

**making a circle: building a community of philosophical enquiry in a post-apartheid, government school in south africa**

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**abstract**

In this paper I attempt to trace some entanglements of an event documented in my PhD research, which contests dominant modes of enquiry. This research takes place with a group of Grade 2 learners in a government school in Cape Town, South Africa. It is experimental research which resists the human subject as the most important aspect of research, the only one with agency or intentionality. In particular, the analysis focuses on the process of the making of the circle, and how integral it is in contributing to building the Community of Enquiry, the pedagogy of Philosophy with Children. A critical posthuman analysis is offered which engages with the material-discursive entanglements of the making of the circle. Also, how this making of a circle can be a democratising practice, by including in the concept of democracy, the more-than-human. The analysis also focuses on the placing of the chairs by the children, as a deliberate pedagogical practice, and how this works to disrupt the adult /child binary. There is a move beyond the linguistic turn by paying attention to not only the discursive in the transcriptions but also the intra-actions in between human and more-than-human, the circle, the chairs and the materiality of place.

**keywords:** community of enquiry; philosophy with children; posthumanism; circle.

**hacer un círculo: construir una comunidad de investigación filosófica en una escuela pública post-apartheid en sudáfrica**

**resumen**

En este texto, intento rastrear algunos agenciamientos de un acontecimiento documentado en mi investigación de doctorado, que problematiza los modos de investigación dominantes. Esta investigación se lleva a cabo con un grupo de estudiantes de segundo grado en una escuela primaria pública en Ciudad del Cabo, Sudáfrica. Es una investigación experimental que pone al sujeto humano como el aspecto más importante de la investigación, el único con agencia o intencionalidad. En particular, el análisis se centra en el proceso de creación del círculo, y en su grado de contribución al desarrollo de la Comunidad de investigación, la pedagogía de la filosofía con niñas y niños. Se ofrece un análisis posthumanista crítico que se relaciona con agenciamientos material-discursivos durante la realización del círculo. Además, estudio cómo esta creación de un círculo puede ser una práctica democratizadora, al incluir, en el concepto de democracia, algo más que lo humano. El análisis también se centra en la colocación de las sillas por parte de los niños y niñas, como una práctica pedagógica deliberada, y cómo funciona para interrumpir el dualismo adulto / niño. Hay un movimiento más allá del giro lingüístico prestando atención no solo a lo discursivo en las transcripciones, sino también a las acciones internas entre lo humano y lo más que humano, el círculo, las sillas y la materialidad del lugar.

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making a circle: building a community of philosophical enquiry in a post-apartheid, government school in south africa

**palabras clave:** comunidad de investigación; filosofía con niños; posthumanismo; círculo.

**fazer um círculo: construir uma comunidade de investigação filosófica numa escola do governo pós-apartheid na África do sul**

#### **resumo**

Neste artigo, pretendo traçar alguns agenciamentos de um evento documentado em minha pesquisa de doutorado, que contesta formas dominantes de investigação. Esta pesquisa se realiza com um grupo de estudantes de segunda série numa escola pública na Cidade do Cabo, na África do Sul. É a pesquisa experimental que mantém o sujeito humano como sendo o aspecto mais importante da observação, o único aspecto dela que possui ação ou intencionalidade. Particularmente, a presente análise tem como foco o processo de fazer o círculo, e quão integral ele é em sua contribuição para a construção da Comunidade de Investigação, a pedagogia da Filosofia com Crianças. É oferecida aqui uma análise pós-humanista crítica que se relaciona com os agenciamentos material-discursivos do processo de fazer o círculo. Além disso, como este fazer um círculo pode ser uma prática democratizante, incluindo no conceito de democracia o mais-que-humano. A análise também foca no ato de posicionar as cadeiras pelas crianças, como uma prática pedagógica deliberada, e em como isto funciona interrompendo o binarismo adulto/criança. Há um movimento para além da virada linguística ao prestar atenção não somente no âmbito discursivo nas transcrições, mas também nas intra-ações entre humanos e o mais-que-humano, o círculo, as cadeiras e a materialidade do lugar.

**palavras-chave:** comunidade de investigação; filosofia com crianças; pós-humanismo; círculo.

making a circle: building a community of philosophical enquiry in a post-apartheid, government school in south africa<sup>2</sup>

*the making of a circle*

I was employed as the Head of Inclusive Support at the research site (school), until June 2016. I am therefore known to some of the children at the school. On the day of the research-data creation we are working together as co-creators in this PhD research process. In order to research how critical posthumanism can reconfigure the concept of inclusion at this school, I have used the Community of Enquiry as a pedagogy and methodology. Every child and teacher at the school was invited to participate in the research in order to enact an inclusive research design. The children who participated had their parents' consent and had given consent themselves. I 'difficultated' (see below) thirteen Communities of Enquiry with thirteen groups of children from Grade 1 to Grade 7 in their specific class groups. Each session was documented through video recordings, audio recordings, and photographs. The data created included the formation of the circle, the artwork and drawings, the questions and the philosophical enquiries.

When I returned to the video footage after this particular session, "using a particular approach to noticing, one that draws inspiration from scientific observation alongside ethnography and critical theory" (Swanson, Tsing, Bubandt & Gan, 2017, p. M7), I was not just noticing the children and their bodies, the semantics and verbal discourse but also the materiality of the event. Murriss and Haynes (2018, p. 12) point out that "[t]he recent 'material' or 'ontological' turn has informed a new scholarship in education to focus not only on the human and discursive, but also to include the more-than-human, such as material, space, atmosphere, breath, sound or nonhuman animals" as part of 'data'. As decisions

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about what to exclude or include involves choices, the idea of creating data (e.g., do I, or do I not, include the role furniture plays) takes on an ethical component. In this paper I explore the material-discursive intra-actions with and through the chairs, the hall, the children and the circle. Intra-action is a Baradian term, “the notion of intra-action (in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’, which presumes the prior existence of independent entities or relata) represents a profound conceptual shift” (Barad, 2007, p.139). This posthuman research is based on a relational agential ontology, inspired by the work of philosopher and physicist, Karen Barad. What this means is that we turn our attention to what we have previously paid less attention to, that is, the role the more-than-human plays in knowledge construction. I am now noticing in a different way. There is not a focus on the child as a separate subject acting on the paper, but rather a focus on the material-discursive relationality that brings the individual into existence. The “profound conceptual shift” that Barad (2007, p. 139) refers to has made possible and opened up the inclusion of the more-than-human in what counts as data and what matters in data analysis. Paying attention to the more-than-human is difficult to consider when our gaze is usually fixed firmly on the humans, what they say, how they said it and also what can and cannot be said (the notion of ‘discourse’) since the linguistic turn. However, Barad’s theory of “agential realism” not only disrupts epistemologies and ontologies but also questions the ethics of ontoepistemologies that take human exceptionalism as a given (Barad, 2017; Rose, 2017; Braidotti, 2018; Haraway, 2016 & Swanson et.al 2017). Critical posthumanism therefore provides the theoretical framework for thinking about a transformative theory/practice. It is transformative because it decenters the humans and involves a rethinking of what humans do and what certain humans previously excluded (children, people of colour and living in poverty etc.) are actually capable of.

### *walking into the school hall with the chairs*

When I start watching the video footage of the research session, I see the children walk into the school hall chatting and laughing as they carry their chairs inside. Murriss, Crowther and Stanley (2018, p.162) suggest not ignoring the

atmosphere, or labelling it, and to resist representationalism. I acknowledge the presence of the atmosphere without trying to determine what 'it is' as if it cannot be changing all the time as different intra-actions take place. The shifting of a chair, the place of the floor under and around chair, the sounds of laughter, sneezing, dust particles tickling, all these intra-actions which contribute to the atmosphere - what I would tentatively call an air of expectation or anticipation about what the research is going to be about.

The school hall being entered was built with exposed brick work, it has an approximately 5 metre-high double volume ceiling. There are huge windows about a metre from the ceiling that, when seated on the floor of the hall, reveal the sky. The windows are so high that only the clouds, bugs and birds can look in. The floor of the hall is made of suspended wooden strip flooring. The raised stage is mainly used when school plays are performed or for art exhibitions and musical performances. A massive grand piano stands in the corner; it is very old. The hall has an approximately 500 plus person capacity, and it is used regularly every Monday when all the children and teaching staff meet for Assembly.<sup>3</sup> The main entrance of the hall houses a foyer with bathrooms and there are doors at the stage end of the hall that each lead off to more bathrooms and change rooms.



Figure 1. Walking into the hall with their chairs to create a circle

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<sup>3</sup> During and assembly a class presents some inspirational play or act. Sometimes a guest speaker, a teacher or the principal provides some educational, motivational or inspirational input.

The children walk into the hall carrying all the same school-issued red plastic chairs they sit on which are usually behind their desks in their Grade 2 classroom. Some children walk quickly and put their chairs down noisily, some children are more tentative and stroll in quietly. The chairs are in their arms, some leaning against their chests, some chairs are being peered over or around, some children come inside the hall in pairs, negotiating the entrance, looking up and down to check their footing as a step up is required from outside. It is a sunny Autumn day, as the children slip through the door, sunbeams shining from the African sun make their way inside too. They are all making their way into the massive expanse of the school hall, the children walk over to where I am standing as I call to them: "Let's make a circle." They are consenting participants in this PhD research. There is giggling, shuffling, chatting to each other and dragging of feet on the wooden strip floors. There are also continued negotiations about seating.

As a PhD researcher/teacher/co-researcher/enquirer already entangled with the desire to work in a space that is not a traditional classroom, I was drawn to the huge school hall. I was intrigued by the idea of a space other than their classroom, and this became a significant part of the methodology and pedagogy for each of the 13 philosophical enquiries. The children usually sit in groups at small tables, with chairs, in their Foundation Phase classrooms at this school, as seen in Figure 2 below.

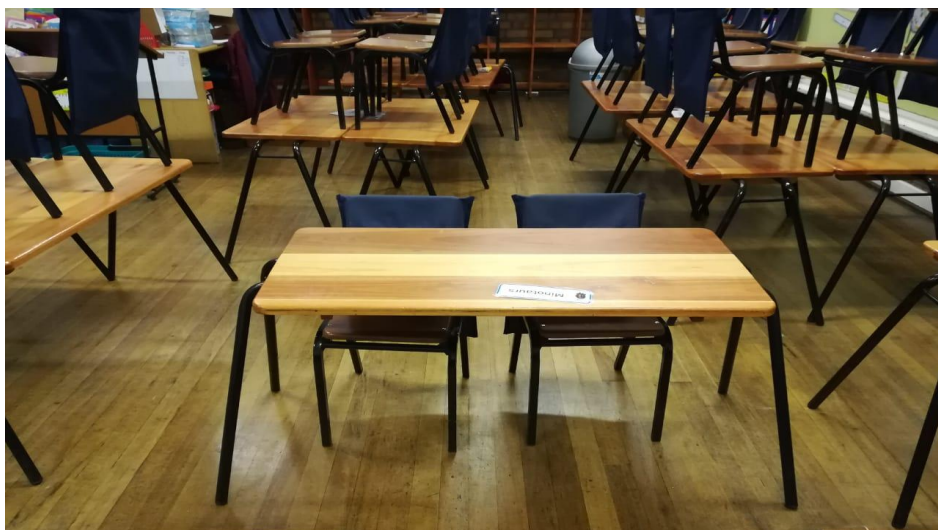


Figure 2. Desks and chairs in rows in a Foundation Phase classroom

Most of the classrooms have a mat at the front of the class which provides much needed alternative seating for being read to, playing games or learning in a group but not necessarily as a group. I see the usual classroom space and layout of desks in rows as a map; these children were coming from a classroom, which has a predetermined landscape. This is not necessarily negative; teachers set up their classrooms to function in specific ways, with prearranged assigned seating for pedagogical and practical reasons. Children have none or very little say in this in terms of classroom layout. Ingold (2007, p. 15) suggests that a map provides a “complete representation of the territory,” and in this case the classroom layout provides a predetermined route.

The process of including children in teaching or research requires a change in pedagogy. In this research, the choice of the chairs is necessary, and the making of the circle is not *just* about its shape and how this makes it easier to see each other. The circle also serves to disrupt the map and opens up a space for “wayfaring,” which is about movement and about being the movement (Ingold 2007, p. 75). The hall is not mapped yet for this research; together with the children, the chairs, the sun, the shadows, the light coming in from the windows and the bulkiness of the piano – decisions are made and remade about where to think/draw/speak/imagine – it is not pre-determined. There is no right way or place. There is continual movement and the possibility for movement, which may not always be possible in the regular classroom setting.

As the school hall was available when I came in to work with the children, I asked their class teacher to ask the children to bring the chairs they sit on in their classroom along to the school hall. They needed to bring their chairs with them, as the only chairs available in the school hall are adult-sized plastic maroon colour chairs, stored in a storage room, alongside the hall. These chairs are used when parents come for meetings, or to the Assembly or other gatherings in the hall. The children almost always sit on the floor and the teachers and other adults sit on these chairs. I may not have noticed the chairs, the plastic material they are made of or their arresting red colour, had I not shifted from the usual anthropocentric focus in this research. Here in South Africa, there is a growing awareness of the

making a circle: building a community of philosophical enquiry in a post-apartheid, government school in south africa

dangers of plastic for the environment with now even very popular fast food restaurants (finally) rejecting the use of the single-use straw. I am therefore struck by the use of plastic and plastic chairs in this school. These plastic red and maroon chairs and one plastic and metal wheelchair are a sharp juxtaposition as they scrape noisily against the wood strip floors and exposed brick wall in this modern, functionalist yet minimalist space which is the school hall. The children did not have any say in the purchasing of the plastic chairs which they sit on at their wooden desks. So, when we trace some of the entanglements: the wood, the plastic, where the chairs were manufactured, the implication of the carbon footprint if they were transported via air or sea from another country into South Africa, whether a 'real child' was used to measure the height and comfort provided by the chair and the ecological costs. When we consider the amount of money spent on children in schools during apartheid and now post-apartheid, it puts the endless use of the earth's (non-renewable) resources into sharp relief.

### *the school, the place and the land*

The school hall the children have just walked into is attached to the Oakwood Primary School<sup>4</sup>, (hereafter OP) building via corridors and an open courtyard, which has plants, trees and a mini fountain. During apartheid, the school was located in an area demarcated as a white area, by the Group Areas Act<sup>5</sup> no 36 of 1966. This Act enforced segregation by assigning geographical living and working areas to specific racial categories designated by apartheid legislation and practices. The Act also restricted ownership and occupation of land to specific apartheid racial groups<sup>6</sup>. The school was opened in 1948 and functioned as a government primary school that only children classified as white during apartheid could attend. The geographic location of the research site is historically significant because 1948 was the first year the National Party came to power in South Africa.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a pseudonym.

<sup>5</sup> The Group Areas Act No. 36 of 1966, "separated population categories by declaring certain areas African, Coloured, Indian or White, and forcibly removing those who were occupying land or houses in the areas designated as white areas" (Bozalek 2004 :82).

<sup>6</sup> The population registration Act of 1950 and its 1967 amendment, introduced racial categories into which everyone in the country had to be classified.



When the National Party gained power in South Africa, the all-white government immediately began enforcing policies of racial segregation under a system of apartheid legislation. The children walking through the door in 2017, carrying the plastic red chairs, would have been classified by the apartheid government as either black, white, coloured or Indian. For this group of children, being together in the same government school in South Africa would have been an impossibility, until 1990. From 1955, the time that the school hall was built until 1989, for those 34 years, only white children would and could walk through the doors into the hall. In post-apartheid South Africa, the past and future are intricately connect; the past is not simply over and the future is not just yet to come, but they are “iteratively reconfigured” (Barad in an interview with Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, p. 66). Even the notion of ‘post’ in post-apartheid is troubled, as the legacy of apartheid policies continues to affect schools in insidious ways. For example, as apartheid policies were only formally eradicated/abolished in 1990, from 1948-1990 the money spent on the infrastructure of the suburb and resources at the research site, were systematically provided by the apartheid government, because the children and suburb were for those designated as white. The (National Party) government was mandated to spend more money on white children in state schools than any other race group in state schools during apartheid. According to Christie (1990, p. 98), “[i]n 1982-3, the state spent R1211.00 annually on each white pupil, R711.00 per Indian pupil, R498.00 on a coloured pupil and R146.00 on an African (Black) pupil.” Because of the additional funds allocated to white pupils this school has a 25x5m swimming pool, a school hall (the same school hall we were forming a circle in), corridors that connected the various parts of the school, a large school field and it even had tennis courts. This level of infrastructure and resources are not common in under-resourced schools to the present day in South Africa.

OP is a former Model-C<sup>7</sup> government primary school in Cape Town, South Africa. Model-C schools were state-aided and additionally received funds from parents through school fees. School fees at former Model-C schools are relatively high and are currently used by the Governing Body of the school to employ additional staff and to pay for extra resources like grand pianos, infrastructure and music teachers. The racial integration of the children at the school happened in 1991, after Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the African National Congress was unbanned in 1990. The Group Areas act was repealed in 1991 by the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act, 1991. The racial integration of the staff happened in 1998, when I was employed as the first black teacher<sup>8</sup> at the school. All these historical factors are important as we trace the entanglements of the 'school' in its post-apartheid setting. Barad in an interview with Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2012, p. 666) argues that the memory of the past cannot be erased, but rather "the memory of its materializing effects is written into the world." This notion of the past not being erased makes it possible to attempt to trace some of the infinite entanglements and the relationality of the history (past, present and future) of the school, the children, the teachers, the chairs, the resources and how the school functions in 2019 as a government, inclusive, mainstream school<sup>9</sup>? In this research project, I do not position children as separate, finite entities. Rather I draw on the work of Simon Ceder who, in his doctoral thesis, proposes an idea of educational relationality, inspired by the work of feminist philosophers Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. In thinking with Ceder (2016, p. 35), he would suggest that we consider an intra-relational view of childhood where "children are not considered to be entities existing in the surrounding world, but rather living as an entangled part of the intra-relational world." This has implications for how the children are living as an entangled part of the research site which is identified as an inclusive school.

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<sup>7</sup> Model C schools were schools that were state aided by the Department of Education and Culture Administration: House of Assembly prior to 1994. During apartheid this was the department that provided education to children classified as white. (Reynolds, 2013:41)

<sup>8</sup> I was classified as coloured during apartheid, but would self-identify as a black South African.

<sup>9</sup> Mainstream in South Africa is demarcated as different to a Special Needs School, children with severe disabilities attend OP, which is not commonly found in other mainstream schools in South Africa.

Inclusive education in South Africa came out of post-apartheid policy development, the blueprint of which was Education White Paper 6 on *Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System*. OP has become an inclusive school, within the special needs framework, a direct response to the South African government's need, post-apartheid, to "create special needs education as a non-racial and integrated component of our education system" (White Paper 6, 2001). The framework with which inclusion is understood at OP is from a human rights perspective with its focus on the autonomous individual.

### *let's make a circle*

The research session, parts of which I describe below, is number 2 of 13 philosophical enquiry sessions I engaged in at this school, one with each class of children at the school from Grade 1 to Grade 7. When I was preparing for this session, and after watching the video footage of the first session that had been recorded, I realised that, during the first session, I had not asked the videographer to record the children walking into the hall, but had used a usual anthropocentric focus on what I had considered would be the beginning of the philosophical enquiry: to start recording only once the children were seated in a circle.

Using critical posthumanism as a navigational tool requires that attention is also paid to the materiality of the event as we try to decenter the human. I made an " agential cut" which is "at once ontic as well as semantic" and specifically asked the videographer, Joyce West, to start video-recording as the children walked into the hall with their chairs ( Barad, 2007, p. 148). As a researcher now re-looking at the video footage I have to keep challenging my humanist assumptions that the analysis of this pedagogical event will focus on the humans. Rather I need to draw my own attention to the material and more than humans in this event. So the analysis is/was/will be on the intra-actions between myself, the humans, the video camera, the recorded footage, the sounds, what is focused on by the video camera lens and what is ignored. I also asked the videographer to focus on the whole human and more-than-human bodies and specifically to videotape the whole scene and not only zoom in on the face and mouth when a

child or adult was talking. The result is quite disconcerting footage, as there are legs and shoes and feet, incomplete human bodies but this lends itself to a different way of looking at what is usually expected or what has been normalised in educational research. Ceder (2016, p. 18) “uses the concept of relationality as a de-centering concept.” Decentering the human would include analysing the children, chairs, hall, concepts, floor not as individual entities, but considering the relationality in-between them.

The way I am working with and through the transcription below, is to try to shift my gaze and analysis from only the human, in order to include, through a relational ontology, the more- than-human. As unsettling as this is, I can ask what else is happening? The analysis can therefore include the intra-actions and what is happening in between the concept of circle, the scraping of the chairs on the wooden floor, the notion of the embodied circle that only comes into being through relationality. I’m paying attention to the data that is not lying on the ‘cutting room floor’ but is foregrounded as what is usually discarded when we only focus on what the humans are doing, which has been the case when engaging in research with ‘children in schools’. Rather I want to discover, how does this circle work? How do these 4 minutes of making of the circle and all the minutes in the past/present/future and their entanglements bring the philosophical enquiry that happens a bit later, into being?

I am drawn to this idea of the making of the circle, because of my encounters with Sara Stanley’s work in South Africa. Sara Stanley is well known in the field of Philosophy for Children for her philosophical play approach. The focus of work is “the rhetoric of the imaginary and its capacity to use play as a resource for philosophical enquiry ” (Lyle and Stanley, 2017, p. 53). I watched Sara demonstrate her philosophical play approach with a group of 32 Grade 1 children at a government school in Cape Town, South Africa. She was doing this model lesson for a group of pre-service Foundation Phase student teachers from the University of Cape Town. When the children walked into the classroom, she called them to the mat and encouraged them to make a circle. I was fascinated by this process which was far more ‘messy’, more participatory, more playful and

enacted a destabilizing of the authoritative teacher role. This was clearly a deliberate pedagogical strategy on Sara's part. She encouraged the children through various prompts to make the circle. She did not tell them where to stand or how to sit. She guided them through inquiry and questioning to let them make the circle. Sara's philosophical practice "assumes a different view of child, a child who is already capable. Her practice also assumes a different view of knowledge." (Reynolds and Peers, 2018, p. 140).

In the transcript below, let me draw your attention to the children greeting me as "Mrs. Reynolds". This is a convention in the school, in most government schools in South Africa, a strongly reinforced authoritarian adult relationship. One of the affordances of looking at the making a circle together, in the first four minutes of our intra-action brings the opportunity to destabilize the authoritarian relationship into relief.

Rose-Anne: Is this the best circle we could make?

*[Many children loudly exclaiming] : No....no*

Rose-Anne: How could we change it ? *[Making a circular motion with my hand]*

*[Some children immediately start moving their chairs forward and inward, lifting their feet slowly off the ground and lifting their chairs with their hands under the front of the seats of their chairs. Other children simply slid themselves and their chairs forward noisily scraping against the wooden floor as they did this. The 'bad' acoustics in the hall echo the sounds and the sounds bounce off each other as if competing for space. Some children do not move at all, watching the others moving and some just stare into the space(s) around them, their attention drawn elsewhere.]*

Rose-Anne: ...*[indistinct]*...so that everyone can be in the circle.

Rose-Anne: *[I direct my question to one boy]* Brent, are you in the circle? *[There is now more of an urgent need to get into a circle, lots more chairs are being moved in, more scraping along the wooden strip floors, making small movements, they are talking about the circle making suggestions to each other*

making a circle: building a community of philosophical enquiry in a post-apartheid, government school in south africa

*and into the circle.]*

Rose-Anne:           What's happening here, with Mrs. Adams and me? *[Moving my hands from side to side as I show the big gap between the class teacher and me. I walk across the forming circle with an adult maroon colour chair in my hand, I ask two boys who have an empty chair between them] Who is sitting here? I start to swop the chair with mine, as I do this the boy [Luca] on my left looks up at me and gently places his hand on my arm. See figure 3 below.*



Figure 3. On touching

Luca:                   It's Gareth's chair. *[I meet Luca's gaze and realise Gareth who has chosen to be in a wheelchair on this day wants to remain in the wheelchair and so rolls himself into the circle, to another position in the circle as he adjusts his position I move his red chair and place mine where his was. I move Gareth's chair close to him on the opposite side of the circle.]*

*[Indistinct]*

Rose-Anne:           Are we all in the circle now?

Zara:                 No not really....

Clint:                 There should only be one gap that people come in and out of  
*[Motioning with her hands to describe the gap].*

Rose-Anne:           Good morning grade 2's... some of you don't know me, but I'm Mrs. Reynolds.

- Yaasien: *A couple of children nod*] I know you.
- Rose-Anne: *[Nodding]* You do know me? And there's one other person you don't know in the room and that's a lady Mrs. Joyce *[indistinct]* and she's going to be videotaping this for us. Can you all say good morning to Mrs. West?
- Children: *[In chorus]* Good morning Mrs. West.
- Joyce: *Morning.*
- Rose-Anne: Grade 2's I'm going to ask you just one more time, let's really think about what we can do to make this circle just be...*[indistinct]*
- Rachel: It doesn't look like a circle.
- Rose-Anne: I also don't think it's a circle. What makes something a circle?
- Brent: It's an oval!
- Rose-Anne: It's an oval, how can we make it a circle?
- Brent: By one of them like, one of the parts coming a little bit down.
- Rose-Anne: One of the parts come a little down, should we ask Mrs. Adams to move a little bit down.
- Mrs. Adams: *[ Gets up off her chair and while bending addresses the child who suggested she moves and says]* Must I come in? *[Lots of chatting, moving and adjusting positions]*And aunty Natalie must come in.
- Brent: *[Addressing Mrs. Adams ]* That part must come in a little more.
- Ryan: *Brent you mustn't be in the corner.*
- Kouthar: There mustn't be any corners, it must be round *[She repeats herself as she realizes we can't hear her]* There mustn't be any corners, it must be round.
- Rose-Anne: Kouthar says there mustn't be any corners.
- Brent: I said the same thing *[Nodding in agreement]*.
- Rose-Anne: Did you say the same thing? So, let's see, do we have a corner here B?
- Timothy: Corner!
- Rose-Anne: Let's try and make ourselves a bit more round, mmm. now?
- Anne: My head is round. *[Pointing at his head.]*

making a circle: building a community of philosophical enquiry in a post-apartheid, government school in south africa

Timothy:

Gareth: Round... round... round [*Shaping his arms into a big circle in front of his chest, so that his fingers and hands are touching and repeats*] round. See figure 4 below.



Figure 4. Round, round, round.

### *researcher as difficultator*

As a 'difficultator' when I ask "Is this the best circle we could make?", I am bringing my role as teacher/researcher/facilitator in a philosophical enquiry into question, to destabilize the role of authority implied as an adult at the research site. Haynes and Kohan (2018) suggest the role of difficultator is one of cultivating ignorance and weakness. They explain:

Ignorance is not a negative oppositional position. With regard to decentering, in ignorance we find hesitation and waiting, inaction, an opening towards the possibility of including the more than human in ways that have not been done before, a way to recuperate the material of human, inhuman and nonhuman *in* rather than *above* nature. (Haynes and Kohan, 2018, p. 206)

Ignorance and weakness are not the usual dispositions or traits required of what routinely is called a 'facilitator', and not a difficultator, but rather requires challenging the different ways of being and doing facilitation in a philosophical enquiry. What in these intra-actions brings ignorance and weakness into being? When I ask these questions about the circle, in the transcription above, I am deliberately tentative. I am not sure what the children are going to say or do about



how the circle will be made. I stay with this surprise and engage with this as the work of this moment and the moments to follow. The children similarly are not sure what I am going to say or do and are asking questions in response. We are not sure in that we do not know, but we are in a place of not knowing together, questioning what is usually known or taken for granted even that we all understand what a circle is, in the same way.

These questions work to disrupt the adult/child binary with these ways of being with the children in this role as difficultator, in this hall, with these chairs, in the making of the circle. As a practitioner I see Philosophy with Children as a democratising pedagogy in the way the adult/child binary can be disrupted and how it contests the implied power dynamics – not simply that the teacher is more knowledgeable than the children or even the chairs, but that we pay attention to their relationality. We have not ‘gotten to’ the stimulus/provocation/text/thinking time or philosophical discussion, the next important steps in a philosophical enquiry. But this ‘making a circle together time’ has also been an opportunity to be intra-acting with the idea that we would be working with concepts and thinking together. Deleuze and Guattari (1987/2014) cited in Murriss and Haynes (2018, p. 11) argue that “philosophy is a *doing* a creating of concepts. Concepts are complex, not discrete, but intensive coordinates, in that they are composed of many parts.” So the children, the circle and what a circle is (and what it is not), plus the chairs, and the sun, air, video recorder as concepts are put into question and come into being through their relationality.

### *so, why a circle in a community of enquiry?*

Kohan (2014, p. 1) considered Lipman’s project, P4C to be “potentially revolutionary – not only for philosophy and education, but for childhood as well, both theoretically and practically.” This is my experience as a philosophy with children practitioner, enthusiast and emerging difficultator. Theoretically and practically we were already starting the philosophical enquiry through this making of the circle, playing with these concepts, the space and time, the hall and sunlight all intra-acting. The process of the making of the circle is integral to

'building' the community of philosophical enquiry. This aspect of this PhD research made me question why there is less focus on 'how the circle is made' in research about Philosophy with Children. In my P4WC training, it was more or less assumed to ask participants to sit in a circle, which would ensure among other reasons that the participants could see and hear each other better. This seating arrangement also facilitates particular thinking moves and games which all help with building the community of enquiry. There was, however, by comparison, more focus on the thinking, rhizomatic concept development (Kennedy, 2012), and the role of questions in developing the community of philosophical enquiry.

So, why the circle in the Community of Enquiry? Lipman (2003, p. 100) explains what this figuration facilitates: students are "seated in the circle of chairs, face-to-face with their classmates, they employ the same thinking skills and thinking tools (such as reasons and criteria) that they have seen others employ." On doing a search in the most recent collection of scholarly work from the community of scholars around the world, who I am entangled with in the Routledge International Handbook on Philosophy for Children, I found 'circle' mentioned 13 times in relation to a Community of Enquiry (Baumfield, 2017, p. 123; Echeverria and Hannam, 2017, p. 6&8; D'Olimpio and Teschers, 2017, p. 147-148; Mendonça and Costa Carvalho, 2017, p. 132; Glaser and Gregory, 2017, p. 183; Strong Makaiau, 2017, p.22-23; Strong Makaiau, Ching-Sze Wang, Ragoonaden and Leng. 2017, p. 231-232). What I would like to add to this entanglement with a community of people doing research in Philosophy for/with children, is how paying attention to the more-than-human changes what only counts as important in the Community of Enquiry. What are the affordances of the circle and the materiality of the chairs (and not just the humans including the children) in the case of this video recorded session of the circle? Doing justice to the role of the material (including the video-recorder through endless play-back sessions in my office) decenters the human in what counts as important in philosophical enquiry with children (and chairs and ...).

### *thinking with and through the circle*

In this paper, there has been an attempt to trace some entanglements: in between the humans, more-than-humans, the concepts and the material-discursive being analysed as research data. The posthuman analysis took place by paying attention to what is usually ignored in research data through intentionally returning to video footage again and again. This paper shows how the making of a circle can be a democratising practice, by including in the concept of democracy, the more-than-human. We looked at how the chairs placed by the children, as a pedagogical practice, work to disrupt the adult/child binary. The analysis also included the intra-actions between the chairs and humans, more-than-humans and the materiality of place. As the substantial descriptions of the role the more-than-human played in the enquiry shows, my deliberate choice to not only privilege the discursive in the transcriptions was an attempt to do justice to the material-discursive relationality involved in the making of the circle. Normally understood as mere preparation to the actual (thinking) work done by the child(ren) and the adult(s), this paper shows that the thinking work in a community of philosophical enquiry is always already entangled with the material world as an ontological given. Matter and meaning cannot be separated out. The (sometimes) plastic chairs which serve as a stark reminder about climate change and our human culpability in the destruction of the cosmos, along with the ever widening circle in the community of philosophical enquiry are not mere background to what matters in Philosophy with Children.

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