

RESEARCH REPORT

An Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry Into Curriculum Making Experiences as a Resource Teacher

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At the time, I was one of two resource teachers. Both of us were new to the school; I had been there for just over a year. I sped walked down the hall to visit a few students whose stories filled the narrative of the previous day. My intent was to check in with the educational assistants, teachers, and students in order to get a temperature check prior to any incidents occurring. From down the hall, I heard Mrs. Wilson¹ call my name. "Miss Michelle," she said, "can I speak with you?" Her voice and body emanated tension as she called out.

Without breaking stride, I turned and mentally switched gears. Mrs. Wilson's class had two students on my radar whose needs were not yet being consistently met. Was her concern about one of these boys? Mrs. Wilson stepped out into the hall, closed her room door behind her, took a deep breath, and said, "You need to take Sam. He won't stop walking around, interrupting the class, and getting into things. He needs to be with someone who can meet his needs right now." I nodded and she swiftly turned around, opened her door, and walked to the front of the class to resume her lesson. As she talked to the class, I quietly gathered up Sam, his work, and a snack. Hand in hand, we headed to the resource area, both of us carrying some healthy snacks and items to support curriculum making.

Coming to the Research

Teachers are often master students who thrive in structured school settings; however, not everyone learns well in school. There is a great responsibility for adults in schools to support students as thriving learners. What barriers are there to student learning? What changes are needed to nurture learning? How can we best learn alongside others? Through autobiographical narrative inquiry, I have explored these questions in an effort to bring forth transformation within myself. As a master student, perhaps I can learn to provide richer opportunities for others to engage in learning. As a resource teacher, perhaps I can experience learning alongside other adults with greater frequency and duration. As a human, perhaps I can learn to make curriculum alongside others and to let curriculum re-make me in a cherished relationship that never ends.

Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posed the question, "What does narrative inquiry help us to learn about our phenomenon that other theories or methods do not?" (p. 123). Narrative inquiry supports an exploration of how a person's position in the world affects the questions that person asks about the world. Through narrative inquiry, one can explore "the whole context of a life" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 101). In using autobiographical narrative inquiry with a field text, I am not just re-telling my experience to myself. I am transforming this field text into a research text so that I may understand myself in relation to myself and the world. I am part of the phenomenon that I wish to study.

There are three ways to justify research: personal, practical, and social justifications. Personal justification is about finding points of tension or puzzles in life, and leaning into them.

¹ All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of others.

Practical justification is about exploring possible change in one's practice or perspective. The theoretical type of social justification concerns "how an inquiry can contribute to new methodological and disciplinary knowledge" (Shaw, 2017, p. 223).

My own research began with selecting experiences fraught with tension and a feeling of incompleteness, followed by writing personal autobiographical narratives of these experiences, and re-reading them. I then selected one autobiographical narrative with the purpose of delving into the research puzzle in an attempt to draw learning experiences from re-viewing the narrative, and exploring new understandings of how to learn alongside others. It is my hope that others in my discipline may also glean some information that will aid them in shifting practice and perspective.

Understanding Curriculum Making

Schwab (1973) discussed five essential ingredients to the curriculum making process. First, general and specific knowledge of children is required. Second, there is knowledge of milieu, or the social environment in the classroom. The milieu is affected by the dynamics of many areas, such as the class, the school, student relationships to one another, family relations, the community, and the political climate. Third, there is knowledge of teachers: what they know and their flexibility, personality, prevailing moods, relation to children, feelings of self, background, and biases. Fourth, there is knowledge of subject matter and how experts in the field view their subject matter.

Here, I pause and digest these first four essential ingredients. Knowledge of children, milieu, teachers, and subject matter are essential. The interactions of these four ingredients is dynamic, which is the essence of the curriculum making process (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). The fifth ingredient is knowledge of the curriculum making process (Schwab, 1973). A teacher may understand and anticipate how these ingredients will collide to shape the learning experience for all. Since curriculum is being made not only by the teacher but also by the learners, the social environment, and the subject matter, it is a daunting task full of unanticipated interruptions. Tensions may arise when teachers view interruptions as something negative, an unhelpful disruption to their plan which requires immediate rerouting. Conversely, interruptions can also be perceived as new learning journeys, a way to acknowledge students as curriculum makers, and an opportunity for teachers to learn alongside their students. Sam, a master of interruptions, was a largely unacknowledged curriculum maker, and Mrs. Wilson gave me an opportunity to slow down and make space to learn from him.

Curriculum making occurs anytime a teacher interacts with a student, educational assistant, peer teacher, or other person. When Mrs. Wilson spoke to me, she provided me with enough information to take steps to support Sam. This is curriculum making. When I entered the class to "gather up Sam," I took time to greet him, do a temperature check, invite him to my space, ask him what we needed for that space, help him to gather items, and offer my hand. This guided Sam in transitioning to another space. He felt wanted, and he connected with me. This is curriculum making. The teacher, returning to the front of her class to teach, gave Sam and I space to do this without directing the class's attention to us. This is a good way to respect all students in the class by making private spaces within public spaces. The class received this message from Mrs. Wilson, Sam, and me. This is another snippet of curriculum making.

One may imagine school as not just an institution for subject matter, but as a space that shifts the focus to the learning process. The definition of curriculum making could be extended to include any intentional learning interaction made between people at any time and in any place. Curriculum making does not need to be done by a teacher, or even in an interaction with a human. It could be a dog owner interacting with her dog in the park. With this extension, a curriculum maker is one who consciously understands the dynamic mix of ingredients that make up interactions in life, and uses them to support growth in self and others. To me, this is curriculum making. If curriculum making is any interaction, then teaching is the art of interaction,

and the exploration of understanding how to learn alongside others and how to invite others to learn.

Finding Threads of Continuity

Dewey (1938) outlined that “the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after (p. 34). Expanding on Dewey’s ideas, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote the following:

The linear notion that objectives and achievement were mediated by the teachers and curriculum was narratively in question. According to a narrative construction, the teacher is not merely a filtering variable factor to be considered as either an impediment or a catalyst for the achievement of objectives. Rather, the teacher is part of the curriculum and therefore part of the establishment of the goals in the first place and part of the ensuing achievement. (pp. 28-29)

Applying these ideas to my journey with Sam, I am beginning to understand curriculum anew. Do I *implement* or *make* curriculum, or is curriculum *making* me, shaping me continuously? And so I begin to search for new words.

As Sam and I walked down the hall, I reflected on the past few weeks and how I could have better supported this student, class, and teacher. I thought of possible next steps, planned on chatting with the teacher later in the day to discuss and decide what to do, and scheduled in possible times to fit these steps into my schedule. I paused, and asked myself how I could get into this classroom, crossing the boundary into Mrs. Wilson’s world, into Sam’s world, so that I could better understand what Sam needed to be successful in class. I wondered how I might transition from being an outsider looking in, to an active participant in the curriculum *exploring* process with Sam. So began my journey where I learned to cross boundaries, enter other worlds, and begin making curriculum in partnership with classroom teachers and students.

Travelling into Sam’s “World”

As I interacted with Sam, I created space so that Sam could invite me into his world. Lugones wrote of “worlds,” referring to societal constructs that contain people. These worlds can even represent whole societies. Lugones (1987) also described the importance of playfulness.

Those of us who are “world”-travelers have the distinct experience of being different in different “world” and of having the capacity to remember other “worlds” and ourselves in them . . . The shift from being one person to being a different person is what I call “travel.” (p. 11)

As I spent time learning alongside Sam, I became someone else, as the curriculum Sam and I played with together changed us both. I began to view curriculum as something that *acts* upon me, upon us all.

Curriculum Making with Sam

Upon arriving in the resource area, we put our things on the desk. I quickly turned off the main lights, softening the room to hold natural light from the window, and drew the hall window shade to decrease distractions. I pulled out two chairs and sat in one, smiling at Sam, giving him space to direct our curriculum making.

Sam walked to the bookshelf and grabbed a fidget from the basket. He played with the item, chatting with me nonstop about his siblings, his morning on the bus, his pets, his favourite animals, and as he bounced from idea to idea, he slowly allowed me space to comment and ask questions. It was quite some time before we got to the classwork that day, which followed after chatting, having a snack, delivering some heavy books to

different classes, and having another snack. Throughout the whole process, Sam and I learned much from each other, and we did this in a good way, with space to communicate.

One place curriculum making occurs is “the moment where teachers’ and children’s lives interact as they meet in schools” (Driedger-Enns, 2014, p. 87). By this definition, Sam and I were making curriculum.

The teacher must have “intimate knowledge of the children” (Schwab, 1973, p. 502) as part of the essential ingredients in the curriculum making process. In this story, I understood that Sam’s nervous system was overactive. I reduced external stimuli by dimming the lights, removing distractions from outside the room, and putting out a chair to invite Sam to sit without words. Here, I was trying to set Sam up for success in calming his nervous system. I sat quietly with a smile, breathing deeply and relaxing my muscles to model how to calm my nervous system. All this was communication with an understanding of the ingredients needed to meet Sam where he was at and *invite* him to *grow* from this place. This is curriculum making.

At the same time, Sam was communicating with me. His response, or lack of response, told me what worked and what did not work in the moment. Nonverbal cues came to the foreground as he spoke through actions such as pacing and fidgeting, and more subtle cues such as breathing and the tension in his muscles. These interactions brought me more solidly into my own body, grounding my awareness of my own tensions, helping me to actively release my shoulders, slow my breathing, and be present in the moment with focus. Here, Sam was a curriculum maker, leading me to reflect. How could I communicate calmness nonverbally in a classroom while teaching a whole class? How long could I do it for? Is it a sustainable model?

Making Curriculum for Sam

Later that day, I connected with Mrs. Wilson, but she was quite busy so we decided to chat the next morning. During our talk, we discussed the calls that Mrs. Wilson had already made to Sam’s home. We agreed that it was time to have an in-person meeting with the family to discuss strengths, challenges, and next steps. Sam’s mom shared that she had similar experiences at home with her son and told us that Sam’s older brother, who had also behaved in a similar way at Sam’s age, had been diagnosed with ADHD. Upon the meeting’s conclusion, I committed to writing a letter outlining the challenges that Sam faced in class, and Mrs. Wilson began to fill out a weekly reporting form. Sam’s mom visited the doctor, who prescribed medication for Sam, which we monitored at home and school. This medication supported Sam in self-regulation and focus, thus supporting him in interacting with and learning from others at school. Here, the doctor and Sam’s mother provided Sam with medication that was also a part of the curriculum making process.

Throughout this process, Mrs. Wilson communicated with Sam’s mom through phone calls and she continued with the weekly reporting form, which Sam’s mom took to the doctor. Through all of this, I popped in and out of class, but did not maintain a consistent presence in the classroom. While educational assistant time was provided as a resource to support this process and Sam was beginning to get the help he needed, I was not present enough to be an active participant in the curriculum making process with Sam, Mrs. Wilson, or the classroom. The provocative question I had asked myself earlier about crossing boundaries to participate in the learning process had been lost in the busy shuffle of life as a resource teacher.

Here I pause and reflect on expectations of teachers and children. Sam, a bright young boy, thrived in co-creating curriculum in a room with natural light, few distractions, and an attentive participant. While it was difficult for him to focus on the worksheet, it was clear that Sam was capable of learning and leading learning. I wonder whether Sam’s need for medication was created or exacerbated by the systems in schools, by the expectations set on young

children, by the way schooling is done. If this is true, then the way schooling is done needs to change. The way curriculum is made needs to change. But how?

In the process of making a plan for Sam – making the curriculum *for* Sam – Mrs. Wilson and I drew on our professional knowledge landscapes, which Clandinin and Connelly (1996) described as the place where theory and practice intersect. As the resource teacher, I used my knowledge of interacting with doctors regarding ADHD to support Sam’s mom with a letter and reporting form that provided the doctor with the information required to support a medical decision regarding Sam. In this process, Mrs. Wilson and I both explored information from articles and our previous experiences on understanding and supporting students with ADHD. As the resource teacher, I was able to collaborate with Mrs. Wilson in this process, enriching both of our professional knowledge landscapes, which directly affected our curriculum making process. Through collaboration, we shared what worked for each of us, expanded our understanding of the other’s teaching practices, discussed the student’s strengths, challenges, and possible supports in his learning journey. By simply having someone to talk to, we stimulated further self-reflection that brought about new ideas.

Throughout this part of the process, Sam was no longer present. We made the plan *for* Sam, not *with* Sam. Sam’s part in curriculum making was interrupted. What does this mean for Sam, for his mom, for the teacher, for myself? What opportunities were lost because he was not there?

Crossing Boundaries: The Curriculum Making Cycle

At home one night, I took some time to review my caseload, thinking about where I spent most of my time, and where there was wiggle room to make changes. I determined that most of my day was still being spent shifting the school climate from reactive responsiveness to proactive anticipation of needs. I acknowledged to myself that achieving this goal would take time and that, while things were definitely improving, much more needed to be done to make space for students and staff in anticipating student needs and proactively establishing supports to meet those needs.

Soon after, I emailed the classroom teachers I worked with about supporting their classrooms for one period every second day for an eight-week cycle. I asked each teacher to connect with me by email or in person to discuss this further. Mrs. Wilson, as always, was one of the first to chat with me. With an energy that permeated her every pore, she explained the guided reading process in her classroom and how I could support her and the students. “For guided reading, we can put them in four groups, and you and I can each work with one group at a time while the other two groups work on their other activity . . .” (Mrs. Wilson, personal communication, November 6, 2019), and so the conversation went for some time. I left Mrs. Wilson’s room just as excited as she was, with an armful of books, a USB full of reading resources, and a few sticky notes quickly penned with shared ideas.

When it came to actually working in the classroom, it took me time to learn the ins and outs of Mrs. Wilson’s world: the rules, the student expectations, and the different needs of each child. The students, too, had to learn how I was different from Mrs. Wilson, how the groups would work with new social expectations set for each grouping situation, and so on. Sam was wonderful at engaging with me, telling the others about his visits to the resource room and how he and I worked together. This helped to bridge a gap with other students who then also desired to take a walk with me and learn together. I laughed and said, “But we’re learning together here in your classroom,” and we were all excited about the prospect. I was in the class, and I was making curriculum with students. I began to experience stories shared with Mrs. Wilson by proximity and camaraderie. Between lessons, Mrs. Wilson checked in with me to see how things were going (she was the expert in this world), and we discussed changes to make and celebrated successes. This, too, was curriculum making.

The secret stories that I experienced in Mrs. Wilson's class no longer belonged only to Mrs. Wilson. I, too, had ownership of these stories. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) stated that secret stories are shared in private spaces with other trusted teachers. The classroom teacher and I had built a strong enough relationship to be comfortable in experiencing secret stories together. Some of these secret stories we discussed, to learn from our experiences, but other stories continued to exist as a shared memory, which in turn deepened the camaraderie between Mrs. Wilson and me.

We had built our relationship on a foundation of trusting each other's knowledge, both professionally and practically. Driedger-Enns (2014) introduced personal practical stories that view teachers as a whole person, defined by all of their life experiences, not just the professional teaching experiences. Mrs. Wilson and I had many discussions that drew on our personal and practical experiences, which helped to stretch our thinking as we made curriculum together. I was able to journey into a classroom's "world" and become co-curriculum makers with Sam and Mrs. Wilson, and as our relationships grew I became more comfortable "world-travelling" (Lugones, 1987) from the halls of the school into the grade 1 classroom and back again, making curriculum *alongside* groups of children.

Building Relationships

Opportunities for co-curriculum making are rooted in relationships. Resource teachers cannot simply step into a teacher's classroom and state, "I'm here!" and expect a warm welcome. Resource teachers need to be aware of the milieu, including the stories being told of them in the school and in homes. Trust is foundational in building relationships, and how a person is perceived by many is a big part of building trust with individuals. It is important, as well, that administrators are a part of this process. Through administrative support, spaces for co-curriculum making are born; these opportunities can be classroom teacher to resource teacher, but also administrator to teacher, teacher to teacher, parent to teacher – essentially anyone who is willing to invest time in supporting curriculum making. With administrative support, opportunities for relationship building flourish, thus supporting the co-curriculum making process.

Conclusion

Circling back to my original questions, I reflect on what I learned through the autobiographical narrative process and the writing of this research report. These two questions provide me with focus on my journey. As I reflect, I find myself with new questions, rather than answers.

What barriers are there to student learning? For students like Sam, I have heard many say that the barriers are within the student. Some might discuss environmental barriers and how the teacher can support reducing stimuli. What about the barriers of the school structure? There are expectations that Sam must sit and listen to the teacher inside a building, that he should learn subjects by using items such as worksheets. Does the problem lie within Sam or within the system?

What changes are needed to nurture learning? In Sam's story, medication was given to him to support regulation. However, when taken out of the classroom structure, Sam was able to learn and direct learning with co-regulation and without medication. Again, I reflect on whether I could co-regulate Sam while working with a whole class. It would be very difficult for me to notice all of Sam's subtle cues at the same time as supporting a whole class of students, and sustain this attention to detail for one class, let alone a whole day. What does this say about the current structures that exist in most classrooms? What sustainable changes could schools make to support all students better?

How can we best learn alongside others? Within this story, I find evidence of my growth as a resource teacher. I believe that all good teaching comes from slowing down, and learning with and from others. I learned with and from Sam. I learned with and from Mrs. Wilson. I changed my practice with other teachers as a result of my learnings. I am becoming a sharer of curriculum making, creating space and silence so that I can hear and see what others are learning, increasing my opportunities for growth.

Sam's story is not finished. I warn the reader not to "freeze the narrative" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 166). Rather, I encourage you to think of Sam temporally, shifting your focus on him from the past to also include the now and the future. Contemplate the possibilities. Then, shift your focus once again to learners in your life. How can we make curriculum *with* others in a good way that makes space for everyone to learn?

I consider this last question beneficial to focus on for the next leg of my journey. Who knows what I will learn and what opportunities for learning will pass me by unnoticed? One thing I do know is that I will make time to re-explore my memories through autobiographical narrative writing, so that I may continue to make curriculum *with* myself.

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About the Researcher

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