughts to me and creating a further understanding of their artwork and play, the children reveal the potential of what artmaking can offer not only for my research, but also for education related to sustainability.

These conversations happened individually or in groups during their free play time. As a result they were typically brief and full of distractions. It was a common occurrence that mid sentence something more exciting was happening and the children ran to investigate. I asked Sabrina what she thought was important for me to write about in my dissertation about our time together and she replied, “Having fun making.” “Having fun making what?” I asked. After thinking for a second, she replied, “Umm having fun making doing artwork and playing with Lindsay and making stuff.” It was heartening to know that our time together was enjoyable for the children.

Unfortunately, many of these conversations felt forced. They did not emerge naturally and after I asked them questions, I could tell the children did not feel like discussing it with me so I did not pursue it further. Perhaps the children were not interested in talking about what we had done or the temptation to play with the other children playing around them was too great. I was also hoping to get more input from the children about videos that I had taken of their interactions and artmaking. Although I wanted to ask them more questions, there was rarely a good time or quiet place for this to
take place during their busy day. As a result, I was not able to include the children as much as I would have liked in my discussion of the data.

The children were action-oriented and less likely to engage in reflection, which can be a limitation for their participation as co-researchers. However, children do recount their activities and thoughts about their day in conversations later. If I had the opportunity to spend more time with them during other periods, perhaps during their meal time or quiet time if they weren’t napping, or at the end of the day when they were waiting to be picked up, I could have captured more of their thoughts and musings.

When working with children, flexibility with time and place may be particularly important. This possibility could be the subject for future study. However, given the realities of my prescribed time with these children, I utilized narrative inquiry in reporting this work, assuring that the children’s voices and stories would be heard. This is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Through my research with children, I consider the trusted relationships I built with them, my way of being in the presence of the children, and practicing “being there” with them, of the utmost importance. I also consider my role to be a researcher collaborating with children, where I aimed to augment their voice and agency in the research process.

**Theoretical Framework**

My views concerning children are grounded in theory that values and respects children, specifically illustrated by the Reggio Emilia approach. Built relationships and
trust with the children with whom I was researching was fundamental in my doctoral work, especially as I entered into a more active role during the second part of my study, which was situated in the “third pedagogical site” (Wilson, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). Brent Wilson’s (2005, 2008a, 2008b) concept of third site pedagogy also guided my work. The third pedagogical site is a place in which informal collaboration between children and adults occurs that is separate from the formal classroom (Wilson, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). This theoretical framework will be explored and discussed in detail in this chapter.

A Brief History of Reggio Emilia

There are many models and approaches to early childhood education. The ethical and socially just ideals, beliefs, and practices upon which the Reggio Emilia approach is based make it much more than an approach to early childhood education, but a system of thought and a philosophy. The history of the Reggio Emilia approach is important to understand in order to appreciate the influence of the culture of Reggio Emilia on methods of teaching young children.

The Reggio Emilia approach is named after the capital city and region of Reggio Emilia in Italy. Only days after World War II ended in 1945, the population of a small village in the region of Reggio Emilia came together and built a school for young children using only volunteers (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). This occurred in an environment of greater political equity for women, which empowered women to return to the workforce after the war. These women advocated for and made available quality child care for their children (Fraser, 2000). The entire community was invested in
starting this early childhood program. Over time, it inspired more programs to be established (Edwards et al., 1993).

The founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, Loris Malaguzzi, opened the first municipal school in Italy in 1963 (Edwards et al., 1993). Before that time, the schools were governed and managed by the Catholic Church (Edwards et al., 1993). Loris Malaguzzi said that the child was “now understood as interactionist and constructivist. This new child had the right to a school that was more aware and more focused, a school made up of professional teachers” (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 2005, p. 7). The Reggio approach to teaching was “conceptualized as a retort to the marginal and subsidiary role commonly assigned to expressive education” and was a “reaction against the concept of the education of young children based mainly on words and simple-minded rituals” (Gandini et al., 2005, p. 7). The importance of social justice in this approach to education reflects the history of Reggio Emilia since many of the citizens of the city participated in the resistance movement during World War II. New and Kantor (2013) stated that “Reggio Emilia’s municipal early childhood services grew out of this same culture of collaboration and activism” (p. 332). What started off as a philosophy of young children’s education in a small city in Italy soon became an admired approach that was transported to the United States and internationally.

The Reggio Emilia approach arrived in the United States in the late 1980s (New & Kantor, 2013). The Reggio philosophy was built upon the work of Piaget, Dewey, Montessori, Hawkins, and others during the Italian progressive movement of the 1950s (Gandini et al., 2005). This philosophy was grounded in the belief that children had unrecognized potential and intellectual abilities that could flourish given the opportunity
and thus represented an intellectually challenging approach. Reggio Emilia came to the United States during a time when research concerning children’s brain development was flourishing and very popular (New & Kantor, 2013). In 1987, the traveling Reggio Emilia exhibition, “The Hundred Languages of Children,” came to the United States and attracted the interest and awe of many educators. The exhibition demonstrated the hundred languages of children, including the children’s symbolic languages, such as drawing and painting, in which children made visible their thinking. The popularity of Reggio Emilia grew rapidly and by the late 1990s it was extremely well known. In 1991, *Newsweek* named Reggio Emilia the best early childhood system in the world.

In the United States, the Reggio Emilia approach began to lose some of its popularity with the introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 during the George W. Bush presidency. There was a shift of focus onto standardized testing; the NCLB goals clashed with Reggio’s ‘untestability’ (New & Kantor, 2013). Despite the challenges imposed by NCLB, there are many Reggio inspired schools in the United States today. The approach to learning in these schools has demonstrated great benefits for their children, community, and early childhood education.

**The Image of the Child**

The image of the child is fundamental to the Reggio Emilia philosophy. It incorporates a way of being with, interacting with, and responding to children. The image of the child informs every encounter that an adult has with a child. This philosophy
provides the foundation of my research with children. Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, defines the image of the child:

Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image. For example, if your image is that boys and girls are very different from one another, you will behave differently in your interactions with each of them. (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 1)

Malaguzzi (1994) continued to discuss that the image of the child needs to be a positive and respectful one: “It is necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold” (p. 5).

I believe that the image of the child is one of the most significant concepts that guide how adults interact with children. The ways in which adults view children, what they think children are able to understand, what they judge children to be capable of, all influence how they interact with a child. The biases, preconceived notions, and views concerning the abilities of children, all inform adults’ encounters with children.

We must treat all people as we would like to be treated, and this is especially important when we are in the presence of children. We need to grant children respect, as all human beings rightly deserve. Unfortunately, the idea that children are not competent, capable, or complete is pervasive in our society. Many times, the opinions and emotions of children are not taken seriously. For example, many people laugh at photographs of children who are crying while sitting on the lap of a stranger posing as Santa Claus or the
Easter Bunny. Many parents and adults, knowing the children are physically safe, share these photos of their children crying in fear because they think they are cute and endearing. If an adult was forced to sit on a strange man’s lap and resorted to crying in fear, it would not be considered a laughing matter. Their cries would not be dismissed. This is just one example where children’s views and feelings are not respected and taken seriously. Young children are especially prone to disrespectful treatment.

It is particularly important to consider the image of the child when researching with children. Malaguzzi (1994) discussed further how children are strong and capable and points out that adults who have differing views of children should realize that their beliefs and actions, instead of conferring benefit, may have unintended adverse consequences for the child’s development:

Those who have the image of the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass gain something from this belief only for themselves. We don’t need that as an image of children. Instead of always giving children protection, we need to give them the recognition of their rights and of their strengths. (p. 5)

Though my research with the children, I strove to give them that recognition and the right to be collaborators in research concerning themselves. The image of the child is most frequently discussed in education contexts. It needs to be emphasized that these concepts are not only important considerations for teachers, but for all parents and adults, and especially researchers. Thompson (2005) and Tarr (2003) encouraged educators to reflect on their image of the child and the ways in which their assumptions might influence their practices.
In research, there are special protections for children as research subjects. These additional protections for children participating in research are important and necessary. Parental consent is required, and for older children, their assent is necessary as well. Traditionally in research, children do not have any power or agency in the research process. The researcher commonly views their research in a traditional top down approach where the researcher holds the knowledge and power and studies children through a lens that views them as having inferior capacity. In my research I aim to reject the hierarchical approach to researching children as subjects and instead fully integrate my image of the child in my project. One of the most significant ways that I have tried to do this is to not only view them as full participants, but also to involve them as much as possible in the research process. The nature of my qualitative research lends itself well to this approach, allowing openness and full transparency with the children.

The Hundred Languages of Children

The hundred languages of children is another element of the Reggio Emilia philosophy that is closely tied to the image of the child. It embraces the concept of multiple intelligences. The premise is that children do not only have their spoken language, but in fact have a hundred languages or ways of expression and communication. Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (2012) explained, “Reggio educators have clarified how they use the word languages as a metaphor for the different ways humans express themselves and as a wider view of the extraordinary competence of children” (p. 17). The number 100 used in the term one hundred languages is an arbitrary
large number used to illustrate the numerous ways children are able to communicate their thoughts and ideas.

Each and every one of the ways children communicate needs to be respected and valued. Spoken language is typically privileged in the majority of contexts, but children communicate their ideas in a variety of ways. Edwards et al. (2012) stated that “Children experiment and develop competencies in using spoken language, gestures, drawings, painting, building, clay and wire sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, music, and emerging writing, to name a few” (p. 7). Children use various languages, such as artmaking, “to make their own thinking visible” (p. 7).

There is a poem written by Loris Malaguzzi, translated by Lella Gandidni, titled, “No Way. The Hundred is There.” Edwards et al. (2012) include the poem in the third edition of The Hundred Languages of Children as a way to preface their philosophy and I believe it is important to include it here as well:

The child

is made of one hundred.

The child has

a hundred languages

a hundred hands

a hundred thoughts

a hundred ways of thinking

of playing, of speaking.

A hundred always a hundred

ways of listening
of marveling, of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.
The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and at Christmas.
They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.
They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there. (p. 3)

I believe this poem beautifully illustrates how the Reggio Emilia approach views children
and how they hold their hundred languages in the highest regard. The poem ends with
the child exerting their agency, pushing back, refusing to be silenced.

As researchers it is our duty to listen to children’s hundred languages and make them visible. I write their personal stories and personal histories as I am embedded with them and collaborate with them in this research. I am not able and do not desire to remove myself from my research with children. Who I am as a person is part of who I
am as a researcher. Davies (2014) writes “we, as social science researchers, are part of, and encounter, already entangled matter and meanings that affect us, and that we affect, in an ongoing, always changing set of movements. Each action we engage in and each interpretation is, therefore, an ethical matter and mattering” (p. 3). My professional identity as a teacher, artist, and now researcher, and who I am as a person, cannot be separated from my work with children. How we view children and value their hundred languages is reflected in everything we do with them. Davies (2014) discussed issues we must consider when working with children and suggested that researchers need to practice their listening, beyond listening as usual, and be open to the possibilities of “the listening as a subject as intra-active becoming” (p. 34).

In my research with children at Hort Woods, I worked on my listening practices. It is essential to take the time and care to not only hear but to truly listen to, absorb and appreciate these hundred languages. Rinaldi (2001) discussed the meaning of listening:

   Listening should be sensitive to the patterns that connect us to others. Our understanding and our own being are a small part of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together. Listening should be open and sensitive to the need to listen and be listened to, and the need to listen with all our senses, not just with our ears. Listening should recognize the many languages, symbols and codes that people use in order to express themselves and communicate…Listening removes the individual from anonymity (and children cannot bear to be anonymous). It legitimizes us and gives us visibility. It enriches both those who listen and those who produce the message. (p. 2-3)
Both Thompson (2005) and Tarr (2003) wrote that one approach educators can use to begin to understand and provide greater value to children’s work is through a “pedagogy of listening,” which is a Reggio Emilia concept as well. Educators, as well as researchers and parents, need to truly listen to children. McClure (2009) argued for “localized, site-specific reconsideration of images of children and pedagogy that renders images of young children as constructions simultaneously mythologized and marginalized by the categorizations of art and education” (p. 91). We must no longer marginalize children, but thoughtfully listen to children, reflect on our preconceived ideas about children, and put the needs of children back at the center of our efforts.

**The Language of Art.**

Included in the hundred languages of children are various forms of artmaking. Art allows for many possible means of communication and provides opportunities for children to form deeper connections and explorations with place. Pelo (2007) demonstrated and discussed the concept that there is in fact a language of art. Tarr (2003) stated, “Experiences in visual expression are not add-ons or isolated activities but are a form of inquiry or way to investigate a theory, idea, or problem, a way of clarifying understanding, the communication of an idea” (p. 11). Kind (2010) states, “There may be an interest and desire to engage with the arts as a visual language, yet without a depth of conceptual understanding too often the visual arts are viewed as literal representations of self, experience, or knowledge” (p. 116). The art educator and researcher are uniquely situated to understand these learning processes and promote these ideas and use of these
models. “In fact, drawing, painting (and the use of all languages) are experiences and explorations of life, of the senses, and of meanings. They are an expression of urgency, desires, reassurance, research, hypotheses, readjustments, constructions, and inventions” (Gandini et al., 2005, p. 9). Tarr (2003) also discussed, “We can think carefully about how we might move beyond the constraints we have placed upon ourselves to provide opportunities worthy of children who are making and communicating meaning and who are capable of creating rather than replicating culture” (p. 11). When children create art that is their own, as opposed to coming from an adult, they are able to express ideas that are their own as well.

These artistic expressions are not isolated to a single child, but are frequently created alongside or in collaboration with other children. Artmaking as a social endeavor embraces the notion that children’s art is often a social collaborative act (Thompson, 1999, 2009). Children listen to and respond to each other’s visual languages. “When preschool and kindergarten children draw in close proximity to others, they initiate interactions overtly as well as inadvertently” (Thompson, 1999, p. 66). One example is as follows: Elsa spontaneously started drawing with her finger in the sand on the ground (Figure 2-7).
Figure 2-7. Elsa uses her finger to draw in the sand

The children were playing outside during their outdoor free play time. Elsa, in her *Frozen* dress, crouched down and began to draw next to the path in the sand with her finger. When her drawings were noticed, other children crouched down beside her and started drawing as well (Figure 2-8). Some children used their fingers to draw while others used little sticks and wood chips they found in the sand.
As an interested adult, I stood close by and took photographs. It was exciting for me to see the drawing activity catch on and that so many children naturally gravitated towards the drawing event. I was not part of the children’s conversations during this event, but my presence still had an effect on the children’s artmaking. Lindsay shared that she was drawing a picture of me in the sand (Figure 2-9).
Figure 2-9. Lindsay draws me with her finger

The sand drawings gradually became a social group artmaking activity involving seven children (Figure 2-10). Some of the children who chose not to join the community drawing event still came over to watch. A couple children drew individual drawings while others drew together. These children were communicating using their drawings in the sand, another example of one of the hundred languages of children, and reaffirming the significance of the social aspect of artmaking; forming relations not only with the sand, but with each other.
Third Site Pedagogy

In grounding and developing my role as a researcher in a sound theoretical framework as I planned my dissertation research project, I also turned to Wilson’s concept of third-site pedagogy. In a discussion of artwork by J. C. Holz, Wilson (1974) discussed the ludic behavior continuum. Wilson (1974) argued that school art is very different from play art since it has rules and guidelines set by adults, with the result being that the art produced is not truly the children’s own. As a result, school art falls toward the liminal end of the ludic continuum. Viktor Turner defined liminality as a "complex series of episodes in sacred space-time, and may also include subversive and ludic events" (as cited in M. Wilson, 1977, p. 45). Concerning the other end, Wilson (1974)
stated, “The spontaneous art of young people is play par excellence. It is certainly one of the most flexible, potentially complex, and involving of all types of play” (p. 4).

In the first part of my research study, I researched children’s spontaneous artmaking during their outdoor free play—their ludic play art. In the second part of my research, I studied deliberate artmaking in the woods beyond their outdoor play area where I endeavored to facilitate conditions in which ludic play art was possible for the children. In order to accomplish this, I removed the obligation of participation as Wilson (1974) discussed and as is required for volunteering in any research study. If a child who was enrolled in the study did not want to participate in the woods or in the classroom that day, they did not have to join the activity. However, no child chose not to participate. There were still some constraints and rules that needed to be followed (for safety) while we were out in the woods so ludic play was not fully incorporated; however, with a provocation to create art and an emergent curriculum, my hope was that children felt as though they were creating art that was their own. Although not self-initiated, collaborating with nature with their canvas, their art materials, and each other, the artmaking possibilities were endless. This aligns with Wilson’s (1974) ideas, describing spontaneous artmaking as a flexible and a potentially complex type of play.

Wilson (2005) later expanded on his ideas of the ludic play continuum and theorized three pedagogical sites. The first site is the informal space of play art, the second is the formal traditional school art site where art is adult directed, and the third pedagogical site is “between school classrooms and kids’ self-initiated visual cultural spaces—a site where adults and kids collaborate in making connections and interpreting
webs of relationships” (Wilson, 2005, p. 18). I argue that the second part of my study falls within this third pedagogical site.

In my dissertation field work, children had agency in a space “wherein kids function simultaneously as teachers, students, and audience” (Wilson, 2005, p. 23). The children and I collaborated, researched, investigated, and created art with nature together. When we were in the woods, the natural surroundings provided opportunities to partially relinquish the roles of child and adult. This facilitated our becoming collaborators. While in the woods we were still at school, but also not at school, thereby providing a third pedagogical site. Wilson (2008b) stated that one of the most important features of the third site is promoting and enabling children and researchers to pursue a common interest (p. 128) “where adults and kids collaborate as colleagues” (p. 129). In my studies, we were co-researchers using art to explore our relationships with nature.

In summary, in addition to the important concepts related to the image and languages of the child that are essential to the Reggio Emilia approach, the theoretical framework described by Wilson, specifically Wilson’s (2005, 2008a, 2008b) three pedagogical sites, helped guide my dissertation research. The use of Wilson’s third site pedagogy is consistent with a broad interpretation and implementation of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. In this expanded construct, the concepts central to the image of the child and the hundred languages of children are applied in the woods, a setting separate from the traditional classroom. This is a natural connection, since the third pedagogical site is an ideal space to facilitate the application of Reggio ideas. In the third site the child is heard and a respected collaborator. It therefore can be considered an extension of Reggio beliefs. The use of Wilson’s (2008b) third and “most powerful pedagogical site”
outlined above, provided additional context for my relationship and research with the children as well as perspective as I continuously reflect on my role with the children (p. 129).

**Collaboration and Negotiation**

Collaboration involves negotiation. The children were my colleagues; however, a truly equal collaboration with the children was not possible for my research, although it remained a worthwhile goal. I was an unavoidable, though interested, adult presence, not a peer. As an adult, the power dynamics engrained in our society and culture were too embedded to fully surrender our child-adult roles. There were safety concerns and school regulations to consider as well, given the ages of the children. However, during our time together, I believe that we were able to experience an other-than-child/other-than-adult collaboration in which we relinquished our traditional child and adult roles to a certain extent and were able to become colleagues (Wilson, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). Although I believed us to be co-researchers, there was still a power imbalance. Within the spaces of the third pedagogical site, the power imbalance and traditional authority of the adult can be challenged, although it is difficult and in some circumstances impossible to completely overcome. Whether it is necessary for the roles to be entirely equal, and the extent to which different degrees of inequality impede the ability to achieve desired outcomes of research, remain open questions.

The ways in which I viewed my role with the children and how the children understood my presence evolved over time. I continued to reflect on what it meant to be
an atypical interested adult researching with them. Researching with children in the third site is a continuous negotiation and collaboration. I considered, “What possibilities for inquiry and understanding emerge in the specific kinds of liminal spaces that exist in early childhood classrooms when teachers and children negotiate the focus and structure of their time together?” (Thompson, 2009, p. 30). When I first started working with the children, they learned to get to know me and my role through built trusted relationships. At the same time I learned by getting to know them. The process of developing relationships with the children as well as the types of relationships, were also dependent upon the children and what types of relationships they wanted with me. As a former elementary school art teacher, I initially struggled to know my place with the children, balancing being an interested adult investigating with them and an adult who more actively assumed the role of teacher. The children also had expectations of me as an adult in their child care setting that cast me in a teacher-like role, which brought with it certain expectations for what I would do with and for them. The children expected me to enforce established school rules and behavior expectations. For example, children would approach me to let me know that another child pushed them or to let me know that they needed to use the bathroom. While my intention was to meet them as full collaborators, their assumptions and the assumptions of the center itself made that difficult. For each encounter, exchange, and interaction, there was negotiated agency and compromise.

When I reflect on collaboration and negotiation in research with children, I find it primarily to involve ethical considerations. The relational ethics of researching with children are closely tied to the image and vulnerability of the child and power dynamics. As producers of their own culture and constructors of knowledge, children cannot be seen
as inferior and passive subjects to be researched. The researcher, who is inherently privileged, must consider their positionality and give children the opportunity to have an active role in research that concerns them.

For this dissertation, some of the power imbalance was unavoidable. I am the person in the position of power and privilege and I am the one writing the stories in this dissertation about the children. I believe that I was successful in the third pedagogical site when collecting data with the children. Documentation was very open in both the first and second parts of the study. It was not me separated from them, but us investigating together. I was involved with the children’s play and artmaking when invited and the emergent curriculum allowed the children to take the lead in their artmaking explorations. Providing cameras for the children during the second part of the study was instrumental in enabling and supporting our collaboration. Sometimes the collaboration was messy and was not what I had envisioned. Although I attempted to include the children’s views in my discussion of the data, I was not fully able to do so due, in part, to time constraints, as previously discussed. There was little interest in having conversations about what they created on a subsequent day. The ages of the children, particularly the three year olds, also made it challenging at times to interpret the data together. These may also reflect developmental limitations that are unavoidable.

I have struggled with my own unease as a researcher. This unease did not surface until after my time working with the children ended and I began to write about our experiences. I felt an immense responsibility to authentically write the children’s stories. My apprehension was not with researching with the children, but with writing about my research with the children.
In the third site children and adults relinquish their traditional roles, which have an effect on my role as a researcher. Although in the third site I was able to relinquish certain roles, I struggle to relinquish others. As I try to deal with my own unease and my own thinking about what happened, I realize that making sense of each other’s experiences is a vigorous negotiation. I have a deep concern of the ethics of interpreting the children’s stories and having my voice overtake the voice of the children. I realize that writing about the possible phenomena that could be happening does not decenter the children’s voices and can add valuable context to their stories. However, I struggle with committing in writing an interpretation that may not be consistent with the child’s view. Would I want someone writing about, analyzing, and interpreting my artmaking experiences without my input? My answer would be no. Artmaking is a deeply personal and complex experience and someone writing about it without my participation would feel violating and intrusive. The written narratives in this dissertation, which include some of my thoughts at the time, are a form of interpretation. Drawing additional conclusions from these stories without the input of the children carries a large risk of interpreting them incorrectly. The children’s participation is essential. I discuss this viewpoint further in Chapter 5.

One of the goals of my dissertation research is to dismantle some of the traditional views of researching children and reconsider the possibilities of researching with children as respected, valued, and capable collaborators. I believe that researching with children is dependent upon how we view children and our image of the child. We must believe that children are our research partners and treat them accordingly to help ensure that researching with children is conducted in an ethical manner. This should also lead to
better meeting the aims of the research by both reducing adult biases and allowing the voices of the children to be heard. We will never truly be able to achieve these goals until we change the way we view our children—where their needs, potential, and abilities are genuinely and fully respected and reside at the heart of every art educator’s practice.

Children’s Ecological Identity

When researching with children, we need to respect their ideas and abilities, including their developing ecological identities. A child’s ecological identity is shaped by many factors, one of which is the concept of home. When discussing ideas concerning home, Noddings (2002) stated, “Place does not determine the self, but it influences and shapes it” (p. 174). This ecological identity is what we need to keep in mind and foster in children. Pelo (2014) discussed how place is an integral part of our identities. Every child has a home, an important special place to which the child connects, understands, and becomes rooted. When no place feels like home, the child will not have a relationship with, or feel a responsibility for, that place. Not feeling bonded with a place may result in not respecting the land or our Earth as a whole. Pelo (2013) states:

To nurture ecological identity in young children, we invite them into relationship with the world beyond walls and with the creatures that live there. We invite them into ethical thinking anchored by the compassion that comes from caring and engaging in relationships. We invite them to come home to the Earth, and to live honorably in that home. (p. 43)
As children learn about the natural world within and around their place through art, they notice changes in their natural environment, such as the ones that come with the seasons, and grow a love and a sense of wonder for the natural inhabitants. “Time is intimacy. When we visit a landscape again and again—visit and notice, consciously, what we find there; visit and talk about what we notice—when we visit the landscape again and again, we come to know its particularities” (Pelo, 2013, p. 65). Children learn about who they are in relation to other living and nonliving entities around them through physical, visual, auditory and even olfactory contact with the natural environment. Rinaldi (2003) states that “Children are born searching for and, therefore, researching the meaning of life, the meaning of the self in relation to others and the world” (p. 2).

Art is a tool for life, part of the hundred languages, which enables children to discover and relate to the world around them. They can explore what it means to be in a shared world with others and be a part of nature. Through artmaking, children are able to learn about and form relations with the natural inhabitants they encounter—developing an ecological identity, which can guide them to live sustainable lives.
Chapter 3
Researching with Nature

The children can see the woods from indoors through the large windows lining the hall outside their classroom. When the children are playing in the outdoor play area, they play under the branches of large oak trees that live closer to the school, but the woods themselves lie beyond the fence. The fence stands as a border between their outdoor play area and the woods beyond. The woods were rarely utilized by the teachers at the child care center. I was privileged to work with a teacher whose passion for ecological sustainability made her excited to take her class, with whom I had been working, beyond the boundary; beyond the fence into the woods.

We researched with the woods. The with in researching with nature is purposeful. When I consider children playing and creating art in the outdoors, they are not merely learning about nature or in nature, but with nature. As Taylor (2013) discussed, it is problematic to view children as subjects learning about nature as an object. When we use this language, talking about nature as an “other,” it puts a distance between us. Children are part of nature. Nature is part of children. Nature cannot be teased out. Taylor (2013) discussed common worlds wherein both childhood and nature are reclaimed as “full of entangled and uneven historical and geographical relations, political tensions, ethical dilemmas and unending possibilities” (p. 62). Children are not separate from nature, but fully entangled.
When I first embarked on my research with children and the woods, I assumed that if children spent time in nature they would gradually foster a relationship and begin to love it. I believed that when children could connect meaningfully with the natural world then they could start to understand it. When they understood it, then they might care about it and want to protect it. I hoped that children could be stewards for the environment and that this could be the generation to help save the earth after having fallen in love with it. This is the dominant view underlying the majority of the literature on children and the natural world. However, after reading about ‘common worlds’ pedagogies, especially Taylor (2013), I have shifted my mindset. This shift may appear insignificant; however, I believe it is a critical distinction that can make a difference. The flaw in thinking that we could be stewards for the environment, or that we need to take care of it, is that this positions the environment as separate from us. This way of thinking not only separates humans from the environment, but also positions us as superior, with nature a subservient object that relies on humans to protect and save it. This hierarchical view of humans as superior to nature is incompatible with ecological sustainability. It is not just a hierarchical way of thinking, but also dualistic. This traditional way of thinking creates a human-nature divide that separates humans from the natural world.

I believe that one way we can combat this hierarchical and dualistic mindset is by encouraging the development of an ecological identity, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Nurturing an ecological identity could help children to understand that the natural world is part of who they are and integral to their identity. Pelo (2013) discussed that to develop an ecological identity one must both “re-situate the human within the ecological, and... re-situate the beyond-human within the ethical” (p. 43). When children
understand that they are a part of nature, then the barrier between themselves and the
more-than-human can disappear. The differences can begin to fade into the background
and the children can realize that nature is who they are. Elliott and Young (2016) stated,
“The potential for children in this relational pedagogy is to realign humans as part of
nature, and something changes when this is explicit. It is not a story of us and them, but
the reimagining of ‘we’” (p. 61). The shifted mindset of thinking about “we” is a
challenging and powerful one; an essential one to live ethically. The children and I
came entangled with the woods—*we* researched together.

“The woods,” officially named Hort Woods, is a four acre patch of oak-hickory
forest. Large white and black oaks have been growing there since before the university
was founded in 1855. It is considered an urban woodlot, and along with the oaks,
invasive non-native trees like the Norway Maple grow (Pennsylvania State University
Office of Physical Plant, n.d.). The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and
Natural Resources (n.d.) defines invasive plants:

“Invasive” is a name for plant species that are not native to the state, grow
aggressively, spread quickly, and displace native vegetation. Invasive plants are
generally undesirable because they are difficult and costly to control and can
dominate entire habitats, making them environmentally destructive in certain
situations. (p. 1)

Like many urban woodlots, the sunlight that reaches the forest floor along the
edges of the woods encourages growth of invasive plants, which can then crowd out
native species. The university is starting a rehabilitation project for this patch of woods
to remove invasive species and to also plant native species, such as white oak, redbud,
serviceberry, black cohosh, and witch-hazel, where there are gaps in the canopy (Pennsylvania State University Office of Physical Plant, n.d.).

Hort Woods, however, is more than a collection of the plant species and the countless creatures that live there. It is our collaborator for this research (Figure 3-1). In this chapter I will discuss researching with nature, not merely in it and about it, and consider nature as teacher and nature as art studio.

![Google Map of the woods and the Child Care Center at Hort Woods](image)

Figure 3-1. Google Map of the woods and the Child Care Center at Hort Woods

**Nature as Teacher**

Nestled in Hort Woods, a blanket lay draped over a bed of fallen leaves under a canopy of oak trees in a clearing in the forest—our ‘home base.’ This is the place where we gathered together to start our outdoor explorations; traces of the indoors; a site they
could see from a distance offering security in the four acre section of woods. Relaxing together on a familiar object (blanket) adds to their feeling of safety. The blanket can also be viewed as a barrier between the children and their natural world. Whereas lying directly on the dirt and leaves would have been an even more natural experience, the children on the blanket still clearly appreciate the natural environment above and around them.

The children giggle and squirm as they lay on the blanket looking up at the leaves fluttering overhead (Figure 3-2). Firetruck twirls a green maple leaf stem between his forefinger and thumb and carefully places it next to an old brown oak leaf on the corner of the blanket above his head to free up his excited hands. The children giggle and smile and flip over from back to front and front to back in delight. The boy lying next to Firetruck, Leaf, brushes the leaves off the blanket, not realizing their significance. Silently in response, Firetruck picks his maple leaf back up and resumes twirling it between his finger and thumb. Smiles stretch across the children’s faces as they get ready to start another adventure in the woods. Jewel says, “I wanna stay here overnight.” The children are eager and willing to continue their partnership with the woods.
One concept I consider in my research is the role of the woods and nature as teacher. Since children are a part of nature, they in essence are able to teach and learn about themselves—to learn from each other and the more-than-human while exploring the woods and getting entangled with the natural world.

The Environment as the Third Teacher

The environment as the “third teacher” is an important aspect of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. In Reggio literature, the third teacher is typically referred to as the indoor classroom space. The approach recognizes the power that the learning space has on the learning itself. Edwards et al. (2012) state, “The environment is seen here as educating the child; in fact, it is considered ‘the third educator’ along with the team of
two teachers” (p. 339). Careful attention is placed on the setting where children learn, such as the layout of the classroom and the school, the materials that are available for the children to use, including how they are presented and organized, the lighting, displays on the walls of documentation that make visible children’s learning, the furniture and décor—the entirety of the physical space. Edwards et al. (2012) point out that “It is important to note that the quality of a space (or environment) results from many factors: size and shape, functional organization, and sensory experience, color, light, and materials” (p. 325). However, the environment as teacher is not narrowly construed as just the physical environment: Reggio educators recognize the importance of the culture, relationships and interactions that emerge between the people and materials available within the space, and the provision of choices for the children (Edwards et al., 2012). Edwards et al. (2012) explain:

Each school is full of light, variety, and a certain kind of joy. In addition, each school shows how teachers, parents, and children, working and playing together, have created a unique space—a space that reflects their personal lives, the history of their school, the many layers of culture, and a nexus of well-thought-out choices. (p. 340)

Every aspect of the classroom is carefully thought out to be optimized for the children. As a teacher, the space plays an instrumental role in children’s learning. I intend to extend the Reggio concept of the environment as the third teacher beyond the walls of the school. For this research I am interested in outdoor learning spaces and the natural environment as the third teacher. I consider the possibilities that can be afforded when the outdoors is considered a teacher in itself.
The Natural Environment as the Third Teacher

There is limited writing about the natural environment as a learning space in Reggio Emilia literature. Perhaps this is because in Reggio Emilia, Italy, schools typically may not have sufficient natural areas adjacent to them to serve as a space for learning. Edwards et al. (2012) state:

Educators in the United States are well aware of the importance of the environment. This is evident, for example, in their imaginative use of outdoor spaces, a marvelous American resource not so readily available to, or so easily tapped by, Italian teachers, who often work in a highly urbanized environment. (p. 319)

However, in Reggio Emilia, the United States, and globally, schools and classrooms are carefully designed and planned by adults. The natural environment, on the other hand, is a space that is not curated by people; it is, however, one that still actively teaches. Unlike the classroom, which is a controlled environment, the outdoors functions differently. Nature cannot be designed, organized or regulated by the teacher. It is dynamic. There are many elements outside of a person’s control, from the emergence of invasive vegetation, presence of insects, birds and other non-human living species, to the volatility of the weather. The natural world itself commands respect and requires a more responsive and collaborative relationship. It instructs and educates us, and informs and coaches us as we interact with it and learn to better collaborate with and support each other. Nature becomes the teacher.
It is not a novel proposal that nature can be seen as a teacher. In environmental education literature, it is a common idea that children learn from nature and that nature is a teacher; however, nature is typically still viewed and written about as being separate from children. In common world pedagogies literature, children are seen as inseparable from nature. The natural environment is more than a tool. It is an active, vibrant teacher.

The woods are more than an object to be used. Discoveries can be made and much can be investigated when one is watchful, attentive, listening, and encountering the natural world. The diversity of the woods and freedom from indoor constraints can facilitate the creation of new ideas, concepts, and possibilities communicated through art.

Describing common world pedagogies, Blenkinsop, Jickling, Morse, and Jensen (2018) state, “No longer is the environment an important backdrop upon which learning happens, nor is it simply something to be interpreted solely by adult humans. This is a time where the environment can become an active member in teaching and learning” (p. 9). Many questions come to mind when the natural environment is reframed as teacher. What is the role of the outdoors and the more-than-human in children’s lives as learning spaces? How are those natural experiences mediated by adults? The types of encounters young children typically have in school and at home are usually directed by adults. Adults typically decide the type of spaces where children learn and the materials they encounter in their learning space. Therefore, what adults view as important are unconsciously or consciously imposed on children. Many children are not typically allowed to go outside at free will, but must go outside only when a parent or teacher grants permission (Kemple, Oh, Kenney, & Smith-Bonahue, 2016). Inside is the default
learning space. How does this restriction limit children’s learning? What would happen if children had more time to learn, play, and create art with natural materials?

Children should have time and opportunities to form relationships with and learn from the natural world through both artmaking and outdoor experiences. Aside from being with and learning with nature outside, which is limited for children at school, I also consider bringing aspects of the outside indoors, and bringing some of the indoors outside, and the educational value both can afford.

I believe that extending the Reggio philosophy of the environment as the third teacher to the natural environment as the third teacher is a more effective way to illustrate nature as teacher than the way it is discussed in environmental education literature. Anne Dyson (2016) discusses a “permeable curriculum,” a flexible adaptable curriculum that brings to the classroom concepts, culture, interests and resources that are relevant to the individual children being educated and can positively influence their development and learning. Learning and creating with the woods can be considered a further approach for the use of the permeable curriculum by using the natural world to supplement and enrich the children’s educational experiences, fostering their understanding of their place on our earth and their place within nature. When classroom boundaries are made to be more porous and permeable between outside and inside, the curriculum and curricular space has an opportunity to blend. I consider the potential of the natural environment as the third teacher by bringing the outside indoors and the indoors outside.
**Bringing the Outside Indoors.**

During our time in the woods together, we brought a basket outside with us each day, which we left at our home base (Figure 3-3). While in the woods, children discovered and collected natural objects such as leaves, sticks, feathers, rocks, acorns, and bark. They placed their collected treasures that they wanted to further investigate in the basket to bring indoors back to their classroom. I explained to the children that we were just borrowing the natural objects for a short time and then we would return them to the woods. By bringing the outside indoors, the children were able to extend their learning in the classroom.

![Figure 3-3. Basket of collected natural objects](image-url)
Once inside, the natural objects were placed on the light table. During the children’s indoor free choice time they were able to go to the light table at will and study and play with the objects and books. The light table provided a great space for the children to keep and more closely study their collections of newly found outdoor objects throughout the three weeks. They took pleasure in studying the natural objects they found in more detail once inside (Figure 3-4).

![Image](image-url)

Figure 3-4. Lindsay investigates natural objects on the light table

By bringing the objects into the classroom, the children were provided with additional opportunities and time to investigate and play with their collections. The light table allowed the children to look carefully at the natural objects and notice new details, such as the veins in leaves as they were placed on the table with the light shining through.
They were also able to observe the changes in the natural objects over time, such as how leaves began to dry out and curl. The objects changed color, texture, shape, and smell over this period of time, all of which the children had the opportunity to observe. Not only were the children able to study their own collected objects, but the natural objects that other children collected as well.

In addition to observations at the light table, the children were able to play with the natural materials that they brought indoors. I believe that this play can be powerful as a way to further entangle children with nature and form their ecological identity. As an example, two girls took a feather in each hand, waving their arms up and down as they ran around the carpet in circles—embodying hawks (Figure 3-5).

Figure 3-5. Elsa and Lindsay wave feathers up and down embodying hawks
On the light table alongside the objects were books on land artists, which the children could explore during their free time. The books primarily included the work of Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo. They had large images to engage the children in their work (Figure 3-6).

Figure 3-6. Books on land artists

The large books functioned as a provocation and an example of how some people have worked with nature to create artwork. The children enjoyed looking through the books and at the photographs (Figure 3-7). While we were in the woods, the children were not instructed to make artwork in a style similar to these contemporary land artists, but to create art with nature however they felt best suited their individual explorations. Instead of curtailing their own investigations to conform to someone else’s processes or
creating artwork by copying the ideas or styles of others, they were encouraged to freely express their own impressions, thoughts, and ideas. In the spirit of a Reggio Emilia approach, the children used objects they found in nature and pursued their own inquires in their artwork (Reggio Children, 2004).

Figure 3-7. Firetruck works at the light table

Their natural collections stayed on the light table for a period of three weeks, which spanned the course of the three weeks that each of the three groups had their time
in the woods. By the end of the three weeks, the light table had compiled all of the collected natural objects from all of the children in the classroom. At the end of the three weeks we returned all the objects to the woods, which caused some sadness for some of the children as they had become attached to them. Importantly, the children understood that the woods was home for these natural objects and where they belonged.

I recognize that when inside the classroom, the natural objects were out of place and away from their natural setting and surroundings. The context and surroundings in which natural materials are studied are important; however, I do believe that first seeing the objects in their natural environment gives the children an understanding from where the objects came and their place in nature. By bringing aspects of the outdoors inside, the natural world continued to teach beyond the hour that the children spent in the woods. Returning the objects to the woods continued this circle of learning.

Bringing natural materials inside is not unique to my research and is an easy way to incorporate the natural world into the indoor learning space. Natural materials can be seen in many classrooms and are frequently found in Reggio inspired classrooms. The Reggio approach emphasizes the importance of found objects and loose parts as part of children’s materials (Topal & Gandini, 1999, 2019). Loose parts, a term coined by architect Simon Nicholson, are considered to be objects that were not designed or produced for play that help form connections (Nicholson, 1973). These materials are believed to empower creativity, stimulate imagination, inspire storytelling, and encourage thinking with materials as a language (Topal & Gandini, 1999). Loose parts do not have to be bought, but can be easily collected. Children are able to investigate twigs, stones, nuts, pinecones, and other natural objects alongside manufactured materials such as
buttons, bottle caps, beads, and colorful plastic shapes. Topal and Gandini (2019) discuss the potential of natural objects as part of loose parts play:

Working with organic objects involves a different aesthetic than interacting with human-made forms. It’s a more subtle aesthetic that can lead to deeper, more mindful creative work in all disciplines. However, it is the teacher’s attention to children’s discoveries, questions, and theories about natural materials and phenomenon that is the key to enhanced learning. (p. x)

Children can collect both these natural and human-made objects themselves when they go on walks or at home. Since they are collected by the children, they may hold more significance than items provided by a teacher. Natural objects as loose parts provide a tangible connection to the outside world, stretching beyond the school’s walls.

Potted plants, or classroom pets of animals or insects are also found in classrooms and add another dimension to bringing the outside indoors. Open windows that provide natural light, allow children to feel a cool breeze or to hear the chirping of birds or pitter patter of rain can connect our senses with the outside as well. Classrooms may also have indoor gardens to learn about plants or caterpillars to learn about metamorphosis.

However, often times when the outdoors is brought indoors, it typically is viewed as an ‘other’ that we learn about. It is important to learn about these incredible natural phenomena, but we also must challenge ourselves to reframe our thinking that nature is not separate from us when we discuss the natural world.

There is an obvious benefit to bringing aspects of nature into indoor environments. However, we must also insure children recognize that they too are a part of nature. It is important to also teach them that the natural objects they find belong
outside in nature, even though they can be collected. If natural objects are collected, the children should return them with care when they are done with their investigations to the spot they were found. The children should want to treat the more-than-human with the same respect they would want to be treated. We must be mindful not to disrupt the natural environment. Learning about the role each object plays in its ecosystem are lessons that nature teaches us. What if in addition to collecting natural objects, we left the natural materials outdoors and let children have plentiful time to explore and discover them where they belong?

**Bringing the Indoors Outside.**

Mia quietly sat on the blanket at home base and began to craft a ladybug out of clay (Figure 3-8). This activity could have taken place in a variety of spaces—the classroom, the playground, the woods, a kitchen table, but in a school setting artmaking traditionally takes place in the classroom. Frequently art is restricted to a designated area of the classroom. However, when children express interests in the natural world, their questions may lead them outside to investigate. The nature of the emergent curriculum in a classroom allows for children to follow their inquiries and investigations outdoors. Following children’s exploration outdoors leads to meaningful learning experiences.
After it was completed, Mia carried her ladybug gingerly through the woods looking for the perfect place for it to sit. She chose a fallen tree and carefully placed her ladybug in its new home, which then became part of the landscape. She then documented her artwork with her camera (Figure 3-9). Her artwork would have taken on a different life if it were completed in the classroom. If after she finished its construction it was then fired in the kiln and then potentially glazed and fired again, it would have taken on an altered and more permanent life. By leaving the wet clay ladybug in the woods, it united with the log and the surrounding environment. The ladybug was intentionally perched on the top of the fallen tree, whose bark was weathered away, looking down along the log into the surrounding woods. Eventually the rain and elements would gradually melt her clay ladybug back into the earth, back into nature. Her ephemeral artwork took on a
different life because it was created and placed in the outdoors, rather than produced within the more systematic expectations of artmaking in the classroom.

Figure 3-9. Mia’s photograph of her clay ladybug

The outdoors experience, highlighted by Mia’s story, is powerful and supports the value of creating within nature. Educators must consciously make full use of the potentials of the outdoor spaces of the school; not just bring indoor activities outdoors. Outdoor settings for free play or a guided activity are common and can have benefit, but structured, guided, outdoor activities that facilitate encounters with the full natural environment are different. They result in additional and different outcomes, and can help children find new meaning in these spaces. Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, Moore, and Boyd (2014) cautioned that, “Simply providing children with access to open-ended play,
the outdoors and nature is not enough to support environmental learning” (p. 80). Children need to have meaningful engagements with nature; merely being in an outdoor setting may not be enough.

Although there are benefits to bringing the outside indoors and bringing the indoors outside, I believe the full potential of the natural environment as the third teacher is when children are outside—entangled in the natural environment through both the space they inhabit and the natural materials used.

**Nature as Art Studio**

Nature is not only a teacher, but also an art studio. When children not only learn and play in the outdoors, but artistically explore and create outside as part of their play and explorations, nature becomes an essential space for artmaking. Kind and Argent (2019) state:

The studio is a fabricated space; that is, it is carefully composed, curated and created space. It is not merely a background to children’s experimentations or a container for art explorations but an emergent space itself always in the making. As a curated space, the studio brings different elements into relation with each other so that they touch, provoke, intra-act and encounter each other and create previously unrealized possibilities. (p. 35)

The natural world uniquely functions as a physical emergent space that provides the natural materials used for the children’s creations—an art studio.
Artmaking is essential to child development. What messages are being communicated by the environment in which our children learn? If children are going to school to learn about things that are important, and traditional learning takes place in the classroom, then are we inadvertently teaching children that relationships with the outdoors and the natural world are not important? As illustrated by Mia, there is a big difference in a child modeling an insect from clay taken from a plastic bag in a classroom, compared to creating an insect out of clay (from the earth), outside and placing it in its natural setting in the woods. These are stark contrasts. To divorce the natural setting from the images of the creatures who live there or materials from their origins in nature is potentially depriving the child of important and valuable learning experiences.

When we consider the environment as the third teacher, then what are the children not learning by missing the outdoor environment as their third teacher? What does it mean to only have an art studio indoors and to privilege certain types of artmaking materials? Children need time outdoors for environmental inquiry. They need opportunities to learn, play, and create art with the natural environment. As Diane Kashin said, children need to have access to “the atelier of nature” (D. Kashin, personal communication, May 7, 2015). The woods was our atelier for this research.

**The Language of Natural Materials**

Within the Reggio concept of the hundred languages of children is the language of art and within the language of art is the language of natural materials used for
artmaking. Children communicate through hundreds of languages and artmaking offers a means to explore and express their ideas (Edwards et al., 1993). Aesthetics and materials are central for children’s artmaking, providing multiple possibilities for communication. The woods I inhabited with the children, with whom I shared this research, was composed of rich diverse natural materials that could be used for play and creating art. How do we value interaction with natural materials as one of the “hundred languages of children” (Edwards et al., 1993)? In my research with children, I listened intently and took their creative play seriously. I considered my “image of the child” and not only took the children seriously, but the natural materials they encountered seriously, as full of potential for artmaking and as a means to understand and explore the world with which they are a part (Malaguzzi, 1994). Elliott and Young (2016) explain:

Shifting from the individual human to the collective more-than-human notably includes the stick, ant, dog, mountain, human and water, and these have the potential to become expanded sites of sustainability knowledge. For example, a stick that was once relegated as an object for children’s play is now imagined as a dog toy, a home for ants or part of a mountain ecosystem propelled through waterways. The stick is enlivened through and with nature and not just as a byproduct of trees, because the stick becomes constituted in and by the collective relationality. (p. 61)

In this study, I researched with children and the children researched with natural materials. Children did not merely use natural materials to create art, but collaborated with the natural materials in their artmaking. They worked with sticks, leaves, seeds, insects, rocks, feathers, bark, shadows, wind, and numerous other natural materials in
their creations. Children learned about the materials they chose in their art and were able to understand these materials and their affordances. They got to know the natural materials in their artmaking intimately through their encounters.

Children modify materials through artmaking. They alter their materials to bring their ideas to life. These materials can be used as a way of researching and to ignite thinking. “Every mark, gesture, and action becomes a question: What can this material do? What can it become? How can I join its becoming?” (Kind, 2014, p. 874). The open-ended nature of natural materials supports their inquisitiveness, creativity, and imagination. Kind (2014) states:

But what if the human role in shaping materials is not as central as we believe? What if materials shape us as much as we shape them? How might we experience materials differently if we acknowledge them as joint participants in our interactions with them? (p. 867)

The children’s artmaking was a collaboration with nature. Children experienced “how materials ‘speak back’ to children in agentic ways (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2017, p. 3). Learning and working with natural materials helped the children understand, appreciate, and further root themselves within nature. Each encounter, no matter how insignificant it may have seemed, was a learning opportunity full of potential. Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2017) discussed:

Materials themselves propose particular possibilities. Materials do not just feel or act differently from each other, or have different properties, or produce different forms and images. They also provoke different ways of thinking as a child engages and works with them. (p. 4)
The use of natural materials in the natural environment provides different ways to make meaning than art materials the children may encounter in a traditional classroom studio. They were able to meaningfully inhabit, connect with, and discover their natural home and cultivate a sense of place. The children’s use of natural materials for artmaking facilitated these goals.

Children worked with found natural materials as well as natural art materials, such as clay and charcoal that I provided, as one of their hundred languages. Children were able to express themselves and communicate ideas in many ways. Gandini et al. (2005) state:

A fundamental premise is that children have an innate desire to understand their world and to master ways of interacting in it. Children make sense of the world by acting on the physical and social world. Through their actions they construct knowledge and character. They are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with the body of knowledge. Rather, they are vessels that are already full—full of questions and theories. When children can act on their questions and theories, they develop knowledge and, most essentially, the ability to think deeply and make meaning. (p. 190)

Art practice in collaboration with nature supports children’s visual languages and their diverse hundred languages, which are part of the complex process of knowledge building. This makes art practice in the outdoors an accessible, unique, and meaningful learning environment.

The lessons taught by the natural environment as the third teacher are invaluable. I believe young children connecting, learning, and creating art with nature leads to them
forming an ecological identity and sustainable values. A mindset of ecological sustainability has the power to transform young lives and thus provide a more optimistic future for us all. When children can see themselves not as disjointed and separate from nature, but as part of and entangled with it, they see themselves not as environmental stewards or protectors over a passive natural world, but as humans who live sustainably with their more-than-human neighbors. When children form relationships with the natural world through art, they can begin to peacefully move forward—together.

With the current state of our Earth, it has become critical that children are able to live their lives as part of and alongside nature; not as masters over it. To see humans and nature as inseparable; with their lives entangled together with the more-than-human—not seeing nature as resources to be used solely for their benefit, but as a partners and collaborators. No longer can we, as educators and adults, unconsciously impose our hierarchical dualistic views of human-nature on children. If we want to see change and a sustainable future we have to think about the natural world differently.

Nature is what we have been, who we are, and what we will always be. Our views of our own relationship with nature are reflected in our behaviors and language. No matter how good our intentions may be, we can unintentionally influence the mindset of children and how they see the world around them. This means we must take special care to also develop our own ecological identity and challenge ourselves to see ourselves as part of the natural world. Personally and for this study, that is what I aimed to do. Before embarking on this research and learning about common world pedagogies, I did not fully and completely comprehend that I was a part of nature since I saw myself as a steward for the environment. I knew as a human species we were part of nature, but I had
not thought deeply about it to fully comprehend its implications. It was a profound realization for me. I think that when we can make that connection and see nature as part of our identity something special happens—we may act, behave, and create differently. I believe that when children work with natural materials through their artmaking and have these encounters, it can help them to develop their ecological identities and see themselves as a part of nature.

We need to not only consider what it means to research ethically with children, but also what it means to research ethically with the natural environment. It is essential to both recognize and internalize the fact that humans are a part of nature in order to research with the natural world. My research was not only a partnership with children, but a partnership with the natural world.
Chapter 4

A Relational Inquiry

Luke shouts, “It’s a daddy long legs!” as he excitedly points and spots one crawling a few feet away. “Oh my gosh! A daddy long legs right there!” Another one is spotted. Multiple daddy long legs are now discovered crawling around and across the sand pit. It is my first day researching with the children at the Child Care Center at Hort Woods. I was just introduced to the children inside their classroom and we walked outside together to the outdoor school grounds area to play. After running around in circles exploring the space and releasing energy, many of the children settled in the sand pit to play. I purposefully did not have my camera with me. Today was about getting to know the children and them getting to know me. I would be doing research with them over the next several months and building rapport was the first step towards trust in that relationship. I did not want the presence of my camera to complicate or potentially jeopardize their first impression of me or have them feel uncomfortable in my presence under the gaze of the camera. To my delight, the children were already showing a great interest in the natural inhabitants of their outdoor play area. I was overjoyed to see the children get so excited to find daddy long legs.

My heart then sank—Luke and Steve decided to make a “daddy long legs trap.” They picked up a daddy long legs and put it in the bottom of a sand pail. They then both proceeded to add shovelful after shovelful of sand on top of the daddy long legs until the bucket was filled to the top. I thought to myself, “Well, there goes that one.” I thought
there was no way the daddy long legs could survive this trap set by the two four-year-old boys. After witnessing the trap on the first day, I couldn’t help but wonder if this was somehow an omen for my upcoming research. If I, like the daddy long legs, would be buried alive in my attempt to venture too close through my inquiry with the children.

I was not sure how to proceed. The teacher inside of me wanted to ask them what they thought happened to the daddy long legs and what they thought it might be feeling, in the hope of nurturing respect for others through questioning. I decided on the first day I should refrain and hang back and let the boys continue with their play. I was interested in what would happen and where their play would take them; if they would forget about the daddy long legs in their bucket or activate him again in their play. They continued to play in the sand pit; next to them sat their bucket trap full of sand with the daddy long legs buried somewhere on the bottom.

There were many daddy long legs around the sand pit that day. As I saw them crawl close to the boys, I wondered if their fate would be the same as their friend’s. Luke and Steve then started to argue over who got to hold the daddy long legs bucket trap. This brought the attention of one of the teachers who came over to see what was wrong. When she found out that they had a daddy long legs buried in the bottom of their bucket, she reminded them to respect all the insects they encounter. They listened, but showed no remorse. They then dumped the bucket, following her instructions, to find the daddy long legs, which had been buried on the bottom for quite some time now. The boys spotted him on the ground, not squished from the weight of the sand or with all his legs broken off, but standing, and then, crawling away. Did it somehow miraculously survive the trap? Or was it merely another daddy long legs crawling across the sand pit that had
previously gone unnoticed? Luke and Steve believed it was one and the same—a survivor.

When I reflect back on my first experience researching with the children at Hort Woods and the daddy long legs encounter, I reframe my thinking to see their daddy long legs trap as a way to further investigate their world. Just like the daddy long legs surviving the sand trap, my research went on to live another day; excited to see what the future would hold over the next several months as the children and I investigated together.

The methodology for this research study is what I refer to as a relational inquiry. Relationships are the foundation of both my research questions and methods. Relationships with children and relationships with nature through art are fundamental to my work as a researcher. Through collaborative inquiry, I researched with the children and we researched with natural materials to explore how they relate to and engage with nature through art. Through my research methods I wanted to complicate traditional dualisms of researcher-researched, observer-observed, and the human-nature divide.

This study is a qualitative ethnographically informed inquiry. Through the use of photography, video, conversations, and field notes I collected data alongside the child participants. The methods used were ethnographic even though my study was not a traditional ethnography. Glesne (2006) explained, “The methods of participant-observation and in-depth interviewing are often referred to as ethnographic field methods whether or not one is doing an ethnography” (p. 9). My role in the research was that of a participant-observer. Glesne (2006) discussed the benefits of this type of research:
Through participant observation—through being part of a social setting—you learn firsthand how the actions of research participants corresponded to their words; see patterns of behavior; experience the unexpected, as well as the expected; and develop a quality of trust, relationship, and obligation with others in the setting. (p. 49)

My decision to pursue this research using qualitative ethnographically informed inquiry—a relational inquiry, was driven by my belief that this design would best serve the goals of this project and make possible its success.

Collaborators

The child participants in this research study consisted of all of the children in the Sky House classroom at the Child Care Center at Hort Woods, which was a total of 23 children over a 16 month period. Sky House is a mixed age classroom and all of the children ranged in age from three to five years old. However, there were not 23 children in the class at the same time. Since my time working with the children spanned over the course of an academic year, some of the older children aged out of the classroom before the second part of the study began, and newly turned three year olds entered the classroom. For the second part of the study, the children/parents/guardians of the entire Hort Woods classroom chose to participate. Informed consent and permissions from all were obtained. This project was approved by The Pennsylvania State University Office for Research Protections Institutional Review Board and The Child Care Center at Hort Woods.
For the second part of this study, the children were divided into three groups by their classroom teacher, Jenn, for our excursions into the woods. There were two groups of six children and one group of five children with a total of 17 children. The number of children per group was determined by two factors. The first is the number of children in the Sky House classroom. The second is the number of children the administration and classroom teacher are allowed based on the permissible adult to child ratio in the outdoor study setting.

I would like to acknowledge the various backgrounds of the children who participated, but the children’s age and gender were the only demographic data that I collected for this study. At the time of the study, I did not know the cultural, ethnic, or racial identities of the children nor did I attempt to collect this data. As a result, I cannot presume the race, ethnicity, or class of any of the children who participated or if any of the children had any disabilities. However, since the child care center was university affiliated and was located on campus, I can assume many of the parents were members of the university faculty and staff and therefore likely to be middle-class college graduates. I know subsidies were available for low income families. I recognize the children represented different ethnic and cultural origins reflective of the university community in which this child care center existed. I do not discuss race, class, gender, and ability in this dissertation; however, I did not assume all children to share the same culture, nationality, or ethnicity, or to have the same experiences and backgrounds. I do recognize and honor the children’s differences and do not lump them together as a homogenous group. I tried to honor their diversity in my being, interactions, and writing.
I do not consider the teachers of the Sky House classroom to be research participants; however, they were essential collaborators. The Sky House classroom had two teachers and one supervising lead teacher, Jenn, who was invaluable to this research. She studied Environmental Education, graduating from the College of Health and Human Development at The Pennsylvania State University. She is passionate about sustainability and young children’s relationship with the natural world. Her teaching is informed by the Reggio Emilia approach and she practiced an emergent curriculum already with the children of Sky House. Jenn was not only extremely supportive of this research, but also helped with video data collection by wearing a GoPro camera during our time in the woods. Given Jenn’s interests and experience, she was an ideal collaborator on this project.

The layout of the Child Care Center at Hort Woods and its proximity to the outdoor play areas and woods were also critical for this research. The Child Care Center at Hort Woods is a two story 21,500 square foot building that serves up to 170 children. (Child Care Center at Hort Woods, n.d.). It was constructed to be a sustainable building with LEED Platinum certification, using natural ventilation and light, collection and use of rain water and use of recycled materials (Child Care Center at Hort Woods, n.d.). Immediately behind the building are the outdoor play areas. The woods can be entered through a gate in the fence from the rear of the play area behind the school.
An Emergent Artful Inquiry

I walk up to the main entrance of the Child Care Center at Hort Woods. I press a small circular button and wait patiently to hear the door unlock. I hear the quiet click and open the door. The next set of doors opens automatically and I say hello to the woman at the front desk. I open the visitor’s binder, sign in, and proceed up the stairs. The children of the Sky House classroom had a set schedule so I always came at 9:45 in the morning to be there for their morning free play outdoors, which usually lasted a little less than an hour. The children went outside again in the afternoon; however, I only came during their morning sessions. For the first part my research, I visited the children of Sky House and joined them in their outdoor free play once or twice a week for the academic year.

As I walk to the Sky House classroom, I pass classrooms of children on my left and large windows looking over the school grounds and Hort Woods beyond on my right. When I enter the Sky House classroom, the children are usually starting to line up in preparation for their name to be called to get dressed for the outdoors. Whichever child sees me first typically announces excitedly to the rest of the class, “Becca’s here!” This acknowledgement always makes me smile. I place my bags in the teachers’ closet, and with my notebook and camera in hand, I start to help the children get ready to go outside. As we wait for all of the children to be called out of the classroom, to ensure attendance, I help them with getting their outdoor shoes on in the hallway. Sabrina is almost always the first one to ask, “Can I hold your hand?” Her asking reminds the others, usually Emma or Mia, who also ask to hold my other hand for our short journey to the outdoors.
Gem and some of the boys almost never asked to hold my hand, but would frequently ask to hold my notebook. Holding my notebook started off as being an alternative offer if both hands were already spoken for and another child asked, but turned out to be just as desirable.

When all the children are ready with their outdoor shoes and jackets on and they have formed a line along the windows, we start to walk down the hallway and head down the stairs in a single line as a group. The children are asked to hold onto the railing with their right hand as they walk down the stairs, which would cause unrest with whoever was holding my left hand. As a result, we always let go at the stairs and rejoined at the bottom. This break also allowed me to switch children if more than two had wanted to hold my hands, to ensure everyone had a turn. When we exit outside, the children sit on the stairs while the teachers again take attendance and decide which area the children will be playing in that day—each class is limited to one area. The children are used to this routine. There are four different play areas behind the school that were unofficially called Jumping Rock, Loose Parts, Grassy Circle, and Climber. Other classrooms go outside at the same time so each class is limited to a section to ease supervision. When the teachers decide which play area they will use, which is usually determined by what’s available and where they went the previous afternoon and morning, the announcement is made and the whole class walks over.

As soon as they reach the designated area of play, the children start by running around in constant motion, exploring the space again—running, screaming, jumping. They are able to release some of their energy; enjoying those behaviors that are not allowed in the indoor spaces. Certain designated play areas also have various play
equipment the children can use, which are stored in that space. The teacher has access to the storage units and brings the play items to the children. For example, Loose Parts has wagons and Grassy Circle has tricycles. Sometimes other materials are also offered to the children, such as capes for dramatic play. After the initial excitement of being outside and running around, the action slows and children start to settle into various play activities.

When I was researching with the children during the first part of the study, I was most interested in their spontaneous artmaking and their interaction with the natural objects and natural aspects of their outdoor play area. This led me to gravitate towards children who were interacting with the natural setting features of the designated play space. For example, if there was a group of children playing on the playground structure and another playing in the leaves, I would approach those students playing in the leaves since I was unable to be present with all the students simultaneously.

I collected data though photography and video with my camera and by taking field notes in my notebook. The children also, on occasion, took photographs and drew in my notebook to aid in documentation. I documented various aspects of their play, but focused on spontaneous self-initiated artmaking events that were emergent from their free play outdoors. These data were later reviewed and critically examined, and helped inform the design of the second phase of the study.
A Deliberate Artful Inquiry

The second part of the study was built upon the data obtained from observing the children engaged in self-initiated emergent artmaking during the first part. The objective of the second part of the study was to further explore what comes to matter when children relate to and engage with nature through deliberate artmaking. My research moved from focusing on the artmaking activities which were spontaneous and stemmed from their own play to artmaking that was intentional and deliberate. The second part of the study also moved from the outdoor play area to the woods beyond it.

Directly after their morning outdoor free play time, we walked the group of children participating that week around the fence that lined the play area to enter Hort Woods. Over the course of three weeks, each child participated for a little over one hour a day for one week for a total of approximately five hours per child. Jenn and I talked with the children ahead of time about camera use, expectations, and how we were going into the woods to create art with nature. The meaning of “art” was purposefully left to be interpreted by the children for whatever they believed it to mean. Since we went directly after their outdoor free play, they were already dressed for the weather, including bug spray if their parents provided it, and already had an opportunity to expend energy during their gross motor play. After making our way into the woods together, I laid down the blanket at our established home base, which was a small clearing in the woods, where we gathered and discussed the children’s inquiries for a few minutes before distributing the cameras and dispersing to explore and create art.
The children wore neon yellow reflective vests while in the woods as a safety measure. The vests allowed for the children to be easily visible to the teachers and to each other while in the woods. Unfortunately, they did provide an additional separation between the children and their natural environment. However, the children enjoyed wearing them as something different and special—a uniform to go do important work.

Once in the woods, the children were free to follow their inquiries and explore various areas of the woods under their own direction. Four adults accompanied the children in the woods: their lead classroom teacher Jenn, myself, another Hort Woods employee, and a volunteer to help with video documentation. The Hort Woods employee varied based on who was available to accompany us, which was typically a floater teacher. The administration requested that there be another Hort Woods employee with the children in the woods in addition to Jenn. The Curriculum Specialist as well as one of the regular Sky House classroom teachers also served as the extra adult on occasion. The role of the adults was to listen to, respond, and support the children in their artmaking endeavors. Since there was a four-to-six or four-to-five adult to child ratio in the woods, when a child or group of children went off to explore a new area of the woods, an adult was able follow them in a supportive role.

The art curriculum and time in the woods itself was inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach and utilized an emergent curriculum. In an emerging curriculum, the curriculum evolves from and is dependent on observing and responding to the ideas, needs and interests of the children. In the woods, the children created site-specific artworks from the natural materials they encountered. The adults followed and supported their curiosities and investigations as they created art in this new outdoor space. I took
field notes, continuous video with a GoPro camera, and photographic documentation with my handheld camera. In addition, the two teachers took continuous video documentation by wearing a GoPro camera, and the volunteer by using a handheld video camera. I also provided cameras for each of the children to use to photograph and document their own artwork and experiences.

Midweek I brought provocations of natural art materials for the children to use to create their art if desired. Monday and Tuesday the children only used found natural materials in the woods for their artwork. On Wednesday I provided and introduced charcoal as provocation, Thursday I introduced clay, and Friday I provided both charcoal and clay for the children to use if they wished. Towards the end of the week I also brought another provocation of books to home base, which contained large images of the artwork of land artists Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo to show the children how other people have collaborated with nature to create art.

Children also collected natural objects that they wanted to bring inside to study further, which they placed in a basket at home base. The objects were kept on the light table in their classroom, along with the land artist books, to be available for children to investigate during their indoor free play time. After all of the groups had completed their week in the woods, we returned their found natural objects back to the woods. Each day we also brought out with us a trash bag, which we kept at home base to properly dispose of any found garbage.

On the last day of a group’s participation, I informally met with the children on Friday afternoon to look at and discuss their experiences, to view the photographs they had taken over the past week, and to curate, choose, and obtain captions for their
photographs in preparation for the art exhibition. On subsequent days, I also returned to
the Sky House classroom to talk more with the children about their artwork, photographs,
and experiences. It was my hope to present to the children some of the data I collected
and have the children analyze and interpret the data with me to extend their learning and
determine what came to matter from their experiences. Although I was unable to fully
include the children in the data analysis aspect of my research as intended as discussed
previously in Chapter 2, curating the exhibition including providing titles for their works
and talking about their experience with family and friends, was a form of interpretation.

Making Experiences Visible

Photography played a significant role in the second part of the study because each
child had a camera to use for documentation—making their experiences visible. The
number of photographs taken over the course of the week varied greatly among children
(Table 1). The number of pictures taken ranged from 18 to 1,279 among the children.
The photographs taken functioned as both a means of artistic expression in itself and also
as a form of documentation. Some children chose to only take photographs of their
artwork they had created in the woods as a form of documentation, while others
embraced photography as an art form in itself and also took photographs of each other
and interesting or beautiful things that they discovered in the woods. I had discussed
with the children the idea of ephemeral art and how the artwork that they created in the
woods would be temporary and photography was a way to document and share their work
with others. The books on land artists provided photographic examples.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of Photographs Taken</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>F</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leaf</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Age, gender, and total number of photographs taken by each child
The cameras that the children had available for their photography were GoPro Hero3 cameras and two old digital cameras. All of the children had a chance to use each of the three different types of cameras. Their classroom teacher Jenn and I helped to teach the children how to use each of the different cameras. I had tied a different colored piece of yarn to each of the GoPro cameras so that the children could keep track of which camera was the one they were using for the day. All of the cameras had wrist straps so that the children could easily carry them through the woods. Some children chose to leave their camera at home base for part of the time and return to get it when there was something they wanted to photograph. Others chose to carry their camera with them the entire time. In addition to the cameras that the children used, I also carried my own personal digital camera to document the children working in the woods. All of the adults, including myself, wore a GoPro Hero3 mounted to our chests, which were set to video mode to capture video data to document our hour in the woods with the children.

We also tried one digital camera that was bright colored plastic that was marketed to young children, but I quickly decided to replace it with another GoPro. The image quality and resolution was poor and it was no easier to use than a regular digital camera. The regular digital cameras and GoPros were much nicer to use and the children were fully capable of using them successfully. Sometimes adults assume since the children are young, and in our case just three to five years old, that they should use cameras that are more “child friendly.” However, typically they are poorer quality. When children are taught how to be careful and how to properly use an “adult” camera, there is no reason why they shouldn’t use the better product if it is available.
Some of the children had some challenges while taking photographs during their first day outdoors with the cameras. One issue that arose was that the GroPro cameras had very small buttons that were more challenging for some of them to push. Sometimes the children thought they were taking a photograph, but they had not pressed the shutter button hard enough. We taught them to look at the screen after they took the picture to see if the photograph they had intended was taken. After some practice those children who were having difficulty were able to press the shutter button and successfully take photographs with the GoPro.

Another challenge that arose was that many of the children held their camera too close to the subject they were trying to photograph, which resulted in blurry images. I showed them how their unfocused photographs did not come out clearly and I demonstrated for the children the distance that the cameras needed to be held away from what they were trying to photograph. We continued to remind the children during our time in the woods that the cameras had difficulty focusing when they were held too close.

While taking photographs, some children also moved their camera as they took a picture, which resulted in motion blur in their final photographs. The process of pushing down hard enough on the shutter button sometimes made the camera move downward. Children were also sometimes trying to take a quick photograph and had difficulty staying still and holding the camera steady when they pressed the shutter button. As these challenges presented themselves while the children used the cameras, I talked with the children about how to overcome them. The children were very receptive and quickly learned. With practice, the children learned how to slow down when photographing and
hold the camera steady, which resulted in improved photographs over the course of the week.

*Nature Love: Building in the Woods*

The children’s final art exhibition of their photographs was titled, *Nature Love: Building in the Woods*. I thought it was important for the children to have the opportunity to showcase the work that they had done during their time in the woods and have the opportunity to share their artwork and ideas with others. I believed that a final art exhibition would provide an occasion to highlight their accomplishments and would be a worthy culmination of our work together. From the onset of our project in the woods, I planned on having an exhibition of the children’s work and let the children know that after they completed their time in the woods, they would have the opportunity to share their photographs and artwork and ideas with others.

Providing the space and time for an art exhibition allowed for the children’s achievements to be recognized. The art exhibition, as well as their involvement in its process, honored their hard work and learning. The art exhibition provided an opportunity for the children to reach a wider audience with their artwork. They were able to share their work with other children in the school, teachers, staff, parents and other family members, and the greater community. Their community was able to come together to celebrate their artwork, ideas, and sizeable efforts.

When I planned and organized the art exhibition there were several ideas that I knew I wanted to incorporate. The most significant concept that I considered was the
level of the children’s involvement. I felt that it was very important for the children to be heavily involved and feel a sense of ownership of the art exhibition and a sense of pride from their work on display. In order to accomplish this ownership, I wanted to have the children curate their own art show. I also wanted to have a closing reception, as opposed to an opening reception. One benefit of a closing reception is that the parents or guardians would be able to help deconstruct the exhibition by taking their children’s artwork off of the wall themselves at the end of the reception to take home. The other major benefit of a closing reception would be that the reception itself would be a nice celebration and culmination of our work together. I also wanted the children and visitors to have the opportunity to engage in relevant hands-on activities during the reception and for light refreshments to be served.

In order for the children to feel a sense of ownership of the exhibition and to augment their agency, the children curated their artwork. Each child selected their three favorite photographs to include in the show. I sat down with each child individually to decide which three photographs they wanted to have printed and shared in the art exhibition. I had all of their photographs uploaded on my laptop. For each child I set up a separate folder, which contained copies of all of their images. I explained to the children the process of how we would gradually reduce their number of photographs until they had chosen their three favorites. The first step was each child clicked though their photographs and said “yes” or “no” for whether they thought they might like the photograph in the exhibition. As we clicked though the images, the “no” photographs were removed from the folder and the “yes” and “maybe” were kept in the folder. We then went through their photographs as many times as needed to further narrow down
their selection. Sometimes a child already had a couple of favorites, which they knew they wanted to have in the exhibition, and they just had to narrow down their remaining photographs to finalize their final three. Some children were able to choose their three favorites in one sitting and for others it took multiple sittings. Although the process could be time consuming, I felt that it worked well.

Once all of the children had chosen their three photographs for the art exhibition, I sat down with each child again individually to discuss their three photographs and title them. I showed the children one photograph at a time on my laptop and asked them if there was anything they wanted to tell people about their photograph and what they wanted to title it. I collected quotes about each of the artworks and recorded the titles for each piece. I had to explain to some of the younger children what titling their artwork meant and explain further what they wanted their photographs to be called and what they wanted to name them to help share their ideas with viewers. For titles that were not recognizable words, I did my best to write them phonetically. I would repeat the title back to the child several times for verification to make sure I understood what was intended since the child was unable to spell it for me.

I also met with the children in a group for them to decide on a title for their art exhibition. The children collaboratively came up with the title of the art exhibition during a guided group discussion with myself and their classroom teacher, Jenn. After some conversation among the children, the children decided they liked the titles “Nature Love” and “Building in the Woods.” We decided to put them together to title the exhibition, “Nature Love: Building in the Woods.” I found it interesting that the word “art” did not come up in their conversation. “Building” in the woods, as opposed to
making art in the woods, was the language used by the children during our conversation. I was interested to hear about what the difference between “building” and “art” was to the children. I believe for many of the children terms such as building, art, and play are intertwined with blurry boundaries. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to discuss or explore these ideas with them during the discussion since we only had a short amount of time together and we were unable to find additional time to meet as a group.

Although I wanted to have the children involved in every aspect of planning and constructing the art exhibition, there were certain elements of the organization and installation in which the children were not able to participate. Although the children curated and selected the artwork to be included in the art exhibition, I primarily prepared and installed the exhibition myself. The children were busy with their teachers and their class curriculum and had limited time in their schedule to work with me.

When installing the art exhibition, I wanted the artwork to have the maximum visibility for the children of the Sky House classroom, which is why I decided to have it in their hallway of their school, as opposed to another, perhaps more prominent, gallery space. The entrance to the art exhibition was located at the top of the stairs on the second floor, where the Sky House classroom was located (Figure 4-1). It ended at the other end of the hallway at the Sky House classroom doorway. One of the children volunteered and penned the sign for the entrance for the exhibition title on three wooden panels with pencil. I traced over her writing with a wood burning pen tool since the teachers did not think it was safe for the children to use the wood burning tool, even with supervision.
At the entrance to the art exhibition was a small sign describing the content of the exhibition (Figure 4-2), a vase decorated by the children (Figure 4-3), and natural objects that the children collected from outside to include in the exhibition, which provided physical natural objects in the indoor exhibition space. These objects included fallen leaves, acorns, sticks, pieces of bark, and pinecones.
The small sign read: “A collaboration between nature and the artists of the Sky House classroom. The art in this exhibition was created in the forest of Hort Woods and documented by the artists through photography.” I felt it was important to provide a brief description of the content of the art exhibition to provide context for the parents, Hort Woods’s teachers and staff, and other adults who would walk down the hallway and see the art exhibition.
To create the vase for the exhibition entrance, children took turns and drew on the wooden vase with pencil. They chose what they wanted to include on the vase, relating to the art exhibition, for their collaborative drawing. I had originally intended to supervise the students one on one with a wood burning pen to trace over their drawings, but the teachers felt as though it may be too dangerous so I carefully traced over their lines with the wood burning pen myself. I then filled it with some of the branches and leaves that the children collected.
To complement the art exhibition, I included photographs of the children from each of the three groups to further give the children the recognition they deserved. This display was titled “Meet the Artists” (Figure 4-4). “Meet the Artists” was placed on the wall in front of the Sky House classroom, which was at the far end of the art exhibition hallway. One of the children volunteered to write the title sign that accompanied the photographs. In order to protect the identity of the children in this dissertation, I blurred their names in this photograph, including the notation indicating that two students were not present when their group photographs were taken.

![Figure 4-4. Meet the Artists](image)

Each child had their three selected photographs hung in the art exhibition, for a total of 51 images taken by the children of Sky House. I personally had their images printed, which also functioned as a thank you gift for the children. Each child had one 8” x 10” print, one 11” x 14” print, and an 8” x 10” canvas print (Figure 4-5). I wanted a
range of large sizes, dimensions, and textures of their photographs to provide some variety and have the greatest possible impact on the viewers. Their prints were mounted on black foam core as well as the labels I printed for each of the photographs and other textual elements, such as quotes.

Figure 4-5. Variety of children’s photographs displayed in the art exhibition

In terms of textual material included with the visual components of the exhibition, I included a label for each artwork, which included the child’s first name, age, and the title that they chose for their piece. (I blurred out the names in the photographs included in this dissertation to protect their anonymity). I also included quotes from the children to accompany their artwork (Figure 4-6).
I decided to include one quote from each child so that their voice was heard and to provide a window into their artmaking process. Therefore, one out of their three photographs had a quote to contextualize it. The reason that I did not include a quote for every artwork was because the artists themselves could not read so I did not want to include too much text in the exhibition. I wanted the children to feel wholly a part of the exhibition and not feel alienated by too much written material that they could not read themselves (Figure 4-7).
The artwork was mounted on the wall along the second floor hallway, which was primarily brick (Figure 4-8). The brick background provided a lovely backdrop for the display.
I made a conscientious effort to ensure that the art exhibition was primarily for the artists themselves. Therefore, I intentionally placed the artwork lower on the wall to accommodate the height of the artists (Figure 4-9). With the artwork at the eye level of the children, it helped to demonstrate that the exhibition was primarily for the children, not the adults. However, there were a couple sections of the hallway where the classes regularly lined up against the wall and the teachers requested that the artwork be hung above their head height in these wall sections (Figure 4-10).

![Figure 4-9. Artwork hung at children’s height](image-url)
I also hung documentation photographs that I had taken of the children working in the woods from the ceiling along the hall of the exhibition (Figure 4-11). I included large photographs on both side of the black boards so that they could be easily viewed from either direction in the hallway. I felt as though photographs of the children themselves working in the woods were important to include. The photographs provided a behind the scenes look into the artists’ artmaking process in the woods. They also helped to provide some context for the children’s artwork hanging on the walls.
After the art exhibition was installed, the children and the school community were able to enjoy their artwork for 48 days until the closing reception. Their artwork was on display from October 21st until December 7th, which was the closing reception. I created a flyer to advertise the exhibition and the closing reception to display and to make available to distribute to the parents, staff at Hort Woods, and the community (Figure 4-12).

Figure 4-11. My documentation photographs hung from the ceiling
SKY HOUSE ART EXHIBITION
Nature Love: Building in the Woods

October 21 – December 7, 2016

The Child Care Center at Hort Woods – 2nd floor hallway – Regular business hours

RECEPTION: Wednesday, December 7th 3:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

We ask that families do not remove any child’s work from the exhibition before 4:30 p.m. December 7th so that all may enjoy the work of the children. Parking is available in the Hortony Deck on Fletcher Road.

Figure 4-12. Flyer for the art exhibition
When the parents and community members arrived for the closing reception, some people slowly walked down the exhibition hallway looking at the art, where others, especially parents, walked straight to the Sky House classroom to find their child to be able to look at the art exhibition together (Figure 4-13). Many people who attended the reception had already had a chance to look at the art exhibition, especially staff and parents who had been on the second floor hallway for drop off, etc. over the previous month and a half. However, for many the closing reception was the first time that they were able to see the children’s artwork. To contribute to a festive celebratory atmosphere, light refreshments were provided. These were supplied by the school to comply with their regulations related to food being served to the children in their facility.

Figure 4-13. Sky House classroom during reception
During the closing reception, materials for interactive activities to support the exhibition were provided. Clay, charcoal, and natural materials were available for the visitors to use in the Sky House classroom while they attended the reception and viewed the exhibition. The artists, as well as their siblings who attended, and some adults participated (Figure 4-14).

Figure 4-14. Children participated in interactive artmaking activity
The children sat around a table in their classroom where the materials were placed. The artmaking in this space utilized some of the same materials we used when we were in the woods, but the experience was quite different (Figure 4-15). Many of the artworks that were created in the woods involved aspects of the woods that are not possible to bring indoors or were not easily transported, such as the trees themselves, and large sticks and logs. The variety of natural materials was of course significantly reduced from what was available in the woods themselves.

Figure 4-15. Children created art with a variety of materials during the reception
In preparation for the reception, I also wrote a thank you note for the Sky House parents with instructions on how to download all of their children’s photographs that they had taken over the course of our work together, which I distributed at the reception. I felt that it was important to provide a way for the children to keep all of their photographs since they were, after all, the children’s work. At the end of the closing reception, the children were able to take home with them their three photographs that were displayed in the exhibition. Parents expressed their appreciation as they left the reception.

The Penn State College of Arts and Architecture’s School of Visual Arts published a description of some of my research including a depiction of the art exhibition in their newsletter ArtsWord (Figure 4-16). It was titled after the name of the exhibition, “Nature Love: Building in the Woods.” The distribution of this newsletter helped to disseminate some of this work.
The art exhibition contained the visual documentation of the natural artworks created by the children. It was rewarding to see their photographs, sculptures, drawings and collages displayed and to observe the pride they and their families had in their accomplishments. But this visual exhibition was an incomplete representation of our shared artmaking experiences in the woods. The next chapter offers a more complete representation of our shared experiences through their stories.
Chapter 5

Narrative Entanglements

I believe that the essence of the data collected in this study is best illustrated through the telling of stories. Narrative inquiry offers a means to both honor and explore the lived experiences of the children. The telling of stories, “quite possibly, is the principal way of understanding the lived world. Story is central to human understanding—it makes life livable, because without a story, there is no identity, no self, no other” (Lewis, 2011, p. 505). Through stories the voices of the children can be highlighted and heard, which is why children’s narratives are central to this dissertation.

Stories are essential to this research. Children’s words are represented in the title, and both begin and conclude this dissertation. The data from this study are in the form of photographs taken by the children and myself, my field notes, video taken by myself and other adults, and recordings of our conversations. In my desire to represent these data accurately and to uphold my image of the child, I describe our experiences through stories so that the children’s voices are featured in the work. Narrative inquiry helps disrupt and challenge singular ways of knowing and interpreting these experiences.

The stories I share offer a window into our time together, which I hope reflect and honor their complexity. In this chapter I will share four stories from the first part of this research study, centered on the children’s emergent artistic entanglements in the outdoor play area. Observations from these representative stories informed the planning of the second part of the study. Four stories from the second part of this study are then narrated, which center on the children’s deliberate artistic entanglements in the woods.
I realize it is a great responsibility to tell and describe the stories of the children in a most ethical and authentic manner. After stories are told, is it the traditional role of the researcher to analyze them objectively in an attempt to provide potential explanation(s) for the findings and to determine their meaning(s). This is the basis of qualitative research. When the research involves children, it is often assumed that the child cannot or will not describe what they mean, even though children may be capable and willing to decide what they want to reveal and/or discuss.

I find it problematic to further analyze these stories because that would require that I make too many unqualified assumptions. Hendry (2007) states:

Treating stories as objects of study is I would argue a violation of the sacredness of humanity. It is an unethical act. To treat stories as objects of “analysis” and “interpretation” dehumanizes and contributes to the very objectification that qualitative researchers have critiqued. Thus, my primary contention in regard to the future of narrative research is that there is no future unless we radically transform our notion of research in ways that honor the sacredness of our humanness. (p. 495-6)

I believe narrative ways of knowing are the most ethical so I turned to narrative inquiry to capture the experiences of the children for this research. Instead of speaking for the children and interpreting their experiences, I let the stories stand on their own.

Thompson (2017) states:

We run the risk of dressing others’ experience in unsuitable and ill-fitting garb, if only because that is what we have in our closets. If the goal of research is to celebrate the multiplicity and potentiality that emanates from every situation, the
danger of imposing a single ill-suited meaning on an event is minimized, if it is never wholly avoided. It is a matter of keeping the situation open for continued discussion, rather than closing it down, of leaving the ending indeterminate, of withholding the punch line. (p. 15)

The following narratives help to illuminate what comes to matter for the children when they relate to and engage with nature through art.

**Emergent Artistic Entanglements**

Below are four artmaking events that took place during the children’s outdoor free play time. The first three were spontaneous, self-initiated, emergent artmaking events during the children’s outdoor play: “Olaf” to “Stamp,” “A Treasure Map,” and “I’m just Drawing on Your Shadow.” The last was initiated by me, “Our Nature Collage.”

**“Olaf” to “Stamp”**

I spotted Taylor, who is five years old, crouching by herself in the corner of the play area on a pile of mud she had discovered. There were scattered oak leaves, sticks, and pines needles across its damp surface. The day before, it had rained all day long and the ground was still wet. There was a circle of lighter colored mud where she had settled in. Taylor was squeezing mud in her hand (Figure 5-1).
I walked over to her and she began to tell me about the brown and black types of dirt that she had found. With a handful of brown dirt, Taylor remarked, “This is cool,” as she squeezed the dirt in her hand. I asked if she was making something with the dirt. “Uh huh,” she replied. My inquiry into her making something opened up the potential for her intra-action with the soil to go beyond a sensory exploration. “What are you making?” I asked. Taylor answered, “I am making honey from the bear… Just like he was accidently eating dirt instead of honey.” I wondered, aloud, “The bear was accidently eating dirt? What does dirt taste like?” Taylor entertained my inquiry, “Uh. It tastes like maybe poop?” “Oh no, you think dirt tastes like poop? That must taste terrible. Did the bear get sick when he ate the dirt?” “No,” Taylor replied as she continued to squeeze and play with her dirt ball in her hand. “No? That’s good. Yeah, I don’t think dirt would make a bear sick.” She squatted quietly, thinking about her story. She then stood up and
excitedly shared, “But he pretended that it was eating honey, but he was eating it and then it was dirt!” We laugh. “Ew. I would never eat dirt if I was him,” Taylor added as she squatted back down. I asked Taylor, “Have you ever eaten dirt before? I tasted dirt before when I was a kid.” She stands back up, “Ewww!” I tell her, “I know” (Figure 5-2).

Taylor had been playing with the dirt throughout our conversation and she had formed it into a ball. She threw it on the ground saying, “It can be a snow ball…fight.” She repeated, “It can be a snow ball fight or it could be a snowman. I’m gonna make a snowman! Yay!” She picked the ball up and brought it back over to the mud pile. She carefully set it on the ground next to her (Figure 5-3). She told me, “Keep an eye on it so it doesn’t blow away,” as she dug into the dirt with her fingers to pick up some more mud. “Okay, I’ll keep an eye on it for you,” I replied. She squished the mud in her hand
and formed it into a ball. She carefully picked out little pieces of leaves. She then set her new ball down next to her other ball, realizing that the new ball was larger and would have to go on the bottom. She then placed her smaller ball on top and pressed firmly to attach it.

Figure 5-3. Taylor carefully sets her mud ball on the ground

She picked up another small piece of dirt and rolled it in her hand, “There we go,” and stuck it on her snowman. I noticed her skill at rolling the mud and remarked, “You’re good at making balls out of dirt.” “Uh huh,” she agreed. She picked up another small piece of dirt, “But not of black dirt.” I asked, “The black dirt doesn’t roll as well?” I could not fully understand her reply; she may have been talking to herself. I added, “Yeah, rolling the dirt around in your hands is a good way to make a ball.” Taylor then added on another piece to her snowman (Figure 5-4).
“Tada!” Taylor announced that she was finished. “Hi. I’m Olaf and I like warm hugs,” she added referencing a quote from the movie. I asked her if she had made the character Olaf from *Frozen* as she picked up some more dirt from the pile. “This is his arms,” she explained holding two more small pieces of mud. She went over to Olaf and pushed them hard on his side to make them attach. The pressure made Olaf’s head fall off. “Ah, his eyeballs falled off.” “Here’s his arms,” Taylor says as she reattached them. “Eyeballs,” she said as she pushed the head back on his body.

She laughed in delight at her finished sculpture, “There’s Olaf.” “It’s Olaf!” I chimed in. Taylor then got an idea, “Oh. Oh. Let me get a smiley face.” Taylor picked up a stick to draw a smile on his head. “There ya go. Tada!” she blissfully said; her
artwork now completed. I asked her to clarify what she did with the stick because I was unable to see. “It’s a smiley face,” she said as she acted out a smile with her arm and body. “Wow! Look at Olaf!” I cheered. “Before he falls off,” added Taylor. “Before he falls off?” I add. We laugh, Taylor pleased with her completed artwork (Figure 5-5).

![Figure 5-5. Taylor’s completed Olaf sculpture](image-url)
As evidence of her artmaking through sensorial play, Taylor’s knees and hands were covered with mud. “Take a picture of my dirty hands!” she requested excitedly, displaying her hands proudly for the photograph (Figure 5-6). In this moment, Taylor’s request of me to document this image also exemplified her agency in this practice of artmaking. Her request that I photograph an image that she curated is as much artmaking as her creation of Olaf. Her request for this photograph and desire to have her creation documented also reflects her pride in her natural outside artmaking and her understanding of its transient nature.

Figure 5-6. Taylor requests me to photograph her hands
Moments later she stepped on Olaf and said, “Now he is in the dirt!” (Figure 5-7). I could see her satisfaction with squishing Olaf back into the ground.

Figure 5-7. Taylor steps on her Olaf sculpture
Her mud sculpture quickly took on another form (Figure 5-8).

As she slowly pealed the pancaked Olaf off the bottom of her boot she said, “I picked him up out of the dirt!” (Figure 5-9). Curious, I ask, “Why did you squish him, Taylor?” She replied, “Because I want to make a new Olaf.”
Taylor then slapped the mud pancake onto the bordering wooden walkway. “Look a stamp!” she exclaimed. The mud pancake had left a wet imprint on the wood (Figure 5-10).

Figure 5-9. Taylor holds her flattened Olaf sculpture

Figure 5-10. Taylor’s wet stamp imprint on wood
Her sculpture had now transformed into another type of art—a stamp. I got excited thinking about the power of transformation in her artwork. Then two maintenance men arrived with leaf blowers. They started to blow all the fallen leaves out of the outdoor play area. Many of the children ran over to watch, but Taylor stayed, excited about her stamp (Figure 5-11). Mia and Emma then come over to check out what was going on in our little corner. Emma got excited seeing the mud and picked up some of her own.

Figure 5-11. Taylor creates her stamp artwork
Taylor took her stamp and wrapped it around the railing. She pushed it with all her might to get it to stick (Figure 5-12). “Look! I got a stamp!” she shared. Emma joined in with her mud stamp, squishing it on the railing, repeating, “Look I got a stamp!” they laughed. Mia then bent down to the pile of mud and got some dirt of her own in order to join in on the fun. The leaf blowers were blowing so loudly it was difficult to hear the children, but the girls didn’t seem to mind.

Figure 5-12. Taylor’s stamp pressed onto the railing
Taylor and Mia ran their hands along the smooth railing, learning about the novelty of this new railing canvas. Taylor then grabbed the railing with her dirty hand and said, “Yes! My hand made stamps!” as she saw some of the dirt from her hand transfer onto the railing. The children continued to stick their mud stamps onto the railing with giggles and delight (Figure 5-13).

Figure 5-13. Emma joyfully makes a mud stamp
The three girls visited the mud pile again to collect more dirt, carefully removing the leaves, using their thumbs to pry up more chunks of dirt (Figure 5-14). They continued, excitedly, to see the mud prints their stamps left on the railing.

Figure 5-14. Taylor, Mia, and Emma collect dirt for their artwork

The focus then shifted when Taylor found a worm in the dirt. She excitedly picked it up without hesitation and placed the worm on her stamp (Figure 5-15). After the three girls investigated it for a while, Taylor left to show the worm to some other children and I followed.
“I made him into an “O” Taylor shared showing that the worm was in the shape of a circle. “He made a ‘P,’” she showed me again. In excitement she shouted, “He is doing the ABCs! Take a picture!” The worm became the new art medium as she gently manipulated it to take on different shapes. Taylor, the worm, and the mud collaborated in this new artwork—each acting and responding to each other.

Her mud had now transformed from a snowball, to Olaf, to a stamp, and now the canvas for her worm art. The possibilities and open ended nature of the mud demonstrated the immense potential of natural materials for artmaking. These types of encounters with the natural world hold great capacity for learning. I took the requested photograph of Taylor’s worm art to show her (Figure 5-16).
Figure 5-16. Taylor gently manipulates the worm into different shapes.

It was then time to line up. Taylor thoughtfully looked around the play area. She then took her mud, formed it into another shape, and carefully placed it on a stump slice as its final resting place from their collaboration—another work of art (Figure 5-17).

Figure 5-17. The final form and location for Taylor’s transformative artwork.
“A Treasure Map”

Gem, who is four years old, squats alone on the ground after picking up a stick. She starts to use the stick to make markings in the dirt. “What are you drawing?” I ask. “A map” she casually replies. Getting excited and wanting to know more I ask, “What kind of map?” She responds, “A treasure map” (Figure 5-18).

Without warning she quietly stands and takes her foot and smoothes over her map drawing. She walks over to the nearby metal chain fence and carefully puts her drawing stick through a hole in the fence. I wonder why she decided to abruptly end her drawing, erase it, and dispose of her drawing stick too. Perhaps her treasure map was a secret and she did not want me to see it. However, she then quickly finds another stick on the ground and tells me, “I got a stick to draw with.” She then sits cross legged on the
ground and makes a large line in the dirt with her stick. She seems unhappy with her
drawing and starts to scribble it out, erasing it with her stick. She starts to say something,
“That doesn’t…” She stands up looking for a better location for her artwork.

She finds a spot nearby of undisturbed dirt and sits down cross legged again. She
starts to draw, but perhaps realizes that the dirt is too packed to be disturbed by her
drawing stick to reveal the darker dirt underneath, and changes focus. She then tries to
push her stick directly into the dirt with her left hand and then proceeds to pry the top
layer of dirt off with the stick with her right. She uses her stick as a lever to lift off a
small section of dirt. She looks up to tell me, “I’m getting the dirt.” I reply, “You’re
getting the dirt? Yeah?” She continues, “I’m getting the dirt out of the ground.” I ask
her, “You’re prying it up with the stick?” “I’m breaking it up,” she answers as she clears
away the removed dirt to reveal a clean hole where the dirt once was.

She decides to make another hole. She pushes the stick vertically into a new spot
of dirt. She then moves her hand to the end of stick for better torque, pushing down,
splitting the dirt, again gently prying up another chunk. She brushes away the newly
lifted dirt with her stick. “Look, I opened the ground,” she tells me. “Yeah you did. You
opened the ground right up,” I reply. She then repeats the same process two more times,
making two new holes. I ask her if her creation was part of the map she was drawing.
She replies an unconvincing, “Yeah.” Perhaps because she had not thought of it
previously as part of her map, but believed it would be a good addition to consider; or
perhaps she could tell in my voice earlier I was excited to hear she was making a treasure
map and said it to please me; or perhaps I misread her reply and her map was merely
taking on a new form. She then creates another hole with her drawing stick (Figure
She then adds another, contributing to the dotted canvas before her until she is satisfied with her artwork and walks away. This new treasure map was not erased after its completion and was left undisturbed by Gem; available for others to view.

Figure 5-19. Gem creates holes in the dirt with her drawing stick

“I’m Just Drawing on Your Shadow”

Tina, who is four years old, is standing next to me as we watch some of the children playing. It is a bright sunny day and our shadows are sharp and bold. Luca, who is three years old, and who was playing nearby, notices the crisp shadow edges. He walks in front of us and bends down in front of Tina with a stick in hand. “I’m drawing on your legs!” he says excitedly as he starts to trace the lines of her shadow with his stick (Figure 5-20).
Figure 5-20. Luca draws on Tina’s shadow

Tina whines slightly and makes a face, suspiciously watching Luca squatting before her. She starts to lift her feet, then backs away saying, “Don’t draw on my legs.” Her shadow is an extension of herself. Luca replies, “I’m just drawing on your shadow.” Tina gets upset and shouts, “I don’t like you drawing on my shadow!” as she runs away. Luca watches her run away and looks confused and disappointed. I tell him, “You can draw on my shadow.” He happily agrees. He takes his stick and runs it along the edge of my shadow in the dirt. A moment later Tina returns (Figure 5-21).
Figure 5-21. Luca draws on my shadow

Luca then moves back to his first choice of shadow canvas and starts to draw on Tina’s shadow again. She stands still watching him closely. As Luca draws the stick along her shadow towards her shadow feet and her actual feet, he leaves the ground and then quickly continues up her body on her legs and to her stomach, tracing her actual body. The transition to her body startles Tina and she notices the stick left a dirty mark on her stomach on her pink jacket (Figure 5-22).
Figure 5-22. Tina notices dirt on her jacket from Luca’s drawing stick

She starts to get a little upset, but stays. Luca is standing in front of her on her shadow. “I stepped on her shadow,” he cheerfully shares with me. He playfully stomps in front of her on her shadow. “Stop it Luca! It makes me a little nervous,” Tina tells him as she closely watches her shadow. He then gives her a long big hug to reassure her. “I don’t want a hug right now, Luca!” Luca is not accurately reading her and the situation. Tina has then had enough and pushes him away and leaves. With stick still in hand, Luca’s attention is then drawn to his own shadow. He orients himself and squats so he can draw on his shadow that is cast out before him (Figure 5-23). However, the social aspect of drawing with Tina is lost and his own movement complicates the drawing. He loses interest quickly and leaves to play elsewhere. The shadow drawings come to an end.
“Our Nature Collage”

It was an extremely cold November morning, only 30 degrees outside, but bright and sunny. The children were all bundled up playing outdoors, happily discovering frost still on the ground. Tina walks up to me saying she has no one to play with; I gave her a couple suggestions, which she turns down. I see a window of opportunity. I ask if she wants to make some art with me. “Sure,” she replies. I was overjoyed. This was the first (and only) time I asked one of the children if they wanted to create some “art” during the first part of my research. “What do you want to do?” I ask. “We can get some sticks and bark,” she answers. “That would be great. You want to find some?” “Sure. I just found some bark with Mia right over here,” Tina answers as she scans the ground. “Over where?” I ask. Tina finds a piece of bark. “Found the bark! Here!” she says excitedly as she runs over and points to it on the ground. “Oh yeah, you want to collect some?” I ask
her. “Sure some bark,” says Tina. “Or do you wanna, how do you want to do this?” I stop myself, making sure she still has the lead for the direction of the artwork. “Look at some,” Tina says as she picks up the piece of bark. “Nice piece of bark there,” I say. “Yeah,” says Tina. “Great. So now what do we want to do with it?” I ask. “Put it…maybe here,” Tina looks around finding a place to put the piece of bark. “Put it down. On here,” she clarifies. She holds the piece of bark over a rectangular stone that is part of a walkway. “Okay,” I say agreeably. She drops the piece of bark onto the middle of the stone (Figure 5-24).

![Figure 5-24. Tina’s nature collage](image)

Pointing her finger at the stone, “That’s where our nature collage will be.” I repeat after her, so excited that she wants to make a nature collage. Her use of the term “nature collage” leads me to suspect she has made one before. “Okay perfect! On this
rock?” I clarify. She directs me, “Yeah. You go find some sticks, some sticks and bark. Okay?” “Okay, I’ll find some sticks and bark. Are you going to find some too?” I ask. “You look that way and I’ll look this way,” Tina points me to look in one direction and her in another. As she turns to look in the direction she pointed for herself, she sees some of the girls are playing in the wagon. As soon as I saw, I knew. Our artmaking couldn’t compete with her beloved wagon rides; one of her favorite things to do when she plays outside. She immediately runs over to them without looking back or saying anything to me. I can’t help but laugh to myself. I still walk over to the girls out of desperation, hoping that maybe she will want to continue after they are done. She ignores my requests and I laugh to myself. When it is almost time to go back inside I asked Tina if she would want to finish her nature collage another time or if she didn’t feel like it anymore. She said she didn’t feel like it. I said that was fine and asked if there was a reason why. She said, “It’s because it’s now done. I’m done with it.”

From Emergent to Deliberate Entanglements

The first three events are examples of emergent artmaking of young children in an outdoor setting, using only natural materials. The last event was an attempt to initiate a collaborative artwork. Wilson (2007) discussed how difficult it is to achieve a truly equitable collaboration between an adult and a child. At various times throughout the collaborative process both parties may be able to exhibit agency. “Equity, however, is much more difficult to maintain when there are great disparities in age, experience, knowledge, motives, and status—as is usually the situation when adults and children co-
produce other than child/other than adult visual culture” (Wilson, 2007, p. 11). An imbalance of power may occur in collaborative endeavors; however, the child’s agency must be respected, and both parties must accept their respective roles, and understand that their contributions to the artwork are given the same status.

During all the activities described in these stories, I interacted with the children to varying degrees. In the earlier stories, the interactions were primarily through participant observation, where I also interacted with the children, including in some cases, in my asking questions. My visible presence could have influenced the children’s activities, and my questions may have triggered them to change directions or affected their artmaking. In these ways, my presence and interactions with the children could be considered interventions, which is inevitable.

In the last story, the activity was initiated by me, but that did not ensure completion (from an adult perspective) of the undertaking. This child, as well as the other children were clearly comfortable in my presence, and did not feel that they had to follow my lead. They were comfortable pursuing their own interests in my company. This provided me with some assurance that my approach in this study, researching with children, had merit and legitimacy.

Importantly, the lessons learned from the children’s stories and my observations of them in the woods informed the plans for part two of my study. Taylor used mud and dirt to create a snowball, a sculpture of Olaf (the character from Frozen), and stamps. Other children joined her, clearly enjoying artmaking with this medium. This supported my choice for the use of clay in part two of my study. In addition, the children produced art from natural materials they found outside, as illustrated by the “nature collage,” and
this was continued in part two. The children also pursued drawing in the dirt in part one, with shadow drawings and the use of a stick to draw a treasure map. With this in mind, I provided charcoal as a natural tool for drawing in part two. For the first two days in the woods I did not provide any art materials; the children created their art with the natural objects that they encountered, as they did for the entire week. The next day I provided charcoal as a provocation that the children could use if they chose. The following day I provided clay as a provocation and the last day I had both charcoal and clay available for their use.

Another lesson learned from the children’s stories was that the use of photography was important to them. Not only did they enjoy documenting their creations and taking pictures of each other and of me, but through the lens of the camera they captured images of nature. This was exemplified by Taylor asking to take a picture of the worm she found, as well as the children taking pictures of other living creatures and natural objects that they discovered in the woods that they clearly felt were special. Based on these experiences, photography continued to play an important role in the second part of the study. I provided each child with a camera to use at their discretion.

Purposeful adult intervention and collaboration can have great potential and generate wonderful possibilities. However, when collaborating with children, adults must honor their work and ensure that they augment children’s agency throughout the research process. The children’s stories guided my model for the second part of my research study. In part two, I explored artmaking in the woods with the children as they engaged in more deliberate artmaking experiences, with the intention to create art.
Deliberate Artistic Entanglements

Below are four artmaking events that occurred during the children’s time in the woods. They were deliberate, intentional artmaking experiences, described here as “Design,” “Snowman,” “Super Stormy,” and “White Bunny.” I decided to focus on stories of the artwork that the children chose for the art exhibition. Since the art exhibition provided a means for the children to share their ideas and the photographs that were most meaningful to them, I felt that it was important for me to highlight a sampling from those stories (as opposed to other artmaking experiences in the woods). Some of the children’s photographs were documentation as a means to record their ephemeral site specific artworks, as the children clearly wanted a recording of their accomplishments. We had also discussed as a class how contemporary land artists, such as Andy Goldsworthy and Nils Udo, used photography to capture their ephemeral artworks, which were displayed in the books I provided. Other photographs, however, were artworks in themselves that utilized photography as an art form. In the latter case, the children used the camera to take a variety of pictures, unrelated to any of their own creations, delighting in capturing images in the woods.

**Design**

Mia, gripping a piece of charcoal with her right hand, begins to walk across a fallen log on the ground like a balance beam. The sun is shining through patches of leaves on the trees overhead creating dancing sun spots on the log before her. Mia, who is five years old, turns her head to the left and then to the right as she walks across the
fallen log. Today is the first day I have introduced charcoal as a provocation. Something to the right captures her interest and she hops off the log to a skinny tree beside her. She immediately starts to draw on the tree’s bark as if she knew what she wanted to do when she spotted it. She grabs the trunk firmly with her left hand and with her right begins to cover the smooth bark with black bold charcoal marks in an up and down drawing motion (Figure 5-25). The sun beams though the canopy and dots both her face and body and the tree trunk canvas. She then pauses looking at her drawing and the charcoal residue on her hands. She adds a couple more marks and then slowly backs away from the tree admiring her artwork with a little smirk.

Figure 5-25. Mia draws on a tree with charcoal
Mia hops back on the fallen log, quickly crossing it, to another skinny tree. Again, she grabs the trunk and at her eye level begins to draw on its bark. This tree is even skinnier than the last and she spends less time with it before she is satisfied with her work and moves on. She walks through the woods, noticeably glancing to the left and to the right, appearing to look for another tree to draw on. She selects another. Grabbing the tree with her left hand and with charcoal in her right, she again begins to create her vertical makings. When the area in front of her is acceptably black, she goes up on her tip toes to continue her drawing above eye level. She pauses again, still holding onto the tree with her left hand, and sees another tree beside her to which she decides to move. It is a skinnier tree. She repeats her drawing process and then moved on to a larger tree. She makes a few marks, but it doesn’t hold her attention.

She looks around again, and sees another tree. She grabs the trunk and begins, again, her vertical drawing. Something about this tree holds her interest. She makes her vertical markings with her head slightly tilted to the left and her left foot behind her, toes pointed. She presses the charcoal hard as she draws on the smooth bark of the tree making a thick opaque layer. Black charcoal dust drifts down collecting in her gripping hand and arm (Figure 5-26). The black speckles pepper her skin. Her up and down drawing slows and she takes a break to look around. Then, abruptly, she lets go of the tree and starts to walk quickly back to home base.
Figure 5-26. Charcoal dust falls onto Mia’s hand while drawing

On her way back to home base she stops four times to draw on branches protruding in her path, but only for a couple of seconds each—enough time to make a couple of marks. It is unclear what drew her back to home base with such purpose. Perhaps it was because children were starting to gather there and we could hear their laughter and screams or perhaps she felt her work was completed. This entire time she was working in silence, with me following, and her comfortable with my presence. I
decided not to be the first one to speak so I decided not to ask. I did not want to ruin her concentration by interrupting her process. We had a good relationship and I knew if she felt like talking she would initiate a conversation. When we arrive at the blanket at home base, which is where she had left her camera, I notice she has charcoal smudged on her cheeks and nose. Concerned that Mia was going to run off with her friends and forget to take photographs of her artwork, I remind her that her camera is in the basket if she wants to take pictures when she is done. “I’m done,” she tells me. She puts away the charcoal and places her hand through the camera strap so the camera hangs on her wrist. She walks back to most of her trees and takes photographs of each one (Figure 5-27). I follow her to each tree; documenting her documentation process.

Figure 5-27. Mia photographs her artwork
Mia chose one of her photographs of the charcoal tree drawings to be displayed in the art exhibition (Figure 5-28). I asked her if she could tell me about her photograph. She replied, “It’s made out of charcoal and it’s gonna be a black tree.” She chose to title it “Design” because, “It was a design.” The photograph she chose was the photograph of the tree with which she had spent the most time.

Figure 5-28. Mia’s photograph of her artwork she titled, Design

Snowman

We are greeted as we head into the woods with a loud mechanical roaring sound. There is construction taking place on the water tower next to Hort Woods. It is so loud it is even hard to hear what the children are saying at times. The woods does not feel peaceful today. The constant loud noise does not appear to affect the children, perhaps
because of the excitement and novelty of the woods and today the children are working with clay.

Alexandra and Luca each grab a ball of clay out of the bag at home base. They walk a few steps to a neighboring tree, simultaneously recognizing its potential as a site for artmaking. I cannot hear their conversation from where I am standing with the mechanical roar still thundering in the background. They start to pinch little pieces of clay off their clay balls and stick the pieces onto the tree trunk in front of them. I walk over to get a closer look. Some pieces are stuck on with a singular motion and others are squished on with their fingers smearing the clay repeatedly into the bark’s rough surface (Figure 5-29). Something captures their attentions and they run off together leaving their artwork on the tree.
Tina, who is five year old, takes a ball of clay out of the bag. As she is about to stand up, she picks up a stick that she spots beside her feet on the ground. Standing there, she starts to forcefully shove the end of the stick into her clay. Her arms shake as she works the stick into her ball. After it is secured, she holds the stick like a handle with the ball on top and scans the ground. She finds another stick, which is skinnier, but about the same length, and pushes it into her ball next to the one already placed. The second stick goes in easier. She smiles to herself and carries her artwork to a nearby tree. The tree has black charcoal smudges on it from previous children’s explorations. Holding the clay
ball with the sticks pointing down, she presses her artwork onto the side of the tree with both hands. Without taking her hands off, she takes a step backwards to further lean against the tree. She has one hand over the other pressing the clay into the bark using the weight of her body. When she feels the clay grip the tree she lets go. She looks down for a few seconds and picks up two small sticks beside her. Using one hand to hold her artwork on the tree, she uses the other to insert a stick on each side of her clay ball. She then takes a step back and points to her work and tells Jenn, who is standing next to her, that she made a snowman. A moment later her snowman falls to the ground. Tina asks Jenn why it fell. I have trouble hearing their conversation because of the construction noise. Tina, seeming satisfied by the answer Jenn provided, walks her artwork to another tree nearby—the tree Luca and Alexandra were working on earlier.

She takes her snowman and pushes it up against the new tree’s bark on an available spot. The tree already has numerous bits of clay that clung to its side. This tree’s bark had a nice textured surface and the clay attached more easily than it had to the smoother tree. Assuming the same formation as before, a few steps back from the trunk’s base, she pushes her clay snowman onto the bark with one hand over the other at an impressive angle. As her artwork hangs onto the tree’s bark on its own, she takes her finger and makes two pokes. “I made the eyes,” she tells Jenn. She drags her finger in a line below, “And the smile,” she adds. She makes another poke for a nose; then takes her forefingers and thumbs and pinches and pokes to shape the clay into her desired form.

Her snowman now completed, she turns with a huge smile on her face and walks the few steps to the blanket at home base where her camera was laying. She picks up her camera excited to document her work. She struggles with turning it on and gets
frustrated that it is taking too long, her lower lip protruding out. She figures it out without assistance or asking for help and takes a photograph of her work. Proud of the artwork she accomplished, she takes another ball of clay and picks up two sticks on the ground. It appears that she is making another snowman or something similar. She pushes her second artwork on another free space on the tree and adds two more sticks for arms. While she is securing her second snowman, her first falls to the ground. Undeterred she picks it back up and tries to stick it again to the tree (Figure 5-30). Once reattached, she returns to her second artwork and makes the same face with her finger as her first.
“There! I made two snowmen!” she turns to tell me. “This is one and that’s the other,” she shows me pointing. “Wonderful. I’m gonna take a picture of your snowmen,” I tell her and proceed to take photographs of her work. She sees me taking pictures and asks me, “Where’s my camera?” She is scanning the ground and can’t remember where she placed it. I find it and hand it to her. She takes several more pictures (Figure 5-31).
When she is done, she walks over to me and says, “Here,” handing me her camera. I ask her if she wants to see the photographs she took and she replies, “Sure.” I put the camera into review mode and hand it back to her so she can toggle through. After looking for a second she hands it back to me and says, “I saw them,” satisfied she didn’t need to take more. It was one of the second round of photographs that she chose to include in the art exhibition (Figure 5-32). She runs over to Jenn telling her about the
snowmen she made. She then runs back to her artwork, gives her snowmen a few more reassure pokes, and runs back to Jenn with a huge smile across her face.

Figure 5-32. Tina’s photograph of her artwork she titled, Snowman

**Super Stormy**

“Watch out, Becca. Coming though,” Luke tells me with a big smile on his face. He is holding a long crooked stick and passes in front of me. Luke, who is five years old, is collecting large sticks. Firetruck walks towards us, and Luke says to him, “Hey Firetruck, I’m gonna build a teepee,” Luke continues past carrying his stick. Firetruck, holding a large green maple leaf, says to me, “Hey. Hey. Can you hold this? I’m gonna take a picture of this leaf.” “Okay,” I reply. I hold the leaf as directed so that he can take his photograph. He then runs to home base to put the leaf in the nature basket to save to
bring back inside. Luke walks towards me again holding another big stick, “Look at the stick I found.” “Oooo,” I say, impressed. Firetruck returns and three boys now, Firetruck, Luke, and Leaf, are collecting sticks to build their sculpture. “This one is heavy,” says Leaf and he lifts up a larger log and starts to drag it through the woods to the building site. I follow the three boys, each dragging a large stick through the woods, one after the other.

When we arrive at the desired building site, Firetruck and Luke ask me to hold their cameras for them to help free up their hands to move large logs and sticks. There is already a pile of large branches on the ground. Several other children begin to gather around them. Luke says impatiently, “Come on, Firetruck! Let’s build it!” He is excited to get started and is already lifting up a long fallen log that towers over him (Figure 5-33).
Figure 5-33. Luke lifts a long fallen log

All the children agreed that the spot they originally had intended as their building site was no longer adequate, for a reason unknown to me. All of the children started to pick up and carry the collected sticks and moved them into a small clearing in the woods. They made a large pile of sticks, ready for the sculpture to be erected. Luke, leading the group, carries one of the large logs and props it up against a nearby tree. Jewel and Leaf follow his lead and pickup sticks from the pile to lean up against the same tree. Luke goes to retrieve another stick, which is skinny and twice his height, to add to the shelter
Luke struggles a little with the long stick since it keeps getting caught on the ground behind him as he tries to place it. Undismayed, he tries again and again until the branch is propped leaning up against the tree.

Figure 5-34. Luke adds a long stick to the sculpture

Luke, Jewel, Gem, Firetruck, and Leaf are all now going back and forth from the stick pile to their building site. The children then find some old clay left from the previous group. They decide that it will help make their structure strong and will be a
material to help support the sticks to the tree base. As Luke scrapes some old clay off of a tree truck he says, “My teepee is gonna be strong!” He then runs back to it, leaving three other children at the tree still trying to scrape some off with their fingers. “I got some clay guys,” Luke says as he squishes some clay to the end of a stick. He then rolls the remainder of his clay into a ball between his hands and adds it to the sculpture (Figure 5-35).

Figure 5-35. Luke adds clay to the sculpture
The children continue to add all of the sticks from the pile to their sculpture. When the last one is added, Luke goes to look for more sticks. He sees Firetruck carrying a long stick and says, “Hey, Firetruck! Put that on our teepee!” Firetruck walks the large stick over to the sculpture, then raises it the air and makes a spraying sound with his mouth looking up at the sky. “Sppsss! Watch out for bug spray! Sppsss!” he shouts. He turns to me with a huge smile on his face, “This is a bug spray” “And if the bug is up here…” he excitedly shares point to the top of the sculpture, “they spray the bug spray and it flies away,” as he whips his arm back. Firetruck places his bug sprayer on the sculpture, but as soon as he does, Luke picks it up and says, “Hey, Firetruck, put it on this side we can make it wider.” Firetruck tells him with excitement in his voice, “This is a bug spray!”—happy to let Luke place it where he wants. Gem returns to the sculpture and shares that she found more clay. Luke places on two more sticks. Luke requests to Leaf and Gem, “Guys, have you found more sticks?” “I have clay,” they both reply as they add it to the sculpture (Figure 5-36).
“Watch out for the bug spray!” Firetruck announces as he approaches with two more sticks, which are bug sprayers as well. They are interrupted by the five minute warning before we all have to go back inside the school. Luke rushes to add one last log to the sculpture. It is now time for documentation and the children get their cameras to capture their artwork. Jewel hands me her camera, thinking she was done, but then remembered and shouted, “The teepee!” as she runs over to document it. Luke shares
and lets her know, “I got a picture of the teepee,” although after watching several other children take photographs of it, he decides to take another (Figure 5-37). I take a photo of him taking a picture with his camera. When he finishes, he turns towards me, and sees that I was taking a photo of him. He then raises his camera again and takes a picture of me.

Figure 5-37. Luke photographs the sculpture
Luke chose this photograph to go in the art exhibition (Figure 5-38). At the end of the week when we discussed his photograph he shared, “We made a teepee.” He named it “Super Stormy” because, “It never ever gets wrecked by a storm.” I remembered they took special care to ensure it was strong.

![Figure 5-38. Luke’s photograph of his artwork he titled, Super Stormy](image)

**White Bunny**

I hear in the distance, “Sabrina, come check this out!” in an excited voice. Sabrina and Han, who is also in earshot, run over to see what Lindsay has discovered. Lindsay is standing a couple feet away looking down at a dead rabbit. Today was our second day venturing out in the woods together. As soon as we took our first few steps
into the woods, the familiar foul smell hit me again. I had smelled it yesterday as we walked to home base; I knew there must be a dead animal nearby. The source of the smell was not discovered yesterday, but after the children dispersed their separate ways today, it didn’t take long for the children to discover the rotting animal—a rabbit.

Han slows as he gets closer, but walks right past Lindsay’s guarded distance and stops and squats just a few inches from the rabbit’s body. I instinctively say, “Whoa! Don’t get too close.” My inner teacher wanted to ensure he did not touch the rabbit in fear of germs. Han keeps his position, but tucks his hands between his chest and his legs as he continues to squat over the rabbit, looking intently. Han points excitedly and says, “I see some bones!” (Figure 5-39).

Figure 5-39. Han observes the rabbit’s bones
Lindsay asks, “What is it?” “What do you think it is?” I ask the children. Sabrina, keeping her distance from the rabbit says, “A dead animal.” “That’s right,” I reply. Han stands up and jumps backward saying, “It smells yucky!” as he waves his hand in front of his nose. Lindsay says, “I think it’s a cat.” “Look at its feet,” I reply since the rabbit’s head was not present and the feet offered the children a good clue. “It looks like a wolf,” Han tells me. “I think wolves are a little bit bigger. Do you recognize the feet?” I ask the three children. “It’s a baby wolf?” Han asks. His response makes me smile. Sabrina says, “I know what it is. It might be like a creature?” I reply, “Mmhmm. It’s an animal, yeah.” The children continue to carefully inspect and contemplate the rabbit’s identity.

Lindsay is getting impatient with me asking her and the other children what they think it might be and she directly asks me, “Can you tell us what it is?” “You want me to tell you?” I ask to verify they no longer want to figure it out on their own. “It’s a rabbit,” I tell them. “A rabbit died,” says Han. “I kind of knew it,” says Lindsay. They then go on to discuss what had potentially killed and eaten the rabbit. They decide it must have been a wolf that had it for dinner. I explain to them that the patch of woods is too small for a wolf to live in. After some more discussion, Lindsay says, “It must have been a big bird.” Han has been twirling a feather he had found earlier between his fingers and the topic of hawks had already come up in a previous discussion.
Two more children carefully approach (Figure 5-40). Nico says, “What is it?”

Han and Lindsay excitedly reply, “A bunny!” “A bunny!”

Figure 5-40. Children gather to look at the dead rabbit

“It’s sad,” Elsa says, as she crouches over the rabbit (Figure 5-41). Elsa and Han thoughtfully study it. Elsa’s slow and thoughtful movements demonstrate her respect for the dead rabbit. Han then runs off into the woods to get the rest of the children. He is excited to share their discovery. As they all come bounding through the woods back towards us, I hear Han yelling, “Right here!” They start to slow as they get closer and circle around the dead rabbit.
Figure 5-41. Elsa and Han crouch over the rabbit to get a closer look

Han shouts, “I want to take a picture of it!” “I want to take a picture of it too!” “Me too!” other children echo. Steve, who is standing over the rabbit calmly adds, “Cool.” “It smells so yucky,” Han remarks again as he inches closer to take a photograph. He adds, “You don’t want to pick it up.” I agree and remind the children not to touch the rabbit.

Children crouch closer and start taking photographs with their cameras. Some children take their time looking at the rabbit and take a few very deliberate careful photographs. Steve quickly takes one photograph and immediately runs away shouting, “A dead bunny! A dead bunny!” Elsa takes her time, her camera hovers over the rabbit, looking at it through the camera’s display screen, and takes a photo (Figure 5-42). She stands up and turns to ask, “It’s dead. Why?” I explain that we are not sure and perhaps
it died from a predator or maybe it died from natural causes. Lindsay says, “I think it died because it was sick and then it died.”

Figure 5-42. Elsa photographs the dead rabbit

At this point, many of the children have run off to continue to explore other areas of the woods. The two girls who are left, Elsa and Lindsay, discuss how they want to build a house with sticks and decide to build it farther from the bunny and walk away to find the ideal location.

For the final art exhibition, Elsa, who is four years old, chose the photograph that she took of the rabbit as one of her three photos to be displayed (Figure 5-43). During her selection process she shared, “This picture I loved.” When I asked her to elaborate she added, “It’s a cool picture.” I asked her what she wanted the title of her photograph to be and she replied, “How about name is ‘White Bunny’ because it’s white?”
As I was sitting with Elsa looking at and discussing the photographs she had taken that week, Leaf walks over and chimes in excitedly, “I took that too! I took that picture too!” as he sees her photograph of the rabbit on my laptop. I acknowledge him, “Yeah you both took a picture of the bunny.” “Because we liked it,” Elsa shares. I ask, “Yeah, why’d you like it?” “Because it’s good. It’s interesting,” Elsa replies. I have a realization and share, “You two are the only two that have photographs of the bunny that are going to go in the art exhibition so is there anything you would like to tell people about the bunny and why you think it’s important to go in the art show?” Both children answer, “Yes,” simultaneously. “Because it’s special,” adds Elsa. “Because it’s special. What makes the bunny special?” I ask. Elsa relies, “Because the bunnies are soft.” I question, “Because it’s soft?” Elsa elaborates, “Because the bunnies are different.” We
are then interrupted by Gem. Elsa and Leaf are distracted and the conversation abruptly ends.

I found it interesting how in our conversations after returning from the woods, Elsa never referred to the rabbit as being dead. Other children used the word “dead” as a descriptor for the rabbit and would refer to it as the “dead bunny.” Elsa, on the other hand, used words such as white and soft, although she knew it was dead, and she titled her photograph “White Bunny.” Out of all of the children she took the most care photographing the rabbit. Her slow and careful consideration in her photography was a reflection of her learning, connection, and entanglement.

On a later day, Elsa and I have another conversation. I ask her, “What do you think is important for me to write about when I tell other people about what we did?” She answers, “Maybe you can write what I found in the woods.” I reply, “Oh yeah, what you found in the woods. What did you find in the woods?” Elsa pauses and says, “Uhhh I found a black beetle and I take a picture and you can write I found a black beetle. And you can write I found a white bunny.” She didn’t want to elaborate. “Anything else you want me to write about?” I ask. “Yes. Write about what I do in there.” I probe, “What do you want me to say about what you did in there? What did you do in the woods?”

Elsa answers, “I’m taking photographs and I’m doing artwork. You can write it.”

And so I wrote it with ethics and authenticity at the forefront of my mind. These narratives highlight what emerges when children relate to and engage with nature through art. The stories told in this dissertation are a collaboration between my narrative, the children’s experiences, and the natural world. Their experiences are made visible through these narrative entanglements.
Chapter 6
Discussion

Every place has a soul, an identity, and seeking to discover it and relate to it means learning to recognize your own soul as well. More and more we are witnessing an apathetic and fossilized acceptance of vulgarity and ugliness, of the lack of care for the environment in which we live. It is the responsibility of education, as well, to contrast this tendency that jeopardizes, at both the individual and social levels, the quality of our current and future life… Our hope is that a sensitive approach to our surroundings can constitute a positive element for participation and conscious solidarity with others and with that which surrounds us, an indispensable attitude for the future democracy and humanity.

(Reggio Children, 2008, p. 11)

To my knowledge this study is unique in its focus on preschool children making art in a natural setting, using only natural materials, for an extended period of time, and in researching with these children as collaborators, as artists and researchers, documentarians and interpreters. The observations and narratives included here will hopefully further stimulate work in this area. There is a dearth of literature within the field of art education related to these matters. One of my goals was to bring the issues and concepts described in my dissertation work to a more prominent place. Given the recent and continuing setbacks to environmental protections and the rising dangers of
climate change, it is increasingly important to emphasize our understanding that we are a part of nature and to embrace sustainable values (Popovich, Albeck-Ripka, & Pierre-Louis, 2020). Coupled with this are budget cuts of art education programs in public schools (Hancock & Wright, 2018), no doubt exacerbated by our current economic crisis. Given these challenges of our times, a further purpose of my work is to emphasize the significant role that art education can have in the development of an ecological identity, its centrality in addressing issues that will determine our future as a planetary system.

with Children

In this dissertation I have argued for the rights of children, especially concerning the right for their work, thoughts, and opinions to be taken seriously and valued. This is especially important for research that is about them and affects them. I looked to Reggio Emilia’s image of the child as grounding for my work with children, where children are considered competent and capable to collaborate with me in this research. We investigated together what comes to matter when they use art to form relations with the natural world. Central to this work was the trusted relationships we built and my attunement to their hundred languages. I was an interested adult who practiced being there and the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2001, 2006; Schulte, 2013; Tarr, 2003; Thompson, 2005, 2009).

Guided by Wilson’s concept (2005, 2008a, 2008b) of the third pedagogical site, my intentions to research with the children was pure, but the lived reality was more complicated than anticipated. I felt that our collaboration in documenting our shared
experiences through photography, as well as the children’s inclusion in the research process as a whole were successful, but the interpretation of the documentation presented challenges. Since I needed to determine what was important to them, I did not want to analyze the videos and photographs by myself. I needed to solicit and to honor their interpretations of their work. I did not want to speak for them. My frequent attempts to have these conversations with the children were largely unsuccessful. During the constrained time we had together, the children were not interested in talking with me about our time in the woods and the artwork they created, although they said they had fun and were proud of their work.

One challenge was that our conversations happened during their free play time, and playing with their friends was much more fun than talking with me. Their curious minds and active bodies were continually distracted by the other children playing in the distance. Our collaboration was also limited by the amount of time I could spend with the children. Perhaps if I had more time, and this time did not disrupt their free play, we would have learned and listened to be able to collaborate on their interpretations as well. The children’s reflective and analytical capacities were not highlighted during our conversations, which privileged verbal communication. I had to accept that our conversations felt forced and were clearly not an activity the children believed was important for our research together. Perhaps the process of choosing their photos for the art exhibition, and the conversation that occurred around that activity, were enough for them; perhaps this reflective and interpretive process should be recognized as the exercise of one or more of the children’s hundred languages. In order to respect the children, I didn’t push these conversations, and had to accept and be comfortable with not knowing.
That does not mean that they did not have opinions and thoughts regarding our time together. Their choice of photographs to display revealed the work that they felt was most significant. It is as much my inability to recognize the best way for the children to communicate with me, their hundred languages, as it is a developmental limitation of researching with three to five year olds.

Throughout our collaboration I was aware of the power imbalance in our relationship. It felt unethical to analyze and make any unilateral conclusions concerning the meaning and implications of their works or determinations about what came to matter without their participation in that process. I felt the only proper and fair way to make their learning and experiences visible, was through narrative inquiry and photography (Lewis, 2011). I told their stories through my writing about their artmaking in the woods with my photographic accompaniment. The children’s photographs that also accompanied the narratives were essential to contextualize the stories and to provide an interpretive lens crafted by the children themselves.

This research study presents unanswered questions, but also suggests new directions to pursue, and different possible approaches to explore and consider when conducting research with young children. Researching with young children as collaborators is possible and worthwhile, but challenging in ways that are undoubtedly unique to each situation.
with Nature

Along with my attention to researching with children, I concentrated on researching with nature as well. Throughout this dissertation I have advocated that we need to reposition ourselves within nature. Humans are inseparable from nature and our mindset needs to reflect that truth in order to develop an ecological identity. We should not learn about nature as an object or something separate from us. We are inextricably linked. We are intertwined and intra-acting with all the other living and nonliving inhabitants of this planet—we cannot be untangled. Nature is an agent in this research as well the child.

I reflect on the word nature and its various meanings for this dissertation. Mcphie and David (2018) explore the various meanings and ways nature has been discussed in research and teaching. Nature is not a word that is easily defined, but a concept that can be understood and used in various ways. Mcphie and David (2018) explain, “we can experiment with how concepts, namely nature, come to matter… realize that concepts are performative through our specific intra-actions and storytelling of the world” (p. 14). Nature is a concept, and we each need to explore its meaning to us individually and how it behaves so we can understand our place within it.

As an action, I discussed how in this research study nature functions as both a teacher and an art studio. I expanded the Reggio Emilia concept of the environment as the third teacher to embrace the natural environment as the third teacher (Edwards et al., 1993, 2012). I also discussed nature as an art studio, or atelier. Within the atelier of the woods, the children used the language of natural materials, as one of their hundred
languages, for their artmaking. The materials, however, were not passive, but participatory. These material encounters were not about acquiring knowledge about the other, but about experiencing an open way of working and being together in the world (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017).

When children are limited to learning facts about plants, animals, and recycling, for example, they are restricted to knowledge about a distant other. I believe there is added value to physically encountering the others with whom we share our existence. It is hard to know all the consequences that result from these experiences, but I believe encounters such as this are what children use to develop their ecological identity. What do children learn from working with the natural environment? What if we consider the woods the active participant that it is? What histories and stories would the natural materials tell us? One limitation of my research with the natural environment is that I recognized that I privileged the children in the narratives I told. It was challenging for me to think about the actions of the natural objects without anthropomorphizing them. I tried to consider how the children and the natural objects affect each other, but realized the difficulty in incorporating nonhuman perspectives.

When the child pokes their finger into the clay, does it resist, holding its ground, and push back or willingly allow the little finger to tunnel a hole into its soft middle? When a child draws on the tree with charcoal, does its rough bark scratch back carving the charcoal into dust or does it openly accept the black color to coat its sides? When balancing skinny logs, the logs work with gravity, tilting, resisting being balanced or do they feel the friction of the other logs and try to find the point in which a delicate balance is reached? When a feather is picked up to be photographed, does its smooth delicate
surfaces resist and actively slip from the hold of the fingers of the child or its light fluffy feathers dance and sway in the breeze welcoming the child to take its photograph (Figure 6-1)?

Figure 6-1. Han photographs a feather/A feather is picked up by a boy

Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015) explore how considering the agency of the natural objects that are encountered can bring new possibilities into view. This consideration creates the potential for developing more ethical relations with the natural environment. As researchers are attuned to the children, researchers need to also be
attuned to the movements and actions of the natural objects and species that are encountered (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). However, Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015) admit that achieving this relationship is hard work:

The hard work is not just about noticing the multitude of things that are going on for human and nonhuman others, but it is also about noticing what human and nonhuman others notice (Tsing 2013). Of course, this is never fully achievable. The limits to human intentionalities, observations and knowings are premised in multispecies ethnographies, precisely because they acknowledge that humans are not the only ones exercising agency and not the only animals noticing, observing, acting, knowing, affecting and being affected. (p. 514)

Although I was not able to reflect the agency of the natural world in my written narratives, I wrote with an awareness of their active participation. There is always more transpiring during the artmaking events than I can discern, both with the children and with the natural world. These may have become more evident if I had been able to surreptitiously capture on video all of the children’s discoveries and experiences in artmaking with the woods. Cultivating attitudes and practices that would better allow me to take note of the natural world itself and the ways in which children encounter it would be worthwhile to pursue in future studies. Although it is difficult to achieve a fully post-human consciousness, this is worthwhile goal to pursue. The more that we (adults) appreciate and accept our place in the natural world, the better we will be able to serve as role models for children to do so as well.
Children as Land Artists

Artmaking is a meaningful way for children to form relations with the natural world. Artmaking is not just a way of interacting, but intra-acting with the natural materials children encounter. Artmaking allows for children to fully participate with the more-than-human, which helps them learn with the natural environment—to make sense of their world. Children actively explore their ideas through art as a way to make meaning. Some contemporary artists also follow this practice. Land artist Andy Goldsworthy said, “I go to a place and never know what I'm going to do. Art can show you what is there. I'm always amazed how blindingly obvious things are which I'd never noticed” (Maddocks, 2014, para. 6). Contemporary artists and children can use art to learn what is there—to further their relationship with the natural world.

The children at Hort Woods created art in the same spirit as land artists Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo. Topal and Gandini (2019) discuss:

Goldsworthy works directly with the land to create outdoor sculpture and designs by rearranging the natural materials he finds there. We believe he works in much the same way that children explore when allowed time and space outside on their own. His books and videos showing his process and creations are inspirational for children and adults alike. (p.76)

The characteristics of land artists also are characteristics of some of the emergent art practices of the Sky House children. Just like these professional artists, the children at Hort Woods were able to create self-initiated artworks stemming from their own ideas and inquiries that were site specific. Both Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo create
artworks that are integrally tied to their place of creation. They go to a site without any preconceived idea of what they are going to create, become inspired by that place, and then create their artworks. They enter the site and place of the artwork with an open mind and a desire to understand more about the natural elements of the specific site. The artwork created by the children of Hort Woods was also emergent and spontaneous. Through their artmaking process they developed a greater understanding of the natural world, although they may not have been actively searching for it.

Another characteristic of land artists Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo is that they do not use any tools to facilitate the creation of their artworks. They use natural materials, such as spit, hair, and thorns, to aid in their artworks’ construction. During the first part of my research, where I observed the children spontaneously create art during their outdoor free play time, the children also did not have access to any unnatural manufactured materials when creating their art. Only using site-specific natural materials that they find in their immediate environment is one of the major distinguishing factors of land artists from other art practices. The use of these site-specific found natural materials for artmaking is of the upmost importance to land artists and the children at Hort Woods. Andy Goldsworthy explains:

A rock is not independent of its surroundings. The way it sits tells how it came to be there. The energy and space around a rock are as important as the energy and space within. The weather—rain, sun, snow, hail, mist, calm— is that external space made visible. When I touch a rock, I am touching and working the space around it. In an effort to understand why that rock is there and where it is going, I do not take it away from the area in which I found it. (Beardsley, 1984, p.134)
During the second part of my research, when we created art in the woods, I did provide charcoal and clay on certain days for the children to use in their artmaking in addition to their found natural materials. Although charcoal and clay are natural art media, they were not found in Hort Woods and were not a part of that specific natural environment.

The children’s artwork and the artwork of Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo were also both ephemeral. Andy Goldsworthy is interested in time and the process of decay and renewal. The children may also philosophize about what happens to their artworks in the outdoor play area or in Hort Woods with the passage of time. Many children looked for their specific artworks in the woods when they returned the following day. They were excited to see how their work might have changed. Some children struggled with the ephemeral nature of their artwork in Hort Woods. For example, Tina grew increasingly frustrated when the wind would blow the leaves off of her completed sculpture, which she had carefully placed in a line along a log. The impermanence of the artwork they created was new for many children and was a topic of discussion.

The children seemed content with the idea that they were able to capture their ephemeral artwork at its best with photography. Photography and documentation are fundamental to land artists because of the impermanent nature of their work. Goldsworthy (1993) states:

Each work grows, stays, decays- integral parts of a cycle which the photograph shows at its height, marking the moment when the work is most alive. There is an intensity about a work at its peak that I hope is expressed in the image. Process
and decay are implicit in that moment. A drawing or painting would be too defined. The photographs leave the reason and spirit of the work outside.

I had brought into the Sky House classroom large books containing the photography of Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo to show the children how other people have worked with natural materials to create art. The images in the book were not intended as exemplars, but as provocations. The children looked at the enlarged photographs of the artwork and were able to understand that photography was a way for the artists to share their work with a broader audience, which we discussed. In most cases, the artists themselves were the only ones to see the original artwork in person. The photographs offer a way to continue the artwork through a different medium.

I believe something special happens when children create art as land artists; when their work is site specific and they use found natural materials from that site, when they do not have a preconceived idea of the artwork they want to create, but are inspired by their encounters with the site. I believe this type of making allows for the creation of art with the natural objects—being able to recognize their agency and respond to their actions during the artmaking process, making the artwork together.

Other forms of artmaking with natural materials are still worthy endeavors, but differ from what I advocate. I have seen many art teachers create lessons inspired by Andy Goldsworthy that do not take into account the fundamental principles of his land art. For example, having students sketch out their ideas before going outside to their site, collecting natural materials and bringing them back into the art room to create art, asking students to bring in found natural objects from home, asking students to create something specific with the natural materials outside, such as a lesson on one of the elements of art
such as lines and asking students to make their artwork circular, spiral, etc. That is not to say these artmaking activities are not worthwhile, but I believe a different type of learning, with, in relation, can take place when the principles of land artists are embraced.

**Pedagogical Implications for Art Education**

The study described in this dissertation demonstrates that young children are able to use art to form relations with the natural world. However, "The importance of place in education had been overlooked for a variety of reasons. One is the ease with which we miss the immediate and mundane. Those things nearest at hand are often the most difficult to see" (Orr, 1992, p. 126). The creation of art outdoors with natural materials is not commonplace in the typical classroom. Most art supplies are manufactured and are very different from the natural objects children would encounter outside for artmaking. Educators are typically the ones who make the decisions concerning what art materials are provided and available for the children’s use. The absence of natural art materials and outdoor artmaking spaces from schools limits the type of art created by the children and as a result affects the definitions of artmaking that children develop (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017).

It can be challenging for classroom teachers to implement artmaking with the natural world in their art or early childhood classrooms. The lead teacher of the Sky House classroom, Jenn, had the desire and understanding to incorporate land art into her classroom’s curriculum. However, time and structural resources were primary obstacles that had kept her from attempting to incorporate this type of curriculum on her own.
Jennifer Hooven (2016) wrote about her experience working with me and participating in my research with the children in her classroom:

Working with PhD [candidate] Rebecca Taudien to support her thesis has honestly been one of the most fulfilling experiences I have had in my ten years of teaching and mentoring college students at Penn State. As an environmental educator with a degree in Recreation and Park Management from PSU, I have always been motivated by a deep desire to marry my love of nature with my work in early childhood education. Spending time in the outdoors with the children in my class provides me with countless opportunities to teach and learn through our relationships. Art making and the process of creation with natural objects is something many children gravitate towards organically when spending hours outdoors, but, finding the time and structural resources necessary to make this happen while teaching and learning in a center setting is challenging. With Rebecca’s leadership, planning skills and attention to detail we were able to craft a wonderful, relaxed, and very meaningful land art experience for the children in my mixed age preschool classroom. The week each group of children spent in the Hort Woods exploring the terrain and working with cameras, clay and charcoal supported them to develop a real relationship with nature, and I am certain that is a feeling they will never forget. The care that Rebecca took to create a stunning gallery-type display in the halls of our school showed her amazing respect for the young artists’ work and this not only supported them to reflect on their experience and what they had created, but also allowed them to share it with the most important people in their young lives—their families. (personal communication)
I am thankful that Jenn was able to have a rewarding experience by participating in this research—the feeling was mutual. I was extremely lucky to work with a teacher who already was so invested in the value of incorporating the natural world and art into her curriculum. However, even with the desire and drive to have her children partake in these types of projects, she had never taken them into the woods behind their school before on her own. This demonstrates that even a highly motivated teacher in a relatively safe environment faces real obstacles and challenges when desirous of bringing their students into wooded or other outdoor areas. I do not claim that children need experiences identical to the ones described in this research to develop an ecological identity, but that this is one type of experience that does help to support children’s development of an ecological identity.

When considering what counts as experiences in nature, it is important to remember that any type of outdoor experience is beneficial. Children living in urban settings may face more challenges, but they can still go for walks outside and investigate their available natural world; the insects on the sidewalks and the birds in the sky. The shining sun, white cottony clouds, swirling wind, shadows, and neighborhood insects and birds cannot be taken away by development. However, public parks are an important access point for urban areas. Unfortunately, there is inequality and the neighborhoods with poor urban planning that do not have even small green spaces and parks are frequently found in low-income communities. However, as Pelo (2013) states:

Rather than contribute to a sense of disconnection from place by writing off our most urban environments as unsalvageable or not worth knowing, we can instill in children an attitude of attention to what exists of the natural world in their
neighborhoods. The sense of care for and connection to place, then, can become
the foundation for critical examination of how that place has been degraded, as
children grow older. (p. 45)

Aside from urban challenges, there also may be geographical and cultural
challenges. Adults living in certain geographic areas may have fears of children going
outside due to poisonous insects or animals, such as rattle snakes and scorpions. Just like
in urban areas, it is important to take advantage of what natural areas are available, with
attention paid to the necessary safety precautions. Regardless of one’s culture, it is
important to carefully consider the benefits of spending time outdoors with the natural
world. When considering limiting children’s access to the outdoors due to weather, a
Swedish saying is a helpful reminder: “Det finns inget dåligt väder bara dåliga kläder”
(J. Taudien, personal communication). This saying translates to, “There exists no bad
weather, only bad clothing.” However, we are unable to truly know what effects these
outdoor experiences really have on children. The art exhibition and the inclusion of my
research in the school’s newsletter, revealed some of the effects my research had on the
adults, who turned out to be an unanticipated group of participants, even if we aren’t able
to fully know it ultimately affects the children.

The Child Care Center at Hort Woods chose to highlight the Sky House
classroom and the research I was conducting with the children in their
October/November/December newsletter. They wrote an article for their newsletter
about my work with the Sky House classroom and the art exhibition in an article entitled,
“Penn State PhD Student Rebecca Taudien Provides Extraordinary Art Education
Experience for Preschool.” The administration, teachers, and staff of Hort Woods were pleased and appreciative of my research and our collaboration:

When PhD candidate Rebecca Taudien proposed her thesis work to Hort Woods we could not even begin to imagine the amazing experiences that would follow in the coming months. Working alongside our teaching team of educators in our Sky House preschool classroom, Rebecca’s focus was to complete an art project that would later become part of her PhD dissertation. Over the last year and a half, Rebecca has been working with small groups of children from our Sky House classroom investigating the connection between nature and art. (Ebeling, 2016, 4)

In their newsletter they also described the work that the children did in the woods and wrote about the art exhibition and reception. The newsletter also discussed the influence that the art exhibition and my research with the Sky House classroom had on the other classrooms in the school:

The impact of this project is ongoing. Through the visual display which was depicted along the preschool hallway many children began to show an emerging interest in the woods. In November our Room to Grow classroom began to explore the woods alongside the Sky House children. Their explorations led to: identify living and non-living things in the immediate and surrounding environment, exploring the change of seasons in the environment, and recognizing that plants and animals grow and change. Extraordinary learning experiences are possible when faculty and student research projects align with our philosophy and are relevant to the expressed interests of children. (Ebeling, 2016, 4)
The newsletter also included a quote from a parent’s perspective concerning the continued impact of our time in the woods on her son:

I was amazed to see what the children were able to do with the cameras. It's been wonderful to see their images and descriptions of what they found meaningful in the woods. We're even planning on giving Nico a camera for Christmas because he's asked to continue the project. (Ebeling, 2016, 4)

Overall, the work described in this dissertation demonstrates the feasibility and potential benefits of conducting research in art education with children with a natural (woods) environment.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Move through the world differently—tenderly, fiercely, modestly—aligning yourself with the lay of the land, with the reach of the sky, with the movement of the water. Say “we” when you speak of the Earth, and take the Earth with you to the voting booth, to public meetings and zoning hearings, to family reunions and school potlucks. Learn the names of the birds that pass through your backyard, of the insects that fly through your windows, of the clouds that shape-change in the sky above your street. Learn the names, and speak them, and teach them to your neighbors. (Pelo, 2013, p. 46)

The real influence and impact of this study is unknown. How much of an effect this project had on the children as a whole or their ecological identity remains unclear.
Although this research may leave us with more questions than answers, I can only hope that personally, and collectively as art educators, we can continue to make strides towards applying at least some of the ideas that I advocate for in this dissertation—impacting practices and policies which can help steer us to a more hopeful future for children and our planet. There are and will be future set-backs and challenges, but we must persist; rebuilding the layer upon layer of leaves, as Alexandra did creating her artwork (Figure 6-2). Some leaves are big and some are small, but all are unique and significant contributions. We must march forward, knowing there will be obstacles and that the wind may blow us off our course at any time, but we will persevere.

Figure 6-2. Photograph I took of Alexandra’s artwork, Branchy Leaves

It is my hope that this dissertation, which highlights children’s artistic entanglements with the natural world, is a step, although small, towards change—an
additional leaf. Progress in shifting the ways in which our society views both children and the natural world will take hard work, time, and dedication. The importance of artmaking in young children’s lives, as exemplified by both Alexandra’s work and this dissertation, must continue to be highlighted. We must persist in advocating for young children and pursuing research that will direct best practices for art educators. Although this chapter now comes to a close, this work must continue. As Alexandra proclaimed, “Tada! Look at my leaves!”
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Appendix

Photographs Selected by Children for the Exhibition

In *Nature Love: Building in the Woods*, the children’s art exhibition, each child had three photographs on display as well as a quote to accompany one of their artworks. The following children’s photographs were printed for display. In this appendix, each child has a page, which includes their name, age, three chosen titled photographs, and quotes that they shared to contextualize them. One quote per child was included in the art exhibition. This appendix contains the most pertinent and essential data from this dissertation because it is what the children wanted to share with others.
Steve
Age 5

Bird House

“This is me and Han making the bird houses.”

Point

“A teepee so we can know what game to build.”

“We used long sticks and short sticks.”

Tomato Tornado

“I liked it because I spinned the camera and it looks cool because it’s like a tornado tomato.”
Lindsay
Age 4

Bluebird House

“Because I want bluebirds to come in it.”

“Can I tell you what it was made out of? Clay and sticks!”

“This is for the mommy (pointing to large hole on top) and these ones are for the babies (small holes) and this is where the food is (hanging ball).”

Flag Mountain

“I used sticks, clay, and a leaf and it was supposed to be a flag.”

Heart Tree

“I used some clay and a leaf and that’s a decoration for the tree.”
Nico
Age 3

*Muddy Gerder*

“A dirty tree.”

“It was a map to show them the mud.”

*Bogi*

“It was the tree’s birthday so I gave it a birthday cake to it.”

*Wasabell*

“I like my leaves.”
Elsa
Age 4

White Bunny
“This picture I loved.”
“It’s a cool picture.”

Black Beetle
“Because they’re cool. Because I like it. Because it is beautiful.”

Black Tree
“Maybe I’ll call this one black tree because it has black on it.”
“I’m just coloring it.”
Sabrina
Age 5

*Flower*

“I wanted to make that art so other people could see it.”

*Sabrina*

“I think about it because I loved the leaves and then I put one on my artwork.”

*Pretty Flower*

“Because I love it and I just love it.”
Han
Age 4

Woods

“Up here is where the food is and down here is where they sleep on the side and down here and that’s when they pop out and they fly out. Those sticks are so when something wants to get it the sticks poke it.”

Snakey

“A fort.”

“Inside it’s little, but if you collect more sticks and make it wider it turns bigger, but right now it’s small like others made of little sticks and medium one.”

“I want it to have a name like a snake.”

Animal Trap

“I wanted to take a picture of it so when I want to draw some animals that are not living in good places I can draw an animal trap.”
Gem
Age 5

*Masterpiece*

“I stucked a stick here and then I put a little thing that I found on the playground. I sticked a stick here and then I put clay around it and that stick and then I took a picture.”

*Teepee*

“Sticks and clay. We put the sticks down and splatted clay.”

*Holey*

“It had mud inside. I stucked a stick down and then wiggled it and when I pulled it out it looked like mud.”

“It looked interesting for the art show.”
Anna
Age 3

Anna’s Shoes
“My shoes!”

Leaf
“Leaves.”

Stick
“Stick.”
Luke
Age 5

Super Sail

“‘It never gets wrecked when a storm comes.’”

Super Stormy

“We made a teepee.”

“It never ever gets wrecked by a storm.”

Super Barky

“Because it’s so cool because of its bark.”

“It’s so bumpy and it has different colors.”
Jewel
Age 5

Spots

“Spots, spots, spots, and then stick and leaves.”

Best Friend Jewels

“I just thought it would be nice if we could do us together.”

Sky House’s Teepee

“I thought I could make my own teepee and to make it better than the ones we did before because it had a little hole in the side.”
Leaf
Age 3

*Oides*

“A dinosaur museum.”

*C3PO*

“I loved the dead bunny.”

*Aids*

“A Star Wars lightsaber.”
Firetruck
Age 4

"It’s just me."

The Sailboat

“We didn’t have water.”

Campfire

“We only made the campfire. We didn’t make marshmallows.”
Alexandra
Age 3

**Ant Art**

“Because it has ants on it.”

**Branchy Leaves**

“A leaf with branch and the branch was sticking and it was hard and it could move and it didn’t blow away. The wind was not strong enough. I made a hole and stucked it in there.”

**Tree Branch**

“I saw some green things like this.”
Tina
Age 5

Snowman

“I made it out of clay and I used my fingers for the face and sticks for the arms and legs.”

Mermaid

“I used leaves on a long hanging branch. Mermaids are really beautiful and I tried to make it, but that was the best one I could make.”

Snowflake

“I like snow.”
Mia
Age 5

Ladybug

“One leg fell off.”

Design

“It’s made out of charcoal and it’s gonna be a black tree.”

“It was a design.”

Snowflake

“We’re pretending it’s cold.”
Luca
Age 3

Flydel
“It’s pretty with that thing on there.”

Frosty
“This artwork is a snowman and it’s Frosty.”

Tree Mane
“I like the leaves when they are pretty in the sun.”
Jack
Age 4

A Belly Button

“The clay keeps the belly button in place.”

A Vent

“I kinda made it a drain.”

“I kind of like it.”

A Burn

“It’s a burn.”
VITA

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Instructor for AED 303: Visual Arts in the Elementary School, Fall 2015, Spring 2016, Fall 2016
Instructor for AED 212: Interpreting Art Experience: Educational Implications, Spring 2016
Teaching Assistant for AED 489: Advanced Practicum: Saturday Art School, Fall 2015
Teaching Assistant for ART 10: Introduction to Visual Studies, Fall 2017
Teaching Assistant for ART 003: Visual Images on the Web, Summer 2015

Conference Presentations

Taudien, R. B. (2019). I loved the dead bunny: Young children’s artistic encounters in the woods. The National Art Education Association National Convention, Boston, MA
Taudien, R. B., Park, H., Coombs, A., & Thompson, S. (2019). Relational inquiries: Thoughts and approaches to working with children. The National Art Education Association National Convention, Boston, MA
Taudien, R. B. (2016). Connecting with the past and considering the future: Reengaging the Big Red Book. The Penn State Seminar in Art Education @50: Transdisciplinary Inquiry, Practice, and Possibilities, University Park, PA

Publications