

INSPIRE 2020 KEYNOTE OVERVIEW

Storying subversive texts

BRINGING PHILOSOPHY, RESEARCH AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PRACTICE TOGETHER AS A MEANS TO RE-CONFIGURE 'QUALITY'

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'It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties'.

Haraway (2016)



What a beautiful and curious mind revealed in this keynote presentation, with the compelling message that philosophies and theories should be shaping our thinking and early childhood practices to interrogate 'quality'. At last, a point of view that replaces the prevailing emphasis on meeting regulatory requirements and pursuing normative practices in our early childhood settings. Jayne proposed dwelling more ethically with children, and together, questioning and interrogating, through a feminist, PhEMaterialist lens, investigating ethical dilemmas about gender, sexuality, climate, human supremacy, materials and all things other than human. We should question our, often ill-informed, taken for granted ways of being, and our use of materials without asking about their origin and the impact on the earth as a result of the manufacturing processes on, human life and non-human beings along with our consuming habits. Jayne recommended activism, raising awareness with children of the very minutiae of the every day 'doings', and living life more thoughtfully, striving for social justice in our work for and with young children.

Jayne began her insightful keynote by proposing we dwell on what inspires us. What a gift! Listening to and watching Jayne was an hour of complete inspiration. Her presentation was an academic 'dare', for us to take a walk on the 'wild side' in our thinking, in being open to theories that challenge our safe and if we are to be completely honest, our predictable work with young children. Jayne demonstrated, through examples of environmental and human problems and inequities, to consider being activists in our early childhood settings and in life.

Listening to such seductive language and seemingly dangerous and intriguing ideas, describing concepts and theories, of sticky knots and entanglements— the anthropocentric impact and views of humans, about human rights, climate change and ethical dilemmas was and is exciting and inspiring. The complex language is a reminder of the politics that shape our lives, our education and our work. We hold the potent power within us to affect change, as long as we remain open to ideas and to being curious about theories to underpin our practice.

Jayne spoke with such fluid ease, and as she spoke, a glittering kaleidoscope of theories and philosophies tumbled about us, revealing, for some of us, a paucity of our own theoretical knowledge and our sedentary approach in our thinking about young children. Jayne reminded us that the way we humans continue to live our lives without really thinking about our impact on the world and the non-human elements we share this world with has created the global crisis of climate change and an inequality of human and children's rights.

The deep thinking of academics such as Professor Osgood is needed to provoke us. To shift our thinking, to unsettle us, to make us uncomfortable in our 'not knowing about' the new and recent philosophies and theories that are being explored by feminist researchers and activists around the world on our behalf. We need to question the impact of humans and our consumerism on the global climate and consider the urgent need for social justice.

We need to become re-sponsible, to be an unknowing being about space, place and matter, to question the heteronormativity and gendered values represented in books, in our resources and materials. We should also question the source of the foods we eat and offer to young children. We are summoned to notice 'to take notice' of the seemingly innocuous stories underlying the 'humdrum, the mundane', the ever present, early childhood materials such as Lego, plastic animals, resources such as glitter. Jayne invites us to act, to ask questions, to take a stand about the manufacture of these goods—to agitate about capitalism and subvert, with a heightened sensitivity, of being open to 'what else' to the 'who we touch' when handling a plastic animal...the 'sticky knots' we encounter every day in the wonderful world of early childhood.

Will we too be enchanted by 'the queerness of very small children their curiosity and wonky ways in which they approach the world? They do have a lot to teach us about what is right and wrong' (Osgood 2020)... so, what will we do to make a difference in this world, for children and their future world and for early childhood education to be valued and to flourish in an equitable society?

PhEMaterialism - is a theoretical entanglement. The Ph refers to post human philosophy and doings... Its phonic phem refers to multiple feminisms... E refers to education in the very broadest sense... Materialisms come from materialist thought. Ph is sounded F – the letter and sound brings together post-humanism and feminism in one expression. PhEMaterialism includes socially engaged, arts-informed, experimental methodologies that push researchers outside their comfort zones. The aim is to find new ways of creating participatory, action-orientated research that attends to what happens between the human and the more than human. It is explicitly committed to social justice and making a difference in the world. (Jayne Osgood, INSPIRE 2020)



MATTER MATTERS... exploring the sticky knots

To illustrate 'who and what do we touch' Jayne used an everyday object found in early childhood settings as an example. 'The animal figurine, or more specifically farm animal figures, provide us with a means to open out diffractive lines of enquiry to ask difficult questions about childhoods lived in the Anthropocene' (Osgood & Mohandas, 2020). The ensuing discussion took unanticipated directions as Jayne explored childhood innocence and the matters of:

HETERONORMATIVITY

Animal figurines are deemed as resources beneficial to open ended and pretend play, but it is the silence in our thinking and the questions we don't think to ask that are the issues. The cow family reflects the dominant Western family discourse (father, mother, child). Does this reinforce heteronormative values? Queerness is evident in nature. Yet, do we talk to children about this?

CAPITALIST MANUFACTURING

- annually 30 million animal figurines of this brand are sold around the world
- the carbon footprint of plastic animals is immense
- worker exploitation in China: overcrowded working conditions and low wages
- the synthetic plastic materials exceed safe levels for children
- energy consumption as a result of the manufacturing contributes to global warming

INDUSTRIAL (INTENSIVE) FARMING

- mad cow disease over 4.4 million cows slaughtered
- 2.5 million hectares of Amazon rainforest burnt for agriculture – beef and soya production
- use of harmful pesticides and fertilisers

MEAT EATING

- increases in vegetarian and vegan diets - soya bean farming is the second largest driver of deforestation
- Karala, India – meat eating is deemed to be an act of political subversion and religious persecution

And so in investigating the origins of the plastic cow we become aware of the need to look deeply into the provenance of our everyday materials and resources - we can no longer accept the cow as a non-political, benign object.

References:

- Haraway, D.J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. London: Duke University Press
- Osgood, Jayne & Mohandas, Sid. (2020). *Figuring gender in early childhood with animal figurines: pursuing tentacular stories about global childhoods in the Anthropocene*.