

Book Review

***The Girl with the Brown Crayon* by Vivian Gussin Paley. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, 99 pages.**

Colour Me a New Curriculum-Making Story

See, Tico, he gived away all his wings because he wanted everyone to stop being mean to him. But he wanted to have some friends. Because they was being, like, 'I'm not going to be his friend 'cause he has golden wings. And he thinks he's better than me.' " She measures our attention, preparing us for an important statement. "But see, he really wasn't thinking he's better. But they thinked he was." (Paley, 1997, p. 13)

The above story fragment captures a moment whereby Reeny, a child in kindergarten, perceptively explains to her class why a fictional character, Tico, a bird, forsakes his special “golden” wings to maintain a sense of community. In suggesting a reality where some friends are more accepting of their peers’ special talents, while others require the needs of the group to be paramount, Reeny compels her teachers and classmates to think about what it means to be yourself in a community of other individuals. Writing during what was to be her last year as a kindergarten teacher, Vivian Gussin Paley (1997) inspired by her class’s appreciation of Leo Lionni’s picture books by using them as sites of educative (Dewey, 1938/1997ⁱ) possibilities. In doing so, she explores what it means to be a teacher coming alongside her co-teacher Nisha Ruparel-Sen and the children in the class, shaping a curriculum that is lived (Aoki, 1993ⁱⁱ) where caring (Noddings, 2005ⁱⁱⁱ) is at the heart of composing sustaining school stories. Embarking on a journey with her fellow travellers, Paley discovers that children are able to reason poignantly and insightfully on a diversity of topics, such as culture, race, identity, community, and belonging. By broaching topics adults often deem too challenging, the children question the rationale that such themes are taboo for young children to access. At the same time, Paley invites resonances, wonders, and inquiry into her stories to live by, those complex narratives dealing with identity, what Clandinin et al. (2006) proffered, “are multiple, fluid, and shifting, continuously composed and recomposed in the moment to moment living alongside children, families, administrators and others both on and off the school landscape” (p. 9).

Reading and re-reading *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, I found a liminal space (Heilbrun, 1999^{iv}) opened up for me to explore what it means to be a teacher engaging in curriculum making with children. Occurring in school settings but also in less recognized familial ones, curriculum making is relational where “children negotiate and navigate their unfolding understandings of themselves in their homes, communities, and schools and, as well, their experiences as they move within the spaces between these three, sometimes quite different, contexts” (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2011, p. 2). Different passages within Paley’s work permitted me opportunities to reflect, tell, and re-tell stories of my practice as a teacher shaping curriculum.

Recognizing Shades and Gradations

“I would prefer to have Reeny in a school with more black children and teachers . . . she will not become a leader of her people if she remains here” (Paley, 1997, p. 63), Miss Ettie, Reeny’s grandmother, explains to Paley. Miss Ettie elaborates and relates how a white staff member mistook her son-in-law for a technician rather than a parent and how she knows that this incident would never have occurred in her neighbourhood school. In this moment, Reeny’s grandmother renders visible the tensions she has with having her granddaughter as part of a school that does not explicitly cater to African American students. She shares her misgivings that Reeny’s opportunities for growth will be diminished. In the midst of turning the page I am visited by a provoking thought. I have been *that* teacher trying to negotiate a curriculum with students that seeks to honour their talents while perhaps *not attending enough* to what is happening in the familial curriculum-making worlds of students. A memory draws me back in time.

One day, after school, I met with the mother of one of the Grade Five students. This lovely woman and I had developed a comfortable relationship. She confided in me that she felt at ease with me because of the similarities in our outlook on life and the similar values with which we had been brought up as women of colour. Lucia^v visited with me quite often, and we enjoyed one another’s company. This time, however, I specifically asked Lucia to drop by the classroom to have a chat about her son Tomás^{vi} and was a little apprehensive in sharing some observations I had made with respect to his behaviour over the past few days. Tomás, who when I first came to teach the class had been reported by other teachers as being short-tempered and a mediocre student at best, had not lived up to his infamous reputation. Instead, what I found was a young boy who was incredibly pleased with the way I pronounced his name. I learned from Tomás’s mom that other teachers and even Tomás’s peers employed an anglicized version of his name that had stuck with him in the past two years he attended the school. I further discovered a boy who could write incredible stories with the snappy dialogue that a teacher often dreams about, a child who could not only play a mean game of soccer but also multiply numbers with ease. In other words, Tomás was a student akin to other students deserving to be understood in the multiplicity of the stories he told and lived. Lugones (1987) recollects for me:

one can be at the same time in a “world” that constructs one as stereotypically latin, for example, and in a “world” that constructs one as latin. Being stereotypically latin and being simply latin are different simultaneous constructions of persons that are part of different “worlds.” One animates one or the other or both at the same time without necessarily confusing them, though simultaneous enactment can be confusing if one is not on one’s guard. (p. 11)

The end of the day drew near, and amidst the cacophony of scraping chairs, slamming of lockers, and pounding of feet headed outdoors, Lucia walked into the classroom. She nodded lovingly to her son who sat at his desk pounding his fist and asked him calmly to leave the room. Cheeks flushed red, eyes bright with some unspoken emotion, Tomás jumped up and stomped out of the classroom, slamming the door behind him. Troubled, I met Lucia’s darkened gaze.

Before I could speak, Lucia proceeded to share with me that there were problems at home. She and her husband were considering a separation. Tears started streaming down Lucia's face as she

revealed that Tomás wanted his father to remain at home. In tugging this memory forward, I am grateful to Miller Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck (2012) who help me to more profoundly understand, "To make them consistent with reality, curricular conceptual representations of family need to be reshaped to accurately reflect and honour the many and varied ways in which people form caring groups that support and honour their members" (p. 742).

That year, my identity as a culturally competent (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2000^{vii}; 2012) teacher bumped up or came in tension with my realization that while I was actively trying to bridge the mandated curriculum by attending to the lives of students, there was something elusive that was missing in my thinking. For Tomás, I had not thought deeply enough about what it means to be caught between two worlds. In Tomás's school world, he had to live by certain rules which defined who he could be in that space. In Tomás's world of home, he was shaped by different expectations. Speaking later with Tomás, I learned how Tomás's dad might yell and how this yelling could be frightening. bell hooks (1994) wrote nostalgically of a time where attending school for her was "sheer joy," and attributes this incredible emotion to the fact that "teachers made sure they 'knew' us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family" (p. 3). My personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), gained by "reconstructing the past and the intentions for a future" (p. 25) to handle the present, had not prepared me for how I would feel when I learned of the very real issues of love, belonging, and family that Tomás was attempting to make sense of at home and at school. In not fully attending to different stories of this young boy, I had not 'known' Tomás. And in not knowing Tomás, had I inadvertently ignored his storied life? Had I been too busy thinking about the world of school that I was trying to create for him and other students, that I neglected to notice Tomás's wings, those golden feathers of his, were not holding him aloft as high as before? How had I missed that the currents of wind, which once sustained him, changed direction causing him to act differently in class?

I wonder now whether Paley experienced a similar sense of shock as she sat alongside Miss Ettie on the bench partaking in that remarkable conversation. Did she question, much like I have queried about Tomás, whether she really 'knew' Reeny? Had Miss Ettie's constructions of her granddaughter as a future leader in the African American community disrupted Paley's own teaching stories? Did she begin to consider, much like myself, whether she unintentionally made it more challenging for children to live a school story of safety and open sharing? In thinking about previous students, did Paley contemplate how *her* knowing of the children in her care could have varied from the knowing shared by the children's family? Perhaps in the quiet moments after the chat with Miss Ettie, Paley felt herself turning inward, to a time when she, like Reeny, was a precocious child shaping her identity in those spaces inside school and outside of school.

More Than Cherry Blossoms

One of my earliest formal teaching experiences comes from being a foreign language teacher. I taught English as a second language teacher in Japan. For over a year, I worked alongside students of different ages sometimes individually and in other times, within small

groups. One of the students was a high school student. She, similar to Tomás, was a student with whom I had developed a special rapport. Hiromi^{viii}, unlike some of the other students in the school, was confident conversing in English though it was not her first language. However, it

was I who felt as if English had suddenly become a foreign entity when during a private lesson, Hiromi revealed to me she was dating a much older man. Taken aback and very worried, I asked her whether her parents knew that she, a sixteen year old girl, was in a relationship with a thirty-five year old male. I was concerned about the age gap between Hiromi and her “boyfriend,” as well as about the discrepancy in power a much older male would have on an impressionable young person. My disquiet only deepened when she informed me that she could not tell her parents about her friend as he was married.

Prior to this conversation, I had only seen the trappings of an iteration of a female Japanese student. Her hair secured in two side ponytails, her white blouse with tie slightly askew, and the dark pleated skirt Hiromi wore, concealed from me other stories she lived out. I am drawn close to Adichie (2009) who cautions against accepting a single version of a story. She warns, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.” She further elucidates, “It is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person.” Now as a graduate student, I contemplate how the constructions teachers animate at school and the ones animated at home shape the stories students live by. I recognize what Cremin argued, that “every family has a curriculum, which it teaches quite deliberately and systematically over time” (cited in Jackson, 1992, p. 8) *and* further understand that each classroom does the same; so how does a student negotiate and thereby live in this space between their various curriculum-making worlds (Clandinin et al., 2006)? By which tools are they able to fashion constructions of themselves, which pay homage to their dreams and hopes of who they are in any given moment, and who they wish to be in their forward-looking^{ix} stories? At the same time, I ponder the people students can turn to in their lives when negotiating winds that can potentially steer them into dangerous skies. I think about Reeny. In kindergarten she had the love of her family and additionally the love of her teacher and friends. But what happens to those students who grow up without that kind of support or conversely, the students who though possessing that valued support are unable to, for whatever reason, access it? Do they lose their bright glittering wings? Do they by necessity switch them out for lesser wings, ones that cannot possibly buffer them?

Maxine Greene (1977) speaks for the need to be awake and to seek out clarity as a means of bridging understanding. She believed “if students (and their teachers as well) are enabled to pose questions relevant to their life plans and their being in the world . . . new perspectives will open up . . . perspectives on the past, on cumulative meanings, on future possibilities” (p. 123). I think about Tomás and Hiromi, and try to reflect on how my understandings of them evolved as I became more awake to the complexities of their lives. My thoughts slide to Paley, and I wonder in what ways did her constructions of students, especially Reeny, alter as she became more awake to the lives of students beyond the classroom? What about Miss Ettie? As a beloved grandmother, how had her stories to live by, those of an African American woman whose grandmother had been a slave, and those of a woman who had been once a teacher herself, come to shape how she constructed Reeny? And there is Reeny herself. I am unable to forget that even as young as she was when Paley taught her, Reeny was her own person. And similar to Tomás

and Hiromi, Reeny had multiple constructions of herself in the different worlds she lived. It is Reeny who startles her grandmother when she keenly observed, “Grandma you forgot something about Swimmy. He was the leader of red fish . . . That means a black fish could be the leader of

another colour fish” (p. 91). In this manner, could Reeny have been comforting her grandmother, assuring her that Reeny’s own self-construction allowed for possibility? Was Reeny trying to tell her grandmother that she was like the character Swimmy, able to navigate cross-cultural waters while charting new courses? Or perhaps at the back of her mind, she made that intuitive leap, discerning what Tico had already learned, that the relationships we hold close *do* matter.

Shaping Identity and Building Community

As the story of her final year of teaching kindergarten unfolds, Paley seems to be opening herself up to a new way of understanding curriculum making. She reflects, “The children keep track of each other’s footprints in a way no magnifying instrument of mine can ever accomplish” (p. 96). Emboldening upon a traditional notion of curriculum by using specific picture books in innovative ways alongside the kindergarten class, Paley also recognized that there needs to be more: “Leo Lionni cannot supply such stories for us. We need real people, real family members to tell us this part of who we are” (p. 85). This sentiment, while not explicitly stated in the book, emerges in how Reeny and Miss Ettie behave with one another, their loved ones, and the other people they come alongside. Paley’s insight becomes my insight as I think about Tomás and Hiromi’s grappling with what it means to be themselves in relation with others and I contemplate as well what it means for me to be a caring teacher.

I am left with a feeling that the more awake (Greene, 1977; 1995) we are to the experiences of children, their stories to live by, the less clear we can see where the lines are demarked. Vivian Paley’s class demonstrated that curriculum making belies superficial understandings, for it is fluid and ever changing (Schwab, 1973^x). One of our earliest science lessons teaches students that mixing of yellow and blue make green, that combining blue and red produce purple, and so forth. Yet I think we tend to ignore that curriculum making, while it is in part a hegemonic endeavour, reproducing certain modes of thinking represented as labels, categories, and constructs (Greene, 1993^{xi}), those static colours, it is also a space where we can *shift* attention away from these habitual constructs (Anzuldúa, 1987/1999^{xii}), and infuse tints of colour. By purposely opening our hearts and minds, we can attend to diverse voices and honour many stories rather than privileging a few. Differing perspectives can inform us in shaping new palettes that build sustaining and healthy relationships amongst community. These are relationships which call on us to fly to our best ability, to live out self-affirming stories, while concurrently celebrating the many hues of our plumage so as to enjoy the multiplicity of who we are *in relation* with one another.

Paley’s young class proffered such perspectives by interpreting situations in ways that were novel to the adults living alongside them. Curriculum making, in this vein, is infinitely more complex and involves numerous constructions of children, teachers, and family members, and invariably, a readiness to have our stories interrupted and a willingness to be dispositioned (Vinz, 1997^{xiii}). hooks (1994) reminds me a classroom community is only that when “our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one

another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (p. 8). Tomás and Hiromi, as well as Reeney and her peers, assist me to understand that like adults, children and youth compose their lives in the midst of familial, linguistic, cultural, and institutional narratives (Clandinin, 2013^{xiv}).

That is, attending to such experiences is crucial in co-composing curriculum based on a foundation of mutual care and respect.

In starting to interrupt my stories of teachers, students, and school, I find that I am more willing to entertain those questions that I perhaps wouldn't have known to ask before. It is Paley (1997) whose words linger as I now think about [re]shaping lines:

I need the intense preoccupation of a group of children and teachers inventing new worlds as they learn to know each other's dreams. To invent is to come alive. Even more than the unexamined classroom, I resist the *uninvented* classroom. (p. 50)

And as I envision a forward-looking story, it is Reeney's words about Tico that nourish my hope that I (we) can colour beyond self-imposed lines:

Yes, you could too be my friend. I just don't want to give up my wings because I like them, because they look pretty. I'm not saying I look prettier than you. But I'm thinking, why don't you stay and we'll *talk* about it. Don't fly away. See, we can keep talking about it, okay? (p. 99)

Jinny Menon
University of Alberta
Canada

References

- Adichie, C. (2009, July). *The danger of a single story* [video file]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987/1999). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute.
- Aoki, T. T. (1993). Legitimizing lived curriculum: Toward a curricular landscape of multiplicity. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 8(3), 255–268. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=adb158c6-6936-4cc5-8d30-e928b6487ced%40sessionmgr13&vid=4&hid=10>
- Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. San Francisco, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Clandinin, D. J., Huber, J., Huber, M., Murphy, M. S., Orr, A., Pearce, M., & Steeves, P. (2006). *Composing diverse identities: Narrative inquiries into the interwoven lives of children and teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Connelly, F. M. & Clandinin, D. J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938/1997). *Experience and education*. New York: NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Greene, M. (1977). Toward wide-awakeness: An argument for the arts and humanities in education. *Teachers College Record*, 79(1), 119-125. Retrieved from https://maxinegreene.org/uploads/library/toward_wide_wakeness.pdf
- Greene, M. (1993). Diversity and inclusion: Toward a curriculum for human beings. *Teachers College Record*, 95(2), 211-221. Retrieved from http://wp.vcu.edu/hhughesdecatour/files/2013/01/Toward-a-curriculum-for-human-beings_Maxine-Greene.pdf
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Heilbrun, C. (1999). *Women's lives: The view from the threshold*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Huber, J., Murphy, M. S., & Clandinin, D. J. (2011). *Places of curriculum making: Narrative inquiries into children's lives in motion*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Jackson, P. (1992). Conceptions of curriculum and curriculum specialists. In P. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum* (pp. 3-40). New York, NY: Macmillan.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159-165. Retrieved from <http://edt2.educ.msu.edu/DWong/te150s11/CourseReader/LadsonBillings-ButThatsJustGoodTeaching.pdf>

Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Fighting for our lives: Preparing teachers to teach African American students. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 206-214. Retrieved from <http://www.fredonia.edu/pdc/keynote/Fighting%20For%20Our%20Lives.pdf>

Ladson-Billings, G. (2012, October). *Cultural competency* [video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mgouex0WSJw>

Lindemann Nelson, H. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Lugones, M. (1987). Playfulness, “world”-travelling, and loving perception, *Hypatia*, 2(2), 3-19. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810013>

Miller Marsh, M. & Turner-Vorbeck, T. (2012). Education and family diversity. In J. Banks (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of diversity in education*. (pp. 742-744). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.sagepub.com/hall/study/materials/deeperlook/deeperlook5.1.pdf>

Noddings, N. (2005). *Caring in education*. Retrieved from http://www.infed.org/biblio/noddings_caring_in_education.htm

Paley, V. G. (1997). *The girl with the brown crayon*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Schwab, J. (1973). The practical 3: Translation into curriculum. *The School Review*, 81(4), 501-522. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1084423>

Vinz, R. (1997). Capturing a moving form: 'Becoming' as teachers. *English Education*, 29(2), 137-146. Retrieved from <http://login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/214376816?accountid=14474>

Notes

ⁱ Dewey (1938/1997) proposed that for learning to be educative, “the educator views teaching and learning as a continuous process of reconstruction of experience” (p. 87).

ⁱⁱ For Aoki (1993) such a curriculum honours “lived meanings, thereby legitimating thoughtful everyday narratives” (p. 263) and does not privilege the conventional conception of a curriculum as planned over teachers’ and students’ experiences.

ⁱⁱⁱ Noddings (2005) expressed, “The caring teacher strives first to establish and maintain caring relations, and these relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything teacher and student do together” (para. 9).

^{iv} Heilbrun (1999) explicated, “The most salient sign of liminality is its unsteadiness, its lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing” (p. 3).

^v Lucia is a pseudonym.

^{vi} Tomás is a pseudonym.

^{vii} Ladson-Billings (2000) contends, “Cultural competence can be supported in the classroom . . . through the use of curriculum content sections that reflect the full range of humanity extant in students’ cultures” (p. 210).

^{viii} Hiromi is a pseudonym.

^{ix} Lindemann Nelson (2001) interpreted a forward-looking story as a pairing of a “commitment to a future course of action” (p. 16) with a desire of where one wishes to go.

^x According to Schwab (1973) curriculum is shaped amongst the *interconnected* commonplaces of learner, subject matter, milieu (context), and teacher.

^{xi} Greene (1993) identified these hegemonic ways of being and thinking as “the taken-for-granted” (p. 211).

^{xii} Anzaldúa (1987/1999) employed the term *la facultad* to refer to an ability that is developed when habitual modes of seeing reality are broken and new ways of seeing are created.

^{xiii} Dispositioning, Vinz (1997) suggested, occurs when we consciously open ourselves up to ambiguity and uncertainty in order to shape new understandings.

^{xiv} Clandinin (2013) evokes a sense of the intricate nature of the lives people live. Individuals are constantly in the midst of living storied lives. That is, their stories to live by, their stories dealing with identity are shaped by enduring, unfolding, and interwoven narratives.

Jinny Menon is a doctoral student in the Teacher Education Program in Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. She is also a member of the university’s Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development. A former elementary school teacher/administrator, Jinny is interested in narrative inquiry as a relational methodology. She looks forward to adopting a multiperspectival approach while inquiring into the curriculum-making experiences of South Asian girls, their mothers, and teachers in and out of schools. Email: jinnymenon@hotmail.com