Playful Inquiry as Fugitive Hope: Making Sanctuary in Early Childhood Education in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

In the context of intensifying neoliberal governance, ecological precarity, and the erosion of educator agency, this paper explores playful inquiry as a fugitive practice of hope in early childhood education. Drawing on empirical material generated with the *Playing in the Anthropocene Inquiry Group* (PLAi), a hybrid educator collective, the paper considers how playful inquiry groups can be understood as practices of making sanctuary. Play is reconceptualized as an ethical, speculative, and relational orientation that resists capture by standardization and productivity logics. Reading interviews, pedagogical documentation, and conversations diffractively, the analysis attends to what these materials do—how they sustain collective care and open pedagogical possibilities within, rather than outside of, constraining systems. The paper argues that playful inquiry, held through practices of sanctuary, enacts a form of fugitive hope that supports educators in imagining and living education otherwise in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: playful inquiry; fugitivity; early childhood education; Anthropocene

Introduction

In the present political landscape, the figure of the early childhood educator has become precariously entangled within the neoliberal logics facing education more widely. The pushdown of "developmentally appropriate" curricula, the standardization of learning, and the foreclosure of emergent, relational, and embodied pedagogies operate as forces of capture, delimiting what becomes possible in early childhood education (Lenz Taguchi, 2011). Educators find themselves positioned as technicians, enacting prefigured scripts rather than co-composing pedagogical worlds with children. The erosion of educator agency is not merely a structural imposition but an ontological reconfiguration of what it means to teach and learn within these conditions.

Professionalism in early childhood education has now been sutured to neoliberal imperatives, where notions of efficiency, data production, and evidence-based practice circumscribe the kinds of knowledge that are recognized and valued. As professionalization becomes synonymous with compliance, spaces for pedagogical experimentation and ethical responsiveness are diminished. Professional development, rather than nourishing inquiry, becomes a technology of governance, working to align educators with dominant epistemologies (Brown et al., 2016; Pesonen & Valkonen, 2023; Plum, 2012) and create divisions and hierarchies between age groups, school roles, and seniority. The reduction of the field to a site of implementation forecloses the possibilities of play, inquiry, and speculative engagement with the unknown that are inherent to and essential for meaningful and transformative education, particularly in a time of threatened democracy, artificial intelligence, and ecological devastation.

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Within these constraints, inquiry can serve as a generative practice for educators. Inquiry, according to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), is not simply a methodological stance but a political and ethical orientation to knowledge generation, that unsettles traditional top-down, de-contextualized learning. It is an ethical commitment to troubling taken-for-granted norms within localized, situated contexts, and often reveals issues of culture, power, and hegemony. Inquiry may therefore be considered a fugitive act, as it empowers educators to critique and break out of traditional patterns of passive knowledge transmission and engage in practices that resist and reimagine dominant educational structures (Sugarman, 2024). This movement away from mastery and toward uncertainty resonates with broader articulations of fugitivity in the Anthropocene.

Akomolafe (in Young, 2022) tells us:

> "The fugitive is the figure of the Anthropocene, a political invitation to unlearn 'mastery,' to fall to the Earth, to learn how to commune with soil… In a sense, the fugitive answers the question that is hidden within the words of my Elders, when they say: 'in order to find your way, you must become lost.'"

Fugitivity, as theorized within Black radical traditions, emerges from histories of racialized capture, dispossession, and refusal, naming practices of escape and collective survival that exceed incorporation into dominant structures (Harney & Moten, 2013). It is not a metaphor to be freely mobilized, nor an identity to be claimed, but an ethically charged orientation grounded in specific material and historical conditions. Bringing fugitivity into early childhood spaces demands careful recontextualization, particularly given the field's frequent tendency to appropriate radical concepts in ways that flatten their political force. In this paper, fugitivity is not used to equate educators or children with historically fugitive subjects, nor to romanticize transgression or escape. Rather, it is taken up as a way of attending to how pedagogical practices move: how they refuse capture by neoliberal logics of standardization, surveillance, and productivity, and how they reorganize relations, attention, and response-ability from within the very systems that seek to contain them.

Within early childhood education, this orientation toward fugitivity becomes visible through play. Play offers a way of inhabiting uncertainty without mastery, of experimenting without guarantees, and of lingering in what cannot yet be known or resolved. Play is undefinable but can be understood as an act of experimentation and world-making (Goodman, 1978; Haraway, 2016). When play intra-acts (Barad, 2007) with inquiry, each, in contact with the other, emerges as a movement of possibility not only for children but also for educators. As Baker and Salas Davila (2018) suggest, inquiry is always already playful, and play is always already an inquiry into the world. Play and inquiry unsettle, disrupt, and make new relations possible, and are a way of lingering in the uncertainty of pedagogical encounters, of experimenting with how else we might be and become together. In playful inquiry, educators and children refuse the closures of the predetermined, engaging instead in the speculative, the generative, the yet-to-come. In this way, it moves as a fugitive gesture, not towards an outside, but within the very conditions that seek to confine. It is an enactment of refusal of the way things are, and an insistence on creating something other. Educator inquiry groups may thus be considered a fugitive act: they do not start up a new system, but work from within.

Yet fugitive movements are fragile. Without practices that can hold uncertainty, risk, and relational vulnerability, playful inquiry risks being reabsorbed into the very logics it seeks to resist. It is here that the practice of making sanctuary becomes necessary as a way of holding space for fugitive practices to persist, deepen, and remain ethically responsive. Akomolafe (2019) speaks of sanctuary not as a solution to or refuge from the

troubles, but as a practice of tending to spaces of refuge, care, and becoming in the midst of instability:

> "Sanctuaries are not places where we are set straight; sanctuaries are places we are broken down. Sanctuaries are not sites of solutions. They are practices that help us see that the way we see the problem we want to address is often part of the problem."

Sanctuary is not a place of withdrawal but of emergence, where new pedagogical relations can be nurtured. In early childhood settings, making sanctuary means co-composing pedagogical spaces that refuse the neoliberal enclosures of childhood (and childhood-adjacent adults) and instead cultivate conditions for speculative play, ethical attunement, and relational worlding. It is a practice of making room for children's and educators' collective becomings (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), where play and inquiry operate as counterforces to standardization and control.

The urgency of making sanctuary is intensified in the Anthropocene, where ecological and social precarity demands pedagogies that are not about mastery and control but about response-ability (Haraway, 2016), attunement, and experimentation with what might yet be possible. In response to this call, a collective of early childhood educators came together to form a playful inquiry group, an emergent space for reimagining pedagogical possibilities beyond the constraints of neoliberal governance. The Playing in the Anthropocene Inquiry Group ("PLAi"), a hybrid in-person and online gathering space facilitated by the author of this paper, convened a diverse group of professionals working in early childhood to engage in collaborative play, storytelling, and speculative inquiry, to resist the surrounding forces that seek to enclose their practice. The monthly gathering became a sanctuary, as evidenced in the reflections of many group members, where new pedagogical and ontological possibilities were allowed to be dreamed together. In a political climate where education is increasingly a site of ideological contestation and control, engaging in playful inquiry is an act of fugitive hope. Hope, here, is not an individual affect but a collective movement, an insistence on the not-yet-imagined. As a collective, we engaged in sanctuary-making that troubles the dominant regime, opening up cracks where alternative futures might emerge, fostering more ethical ecologies of pedagogical and political possibility. And we deliberately did so through play, for as Grocott et al. (2023) asks, "Isn't play sometimes transgressive, a middle finger up to the normal rules and routines we work by?" (p. 292).

Modes of Inquiry

This paper engages in postqualitative inquiry to consider how the space co-created within a playful educator inquiry group might be understood as a practice of making sanctuary. It draws on empirical material (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020) generated with participants of PLAi to speculate about doing education otherwise and reconceptualize play in a time where play is tenuously and paradoxically positioned as both opposite to and as an instrument for learning.

A postqualitative analysis (St. Pierre, 2020) moves away from conventional methods of coding, categorizing, or reducing data into themes and instead diffracts (Barad, 2014) insights through one another, generating new, unexpected understandings. The playful moments, pedagogical documentation, tangential conversations, and interviews serve as empirical materials that intra-act (Barad, 2007), each one reshaping what the others do for our understanding. This study likewise shifts from a traditional, extractivist notion of data collection to the idea of data as something co-constructed through relational encounters (Barad, 2007). In this way, group members were co-producers of knowledge, in an approach that refuses dominant structures of knowledge production and transmission that would position educators as both passive receivers of professional

development and as disseminators of pre-figured worlds (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Through dialogue that weaved through and across gatherings, educators pursued their own lines of inquiry, responding to each other's reflections as well as the influences of materials, documentation, and more-than-human presences that shaped their explorations. Within the inquiry group, conversations created space for thinking to shift, expand, and take unexpected turns, much like play itself.

Shifting methodologies: from qualitative toward postqualitative research

This paper is part of the author's ongoing process of shifting from qualitative to postqualitative approaches to research. Many of the initial intentions for methodologies and analyses—such as semi-structured interviews before and after the year of meetings, intended to be analyzed using thematic analysis—were undertaken with traditional qualitative frameworks in mind, focusing on coding and categorization.

However, as the research evolved, I re-turned (Barad, 2014) to these materials not to simply represent and report what was said and done, but to attune to what the data *does* in the world: how it moves, affects, and generates possibilities for education and play in the Anthropocene. For example, interviews, documentation excerpts, and conversations were not approached as sequential accounts or mined for common themes. Rather, they were placed in relation with one another and read diffractively, such that moments from different times and contexts could speak to, trouble, and enliven one another. This process itself is an essential aspect of how the sanctuary of the group continues to live, as it resists closure, preserves relationality, and allows the group's playful, ethical orientations to keep generating possibilities beyond the temporal bounds of the gatherings. As a result, what materializes in this inquiry is messy; and as Hogarth and Hankin (2024) state, "[m]ess-making as a force for resistance opens spaces for more-than-human communion and transformation for flourishing post-Anthropocene worlds" (p. 356).

The Playing in the Anthropocene inquiry group

I was moved to form a group of educators in my local context while attending a conference about play and sustainability convened in July 2023[2]. Through speaking with the other attendees[3], I found that there were not enough conversations happening on a regular basis at the intersection of education, play, and the state of the planet. During the "unconference" portion of the gathering, in which attendees were asked to start sessions based on their own questions, I asked a roundtable, "What would it look like for a group of educators to gather together to talk about playing in the Anthropocene?" A board member of the Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network (BARIN) suggested that I seek funding through their inquiry group grant program to form and support this endeavor. With their support, I began recruiting members and by December 2023, the Playing in the Anthropocene inquiry group ("PLAi") had begun monthly meetings. At the time of writing, PLAi continues to meet monthly with an expanded international membership.

Members of PLAi were recruited through professional and personal networks via fliers sent out by email. The first group met monthly during the 2023-2024 school year, and included early childhood educators, program administrators, and researchers working in the local area.

The study received university ethics committee approval, and members provided consent to being recorded for the purposes of this research. They were invited to participate in

[2] This gathering was convened by Ben Mardell and Amos Blanton, researchers and educators committed to play and sustainability, which was the premise of the gathering.

[3] Attendees included researchers from Harvard Project Zero, LEGO Foundation, local preschools, Italian pedagogists, art and design specialists, play experts, and others who were invited by the hosts.

two brief semi-structured interviews at the start and end of the school year to discuss their experiences related to the inquiry group. Of the regularly attending 13 members, 8 agreed to participate in the interviews; 4 completed both interviews.

The group's inquiry delved into issues of both practice and theory around fostering meaningful connections between children and what we referred to as "nature" (the more-than-human world), as well as tensions between system structures and pedagogy. Questions the group raised included: "Should we be introducing children to the climate crisis? And if so, how?" and "How and why do we distinguish between 'outside materials' and 'inside materials' and what consequences does this have on child-nature relations?" Our inquiry was shaped by key values of the Reggio Emilia approach, particularly the hundred languages (Malaguzzi, 1996) and the use of pedagogical documentation. To work with our "hundred languages," we began each meeting with a playful provocation that engaged different modes of expression: drawing, natural materials, movement, digital technology, sound, and more. Each meeting involved studying and reflecting on documentation (photos, videos, notes, and artifacts) collected by a participant. In addition, while the Reggio concept of the "environment as the third teacher" traditionally refers to the pedagogical role of the curated classroom space rather than the natural world, our group extended this idea to consider how the natural environment itself is an active and co-constitutive force in our pedagogical and ontological becomings. The group's structure was further informed by the practices developed within Project Zero's *Pedagogy of Play* initiative, particularly the structured protocols for engaging playfully with pedagogical documentation (Pedagogy of Play team[4], 2023). These protocols provided a means of integrating play with reflective engagement, drawing on Reggio-inspired approaches to documentation while opening space for experimentation and improvisation[5].

In the analyses of these meetings and conversations, I draw on posthuman and feminist new materialist perspectives. Haraway's (2016) call to "stay with the trouble" and Barad's (2007) concept of agential realism urge a reconsideration of the role of pedagogical documentation and digital tools and technologies in our gatherings, not as passive instruments but as active participants and co-players in our inquiry process.

Sanctuary and Speculative Inquiry

The inquiry group was not merely a space for professional development but a site of collective refuge: a sanctuary where educators could play outside the constraints of standardized expectations and engage in pedagogical experimentation. Through playful engagements with materials, collaborative documentation reflections, and open-ended dialogue, the group cultivated conditions for speculative and fugitive inquiry. The rhythms and structures of our gatherings—our ways of coming together, attending to one another's stories, and lingering in uncertainty—became central to the creation of this sanctuary.

Alongside these structural dimensions, the voices of participants provide further insight into how the group functioned as a space of possibility and educating *otherwise*. Interviews with group members during the first year of meeting reveal how the inquiry group disrupted dominant paradigms of professionalism, invited more expansive orientations toward pedagogy, and generated shifts in how educators understood their

[4] I refer to the Pedagogy of Play team in this citation for a more equitable distribution of credit on the project, which is otherwise cited as Mardell et al. (2023), and can be found in the references as such.

[5] While Reggio pedagogists might dispute the use of protocols such as this for reflecting on documentation (Filippini, personal communication, November 28, 2023) many American experts believe that for the American context, protocols and thinking routines help make reflection more democratic (Krechevsky, personal communication, November 27, 2023).

practice. In what follows, I trace these threads, attending to how sanctuary was made in an unexpected, ongoing collective process.

"No one cares, but we care"

One of the ways sanctuary was made within the inquiry group was through a collective attunement to the enchantment within the mundane, a practice resonant with Akomolafe's (n.d.) call to slow down and notice the otherwise possibilities already present in the everyday. Engaging playfully with pedagogical documentation became a means of cultivating this attunement, inviting educators to linger with the materials of their practice—photos, transcripts, drawings, and artifacts—as lively participants in ongoing inquiry. Through protocols that encouraged speculative engagement rather than assessment, documentation of mundane moments in the life of early childhood spaces was not something to be analyzed for what had happened, but a provocation for what else might be.

Bayo Akomolafe (2019) provokes us to consider the "mundane" work of making sanctuary:

> "What would it look like to co-generate a politics that revisits the ordinary as if it were enchanted and surprising? What would it feel like to find god in the dirt under the fingernails of our playing children, or in the thick folds of the mundane?"

The Looking Playfully at Documentation protocol[6] (Pedagogy of Play team, see Mardell, 2023) is a structured yet imaginative process that allows educators to "find god in the dirt under the fingernails of our playing children" (Akomolafe, 2019) and ascribe new meaning to ordinary events. It invites educators to collaboratively explore documentation in ways that resist quick interpretation or judgment. Although the sharing teacher was present for the recorded event, they too are invited to wonder and open up space for possibilities of reading the moment otherwise. The protocol typically unfolds over 25 minutes through a playful sequence of steps involving observing, questioning, role-playing, and reflecting. Rather than aiming for consensus or definitive answers, the protocol provokes teachers to consider engaging in ways that are not "how it always goes" (PLAi participant). We are not told "this is what happened," but rather are asked to envision futures sparked by the documented moment in an act of collective wondering.

Table 1. Looking Playfully at Documentation Protocol Transcription excerpt, March 2024
Guiding question: *Regarding this water pump, how do we honor the exploration and play that's growing out of the water pump, while drawing attention to the fact that water is a precious limited resource?* Documentation sample:

[6] Find the full protocol and examples of how it has been used in the Pedagogy of Play book here: https://pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/PoP%20Book%203.27.23.pdf

Transcription excerpt:

Ellen:
One of our daily practices is to pour water into pitchers and then we just dump it into the plants around the room to make sure that it's being repurposed. So it just makes me think about future gardening and oh, if we're going to dump the water, making a mud puddle is a perfectly good reason, but like, is it more, is there another utilitarian useful way that they could use the water, similar to work-housing?

Tim:
I wonder if you start on a particular day purposely with less water and talk about that. Today our jug is only half full or a third or a quarter, not enough for math, if you want to go with that, but if you just pointed out the difference between a full jug and a half jug, what would the talk sound like?

Amanda:
I wonder if you kind of told them at the beginning you're only getting one jug full of water if the way that they use it changes.

Ben:
You say that water is a precious limited resource, and it's in a strange way, I mean, we're not wanting to go there with the kids at all, but this is how a lot of people get water. They don't turn on a tap, but they have to go to a place and use a pump, and it is a precious limited resource. So I think, you know, Tim's suggestion of having, making clear that this is the amount of water we have for this play period, I'm wondering what the conversations will be, as opposed to, I think, our normal experience, of most people living in [our local area], is you turn on the tap, and it's endless, bountiful. There's no end to the amount of water that we can normally get.

Nora:
I wonder what would happen if you gave them a challenge like let's see how many different things we can do with the least amount of water you know or however you would say it to a two-year-old.

Lisa:
That makes me think of -- Ben, your question "what is enough and when is enough" and how that might work in this context and also with toddlers.

Ben:
[It's about] having people be more thoughtful of what is enough in our consumption and how to think about that there needs to be limits. I think it can be, I think there's a persuasive argument that probably most people on this call, well, we clearly use substantially more resources than the world's global average, and that's not a sustainable situation.

Sanctuary here emerges as a practice of deliberate pause: noticing what might otherwise be invisible and lingering with the pedagogical potential of small intra-actions with a water pump. Play becomes an opening for asking ethical questions (What is enough? How do we care?). This turns the water pump from a simple tool into a site of pedagogical inquiry—a material-discursive engagement (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) where children and educators intra-act with ecological, social, and political entanglements. Ben's reflection that "most people in our area... turn on the tap, and it's endless" draws attention to how normative assumptions about abundance and consumption are embedded in everyday life, and, by extension, in educational spaces. The idea of creating scarcity as a prompt for reflection opens a crack in this dominant logic, and nurtures fugitive hope in the smallest of pedagogical acts.

One participant reflected on how these moments of collective sense-making transformed her sense of belonging in ECE:

> "No one cares, but we care. We really put meaning and value to this, you know? That was a new culture for me [...] I've never seen any school or daycare center who's just watching those tiny little scenes of, you know, a few children playing with the little toys. And then there are so many people who have different interpretations about that photo. [...] That's just such an elite thing to do. You know, we just truly care about children and what they do and their thinking process and how we can help them later."

Spending time in the cracks—those in-between moments often overlooked in the flow of daily practice—allowed us to engage with the documentation not as a tool of assessment or evaluation, but as a living, relational process. Re-turning (Barad, 2014) to photographs, videos, and transcripts was not an exercise in review, but acts of re-engagement: of seeing differently, with new lenses, new questions, and altered sensibilities. In this way, documentation functioned less as a record of what had happened and more as a material-discursive apparatus that opened up new possibilities for thinking-with moments, children, and each other. The participant's reference to the group's collective effort to value "tiny little scenes" of children reveals a "politics that revisits the ordinary as if it were enchanted and surprising" (Akomolafe, 2019); that is, we make sanctuary by placing significance in the moments that slip through the cracks, the ones that evade the developmentalist gaze and invite us to linger in the uncertainty of the moment.

"Everybody kind of understands the struggle"

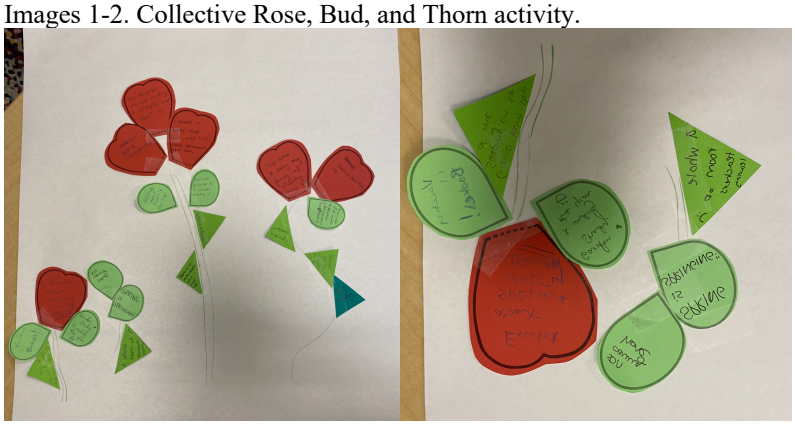
In our gatherings, sanctuary was not something we explicitly named, but something we lived. As educators arrived -- sometimes breathless from the day, or weary from the weight of expectations -- we did not need to speak audibly of our struggles for them to be felt. The act of coming together, of stepping into a space where inquiry was playful

rather than evaluative, where stories could unfold without the demand for solutions, was itself a refuge from the relentless demands of the job.

Often, our group structures invited us to speak not only of our classrooms but of our personal selves, the part of our identities we are often asked to "leave at the door" (a task aligned with the Cartesian mind-body dualism that wreaks havoc on the early childhood field). Through playful engagements with materials, role-playing documentation, or responding to unexpected prompts, we found ways of being together that did not require us to justify, explain, or defend our work.

During one gathering, participants engaged in a practice known as *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*. Each person was invited to share a "rose"—a moment of joy or affirmation from the week—a "thorn"—a challenge or tension they were carrying—and a "bud"—something anticipated but not yet realized. As these reflections were offered, participants added colored construction paper to shared flower stems, creating a collective visual where individual experiences could be placed into common care, allowing the group to celebrate moments of lightness and hold the weight of difficulty together.

Images 1-2. Collective Rose, Bud, and Thorn activity.



Some of the participants shared aloud:

> "Uh, it feels really negative, but I'm just going to share my thorn. An entire room of teachers is leaving my center in the next three weeks, so I have no idea what's going to happen." — Christina, toddler teacher

> "Student growth is slower than I'm used to this year. That's been a big struggle. They came in lower so I get that they're not where they usually are but I'm feeling a little sad knowing how close the end of the year is and knowing what they're going to leave with. I am really excited about spring. I wrote that down and I'm excited we're entering Unit Four which is about our earth and so it just feels like there's a lot of growth kind of going around right now in the classroom so I'm excited about that. And my bud is that we had such a great time on April vacation. We already booked the same hotel for next year." -- Tim, kindergarten teacher

In these moments, struggle could go unspoken yet deeply understood, diffused through laughter, movement, and shared acts of creation. The burden of professionalism, of being "good teachers" in a system that often demands impossibilities, loosened. Instead, we found refuge in a different kind of attention, one that allowed us to linger, to make meaning together without urgency, to exist as more than our labor. Our co-created sanctuary was not escape; it was a quiet reclamation of what it means to be an educator beyond the metrics and mandates that seek to define us.

On many occasions, participants alluded to the struggle understood to be implicit in the role of teacher or educator, and how coming together in the space of the inquiry group enabled them to find solidarity in this struggle.

> "Everybody kind of understands the struggle of being an educator." — Amanda, pre-k teacher

> "Working with young kids isn't always easy. You know, there's gonna be some stress there and— so feeling that you're working as a team, as a group, not in isolation, I think, is really important for early childhood education." —Ben, atelierista

These reflections speak to the systemic separation embedded in the field: teachers compartmentalized, administrators elevated, researchers abstracted. This isolation, often intentional, works to undermine collective power and erode the possibilities of resistance. Similarly, a public school teacher expressed the tension he experiences between the rigid and managerialist practices of the school, and the hope that emerges in the inquiry group:

> "I often come pretty tired, it's like the end of the day, but I always leave feeling pretty inspired and hopeful, which I don't always leave school at the end of the day feeling inspired or hopeful. I think most days I start that way, but I appreciate the space for talking about teaching and learning. Like I said, it doesn't happen in my building in the way that I like it to. So it's just nice to know there are other teachers out there that are thinking about their kids and their practice and trying some things out and thinking about their kids beyond school, which I think we don't do much. We're kind of like, oh my God, they're in front of me. They have to do these things to meet these standards. I don't think we think about them too far beyond our classrooms often." -- Tim, kindergarten teacher

Tim's words illuminate how the inquiry group offered a reprieve from the isolating and depleting conditions of daily teaching, conditions shaped by standards, urgency, and a narrow framing of children as data points. Arriving tired and worn, Tim finds not escape but a relational space that rekindles hope and inspiration through collective reflection and shared inquiry. The quote highlights how sanctuary is not about avoiding struggle, but about encountering it differently—together. In this shared space, teachers think with and alongside one another and their children, beyond the instrumental demands of schooling. The group becomes a site of mutual recognition, where the pressures of the profession are not erased but are held communally, allowing for moments of restoration, critical reflection, and the emergence of new pedagogical possibilities.

We did not escape the struggles of our profession, but rather found ways to exist in them differently, without being defined solely by our labor. Through playful inquiry, we engaged in acts of resistance to the neoliberal, outcome-driven expectations that define early childhood education today. In these moments, there was no need to justify or defend our work. The sanctuary we co-created was a refusal to be captured by the pressures of professionalism, a radical act of fugitivity that allowed us to reimagine what it means to be an educator. As Akomolafe (2019) might put it, we were "slipping through" the categories that seek to confine us - teacher, professional, assessor - and making space for more nuanced ways of being. Through these gatherings, we embodied Akomolafe's (2019) vision of sanctuary, not as a place of peace from chaos, but as a place where we could question, resist, and reimagine what it means to be human, to be educators, and to be in relationship with one another. As he suggests, sanctuaries are places where "we

lose some of the categorical independence modernity burdened us with" (Akomolafe, 2020).

"I appreciate the stories"

In early childhood spaces, teachers are subjected to overwhelming pressures from administrators who enforce curricular standards rooted in neoliberal and managerial logics, leaving little room for reflective practice, especially in dialogue with colleagues. This isolation is intensified within the hierarchical structures of the field, where administrators, researchers, and "specialists" are often distanced from the everyday experiences of teachers and children, unable to witness the subtle complexities of classroom life. This separation cuts off avenues for building resistance and solidarity amongst colleagues, intensifying the feeling that our struggle is individual, and muddying our path to making sanctuary.

When asked what aspect of the inquiry group she found most inspiring, Nora replied: "As someone who sits in an office most of the day, I appreciate the stories from teachers about their classrooms."

As Nora reminds us, stories matter. Stories entail complexity and resist the emphasis and prioritization of assessment and measurable outcomes that conservative and neoliberal forces impose. The inquiry group often became a space for storytelling, an embodied engagement with the minor (Manning, 2016). In this space, small yet significant moments—a lost sock, the philosophical musings of 4- and 5-year-olds, a boy wishing for magic powers—are held as valuable insights into the lived experience of education.

One such story emerged during the last gathering of the year, when we watched a clip from Silly Symphonies: Flowers and Trees (Gillett, 1932) and launched into a discussion of the blending of arts and science through anthropomorphism to foster deeper human-nature relationships. Martha, an early childhood program administrator, recalled an experience with a child and a bird feeder:

> "We put out one of those window bird feeders that's rounded and comes into your classroom. And we moved through the process of supporting the children to basically outfit the bird feeder the way they felt they needed to. And it looked like a condo. They filled it with doll furniture and put all sorts of things. And the birds weren't coming. We kept going back to revisit, Why do you think the birds aren't coming?
>
> So it was this avenue of beginning to talk about, here's the imaginative, here's the play, and then really slowly working towards what the birds really need or don't need. And one of the children really wanted to use his magic powers to attract the birds, which again, do you have magic powers to do that or not? But he really wanted to use them. So, you know, we just kept navigating that conversation together.
>
> And then talking about what's science and what's artistic. Working that into our vernacular—what are the differences. What do you have to do in scientific observation? You have to do what's in front of you, as opposed to adding on to it, taking it in another direction. That's artistic."

As Rose (2013, p. 13) states, "Stories themselves have the potential to promote understandings of embodied, relational, contingent ethics." The teachers' accounts of their everyday lived experiences become ethical matterings that shift how we relate to one another, to children, and to our roles in the field. When teachers tell stories not to

solve problems but to dwell in the complexity of them—when they "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) together—what emerges is not consensus or closure, but an opening, which creates cracks in the dominant structures. Through stories, participants begin to enact a hopeful, fugitive ethics grounded in the work of reclaiming togetherness in sanctuary and becoming-with others.

As Christina, another participant, shares: "Getting to bounce ideas off people and hear what other people are doing has been so great. It has really made me think about what we do in our [classroom] and why."

By engaging in conversation with colleagues, Christina not only reflects on her own practice but is also invited to reimagine what it means to be a teacher. The space of the inquiry group provides a fertile ground for this reimagining, allowing for a shared exploration of purpose and meaning in the work. The simple act of exchanging ideas becomes a powerful tool for deconstructing the isolation often imposed by hierarchical structures and offering a collective, critical space for transformation.

This is echoed in what Ellen, teacher and educational consultant, tells us: "I'm learning so many other things [...] I never thought I'd be learning about."

She illustrates the way the sanctuary of the inquiry group opens possibilities for cross-pollination and unexpected learning. Ellen's statement reveals the expansiveness of the sanctuary created within this space: it is not just about *what* is learned together, but *how* new ways of knowing and understanding emerge through the intra-actions of the group. This reflects Akomolafe's (2019) notion of sanctuary as a space for breaking down rather than reinforcing existing categories and hierarchies. In the inquiry group, the boundaries between "teacher" and "expert" become fluid, and all participants—novice or experienced—are both learners and teachers.

Making sanctuary, then, is an act of resistance against the logics that perpetuate divisions between roles in the field. These divisions curtail the accumulation of stories: stories of struggle, resistance, the mundane, and hope that are essential to the collective intelligence of the community. When we come together in the inquiry group, we create a space where expertise is redistributed, where novice teachers have wisdom to offer and where children's words and artifacts become guiding forces in our conversations. These stories do not promise that things will become easier; rather, they serve as a collective reminder that we are not alone in staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016). In this space, sanctuary is not a retreat from the field, but an ongoing practice of coming together to make sense of our shared struggles and resist the forces that seek to divide us.

The stories shared within our inquiry group—stories of daily life, of struggle, of joy—offered more than insight into others' practices; they became mirrors through which we could more fully recognize and understand our own. These narratives, emerging across differences in role, experience, and perspective, reminded us that there is no singular way to teach, to be an educator, or to engage with children. In a time when authoritarian and fascist tendencies seek to standardize, discipline, and constrain the possibilities of education, such plurality is not just comforting, it is vital. The act of listening to one another, of holding space for divergent ways of being and knowing, becomes a quiet but powerful form of resistance, and a reaffirmation of the pedagogical richness that emerges when we refuse to be made uniform.

"It's a safety to sort of explore"

The inquiry group also came to be experienced by participants as a fugitive space in the sense Akomolafe (2019) describes: a sanctuary not as a safe haven, but as a threshold space where dominant structures loosen just enough for something else to take shape.

> As Tim tells us:
> "It's a safety to sort of explore and sort of like work through something, which I think is the same thing as playing, and playing or working through something, is powerful."
>
> Jess similarly reflects:
> "There's an element of stress that's been taken away in this environment because it's outside of my workplace and it's outside of any degree or certificate programs, so I can more fully embrace trying different things, trying weirder things, getting ideas from other people, and knowing that it's all about bettering the practice and learning through that, not making a grade."

While Tim describes sanctuary as "a safety to sort of explore," Akomolafe (2019) reminds us that sanctuary is not necessarily a safe space in the conventional sense. Rather than offering comfort, certainty, or protection from discomfort, sanctuary is a space where the usual coordinates of safety are unsettled. It holds the potential for transformation because it allows risk, rupture, and ambiguity to enter. When Tim speaks of the "safety to explore," what is being named is not the absence of difficulty, but the presence of a different kind of safety that makes room for uncertainty without punishment: the safety of not being surveilled, judged, or forced to produce tidy outcomes. This aligns with Akomolafe's (2020) fugitive sanctuary, a space that shelters the possibility of becoming otherwise. Safety and risk are not opposites; they are entangled. Sanctuary allows for risk because it holds an ethical container, a collective willingness to stay with discomfort, and to allow what is strange or emergent to take form.

Tim's insight speaks to sanctuary as a space of *experimentation without resolution*, a concept Akomolafe (2020) emphasizes. Sanctuary is not a polished or purified escape from the world's troubles but a space where breakdown becomes generative, where safety is not about insulation from risk, but about *the freedom to not-know*, to play, to fail, to feel. Tim's linking of play and "working through" speaks directly to this idea: sanctuary becomes a site where exploration is not linear or instrumental, but emergent, relational, and open-ended - precisely the kind of fugitive space that resists capture by dominant logics of productivity and progress.

Jess further sharpens this fugitive quality when she names sanctuary as a space *outside* institutional capture: outside of school, outside of credentialing programs, outside of evaluation. This is fugitivity in action. Akomolafe's (2020) fugitivity is not about escape in a geographic sense, but about a "slipping through" of fixed expectations and sanctioned performances. In Jess's case, the inquiry group becomes a site where different ways of knowing and being can take root: "weirder things" that wouldn't survive within the normative pressures of certification or performance-based professional development. Sanctuary does not eliminate vulnerability; rather, it redistributes it. The stress of institutional expectations is replaced by the vulnerability of creative experimentation. This echoes Akomolafe's (2020) idea that sanctuary is a fugitive zone, a crack in the dominant structure. It is a practice of refusal: of the measurement gaze, of the constant demand to be productive in legible ways, and a movement toward something less graspable but more alive.

Together, Tim and Jess illustrate that sanctuary is not passive rest, but active departure—a collective space for undoing, becoming, and imagining otherwise. Their experiences affirm Akomolafe's (2020) idea that sanctuary and fugitivity are intimately linked: both are about creating conditions for new kinds of attention, ethical relation, and modes of existence that resist dominant scripts of what it means to be a "good" teacher. Instead of reproducing institutional logics, they point to spaces where being-with, not being-graded,

becomes the site of transformation. Sanctuary is where we feel safe enough to take real risks. It is this paradox that makes sanctuary a site of transformation.

(In)Conclusions: Fugitive hope and educating otherwise

In the landscape of early childhood education defined by precarity, control, and the erosion of educator agency, the PLAi inquiry group cultivated a fugitive pedagogical space: a sanctuary not of retreat but of return. Here, professional development was not a mechanism of alignment, but a minoritarian practice of "looking playfully." From within this "crack" (Akomolafe, 2020), otherwise pedagogies could begin to grow.

This sanctuary was collectively made not as safety or retreat, but as a practice of staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016): of lingering in the tensions, failures, and enchantments of everyday practices of being an educator, without the demand for resolution. The group's repeated return to play as method, mood, and movement enacted a fugitive hope: a hope not reliant on institutional change, but on creating cracks within systems, where alternative pedagogical futures might take root. In re-distributing agency across teachers, children, artifacts, and more-than-human forces, this group enacted what Harney and Moten (2013) might call "fugitive planning": a way of being together that does not seek legitimacy from the system, but imagines and enacts alternatives within and against it.

Educators spoke of recovering something often lost in institutional spaces: the ability to wonder, to dwell, to be unfinished. Tim's statement - "it's a safety to sort of explore" - captures how the fugitive hope grown in this space allowed participants to engage playfully and seriously at once. This "safety" was not about protection from difficulty, but freedom from surveillance. It created the conditions for educators to think with one another and with the materials of their practice in ways that were speculative, embodied, and ethically entangled.

In this way, the inquiry group resisted the colonial logic of mastery, of knowing in advance, of fixing the child or the teacher according to developmental rubrics. Instead, it embraced partiality, emergence, and the local knowledges found in the small stories of socks, sand, and silent gestures. It interrupted the professionalized and standardized gaze with a relational ethic grounded in collectivity, in listening otherwise, and in staying close to the "tiny little scenes" that dominant educational paradigms often deem irrelevant.

Through this work, we join others in the call to build educational practices that are not simply critical but *otherwise*, practices animated by what Tuck and Yang (2014) might describe as refusal: the refusal to be reduced to metrics, to be captured by developmentalism, to reproduce colonial hierarchies of knowledge. The group's refusal, grounded in care and curiosity, offered not a blueprint, but a gesture: a way of being together that opens space for otherwise pedagogies, and hope for finding ways to live, learn, and teach differently.

"No one cares, but we care." This simple yet profound statement speaks to the heart of sanctuary. In the cracks of exhaustion and bureaucracy, care became a radical act. Paying attention - to a child's gesture, a colleague's story, a photograph out of context - became a form of political imagination. Thus, sanctuary is not a static place but an ongoing practice: of noticing, of wondering, of coming together again and again to play at the re-storying of what it means to teach, to be human, and to hope.

In a time when both education and the planet are under threat, reclaiming play and inquiry as fugitive acts is not merely desirable, it is necessary. In the cracks of a crumbling paradigm, we might yet find one another. And we might, through these playful, speculative, relational acts, begin to reimagine what education can become.

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