

Book Review

***The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom* by Vivian Gussin Paley. Cambridge: First Harvard University Press, 1990, 163 pages.**

The Boy Who Would Be a Hockey Player, Musician and So Much More: Composing a Life Alongside my Son

Prelude

*They huddle together as teenagers do
He stands close by, wants to be part of them too
One shoulder turns away, and then another
He moves closer, trying to do what they do
One back turns, still he hovers close by
Until one yells B—off! You're not wanted here
Confused by the angry tone, he turns to walk away
What's his problem? What did I say?
The signs are there yet he doesn't see
Until it's too late and he's made someone angry
Some things for him don't come naturally
Non-verbal and social communication, especially
But it seems these can be taught intellectually
With help and time doing social skills autopsy.ⁱ
(Story fragment, Fall, 2014)*

In *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, Vivian Paley has moved from kindergarten to preschool, and this book recounts her teaching experiences with a lively group of 3 and 4-year-old children. Much as she does in other works (2001, 2007), Paley engages them in what begins as fantasy play, develops into storytelling, and leads to dramatic re-enactments of stories on a pretend stage. She believes that when stories are used in this way, they become a vehicle for several kinds of learning. This book highlights the idea that in the course of creating their own dramatic worlds, young children learn to develop not only language skills and abstract thinking, but also social skills. Much of the book focuses on Jason, a boy who exists in his own fantasy world built around a toy helicopter. Through Paley's voice and the children's play and conversations, we follow Jason's cautious and uneven journey as he learns to leave what he knows to engage in his classmates' imaginative play. The strength of this book, I believe, is the compelling example Paley sets for addressing differences in children through imaginative play as she creates a safe and inclusive classroom community where everyone belongs.

As I read *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, I did so not only as a curriculum and teacher education scholar, but also as a mother. Many of Jason's experiences strongly resonated for me, calling forward memories of my son Danny and his uneven journey through school. I highlight some of these by way of story fragments that I lay alongside moments in Paley's journey with Jason. Looking across both boys' experiences reveals what I see as Paley's understanding of curriculum making in her class as well as my understanding of curriculum making (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) in my home. Some of these highlighted story fragments also illustrate the tensions created when home and school contexts do not share a vision of inclusion for a child living with differences.

I watch him play

A friend by his side

One hand gripping a small toy

The other working through the other toys

Rarely looking up, he seems oblivious to the other

I wonder why it is that they don't play together

Should I be worried? Is this way to play ok?

Seems other people's children play together at this age

Seems other people's children play imaginary games

Whether alone or with another, his play is the same

Until he bounds downstairs,

Midway back up, hockey stick in hand,

He calls out to his friend

Wanna play hockey?

How about I shoot, you be goalie?

(Story fragment, Fall, 2014)

The first of the two story fragments I share took place when Danny was in junior high. It was a time when he desperately wanted to be part of a group but his attempts were usually rebuffed. Undaunted and unable to read the more subtle non-verbal signs of rejection, he persisted to the point of frustrating others. His Grade 7 teacher noticed such outbursts and contacted me to express her concern about the way Danny was being treated. I thanked her for her honesty and shared that Danny had attended a social skills program in which he and I were encouraged to carry out social skills autopsies of situations gone wrong. In this program, we had learned that what Danny could not pick up intuitively about social communication, he could certainly learn intellectually through direct instruction. At home, I began to draw his attention to non-verbal communication by watching parts of sitcoms on mute and identifying emotions on actors' faces. These social skills lessons and autopsies became part of the curriculum Danny and I co-composed at home, and I held on to the hope they would eventually transfer to the school setting.

The second moment I share occurred when Danny was a preschooler. I had many opportunities to observe how he interacted with other children, both at home and in his preschool setting. I worried that he did not communicate regularly with others or engage in sustained play with them. Danny seemed to be in his own world, whether playing

alone or with a friend. I believed that with time, he would learn to engage more with playmates and make friends. At that time, he struggled when given paper and pencil tasks; holding and using a pencil was of little interest to him. Eventually, the preschool teacher informed me that he would need extra practice at home.

Fine motor problems

More practice will help

Connecting dots? Don't want to, no

How do I motivate him?

Hockey team names dot to dot

With matching team crests to color

He's calling for more, I can't keep up

They're all over the wall, from bottom to top

Hey mom, there's more teams

Can you make up another one?

(Story Fragment, Fall, 2014)

By combining his strong interest in hockey with pencil-holding practice, I had managed to catch his attention and motivate him to hold the pencil to connect dots for team names. What is more, he went on to use colored pencils to decorate team crests. What became clear to me was that he had no difficulty handling a pencil; he was simply not interested in dot-to-dot exercises that were of no significance to him.

Jason's Story

The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter consists of four chapters. A first brief chapter introduces us to Paley's use of play as curriculum making. As they engage in imaginative play together, children create stories. These stories are told to and transcribed by Paley and then re-enacted on a pretend stage. Each storyteller chooses classmates to dramatize the roles in his or her story, and each story is re-enacted at least once. Dramatizations often result in the addition of more events or characters. Storytelling and story acting that begins with fantasy play live at the heart of Paley's curriculum making. She believes that play is the universal medium for learning. (Paley, 1990).

The second and fourth chapters focus on Paley as she reflects on her teaching practice. She recalls an experience from long ago when a graduate student who was conducting research in her classroom had noticed a discrepancy between the feedback Paley provided to a particular child as compared to the rest of the class. Still bothered by his finding, Paley questions her practices. With humility and clarity, she revisits moments lived out in her classroom and reflects on the teaching process. Together, she and two assistant teachers discuss the meaning of events unfolding before them. Thanks to her brilliant insights, we become the beneficiaries not only of the children's learning but also of Paley's. She reflects on the issue of what constitutes good and bad questions to ask the children as she ponders the effect these can have on the children's evolving stories. By reflecting on and questioning her practice, Paley sets a powerful example for future,

beginning, and practicing teachers as well as teacher educators, researchers, and policy-makers.

The third chapter, which makes up most of the book, focuses on Jason, a boy who does not engage in classroom play with the other children. What is more, he does not watch his classmates play nor show any interest in participating in their fantasy play. He is completely absorbed by his toy helicopter. In some ways, he is trapped in his own helicopter fantasy world, which he protects from others by building a heliport for himself and his helicopter in one corner of the classroom. The heliport becomes Jason's home place and serves as a protective wall between him and the rest of the class. At times, Jason noisily emerges from his heliport, intent on sharing his helicopter story with his classmates calling out "I am a helicopter." These interruptions are not appreciated, because they typically occur when Paley and the children are engaged in play, storytelling, or story acting. When other children invite him to join their play, Jason repeatedly ignores or turns down their invitations. When a classmate gets too close or attempts to touch his helicopter, Jason quickly retreats to the safety of his heliport claiming he has to make repairs to his helicopter. With careful observation, wisdom, and remarkable patience, Paley sets out to find out if her play-based curriculum making can entice Jason to join the others so he can be included in the classroom community. Eventually, thanks to her encouragement and the children's invitations, Jason learns to leave the comfort of what he knows and slowly begins to take on roles in his classmates' dramatizations of their stories. He continues to carry his helicopter into each of these roles and then slowly begins to create his own stories. Small step by small step, Jason learns to imagine and to pretend and eventually learns the difference between: "I *am* a helicopter!" and "I *choose* to be a helicopter" (Paley, 1990, p. 119).

Curriculum Making

A style of teaching is best illuminated by those who do not meet the teacher's expectations. These are the children who shed the strongest light upon the classroom. (Paley, 1990, p. 11)

Paley's words resonate for me as I consider my experience with my son alongside my experience with the many children I taught before becoming a mother. In the same way that Jason causes Paley to analyze herself, my son's uniqueness caused me to reconsider much of what I knew about teaching. I began to observe Danny closely and to study his ways of being in the world. I learned it was important to maintain a calm and structured home environment because he was easily overwhelmed by noise and chaos. Hockey continued to be a favorite activity, offering a way to connect with friends as well as a useful context for math homework. Huber et al. (2011) refer to such home-based interactions as *familial curriculum making*. Recognizing additional possible sites of curriculum making besides in-class curriculum making (typically understood to involve the mandated and planned subject-matter curriculum making), Huber et al. (2011) understand familial curriculum to be a kind of responsive curriculum (shaped by the lives of a family) that "begins with the child's knowing and focuses on helping him or her move forward in life" (p. 40). They see familial curriculum making as important to the

negotiation of a curriculum of lives as in-class, in-school curriculum making (Murphy et al., 2012). Furthermore, they point out that if these two curriculum-making worlds are at odds, as they were for Danny in junior high, it can create tensions for children as they negotiate their life making in these two curriculum-making worlds (Huber et al., 2011).

Paley's understanding of curriculum making connects with a narrative understanding of curriculum that begins with the child's knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). This is evident in the way she interacts with Jason. She does not do so from a deficit perspective. Paley is a teacher who is respectful of each student's strengths and lets life's complexities have their full dignity. Jason is an idiosyncratic outsider beyond race, place, or age who gradually becomes Paley's teacher and helps her teach other teachers. In a similar way, Danny became my teacher and guide; my relational knowing of him allowed me to anticipate his needs and help him negotiate his way in the social world.

Paley's curriculum making also recognizes the social function of story playing and storytelling: she strives to achieve mutual and reciprocal growth between Jason, the outsider individual, and the rest of the class as the insider group. Achieving this inclusion required Paley's guidance. It has been my experience that some teachers do not see building community in a class as their responsibility. I lament the way special needs support was delivered to Danny over the years. Steeves (2006) speaks of the need to interrupt a dominant narrative of *fix and serve*, which keeps the focus on a child's disability rather than establishing a relationship and exploring his or her range of abilities. Aid was often delivered to Danny in a way that set him apart, further alienating him from the rest of the group. I wonder why teachers don't see working with the host group to encourage inclusion of the child with differences as their responsibility. Is there not, as Paley models in this book, work for the teacher to do both with the group as well as the child with differences? Is this not the way to proceed to create a community where everyone belongs?

Perhaps my perspective is shaped by my experiences as a Grade 6 teacher, where my curriculum making included a strong social component. Social issues, as they played out in the hallway or on the school field, often spilled over into the classroom and impeded learning. I suspected that for every conflict that came to my attention, there were many other tensions simmering just below the surface; these were often the most harmful, particularly to those children who were most vulnerable. In response to this, I posted a large envelope at the back of my room and called it a HELP envelope. It became a drop-off point for notes that students wrote anonymously to ask for help in solving problems. On a weekly basis, sometimes sooner at a student's request, I would read the notes aloud and engage the class in discussion. Together, we identified issues, shared similar experiences, and brainstormed solutions. This activity created a sense of community in the classroom – students felt heard, safe, and secure in an environment where both their academic and social needs were valued. The students became so respectful of each other through this process that they began jotting notes of issues they had observed between other children during recess. This was such an important part of the curriculum making in

which the children and I engaged over the year. I dearly wish a similar program had been in place for Danny.

Curriculum Making with and for Diverse Children

Throughout the book, Paley never divulges the nature of Jason's difference. She refuses to label or categorize him and I believe this is both a strong example of curriculum making with diverse children as well as a major strength of the book. Paley is respectful of the children's worlds and their individual strengths and complexities.

For me, such labels are useless. A child is always at a certain complex point of development; like Jason, everyone in every endeavor, will continue to use techniques from the past in order to understand and work out ways to live securely in the present. (Paley, 1990, p. 142)

Addressing every conflict or staving off potential ones with incredible humanity, wisdom, and understanding (not to mention patience), Paley never gives up on Jason. It is her firm belief that every child must be given full inclusion rights. "Furthermore I realized that children themselves wanted to bring in the "stranger" and achieve a balance between his or her ways and the culture of the larger group" (American Journal of Play, 2009, p. 129).

*I sit with his teachers
Let me try to explain,
Imagine what it's like
When you can't read non-verbal signs
A bit like social dyslexia
Can you help him with that?
We think what he needs to be understood
Is for other kids, at least the class to know,
What his differences are, that will solve everything
Not a chance thank you very much
When and if that time ever comes,
He'll need a strong safety net.
He's isolated enough
No talk of his differences, at least not yet.*
(Story fragment, Fall, 2014)

The above story fragment highlights an experience I had when Danny was in junior high. Frustrated with his stress level and after-school meltdowns, I had requested a meeting with his five teachers. I intended to try to help them understand the nature of Danny's differences with the story *Thank you Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998). I found one illustration particularly useful and hoped they would as well. In this story, a teacher named Mr. Falker takes a special interest in Trisha, a young girl who is being ridiculed and bullied because she cannot read. He finds her cowering and crying and invites her

into his classroom where he asks her to write some words on the board. Trisha is dyslexic and because the illustration is drawn from her point of view, we see an image of Mr. Falker's blackboard full of marks that have no meaning. As I sat with the teachers and showed them this image, I attempted to draw a parallel between Trisha's dyslexia with reading letters and words and Danny's social dyslexia with reading non-verbal language. Danny could no more make sense of subtle non-verbal signs in a noisy, crowded school hallway than Trisha could transcribe a collection of words on Mr. Falker's board.

Unfortunately, the teachers did not see it as I did and suggested instead that Danny's school experience would improve if his diagnosis were shared with his class. Taken aback, I did not see how sharing a label would help the children interact with Danny, and I informed the teachers that I disagreed with them. It was my belief that the teachers had to lead by example the way to Danny's inclusion, but it became clear during this meeting that several teachers were reluctant to share this responsibility. I had hoped they could agree to work together as a team to support Danny both in and out of class, but it became clear that since the principal had identified one teacher to look after Danny's Individualized Program Plan (IPP), the others considered Danny's social inclusion that teacher's sole responsibility. I left the meeting feeling frustrated and extremely disappointed. Thankfully, I could find comfort knowing there was one teacher who had developed a particularly caring relationship with Danny. He spoke of her often.

She's my comfort zone

For oral presentations

She lets me stand beside my desk

I don't need to face everyone

That's why she's my comfort zone.

(Story fragment, Fall, 2014)

Sadly, this teacher had not been able to attend the meeting. I could not help but think things might have been different had she been there. This was a teacher who had an altogether different attitude toward my efforts to share my knowledge of Danny. Pushor (2014) sees parents as holders of complementary knowledge they have gained through lived experience with their children, and she believes this knowledge is critical to schooling. In teacher education courses Pushor supports teachers to inquire into their earlier experiences of schooling alongside their parents and family members. These experiences open up new possibilities for ways in which teachers might interact with parents and family members.

This thread of inquiry is another strength in Paley's work. For Paley, it is in the course of creating their own dramatic worlds, that young children are capable of thought and language beyond what they might accomplish through traditional exercises. Fantasy play and dramatization promote learning, particularly abstract thinking and problem-solving. The children learn to imagine different scenarios as they consider "what if" and "pretend that," which in turn promotes conversation on various subjects. It was through fantasy play that Jason eventually learned how to interact and socialize to become part of

the group. By tape-recording and analyzing the children's conversations and actions, Paley shows how play is also a way to rehearse problems. During her discussions with two teacher assistants, Paley shares that early in her career, she had a time-out chair that she had used to punish children. Over time, she observed that nothing had ever come of this practice. With the removal of the chair, fantasy play became the means through which she could solve problems such as being able to set limits and control the class. Paley believes that the more we play out the problem involved, the more likely we are to find the right balance between the individual and the group (American Journal of Play, 2009). Further, it is essential for teachers to observe the way problems are solved by all of the many different kinds of children coming from so many different places (Paley, 2013).

A third strength of this book is that through this story, Paley addresses the moral dimension of teaching and learning. This book provided an opportunity "to talk about and think about the moral dimensions of children's play and classroom conventions" (American Journal of Play, p.135). Paley firmly believes in the importance of creating a just society, and that fantasy play, storytelling, and story playing serve a social function. She states that:

The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter may have influenced her teaching the most, giving her the sharpest picture of the mutual and reciprocal growth possible between the "outsider" individual and the "insider" group when the stated goal is to learn to play in each other's stories. (American Journal of Play, 2009, p. 135)

What happened to Jason in school is "the mirror of its moral landscape" (Paley, 1990, preface). The children followed Paley's lead in including him. In the same way, a community must reach out to children who are different and find authentic ways to include them in classroom life. Although Jason's social skills did not come naturally to him, the other children learned to include him and to accept his behavior as part of who he was. Through her work with young children, Paley has "come to understand that children enter school seeking the warmth and the admiration of an intimate community. We may consider ourselves good teachers only to the extent that we keep examining our environments to see if they provide this inclusive home for every child" (American Journal of Play, 2009, p. 137). How we as teachers live with children shows them how they can live. Our identities as teachers are expressed not only in our words, but also and perhaps even more so in our gestures and facial expressions. Children very easily pick up signals from teachers as they live alongside students with difference. Making space for children like Jason and Danny would counteract a dominant institutional story of addressing children with special needs on an individual basis rather than as part of a community of learners.

A Forward-looking Story

*The house is full, family for dinner
Cousins all there but him
Where did he go I wonder?
Found him downstairs, happily on his own
Why did you disappear? Where did you go?
Too much noise, it made my ears hurt
These sensitivities matter I learned
So that years later as I drove him to school
I could understand his desperate plea
That I had to beat the first school bus
So he could enter in a quiet hallway
No hallway press helps him get through the day.*
(Story fragment, Fall, 2014)

This final story fragment illustrates that just as Jason would retreat to his heliport whenever someone tried to touch his helicopter, Danny would seek out a quiet space when he felt overwhelmed. I came to understand that he had developed his own coping skills. In doing so, he was teaching me about his sensitivities. Attending to his sensitivities became an important part of our familial curriculum making. Every day upon arriving home from school, Danny would head down to his music room and decompress by playing his electric guitar. His guitar became his solace as well as his passion. While his attempts at making and keeping friends were more or less successful during this time, he would assure me that:

*I'll make friends when I get to music school...
'Cause we all speak the same language here.*
(Story fragment, Fall, 2014)

And just as he had predicted, Danny did make and keep friends in music school thanks to a very inclusive campus and a music program where collaboration and creativity were respected, nurtured, and encouraged. He had learned to advocate for himself, approaching each of his instructors to inform them of accommodations he would need. In doing so, he developed relationships with each of his instructors and felt comfortable contacting them as the need arose.

With her unique way of working with children, Paley has much to teach us about curriculum making for all children. In *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, she presents a compelling example of inclusion as she guides Jason and his classmates through a gradual and uneven process whereby he and his helicopter eventually manage to “land on a runway built by the class” (Paley, 1990, p. 50). Making a curriculum based on fantasy play, storytelling, and story acting, Paley not only helps students negotiate who they are in the world, but also engages with two assistant teachers as she reflects on her practices. The combination of Jason’s story and Paley’s personal reflection on teaching makes *The*

Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter a powerful book that should be required reading not only for preschool and kindergarten teachers but also for all teachers and soon to be teachers working with children.

Postlude

*There is an image I cherish
In my mind, I'll never forget
They are quietly gathered around him
Drums, bass, piano and voice
He stands among them, center stage
Playing some jazz, rock, metal and blues
I see him steal glances at his bandmates and smile
I have a lump in my throat; he's come miles and miles
In tonight's recital, only he is being assessed
The other players are all there to support,
So he can be seen and heard at his best
Each will return the favor, when his or her turn comes up
In a collaborative curriculum where kids help each other out
In this school, he's learned to be with others and 'hang'
In this school, there's room to be one of the gang
He's on his way, his life's in tune now,
Even formed a hard rock band
I knew for sure it could be done
And as the curtain falls, I smile
I finally know he's having fun!
(Story fragment, Fall, 2014)*

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Notes

ⁱ The social (skills) autopsy approach (Lavoie, 1994) is a problem-solving intervention aimed at the examination and inspection of a social error in order to determine why it has occurred and how to prevent it from occurring in the future.

Claire Desrochers', PhD., interest in shaping educative spaces for pre-service teachers to learn about themselves in relation with diversity is grounded in her narratives of experience as a mother, teacher and teacher educator. Following her doctoral work entitled *Towards a new borderland in teacher education for diversity: A narrative inquiry into pre-service teachers' shifting identities through service learning* (2006), she was co-researcher in a narrative inquiry into the experiences of youth who left school early, published in 2013 as *Composing Lives in Transition: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Early School Leavers*. She currently works alongside graduate students as an adjunct professor in the *Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development* (CRTED) at the University of Alberta.
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