

Book Review

***The Boy on the Beach: Building Community Through Play* by Vivian Gussin Paley. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 104 pages.**

Curriculum-Making Magic: Playfully Composing Lives and Community

Do children make up their stories in order to play? Or do they play in order to put themselves into a story? Perhaps the secret lies in another direction. What if children play and invent stories because it is the way to distinguish themselves from all other individuals, even as they reach for common ground and community? (Paley, 2010, p. xii)

Guided by these wonderings, Vivian Paley's *The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play* is a poignant, intricately woven tale of Paley's work – and play – alongside several children, teachers, and families. With her signature storytelling charm, Paley invites her reader to journey alongside her and her friends to explore the subject of play. With this work, rather than more structured play-based scholarship, and similar to her other books, Paley wanted to “search for the meaning of play along more dramatic paths, trying to capture the shape of a scene before its image is blurred” (p. xii). Peppered by a recurring letter exchange with her Taiwanese teacher friend Yu-ching, the book's chapters unfold through Paley's interweaving of anecdotes, letters, reflections, and wonderings; a layering that, for me, creates a strikingly evocative texture. Together, Paley and Yu-ching wonder about the meaning of play in relation to life making and community building by sharing stories with each other. In one of her letters to Yu-ching, Paley describes their work as ‘anecdotists’: “We like to describe an episode of play, sometimes several of them, and then speculate, interpret, or simply express amazement at what children know without our telling them” (p. 14). In particular, they puzzle about the place of play in composing lives and communities on and off school landscapes and, reminiscent of Aoki (1993)ⁱ, wonder about the curriculum children live alongside others as they playfully make sense of their world(s) (Lugones, 1987)ⁱⁱ.

Play as Lived Curriculum (Making)

More than a decade after teaching in her own classroom, Paley explains that she often visits the beach because “the theatrical outpourings of the young are readily available wherever children play, and few places rank higher than a beach for observing the unlimited reach of a child's imagination” (p. 8). Beautifully illuminating the connections between imagination, identity, and play, Paley introduces Eli, a boy who “cannot be more than four, but ... is already an expert in staging a drama” (p. 3). Through vividly depicted scenes, adventures with Eli, his beachside friend Marianne, their kindergarten classmates, their teacher Mrs. Olson, and others are threaded throughout the book. These scenes provide several of the springboards for thoughtful reflections and wonderings about the nature and purpose(s) of play, including the recurring idea of play as a curriculum that is livedⁱⁱⁱ (Aoki, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 1996).

Similarly guided by the idea of curriculum making as life making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 1996; Clandinin et al., 2006), Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) highlight the multiple ways curriculum is co-composed in the fluid relationship(s) between learners, teachers, subject matter, and milieu.^{iv} Drawing upon Lugones (1987), Huber et al. (2011) reconceptualised children's curriculum making as occurring within two worlds – familial and school curriculum-making worlds. Through their research, Huber et al. made visible the many embodied shifts children experienced as they travelled from one world of curriculum making to another, one construction of themselves to another (Lugones, 1987).^v

Throughout my reading, I was compelled to think about the infinite possibilities in recognizing play as curriculum making; however, one story in particular sits with me. Paley narrates the tale of Emily and the tensions between her familial and school curriculum-making worlds. Emily's familial curriculum making involves the belief in, and dedicated adherence to, healthy eating practices. The curriculum making of her school community, however, involved more flexible ideas of what healthy eating entailed. Attempting to make sense of the ensuing tensions as she travelled between familial and school curriculum-making worlds, Emily would smash two dinosaur toys into each other during play time. She explained to Paley that the dinosaurs were fighting because one dinosaur was eating "bad stuff." This tension-filled story was unpacked and negotiated as a community, involving students, their families, and teachers. Paley noted,

Emily, with her battling dinosaurs, has created a curriculum with which to study the subjects of exclusion, loyalty to family standards, and notions of public morality, topics often found behind the scenes in folktales and family stories. When we are young we need the dramatic impulses of play to help us organize such complex ideas, to put a face to them and watch characters play them out in familiar ways. (p. 50)

Riding the Perfect Wave

Likening a particularly educative (Dewey, 1938)^{vi} curriculum-making moment in Eli's class to "magic" and "the perfect wave on a day at the beach" (p. 39), Paley marvels at how

it is only the fourth day of school, but the children in Mrs. Olson's room are already bound together in the new literature they are producing with the assistance of a teacher who takes their invented plots and characters as seriously as those she finds in books. (p. 23)

With these insightful words, Paley highlights how myriad stories are continually played out in homes and classrooms, daycares and community centres, and many other places. She reminds me that "make-believe is the children's subject and has been since before they took their first steps" (p. 23); a wisdom perhaps too often forgotten in the spaces children inhabit alongside adults.

Reading Paley's description of Mrs. Olson riding a perfect wave of curriculum-making magic alongside the children in the class inspired me to reflect upon some of my experiences as a curriculum-maker within school and familial worlds. I thought of the innumerable times I worried about covering the mandated curriculum as a classroom teacher, oftentimes inadvertently glossing over potentially educative opportunities in the process. While an externally mandated curriculum does not guide my family's curriculum making, I nonetheless

recognize that I have at times imposed a curricular script that is just as fixed through my actions as a mother and caregiver. Thinking about the plentiful instances where I have said, “Maybe later, we have to do this first,” and “We need to focus please!” I recognize that, although these comments may at times have been needed, I have also often felt – and in turn exerted – pressure to get *this* or *that* accomplished before allowing for the “fun stuff” ... a process that has scarcely allowed for space to co-compose an educative curriculum of lives (Clandinin et al., 2006) that honours the embodied knowledge (Johnson, 1989) of my children and the children and youth I have been privileged to know in classrooms and schools. Paley and her friends, however, help me to imagine a forward-looking story (Lindemann Nelson, 1995) whereby I am increasingly awake (Greene, 1995) to moments when I can playfully ride a wave of curriculum-making magic alongside the children I love.

Creative Kindness at Play

Throughout the book Paley illuminates how, as life making, play can mean different things at different times (or even all at once) to different children, including: to create spaces for imagination and wonder, as a way to belong, to ameliorate loneliness, to see themselves represented, to become necessary to the group, to affirm what is known, and also to experience what they know differently. One particular idea of the purpose of play, however, resonated strongly for me. In one of her letter exchanges with Yu-ching, Paley discusses what she calls *creative kindness*, a way children have of playing with one another that builds space for their diversity: “‘Creative kindness,’ we could call it, an outcome easier to manage in a dramatic scene where we can change our stories and insert new roles to suit the needs of classmates who require help” (p. 29). Perhaps this resonated so strongly because I was compelled to consider several scenes – as a parent, teacher, and caregiver – where I have witnessed empathy, acceptance, and community as central to children’s creative curriculum making. As I wondered if these scenes were moments of creative kindness, a particularly resonant memory was called forth ...

Following three years of early education learning focused on speech development, my beloved son Yehia was about to attend kindergarten in a new school. I was fairly certain that I was more nervous than Yehia the morning we walked hand in hand through the school’s large entranceway and towards his new kindergarten classroom. However, he must have been more nervous than I thought. Normally extremely rambunctious, I was surprised when Yehia declined the kindergarten teacher’s offer to play at one of the nearby activity centers, choosing to stay with me instead. While we waited for his teacher’s instructions, and as Yehia nervously fidgeted and watched classmates stream into the room or play at the activity centers, I once again questioned my decision to register him in this school ... and I worried ...

I was so busy questioning myself and worrying that I didn’t notice that one of his new classmates had drawn near, to shyly invite him to join her at the blocks activity center. Startling me somewhat with his sudden movement, Yehia followed the girl to the center where I could see other kindergartners, alone or in small groups, starting to imagine up stories to build and narrate. With tears dangerously close to spilling over, I wondered how the girl knew to invite Yehia, even as I watched the growing group play alongside each other. I was so thankful that I would be able to leave that classroom space with such a beautiful image in mind ... an image of what I think was creative kindness at play.

Turning once again to consider *The Boy on The Beach*, I think about how I always close the cover of one of Paley's books sad to part with her words, wishing we could play for just a little while longer. Yet Paley reminds me that, "As in a really good research study, play does not value closure. It seeks new direction and unexpected results" (p. 11). I hold this thought close as I marvel at children's ability to playfully live a curriculum of belonging with, and acceptance of, one another, and I am left with the unshakeable sense that we can (re)learn so much from children – so long as we build spaces for play in the curriculum-making worlds we inhabit together.

Epilogue: A Paley-Inspired Magical Moment

"Yallah^{vii}, move it!" I called out to my children, Yehia and Noor, and their cousins Mariam and Mohammed. We were over five minutes late picking up Sara and Abdullah, my best friend's children, which – in the exponential arithmetic of driving to school in the morning – meant that we would be arriving at their school at least ten minutes later than usual. Ensuring the kids were seated with their seatbelts securely fastened, I resisted the urge to drive just a wee bit faster as we picked Sara and Abdullah up and started the 15-minute drive to school. I really disliked when the children were late for school because I knew – as a student and teacher – how tardiness can be perceived within school landscapes.

As I drove the six children in grades 3-6 past our neighbourhood park, however, I forgot all about the time. I was captivated by the stunningly beautiful scene ahead ... a heavy curtain of fog was draped over the grass and had wrapped around the trees and nearby playground. Mesmerized, I stopped at the nearby stop sign and directed the children's attention to the fog in case they hadn't noticed. They ooh'ed and aah'ed as I turned, heading once again towards their school. We discussed the fog and how it may have formed as I drove, less hurried than I was only five minutes before. I listened appreciatively, enjoying the discussion and their banter when Mariam wondered, almost to herself, what it might have felt like to touch the fog. Noor said she didn't think she would be able to feel it, Yehia said he thought it might feel "kinda wet," and so forth until I eventually exclaimed, warmed by their curiosity, "I wish we could turn back around so that you could all run out and try to feel it!"

Within moments, Mohammed, in a hopeful, slightly questioning tone offered, "Look Khalto,^{viii} there's a park up ahead." Sure enough, slightly to the right and ahead of us, there was another community park with a gorgeously hovering layer of fog. We were parked at a red light, and I looked once again at the digital clock in my van. I knew that the other parents would be okay with the children being a little late for school, and that I was likely the one who experienced the greatest tension with tardiness. When the light turned green, I paused ever so slightly but, with thoughts of Vivian Paley, Mrs. Olson, Eli, and his classmates in mind, made the decision to signal right and turn in to the park's lot.

"Okay, you all have two minutes to run into the fog – not too far in! – and come back to tell everyone what it felt like ... go!!" Sounds of squealing and cheering from six excited children filled the spaces of my well-loved minivan as it came to a stop. Laughing as they ran into the fog, I started to reach for my phone to take a quick picture but withdrew my hand. I knew this moment would forever be imprinted in my mind, and I wanted to savour every part of it. Looking

at the shadowy figures of six children running amidst a blanket of fog, and listening to their shouts of excitement as they dashed past one another, I wondered if the children would share this story with their classmates and classroom teacher. Searching for the running figures of Yehia and Noor amidst the fog, I wondered if they too felt a shift in familiar stories in this moment...

HONK!! “Okay you guys, we have to go! Yallah!” I won’t deceive you dear readers, I did eventually honk to signal the children back. As I drove the last leg to their school amidst a symphony of excited chatter, I thought about who I was, and who I was becoming, in that moment as a mother, teacher, aunt, graduate student, and curriculum maker alongside six beloved children. I thought about living a forward-looking story of wakefulness to possible places of curriculum-making magic, and how this story will sometimes bump up against dominant, taken-for-granted familial and school narratives. However, the image of six children playing alongside one another in the morning fog sits with me, and I think of Vivian Paley and of the “unexpected miracles along the way when we and the children pause and say, ‘Life stand still here. We want to watch the scene a while longer’” (Paley, 2010, p. 74).

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Notes

ⁱ Aoki (1993) differentiated between two conceptions of curriculum: the curriculum-as-lived and the curriculum-as-plan. The curriculum-as-plan, he clarified, "is the work of curriculum planners" (p. 258), while the curriculum-as-lived honours the multiplicity of interactions, interests, and contextual considerations in life compositions.

ⁱⁱ I draw upon Lugones' (1987) conception of a 'world' here. She elucidated, "A 'world' need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few people. Some 'worlds' are bigger than others" (p. 10).

ⁱⁱⁱ While Paley does not name this as one of the themes within her book, for me, her words invite resonances with the works of the authors cited in this review.

^{iv} Schwab (1973) identified four curricular commonplaces, commonplace in the sense that they are always at work when we speak of curriculum.

^v Lugones (1987) emphasized that ‘worlds’ are *constructions* – created by/for each of us for ourselves and others. Lugones argued that, while we may not agree with the worlds others have constructed for us, we may nonetheless “be *animating* such a construction” (p. 10). She explained that travel from one world to another – the shifts we experience as we travel to others’ worlds and among our own worlds – can occur with varying levels of ease and with playful and loving – or arrogant – perception. Playfulness, for Lugones, “is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight” (p. 17).

^{vi} Dewey (1938) differentiated between educative and miseducative experiences. An experience can be miseducative if it “has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 25). An educative experience, in contrast, encourages the growth of further experience.

^{vii} This is an Arabic word that can signify “let’s go,” “hurry up,” or “come on.”

^{viii} This is a colloquial way of referring to a maternal Aunt (or female elder) in Arabic.

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