

## Living Through a Pandemic with Birds

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*The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the intricate interdependence among humans and other living creatures. It is imperative for educators to acknowledge these connections and embrace an approach that recognizes humans as part of the shared world, woven together with other species and elements. To commit to such an approach, educators should reckon with their pedagogical dispositions and orientations toward the world and incorporate them into their teaching. The curriculum inquiry "Living with Birds" offers a renewed perspective by examining the everyday interactions and relationships among children, educators, a pedagogist, and birds, and their ethical and pedagogical implications in an early childhood context.*

**Key words:** early childhood education, pandemic, living inquiry, educational responsibilities, pedagogist

The pandemic that we are currently facing is a symptom of a much larger problem. It emerges out of an increasingly dysfunctional relationship between human communities, other animals, and the broader environment. (van Dooren, 2020, para. 4)

The world faces significant political and ecological challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, rising incidents of Asian hate crimes, and environmental issues such as the escalating widespread impacts of global warming. Addressing these pressing issues demands an educational approach that is ethico-political and environmentally conscious, demonstrating both responsibility and responsiveness. Education needs to shift from a humancentric perspective to a holistic, relational, and interdependent worldview, which Indigenous peoples uphold. This perspective involves acknowledging that humans are neither isolated nor the centre of

the world. Instead, all beings are intertwined within the fabric of existence. Bruno Latour (1993) has argued that societies structured with a metaphysical division between humans and nonhumans contribute to exploiting nonhuman beings and marginalized groups. Individuals who do not conform to Western values based on skin colour, religion, or gender are excluded from the category of humans and are alienated. Consequently, these marginalized groups, like nonhuman entities, are often treated as voiceless resources and become susceptible to exploitation.

The devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of the complex connections between humans and other beings in our shared world. This significant event has compelled us to reflect on all living beings' delicate and intertwined relationships. As Thom van Dooren and Matthew Chrulaw (2022) argue, ethical considerations in an interconnected world require recognition of the connections between humans and other beings and understanding of our mutual dependence on one another. This ethical approach challenges the

conventional anthropocentric viewpoint (Haraway, 2008; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018) and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the essential roles played by all species within our interconnected world. Thus, a pedagogical commitment that values difference and plurality becomes imperative for educators to cultivate intentional connections with others. However, this perspective also presents challenges, as it calls for a paradigm shift in how educators—particularly those who take a human-centered and child-centered approach—think, learn, exist, and engage with the world and others.

This article explores educational responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and advocates for an ethical approach that recognizes the existence and intrinsic value of the world beyond human constructs and controls (Biesta, 2017). It presents the “Living with Birds” curriculum inquiry project as a pedagogical and ethical response to the crisis, challenging the prevailing human-centric paradigms in education. This inquiry explores interactions between children and birds, providing valuable insights into the transformation of children’s perspectives and attitudes toward the world.

### **Background to the curriculum inquiry “Living with Birds”**

Kinship is reciprocal, situated, tying human beings to other kinds of animals and plants, vulnerable and creative bodies all. (van Dooren & Chrulaw, 2022, p. 2)

As the year 2020 approached, the lives of children, educators, and a pedagogist at a childcare centre in the lower mainland of British Columbia, Canada, met unforeseen shifts. The centre is situated on the unceded traditional and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Kwikwetlem, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. The unfortunate circumstances of the pandemic and air pollution have disrupted our daily lives and affected the lives of birds as well. Bird experts were deeply concerned about the potential mass die-off of migratory birds, which could be linked to the desolate conditions caused by wildfires in California, Oregon, and Washington.

Biologists stressed the significance of providing bird feeders during winter to ensure birds’ sustenance. Educators and the children at the centre expressed collective concerns for the birds’ wellness in our community, raising questions such as “Can the birds find food in the smoke?” and “Can they breathe in the dry air conditions?” In response to these concerns, as educators and pedagogist, we took action and installed two bird feeders in the backyard of our centre. In our curriculum inquiry, we strove to engage with knowledge keepers from our society, focusing on seeking Indigenous perspectives and wisdom. Regrettably, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this was not feasible. The inquiry emerged during the pandemic’s lockdown period, with only essential childcare programs remaining open. This situation posed significant challenges for both educators and children, ultimately leading to feelings of isolation. Considering these circumstances, I recognize the importance of taking a more resourceful and proactive approach to acquiring Indigenous knowledge and actively seeking and incorporating this valuable wisdom into our curriculum.

### **The waiting feeders: An experience of attention and connectivity**

Placing two bird feeders filled with seeds in the centre’s backyard may seem like a small gesture, but it resulted in unforeseen transformations in our daily lives. At first, the children displayed minimal interest, and bird sightings were infrequent. However, we gradually became more attuned to our environment and the existence of other living creatures. We were captivated by the “diverse and purposeful life forms” (van Dooren, 2019, p. 7) that enriched our observations, including raccoons and squirrels. Through waiting for birds to come to the feeders, a profound connection was nurtured with the inhabitants of our yard, which broadened our relationships and provided a fresh perspective on our surroundings.



Figure 1. A small group of children is waiting for birds around the feeders.

### Learning as a response to the social-material world

The act of waiting transformed into a ritual that reshaped our relationship with the backyard. Each morning a group of children, including Anne, Amy, Lucy, Max, Alder, Lily, Jade, May, and Grace (all pseudonyms), eagerly searched for bird activity near the feeders. Waiting heightened our awareness of birds and other living creatures. Through this process, we uncovered how our lives and experiences intertwined with theirs. As Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2014) suggest, waiting became a transformative event where diverse modes of existence intersected at the feeders, constantly creating new connections within our surroundings.

Gert Biesta (2006) has argued that education's core responsibility is to offer children meaningful encounters with the world, allowing them to respond authentically and honouring their singular perspectives. Thus, we decided to set up bird feeders in our yard, unaware of the consequences that would follow. One morning, we found a feeder destroyed, with scattered seeds and broken pieces on the ground. The children were distressed and asked questions about what had happened and who was responsible. At first, they suspected the raccoons due to their frequent presence in our yard. However, our afternoon visits to the yard revealed a surprising culprit: a squirrel enthusiastically feasting on the bird food. This discovery presented us with a challenge: *How should we respond? What actions should we take in this situation?*

### The feeder as a contact zone

It soon became apparent that the bird feeder was a "contact zone," as Donna Haraway (2008) defines it, where various species coexisted, including birds, squirrels, raccoons, and children. Haraway describes the contact zone as a space where interactions shape subjects and relationships are influenced by proximity. For the children, the tranquil waiting area evolved into a complex network of interconnected relationships, with each species impacting and affecting the lives of others.



Figure 2. A squirrel enjoying the food prepared for the birds.

The feeders embodied the entangled relationships of all living beings. Birds, squirrels, raccoons, and humans from diverse habitats converged in this space. The children and educators faced interspecies tensions, recognizing our coexistence. Biesta (2017) states that our shared existence extends beyond our control, emphasizing its profound interdependence. Embracing these connections and acknowledging the interconnectedness of all life forms is a transformative process of *becoming worldly* (Haraway, 2008). The squirrel's presence at the bird feeder sparked vibrant discussions among the children, revealing the discomfort and unease that arise from complex relationships.

Anne: We should shoo the squirrel away.

May: I think they can share, but also, the squirrel might knock the bird feeder over to get the food.

Anne: Yes, that is why we cannot let him eat it.

(Silence)

Miley: How about changing the food? My mom has very sticky bird food at my house. It is hard and in a cage. The birds just like it, not the squirrels.

Luca: I also have a bird feeder at my house that the squirrels don't eat. We just put sugar water in it. The squirrels do not climb our building.

Zoe: But I think the birds will get sad if the squirrels eat all their food.

Neil: The birds are scared of the squirrels and us.

Miley: But if the birds don't share, the squirrels will die. And they are the same as the birds: They live in trees and need food.

(Silence for a while)

Annie: They can have different feeders, one for raccoons, one for birds and the squirrels.

May: But I think they can share the same one. They can share the one on the ground. We should get

one close to the ground for the squirrels and raccoons.

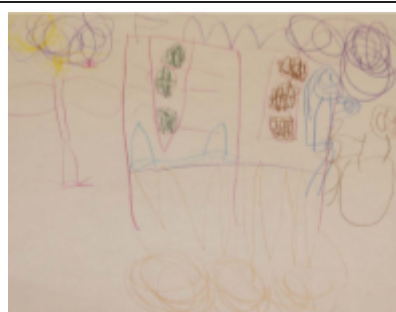
The children recognized the vulnerability of birds and squirrels and wondered how they could coexist harmoniously with the feeders. Manning and Massumi (2014) propose that the environment and its living creatures, including humans, are interconnected and actively involved in a dynamic process of becoming. This process, which they term cocompositional engagement, necessitates attentive participation and interaction from all organisms. Motivated by a sense of ethical responsibility, the children sought ways for birds and squirrels to coexist. To delve deeper into the intricacies of the situation, educators encouraged the children to express their ideas through drawing. It served as a medium for responding to the problem and proposing new possibilities.

### Drawing feeders: Designing a system of reciprocity

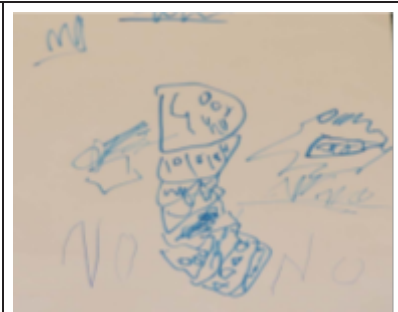
Drawing empowers children to engage actively with the world, expressing their unique and authentic responses to it. Drawing creates a space where children can navigate the complexities of relationalities and differences (Biesta, 2006). In our inquiry, children captured both kinship and the distinct qualities of birds and squirrels through their drawings while acknowledging the tensions and boundaries inherent in the world. The children redesigned our backyard feeders to embrace reciprocity and coexistence between birds and squirrels, blurring imposed divisions while respecting each species' unique characteristics.



**Anne:** *This is for a squirrel, this is for a bird, and this is for raccoons. They are close to the ground because they all can walk or crawl on the ground. We also need water where the animals can drink.*



**Amy:** *This one is for a squirrel, and this one is a bird feeder. We hang one on the fence for the squirrels because they can climb the fence. The bird is behind the cloud, and they are playing hide and seek with a squirrel.*



**Luca:** *I made a feeder for all the animals. So, we can put stickers on the different ones, so the animals know which one to eat.*

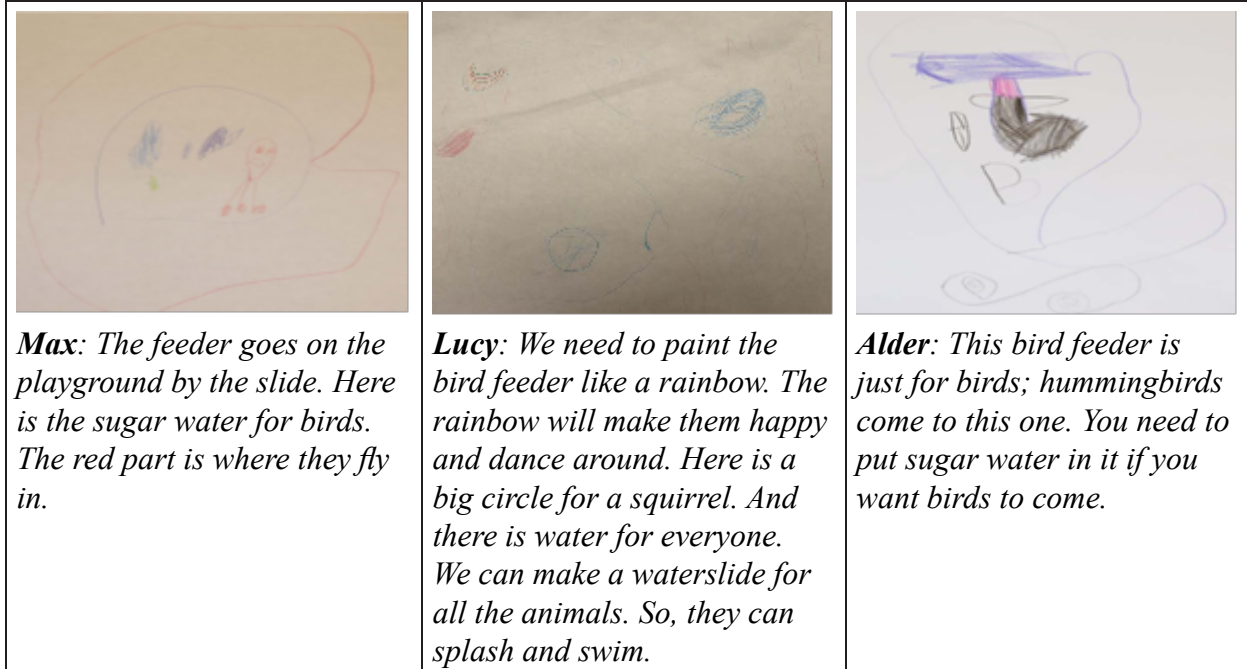


Figure 3. Children's drawings depicting a new design for a feeder.

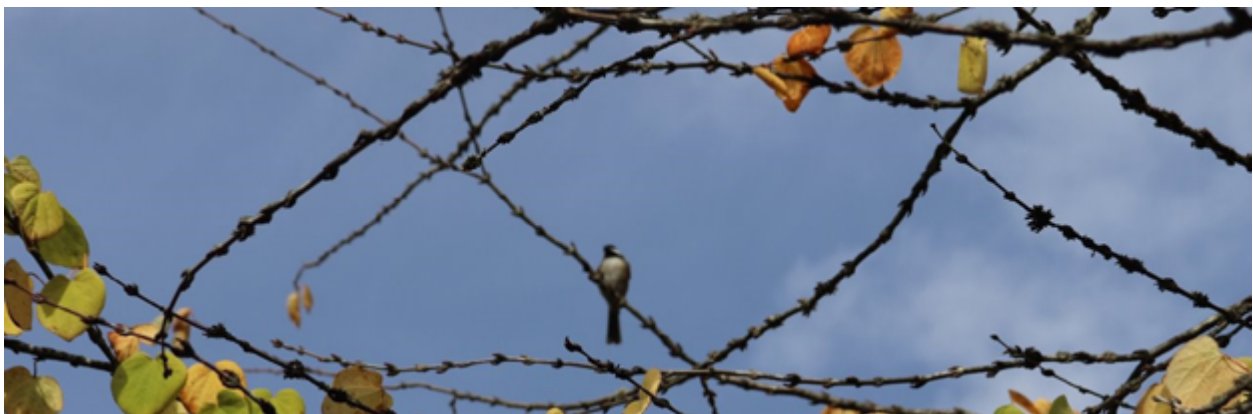
Designing a feeder required a collective perception that “what we add makes a difference in the world” (Stenger, 2014, p. 8). It involved embracing others as members of our community and envisioning how we might transform through our relationship with them. Through this perspective, drawing becomes a dialogue with the social-material world, expanding its significance beyond the mere creation of artifacts. It entails a deep engagement with the world, where children attentively respond to its prompts and critically evaluate their aspirations (Biesta, 2017). Through this transformative process, children become distinct subjects who actively shape their understanding of the world and their place within it.

## Children's worldly relations



*Figure 4. A bird delicately pecking at the seeds in a feeder.*

The yard was filled with joyful chirping and tweeting as an abundance of birds arrived. Their presence grew daily, becoming a delightful and familiar sight as the birds visited the feeders, infusing our place with vibrant life. Enthralled by the birds, the children observed and discerned the unique characteristics of each species. We gathered around the feeders, captivated by their graceful movements and stunning plumage. Cameras in hand, educators captured vivid snapshots of the birds' vibrant colours and detailed patterns, preserving and sharing the delight of our encounters with them.



*Figure 5. A bird perched on a tree branch.*

Amy: Chickadee has black and white on its head.

Anne: Chickadee? I like that name.

Alder: This bird is brown.

Amy: It is Junco.

Lucy: I like Junco. Juncos like to jump, jump, and jump from their belly.

Amy: I want to see if Junco came.

Guided by the educators' photographs, the children closely observed the birds, discovering their names and distinctive features. Immersed in this visual exploration, they were spellbound by the birds' unique colours, movements, and attributes. This experience kindled their curiosity and prompted them to delve into the specific details and distinct qualities that set each bird apart. The children treasured the newfound knowledge, appreciating the diversity among the birds. Moreover, the knowledge deepened their sense of closeness, transforming the birds from mere visitors to cherished companions.



*Figure 6. A flock of chickadees perched on a tall tree.*

Luca: I just saw chickadee! It looks just like the photo!

Anne: There are so many chickadees.

Miley: I know what chickadees look like. They have a black part on their hair.

Neil: Hello, chickadees. Are you here again to eat the food? Bye, come again!

Zoe: The chickadees like to come to us because we are nice to them.





*Figure 7. Chickadees jumping and hopping in the childcare back yard.*

The children perceived the birds as co-inhabitants woven into the tapestry of existence. During this shift in perspective, the tall tree at the centre transformed. Serving as a favoured perch for many birds, it became a central gathering place for the children. It symbolized connections: It attracted birds and children, becoming a beacon of togetherness. Under the tree's branches, the children found solace, inspiration, and fertile ground for their thoughts and ideas to thrive. The tree became a catalyst for new insights and possibilities.

Which birds have visited today?

Is there a particular time for their arrival?

What do they do upon coming?

How frequently do they come?

Do they avoid their trip when the weather is not ideal?

Have you seen juncos today? How about chickadees?

The relationship between the children and birds has bloomed into a symbiotic bond, enriching the daily lives of each. The birds' songs provide a calming background to the children's naps, and occasionally the children respond with their melodies. These birds have seamlessly become part of our lives, filling the children's hearts with genuine appreciation. The children's relationship with the birds is a dynamic exchange, with mutual reliance between different species. It is a testament to the transformative potential of a relationality built on mutual respect and attentive coexistence.

### **The predicament of feeders: The unexpected salmonella outbreak**

In January 2021, the BC SPCA warned people to remove backyard bird feeders due to salmonella transmission among pine siskin birds. Upon learning this, the children and educators promptly removed the feeders. This decision sparked a moment of reflection as we realized that our previous well-intentioned efforts to nourish the

birds might have unknowingly contributed to the spread of harmful bacteria. Acknowledging that seemingly small actions can have unintended consequences that profoundly affect the lives of the birds we had grown to cherish was disheartening. Both the educators and the children felt saddened, confused, and vulnerable. We talked about the issue and shared our feelings. Although the children expressed sadness about the situation, they also understood the urgency of taking down the feeders. They showed concern for the birds' well-being. We felt compelled to act responsibly to minimize the impact of salmonella on the birds. Taking down the feeders did not alleviate the children's concerns. They worried about what would happen to the birds who used to come to our centre to get food. We continued to discuss and explore ways to support the birds' well-being while respecting the need to prevent further transmission of salmonella.



*Figure 8. The children discovered a dead pine siskin in the backyard.*

Jade: Can birds still find food?

Cathy: They will be sad because there is no food for them.

Grace: But we had to take it down because it makes them sick.

(Lucy had been silent for a while and finally broke the silence.)

Lucy: They can still find worms on the ground because there is no more smoke.

Max: Yes, they can find food in the forest because the smoke is gone.

Even when absent, the birds continued to occupy a prominent place in the children's conversations, remaining essential in their lives. Manning and Massumi (2014) argue that existence thrives within individual beings and the interconnections between them. The children engaged in lively discussions and speculation about the birds' whereabouts, sharing various theories and hypotheses. Some believed the birds had sought food in the forest, while others speculated they had migrated to South America due to changing weather. Harnessing their curiosity, the educators proposed a trip to the nearby forest to search for the birds, igniting excitement as the children eagerly anticipated unravelling the mystery of the birds' absence. Despite their earnest efforts, however,

the children were unsuccessful in locating the missing birds. They searched meticulously, scanning the area, peering at the towering trees, and straining their ears for faint bird sounds. Although they couldn't spot the birds, the children remained optimistic that they might be nearby, possibly beyond their visual or auditory range. Listening attentively, they hoped to catch distant bird calls that would guide them. However, they were unable to find any of the birds.



*Figure 9. A small group of children walking the forest in search of birds.*

Amy: Maybe the birds go to someone else's home. They are playing hide and seek with us.

May: Because it's winter, too cold for them to be here.

Anne: When the wind blows, we can't see the birds because they also hide from the wind.

Neil: They are very hungry right now, so they went to look for some food somewhere else.

Luca: They like to fly to warmer places, like Hong Kong.

Daniel: Maybe they are scared of the virus, and they are scared of me because I am getting taller.

Zoe: Some birds have migrated to the south, but some did not because they are winter birds. We might find the winter birds. They stay here in winter. There is also a spring bird. They come in springtime.

The children speculated and proposed theories to make sense of the situation. Some hypothesized that the birds had migrated to warmer climates, while others entertained the idea of the birds engaging in a game of hide-and-seek. As the birds remained absent, the children wondered about their well-being.

As winter progressed, the snow-covered yard heightened the children's concern for the birds and other familiar creatures like squirrels and raccoons. They worried about the creatures' ability to endure the harsh winter

conditions and hoped that they had found refuge in a warmer place.

### Pedagogical implications

On a sunny day, as the snow melted, the children discovered a puddle at the yard's edge—an earthly gift (Kimmerer, 2020) shared with them. They joyfully played in the puddle, sharing laughter and fun, and soon noticed birds gathering to drink and bathe. Captivated by the birds' presence, the children passionately discussed them.



*Figure 10. A flock of pine siskins delighting in the puddle formed in the backyard.*

Amy: Birds are taking a bath.

Jane: No, they are looking for food in the puddle.

Daniel: I think they are swimming.

Anne: They are playing together in the puddle like me playing in the swimming pool.

Jonny: They are drinking the water, too. Look!

Mary: They are flapping their wings to dry their wings.

Anne: They came to drink water.

Maya: When it is rainy and snowy, they want to take a nice bath.

Amy (with an excited voice): Look! Those are pine siskins. They have returned!

Mary: They came back! They have finally returned!

The gathering birds turned out to be pine siskins affected by the salmonella outbreak. The children were mesmerized by the birds' presence and resilience. This encounter filled them with awe, hope, and a deep appreciation for life. The children, expressing excitement and admiration, marvelled at the birds' ability to

survive despite challenges. The puddle, a shared gift, fostered a profound bond between the children and the birds. In her work, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2022) emphasizes that perceiving the Earth as a gift fundamentally changes our relationship with the world, fostering feelings of gratitude and a sense of abundance. Her Indigenous worldview recognizes the profound interconnectedness of all living beings, the deep significance of the land, and the spiritual connections that Indigenous peoples have with their environment. By recognizing and embracing this Indigenous perspective, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the intricate web of life and develop a greater sense of responsibility towards the Earth and all its inhabitants. The return of the pine siskins in our yard sparked the children's curiosity, leading them to ask a series of questions. Their inquiries deepened their curiosity, fuelling their desire to know more about the pine siskins.

How do they survive in winter? How do birds keep themselves warm?

Do birds get thirsty?

Do all birds eat worms?

Where do they find food? (since we don't have our feeders out)

When do birds start having feathers?

Why do birds lose feathers? What happens to birds' feathers when their feathers fall out?

What are birds' feathers made of? What do they feel like?

How do birds swim?

The birds' resilience and unwavering spirit during the salmonella outbreak exemplify vitality and their ability to overcome challenges. They remind us that we too can prevail if we maintain persistence and strive to exist. The birds generously provide us with abundant liveliness, inspiring us to press forward. As Kimmerer (2022) proposes, the act of sharing abundance fosters reciprocal relationships and unveils our innate interconnectedness with the world. Through events such as dialogues, drawing events, walks, and engaging with the puddle, we actively partake in our shared collective life with others.

This study highlights the value of real-world-based pedagogical inquiry and advocates for a transformative process in education that challenges and reshapes existing perspectives and knowledge. According to Byung-Chul Han (2022), many individuals seem to have lost the ability to dwell with things, to infuse them with life, and to make a faithful companionship with them. Our attention is fragmented, lacking depth and insight, as we navigate through the world without truly immersing ourselves in it. Han asserts that genuine and fulfilling experience necessitates time and patience. The presence and absence of birds compelled us to pause and contemplate. This act of lingering and waiting prompted us to question whether COVID-19 was truly the force destroying our lives. Perhaps it is a lack of authentic engagement with the world and an absence of continuity that truly diminish our existence. Through such a perspective, we humans share responsibility for our lives and experiences with nonhuman organisms (Taguchi, 2010) as they affect the formation of our subjectivities, thereby transforming our existence in the world.

## Note

The author received consent to use the children's drawings.

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