



# Phenomenology with Children: My Salamander Brother

# 38

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate young children’s perspectives of nature while exploring a deciduous forest as an extension of their early childhood classroom in a University Lab School. This work was framed theoretically on the premise of ethical listening and doing curriculum and research *with* children in efforts to gain a phenomenological understanding of children’s prereflective and reflective experiences of nature. Children’s prereflective and reflective experiences were captured through methods adapted from the Mosaic Approach and video methodology as part of a dissertation research project. Children spent a minimum of 2 h per week in a natural environment with their teachers over the course of a school year. Key findings highlight how children’s extended nature experiences led them to conceptualize how they can be (in) nature, that they can manipulate nature, resources in a natural space, and how they are nature themselves. Significant life experience (SLE) literature is drawn upon to show implications for early childhood practice and research with children.

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## **Phenomenology with Children: My Salamander Brother**

### **Doing Phenomenology with Children**

Phenomenology as defined by Max van Manen, “is the study of the lifeworld – the world as we immediately experience it rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or theorize about it. Phenomenology aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1984, p. 37). Phenomenology as a research approach was adopted for this study to reach the goal of understanding children’s everyday experiences with(in) nature with little to no interruption of adults. Video methodology, adapted from The Mosaic Approach method of magic carpet, became a primary method as children’s immediate experiences were captured (pre-reflective) and could be reflected upon as often as desired (reflective experiences). van Manen (2014) emphasizes the study of reflective experiences but by also collecting pre-reflective experiences, a dual understanding is revealed. The authors use the terms “we” and “I” in this Chapter to share different viewpoints. “We/our” refers to our joint understanding of meaning derived from the study, while “I/my” refers to Adonia’s primary position in gathering data and children’s reflections of their time with(in) nature. We use the terms with(in) and (re)know as a rhetorical move to show the complexities of how children interact with and within nature while constructing knowledge with or without adults, simultaneously, and/or in different rhythms that are not easily discussed as linear experiences. Be(in)nature is a term I use to consider two possible conceptions of nature: that as humans we can be in nature and manipulate its resources and/or we can be nature. We are alive, breathing, and moving, because we are nature. We are a part of Earth.

SLE literature contributes to our understanding of how direct childhood experiences with(in) nature often influence our future attitudes and behaviors towards the environment (Chawla, 1998, 2007; Chawla & Cushing, 2007; Laird, McFarland-Piazza, & Allen, 2014). When I was a child, I remember using fallen fir tree limbs to sweep the dirt ground and pretend to be Mom. I can remember the smell of the sap and how dirty my hands would get as the dirt stuck to my palms. My connection with (in) nature throughout my life has led me to believe the more time we spend in nature, the more we begin to know and understand the Earth. We can be(in) nature. I assumed that children could also be(in)nature. After reflecting on my own childhood and reminiscing about my joys in nature, I knew I wanted this opportunity for children. This assumption, about children understanding themselves as nature, led me to develop a phenomenological study to investigate preschool children’s pre-reflective and reflective experiences of nature because what I did not know is

what experiences would lead children to be(in)nature. Twelve preschoolers, ages 4 and 5 years, experienced nature in a forest environment near their school with myself and an outdoor educator over the course of nine months. Interpreted Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was utilized to portray children's experiences in anecdotes of a greater phenomenological text. Three of the 14 final anecdotes featured in my research are shared in this Chapter to emphasize how children's construction of nature changes over time, along with what children consider significant about nature. Furthermore, I considered how these SLE in childhood may lay the foundation for pro-environmental behaviors if children carry a pro-environmental consciousness into adulthood, meaning their "knowledge, values, and attitudes are part of their emotional involvement" with(in) nature (Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002, p. 256).

### **Children's Perspectives of the Outdoors**

The key to studying nature as a phenomenon with children is providing them with uninterrupted time and many opportunities to revisit direct experiences (Kellert, 2002). Children can move freely, explore nature's elements, and decide what nature is for themselves and as phenomenologists, "grasp of the very nature of the thing" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177). Then when needed, teachers are nearby for support. Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest that children's spaces such as outside environments "allow children to exercise agency, to participate in their own decisions, actions and meaning making, which may or may not involve them engaging with adults" (p. 93). Revisiting natural spaces over time allows children to (re)know, discovering something different than the visit prior (Tovey, 2007). The more time children spend in nature, the more they find meaning in places they consider significant. Kernan and Devine (2010) confirmed "the most prevalent value attributed to the outdoors by adults was freedom" and moving freely was considered natural and "a necessary part of being a child" (p. 377). There are limited studies capturing children's perspectives of the outdoor experiences while employing The Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2008) as ways to understand. However, one influential study (Waller, 2006) suggests that learning from children without a formalized research agenda gives us the opportunity to know children differently. While the focus of the study (Waller, 2006) was to examine children's participatory methods, children's perspectives of the outdoors were generated through drawings and camera use. Additionally, another study (Mawson, 2014) implied that children approach the wild woods similarly as other outdoor spaces, but in our study children approached the woods with a completely different demeanor and concentration. Without interruption, children addressed their own inquiries and questions about nature.

### **Ethical Listening in Curriculum and Research with Children**

The teacher-child hierarchy begins to dissolve when children are in conditions of (be)coming curriculum with their teachers (Sellers, 2013). Sellers (2013) describes (be)coming as both being and becoming curriculum with children in ways that are not traditionally straightforward and product oriented. Being in the moment and

empowering children as agents of their own learning and (be)coming curriculum while children and teachers are in a constant state of learning from one another. However, moving beyond traditional curriculum and doing research with children sets the pace for additional tensions, involving decisions about, for example, how research is enacted, when and for how long, how roles in the study are decided. (Farrell, 2005). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989, 2005) has set a guide for recognizing children's rights to participate in decisions about their own lives and circumstances. However, Pramling Sammelsson and Johansson (2009) argue that supporting children's right to decision-making depends on how adults receive children and their knowledge, learning, and experience (p. 79). If we consider (be)coming curriculum with children, perhaps we can know children differently.

Furthermore, Dockett, Einardottir, and Perry (2009) suggest that "efforts to engage children not only in the generation of data, but also in the interpretation of data can ensure that the voice of the researcher is not the only one considered" (p. 290). Adults should try to recognize when they are listening to some children more than others (Einarsdóttir, 2007). The phrase *ethical listening* describes the practices that I used, derived from others (Dockett et al., 2009; Farrell, 2005; Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009) in efforts to try and support each child as a co-researcher throughout this study. I acknowledge that the teacher-child power dynamic cannot be denied, but the following practices assisted in discovering a true representation of children's meaning-making:

1. Build strong relationships with children.
2. Children decide when and how to participate.
3. Support children's initiation of reflection invitations.
4. Read children's reflections aloud for editing and confirmation.
5. Share adult interpretation and seek child feedback or edits/additions.

Upholding these values and practices meant that sometimes the children would share what I valued as a great implication for research but then would ask me not to show anybody else. I respected their request because I valued ethically listening and their right to decide how our work was portrayed for others. All of the work was vetted through the appropriate channels of human subjects review boards at our institution, but working with children is far more complex than these institutional procedural steps. The practices described above supported my intentions to carry out a research project while involving children as active researchers (Barratt Hacking, Cutter-McKenzie, & Barratt, 2013).

### **Doing Curriculum and Research with Children**

Doing curriculum and research with children is paired in this section to extend on the notion of children as active agents and researchers in our study. Inspired by Reggio Emilia approaches, curriculum at the research site is developed based on inquiry led by children and teachers both indoors and outdoors. The data generated in this study acted as both curriculum and research as the children were not asked to participate in

ways any different from their regular expected school day. Sellers (2013) suggested a lived understanding curriculum where children and teachers inquire together about what and how learning will take place. In this study, research questions were broad enough to ensure that children could lead how data were generated without an adult agenda. The questions leading to children's understanding of be(in) nature were: (1) How do young children, ages 3–5, experience, interact, and respond to the direct physical elements, an outdoor forest environment near their school? (2) How do young children create meanings about nature in a group setting? and (3) How do young children's meanings of nature emerge and change over a school year?

### **The Mosaic Approach Adapted**

Methods adapted from The Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2008) were employed to capture children's pre-reflective and reflective experiences while considering their right to choose when and how to participate as well as how much to "say" about their experiences in a natural environment. The Mosaic Approach is a meaningful way of conducting research with young children (Clark, 2008; MacNaughton, 2003; Rinaldi, 2006) and asks the question "What does it mean to be in this place?" which may be interpreted as, "What does it mean *to be you* in this place now in this present moment, in the past and in the future? (Clark, 2008, p. 17). A goal of using The Mosaic Approach is to provide research methods that promote children's confidence in answering a question with no "wrong" answer (Clark, 2008). Each element of The Mosaic Approach encourages a different level of engagement, from talking or watching videos to creating books or drawings about their experience. The Mosaic Approach "combines the traditional adult-directed research tools of observation and interviews of family members, practitioners, and children, with participatory tools for children, including the use of cameras, bookmaking, tours, and mapmaking" (Clark, 2007, p. 2).

The methods that were adapted from The Mosaic Approach were Magic Carpet and Child-interviewing. Magic Carpet (Clark, 2008), a method where children typically view a slideshow of photographs from the experience, was revised to offer videos captured by the children or myself. This adaptation of the magic carpet offered a less product-oriented level of engagement that was welcomed by children who did not feel as comfortable drawing or writing or had less experience taking photographs. Child-interviewing, a method of short semi-structured interviews, was also revised to be an open invitation for reflection that could occur at any moment initiated by the children or myself. The methods (Table 1) provided an avenue for participants to choose how and when to share their meanings of experience.

### **Role of a Phenomenologist and Teacher**

My role in this phenomenological study involved my participation as both a teacher and a researcher. During the data generation phase of the study, I invited another teacher, Tess, to help facilitate children's everyday needs in the forest so that I could take on a stronger researcher role to collect participant observations and children's pre-reflective and reflective experiences with video and photographic documentation. Everyday needs involved assisting children who needed a Band-Aid, a shoe

**Table 1** Ways of reflecting: The Mosaic Approach

| Ways of reflecting         | Data generated  |
|----------------------------|---|
| Observations               | Qualitative accounts of how children respond and experience nature                              |
| Child-interviewing         | Reflection invitation conducted one-on-one or in a group (adapted)                              |
| Photography/<br>bookmaking | Children's photographs of "important things" and books created with photos, words, and drawings |
| Tours                      | Tours of spaces led and documented by children  |
| Map making                 | Children create 2D representations (drawings/photos) of space                                   |
| Magic carpet               | Children view videos of experience (adapted)  |

Note: Adapted from Clark and Moss (2008)

tied, a bathroom break or other specific care from an adult. Even with assistance, I acknowledged that my roles of teacher and researcher could not be fully separated especially when some of the participants were members of my own classroom during the study. My intention was that by inviting participants from another classroom, less biased accounts could also be incorporated. Continuous video recording allowed me to capture most experiences while being open to child-initiated reflections or use of the video camera. Then children could request to see a video of their experiences to support their reflections. Phenomenology, not often done with children, allows adults to *listen* and capture children's in-the-moment experiences so that they can be invited to reflect later. While in the act of experiencing, we do not always notice the possibility for reflection and meaning-making.

### Phenomenological Writing and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Three anecdotes of the dissertation study are shared in this chapter to portray how children came to recognize themselves as nature. The use of anecdotes in early childhood education is not a new method of observation (Carr, 2000; Clark, 2004, 2007; Clark & Moss, 2001, 2005). Partnered with methods of phenomenology, "anecdotes recreate experiences, but now already in a transcended (focused, condensed, intensified, oriented, and narrative) form" (van Manen, 2014, p. 250). Additionally, van Manen (2014) described meticulously the complexity of writing a phenomenological text and the challenges of writing about the living now while knowing philosophically, it is already too late (see pp. 43–44). Further he advised:

The problem of writing is that one must bring into presence a phenomenon that cannot be represented in plain words—it would escape all representation. So, we may distinguish between the presentative (immediate) and the representative (mediated) modes. The presentative mode is immediate or direct—the representative mode is mediate or indirect. The writer who aims to bring the object of his or her gaze into presence is always involved in a tensional relation between presentation (immediate "seeing" and understanding) and representation (understanding mediated by words). (p. 370)

The challenges of writing the text, in my opinion, were attempting to write about the essence of the present in past tense to put the reader in the forest, experiencing nature with children. While avoiding the phrase "You had to be there," I was forced

to consider what anecdotes of children's conversations were pertinent to phenomenological understanding. Capturing the essence meant watching and re-watching videos to transcribe the conversations while bracketing my own ideas and reflections, just long enough to know the children's meanings before reflecting and incorporating my own. Additionally, punctum was used to leave a lasting impression in the reader (van Manen, 2014). For the purposes of punctum in this study, photographs were used to capture snapshots of pre-reflective experience and reflective drawings with children's one line statement about their experience.

### **Epoché-Reduction**

The act of capturing the pre-reflective and reflective experiences of preschoolers calls for careful consideration when selecting methodology. The Epoché-Reduction method (van Manen, 2014), when writing a phenomenological text, begins with the understanding that the researcher cannot deny their own preunderstandings of the phenomenon itself and must practice radical openness to the phenomenon while bracketing interpretations and assumptions (van Manen, 2014, p. 224). The radical openness in phenomenology is being aware that our preassumptions, interests, and ideas cannot fully be separated. Bracketing refers to acknowledging one's own interpretations and assumptions separately from the generated data. However, when working in conditions of (be)coming (Sellers, 2013) with children in this study, my own preunderstandings and assumptions were revealed before, simultaneously and afterwards rather than separate. Bracketing all interpretation and assumptions was not possible in this study as my initiative was to instead research with children, listening and understanding together. Practicing with radical openness (van Manen, 2014) allowed me to video record children's direct experiences with (in) nature while journaling about my own thoughts or assumptions. In doing so, the data generation encompassed it all, children's meanings and my narrative interpretation.

Finlay (2008) suggests that an alternative to separating one's preassumptions is to practice with a phenomenological attitude. This means working in a back and forth process of acknowledging personal assumptions and returning to look at participants' experiences in a fresh way. As stated before, because everything we do can have a reflective phenomenological interpretation attached to it, critical decisions are made about what experiences to "bring to life" while maintaining a phenomenological attitude. Videos, photographs, and reflection invitations, as adaptations of The Mosaic Approach, were used as potential ways to understand children's reflections. We should remember that all children are unique and reflect in a variety of ways. These methods, and often those in phenomenological research, do not intend to expose the explicit meanings of one specific person but rather to suggest that these meanings are possible human experiences that are usually constructed as a group. Furthermore, the intent of writing the collection of anecdotes was to "make intelligible the kinds of meanings that we seem to recognize in life as we live it" (van Manen, 2014, p. 221).

A double hermeneutic interpretation was used to analyze preschooler's social constructions (meanings) of nature. Smith et al. (2009) in *Interpretive*

*Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) suggest that double hermeneutic interpretation refers to “the researcher trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (p. 3). IPA seeks to understand the phenomena for what it is and not within the confines of predefined analysis. Smith et al. (2009) explicitly describe six steps to data analysis and uncovered how they might be helpful but are not meant to be prescriptive and can be used in any order. The six steps are as follows:

| Steps of data analysis            | Process   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Reading and re-reading         | Read and re-read to eliminate feeling overwhelmed connection possibilities  |
| 2. Initial noting                 | Write exploratory notes to comprehend data without rules and pinpoint a phenomenological focus                            |
| 3. Develop emerging themes        | From comprehension comments, participant guides understanding but researcher interpretation is interweaved                |
| 4. Find connections across themes | Charts or maps are used to consider how themes might fit together. Some emerging themes may be discarded                  |
| 5. Moving to the next case        | Researcher brackets the ideas from the first case to view the next with new openness. Steps one through four begin again. |
| 6. Look for patterns across       | These lend to theoretical understanding cases   |

Note: Adapted from Smith et al. (2009)

Each of the data analysis steps (above table) was considered for interpretation. Each way of reflecting using The Mosaic Approach (see Table 1) was transcribed employing these steps. Through these steps of interpretation and analysis, each data excerpt was interpreted to capture the essence of a preschooler’s experience in nature.

### **Anecdotes, Photographs, and Drawings of our Significant Life Experiences**

Three anecdotes, “The Earth is Right Here,” “The Butterfly Visit,” and “Salamander Brother,” are shared in this Chapter to demonstrate phenomenology with children and carefully asking questions in the moment to effectively elicit meaning-making. Additionally, these anecdotes were selected to highlight how practicing in conditions of (be)coming with children, in both curriculum and research, led to child-initiated reflection and data generation. As children reflected on their experiences, they found deeper meanings and understood nature as needing compassion and understanding. The experiences that led to child-initiated reflections are the moments that I found mostly likely to attribute to pro-environmental behavior and attitudes.

Tanner (1980) described experiences in childhood, prior to age fourteen, to be the most influential to pro-environmental behavior later in life and most influential to their love for Earth. Additionally, Chawla (1998) found that the adults modeling care and environmental action also credited their direct childhood experiences as influence.



However, Sobel (2012) argued that the “don’t touch” mentality of many environmental educators is limiting children’s access to similar experiences of older generations and (Laird et al., 2014) confirm that many educators recall catching bugs as part of their own childhood but are limiting the same opportunities for children. The experiences in our anecdotes empowered children to make their own decisions about what experiences were valuable and how nature was treated. Beginning with “The Earth is Right Here,” we invite you into our journey in discovering how children came to know nature.

### **The Earth Is Right Here**

Lee, Midas, and Carmen began to walk down by the water so I followed. Lee climbed to lounge on a tree and Midas, Carmen stood nearby.

I asked, “Do you want to talk about what nature is while we wait to see another animal?”  
 Carmen asks, “Do you mean nature items?”  
 I nod with my camera recording.  
 She pauses before saying, “Hmm. Nature can be all on different planets.”  
 Lee states quickly, “I don’t want to talk about this.”  
 Midas repeats Carmen’s question, “Nature items?”  
 Lee interrupts, “Carmen, climb this log.”  
 So I ask, “Are logs nature?”  
 Lee says, “Yep. And leaves.”  
 Carmen bursts out, “Trees are nature! Leaves are nature! Poison Ivy’s nature!”  
 Lee adds, “Branches are not.”  
 “Houses are nature, trucks are nature.” Midas suggests.  
 Lee says, “No they’re not.”  
 Carmen adds, “Children and people are nature because they live on nature.”  
 I ask, “Lee, why do you say houses are not nature?”  
 “Because they don’t walk or something?”  
 Midas says, “Well, they kind of walk but they don’t.”  
 Then I say, “So Lee, trees don’t walk but Carmen said they are nature.”  
 “Yep they are,” nods Lee.  
 So I say to all of them, “How do you know then when things are nature or not nature?”  
 Lee confirms, “Because they’re in the wild. Sometimes they move.”  
 “I’m going to try to wiggle this tree” as he bear hugs the tree and tries to wiggle it. Agitated Carmen shouts, “I CANNOT get up here” referring to the log.  
 “Trees move when you cut them open” she adds.  
 “But that hurts the trees” remarked Lee.

Silence breaks our conversation about nature and Midas announces, “We don’t really care about nature, right guys?” and I say, “Well I really do care about nature a lot” and Carmen immediately joins in, “Me too. Everybody in the world is nice to nature.” I then ask, “Why do you think?” and Carmen says, “Because Earth likes the nature and it likes its beauty.” Midas then changes his mind and reconsiders, “I do like nature and the Earth is right here.” When Midas changed his mind, I knew that together we could help him understand care for nature.

When Carmen said, “Everyone in the world is nice to nature,” I knew she had already formed a connection with nature because she moved carefully and quietly and described the forest as “the animal’s home. I could tell her words were important to the

children as they listened to her intently. Midas was quick to show her that while her theory was ideal, it was not true. However, her influence led Midas to reconsider, if only for a moment, that there is importance in caring for the Earth. Right in front of us. Taking time to talk about nature, to study it as a phenomenon creates opportunities for understanding. Together, we participated in a conversation about nature that led me to understand the children's perspectives as I sparked their interest with one provocative question so the children could lead how the conversation was carried out. The open-endedness of our conversation taught me that talking about nature as a thing, a space and a part of us is essential for children's sustained connection.



*Rosie's drawing as reflective response: Our hands are on the ground because we're looking for worms*

### **The Butterfly Visit**

Right next to our school, Carmen yelled, "Whoa! Our butterfly came back to visit us!" Lillian was being dropped off at school and she met us by the parking lot. Nikki, Midas, and Fitz yelled, "Li-ll-ian! Our butterfly came back to visit us! Come see!" She yelled, "Okay guys!" as she carried her lunchbox next to her mom. We had just started towards the Log Playground when we discovered the butterfly. Nikki carefully touched the monarch's wings and Nadia and Zeke both pushed into Nikki to see it too. She whined, "Ugh! Stop pushing me. It's fragile." Zeke asked, "Can I just see it, please?" Nikki backed up and I called to Tess who had kept walking with the rest of the group, "Tess! There's a butterfly!" She walked the group back to meet us and Midas told her, "It's our butterfly. It came back to visit us!" Tess said, "Oh the one you had in your classroom? That's great." The whole group crowded around the butterfly and Carmen said, "Remember it's wings are so fragile. It bled out of its rolled-up chrysalis. Please don't hurt it." Luis added, "We watched it so long. The poor little buddy. It missed us." I said, "It's great that we get to see it again. Its wings

seem larger.” Lee said, “It might not be our butterfly, guys.” Fitz added, “It probably grew up and came back to see us.”



*The Return of the Monarch*



*Carmen's drawing as reflective response: The butterfly came back to see us because we watered its leaves.*

Zeke and Nadia were ready to move on and started to walk towards the path. When we entered the Log Playground it was as though everyone knew their plan. Zeke immediately climbed onto the Monkey Bar of the Log Playground Tree. He shouted in a teasing way as he swung, "You can't catch me up here! Oh, no you can't!" At the same time Nikki asked, "How do I get up there again?" I said, "Remember at the bottom and then you can climb up to where Zeke is." Nikki carefully climbed up the Slide of the Log Playground Tree and said, "I can totally do this now. My mom would be so happy." I agreed, "We can show her this part of the movie if you'd like." "I am the movie star, duh!" she spits out. I laughed and could hear Luis ask, "Remember when we were looking to see inside the tree?" Yoshi heard him, nodded, and said, "Milly and Nikki, do you want to play with me? Follow me if you want to play with me." Luis followed him and Yoshi began to pound on the stump of the tree and Luis found a stick to join in.

That butterfly missed us. In this journey, I have come to understand that each experience leads us to know something new or remember something old. This is especially true for children. For adults, we often fly through the busyness of life and skip moments to speed ahead to the next. That was the task at hand, to get to The Log Playground. Tess may have seen the butterfly, but we were on a mission to get to The Log Playground. When given a task, it is easy to forget your surroundings. To notice life around us in the moment. Seeing the Monarch butterfly reminded the children of the one we raised together. Our experiences lead us to make connections and process what is happening. Seeing the Monarch sparked a memory and led the children to think about the one we raised and the possibility of it coming back to see us because "it missed us." The lifespan of Monarchs is typically 2–6 weeks, except for the ones that migrate to Mexico. In that moment, I realized that my factual knowledge as an adult led me to immediately assume it was not the same butterfly. Reflecting on it more, I had hoped that it was a Monarch that would migrate to Mexico and I considered how it was more pleasing to perceive that the butterfly missed us. Furthermore, Carmen reminded us of the butterfly's journey, "it bled out of its rolled-up chrysalis," as if reminding us of the complexity of its journey since birth.

Considering the feelings of a butterfly made us feel as though we had modeled a pro-environmental attitude by encouraging their conversation about the butterfly particularly following the hatching experience (Chawla & Cushing, 2007). Recognizing nature has feelings allows us to see immediately that our actions impact life. The butterfly "missed us." The children were careful not to hurt the butterfly and considered how fragile it was, especially the wings because "they had bled." They cared for a caterpillar in the classroom for weeks before it became a butterfly. It felt rewarding to all of us that it came back to visit us. The children's work and care paid off.

### **Salamander Brother**

Tired of our conversation, Zeke ran and shimmied up The Monkey Bar and hopped down, "Tess, did you see that? I hopped right down from that monkey bar. I couldn't

do that before.” “Let me see,” she replied, before he did it again. Fitz, Carmen and Rosie were now at the highest point of the Log Playground Tree when Carmen hopped down and said,

“I’ll let you know if I find any bugs, Rosie.” And you dropped your mitten.”

“Oh! I always do that,” laughed Rosie.

Fitz asked, “Hey guys? Do you think all the worms are sleeping because it’s cold?” “Well it’s a little warmer actually,” Carmen remarked.

“Yeah. No mittens,” adds Rosie.

“Maybe they’re in their cozy beds and we got to find them,” considered Fitz.

“They probably are in a group hug so they can stay warm,” smiled Carmen.

“Do you think they know to use their leaf beds we made them?” asks Rosie.

“Yeah,” replied Fitz.

Rosie looked for a while and then shouts louder than normal,

“I found something! It’s a bug! It’s a beetle, it’s hard!”

“Let me look!” said Carmen, “Oh yeah. It is a beetle.”

“Let’s make a bed for it,” added Milly.

She picked up a large leaf near the Log Playground tree and laid it on the trunk. “This can be its trampoline,” she announced. When Milly places the leaf, the beetle falls a few inches down the side of the tree and Carmen catches it. She whispers, “Got it!”

Rosie, irritated, says, “No! No trampoline! A bed! We’re making a bed!”

I ask, “Hey. What’s all this about? What’s wrong?”

“I want to have it. I want to make it a bed, no one else.”

“I want to be lucky and find a beetle too,” sighed Carmen.

Rosie grumbled, “Ugh,” and says, “Yeah. I am lucky.”

Moments pass by before Carmen yelled, “P! We found something!” I walked over to see and the girls had just turned over a log. Two wet salamanders laid in the log’s print. Carmen was holding a worm in one hand while touching the salamanders with the other. Rosie whispered,

“Aww. Look at it! Can I hold it?”

“Just pet it lightly first” whispered Carmen.

Nikki comes over, “Is it a worm?”

Carmen whispers, “No they are salamanders.”

Rosie goes to pick it up and says, “Whoa. It’s so wiggly. How can I pick it up?”

“Sooooo carefully,” remarks Carmen.

Carmen tries to pick one up with just one hand and whispers, “Yeah. Wow. Very wiggly.” She placed her worm on a nearby log and says, “You rest here a minute.” Carmen gets a salamander in both hands and shrieks as it falls to the ground.” I ask, “What made you scream?” She says, “Because it wiggled way too fast.” Rosie giggled at the wiggling as she loses it in the soil. She moves some of the ground around and instantly jumps up and takes two steps back. “Ahhh! A tiny spider,” she yelled. Then she pauses and says, “Oh well. It’s just tiny” and begins looking again. As she looks she says, “Ugh. I can’t find my salamander.” I say, “Just keep looking under those leaves.” She moves some leaves and I say, “Oh! I see its head.” She picks it up and closes her hands loosely. She opens them to look and moves it from one hand to another whispering, “Whoa. I got it.”

She throws her head back laughing and says through giggles, "Ha! He's tickling me." She puts her mouth close to her closed hands and whispered, "That tickled me. . .you tickled me."

Midas is nearby and Carmen says, "Show that salamander to Midas."

Rosie nods, "Midas! I found a salamander over here."

"Can I hold him?" He asks as he peeks in her hands.

"Yeah, sure" as she circles back around and checks back to see if she can quickly find him his own to hold.

He asks, "Can you help me find one?"

"Oh-kay," Rosie says, "Thanks for not taking it from me. We found it by this log."

"They're just so very cute!" she continues as she scanned the ground.

Carmen placed her salamander on the log for just a moment and Midas says, "Found it!" and went to pick up Carmen's.

"No! I was just resting my hands for a minute," she snapped.

Picking it back up she demanded, "Ahh-ah! Stop tickling me you little salamander!"

Sighing, she continued, "When they wiggle really fast, it tickles too much!"

Rosie peered closer at Carmen's and Carmen said,

"Rosie when they wiggle, they tickle. Like tickle-wiggle, tickle-wiggle."

"Pah-lease. . .help me find one. Please!" Midas pleads.

Carmen says, "Okay. They're very squirmy."

Milly joins them showing her hands. She is holding a well-formed ball of mud. Carmen says,

"Oh! I bet my salamander would love that mud ball, Milly."

"Yep. He likes it!" as Carmen put the salamander's face by the mud ball.

"Rosie, can we see if yours likes my mud ball?" asked Milly.

Rosie lets go of it in her hands and Fitz watches. She says, "This little guy is quite a handful. I can't even take it." Midas talks Carmen into holding her salamander and Milly passed the one she was holding to Fitz. Fitz giggles loudly and spins in a circle as the salamander moves in his hand.

"I can't believe how cute he is. He's crawling up my sleeve because he's cold. I know it!" squeals Midas.

Midas holds it between his fingers and flips it over to see the belly. He remarks,

"Oh, my goodness! He's so spotty. He's like a Dalmatian."

"Why are you tickling me so much, brother?" Fitz yells to the salamander in his hand.

"Yep. Mines my brother too," confirms Midas.

Tess told us it was time to head back to school and so Midas puts the salamander on the log and says, “I’ll miss you Salamander Brother.” Right then, Carmen wrapped her arm around Midas and says, “Pssst. You’ll always be my brother.”



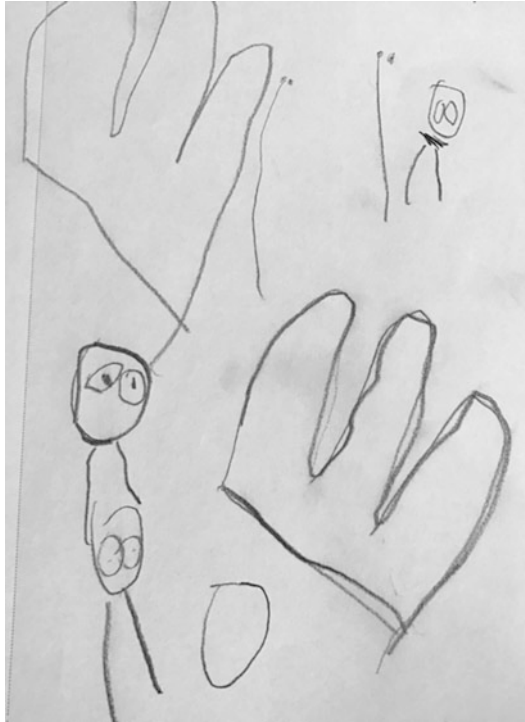
*Midas carefully holding a salamander*



*Midas noticing the salamander's spots*



*Midas' drawing as reflective response: Here's my little brother, Mikey!*



*Lillian's drawing as reflective response: We always hold the worms. They love us.*





*Nikki's drawing as reflective response: To find worms you must look really hard and then bam! You see them!*

I assumed that the conversations about group hugs and cozy beds were the children's way of embracing the chill in the air that day. After we walked for a while, our bodies were warm and we could shed our mittens. The children also empathized with the worms or insects that could not escape into the warm school like they could. When thinking about a group hug, I thought about the warmth it brings. The physical warmth of being close but also the emotional warmth of being held and cared for by people you like. It makes you think of love and family. The salamanders became our brothers. As Rosie was searching for her salamander she was forced to address her fear of spiders again. She jumped and shrieked at first but remembered she had overcome it before and could again. When I think about what it means to have a brother, I envy people with older brothers who probably tickled them and picked on them when they were young just like the salamanders were tickling the children. I wondered if some of the children longed for an older brother too. When Midas said sadly, "I'll miss you my salamander brother," Carmen comforted him by wrapping him in her arms and telling him that he is her brother. In the end, we found that if we care for nature, nature will care for us.

The part of be(in)nature that I find most important is “be nature.” That children can connect with nature to learn they are nature themselves. The children learned that anything once alive, particularly things that could breathe were nature. They learned later that plants and logs, dead or alive are nature too. This realization allowed their relationship and connection with nature to grow. For example, the butterfly “missed us.” Although it could not express feelings, it missed us because it was alive. The children knew that living things had feelings like humans. Ending our experience with salamander tickles was powerful for us. Fitz accepted the salamander as his brother which told me he accepted that he is nature or that nature deserves the same respect. Midas joined in his compassion and his caring side shined through. Carmen accepted his need for care and embraced him allowing me to see the children bond over a special moment that felt like family.

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## **Discussion and Implications**

### **Uninterrupted Time in Nature**

Studying how children interacted and came to know nature was simple and challenging at the same time. It was simple to support children’s uninterrupted time and just be. To be with children with(in) nature while videoing their conversations and interactions with the ground, trees, insects, and life without an agenda. For 2 h, we escaped the real world back at school. We escaped the schedule, logistics, and structure. Doing phenomenology was challenging because children pulled me in every direction to experience nature with them. One child found a worm for the first time and touched it while another climbed higher on The Log Playground Tree than before and they both needed me to experience it with them at the same time. The excitement and passion was real. Without an agenda or adult leading their study, children moved freely and excitement filled the forest. The discovery of a monarch led to the reflection of our care in the classroom to the sadness of the blood it shed. Its return led us to believe it missed us. Discovering a salamander meant realizing nature is like us, and when it has arms and legs, it becomes clearer nature is family. Nature is our brother. Additionally, it was challenging because while doing phenomenology a phenomenologist knows that every second has the potential for a reflection and being open to any experience and any reflection meant the data was abundant but a project was to unfold in the end. Uninterrupted time in nature meant the children discovered nature for themselves and realized over time that you can be(in)nature and nature needs our care.

### **Children’s Curriculum, Research, and Voice**

Children guided this study of nature and we discovered how nature leads us to understand that we can be(in)nature. Listening to children and allowing them to guide the research is a priority for phenomenologically understanding children’s

experiences. Each time the children approached me for a reflection invitation, where they would talk about their experience, request to watch a certain video, or draw about their experience; we knew they found meaning or significance in their interaction with(in) nature. Stepping back while being present meant that the children felt competent in their reflections with no right or wrong answer. More importantly, they did not look for approval or praise to know that their research and voice were valued. The role of a significant adult in children's experiences links directly to Chawla's (1998) point of adult modeling of pro-environmental behavior and attitude. By empowering the children to experience with(in) nature, consider themselves nature, and listen to one another while supporting their needs gave them agency over what they learned about nature and what led them understand that they are nature and nature needs our care.

### **Significant Life Experiences of Preschoolers**

van Manen (2014) reminds us that every experience can be reflected upon and stays with us until the next experience takes precedent. While we know children's nature connections as important, how do we inspire children to sustain connections into adulthood? SLE literature suggests direct experiences in nature (Chawla, 1998, 2007; Chawla & Cushing, 2007; Laird et al., 2014). The most influential direct experiences from our research that may lead to pro-environmental behavior later in life include:

1. **Defining Nature Aloud:** The children could talk about nature often, uninterrupted by adults to discuss, negotiate, argue, and contemplate the elements of nature leading to the discovery of what it is and group meaning-making.
2. **Discovering Nature's Needs:** Over time children used their knowledge of their own needs to suggest that nature needs the same: group hugs, cozy beds, trampolines.
3. **Realizing Nature is Family:** Being in a group with the consensus that nature should be cared for, let's children realize that nature is family.

Based on these experiences, there is a potential for children to reflect on these experiences as memories later in life and recall what nature is, its needs and the discovery that as humans we are nature and/or we can be(in)nature. While SLE suggests strong connections to nature in childhood with adult models, encouraging children to conceptualize themselves as nature provides a new avenue for connection. Phenomenology as a research approach gave us the framework to understand nature as a phenomenon from children's perspectives. We encouraged their lead to help us understand their sense of wonder with(in) nature. Campbell and Jobling (2012) suggest that children need to find a sense of wonder and joy in the natural world. Being tickled by a salamander is just one example of joy we found together. The joy connected Midas to the joy his family brings him, thus leading him to see the salamander as his family and himself as nature. Reflecting as an adult on my own

childhood, my experiences in nature feel less significant than the implications in Salamander Brother. We intended for children to be provided with similar experiences like we had when we were children such as climbing trees, playing in the dirt and catching bugs. However, we discovered that when given the opportunity, children will teach us how they can conceptualize nature on much deeper levels as they make connections to their own lives and the ways their actions impact the environment.

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## Cross-References

- ▶ [Child-Nature Interaction in a Forest Preschool](#)
- ▶ [Children's Imaginative Play Environments and Ecological Narrative Inquiry](#)
- ▶ [Unplanning Research with a Curious Practice Methodology: Emergence of Childrenforest in the Context of Finland](#)
- ▶ [Wild Hope: The Transformative Power of Children Engaging with Nature](#)

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