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ARTICLE

Other knowings and experiencing otherness: Children's perspectives of playing a hunting game in a nature reserve

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Abstract

This research study explored the experiences of children (aged 9–10 years), from four different primary schools, playing a hunting game in a nature reserve. Previous research shows that children's play in green spaces can provide a number of benefits to children. However, there is a lack of research into children's experiences of playing in bio-diverse environments. This study sought to find out how children (aged 9–10 years) "playing" the role of animals in a nature reserve could enable them to experience different ways of being and different ways of understanding their relationship with the world around them. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design that aimed to interpret the first-person lived experiences of the children playing in the nature reserve. Four classes from four different primary schools took part in the study. Six children from each class were interviewed and analysis of their responses generated a number of different themes. The results suggest that playing the hunting game in a biodiverse environment does offer states of being and knowings that are not as accessible in schools. Playing the role of an animal had afforded the children with an accentuated, embodied experience, offering insight into the otherness of the more-than-human world.

Keywords: experience; children; embodiment; ontology; biodiversity; community; outdoor education

Introduction

There are a growing number of voices who argue that children need to be engaged in activities that are non-anthropocentric in nature. For example, Jickling Blenkinsop, Timmerman, and Sitka-Sage (2018) call for "wild pedagogies" that disrupt anthropocentric dominance and "seek to challenge a human-centred, and human exclusive, understanding" (p. 34) replacing it with approaches that "honour the voice and presence of nature and more-than-beings" (p. 34). Furthermore, Ärlemalm-Hagser and Sandberg (2017) challenge educators to facilitate learning within non-anthropocentric ethics, that involve different "intrinsic values of the human and the natural world" (p. 219). As Jardine says, we need to contemplate "how we might understand ourselves, not as an exception to this interweaving indebtedness and inter-relatedness to the Earth, but as an instance of it" (2016, p. 14). There is also an increasing body of research that demonstrates children's play in green spaces can provide beneficial health impacts (Hiscock & Mitchell, 2011; Vanaken & Danckaerts, 2018; Ward, Duncan, Jarden, & Stewart, 2016). Despite this, there is a lack of research into children's play in bio-diverse environments. This research study investigates children's experiences of playing a hunting game in a biodiverse environment. It draws on a

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number of underpinning key concepts to provide a grounding that links to the experiences of the children. These include Huizinga's (1949) theory of play, the existential philosophies of Shepard, (1998; 1973), Turner (1979; 1974), and Buber (1970), and Bone's (2010) exploration of metamorphosis in children's play. These are positioned alongside the pedagogical stances of Blenkinsop and Beeman (2010), and Derby (2015), who argue that if we are to counter the gross ecological abuse and neglect that we continue to inflict on the natural word, Western education needs to reaffirm the importance of other ways of knowing in education.

In Wales, in the United Kingdom (UK), where this research took place, both outdoor experiences and play are statutory parts of the curriculum for primary aged children (Welsh Government, 2015). Nevertheless, there are a multitude of voices warning of the decline in children's experiences of playing in nature places (Dowdell, Gray, & Malone, 2011; Gray, 2011; O' Connor, 2017; Waller *et al.*, 2017). Research shows that children's screen-time is increasing (Šmahel & Blinka, 2012) and that this is potentially negatively impacting on children's physical and mental health (Kardefelt-Winther, 2017; Saunders & Vallance, 2017). Robertson (2015) argues that "technology and always-on connectivity to social-media help remove the material world from the conscious mind" (p. 7) and that this diminishes the opportunity for sensory experiences of nature places. Sibthorp and Richmond (2015) note that even "activities that were once an escape from technology are becoming just another place where modern technology is present" (p. 212). Abram (2010a) states that due to our increasing presence indoors in front of flat screens, we have traded "the world's visceral ambiguity for a flat representation" (p. 13). All of these factors potentially contribute to children spending less time playing outdoors in nature places (Bento & Dias, 2017). Bragg, Wood, Barton and Pretty (2013) assert that this situation is not only damaging for children's health, but "catastrophic" for the environment as children who are estranged from nature when they are young "are less likely to see the importance of taking care of it when they are older" (Bragg *et al.*, 2013, p. 5).

To help counter this estrangement, Louv (2011) warns that we should facilitate immersive experiences in nature for children, as they currently live in the "era of algorithms" (Louv, 2019, p. 20), where the quantitative is prioritised over the qualitative. Indeed, Abram (2010b) claims we are "increasingly blind, increasingly deaf – increasingly impervious to the sensuous world – the technological mind progressively lays waste to the animate Earth" (p. 287). Such developments are particularly corrosive if maintained in nature places, as we sever ourselves from the wonder of sensory experience and deny our essential reciprocity, as if "cutting the earthly vocal chords" (Evernden, 1999, p. 100). The reduction in opportunities for today's children to experience in their play, risk taking and play outdoors in nature places (Lynch, Pike, & Beckett, 2017) is also brought into sharp focus by O'Connor (2017) who suggests that adults' most memorable learning experiences "are often those that have occurred outside of the classroom within play situations" (O'Connor 2017, p. 94). In contrast, children today are being denied impactful learning experiences and are inculcated into an anthropocentric view of the world (Bonnett, 2017; Louv, 2019). This, in turn, leads to future behaviours that are not only damaging to the planet, but also perpetuate a culture that lacks an understanding of community with the natural world "in which our being is ultimately embedded" (Bonnett, 2017, p. 80).

Shepard (1998) argues that the modern urban lives that most children in the West experience impact negatively on their relationship with nature and the development of their psyche. Even childhoods in rural communities are tainted by agricultural cultures that view animals as possessions and nature as resource (Shepard, 1998). Shepard analyses what happens when childhoods are deprived of encountering biodiverse environments, "in a world in which that Other has mostly disappeared" (Shepard, 1998, p. 35). He highlights how this has detrimental and lasting psychological implications as children grow up away from the essential nourishment and nurturing that is given by a childhood in contact with the diversity and otherness of the natural world (Shepard, 1998). It is claimed that the developing child needs non-human otherness, rather than the

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inhuman "urban civilization" and "mechanization of life" that is imposed on children in modern Western societies (Shepard, 1998, p. 104). Living in sterile urban confinement, children are deprived of understanding "the plurality of the self" (Shepard, 1998, p. 126). However, not all is lost as the right attentive engagement with the more-than-human world can "yield its own healing metaphysics" (Shepard, 1998, p. 130). Shepard states that experiencing "the archetypal role of nature", that is "found most complete in wilderness", matures the self "for it embodies the poetic expression of ways of being and relating to others" (1998, p. 108).

This view is supported by Macy (2016) who calls for a "spiritual practice" that "holds life sacred" and "encourages joyful communion" with all our "fellow beings" (p. 153). She refers to this as "the greening of the self" that entails "generating a sense of profound interconnectedness with all life" (2016, p. 152). Macy claims there are reasons to believe that this reality is being experienced by increasing numbers of people, as "the conventional notion of the self with which we have been raised and to which we have been conditioned by mainstream culture is being undermined" (2016, p. 151). Cajete (2015) also feels that "Western science has given rise to a mindset that acts blind to our interrelatedness" (p. 168). In contrast, Cajete (2015) shows that indigenous approaches consider the implications of all actions and act on "the truth that we are all related" (p. 197). This includes all of the more-than-human world, "from the cosmos to what we eat and breathe" (Cajete, 2015, p. 197).

Macy and Brown warn that a shift in understanding is needed in occidental cultures as, though there is "much promise to unfold", we could "lose it all as the web of living systems unravels" (2014, p. 3). Seed concurs and explains that the change required is "not some new resistance to radiation, but a change in consciousness" (1988, p. 38). He argues that if we are truly empathetic and tune in with the other-than-human world, we begin to realise our "humanness" is "merely the most recent stage" of our existence (Seed, 1988, p. 36). What is described here is not just intellectual knowledge, but involves our ontological reality. One's sense of self and relationship with nature changes from feeling as though one is protecting the rainforest to "I am part of the rainforest protecting myself" (Seed, 1988, p. 36). This change is "a spiritual one" as "years of imagined separation" end and "we begin to recall our true nature" (Seed, 1988, p. 36).

Embodiment and Play

Changes such as those outlined above are vital as it is through the "vulnerability of bodily existence" that we are able to experience "the deepest wellsprings of joy" (Abram, 2010a, p. 7). Abram points out that the body is nourished by the natural world and consequently "the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange" (Abram, 1996, p. 46). Rather than standing apart from the natural world through acts of cognition and sedentary indoor practices, when we pay attention, whilst being in the outdoor environment, we notice ourselves as a part of and "utterly inside the physical world" (Abram, 2010b, p. 19). Humberstone (2015) similarly proclaims the value of embodied learnings that challenge the traditional "sporting narratives of body/mind separation" (p. 63) that tend to dominate education in the West. She calls for more attention on the non-cognitive, affective knowings that outdoor experiences grant to learners (Humberstone, 2015). Blades (2015) concurs, positioning the body as a place for meaning-making that can "reveal dialogue" with the natural world and "invites a level of intimacy and mutual engagement" (p. 16). Evernden (1999) highlights that children intuitively understand this. He argues that children see the world "like themselves, alive and sensate" and that "only age and education can correct their view" (Evernden, 1999, p. 14). This is perhaps most powerfully expressed through children's play in nature places. Fasting (2017) describes children's outdoor "magical play" as a world where children 'protect' themselves "against rationality" and "explore for the sake of adventure to feel the bodily and magical play" (Fasting, 2017, p. 642). Children's play has long been proclaimed as far

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more important than just an escape from reality, instead involving entering into a superior reality (Gadamer, 2004; Huizinga, 1949). It enables "transformation back into true being" as the "being of all play is always self-realization, sheer fulfillment, energeia which has its telos within itself" (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 116–117).

The idea of reaching "sheer fulfillment" has resonance with Turner's (1974) theory of liminality. Turner recognised this, describing play or "ludic" expressions as the "essence of liminality, liminality par excellence" (Turner, 1974, p. 61). Turner's (1979) liminality occurs when people are freed from normal modes of behaviour, "a time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen" (p. 465). Turner argues that play enacts higher states of being that involve "intuitive perceptions of a non-transactional order" (Turner, 1974, p. 46). This is supported by Beckett who asserts that in play "relations are formed through moments of playing in the inbetween" and during these moments the players are "free of the demands of social exchange" (Beckett 2017, p. 32). Drawing on Winnicott's (2005) theory of play as occurring in an "intermediate area" between our inner and outer reality, Beckett (2017, p. 33) calls this "playing in the third zone", where the inner and outer world combine.

Metamorphosis in play

In this research study, children aged 9–10 years were encouraged to play in this third zone by imagining and acting as if they were animals during a hunting game. The playing of animals by humans is an ancient practice and is described as being theriomorphic, that is the ascription of animal characteristics to humans or gods, often found in mythology and religion. Huizinga (1949) suggests that the "theriomorphic factor" can be best understood through play. Huizinga (1949), like Turner (1974), uses the practices of tribal cultures to uncover the seriousness of play. He argues that when we truly play, the division between belief and make-believe breaks down and play "merges quite naturally with that of holiness" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 25). Huizinga claims that when tribal peoples dance in animal roles, they are not merely performing, but have "become the other" as there is a "mystic unity" (1949, p. 25). This resonates with Bone's (2010) conceptualisation of play as metamorphosis, suggesting that "change and instability are inherent in play" (p. 405). Bone (2010) explores play that challenges "human/non-human animal binaries" and argues that these enactments involve "unfixedness and infolding: both features of the spiritual" (p. 402). Bone (2010) further contends that the metamorphosis enacted in children's "animal becomings" allows them to experience and become something more than their ordinary selves. Turner (1982) similarly states that, despite the importance of play being an autotelic act, that is playing for the sake of play, its significance is that "we have something to learn in being disorderly" (p. 28). It is when there is a sense of becoming and "the mood of 'maybe', 'might be', 'could be' and 'as if'" that "play, in the full ambiguity of the term, may reign" (Turner, 1982, p. 149).

Non-anthropocentric otherness

Nevertheless, Deleuze and Parnet (2002, p. 2) explain "to become is never to imitate, nor to 'do like', nor to conform to a model". The player has not suddenly been transformed into the animal they are playing, as what "he is becoming changes as much as he does himself" (Deleuze & Parnet 2002). Bone (2010) supports this in her analysis of animal-becomings, claiming that children become "spiritually with the Other" (p. 408). She explains that this is a "spiritual merging" as the "differentiation between child and animal does not suddenly disappear", but is part of the complexity as the "difference 'holds' in this process" (Bone, 2010, p. 411). This resonates with Buber's (1970) existential "I-Thou" philosophy that argues for dialogue with the "Other" as the route to authentic existential understanding. Buber (1970) declares that only when people acknowledge the inter-subjective nature of an experience with another living being are they able to enter into an I and Thou relationship. However, his dialogic philosophy does not advocate the

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loss of self, otherwise the I and Thou dialogue "perishes in the feeling of a unity that does not and cannot exist" (1970, p. 69). Blenkinsop and Beeman (2010) draw on Buber's philosophy of dialogue to analyse how attending to encounters with other-than-human alterity can teach us about reciprocity and the fundamental nature of relation. They state that rather than viewing the "other-than-human-world as backdrop", educators need to embrace the other-than-human as "a co-teacher" (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010, p. 27). To do this, we need to be in a state of "attentive receptivity" so that we may "hear the perspectives of our co- teacher" and "feel the possibility of real difference" (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010, p. 28).

Other ways of knowing

Blenkinsop and Beeman (2010) suggest that in this state of being we can make meaning that "appears to be co-created with an active, present and 'intending' other" (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010, p. 33). This involves ways of knowing that are more intuitive in contrast to the logical, rational modes of thinking that dominate educational discourse (Beeman & Blenkinsop, 2008). Derby (2015) concurs, and calls for new ways of knowing that can counter the dominant narratives that view the other-than-human as "natural resource". He declares that "educating for an ecological imagination" involves prioritising connection to the natural world "via narrative, place-based activities and learning opportunities that engage bodies, emotions and imaginative possibilities" (Derby, 2015, p. 46). This could include providing opportunities for children to "become" other-than-human life and "play with interspecies mimesis" (Derby, 2015, p. 52). Children becoming animals during play involves allowing "metaphor's capacity to elicit ontological attention" (Derby, 2015, p. 52) as it provides a way of being that accentuates an existential awareness (Turner, 1970). Furthermore, this state of being provides an epistemology that contrasts with "logico-mathematical ways of thinking" (Derby, 2015, p. 31) and knowing. It is argued that thinking metaphorically and imaginatively has "pedagogical significance" as it evokes "ontological sensitivity to particularity" or otherness (Derby, 2015, p. 53).

Research Question

Playing in this way allows children to think and act differently (Wood, 2014). In addition, Brown (2009) reminds us that "playing is a state of mind rather than an activity" and that when children play, they are in "the emotional state of play" (p. 60).

This led to the research question:

How could children (aged 9–10) 'playing' the role of animals, during a hunting game in a nature reserve, enable them to experience different ways of being and different ways of understanding their relationship with the world around them?

Despite a lack of research into the impact of children's play in bio-diverse environments, White and Stoecklin advocate natural bio-diverse places as play environments for children due to "their unending diversity; the fact that they are not created by adults; and their feeling of timelessness – the landscapes, trees, rivers described in fairy tales and myths still exist today" (1998, p. 28). Shepard (1998) warns of the homogeneity and lack of wilderness in modern play environments where "everything in sight belongs to me" as even "the buildings, streets, and cultivated fields are all continuous with my voluntary nervous system, my tamed, controlled self" (Shepard, 1998, p. 35). As part of the remedy, he proposes that children experience "more strenuous excursions into the wild world" where they may, "in a limited way, confront the non-human" (Shepard, 1973, p. 267).

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The playing of a hunting game could arguably be seen to potentially steer children towards a less caring attitude towards nature due to the roles of "hunter" and "prey" as viewed through Western-centric optics. However, Shepard (1973) emphasises that for hunter gatherer societies, all animals are seen as beings of reverence and the "prey" is "universally cherished both for itself and as a thing of beauty" (p. 153). Cajete (1994) also elucidates how for indigenous cultures "hunting involves coming to terms with elemental relationships at the physical, social, and spiritual levels" (Cajete, 1994, p. 58). For all people the nature of "journeying towards completeness" is revealed in the metaphoric ideal of "the hunter of good heart" (Cajete, 1994, p. 58). This embraces the firm belief in the interrelatedness of all life as "the hunter represents the community to the world of animals and spirits; therefore, the community as well as the hunter is judged through his behaviour" (Cajete, 1994, p. 59). Shepard (1998) also highlights how hunting involves an acute attentiveness as the hunter does not know what is going to happen and, therefore, "needs to prepare an attention which does not consist in riveting itself on the presumed but consists precisely in not presuming anything and avoiding inattentiveness" (p. 22).

This study examines children's lived experiences of a hunting game, where the children imagined that they were animals. The hunting game took place during a visit to a local nature reserve and some of the children were interviewed when back in school in order to collect data about their experiences.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design that aimed to interpret the first-person lived experiences (Dall'Alba, 2010) of children playing a hunting game at a local nature reserve. Following the game, the data collection involved unstructured interviews with small groups of children as the intent was "to understand the phenomena in their own terms — to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). In this case, the children were purposively chosen as "key informants" (Nowell & Albrecht, 2019, p. 353) about the phenomenon of interest. The questions during the interviews were therefore open-ended and led by the children's responses aiming to "bring out the originary personal experience" (Patočka, 1998, p. 172).

Methods

The hunting game was facilitated by one of the researcher team as part of a series of mindful activities at a local nature reserve. It consisted of the children of each class being split into two groups. One group was identified as hyenas (the hunters) and the other group were deer (the prey).

The following rules of the game aimed to ensure that the game enabled mindful attentiveness, rather than being played in the spirit of aggressive and loud competition. The deer went and hid somewhere within a designated area (approximately 150 m by 100 m) of the nature reserve. The hyena group faced the teacher, closed their eyes and counted to 100 whilst the deer group hid. The hyenas were not allowed to touch any of the deer and the deer were not allowed to touch any of the hyenas. Neither group was allowed to communicate using vocal sounds. The aim of the game for the hyenas was to find the deer. Once they had found any of the deer, they were to close their eyes, so that the deer could "escape" and hide to allow the game to continue. The aim of the game for the deer was to stay hidden from the hyena. After all the deer had been found at least once, the two groups swapped roles to ensure all children had experienced both aspects of the hunt experience to reflect on later. During this game, the children therefore experienced both being the hunter (including being active, listening, looking, being aware of their surroundings) and the hunted (including being still, listening, looking, being aware of their surroundings).

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One of the researcher team attended each trip and facilitated each hunting game. Before playing the game, the children were told that hyena and giant deer used to live in the area, but had become extinct. They were told that archaeologists had found evidence that nearby caves were once inhabited by hyenas. The children were also told that giant deer lived at the same time and would have been hunted and eaten by the hyena. The children were told this information, so that the roles of hyena and deer were understood as being appropriate for their hunting game. One of the research team also introduced the rules of the game to the children and then, with their class teachers, monitored their activities to ensure that none of the rules were broken. It is important to stress that the children had complete autonomy within the 'rules' and they could decide where to go and how to get there. The role presence of one the research team was deliberate to ensure consistency, but, more importantly, to begin to build a relationship with the children for later interviews.

Location

The nature reserve location that the children visited is a site of special scientific interest (SSSI) because of its rare plant life and diversity of floristic and insect communities. The combination of sand dunes, grasslands and trees meant that there were natural areas ideally suited for the hunting game as they provided various hiding places.

Sample

After gaining informed ethical consent under university protocols, four different classes from four different primary schools (A, B, C and D) in South Wales took part in the research. The schools were selected through an opportunity sample of schools who had worked with the research team on previous projects. In total, 104 children took part in the activities. They were all in school year 5, aged between 9 and 10 years. After the activities, two mixed-gender groups of three children from each school – a total of 24 children – and each class teacher took part in semi-structured interviews. This study reports on the interviews from the children only. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Data Analysis

This analysis involved a rigorous thematic analysis, which aimed to "transform lived experiences into a textual expression of its essence" (Beck, 2019, p. 75). As such, phenomenological research "carries a moral force" (van Manen, 1997, p. 12) as it seeks meaning embedded in everyday life. These meanings "are not always apparent to the participants but can be gleaned from the narratives produced by them" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 728). It is acknowledged, however, that the "experiential accounts or lived-experience descriptions are never truly identical to the prereflective lived experiences themselves" as they are inevitably interpretations or "transformations" (van Manen, 2016, p. 313). It was also accepted that as researchers we come to this analysis with "forestructures of understanding" shaped by our experience (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 175). Therefore, it is hard to totally free ourselves of "theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum" (Braun-Clarke, 2006, p. 12). Therefore, to ensure rigour the inductive analysis followed a process of reflexive thematic analysis. As there are many different approaches to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), our analysis followed Nowell *et al.*'s (2017) approach to ensuring trustworthiness. As such, we began with no preconceived ideas or pre-existing coding frame. Themes were generated (Braun & Clarke, 2019) through the development of initial codes. This initial generating of codes, facilitated though analysis software, has been called "eclectic coding" and is described as an "open process" (Saldaña 2015, p. 5). Some of the responses from the children included descriptions that were not about

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the hunting game and so these were discarded. Only the descriptions that related to the hunting game were analysed. During this process, we were conscious that that "coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act (Saldana, 2015, p. 5). Searching for links between the codes enabled the codes to be grouped under larger umbrella headings, or "themes". The researchers transferred the codes from the data analysis software onto sheets of paper in order to be able to visually compare and view the codes and themes more easily. This involved writing the "name of each code (and a brief description) on a separate piece of paper" enabling the researcher to "play around with organising them into theme-piles" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19). This analysis was an iterative hermeneutic cycle as an act of 'dwelling' with the minutiae of data, as "when we stop and linger with something, it secretes its sense and its full significance becomes . . . amplified" (Wertz, 1985, p. 174). In the next stage, the themes were reviewed. This included discarding themes if there was not enough data to support them, or the data were too diverse. Some themes were also grouped together or "collapsed into each other" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20) as further analysis highlighted close links between them.

To organise the generated themes we used what van Manen (1997) calls "lifeworld existentials" or "essential themes", as they are what makes the phenomenon what it is. Put simply, without those essential themes the phenomenon would not exist (van Manen, 1997). It was important that this organisation took place after the establishing of the themes to maintain an inductive approach.

Results and analysis

The analysis generated various related themes which are reported under the following headings based on van Manen (1997):

- Corporeality
- Spatiality
- Temporality
- Relationality

The results and analysis are presented together, so that the themes' relationships with the relevant theory can be explicitly explored.

Corporeality

All of these themes reflect what van Manen (2016) describes as "body-knowledge, a noncognitive knowing" (p. 48). This noncognitive knowing is understood and enacted in and through the body (van Manen, 2016).

Embodiment

One of the main themes expressed consistently in the children's responses was that the hunt game was an embodied, multisensory experience. The data show that the children's experience of playing the hunting game involved a heightened sensory awareness. For example, Pupil 2 (P2) from School D (D) [P2D] said: "You could hear more stuff . . . and you could feel more stuff . . . I used my hearing, because I was hearing D go into the woods, yeah, and he was like in the woods looking through, and then I heard him stepping on loads of sticks, and then he was breaking them". Similarly, P1D said: "when you were outside . . . you could feel all the stuff under your feet, it's one of your senses, where you don't know what it is and you don't what you're feeling and it's just so weird to actually feel what is under your feet". This is further supported by P6C said: "When we was (sic) like doing the deer game, basically when me and my friend was like hiding we

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hid like in this little trail thing and we was looking at all like the leaves and that. And then the sand."

The children were asked if they felt the same sensory experiences would have been felt if they had played the game in the school grounds. In response, all of the children stated that playing the game in the school grounds would not have produced the same experience. All of the children interviewed felt that the hunting game at the nature reserve had enhanced their sensory experiences. For example, P3D said: "It was kind of the sound world. No, it wasn't the same . . . it was a different world, because you felt like you're human but then you feel like, when I was playing the hunting game, you actually felt like a hyena or deer and you could hear all the sounds around you". The sense of an amplified embodied experience, which allows for a greater feeling of relation with other-than-human life, is what Abram (1996, p. 47) describes when he describes the body as "a creative shape-shifting entity", that is the "very means of entering into relation with all things". When we are attentive to our "ongoing, animal experience in the midst of this world, then the flatness dissolves, and the enigmatic depth of the world becomes apparent" (Abram, 2014, p. 125). This idea of experiencing the enigmatic depth of the world when playing the game at the nature reserve came through consistently in the children's responses. For example, P1B compared playing the hunting game in the nature reserve to playing on the school playground but said: "It was different because we wasn't even on a flat surface, so we was on bumps and stuff, and I like being out in the world and in nature".

Analysis of the children's responses also revealed that the children had experienced a heightened sense of excitement during the hunting game, exemplified by this interview extract:

P3C: "Yeah, I never knew what was going to happen, maybe an animal could jump out at me or maybe something just amazing was going to happen, like –

Interviewer: Was that a bad thing, then?

P3C: "No, it's just thrilling, never knowing what is coming next, but if you always know what is coming next it's just going to be boring, like a video game; you play the level all over again, you know what is going to happen, but in nature you don't know what is going to happen, like every time is different".

This unpredictability of the play realm reflects the liminal nature of play (Huizinga, 1949; Turner, 1974; Wood, 2014). In addition, P4C said: "Well I felt really . . . well I felt terrified – well, kind of terrified but like scared. And then like happy at the same time because like I don't want to get caught because I'm really determined to like, yeah, just not get caught. But then really happy at the same time because I was just really enjoying it". Such feelings can be linked to Wood's (2014) assertion, as discussed above, that children's play is able to pivot between feelings of risk and safety. She contends play safely explores exaggerated "emotional states such as fear, bravery, sorrow, excitement, happiness" and children enjoy what she calls "emotional hyperventilation" (Wood, 2014, p27).

Joy and happiness

The children consistently reported that their multisensory experiences had been accompanied by feelings of joy. For example, P5A said: "I think it feels great, because in school, when you play football, say if you wanted to slide tackle, you can't because you'd get muddy and then you're not really meant to be muddy, you can't go down the grass here like there." Likewise, P3B said: "So I felt like . . . happy, yeah, but because it was all, like, energetic. So . . . and I like to use my energy . . . so it was just fun".

This resonates with Abram's (1996) assertions, as discussed above, that we "insulate ourselves from the deepest wellsprings of joy" (p. 58) by shielding ourselves from our corporeal knowings. When we allow affective bodily experiences in education "all that is rigid and certain melts away"

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and what we are left with is "wonder" (Derby, 2015, p. 4). Derby (2015, p. 30) suggests that "when teaching remediates the kinship between knowing and life as it is lived and attunes to the polyphony of being, we experience learning and the world as resonant".

Spatiality

All of these themes reflect how space impacts on the experience of the children whilst playing the hunting game. This includes how they experience outside space differently from "interiorities" (van Manen, 2016, p. 304).

Freedom

Another theme consistently reported was that being away from school and playing the hunting game had induced an enhanced sense of freedom for the children. For example, P4A said:

> "When we were playing the animal game and when we got into the habit of pretending to be animals, I felt free from being in the school, because in the school, there's lots of rules and we can't do as much stuff. When we went out into there, it felt as if we were just free. We weren't in an enclosed space; we could go anywhere."

This is supported by P5C: "I also felt . . . we were free to roam, roam wherever I'd like". Likewise, P1B said: I think it's more free, because there's more space with not everyone, like, annoying you." This sense of ludic freedom instead of "having to do certain things with rules" relates clearly to Turner's (1974) claim that the liminal nature of play activities means they are imbued with liberation. This is because they exist "in a place that is not a place and a time that is not a time" (Turner, 1974, p. 239). It also concurs with Huizinga's (1949) analysis of play as being a "free activity" as it is "consciously outside ordinary life" (p. 13).

This is clearly expressed in this response from P1C who asserted that "I felt like I could do anything. Like I could jump! . . . and like I felt I could fly!" Such feelings resonate with Bone's (2010) assertion that metamorphosis in play engenders a feeling of freedom as normal roles are transcended. It also coalesces with Turner (1974), who argues that freedom in play is where the value of the liminal lies, warning against rules or limits that signify "the intrusion of normative social structure" (Turner, 1974, p. 61).

Absorption

The children's responses show that they felt the place they were playing in and the sense of freedom allowed for an absorption in the activity of their play. When asked if they felt that the same sense of freedom could have been achieved by playing the game in the school grounds the children all agreed that it would not have been the same. For example, P1D said:

> "I wasn't thinking about anything just the game. . . . When you are like in a building or like you are given hiding spots by people that have put the stuff there, it is just a game of hide and seek. But when you go out into nature and nature gives you it, you are playing a hunting game."

This idea that the absorption in their play had meant that there was an authentic sense of playing is a theme that repeatedly emerges throughout the children's responses. For example, P2C said: "So when we were there, it felt like we were actually the animals within . . . if we were in the classroom, we would just feel like people because we were in a classroom . . . but it felt like . . . you are an animal and just you can explore and you can go anywhere, pretty much . . . I really felt in nature . . . I just feel like I am free and I don't care about anything anymore."

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This feeling of complete immersion in the seriousness of play supports Huizinga's declaration that children's play proceeds "with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture' (1949, p. 9). This absorption is as a result of the liminal freedom of play and also in turn provides further freedom to the one who plays. When asked if the same experience could have been achieved by playing the game in the school grounds, the children again consistently reported that it would not have been the same. For example, P2C said: "It feels like a different world because . . . it feels like you have just stepped into a new dimension where all there is grass, sand and everything natural".

Temporality

All of the themes reflect how the children experienced "time" whilst playing the hunting game. This includes how they experience subjective or "lived time" in comparison to "clock time" (van Manen, 2016, p. 305).

Timelessness

The children reported that they had felt liberated because of a feeling of timelessness. For example, P1A said:

> "It feels kind of odd because on the daily basis I look at my watch quite a lot because I have a lot of clubs and stuff, so I have to know when I have to go . . . but when we were trying to track down the girls, I didn't really care about time because I had nothing to go anywhere or anything."

Similarly, P1D believed that:

> "I wasn't thinking about the time at all, because it felt like time didn't matter at all, because here, pupil two is right, outside, we only have a certain amount of time, so we're like, hurry this game of football, hurry doing that. But there, we could just play for as long as we needed, so I don't feel like there was any time."

Links can be made here with Turner's (1974) liminality and Buber's "I-Thou" philosophies, which are positioned as moments "in and out of time" (Turner, 2008, p. 96). The children consistently reported that this sense of timelessness was an enjoyable experience. For example, P1C said: "It just felt like time froze and it was nothing mattered anymore and you didn't need anything it just felt . . . it just made me happy, just looking over everything and everyone." The children appeared to have transcended time when playing because their total absorption in the game and in the present moment. As Buber (2002) explains "the pure present knows no specific consciousness of time" (p. 167).

Weird time

There was also a consistent response from the children that described them feeling weird and different in comparison to school for the duration of the game. For example, P3D said: "When I was playing the hunting game you actually felt like a hyena or a deer, but then when I came back home, I didn't feel like that anymore". Similarly, P3C said: "when I was playing the game, I felt . . . like I . . . and like I hadn't come on a trip and I had come with nobody else, as if I was back in the past and actually living there, way, way back in the past and actually living there". When asked if this weirdness was a good or bad experience the children all stated that it was a good experience. For example, P3B said: "It felt weird . . . a good weird".

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Relationality

All of these themes reflect how the children experienced "self and others" whilst playing the hunting game. This includes whether the "other" is experienced as object or as "otherness" (van Manen, 2016, p. 303).

Togetherness

One of the consistent responses that emerged from the analysis of the data was a sense of togetherness and unity with everyone who was playing the game. For example, P4A:

> "Well, when you're in the school, we just fall out over anything. It's like people are looking for a chance to get angry with someone else, but out there, it feels different and you're not, it doesn't, you're not like . . . it doesn't matter, whether you trip up, you trip over someone else or they trip over you, because you're in nature and something is going to happen, but when you're enjoying yourself, it doesn't really matter."

The children explained that they felt more together because they felt different during the hunting game. For example, P4A said: "Because when you're in school you feel like you just, with everyone else you don't feel close and then when you're out there, you feel different to everyone, you know that this is like a good thing to do, because you don't feel the same way as you do in school, by being . . . you're a different person".

Experiencing "Otherness"

This feeling of being 'other' was also echoed by P1C who said that the whole class was a lot calmer and that this was because "When we were there, it felt like we were actually the animals within". This feeling of difference due to experiencing a sense of "otherness" is also expressed in this interview extract:

P2D said:	"I felt I was the animal; it was because that . . . when I've said, when I saw the prey, the deer, yeah, when I saw the prey and the deer, I didn't, I just kept stalking it, it was getting ready and getting closer, and closer, and closer, but they didn't see me".
Interviewer:	How does that feel?
Pupil 2:	It feels like I was a hyena and then I was catching prey, ready.
Pupil 3 School D:	It felt like you had a different life, so it felt like you weren't human, you were like an animal because you've had one life and now, you're in another life

This is view is similarly expressed by Pupil 1 from School C: "Yeah, so when I was there, I just felt like I was an animal, I didn't feel like I was a human anymore, I just felt like I was an animal".

This experience of existential change during the hunting game was repeated throughout the children's responses. We can draw parallels here with Buber's (2002) I-Thou existential philosophy, as examined above, that involves an augmented sense of being leading to an improved or spiritual sense of relation with others. Buber (2002, p. 37) describes this as "a dynamic facing of the other, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*" that leads to an enhanced feeling of "community".

Community with nature

There was a significant pattern in the responses that showed the children had experienced a sense of community with nature whilst playing. For example, P6B said: So I felt like I was like . . . close to nature, so when I was hiding, yeah, I felt like I was an actual part of nature. Likewise, P5C said:

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"well, I did feel like I was part of nature because like it felt like I blended in with like the trees and the grass and the hills and all the plants" This was echoed by P4A who stated that

> "When we were playing the game, it felt like we were part of nature, it wasn't just like being in the school and playing a game, it actually felt like we were nature . . . and it's so calm and peaceful out there that you feel really relaxed."

This was further explained by P1C said: "Because when you are there, you have like . . . you . . . everything is calm because . . . because you just . . . you are there and you are like bonding with nature."

This sense of being "in nature" relates clearly to Abram's contention that when we feel the sensate depth of the natural environment, we experience ourselves "within the animate landscape" (2010b, p. 9). It also resonates with Buber & Friedman, 1964) philosophy as he declares that during an authentic I-Thou experience one "realizes the unity of the world in the unity of his soul" (p. 141). The children's responses suggest a sense of relation or community that can be realised from a meeting with nature where one can be lifted out of the 'physical' world and experience "the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connexion" (Buber, 2010, p. 51).

We can also draw links here with Blenkinsop and Beeman (2010) and Derby (2015) who accentuate "metaphor's capacity to elicit ontological attention" (Derby, 2015, p. 52). If teaching can be readjusted to make room for activities that facilitate other states of being, involving metaphorical and embodied ways of knowing the more-than-human world, then the "other-than-human" can become a co-teacher and children can experience a "dynamic equilibrium" (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010). Children's play in general is metaphorical, existing in the imagination, but it does not always involve empathic attunement with the other-than-human world. The hunting game in this study engaged the children's bodies, emotions and imaginations within the natural world and also involved them in dialogue with the other-than-human. They did not see the more-than-human world as "it", but were "bound up in relation" and "seized by the power of exclusiveness" (Buber, 2010, p. 14). The liminality of their play led to an expanded sense of self.

Whilst playing the hunting game, the children not only recognised the animate being of nature but they also felt part of it. When specifically asked if playing the hunting game on the playground in school would have been the same, the children repeatedly said that they would not have felt the same sense of community with the other-than-human world. For example, P1C explained: "It's not the same feeling . . . you are there and you are like bonding with nature and then on the playground . . . you are like playing with your friends and there is a lot of noise and you are running around a lot". Similarly, P4A said: "When you're in the school there are so many people around you, and it's hard because you can't hear. All you can hear is people shouting and screaming but when we were there . . . the people aren't like in the school, they won't disturb you . . . some of the girls aren't really friends, but when we were playing the game, it felt like our friendships came closer to each other, as being part of nature".

The children were also adamant that the experience would have been different if the game had been played on the school field or any part of the school grounds because they felt that the nature-rich environment of the nature reserve, being free from urbanity, had allowed for a greater sense of community with nature. For example, Pupil 1D said: "It feels different because, like, you're actually more intact with it and you're not more, like, fenced off of it". This is also illustrated by Pupil 2C who revealed: "Like I'm part of it like. Like because everything I can see was nature and it felt like I was in nature, like I could see everything for the first time". These responses clearly support Derby's (2015, p. 42) assertion that "developing the capacity to think metaphorically" can be "a means to critically distanciate from ontological presuppositions . . . to come into intimate ecopoetic attunement with ecological form". Moreover, this awareness had been reached due to the metaphorical nature of the children's play combined with the biodiverse, nature-rich location of their playing. In addition, they support Blenkinsop and Beeman's (2010) affirmation that when

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people are allowed to interact with the other-than-human world unencumbered, then nature can become a teacher providing ontological insight.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper, we posed the research question: How could children (aged 9–10 years) 'playing' the role of animals in a nature setting enable them to experience different ways of being and different ways of understanding their relationship with the world around them? The evidence from the children in this study suggests that playing the hunting game had enabled the children to experience the alterity of the non-human world. The wide-open expanse of the nature reserve the lack of urbanity and the biodiversity of the location thathelped to augment the children's sense of participation with the more-than-human world. The children's play provided them with an apparent ingress into the perspective of an "other" animal. In addition, playing the role of an animal had afforded them with an accentuated, embodied experience that engaged the children with the natural world and encompassed a sense of joy. In turn, this engagement offered an experience and insight into the otherness of the more-than-human world through "direct egalitarian interaction" (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010, p. 33).

This moved beyond using nature as a resource or to provide rational and logical understandings. Instead, the epistemological knowings were felt through an ontological disruption (to their "normal" sense of self and being) that involved an authentic sense of reciprocity and communion with the natural world and each other. The children's lived-experiences of playing the hunting game had resulted in their accessing different ways of being and had apparently given them a heightened empathic attunement with the more-than-human world. This enhanced insight into the more-than-human world had been made accessible to the children through the multisensory, liminal nature, and location, of their play. This provides evidence for the value of play for children as offering knowings that can be afforded by playing in bio-diverse environments. These expanded knowings involve feelings of joy and a sense of kinship with nature that could help the children to cultivate healthy relationships with the other-than-human world. In turn, these healthy relationships could help to foster healthy attitudes, and behaviours, that ameliorate the gross toxicity that often characterises people's current relationship with nature in the modern Western world. Moreover, it reveals how understanding the more-than-human world as "co-teacher" (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010) is a fundamental part of the process, as non-anthropocentric perspectives are crucial if more empathic attunement with the more-than-human world is to be achieved.

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