Pedagogical Practices of a Special Educator: Engaging Parents Who Have Children With Intensive Needs

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Abstract

As a special education teacher working with intensive needs children and their families, I have come to understand the importance of using "parent knowledge" alongside my professional knowledge to inform my pedagogy, enabling me to authentically and meaningfully program for students. In this article, I use my storied experiences with Shirley and her mom, Nancy, to make visible how my engagement with Nancy shaped my beliefs and practices as a teacher. This article describes a "pedagogy of walking alongside," a pedagogical approach in which parent engagement is integral in all work I do with young intensive needs students.

Narrative Beginnings

I recall the days when I was a student in small-town Saskatchewan. I walked to and from school on my own because we lived just one block away. For the most part, I really loved going to school. In our home, teachers were held with high regard. At the dinner table, I was often asked how my teacher was doing. My parents owned and operated the only pharmacy in our small town, so they were active members in the community. When my parents mentioned that one of my teachers came to the store, I remember being shocked to discover that teachers were able to leave the school. On Saturdays, I delighted in the job of using the price tag gun at the store for a couple of hours. On occasion, I noticed a teacher from the school walk into the store. I immediately got butterflies in my stomach as I began playing detective through the various store aisles. Growing up, there was a very distinct line drawn between home and school. Parents raised their children at home, while teachers taught children at school. Homework was mandatory and it came above all else in my home. If there was ever a conflict at school, I begged the teacher not to not call my mom. I knew that my mom would be incredibly disappointed if she got such a call.

I do recall participating in parent teacher interviews, Christmas concerts, and family variety nights. However, these were school-led events at which teachers seemed untouchable. There was no parent council in my elementary school days. Schools made the decisions as to what was best for the school community and they led the school events on their own. One Christmas, the entire staff did a mock Christmas song on stage for the audience at the annual Christmas concert. The crowd went wild watching the spectacular event on stage. However, after the concert, the teachers were nowhere to be found. I remember begging my parents to stay longer so that I could see my teacher. I got a firm reminder that my teacher needed to get home to her family and that she had spent long enough at school that day.

I was a sensitive little girl. I grew up in a home where our mother constantly invited new people to our home for holidays. If my mother knew someone new to town was alone for Christmas, she invited them to sit at the head of our table. Perhaps because of this sensitivity that was cultivated, I was always drawn to children in my classes who had intensive needs. They were never part of our class for the entire day. They were often never seen at school events. If they did attend a school function, they were to be seen and not heard. They did not participate with our whole class, that is for sure. I recall one of my classmates being hard of hearing. She spent her entire day with an educational assistant. As a result, she had no friends to play with. I remember feeling conflicted at recess. I wanted to try and play with her but I was scared of the educational assistant. As a young child, it was easier to walk away altogether.

When I became a teacher in 2008, my first teaching assignment was as a special education teacher in a small town in Saskatchewan. Imagining what it meant to be a professional, I dressed to impress, bought a new work backpack, and put on a new pair of dress shoes. There was just one problem: my degree had prepared me to be a classroom teacher, but not an interventionist. I knew that the children referred for special education assistance were struggling to meet basic curricular expectations. It was my job to figure out how to help provide additional support to them so they could meet these demands. While I had years of experience working as a camp counsellor for adults who had a variety of developmental and physical disabilities, I had no experience working with children who had special needs. Further, in my first year as a special education teacher, there was no one mentoring me—there were no professional development opportunities in special education in our school division, and there was no additional training on how to program for intensive need students.

Not knowing where to begin with my new students, I decided to start by getting to know them. I invited small groups of grade-alike intensive need students for daily blocked schedules in my office. We visited, played cooperative games, and worked on classroom assignments that their teacher sent with them. I collaborated with the classroom teachers to see which curricular goals needed to be met at each reporting period. I clung on for dear life to those teachers. The sad part was that the teachers were looking to me to find solutions and make recommendations on how to help their students learn. I felt like a fish out of water, but my students and I enjoyed spending time together throughout the school days. Those students helped me survive my first year of teaching. At the end of the school year, I knew that something was missing in my teaching. I questioned my career choice, because I did not feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of the year. I knew my students felt safe and cared for at school, but I also knew that I could not take them to the next level because I just did not know them as well as I needed to know them.

Awakening to Parents' Narratives

As I entered my third year of teaching, my feelings of a lack of accomplishment turned into something else, something that was burning inside that I could not make go away. I needed to do something to enhance my pedagogy. But what? Flipping through the University course catalogue, entertaining possibilities, I landed on one of my favorite undergraduate classes, a class on parent engagement. I remember specific, real-life stories that resonated with me deeply, that rattled, inspired, and moved me. Memories of field experiences that

brought me to tears of joy, flooded my mind. I stopped flipping through the course catalogue immediately. I recognized that my narrative was unfolding, and I needed to pay more attention to the burning and nagging feeling inside me. I decided that I wanted to further my education, to help me address my burning questions and tensions. I enrolled in a Master's program in Special Education and I also became a mom for the first time—two life-changing and personal growth events. I thought my questions would be answered with the achievement of these milestones in my personal life.

My first few months back at work were not easy. While I had to leave my little baby for the first time, it did feel good to be back in a routine and I was happy to be back with my students. When I began creating personalized inclusion plans for my students, I suddenly became very interested in the parents of my students. I was drawn to their stories, their lived experiences, their hopes and dreams for their child, and to forming a relationship with them. As a new mother, I was innately engaged in their narratives, narratives that came to feel settling and comforting to me as the teacher of their child. Even with two milestones achieved, it was not until my return to teaching that I realized what, in fact, the burning inside me was. While I gained a great deal of knowledge and insight from my master's degree in special education, and I was awakening to "parent knowledge" (Pushor, 2015a) through my lived experience as a new mom, I realized that the missing pedagogical piece that I was seeking as a professional was the knowledge expressed in parents' stories of their children. Now, once more at the university, I am interested in building on existing research into "parent knowledge" (Pushor, 2015a) through inquiring into the unique and particular parent knowledge that parents with intensive special needs children have to share with educators.

Awakening to the narratives of parents of intensive special needs students in the last few years of my career, and to how educative they are, I was drawn to using narrative inquiry as a methodological approach. Clandinin and Caine (2013) acknowledged that, "participants are always in the midst of their lives and their lives are shaped by attending to the past, present, and unfolding social, cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives" (p. 170). I enter this inquiry in the midst of my career, and in the midst of parenting my (now) three children. I recognize that I enter in the midst of parents' and children's lives and that I enter into the midst of their families. What can I learn when I stop and listen? What "family stories" (Huber et al., 2010, p. 80) might they tell? How might those family stories rub up against, or sit alongside, school stories? Hegemonic notions of family? About who is knower and knowing? How might they expand and enhance our understanding of what it means to use parent knowledge alongside teacher knowledge in curricular and programming decisions for intensive special needs children?

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define narrative inquiry as "the study of experience as story" (p. 477). How might parents' narratives make visible the particular and unique parent knowledge they hold as they nurture and support their children with intensive special needs in the complex contexts of home and school? How might that parent knowledge inform the pedagogical practices of teachers who "walk alongside" (Pushor, 2015b) them? In my narrative inquiry, the parents' stories are both the phenomenon under study—the *what* into which I am inquiring—and the method—the storied way in which I am conducting that inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The Birth of My Narrative Inquiry

I was in my eighth year of teaching elementary children with intensive needs when a huge challenge landed on my desk. I was asked to do an intake on a three-year old child who was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and a global developmental delay. Her name was Shirley.[1] Welcoming this little three-year-old student into the school community scared me. She was nonverbal, autistic, small, and brand new to the school system. I was more comfortable with older intensive need students who had language. I was terrified about my lack of professional knowledge and experience and I felt a lot of self-doubt. I knew that I would be asked to program for Shirley.

The principal handed me a plan for Shirley that indicated she was to come to school with her mom, so they could see the space and meet the educational team. As a student in Pre-Kindergarten, Shirley was entitled to be at school every afternoon from 12:45 to 3:00 p.m. I felt nervous to have Shirley at the school for so long, not knowing her or how to educate her. We had very few resources to use with her at the school. Further, her report from the medical community discussed how she was a flight risk, unresponsive to her own name, put most things in her mouth, screamed and pinched when she was frustrated, and how attached she was to her mom and dad. I knew that our current plan was setting Shirley, her family, the school team, and me up for failure. I knew I needed to approach my administrator to talk this plan through.

I begged my principal to start Shirley in school for only an hour a day. "Do we have to rip the band-aid off so quickly?" I frantically asked my administrator. I requested permission to suspend my other afternoon classes for the first month of Shirley's entrance. How was I going to place an educational associate with Shirley, if I did not even know where to begin? I felt the process needed to begin with me and the real expert, Shirley's mom, Nancy. I needed time to get to know Shirley. I wanted to know what her triggers were, what provided her with comfort, and what caused anxiety for her. I knew these key things would be best learned at home, so I also asked permission to go to Shirley's house for one hour a day for the first week of her scheduled time at school. It felt foreign to me, asking to spend time with Nancy leading up to Shirley's arrival in school, but it also felt like the right thing to do. Thankfully my administrator approved all of my requests.

A Pedagogy of Walking Alongside

The new plan provided me the opportunity to meet with Nancy and Shirley in their home every day from 1 to 2 p.m. We visited, played, and got to know each other. Shirley lived in a townhouse with her mom, dad, and older brother. When I arrived, I immediately noticed latches on the top of every door. Nancy told me that Shirley would leave otherwise. The living room was full of cause-and-effect toddler toys such as push and pop-up toys, there were dents in the wall, a large baby gate blocked off the living room from the kitchen, and the television was playing a cartoon. Nancy brought Shirley some goldfish crackers and almond milk, because she knew it would keep her settled and quiet for a few minutes, so we could visit.

As Nancy and I talked and got to know one another, Shirley began to get used to me as a person entering into her world. On one occasion, Shirley attempted to share one of her goldfish crackers with me.

I home visited the family daily for a period of two weeks. As Smith (2013) noted, through our time together, Nancy and I built a trusting relationship and she believed me when "I walk[ed] into [their] home and compliment[ed] …her hard work in raising an amazing child" (p. 77). With this trust in place, we switched to having Shirley and Nancy come to school for one hour a day. Together we explored the playground, classrooms, and sensory room. Nancy showed me how much Shirley loved to swing on the playground, find water in the water fountains, and run circles around the gym. Nancy also taught me how to handle transitions between activities and how to calm Shirley. When Shirley screamed or fell to the ground in frustration, Nancy distracted her with another toy or object. Nancy always remained calm and giggled or sighed softly as she waited patiently for Shirley to regulate.

After two weeks of Shirley and Nancy coming to the school together, I asked Nancy to leave Shirley alone with me for the one hour. Shirley would scream frequently to communicate with me. While Shirley screamed for 15 minutes on the hallway floor, protesting, against my request for her to make a visual choice between two preferred activities, I remembered Nancy's voice in my head saying, "Don't let her win all the time, she is stubborn." I waited patiently with Shirley on the ground, until our moment of triumph when a choice was made.

After two months of our slow and staggered entry into school, I began training an educational assistant to work with Shirley. Once again, I called Nancy to come in and help with the transition plan. Being a parent is a "birth to forever" undertaking (Pushor, 2013). Parents are on an intimate journey with their children.

> As teachers who work in schools, we have the privilege of supporting parents in this life-long task of educating their child from birth to forever. It is important to recognize that our provision of formal schooling is just one piece of their child's education. (p. 8)

I wanted her "parent knowledge" to inform my professional knowledge as we worked on transitioning another person to our team. I also trusted that Nancy would know if the educational assistant I chose would be a good fit for Shirley. I knew what Nancy's parent knowledge did for me when I entered the scene; I wanted to offer that same support and authenticity to the staff member I was training. "By making visible what parent knowledge is, and how it is held and used by parents, I am consciously attempting to change the story of the school" (Pushor, 2015a, p. 19). I needed Nancy, the new staff member needed Nancy, Shirley needed Nancy. Nancy knew her child better than anyone else. I yearned for the earlier days of walking alongside each other as we welcomed Shirley and Nancy to the school for the first time.

Parent Engagement

Journeying with Nancy awakened me to "parent engagement" (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). I realized I "involved" my students' parents in the first few years of my teaching career, but I did not engage them. Working with Nancy awakened me to the difference. In the past, I sent home necessary documentation for parent signatures and I greeted parents at school functions. Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) explained, "Parents who are 'involved' serve the school's agenda by doing the things educators ask or expect them to do" (p. 12). In contrast,

> Engagement implies enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, of teaching and learning, with teachers' knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial. (p. 13)

In engaging with Nancy, I utilized her parent knowledge to inform my teacher knowledge. I engaged Nancy as we co-constructed Shirley's day as a team. As confirmed by the Relational Schools Foundation (RSF) (2018), "If parents are a vital partner in supporting young people's educational achievement, they must also surely be a key player in a school's improvement narrative" (p. 5). Parent engagement with school, then, "is a stepping stone to what will actually make a difference and help us narrow the gap and support many more of our young people" (Goodall, 2018, p. 5).

When we engage parents, we turn to their parent knowledge in order to gain their understanding, intuitions, and intimate discoveries of their child. No one knows their child better than the parents. Parents know what calms their child when upset, what their favorite songs are, what scares them, what energizes them, what their different cries mean, and how to read their body language. These key understandings reflect parents' relational, intimate, bodied, embodied, intuitive, and shifting knowledge of their child (Pushor, 2015a, pp. 15–19), knowledge which can make a world of difference for a teacher when shared by parents.

> Parents have been instrumental in their children's learning since birth. Parents may well not hold qualifications related to teaching (although of course many do) but they are also not inexperienced in supporting children's learning; they have been doing it for years by the time a child arrives in school. In undertaking what can only be called a teaching role in relation to their children, parents have clearly been in positions of power when their children were young; there is no clear reason why they should relinquish (rather than share) that power when their children arrive at school. (Goodall, 2018, p. 607)

Coming to understand the difference between parent involvement and parent engagement, the value of parent knowledge, and how important relationships are between a teacher and a parent, I knew I was in a position of great change in my professional practice. What I had been yearning for since the beginning of my teaching career was knowledge and input from the parents, and meaningful connections with families and students. Reaching out to parents was not a sign of weakness or laziness, as I first thought as a beginning teacher. Working with Nancy and Shirley, building relationships as adults with a vested interest in a child, it was evident that the overall success for Shirley was going to be greater. I know

I gained as well because my professional capacity was increased. Nancy, too, spoke to me about how she gained. She no longer felt so isolated and, with my affirmation of the significance of her parent knowledge, she no longer felt so inferior in relation to parents whose children did not have special needs.

Home Visits

I remember the first day that I met Shirley in her home. Shirley opened the door with her mom, Nancy. She was kissing her mom's hand, twirling her blonde curls in her tiny fingers, and smelling her mom's thick brown hair. The behaviours that Shirley demonstrated surprised me because I thought that children who have autism do not like to be touched or cuddled. I had anticipated screaming, yelling, tantrums, and fighting. Instead, Shirley danced in her living room, chewed on her toys, threw them away when she was done with them, and used her mom's lap like a jungle gym. It was so obvious that Shirley was loved just as much as my own child. I learned about Shirley's dad and big brother, and how special they are to her. Shirley's dad took her for daily car rides to help her fall asleep every night. Her older brother never touched the remote when Shirley was around, knowing how captivated and happy she was to hear the Sesame Street theme song. I discovered that Shirley's grandma and grandpa were the only people who ever cared for Shirley, other than her own parents. I learned so many particularities about this little girl and how she was loved beyond measure.

Learning from my experience with Nancy and Shirley, home visits and building authentic relationships between home and school became a priority in my professional practice. Galindo and Sheldon (2011) conducted a study researching the positive gains in a Kindergarten child's mathematics and reading skills when authentic parent relationships were combined with positive school interactions. The research showed a tremendous gain in students whose parents and teachers worked collaboratively in meaningful ways. These findings invited me to reconsider my relationship with Nancy who has an intensive need student. Even though we were not working on mathematics or reading skills for her child, we had other important individual goals we were working on together. For Shirley, we would be looking at the promotion of holistic development as it pertains to the Play and Exploration Early Learning Program Guide (2008) set out by the Government of Saskatchewan. Activities that would fit into social-emotional development, physical, spiritual, and intellectual domains would be the focus for Shirley. Meyer and colleagues (2011) captured the importance of home visits, "The information gained in a home visit can be utilized as a means by which teachers can plan curriculum best suited to the individual needs of children in their classrooms" (p. 192). Knowing the home Shirley came from, the tender and loving strategies that Nancy employed to encourage her to eat, and the special toys that Shirley loved, as examples, helped me to envision and create meaningful programming for her at school. Seeing me away from the school also created a more trusting, meaningful, and authentic relationship for all members of the family as well.

Parent Knowledge

I knew that I wanted school to be more than respite care for her family. Shirley deserved school to be an authentic and enriching experience. I wanted to try and determine Shirley's capabilities, so that I could

meet her at her level. I remembered Nancy showing me how to soothe Shirley in the rocking chair, use music to energize her, and provide her with freedom to play with toys and explore them. Through my relationship and time spent with Nancy, I knew that I had gained enough insights from Nancy's parent knowledge that I could authentically program for Shirley. I purchased a rocking chair at school for Shirley, we put everything we could think of into song for her, and we provided sensory experiences for her to engage in safely. I remembered Nancy telling me that Shirley loved bath time at home. Knowing that, I decided to turn one school water fountain into a water table for Shirley. Shirley delighted in the old water fountain for minutes upon minutes. She would squeal and grind her teeth with delight.

It was in setting up my classroom in a way that would promote rich learning for Shirley that I fully understood how "relational parent knowledge" (Pushor, 2015a, p. 15) is something that significantly informed my pedagogy. Parents know their children differently than anyone else. When we first learn to be teachers, we are not doing it in a relational capacity *with* children. We are learning from the outside. We read, view, observe, and reflect from within university classrooms. Parents, in contrast, learn from and with their child minute by minute, cry by cry, and through various facial expressions, movements, and touch. I came to understand how Nancy's parent knowledge was informing my professional knowledge. It was so apparent that we were a unified team working toward the same goal. I trusted and valued her. I realized that I learned how to teach Shirley, through Nancy. Without Nancy, I would still be in the hallway feeling helpless as Shirley screamed for 15 minutes in protest of making a visual choice.

The school team met with Nancy in December to have a support team meeting and discuss Shirley's progress. It had been three months since Shirley started school. I was eager to hear how Nancy felt the first little while had gone. Nancy expressed that she was no longer keeping Shirley home all the time. She was more comfortable taking her on short outings in public because of the progress she was making at school. I immediately responded to her, reinforcing that we would not have reached this significant achievement without her parent knowledge guiding our way.

> Dignean spoke about such curriculum making in terms of the attentiveness it provides teachers through which to view each particular child:
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> So, it's having that parent knowledge enter in and give you that little insight into each individual, that enables you to know the child more deeply, "Wow I understand you now. I understand that little piece of you that's just quirky, or that's interesting and unique."
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> …It is realizing that when we share our knowledge as parents and teachers, we can attend to children much more richly. (Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015, pp. 217–218)

Shirley adapted to school so beautifully, because of the knowledge Nancy shared with us. Shirley's school days were filled with specific games, experiences, and activities that were based on her individual needs and interests that arose from the knowledge that Nancy was able to share with us.

Parent Knowledge of Special Need Children

I invited Nancy for coffee while Shirley was at school. Something inside me kept going back to Nancy for more. I asked her how she felt about being part of the school community. Nancy expressed to me that she is not like the other parents at school, so she stays away. Her child has different needs, so she feels like her ideas, concerns, and suggestions do not bear any weight or validity. Her child is different and not mainstream and so, as a parent, she feels different and not mainstream either. Woodgate and colleagues (2008) conducted a study looking at the experiences of parents who have a child with autism. They concluded that the parents felt isolated in most aspects of their lives, even within the school. "Parents basically felt that they were now having to 'go at it alone' in all aspects of daily living, but especially with respect to dealing with the challenges of parenting and caring for a child who has special needs" (p. 1078). I appreciated how Nancy felt, but, given how much I learned from her, I knew she had so much to offer the broader school community.

I recall the day I became a mom. It was a hot summer day when our daughter was born. I remember wondering how I would ever know what to do. How would I know what my baby needed? Through time, intuition, and relationship, I developed the parent knowledge I needed to care for her well. Parents learn to know their child on an intimate level. They know the meanings behind different cries, the physical signs of fatigue setting in, and the different emotional expressions. Nancy had the same parent knowledge about Shirley that I held about my daughter. However, she also held a unique and specific knowledge about Shirley that only a parent of a special need child could develop. Shirley had a heightened awareness of medical knowledge, sensory challenges, and personal care needs. Nancy could predict whether or not a specific activity at school would work or not, based on her unique parent knowledge of her child. Nancy's lived experiences with her child who has intensive needs gave her an incredible bank of knowledge, beyond the parent knowledge typically held by a parent, that would continue to guide my programming for Shirley at school.

A Narrative Past, A Narrative Future

I drift back in time, back to my early years as a student in school, a time when everyone walked alone. Teachers walked alone, parents walked alone, and students walked alone. Teachers walked with children at school. Parents walked with children at home. Children with special needs walked apart from children in mainstream classes. Over the 12 years of my career, I have been on a journey that has led me to a "pedagogy of walking alongside" (Pushor, 2015b). Through my stories of Nancy and Shirley, I have shared how teachers, parents, and children can now walk with each other, sometimes hand in hand. I have exemplified how parent knowledge can inform teacher knowledge, and how authentic and meaningful home visits can be at the centre of programming. So much is made possible when parent knowledge is invited and welcomed. How much children benefit when the lived experiences of teachers and parents are shared, and their knowledge is discussed openly and freely. My lived experiences with Nancy and Shirley have led me to my doctoral research inquiry into the educative possibility of the knowledge held and used by parents of intensive needs children. Freire (1994) stated, "One of the tasks

of the progressive educator… is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be" (p. 3). As my research unfolds, my hope is that this research will bring the lived experiences and stories of parents to school landscapes to be used alongside teacher knowledge as central pedagogical practice. In the future, my hope is that no one ever has to walk alone.

Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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Jillian Vancoughnett is a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. Drawing on her 12 years as a special education teacher, Jillian engages in narrative inquiry as a methodological approach in which she explores the stories of parents' lived experiences of either being invited to share their parent knowledge of their child with the child's teacher or of being excluded or marginalized, stigmatized as a parent who is lesser. Jillian builds on existing research into parent knowledge, considering how parents of children with intensive needs have unique and particular parent knowledge to share with educators.