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Posthuman Pedagogy of the Common Worlds of Children and Animals – From Independence to Relationality

Abstract

The author's intent is to describe the concept of pedagogy of the common worlds of children and animals embedded in the framework of posthuman philosophy. In its assumptions, the child's essence is tightly connected to non-human beings, individuals and forces, existing in the common worlds of life. Children and animals living in those worlds are not beings separated from one another, but relational and causative ones, affecting and influencing each other. The pedagogy of the common worlds of children and animals is broadly understood as an educational practice, which allows children to maintain non-hierarchical relations with animals during interspecies encounters. It offers children an unconventional way of discovering, exploring and acting, because it allows them not to learn "about" the world, but rather to learn together "with" the world. Staying in heterogeneous common worlds and establishing deep relations with them is hence connected with the need to care about the common good. It can provide people and non-human beings with a successful existence now and in the future.

Keywords: posthumanism, common worlds, pedagogy of the common worlds of children and animals, relationality, common good.

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Posthumanistyczna pedagogia wspólnych światów dzieci i zwierząt – od niezależności do relacyjności

Abstrakt

Zamierzeniem autorki jest przedstawienie koncepcji pedagogii wspólnych światów dzieci i zwierząt, osadzonej w ramie założeń posthumanizmu. W jego świetle dziecko jawi się jako istota ściśle związana z pozaludzkimi bytami, jednostkami i siłami, egzystująca we wspólnych światach życia. Zamieszkujące te światy dzieci i zwierzęta nie są odseparowanymi od siebie bytami, lecz istotami relacyjnymi, sprawczymi, wzajemnie na siebie wpływającymi. Pedagogia wspólnych światów dzieci i zwierząt jest rozumiana jako praktyka edukacyjna, która umożliwia dzieciom utrzymywanie niehierarchicznych relacji ze zwierzętami podczas spotkań międzygatunkowych. Oferuje ona dzieciom niekonwencjonalny sposób poznawania i działania, pozwala im bowiem nie tyle na uczenie się „o” świecie, co raczej na uczenie się razem „ze” światem. Przebywanie w heterogenicznych wspólnych światach i nawiązywanie z nim pogłębionych relacji wiąże się przy tym z koniecznością zadbania o dobro wspólne. Może to zapewnić pomyslną egzystencję ludziom i bytom pozaludzkim teraz i w przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: posthumanizm, wspólne światy, pedagogia wspólnych światów dzieci i zwierząt, relacyjność, dobro wspólne.

Children living in the 21st century need dispositions to establish deepened relationships with people and with non-human entities so that they can peacefully coexist and prosper in the common life worlds (Taylor 2013).

Introduction

The considerations included in this article are part of the issues of the interdisciplinary research field of childhood studies, where a turn is being made towards the idea of posthumanism (Malone, Tesar, Arndt 2020). It involves questioning the thesis that assumes the uniqueness of humans, situating them at the center of the universe and attributing to them a superior position in the world over other entities. Turning away from the anthropocentric vision of humans and the world means adopting a concept that shows the human as one of many actors in a complex network of interdependent elements.

Adopting the assumptions of posthumanism has allowed childhood researchers to consider children as beings closely related to non-human entities, individuals and forces, existing in heterogeneous communities of life (Taylor 2013; Murriss 2016; Malone, Tesar, Arndt 2020). These communities are referred to by the term “common worlds” (Taylor 2013), borrowed from Bruno Latour, who argues for the possibility of “composing a common world” that brings together humans and non-humans (Latour 2004: 91). The term signals an aspiration to merge nature and culture into a coherent whole, and its essence can be boiled down to the assertion that “humans are not the sole creators or caretakers of the common” (Nelson et al. 2018: 8). Causality within

heterogeneous communities is therefore not exclusively a human domain, but also relates to non-human entities and is diffuse, relational and collective in nature. As Donna Haraway states, “not all actors are us,” because “not all are human, not all are organic, not all are technological” (quoted in Bakke 2010: 345).

The idea of common worlds is close to Haraway’s (2008, 2016) applied concept of worlding, described by the author as “making worlds together” and considered by her as a process of “becoming-with” other species. This is because all species come into being as a result of the inter-species “dance of encounters” that shapes them (Haraway 2008: 4). Common worlds can be seen from this perspective as constantly evolving systems, formed and transformed through encounters between human and non-human participants (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019).

The existence of an inseparable link between the human and the non-human is signaled by the concept of natureculture proposed by Haraway (2003). According to the author, different species, including humans, have always coexisted with each other and evolved together, and have remained in close relations with each other, which makes it difficult to say for sure where human and non-human (or “nature” and “culture”) begin and end. Research in the biological sciences is providing more and more evidence of the existence of a common history of humans and other organisms, the occurrence of the process of symbiogenesis, and the phenomenon of sharing the world by co-inhabiting entities (see, among others, Gilbert, Sapp, Tauber 2012; Haraway 2016; Dunn 2020).

In the field of childhood studies, the indivisibility of the natural world and childhood is signaled by the term “childhoodnature” (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, Malone, Barratt Hacking 2020; Malone, Tesar, Arndt 2020). It indicates the fact that children’s lives are integrally linked with those of non-human beings. Children and animals can thus be considered (co-)actors in the spaces of inhabited worlds (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019). These spaces constitute geographically, biologically and culturally diverse communities that “constitute children’s life worlds” (Taylor 2013:119).

When talking about existence in heterogeneous common life worlds, one should also keep in mind the concern for the well-being of all the entities inhabiting them. This is explicitly insisted upon by Latour (2004: 98), who writes about the need to combine “the question of the common world with the question of the common good.” The author’s view resonates with Haraway’s proclamation of the need to think about the world in terms of responsibility, community and solidarity, and the “necessity of creating new forms of kinship in order to save ourselves and the world” (quoted in Derra 2017: 217).

Accordingly, researchers of the common worlds of children and animals propose a turn toward a relational and ethical pedagogy, recognizing nonhuman relatives as components of our common world (Taylor, Giugni 2012). In the following part of the article, I present the pedagogy of common worlds, thusly approached, putting forward the thesis of its validity, the need for wider dissemination and application to the theory and practice of early childhood education in our country. I precede the presentation of the pedagogy of shared worlds with a discussion of the issue of linking the lives of children and animals in the common worlds of natureculture.

Children and animals in the common worlds of natureculture

The interest in linking the lives of children and animals in the field of childhood studies is, among other things, an offshoot of the animal turn taking place in the humanities and social sciences, which resulted in the emergence of a new academic discipline known as “animal studies” (Bakke 2011; Wolfe 2013). An in-depth reflection on human-animal relations allowed the assumption of the interdependence of humans and non-human beings, their shared evolutionary history and kinship. These issues are clearly highlighted in her works by Haraway (2003, 2008, 2016). The author attributes particular importance to the category of interspecies¹ kinship emerging from “relations of significant otherness” (Haraway 2003: 8).

The connection between the lives of children and animals is clearly seen in the case of children who grow up with pets or spend a significant portion of their time with other types of companion animals² (such as riding horses) or with rural, farm or herd animals. Child-animal relationships are situated in a specific place and formed through the maintenance of daily proximity, an established order of life and intimacy, as well as through exchanges related to keeping each other company, caring, learning and doing chores (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019).

Children’s relationships with pets and those that fall into the category of companion animals are seen as beneficial to children’s growth and development. Children’s affectionate and caring relationships with animals are valued because they enable the development of children’s ability to form positive relationships (Myers 2007). Child-animal relationships are also recognized as potentially therapeutic, supporting children’s learning and correcting perceived negative developmental deviations. One can cite, for example, the example of “animal-assisted learning” or “animal-assisted therapy,” which are based on the idea that children with special developmental needs can gradually gain confidence and build skills through interacting with appropriately selected domestic and farm animals. This type of environment is thought to optimize learning conditions because “interactions with animals are emotionally stimulating and rewarding, and they also reduce stress levels due to the fact that animals do not judge children” (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019: 3; cf. also Katcher 2002; Franczyk, Krajewska, Skorupa 2008; Ross 2011)³.

Children’s lives are also linked with wild companion animal species, with whom they share spaces of common worlds. The geographic and biological peculiarity of

¹ As Haraway argues, our close ones can be considered “all those earthly beings with whom we are connected in a given place and time, all those who need to be taken care of, including for our own sake” (after Derra 2017: 222).

² “Companion animals” can be “horses, dogs, cats, or a whole host of other beings willing to undergo bio-socialization as helper dogs, family members, or team members in interspecies sports” (Haraway 2003: 14). Broader and more diverse is the category of “companion species”, not least because “one must include such organic entities as rice, bees, tulips or gut flora that make human life what it is - and vice versa” (Haraway 2003: 15; cf. also Tsing 2012).

³ At the same time, it should be noted that the relationship between being in the company of animals and human physical and psychological well-being, however, is not as simple and obvious as it might seem (cf. Bradshaw 2019, among others).

these spaces means that child-animal encounters occur in many places, characterized by a peculiar richness of ecological diversity: from the home garden, park and farmland, through the meadow and forest, to the Australian bush or the African savannah. In doing so, the entanglement of children's and animals' lives is more readily recognized and better understood in indigenous communities than in societies belonging to the Western cultural milieu (Taylor 2013; Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019; Malone, Tesar, Arndt 2020).

Research on child-animal relations shows that children, especially those who have not yet begun formal schooling, recognize animals as subjects, not as objects of manipulation or objects of study. This is evidenced, for example, by Leesa Fawcett's (2014) study of children's perceptions of wild animals at ages 5 and 10. The younger children treated animals as their friends and were generally not afraid of them. What's more, they were aware of the difference between themselves and animals, also noticing elements that connect them to humans (such as playfulness or the ability to empathize). Children recognized animals as beings that are both similar and dissimilar to themselves. According to the author, one can therefore speak of an emerging "kinship ontology", as children's experiences cross the "boundaries between humans and other animals, playing with Western ideas of friendship, kinship and anthropomorphism" (Fawcett 2014: 262).

Researchers of common worlds, moreover, draw attention to a variety of situations in which it is animals that cross the boundaries drawn by humans between nature and culture, thus challenging the nature-culture binary (cf. Taylor 2013; Boileau, Russell 2018; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo 2015; Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019). A description of the behavior of raccoons living in an area adjacent to a nursery located in a wooded area on the west coast of Canada can serve as an exemplification of this type of situation (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo 2015). As the authors write, these animals crossed the nature-culture boundaries artificially set by humans on a daily basis, both at the spatial level (they often entered the children's playground and used the equipment located there, they also made their way into the nursery building and snooped around in the absence of humans) and at the ontological level. The crossing of boundaries at the second level is evidenced by the description of the following event:

the children observed through the large window of the kindergarten room a raccoon family consisting of a female and her four cubs staying near the kindergarten. At one point, the female turned her head toward the children and watched them from afar for a long moment. In response to the animal's behavior, one of the children placed her hand on the glass in a gesture of greeting. Then the racoon approached the window and placed her paw where the child's hand was on the other side of the glass. The child and the animal looked at each other closely. The other children looked at each other and at the teachers with expressions of astonishment on their faces. However, no one moved until the racoon turned away from the window and returned to her cubs (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo 2015: 156).

The children and animals resided in an area that, following multispecies ethnographers, can be referred to as the “contact zone.” Within it, “the lines separating nature and culture collapse,” and “encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other creatures contribute to the creation of common ecological systems and niches” (Fuentes, quoted in Kirksey, Helmreich 2010: 546).

Pedagogy of the common worlds of children and animals

As Val Plumwood argues, a problematic characteristic of the dominant educational paradigm is its focus on humans and the resulting focus on reducing the causality of “earthly others” (after Lindgren, Öhman 2019: 1206). This consequently leads to a reduction of human “sensitivity to the fate of animals and leads to their exploitation” (Lindgren, Öhman 2019)⁴. Thus, moving away from approaches based on ideas of anthropocentrism and adopting alternative educational approaches can, in effect, ensure the successful existence of humans and non-human beings now and in the future (Common Worlds Research Collective 2020).

Posthumanist pedagogy of common worlds increasingly applied in the field of early childhood education can be considered such an approach (Taylor, Giugni 2012; Taylor 2017; Boileau, Russell 2018; Nelson et al. 2018; Sommerville 2020; Bacelar de Castro 2020; Yazbeck 2021). It is considered an educational practice of learning, being and becoming “with” the world of which we are a part (Malone, Tesar, Arndt 2020: 110). Within this conceptual framework lies a pedagogy of the common worlds of children and animals that goes beyond the traditional educational approach within which children learn “about” the animal world from the position of those situated outside that world, exploring the world from afar, in which animals are treated as objects of study. Instead, children are offered to learn about the world from the position of one of the many actors that make up the complex web of life and interact with each other in what Karen Barad calls “intra-action.” This term means “the mutual constitution of intertwined causalities” (Barad 2007: 33), thus indicating that there are no clear boundaries between the actors in these relationships.

The pedagogy of the common worlds of children and animals can be considered an approach that enables children to maintain non-hierarchical relationships with animals in the course of everyday interspecies encounters. The category of encounter seems to be of crucial importance in the context of the discussed approach, since every encounter with humans and with non-human beings is an unusual event, the consequences of which we cannot predict. This unpredictability makes these encounters “change us, alter and transform us; we cannot even control ourselves in them” (Tsing 2015: 20).

⁴ This may be indicated by the results of research on child-animal relations, which shows that animals are more likely to be treated subjectively by children who have not yet started school (see, among others, Fawcett 2014; Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019).

Children's encounters with representatives of other species are considered valuable events due to the fact that they enable children to "understand their humanity," as they create opportunities to "look at ourselves from the outside, to see what we recognize as human" (Melone, Tesar, Arndt 2020: 111). At the same time, the pedagogy of common worlds contains the potential for giving children opportunities to "understand non-human beings drawn from practice and experience co-relationality" (Johnson 2002: 19). This kind of world experience will enable children to realize that human nature constitutes an "interspecies relationship" (Tsing 2012: 144). It will allow children both to see the significant difference between humans and other species and to learn ways to exist harmoniously in the area of this difference (Haraway 2003, 2008).

Multi-species ethnographies of child-animal relations conducted by researchers of common worlds show what happens in between children and other animals (cf. Taylor 2013; Melone, Tesar, Arndt 2020; Taylor, Zakharova, Cullen 2021, among others). In it, one can see the mutual bestowal of attention, looking at each other, keeping distance, approaching and moving away, touching, imitating each other's gestures, movements and actions, responding to spoken words and/or noises, etc. The ways of contacting depend to some extent on the type of animals the children encounter. This is evident in the descriptions in the literature of the course of children's encounters with such animals as insects and earthworms (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2015; Nxumalo, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2017; Boileau, Russell 2018), frogs and snails (Rossovska et al. 2020), kangaroos and bears (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor 2015), raccoons (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo 2015; Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019), squirrels (Molloy Murphy 2018) or feral stray dogs (Melone, Tesar, Arndt 2020).

During these encounters, children come into contact with the many manifestations of life, with the multitude of ways in which animals exist in multiple habitats and, at the same time, with the issue of passing away, dying, and death, which is part of the cycle of life (Russell 2017; Melone, Tesar, Arndt 2020; Molloy Murphy 2020).

Experiences accumulated by children in interactions with animals foster the awakening and strengthening of children's sense of belonging to the places they visit and their inhabitants. This can eventually lead to the formation of a new kind of kinship between children and representatives of other species.

An important element of the pedagogy of shared worlds is the documentation of interspecies encounters. The accumulated documentation builds a story about "processes of slowing down and constantly returning to the same places" (Rossovska et al. 2020: 14), through which children become increasingly connected to them. By drawing and photographing places and the animals that inhabit them, spinning stories about them, children deepen their relationships with the spaces they cohabit with non-human others. The feelings and thoughts accompanying the children during their encounters materialize in the documentation, allowing the teacher to gain insight into the process of forming a sense of kinship and friendship between children and animals (cf. Fawcett 2014; Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019; Melone, Tesar, Arndt 2020; Rossovska et al. 2020, among others).

Intertwined with the pedagogy of common worlds, which allows children to become and learn together with non-human others, are ethical issues⁵. This raises the question of possible ways of caring in educational practice for the well-being of all entities with which children come into contact in common life worlds. It therefore concerns actions that foster the composition of a “good common world” (Latour 2004: 239).

Addressing the issues raised, Affrica Taylor and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw (2019) propose situating child-animal encounters in the context of “relational ethics for entangled lives.” The authors frame it as a practice involving human and non-human actors, “which is situated within the ordinary interactions and exchanges that occur in everyday life” (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019: 5–6). In doing so, they consider particularly important those interactions and exchanges that foster children’s noticing of the connections they have with animals and noticing the differences between themselves and animals. The authors argue that noticing differences especially stimulates mutual curiosity and respect, while also generating a sense of concern for the common good. It derives from interspecies kinship and finds its expression in an ethic of mutual sensitivity, multi-species sociability, ecological reconciliation and confronting problems (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019). The ethic of entangled living is local and emerges from a specific network of relationships linking actors in contact with each other. According to the authors, “learning respect in multi-species common worlds can take place in those moments when humans and animals meet and notice each other’s presence” (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw 2019: 60).

The need to respect interspecies ethics appears particularly clear in light of the view propounded by Haraway (2016), according to which the relationship between us and our non-human relatives “is not innocent, and our responsibility for it is far greater and largely never ending” (quoted in Derra 2017: 225). Realizing this responsibility becomes a critical issue in times of worsening climate crisis. It is therefore necessary to take concrete action or, as Haraway says (2016), to respond, to react⁶ to the threats of the human age.

When considering the shape of educational practice that will make it possible to confront these problems, it is worth bearing in mind the principles presented by Taylor (2013) that relate to the overall conduct within the pedagogy of common worlds. The first of these is linked to the need to understand that relationships play a key role in this pedagogy. For it is them, and not “individual developmental trajectories,” that constitute common worlds, and it is them, therefore, that “become the object of pedagogical attention” (Taylor 2013: 122; cf. also Lenz-Taguchi 2010).

Particular importance should be attached to relations of difference in this regard, since focusing on them will make it easier for children to cope with the hetero-

⁵ The close connection between cognition and ethics, facts and values is clearly indicated by Latour (2004). This issue is also pointed out by Barad. The author speaks of the need to introduce into the language of science the concept of ethico-onto-epistem-ology, which “appreciates the interconnectedness of ethics, cognition and existence” (Barad 2007: 185).

⁶ The author writes down the English word responsibility as response-ability, which can be translated precisely as “ability to respond,” “responding,” “ability to react” (Derra 2017: 218).

geneity of common worlds, and will also enable them to coexist amicably with others “who are not always like us” (Taylor 2013: 122).

The second principle is related to the need for the teacher to understand that children enter into complex relationships with human and non-human others in a specific place and time. This principle is therefore linked to the need to situate the process of learning with others within a “collective” (“community”). It leads to the third principle, which can be boiled down to the need to use team-based inquiry into the worlds we co-inhabit in educational practice. Team exploration can thus be considered the “learning-with” method characteristic of the pedagogy of the common worlds of children and animals. Its application will make it possible to grapple with ethical issues involving the search for ways of sharing a common world that allow all humans and non-human beings to thrive despite their differences (Taylor 2013).

Conclusion

Children are not separated from the world in which they live, on the contrary – they are an inseparable, integral part of it, just like non-human beings. One of the key categories used to describe this world is the concept of relationality, highlighting the interdependence of the entities that make it up, exposing the entanglement of different forms and ways of life. Connected with relationality is the notion of community, existence in common worlds, and consequently with the question of appreciating the causality of non-human entities⁷. Adopting this way of viewing the world makes it possible to apply the pedagogy of common worlds of children and animals, derived from Haraway’s concept of “becoming-with”, to educational practice.

This pedagogy creates an opportunity for children and adults to deal with “the small, mundane, ordinary, seemingly insignificant everyday relationships in close-to-home, local, common worlds, and to confront the problems that these intertwined worlds bring” (Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2015: 8). Connecting worlds in educational practice, therefore, creates an opportunity to take action, as a result of which it becomes realistic to ensure that all dependent entities thrive within meaningful differences.

Recognizing and taking into account in educational practice the complex relations taking place in heterogeneous ecological systems, granting causality to non-human beings will open the way to building, in the words of children, “a world in which children and animals are free” (the words of a five-year-old girl, quoted in Melone, Tesar, Arndt 2020: 136). This view resonates with the demand formulated by Haraway (2003, 2008) to build solidarity with animals, which the author treats as “significant others,” as beings, although different from us, but at the same time very close to us. The solidarity of which Haraway speaks is not based on blood ties, “but

⁷ This postulate is reflected in ongoing scientific studies that involve animals. These include the Pigeon-Blog project, in which humans collaborated with pigeons in the process of monitoring air pollution in Southern California. The pigeons, importantly, acted as co-researchers, rather than the object of a human-led experiment (Haraway 2016: 21, cf. also Derra 2017: 219–220).

on shared characteristics, shared pain, the inevitability of death and lasting hope” (quoted by Radomska 2010: 74).

In this connection, it is worth referring to the suggestions put forward by Anne Bell and Constance Russell (1999) relating to pedagogical conduct, which, if taken into account in educational practice, will help strengthen the “life ties” in the world to which we all belong. Above all, the authors encourage teachers to challenge any binary, us-versus-them, man-versus-nature divisions in the educational process. They also urge teachers to help students recognize stereotypes and move beyond them, both with regard to humans and animals. Another suggestion from Bell and Russell is to help students understand non-human others, to treat them as entities that in some ways are like us and in some ways are different from us.

The authors also recommend creating educational situations that foster students’ realization of the fact that humans have deeply rooted connection with other life forms. They consider saturating the educational program with a rich set of “practical, embodied, sensory experiences” (Bell, Russell 1999: 81) to be one of the important issues in this regard.

Incorporating the above suggestions into educational practice requires teachers to go beyond anthropocentrism in their pedagogical thinking and actions. Changing thinking is not easy, of course, and translating it into practice is even more difficult, but it is possible, as Angela Molloy Murphy argues:

For many years I was an early childhood education teacher whose ambition was to “return children to nature.” This was happening until I realized that children are closely connected to the rest of natureculture. Now, instead of “following the child” alone, I recognize the importance of the complex and intricate multi-species relationships that children establish every day in and out of school. I am interested in exploring the relational potential of encounters between humans and non-humans, and supporting children in learning “with” rather than “about” the inhabitants of their shared worlds (Molloy Murphy 2018: 65).

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Małgorzata Kowalik-Olubińska specjalizuje się w zakresie pedagogiki wczesnej edukacji i terapii pedagogicznej. Zainteresowania naukowe autorki obejmują problematykę wspierania rozwoju dzieci ze specyficznymi trudnościami w uczeniu się oraz problematykę związaną z interdyscyplinarnym polem badań nad dziećmi i dzieciństwem.

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