

Book Review

***In Mrs. Tully's Room: A Childcare Portrait* by Vivian Gussin Paley. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 160 pages.**

Keeping Mama in Mind: Curriculum Making through Stories to Live By

I am shown to a chair and immediately there are eight two-year-olds speeding around me, each going in a different direction....Big soft pillows on the floor cushion their tumbles and adult laps offer further comfort, but the stop and go rhythm is unlike anything I am used to in a classroom. This is uncharted territory for me. (Paley, 2001, p. 2)

A boy named Alex comes to a halt at Mrs. Tully's chair. "Mama," he says, and his teacher prints "MAMA" on unlined paper. She waits for more, pen in midair. "Mama you say?" "Mama," he repeats, and is gone before further information can be solicited. "Mama" is the first story of the day. It will be acted out with several others dictated during the next thirty minutes. Along with everything else going on, the twos are doing stories. "Doing" is the verb of choice. (p. 3)

Introduction

The book, *In Mrs. Tully's Room: A Childcare Portrait*, is the eleventh of thirteen books written by Vivian Gussin Paley (2001). The 153-page book is based on Paley's observations in Mrs. Tully's childcare centre for 2 to 5-year-olds, where the children learn through storytelling. Mrs. Tully's centre, which she refers to as a small private school, is in a leased space in a local church within an older district in Chicago, Illinois. The space is divided into two school classrooms: one for the 2-year-olds and one for the *olders* (3 to 5-year-olds). Paley's observations in Mrs. Tully's room are especially insightful as they are made through her lens as a retired preschool and kindergarten teacher of 37 years, who used a similar method of storytelling in her own classroom. Through reflecting on her past practice, while observing the present in Mrs. Tully's classroom, Paley enables the reader to envision ways of teaching for the future.

In Mrs. Tully's Room: A Childcare Portrait reads much like a diary or journal, and brings to life key components of an early childhood curriculum. Paley's observations reveal how Mrs. Tully is alert to the lived curricula in her classroom through the telling and acting out of stories by her students, particularly the 2-year-olds. Attending to Paley's book, we, the authors, each make sense of Paley's writing by drawing on our own lived experiences as former elementary school teachers, current teacher educators and researchers, and mothers of young children. We were each drawn to this book because of the stories of our own families, which presently both include toddlers who have stories to tell. Together we came to see how Paley's work in Mrs. Tully's classroom provides a thought provoking perspective that helps us to reflect on curriculum making with young children.

We are writing this review of Paley's research to thoroughly explore two valuable conceptions of curriculum: 1. Curriculum can be understood as lived curricula, or life making,

experienced by students and teachers through daily face-to-face living on a classroom landscape (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988); 2. Curricula of diversity and inclusion can exist when situations are created for students and teachers to tell and exchange stories that help them “begin to recognize each other and, in the experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another” (Greene, 1993, p. 218). We do not view curriculum as solely a curriculum-as-plan directed by objectives, but, more importantly, as the living experiences of all those who dwell in school places and classrooms. Working with Schwab’s (1973) commonplaces of learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu, we illustrate how Mrs. Tully makes a curriculum of diversity with young students as she lives alongside them in the classroom landscape.

Stories to Live By

Dewey’s (1938) principles of experiential continuity and interaction affirm the importance of acknowledging that all of a person’s experiences—past, present, and future—are related to and interact with each other within a context. Dewey states that “every experience is a moving force” (p. 38) and, thus, past experiences of, for example, students and teachers, modify and affect present and future experiences. It is impossible to control the past; however, teachers can try to understand the past experiences of both themselves and students to invent appropriate learning situations in the classroom (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Both Paley and Mrs. Tully use experience-based stories as foundations in their curricula decision making, which in turn empowers students to make their own curricular decisions, to choose their friendships, and to be comfortable being themselves. For young children, stories are a tangible way to share their life experiences, as well as further experience their lives as they intersect with the lives of those around them.

To understand how we see stories as empowering in Mrs. Tully’s classroom, it is first necessary to explore Connelly and Clandinin’s (1988) concepts of *personal practical knowledge* and *stories to live by*. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) suggest that teachers’ knowledge, termed personal practical knowledge, resides in their practice, and that it encompasses not only the academic knowledge they possess, but also knowledge found in teachers’ past experiences, in their present mind and body, and in their future plans and actions. When teachers employ their personal practical knowledge in order to negotiate the demands of present circumstances, they are restructuring both past experiences and the intentions of future plans. In *In Mrs. Tully’s Room*, both Paley’s (2001) and Mrs. Tully’s personal practical knowledge are revealed through the personal stories they share with each other and with the children. As Paley tries to make sense of what she is seeing and hearing as a researcher in Mrs. Tully’s classroom, she reflects on and writes about her own past experiences as a kindergarten teacher, some of which she has written about in her previous books. Mrs. Tully draws heavily on her own storied experiences as a child, particularly those she experienced in the care of her grandfather, to both teach children in her classroom through storytelling and to demonstrate her teaching beliefs to Paley and the parents of the children. These stories are her stories to live by.

Stories to live by are personal in that they reflect a person’s life history, and social, in that they reflect the contexts in which one lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Clandinin and Connelly (1998) state that it is through stories to live by that one is given a window into people’s past and current understandings to see how they experience living alongside one another. For example, many times throughout the day Mrs. Tully acts as a scribe and records the children’s stories to live by at the story table, carefully repeating each word that the storyteller dictates. The

first story that Paley hears in Mrs. Tully's room is a one-word story: Mama. The story does not simply remain fixed on the unlined paper on which it was written but comes alive and personal as the children act out together their various interpretations of "Mama." Paley writes, "If you do the stories, you'll all do them in different ways and all make different discoveries" (p. 118). In the following excerpt, readers can see how a 2-year-old's one-word story reveals the children's past experiences through their present personal and social understandings of Mama.

The teacher narrates the one word epic [Mama]... Each acts the role according to some inner logic: this one walks on his toes, another bends to touch the rug, someone else closes her eyes and sways. With every new interpretation the suspense builds... Their ability to bring a character to life and reveal something about themselves is astonishing. They are *doing* stories. Doing goes beyond pretending and telling; doing is the final process, or at least the sum of events up to a particular moment (p. 5).

The children are highly capable of making connections from their unique personal narratives of experience, as well as the experiences of others, to the stories being told and read in class. The stories the children tell are their stories to live by, and much can be learned about how the children live their lives together at school from not only the stories they tell but how they act them out together in their classroom.

The Role of the Learner, Teacher, Subject Matter and Milieu

As Mrs. Tully and the children live together on the school landscape, they compose lived curriculum. Schwab's (1973) construct of the four dynamically interrelated curriculum commonplaces (learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu), to which curriculum makers must attend for successful curriculum making, are revealed in the experiences of Mrs. Tully and the children, further stressing how curriculum is lived and made and not simply a text or document that is applied to learning experiences.

The commonplace of learner in Mrs. Tully's classroom, for example, is readily apparent through the ways in which Mrs. Tully views the children. Although the children benefit from the guidance of their teacher, whose world of experience is wider than theirs (Dewey, 1938), Mrs. Tully views the young learners as competent people capable of constructing their own knowledge. There is so much the children can contribute because of the carefully shaped classroom milieu that their teacher fosters. Further, Mrs. Tully acknowledges that the children have powerful imaginations and are capable of creating their own stories—stories, that are, for example, purposefully crafted to welcome an outsider into a group, avoid conflict or misbehaviour, reveal inner pain, or comfort another in his or her pain. Such stories reveal the students' capabilities as learners. Even more, however, is revealed about these learners by examining the subject matter that emerges out of their stories.

The commonplace of subject matter in Mrs. Tully's classroom is often initiated by the students and revealed by way of their storytelling and theater. Foremost on the children's minds are their mamas; keeping mama in mind is "a curricular impetus" (Paley, 2001, p. 7) and a key motivation to tell a story. Just as the students are full of purpose, so are their stories. When telling and acting out stories, children draw upon their personal experience of family life, which results in "the reincarnation of home" (p. 11). In this reincarnation, there exists a safe space for children to initiate the main subject matter of community, which is created in Mrs. Tully's classroom through the group experience of storytelling. The children create a classroom community alongside their teacher as they draw on the personal experience of their home lives.

Mrs. Tully describes storytelling in her classroom as “the beginning of an *us*. A real community,” (p. 12) where students explore personal matters that affect the whole community. Through stories and theater, children “overcome shyness, language obstacles, immaturity and discontent” (p. 115). In this creation of community, the children become so aware of each other’s needs, that “the girl who no one notices had noticed that the girl who never talks has spoken” (p. 82). This triumph is celebrated by Mrs. Tully, who carefully observes and participates in this building of community, just as her grandpa contributed to the community of siblings and cousins where she grew up as a child.

In the teacher commonplace, Mrs. Tully relates to the children in an intimate manner, as both a teacher and caregiver. As a teacher, she brings her personal practical knowledge from her childhood experiences into her interactions with the students. Just as her grandpa told her and her siblings and cousins stories as they gathered around him on his porch, so does Mrs. Tully tell her students stories as they gather around her. Drawing on this familial learning experience, Mrs. Tully also takes on a caregiver role in her classroom where she interacts with the 2-year-old children in an intimate and nurturing way, welcoming them onto her lap as she teaches.

Further reflecting on the teacher commonplace, Mrs. Tully, other than her daily work as a scribe of the children’s stories, very carefully selects the instances to place herself into the children’s busy interactions and provide them with guidance. When she does interject, she does so through storytelling. Mrs. Tully says, like her grandpa, she knows where to “apply” (Paley, 2001, p. 42) a story. For instance, when she observes two of the children entangled in a physical altercation, she does not respond with punishment, but rather, she responds by telling a story to live by of her childhood cow Miranda, starting her story by saying, “My my...our Miranda would cry if she saw you boys” (p. 57). She then ends her story with a description of Miranda in a peaceful barn, inspiring the children to return the classroom to a peaceful and harmonious state. Another time, when children are caught up in an unwavering disagreement regarding their roles in a fantasy they are acting out, Mrs. Tully “alter[s] the fantasy” (p. 109) by offering suggestions that successfully redirects the plot of the children’s story. In another situation, Mrs. Tully turns her back to the conflict occurring in the doll corner as a story is being acted out, listening carefully as the children eventually allow each other “a satisfying role to play” (p. 111). Whether intervening or allowing the children to solve problems on their own, Mrs. Tully is always nearby to help the children keep their stories alive, just as her grandpa did for her decades earlier.

The overall commonplace of milieu in Mrs. Tully’s classroom, which includes the social environment and accompanying relationships, is a manifold nesting (Schwab, 1973) of numerous milieus including: the 1) familial, 2) personal, 3) temporal, and 4) communal. First, it is Mrs. Tully’s childhood image of a “porch full of cousins playing on the steps, hanging over the railings, listening to grandpa’s stories and making up [their] own” (Paley, 2001, p. 33) that contributes to a familial home-like atmosphere in the classroom. Second, through the personal nature of the classroom atmosphere that Mrs. Tully helps create, all children feel welcome and are certain in the fact that their insecurities, fears, and differences are welcome as well. As Mrs. Tully shapes the personal milieu, she provides a safe and motivating space for the children to shape the subject matter through their storytelling, and the subject matter that they most often choose is one which is personal. For instance, a child, Mitya, who does not speak English, “did” a story about his cat. His classmate Alex responded by taking on the role of Mitya’s cat “meowing for all he was worth” (p. 69). From this, a beautiful and much needed friendship began. Third, Mrs. Tully creates a distinct temporal milieu in the classroom where children are not bound by the time limits that rigid schedules create. This temporality, only bound by the

arrival of the children at the beginning of the day and their departure at the end, creates a space where details of the children's stories, as well as their personalities, have the time to emerge. This unbound space allows children to make connections from one person's story to another person's story. Time in Mrs. Tully's classroom is used well, stretched out for as long as the children require to achieve their learning through storytelling. Fourth, the classroom milieu is one of community, a fresh and recently born community where children are learning to look beyond themselves to the needs and desires of their classmates to become "equal partners in work and play" (p. 136). Ultimately, the milieu in Mrs. Tully's classroom is one of a community of learners (which includes the teacher and parents), helping each other to make sense of the world in which they live, encouraging one another in each other's "becoming" (Greene, 1993, p. 212).

Composing a Curriculum of Diversity and Community

Mrs. Tully's classroom curriculum is one of diversity that unfolds through the unique and diverse stories that intermingle there. This curriculum of diversity honors differences and allows space for each child's stories to be told. In Mrs. Tully's classroom there exists an inclusion of "multiple realities" (Greene, 1993, p. 215), where all classroom members are responsive to increasing numbers of life-stories, to more and more different voices. Greene suggests that central to curriculum making are encounters with the arts, such as storytelling, that "can awaken us to alternative possibilities of existing, of being human, of relating to others, of *being* other" (p. 214). Mrs. Tully, through her conscious choice to welcome the telling and acting of life-stories in her classroom, and through her attention to Schwab's (1973) commonplaces, creates a space for a curriculum of diversity.

In Mrs. Tully's class of 2-year-olds there is abundant diversity "like the gumbo stew that Mama kept bubbling on the stove" (Paley, 2001, p. 30), described by Mrs. Tully. Each child comes from a family with their own beliefs and values, past experiences, and stories to live by; however, it is when these diverse children and families, and their stories to live by, coalesce in Mrs. Tully's classroom that tensions unravel. Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2003) state that it is tension that shapes the making of a curriculum of diversity and that a curriculum of diversity is, necessarily, an uncertain moment-by-moment making (p. 344). For example, as Mrs. Tully sorts out the previously mentioned physical altercation between two children, Mrs. Tully brings peace to the classroom by telling a story about a conflict on her childhood farm experienced by her brothers, her cow Miranda, and the other barnyard animals. After hearing the story,

The children are ready to like one another and move on, returning to their activities in a hopeful mood, as though something good has happened. The teacher's story allowed them to imagine people and animals living together in harmony, sparing everyone the indignity of punishment and recrimination. (Paley, 2001, p. 60)

It is within such tensions negotiated across differences that others can come to imagine new ways of being with each other and to restore peacefulness while maintaining the uniqueness and importance of being different.

A curriculum of diversity flourishes in Mrs. Tully's classroom because the teacher, learners, subject matter, and milieu are in constant and dynamic interaction, allowing meaning to be made as the children's and adults' diverse stories to live by rub against each other (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). Greene (1993) believes that in coming together in pluralities and differences, which are revealed through stories to live by, students need to recognize each other in their

striving, their becoming, their inventing of the possible to be able to “reach past themselves” (p. 220) to become and to exist.

A Different Way of Being with Children

Mrs. Tully’s classroom shows a different way of being with children: one in which parents, grandparents, siblings, and other family members are always welcome, and there is a sense of community and solidarity among all those connected to the school. Paley writes that Mrs. Tully’s “faith in fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers is legendary. She believes in them and expects them to bring their wisdom into the classroom (Paley, 2001, p. 83). Paley senses that because the families know Mrs. Tully believes in their children, they are willing to try to understand what she values. In the moments when some parents challenge Mrs. Tully’s actions, particularly on her choice to use stories instead of punishment, other parents defend her use of stories by saying that one must see for oneself how Mrs. Tully’s stories are a powerful way of being with children and how they teach children respect and acceptance.

It is within spaces, such as Mrs. Tully’s classroom, that one can see and awaken to the tensions that too often are buried beneath the taken-for-granted living out of the dominant story of school, which silence stories of diversity (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2003). In Mrs. Tully’s spaces created for families, children, and teachers to live together within a curriculum of diversity, Mrs. Tully attends closely to how the children’s and family’s stories of school and stories to live by bump up against the stories of school happening in her classroom. This interplay is demonstrated in the story of Vassi, a child in Mrs. Tully’s classroom. Vassi does not speak at school, even though she speaks at home. Consequently, Mrs. Tully invites Vassi’s father, who speaks Bengali at home, to come into the classroom so that Vassi can witness his father speaking English. Soon after this visit, Vassi speaks her first words at school while acting out a story about birthdays with her classmates. Here is a nesting of the familial milieu within the personal milieu, within the temporal milieu, within the communal milieu, that contributes to the composing of a curriculum of diversity in the classroom. In the familial and personal milieu, Vassi’s father helps solve Vassi’s struggle to speak at school. Further, in the temporal milieu, Mrs. Tully, acting on her grandpa’s belief that matters such as Vassi’s “will work out in time” (Paley, 2001, p. 79), allows Vassi the time to adjust to the classroom rather than pushing her to speak. And, in the communal milieu, it is within a community of diverse learners, and through the interaction with her classmates in the sandbox, that Vassi finds the courage to speak. Her milestone of speaking at school is achieved through the interaction of the commonplaces, particularly the milieus in the classroom, but also because diversity is acknowledged, welcomed, and never silenced in Mrs. Tully’s classroom.

Conclusion

Paley’s (2001) book, *In Mrs. Tully’s Room*, brings to light how young children and their teachers can create curriculum together through storytelling and theatre. The lived curricula in the classroom is evident through the interaction of Schwab’s (1973) commonplaces: that is, learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu, as well as through the stories that reside within these commonplaces. Drawing on the life experiences and stories to live by of teachers, children, and parents, Paley illustrates how young children are capable of creating community through a curriculum of diversity. Mrs. Tully’s classroom reflects Green’s (1993) call to educators to

begin creating the kinds of situations where, at the very least, students will begin telling stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with others grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something into being that is in-between. (p. 218)

In the wise words of Lillian Tully, “When my babies do their stories...they really see each other. That’s what we need to go after in school, the seeing and the listening to each other.” (Paley, 2001, p. 24). We, the authors, live out this seeing and listening to each other, as we continue to tell and act out stories ‘Paley style’ with our own children, and encourage our undergraduate students to employ stories as a means of curriculum making with those they teach. We believe that when children, teachers, and parents are afforded the opportunity to see and listen to each other, school, family, and community relationships result. These partnerships further a making of curriculum that embraces diversity and inclusion among the children and others who live their lives together in classrooms and beyond.

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