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*Curriculum inquiry, pedagogical documentation,  
and their relationality*

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# Becoming a Community With Clay

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*This co-composed inquiry project reconceptualizes the idea of a community in early childhood contexts through working with clay. Building a sense of community is a dominant idea commonly brought up in early childhood care and education but is seemingly static and rarely reconsidered. To further delve into this idea of a community, one group of infants and toddlers at Simon Fraser University Childcare Society has worked with clay as a big block over several months. Thinking with place-based pedagogy, we attended to how our particular place – our program, identities, and community – becomes cultivated relationally and materially. This attention allowed us to move beyond viewing clay as modelling material and community as strictly human-centred. Working with clay became a vibrant social practice where our thinking, bodies, and relations with place are interconnected, transforming our understanding of how a community lives in our program, with each other and the world around us. By attending to the many ways in which a community has taken shape alongside our work with clay, the project aims to illuminate the complexities and possibilities of early childhood communities.*



## Becoming a Community With Clay

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Project place: Simon Fraser University Child Care Society (SFUCCS) – Bright Clouds

## *Table of Contents*

Introduction .....	4
The Story of Clay .....	5
Community in a Place-Based Pedagogy: A Conceptual Look .....	9
Clay as Event .....	14
The Unboxing Event .....	15
Sleeping With Clay .....	18
Clay as a Social Practice .....	22
Gifting and Receiving With Clay .....	23
Community Spectators .....	26
Transformation in the Life of Bright Clouds .....	28
Block-Body Challenge .....	29
Clay-Transformation Challenges .....	31
Water-Clay Encounter.....	34
Moving With Clay .....	34
Clay Meets Window .....	37
Forest Suggestions .....	41
Dangerous Mushrooms .....	42
Lingering Possibilities .....	45
References .....	46

# Introduction

I acknowledge and honour with deep respect and humility that I am living, learning and working as a visitor on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the sə́ilwə́taʔ (Tseil-Waututh), kʷikʷə́ləm (Kwikwetlem), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish) and xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam) Nations, on which this co-composed inquiry project with children took place on.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the children, families and educators of Bright Clouds at Simon Fraser University Child Care Society (SFUCCS). I am thankful for their encouragement and for sharing their curiosities, questions, and thoughts throughout this journey over the last several months. This co-composed inquiry project with the children would not have been possible without their support.

And lastly, I am grateful to Dr. Bo Sun Kim, the pedagogist for SFUCCS and my advisor at Capilano University. Throughout this co-composed inquiry project, Bo Sun has continually challenged my thinking to deepen my reflective work with the children and educators, making this process significantly more meaningful and memorable.



# The Story of Clay

The story of clay begins at Simon Fraser University Childcare Society (SFUCCS). Residing on the Burnaby Mountain campus of Simon Fraser University (SFU), SFUCCS is a closely-knit community of 14 childcare programs, ranging from the care of infants and toddlers and 3-5-year-olds to school-age children. Among these childcare programs, Bright Clouds is the infant and toddler program that I have been fortunate to call my workplace for almost two years.



When we began this co-composed inquiry project with clay in mid-November 2022, Bright Clouds was budding with newly emerging ideas in response to recent changes. Significantly, four children and one educator joined Bright Clouds earlier in the fall. Also, we were shifting away from the inquiry project that took shape throughout the summer. Because of this, the educators and some children had begun walking to the forest trails of Burnaby Mountain Conservation Area each week in search of a new inquiry. It was an exciting period of getting to know each other and our newfound dynamic. But, there was a strong desire to design an inquiry project that could be welcoming for even the four newest children and bring us all into a community together. At this time especially, many particular differences in rhythms and needs required careful thought and attention. Some children were in the early stages of learning how to control their bodies through crawling or walking, and sleeping patterns varied notably between the youngest and oldest children. Still, recognizing that a living inquiry needs to live and adapt to the ever-changing community of Bright Clouds, there needed to be a project that could embrace these different dynamics and fully welcome each child's participation.

With this context in mind, we intentionally selected a material that could bring us together and tangibly make the idea of community visible. And so at the beginning of March 2023, we settled with clay for its liveliness and physical qualities; clay is rather tricky and demanding, requiring much care to maintain its soft, malleable texture. It is not a material that will always remain the same; instead it can be full of surprises. Although the educators had each worked with clay in some shape or form, it was the first time for the current children and educators of Bright Clouds to work together with clay. Also, recognizing that experimenting with bodies is essential for infants and toddlers, we were curious about how we could cultivate opportunities to work with clay that embrace both this mind-body connection and the social aspect of artistic practices. We wondered:

*How do infants and toddlers meet clay?*

*What can clay do?*

*What can bodies do when they meet clay?*

*How does clay live in the room?*

*How might clay nurture connections with the forest?*

These questions guided us to arrange the clay and studio space to invite bodily encounters. This invitation importantly provided an opening to challenge dominant ideas in early childhood care and education. Specifically, we moved away from the idea of clay as simply a modelling material by intentionally offering the clay as one big block on a low table rather than already split into smaller pieces for the children. Additionally, through the lens of child development, infants and toddlers might be deemed too young to work with the clay in this way. Yet, even from the initial encounters with the clay, it became clear that something highly generative was starting to grow. And with each experience of working with the clay and through ongoing pedagogical narrations, we realized that children's thinking and bodies are deeply entangled in the process of making meaning and co-creating a community together with clay.





From the unboxing of the clay that shook the whole program, to the daily living with clay, Bright Clouds began to buzz each time the clay joined us, and the idea of a community started coming to life. Interestingly, the children gathered around the clay in many unusual configurations that were not typically present during other times of the day. What that entailed for us was that we had to learn to communicate with each other through active, ongoing listening and interpreting. Clay supported us in this, and gradually, the children became very familiar with the characteristics and changes of the clay.

One morning, the clay challenged us when it began to show signs of dryness through deep cracks. Yet, the children did not shy away from these problems. Instead, the dry clay and cracks became highly generative moments of deep thinking as a collective. When the children began to bring a variety of suggestions back to the clay or to support each other, it also encouraged us to pay attention to the multitude of ways to participate in a community.

This idea that multiple forms of participation are possible followed us through our work with clay. However, it was never a straightforward or linear process. Even as the rhythms of Bright Clouds shifted several months into the inquiry project, the clay echoed this change. The clay moved from one corner of the room where it first arrived to where our studio space existed during the summer. The slight location change of the clay offered a surprising connection to the forest and invited us to rethink who/what is a part of our community beyond our peers. Through these many unexpected turns, we continued to take up the idea of a broader community through the ongoing pedagogical documentation and revisiting of our experiences.

Clay called us to become attuned and interpret what is unfolding in-between clay, children, educators, and non-humans to shape our community. By taking up this idea of community through working with clay, we resisted dominant ideas of education that suggest that children need simple, individualized activities. In turn, clay helped us see that infants and toddlers can deeply listen, respond, and make meaningful relationships with others. This co-composed inquiry project has been a rich journey for all of us and invited us to go beyond our first pre/mis/conceptions of how a community can become actualized. It also taught us that working with clay can be a vibrant social practice.





# Community in a Place-Based Pedagogy: A Conceptual Look

## *Conceptual Framework*

It often seems that early childhood care and education is valued as a steppingstone for upcoming education or perhaps simply a place of readying children for life in general. In this, building a sense of community (building strong relationships) is one of the most sought-out outcomes. Relationships with other people are something that every one of us partakes in our day-to-day life, and it serves as a fundamental part of our connections with the world in both minor and grand ways. But what does building a sense of community look like in early childhood contexts? And how do young children go about forming relationships with others?

To delve deeper into the concept of community, the framework offered by a place-based pedagogy has significantly guided the co-composed inquiry with the children. Place-based pedagogies emphasize that individual identities are formed relationally with others, including humans, non-humans and matter, which make up a place (Somerville et al., 2011). By working with literature from current place-based pedagogy, specifically focused on the early years, I have aimed to bring attention to the many complex relationships that make up a place altogether, challenging us to look beyond our human peers and re-think who makes up our community in *Bright Clouds* (Davies, 2014; Duhn, 2012; Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Olsson, 2009; Somerville, 2010; Somerville et al., 2011; Springgay & Truman, 2018).



## *Guiding Concepts*

The central concepts that have guided our co-composed inquiry project are *places of encounter*, *intra-action*, and *place as a rhizome*. In partnership with place-based pedagogy, these three concepts have been the primary guide for our co-composed inquiry project with clay. The concepts are woven together with the concept of community at the heart of the work.

The concept of *places of encounter* first emerged when I began to consider the process of cultivating a community. Davies (2014) shares that community is an active process of meeting others and their differences, requiring thoughtful daily actions that are responsive and open to change. This idea challenges the notion that being in a community is equivalent to being connected to others by static and objective agreements, either by location or by a particular bond. Instead, there is an emphasis on the dynamic nature of community-building and the importance of being responsive to specific humans, non-humans, matter, and places.



Working with clay meant that the studio space in Bright Clouds became a highly active place of encounters where the unfolding relations between the clay, children, educators, environment, and matter made visible how a community is actualized. Paying particular attention to encounters, I noticed that when we all gathered around clay, the clay invited us to work with each other in our unique ways, and each participant in the community brought richness to each moment. Many encounters, from feet on clay, gifting and exchanging, working through problems together and more, showed us that encounters are profusely shaped by who is present, both human and non-human.

The second concept of *intra-action* from feminist physicist Karen Barad (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) challenged us to look beyond what we were doing as individuals and notice how each experience is taking shape alongside all the community participants. This concept of intra-action understands that all beings and entities of the world, including humans, non-humans, matter and place, possess the ability to equally act upon each other (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). When this intra-action takes place, it creates diffractions; diffractions result from intra-actions, ranging from new ideas, learnings, or happenings (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Being in intra-action means that the beings and entities that are intra-acting together are in a reciprocal relationship of transformation. In society, human beings are dominantly understood as the possessors of power to initiate actions and impact the world. And the more common term, inter-activity, is generally used to describe the relationship between humans and the world from a human-centred perspective. Thinking with Lenz Taguchi (2010), we delved into challenging this idea and noticing how all beings, including humans and non-humans, matter and place have immense capabilities to transform or intra-act with the world, no matter how subtly or profoundly.



Throughout our encounters with clay, many moments seemingly could be a spontaneous, singular act from a child. However, by working with the concept of intra-action, I realized that the children were constantly listening, interpreting, and responding to the world in many ways, not just through other children. One of the ways that intra-actions and diffractions were made visible was by noticing how “materials “speak back” to children in agentic ways” (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017, p. 3). In other words, the clay generated many kinds of encounters, catching us by surprise and, at the same time, calling us to respond. For example, the clay offered as a big block invited the children to intra-act with it, resulting in the diffractive idea of clay becoming a pillow and bed one morning. *So, the clay shaped the children’s thinking just as much as the children’s thinking shaped the clay.* These experiences enabled us to expand our idea of community by helping us notice how intra-actions with humans, non-humans, and matter create diffractions of new ideas and realities.

The final guiding concept that has supported this co-composed inquiry is *place as a rhizome*. Originating from the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, rhizomes signify “virus-like interconnections” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 146). They are in the middle of things, without a distinct beginning or end, encouraging a more fluid, open-ended, and interconnected approach to learning (Olsson, 2009). In this sense, rhizomes emphasize messy, entangled trajectories. This concept has supported us in resisting a pre-planned way of working and alternately making improvisatory connections between various intra-actions and diffractions.



Since the arrival of clay, considering Bright Clouds as a place of rhizome allowed me to see the many connections between clay and the community we were forming together. The clay moved around and connected with many things in Bright Clouds, following spontaneous trajectories. The intra-actions and diffractions generated by the clay and community invited many rhizomatic ways of working together. From clay to hands and feet, table to window, water and clay, many connections emerged unpredictably. The transformation of Bright Clouds as a rhizome also shifted my role with the children. My role in this co-composed inquiry was not about giving the children answers on how to work with the clay but rather more focused on how we can make connections with each of our ideas. This way of working challenged me to stop finalizing an experience or composition. The clay and rhizomatic trajectories created an opportunity to be in a community together while maintaining an openness to the unknown and yet-to-be.

The concepts of places of encounter, intra-action, and place as a rhizome have been the central guide throughout the journey with clay during the co-composed inquiry project with the children. Throughout the following pedagogical narrations, there will be an illumination of how the ideas of community and forming relationships have taken shape in Bright Clouds. These concepts helped me determine how we went about working with clay in a way that could reflect the project's essence of community. So, challenging both an individualistic and human-centred way of learning, the pedagogical narrations concretely make visible how the children worked with these complex ideas of a community of humans, non-humans, matter and place in the everyday encounters and exchanges with clay. With a commitment to articulating the rich experiences of the co-composed inquiry project, the pedagogical narrations also reflect a lifelong endeavour of learning to live with others.



# Clay as Event



Working with clay is an event-full process. Unfolding through encounters, events produce unpredictable, emergent movements. By recognizing these experiences with clay as pedagogical events, the collective work with the children and the clay become much more than an activity. Thinking with this idea of clay as an event allows us to recognize “children, teachers and even the [room] and the furniture...in a continuous process of becoming” (Olsson, 2009, p. 37). This idea of an event also helps us notice the fluid process of becoming a community with clay in a way that does not cut off the work as a series of static, one-time experiences.



## *The Unboxing Event*

One morning, a big cardboard box arrives at the low table. It sits in the middle, mysteriously. The presence of the box invites the children to gather around and investigate what might be inside...

Della is the first to peek inside the dark interior. She carefully crouches next to the box. Della's eyebrows furrow when looking between the flaps into the dark interior. She remains crouched in silence, gazing long and steady. Slowly, fingers carefully lift the flaps of the mystery box as Zoey and Gabriel stand close by, seeming a little tentative at first.



When the flaps become opened, hands slowly reach inside to touch what has been hiding in the box. Inside, cool and soft clay awaits. For now, I make a pedagogical choice not to tell the children that this material is known as clay. It seems the clay itself is drawing in the hands of the children to figure out what this new material is through touch. My intention here is to offer space for the children to become familiar with the clay in their own ways.

Finally, the clay emerges from the cardboard box, making its arrival and presence clear with a big thud as it lands on the table. The children help to raise the cardboard box from the clay and unwrap it from the crinkly plastic casing. I sense their curiosity and desire to investigate what has arrived as the children encircle the clay. Zoey and Gabriel ask Karen, **“What is it?”** while their focused eyes concentrate on the big block of clay coming into view.

Runa: **It’s so heavy!**

As the clay becomes settled on the table, finally free from its plastic casing, the children’s joy and puzzlement begin to emerge.



Gabriel looks to Zoey, **“What is it, Zoey?”**

Zoey looks back at Gabriel and simply giggles as if to say she doesn’t know either but is enjoying the clay’s presence anyways.



By unboxing the clay together, this seemingly mundane experience becomes a lively event where everyone, including children and educators, is immediately drawn in. Unboxing as an event means that we can live this experience together, be curious together, be puzzled together, and wonder together. So, unboxing matters because it means that curriculum is not a set of activities prepared and pre-designed for children by educators. Instead, events enable children to be involved in the ongoing cultivation of a curriculum, reflecting the world we all live in and cultivate together. Nothing in the world is ever completely prepared for us; we dive into a messy world, and we figure things out as we go. As Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2017) share, “art asks us to make sense of things, or to figure them out” (p. 7). Working with clay that emerges from a mystery box calls for all our attention. Clay allows us to think together and co-compose this project with clay.



## *Sleeping With Clay*

The morning has been eventful, with many hands and barefoot toes finding their way to the big block of clay. Solar slides one of her feet towards Karen (educator/author), and taking this as an invitation, she places small pieces of clay onto her skin. The cool touch of the clay tickles Solar. She quickly stands up, giggling and shakes the bits of clay off her foot.

Solar sees the big block of clay sitting beside her as she shakes her foot free. She walks right up to it and steps onto the block. Her body wavers for a moment challenged to balance on the clay. Solar struggles to find her balance and places her palms on the table to steady herself. She freezes for a moment, then looks ahead...



A hint of a smile appears. Solar leans her body further towards the clay, and extends her legs, so her tummy is flat on the block of clay. It seems like her smile widens in delight with this new sensation.



Della, who had briefly walked away to wipe her hands on a damp cloth, sees that Solar has lost her balance. She watches in silence while Solar is in pause too.

Karen: **Della, look! Solar is lying down on the clay!**

Della is standing beside the table, still holding the towel. She looks puzzled, watching Solar.

Della: (pointing at Solar) **Sleeping.**

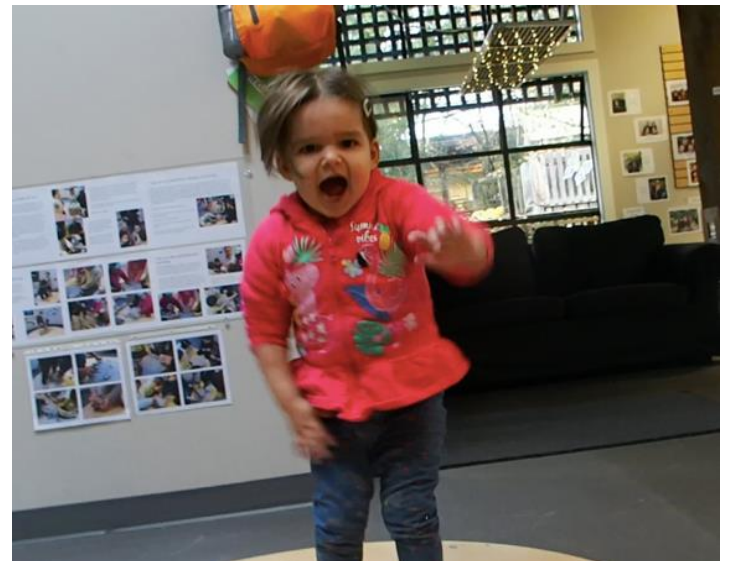
Solar remains very still on the big block of clay until a moment later when she pops her head up with a big smile.

Karen: **Ah! She's awake!**

When Solar gets up off the clay, it seems that she might be feeling excited when she stomps her feet on the table. Zoey has been watching this unfolding event from Karen's lap. But now she reciprocates Solar's stomping motion briefly before sitting down again.

Karen: **Oh, Zoey is stomping.**

Smiling, Solar sings, "**Hopping little bunnies. Hop! Hop! Hop!**" while tilting her body side to side and swinging her arms.





Della: **“All clean!”** “She shows me her hand.

Solar steps off the table to wipe her hands, seeing Della.

Della intently studies her clean hands before placing her palms down on the clay while both her legs straddle the clay. Solar approaches Della holding the towel for wiping hands. Now Della lays down like Solar, resting her tummy on the block of clay. Solar, now beside Della, looks down at her with the towel. Solar unfolds the towel and places it on Della’s back before walking away.

Karen: **“Hmm, it looks like Solar is putting a blanket on Della.”**

When Della stands up, she holds the towel in her hand, and as if rehearsed, Solar returns to the table.

Now Solar begins to straddle the clay again while Della works to unfold the “blanket”.



While Solar and Della continue this back and forth with the clay, Zoey has generally been a spectator, observing from the sidelines. However, it seems that Zoey is becoming more and more intrigued. Still holding the book she was reading in Karen’s lap, Zoey steps up to the block of clay and echoes Della and Solar. She has a big smile on her face now as she tries laying on the clay too.

Della walks over and places a blanket on Zoey. Zoey eventually leaves, and Della, Solar and Zoey take turns in a rotation, walking away, lying down, and putting the blanket on each other. When Zoey returns again, she rests her head on the clay. Now the clay has turned into a pillow.



Solar looks at Karen: “**Shhh.**”

Karen: “**Oh, we have to be quiet.**”

Solar goes to sleep on the table while Zoey occupies the “pillow”.

Della is placing a blanket on Zoey again.

Della: “**Shhh.**”

Della sees that Solar is sleeping on the table, so she walks beside the table and goes to sleep too.

Karen: **Goodnight, everyone.**

I can see Zoey is checking to see if Solar and Della are still sleeping too.



# Clay as a Social Practice

“When art is understood materially, as an affective event, it becomes irreducible to function, form and technique ... it [becomes] a force of relations that [makes} learning felt and inarticulable—in excess of language.”

(Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017, p. 8)



Clay provokes us to attend to how we come together, from our mutuality to the entanglements of our touch, ideas, and relations.

At times, the clay beckons us to gather around and be in exchange with clay together. Other times, clay makes visible the many ways that all of us participate in making our work with clay a vibrant social practice.

## *Giftng and Receiving With Clay*



Two educators and several children are gathered around the big block of clay one morning. Nicole, the youngest child of Bright Clouds, notices us. Although Nicole is not walking yet, she crawls over without hesitation and with an eager expression. Temporarily taking in the scene, Nicole approaches the table until her hands lay flat near the edge. She pauses, looking down. It seems like Nicole is studying her fingertips.



As I draw closer to Nicole, I see that her fingertips are beginning to curl in a great effort to pinch the small pieces of clay that have become pressed into the table. With her gaze still down, she firmly pushes her fingers into the table and squeezes the clay until it begins to release.





Nicole's desire to find and dislodge the little bits of clay becomes mirrored by her body. She begins to inch toward the center of the table, where there are more traces of the block of clay and its encounter with many hands and feet.

When Nicole finds a small piece of clay at the center of the table, she gently peels it off, studying it in her hands. First, Nicole pinches the clay between both her hands' fingertips, then places it in her palm, almost like she is determining how heavy the clay feels. Nicole continues this cyclical practice of finding a tiny piece of clay, placing it in her palm, and weighing it. But after a few tries, she laughs as if she is really pleased with her finding, looking at the educators.





To enter into this gifting exchange with Nicole, I present her my palm, turned up and open to receiving. She looks at it for a brief moment before gifting the clay that is in her own hands into mine, one small piece at a time.

Dominant discourses in education (such as developmentalism) might suggest that infants and toddlers are too young to work with materials such as clay, especially as a big block. As a result, children would be offered clay as smaller, individualized pieces prepared by educators ahead of time. However, I see that because of the way the clay has become offered, it left many small traces, inviting Nicole, the youngest child of Bright Clouds, to enter into a gifting and receiving relationship with others.

Ruozzi (2010) shares that children can listen to materials with their whole body by entering into relationships with them. And in listening to clay's histories through its traces on the table, we are also listening to each other's histories with the clay simultaneously. Nicole is the first child to attend to the small pieces of clay stuck to the table. This moment is also significant because while most of the children have been directly engaging with the block of clay, it shows how we all notice different things, even if we are working with the same material.



## *Community Spectators*

Some children are beginning to take their slippers and socks off as part of a ritual of meeting the big block of clay. Solar wants to join in this bare feet ritual too. While the educators do not notice at first, Solar is sitting on the bench, calling out, “**help!**”. Freya, who is a close friend of Solar, takes action. Solar sits on the bench, and Freya is beside her. Freya smiles and begins to undo the flap of Solar’s slipper. “**Uuugh**”, groans Solar while Freya tugs at her slipper. It seems tricky, but as Solar pushes and Freya pulls, Solar’s feet eventually becomes freed from her slippers, and Solar swiftly removes both her socks. I ask if Freya would like to take her slippers off too, but she smiles at me, shaking her head no. She returns to sitting on the bench, watching the other children’s encounters with the clay.



This moment is compelling to me because I see that even though Freya is not touching the clay directly, she is nevertheless an active participant in this community and the intra-actions with clay. Davies (2014) shares that a community is always “relational, plural, and emergent” (p. 9), with multiple points of entry. In this moment, I see that the clay provokes children’s desire to feel and engage with the clay beyond their hands. But, at the same time, this also invites many kinds of other engagements that are not necessarily some form of touching the clay or being in the making.

After a long time of observing from the bench, Freya finally comes a little bit closer to all of us at the table. She crouches down beside me and tentatively rubs her index finger on the surface of the big block of clay. The clay has been warmed and softened from everyone's touch, and I can see that it has moulded over the pad of Freya's fingertip. Freya immediately turns her finger around, looking at the trace of the clay on her skin.

Desmond is also a child that rarely nears the clay, although I have invited him several times. However, on this morning, he walks over to me and takes a seat on my lap. His face is very serious. From my lap, Desmond does not touch the clay. Still, as the other children's hands feel the clay, I see that his hand makes a pointing shape every once in a while, accompanied by a little exclamation. "Oh!" Perhaps the shape of Desmond's finger is echoing the way that the surrounding children are poking their fingers into the clay...



Freya and Desmond are children who usually do not come near the table when the clay is present. However, this morning, I notice they are both hovering in the space. This event disrupts the notion that a project involving a modelling material is all about literal moulding, shaping and making.

There are many different ways to live with clay. The life of Bright Clouds and the sense of time within our room has transformed dramatically because of the clay, especially because it is our first time working with clay too.



# Transformation in the Life of Bright Clouds



Entering into a collaborative social practice challenges the dominant view of clay as a modelling material, and we begin to notice the transformations taking shape in Bright Clouds. Transformations have followed us throughout this journey of working with clay, from the transformation of our bodies, our relations, and even the spaces that clay adopts. Thinking with Lenz Taguchi (2010), we see that we are always part of a “mutual co-existence of a whole” (p. 40). This view suggests that our minds and bodies are constantly interwoven with each other and the clay, provoking many transformations that go beyond human experience.



## ***Block-Body Challenge***

As Gabriel is engaging with the clay, he begins to work with the total weight of the block. First, Gabriel firmly grips one side of the clay, his tongue peeking out as he pulls with all his might. “Urrhgh!” The clay resists against Gabriel, and he has to let go a few times, yet he does not give up. Gabriel makes a big sound again as he uses his whole body to lift up the block. Della comes in to help too. But even with her help, the block does not budge.

As the clay’s orientation begins to shift in response to Gabriel’s movements, Zoey tilts her head as if to follow the unfolding motion.





All through the clay-body challenge, Elzéar has been studying Gabriel. Finally, when Gabriel is satisfied with accomplishing his goal of changing the clay's orientation, Elzéar turns to face the clay. Just like Gabriel, Elzéar grips both sides of the heavy block and heaves with all his might. Even though Elzéar is not quite strong enough to lift the block, he smiles up at me with satisfaction.

Finally, when the clay is standing 'upright', Gabriel sighs a small puff of relief. Zoey smiles widely at Gabriel's accomplishment. Interestingly, Zoey never touches the clay while Gabriel attempts to change the clay's orientation. I wonder if Zoey does not want to interrupt Gabriel.





## *Clay-Transformation Challenges*

Clay is a lively material that is quite delicate and requires significant care. Over the course of the last couple of months with our inquiry, the clay has become dry and hardened, eventually showing some cracks. In order to relieve this clay, I invite the children into this problem with me.



A large garbage bag arrives at the table, and all the clay is carefully placed inside. The end of a wooden brush firmly pushes small holes into the compacted clay. Then water is dribbled into the holes. It is like the water is being inhaled by the clay when it immediately disappears. From the outside of the bag, curious children surround and watch in a circle. When the small holes are closed up after a good drink, my hands try to push the broken blocks of clay together from the outside of the bag, but it does not work as I thought. The children recognize my struggle and also place their hands on the clay. Some children mirror me and push while other hands hammer at the edges.

Della positions her face in the center of the garbage bag, looking inside. She covers her mouth and begins to giggle. “**Funny!**” But then, Della seems to realize this is also a serious problem.. Looking at Freya beside her, Della says, “**Fix it.**”, as if inviting Freya to join in. Freya seems a little hesitant to touch the clay, but she helps open the bag for Della and Solar.

There is an active collaboration between the children and the clay when they encounter and realize this problem of transforming clay. They come together to meet the clay, to look seriously and *care for the clay* we have become familiar with.





Eventually, I lift up the bag and drop it onto the table in the hopes that the broken blocks of clay will begin to stick together. The children step back and watch me repeat this motion. Each time the heavy bag drops onto the table, there is a BIG thump, and the children seem to get more and more excited in anticipation. The booming sound of the clay echoes throughout the room, and more and more children gather around.

After a few drops, we open up the bag together to see if the clay is coming back together. "**Nope, not yet**", I say. We keep repeating this process of dropping the bag and opening it to check until, eventually, the clay is almost one big block again. Inviting the children to do a final few pushes, many hands come together to press the clay.



In this moment, I feel such an intense sense of care from the children. When they surround the bag, I can feel they have missed the clay profoundly. And, when the clay becomes one block again, so much laughter begins reverberating in the space, bringing to light the children's significant desire to be with the clay again. My role as an educator in this event is not to solve problems for children away from their sight. By inviting children into this literal and metaphorical sticking point, we collectively create a community and culture of being in inquiry together.



## *Water-Clay Encounter*

When I notice that the clay is becoming slightly dry again, I retrieve a small glass jar filled with cool water. I show the children the process of dampening the clay by slowly dipping my fingers into the jar and then rubbing the water onto the clay. The children seem very eager to mirror me in this action. Fingers enter the jar and immediately follow to the big block of clay. At the same time, eager hands anticipate their turn to dip into the water.

I select a glass jar instead of other means of dampening the clay, such as a spray bottle, for intimacy and connection. While spraying the clay could be done by children individually, water in a jar requires someone to hold it while someone can dip their fingers in. Through the glass, it looks as though we are holding hands too.



With the help of the children, the fine lines that were beginning to form on the surface of the clay become smoothed out. The clay shows us another identity of itself: slippery, wet, and "muddy". The children seem to notice these changes and understand that this material needs much care, and for the clay, it is water. The fingers that were once poking deep into the clay seem to glide over the surface in response to the transformation.



Even as we end our morning and get ready to say goodbye to the clay temporarily, the children are very curious about this process and gather around.

I invite the children into this caring practice for the clay. I first show them how I make small holes with the end of a paintbrush. With the same small jar of water we used to moisten the clay, I pour in a small amount, inviting the children to close the holes with me.





*A brief note on the location of the clay:*

The block of clay and the low table were unboxed and arranged in a different corner of the room for a little over the first half of the co-composed inquiry project to meet the needs of Bright Clouds. A few months into the project, the dynamic of the group began to morph once again as our collective lives started to change, resulting in some changes in the classroom environment, including furniture placement.

Amidst these changes, the space by a large wall of windows became opened up, so I decided to relocate the same low table and the block of clay. Now, the natural lighting fills and highlights the space, inviting unexpected connections between the clay, the view of the play yard and the surrounding landscape.

## *Clay Meets Window*

Perhaps it is the excitement of the clay returning to its original state: cool, soft, and malleable. The children respond to this texture by transporting it to the window. Gabriel and Della are the first children to enter into this ceremony-like rhythm. They excitedly walk over to the big block of clay, pinching up a tiny lump. And then, holding this tiny clay in their hands, they climb up on the bench and press their fingers into the window so that the clay sticks to the glass. Gabriel laughs out loud while pressing. Gabriel: **“I’m sticking it on!”** Della: **“Woaaw!! Window!!”**

Soon after, Zoey, Solar and Freya join in too. The children busily walk back and forth to the big block of clay and then back to the window. The space buzzes with excitement, and it feels like the clay is alive, quickly but strongly transforming our engagements with this material spontaneously and unexpectedly.

I begin to wonder, what does the window *do*? How is the window inviting particular engagements and rhythms?



This experience is compelling because it feels like the children, in partnership with the clay, have begun to show how they are thinking with the forest. For the last couple of months, the children have been spending a lot of time getting to know clay as a material. Now it seems like they are beginning to understand the nature and the possibilities of working with clay. The nature of clay allows an intra-action between the outside and the forest with the materiality of the clay so that the boundary is temporarily blurred.

**Gabriel: "I'm going up, up, up! All the way to that tree."**



When I hear that Gabriel is talking about "reaching up up up" towards a tree, I invite Zoey to think with me about what we see on our walks in the forest. I offer a small piece of clay in my palm and point to the window. I remember that Zoey was very interested in touching the vivid orange mushrooms growing on the 'stick house' branches.

I ask Zoey, "**Do you remember the mushrooms that are in the forest? Remember that they were sticking to the tree?**". Zoey looks out the window to where Gabriel is standing on the bench, moulding clay onto what looks like a tree. She slowly replies, "**Yeah...**".



Zoey takes the clay from my palm, and we go closer to the window together. She carefully studies one of the lower window panels. It seems like Zoey is carefully selecting a spot. Her finger nears the cool glass, and she gently pushes the clay onto the smooth surface. She looks back at me with a big grin: "**Mushroom!**"



Zoey and the mushroom in the forest



Freya, who has been sitting on the bench observing other children, joins in on this clay-window event. She walks back and forth several times from the big block to the window. A diagonal line begins to appear. Could it be echoing the stairs outside?

As this rhythm of pinching the clay, walking to the window, and pressing onto the glass continues, it becomes difficult to tell who put which clay where. The children do not seem to mind this and continue to work with each other, sometimes adding a few lumps of clay to the traces of others. In the process of documenting the children's processes, I take in the atmosphere.

Children carefully watch each other, echo their movements and experiment. This rhythm reminds me of how the arts and studio practices can cultivate a generative culture that embraces both collectivity and belonging (Kind, 2018).





## *Forest Suggestions*

In a previous encounter with clay, Zoey pinched a small piece of clay from the big block and pressed it onto the window. She shared with me at the time that it was a mushroom. When I tried to touch the ‘mushroom’ with my finger, Zoey hurriedly stopped me and said, “**Don’t touch!!!**”.

My pedagogical intention here is to bring this idea back to Zoey and share it with the other children. I decide to go about this by printing out a few photographs that I felt might speak to some of our ongoing work with the clay or inspire some new engagements at the same time. I also laminated these photos so that they can join us at the clay table and meet the clay directly. Another reason I decided to bring photos from the forest back to the clay is that I want to invite the children to attend to the more-than-human community members that we are always living with here, in this place. Community is not exclusive to human beings.



## *Dangerous Mushrooms*

As Zoey enters the classroom for the day and begins to settle in, I invite her to the clay table to look at the photos I have brought in. She positions herself on all fours, gazing earnestly. **”Zoey, do you remember the mushrooms in the forest?”** I ask. She responds by nodding in silence and continues to study the photos seriously for a few more moments. I sit with Zoey, and we study them together before trying to continue the conversation.



Karen: **”I remember that you were saying we cannot touch the mushrooms last time, even with clay....”**

Zoey looks up at Karen: **”Yeah...”**

Karen: **”I wonder why we can’t we touch it Zoey. “**

Gabriel who has been at the clay table for some time this morning also wonders.

Gabriel: **”Yeah, why can’t we touch it Zoey?”**

Zoey: **”It’s dangerous.”**

Gabriel: **”Ohhh. “**

After Zoey declares the mushroom as dangerous, she reaches towards the block of clay. She pinches a tiny lump and carefully rolls it between her palms, forming a thin rope-like shape. Zoey looks up at my face and says, “**mushroom**”. She passes me this piece of clay, and I receive it in my palm. I am curious if the clay might make it possible to touch even the dangerous mushroom.

I gently carry this mushroom gifted from Zoey to the photograph depicting what looks like a big patch of clay on a tree. Placing the thin rope-shaped mushroom along the edge of the patch on the tree, I say to Zoey, “**Look. What if the mushroom is on this picture like this? Maybe we can touch it now.**”

Again, Zoey does not respond immediately, but her hands begin to take action.





Zoey's fingers begin to echo my prior motion of aligning clay with images within the photographs. Hands move from the big block of clay to the photographs, initially small pieces at a time. Then, the clay begins to be pressed over the images in larger pieces.

This encounter between the clay and more-than-human community members, activated by Zoey's inventive strategy of touching the mushrooms, has made it possible to re-live and re-consider what we see in the forest. *An impossibility transforms into a possibility*, where we can now touch even a dangerous mushroom, transforming the identity of the mushroom at the same time too.



# Lingering Possibilities

One of these possibilities is furthering the connections of our community. Through this long journey of working with the clay, we began to notice the presence of many more-than-humans, such as the trees and the mushrooms, that we have been forming close relationships with during our ongoing forest walks. While for this co-composed inquiry project, we primarily focused on our bare hands, feet, and bodies, intentionally selecting materials to interweave with clay, such as projections or sounds could support sustained attention and thinking together with more-than-human community members.



In line with this connection, another significant possibility is the curation of a forest studio. When the clay met the windows, we recognized both the children's desire to bring the clay to the trees and the clay's desire to meet the landscape beyond the borders of our classroom. Even though we were unable to bring the clay to the forest directly during this project for concern about the clay's shrinking size, clay meeting the forest could also open up significant possibilities for thinking closely with the places that matter to us. These are only two possible streams that could be pursued, but they genuinely strive to echo the heart of this co-composed inquiry project: to embrace and make visible the deeply situated practice of *becoming a community with clay*.

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