Re-imagining curriculum: Researching as Curriculum Making

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What happens when a M.Ed. cohort of practicing teachers research their practice?

Donning the researcher’s hat, 35 teachers in our cohort recently undertook action research projects to explore their curricular practices in their classrooms. What would happen, they wondered, if we re-imagine curricular engagement with our students? What happens, we wondered, when teachers bring the lens of inquiry into their practice?

Imagine our excitement, when the teachers in the cohort gathered to share their findings with all of us, and we found ourselves all learning together from one another. Sitting around the large table where we have been meeting for the past two and half years, each research group reported on what they had learned during their research projects. “I realized after doing this research project,” reported one teacher, “that I use curriculum as control.” His insightful comment caused those of us around the table to catch our breath: are we also complicit by using curriculum as a means of engaging students in less than emancipatory ways? What is our hidden agenda when we create curricular experiences for our students in schools, teacher education and graduate programs?

Theorizing curriculum through researching our practice opens a dialogue for all educators to enter: what is curriculum, how do we engage in it, how do we invite our students to enter into curricular conversation with teachers, and whose curriculum is it anyway? Politics, narratives, empowerment, reflection on who we are and what matters to us—these are the challenges and ultimately, the gifts of re-imagining curriculum.

The teacher inquiry course, which we taught together situated teacher research within a larger context of curriculum theory and practice. Our course was an invitation to teachers to conduct research in their classrooms, and to share their findings and emergent curricular
understandings with colleagues and educational researchers in the field. The course followed the outline of a research project (Anderson et al, 1994), beginning first with learning about curriculum, and ending with the unexpected recognition that engaging our students in research is itself a curricular act of meaning making.

First, we surveyed the field of curriculum theory and the key theorists in North America whose research and analysis have greatly influenced curriculum design and delivery. We then introduced the concept of curriculum as a re-imagined space where teachers and students negotiate and co-navigate the pedagogical spaces in which they live.

In tandem with learning curricular narratives and theories in the course, we looked at the role of teacher-researcher, research participants, the problematics of ethics, and research design. Individuals and groups of teachers participating in our course, who are all practicing teachers, began to identify research questions that pertained to their own lived experiences in their classes. Their questions addressed immediate concerns or long imagined quests of intervention or rebellion. They started to identify the missing voices of teachers currently working in the field within the curriculum theories they were studying. What, they wondered, are the practices and understandings of curriculum from the experience of practicing teachers? Curious to pursue their inquiry questions, our students designed their own research projects, putting theory into curricular action and then they headed back into their classrooms to investigate aspects of their practice that intrigued them.

This issue invites you to shadow our teachers as they investigate their practice, and come to new ways of engaging in curriculum.

Surveying the Field

Curriculum was first imagined in 1918 when Franklin Bobbitt wrote his book *Curriculum*. His book was the first that looked at curriculum as a field of professional activity. In the late 50’s, the U.S.S.R successfully launched the spaceship Sputnik. Embarrassed by the failure of the fledging U.S aerospace industry to beat the Russians into space, the government’s response was to blame the educators of the country. A call went out to academics (and specifically scientists) to create curriculum that would leapfrog American children into first place in the race to the moon. Educators turned to the earlier work of Ralph Tyler who had introduced curriculum in the 1940’s as a linear process, which starts with a clear identification of objectives leading to curricular activities, which are in turn assessed by evaluative criteria. Tyler’s measurable and behavioral objectives approach to curriculum became a dominating force in North American classrooms. Any student teacher or teacher who has spent hours articulating lesson objectives as a part of writing lesson plans late into
the night, would recognize Tyler’s continuing influence on education today.

During the 80’s and into the 90’s, curriculum theorists re-imagined curriculum as a complex, multi-layered text. Max van Manen (1990) explored the concept of researching lived experience as a curricular inquiry thereby inviting teachers to understand curriculum as a pedagogical engagement that is lived. Ted Aoki interrogated the gaps between curriculum-as-planned and the lived curriculum, and in later years explored the “spaces in between.” Bill Pinar (1996) and Madeline Grumet (1996) contributed to curriculum theory by highlighting the silences and unspoken elements of curriculum, calling attention to the multiple decisions, and complex layers of social, cultural and gendered engagement and relationships that influence curriculum development and delivery.

Curriculum became imagined not as a fixed entity but as currere, the Latin word meaning to run with, to run on a course, thereby forefronting action and becoming an integral component of action. Uhrmacher (1997) focused his attention on the language used in curriculum documents. He illuminated what may go unnoticed, the “curriculum shadow,” the downsides of curriculum, what is privileged and what is disdained. He also drew attention to the hidden curriculum: the covert, latent, implicit ways that schools and classrooms are organized and how those affect the curriculum.

From the 90’s onward, educators were invited to consider curriculum and its practices from a variety of theoretical perspectives, bringing to light issues of gender, race, class, and privilege. Curriculum theorists influenced by Freire’s (1970) work on pedagogy of the oppressed recognized education as political action and challenged educators to create curricular opportunities addressing voice, empowerment, and action that pertains to the social responsibilities of educators. (e.g. Bigelow, 1998, Brandes & Kelly, 2004, Christensen, 2000, Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002. Kelly & Brandes, 2001, Kelly, Brandes & Orlowski, 2004).

Complexity theory along with chaos theory are among the latest newcomers to curriculum theorizing. Chaos theory accounts for and is sensitive to the unique context of a system and the diversity and divergence within the system (Goff, 1998). Complexity theory introduces curriculum as a pedagogical experience in which environment, participants, inquiry, and ways of engagement are intimately engaged in co-creating what Varela (1987) calls “possible new worlds.” Complexity theory invites educators into the curricular and pedagogical space of “dancing on the edge of chaos” (Waldrop 1992) where new patterns and inter-relationships of life and learning are generated (Davis et. al., 1996, Doll et. al., 2005, Fels, 1998, 2004).

In recent years, concepts of curriculum as inquiry—autobiographical, hermeneutic, arts-based, narrative, multi-vocal, and performative—continue to enliven conversations amongst those engaged in theorizing curriculum. As our students planned their research projects, we encouraged our students to pay attention to the multiplicity and complicity of dynamic engagement within a co-evolving curriculum.

Choosing an Inquiry

Initially our teachers’ questions probed into the realities and issues in which they were teaching: for example, could children design a social responsibility framework to help them solve problems on the playground independently? How might a literacy educator involve first nation parents in the development of a family literacy program? What would happen if students were given one hour of free play every day? These early questions evolved as
teachers realized the complexity of their circumstances, the challenges involved in engaging students in action research, and their own preconceptions and preoccupations.

As an example, a family literacy project with First Nations parents engineered by Christine Chambers, was a follow-up to earlier investigations of literacy in the same school. During the process of analyzing data and making sense of barriers in data collection, Christine’s research turned into a self reflective questioning. “These discourses have indeed left an imprint on my soul. I now look for, and listen to Aboriginal family gifts. I no longer look through the deficit lens of ‘needs.’” As she lived her research, Christine came to realize that her own embodied positioning determined the ways in which she addressed her research question, data and participants. She shifted her gaze from a focus of presumed parental lack of involvement in their children’s schooling to an investigation of institutional and historical factors that came into play in the parents’ responses to school, as well as her own role and positionality as an “outsider,” an educator questioning the realities in her school. Researching curriculum by inviting participation of all stake-holders, as Christine did as she engaged First Nations parents in her family literacy project, gives us pause and reminds us to pay attention to those absent in our research and curriculum design. Like Christine, we may then emerge as researchers and educators “laying down a path” (Varela 1987) in unexpected new directions.

Literature Review

Our own curriculum as imagined in our course syllabus included a literature review, which guided the teachers through the theoretical readings and required them to seek out similar research projects in the areas that they were investigating. For example, one research group discovered a study on children’s role models, which proved useful as a guide for their own research, which in turn reflected similar findings. However, as Mary Chow Bonneville, Karen Kozar, Cathy Hussey, and Kim Patrick discovered during a dry-run where they tested a curricular activity with a young student, a child’s identification of who a hero was, may or may not necessarily be in line with the researcher’s anticipations. When an instructor’s nine-year old daughter declared “her mother” as her hero rather than the super-hero or pop singers they had anticipated, these researchers had to “go back to the drawing board” to redesign some of their interview questions and activities so that they allowed for a broad spectrum of responses. (although I agree with the substance of this sentence I think it doesn’t really fit here.

Feminist educator bell hooks (1994) and her concepts of self-actualization and teaching to transgress became for Karen Nesmith a curricular space of inspiration and new learning.
Abandoning her initial intent to create a rubric to improve playground behaviors, Karen’s research takes her into the heart of her students’ narratives and her own reflections. “I must be willing to do the very things I ask of my children…My vulnerability, or giving a voice to my vulnerability, is surfacing ever so slowly.” Karen realized the solution to playground conflicts was not in the articulation of a rubric but in the creation of a responsive space for students to share what they thought and felt about their playground experiences with one another.

**Research Design and Implementation**

The design of individual and group research projects followed the literature review. Nine teachers, inspired by educator Stephen Wolk’s article “the Benefits of Exploratory Time,” (2001) became curious about the impact that exploratory time might have in their classroom. What would happen, they wondered, if we gave our students an hour a day to choose their own activities? These nine teachers, in four separate projects, embarked on a curricular research involving nine classes of students being given the freedom to choose their own activities. How each curricular project was initially designed and evolved over time in the individual classrooms tells the stories of the lived experiences, curricular practices, and preoccupations of the individual teachers and their students.

As they approached their projects, each group or individual teacher shifted the research design to reflect their particular focus, interest or concern. Different questions and ways of doing research and engaging with their students emerged. For example, Russel Lathigee investigated his Grade Four students’ play during free time by limiting his students to games and math manipulatives. He wondered what would happen if he restricted the use of certain games or math manipulatives, and discovered a startling difference in response by the girls and boys in his class. David Lafond and Mary Anne Purdy bravely invited their grade Five, Six and Seven students to choose their own topics and style of project presentations. They found themselves having to engage differently with their students, as their students worked on a variety of projects such as a video of an Australian crocodile farm, a role play on urban legends and a mock trial led by a student who plans to become a lawyer. Valdine Ciwko, Deanne Lawder and Gary Thompson also invited their young students in Kindergarten, Grade One and Two to choose a research topic for a project, and found ways to student learning through a variety of resources such inviting Grade Seven “buddies” to work with the Kindergarten children as they put together their information booklets, or teaming up with the school teacher-librarian to identify relevant materials.

Initially, the perceived barriers to creating exploratory time in the classroom in which students would choose their own curricular activities seemed overwhelming. As Bridget Browning, Kristina Wilting, and Jenn Billingsley (all teaching in the same school but different grade levels: Grades Seven, One/Two and One) wondered, “Will we and our classes be able to survive the anticipated chaos of so many people doing so many individual activities at once?” The anticipated chaos did not occur, much to the relief of all of us! However, as the researchers illustrate in their articles, the experience proved a generative space of learning as each teacher found new ways to engage with his or her students within newly negotiated curricular spaces.

**Researching Ethical Engagement**

The ethics review requirement by our university and local school boards proved a major challenge, as our teachers and ourselves struggled to fill in the forms, meet deadlines, and collect signed parental consent (and student assent) forms. The question of ethics in the research of one’s own classroom through action research is an ongoing challenge. Research
possibilities and ambitions are limited by time, institutional concerns of “doing no harm,” and the complicated and often stressful school timetable imposed upon teachers. These were our considerations as we bent to the task of writing an ethical presence in our research. Our own ethical awareness was sharpened by the difficulties presented as we tried to meet institutional requirements. Is curriculum observed a curriculum compromised? Are children engaged in research projects coerced to participate by the very fact that the researcher is also the classroom teacher? How is it that action research is suspect as a research methodology, held accountable by warnings of coercion, and power differentials? Yet action research simultaneously so coherently mirrors the reflective (and ethical) practice of reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983). We breathed a sigh of relief when the ethics review boards of both schools and university signed their approval.

Researching as Curricular Exploration and Intervention

“Are you dreaming in English yet?” asked a hopeful TESL teacher. The question followed Cathy Romans, Sacha Schick & Shelley Steer, as they test-ran a writing instructional package with ESL students to see if a pragmatic step by step process would improve their students’ writing. Mary Smith and Dawn Sadler turned book time into a collective sharing of experiences evoked by connections their students made with text. What texts, they wondered, will speak to the lived experiences and curiosities of children? Charity Bonneau and Jason Lauzon, teachers in high school, and Brian Ee, who teaches at the elementary level, interviewed students and talked with teachers as they gathered statistics on the number of First Nations students participating in extra-curricular activities. As they noted the dramatic shift in students’ involvement in extra-curricular activities as students move from elementary
to secondary school, the teacher-researchers wondered: What are the institutional barriers to students’ participation?

Research in curriculum becomes an interactive engagement between teacher and students as they explore together new ways of pedagogical engagement and the multiple roles of teacher, researcher and students as they study their own classrooms. Kristina Wilting dressed in a “long wizard-like clock,” thus signaling to her Grade One students that she was now a researcher who would be observing them as they engaged in exploratory play. “I had discussed with the class that when I was a researcher I would wear a colourful cloak and they were to pretend I was a silent ghost.”

As our teachers left our classroom to engage in four weeks of research in their own classrooms, Gaby and I hovered on the margins of the curricular activities that our course outline anticipated. “Letting go,” and trusting that our teachers could undertake their research with careful attention to the hidden curriculum that they were a part of, engage in thoughtful analysis, and present their findings required that we stand aside. We facilitated their journey through ethics review, we provided a sounding board as groups of teachers designed their research projects, we provided guidance and instruction on data collection and analysis, we awaited their return with anticipation.

**Researching as Curricular Relevance and Empowerment**

Co-participating in the research, students and teachers in multiple classrooms simultaneously collaborated in and created a curriculum of relevance and empowerment. Their participation mattered, students were excited to help their teachers “do their homework,” a spirit of collaboration infused the projects. Attention to curriculum and student engagement revealed a “hidden curriculum” in a number of classrooms, as Bridget Browning discovered when she realized through the lens of a teacher-researcher that something was amiss in her classroom.

It is this group that everyone else in the class steals furtive glances at...Their behaviour is drastically different from the rest of the class. They are having so much fun and yet no one wants to join in. Why?

The research projects created curricular spaces which gave teachers opportunities to meet their students anew through their students’ interests, to listen attentively to their concerns, to take time to talk individually with students, to listen to a class with the awareness of a researcher, to reflect on the silences and to invite student input. Using curriculum to make change, to invite new ways of pedagogical engagement, to make curriculum relevant— these were simultaneously goals and results, objectives and achievements. Rethinking the practice of pedagogy invited a new enactment of curriculum in the classroom. Making curriculum relevant invited change for teachers and students. Who inspires you? What experiences do you bring into the classroom? What hopes and experiences do your students bring to you? What curricular experiences might be created that pay mindful attention to the voices of children?
Researching as Invitation

As our teacher-researchers realized through their research, how we invite each other, our colleagues and our students into curricular ventures reflects who we are as teachers, as individuals, and as researchers. Each of these projects illustrates the empowerment and possibility of invitation. Each of these projects speaks to the opportunities that open as educators create pedagogical spaces for collaborative engagement. As Christine Chambers reminds us in her grateful acknowledgement to her research participants, respectful reciprocity surfaces in the ebb and flow of meaningful, caring, and attentive research. To further hijack a west coast metaphor, our classrooms are tidal pools, rich in a marine life submerged until the tide withdraws to reveal the “hidden curriculum,” the shadows of the not yet seen, and the extraordinary possibilities that dwell within curricular waters. To inquire into one’s teaching practices through the lens of a teacher-researcher creates new spaces for reflection, and invites curricular re-imagining and new opportunities of pedagogical relationships between student and teacher.

For us, researching as meaning making became a project of interruption, of intervention, of pause and reflection, of re-searching new ways of engagement. As Freire (1970) anticipated, an educational project calls for action, through collaboration, through listening, through reciprocal engagement, through mindful awareness—such a pedagogical endeavor becomes a project of empowerment and revelation. On the surface, our course was a curricular requirement for the fulfillment of a Master’s degree. The pedagogical experience that emerged, unexpectedly, happily, for us, was an opportunity to learn again what curriculum might be, and how powerful our learning is when our students share with us.
Maxine Greene (1996) distinguishes between education and schools. Education, she says, is about “engaging … human beings in activities of meaning-making, dialogue and reflective understanding of a variety of texts, including the texts of their social realities.” (305) Schools on the other hand are “forms required by a society caught in material pursuits, divided by class and gender and colour boundaries, fragmented in commitments to values and to faith” (305). Our course, and the research projects that the teacher-researchers undertook, provide an illustration of the potential bridges between education, curriculum and schools. They illuminate the possibilities within teacher research to imagine new curricular engagements, make meaning and reflect on students’ and teachers’ lived experiences in schools.

Finding the unexpected and the unanticipated—these ambitious and courageous research projects brought children’s, parents’, and teacher-researchers’ voices into renewed curricular and research paradigms. The meaning making that emerged is simultaneously an invitation and a discovery of the unexpected and unanticipated.

The gifts of insight that researching pedagogical spaces makes possible is through the generosity of those who choose to journey with us. As we stand aside so that the voices of our teachers might engage you in their journeys, it is with heartfelt thanks to all those in our M.Ed. cohort for their willingness to engage in our curricular re-imagining of research as an action-site of meaning-making. Initially two parallel paths—curriculum theory and teacher inquiry—intertwined, inviting our teachers, whose work is in this issue, to recognize and re-imagine themselves within reciprocal spaces of curricular engagement. Learning that emerges through deliberation (McCutcheon, 1999) and reflection, and which provides opportunities to discuss the multi-faceted practical realities within our schools, is the story that our teacher-researchers tell.

**Resources**


**About the Authors**

The focus of Dr. Brandes' work is teaching for social justice, teacher inquiry, teacher
education, and investigating school/university partnership.

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