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*Literacy disrupted: Re/scripting possibilities for critical curriculum change in Australian primary schools*

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**Title:** Literacy Disrupted: re/scripting possibilities for critical curriculum change in Australian Primary schools.

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## **Abstract**

As top-down educational policies continue to dominate and shape pedagogic practices, this paper examines the reconceptualization of curriculum for disrupting literacy in Australian Primary Schools. It speaks to the pedagogic possibilities arising from change making to curriculum in the teaching and learning of literacy to provide an account of the problematic persistent pedagogic inequalities faced by children who have experience(d) issues of social cultural and economic disadvantage. Weaving storied vignettes of classroom practice throughout, we articulate how within the world of schooling, standardized pedagogic practices reinforce inequality and constrain opportunities for how some children learn to be literate. We draw on the process of *currere* to think with theory about how educators enact the enterprise of critical re-negotiation of curriculum. Central to this paper is recognition of the subjectivities of educators who work with children in classrooms who live between, within and outside of the technicalities of “document based” curricular work as enacted in hegemonic literacy classroom routines, practice and behaviours to articulate a pedagogy of possibility and of hope.

## **Introduction**

We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are.

Anais Nin

Australia, an industrialised Western country has repeatedly moved to overhaul its education system in the hopes of producing individuals who would cater to the newly dubbed global knowledge economy (Horsley, 2015). This change has led to individual schools focusing on demonstrating students' literacy skills through mandated participation in aptitude tests, such as those delivered through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the National Assessment Program. One of the challenges clearly evident in contemporary Australian primary classrooms, forged through the normativity of democratic instruction, is how inclusion and exclusion get enacted. Situating children's literacy learning vis a vis neo liberal educational

policy sociologists of education have examined how mainstream school curriculum as the basis of teaching and learning, is not neutral, but embeds the ‘cultural capital’ of relatively powerful social groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Kanu and Glor (2006, p. 102) in their discussion of knowledge economies and meritocracy, state how:

the negative right imposes ‘soul-less standardisation’ that leaves some students behind by eroding curricula and pedagogies that build on the experience, language and cultural identity of these students, decreasing teachers’ autonomy of judgment, undermining moral vision and social commitment in schools, and derailing the very creativity, ingenuity and flexibility that schools are supposed to cultivate.

Mak (2006) has specified how formal learning and its characteristics -the what and how to learn and teach are predefined in a hierarchical basic skills curriculum that is performatively constructed vis-à-vis a Canon of marks and pedagogical methods (Wright, 2016). This belief resonates with the neoliberal reconceptualization of curriculum knowledge as a commodity, a thing distinct from the knower and as with the possession of other types of commodities, is a measure of wealth (Doll 1993, Giroux, 1985).

Paolo Freire, (1974) emphasised that it is the responsibility of teachers to reject the industrial idea of reproducing education and that nothing can be done about the educational consequence of economic inequalities. Furthermore, teachers must collaborate with students through a dialogical and problem-solving approach, within the context of what should be a liberating social justice concept of educational praxis. This entails questioning and trying to comprehend the world we live in and to be an active subject in charge of our own decisions. In this context according to Alexander (2013, p. 92), the term pedagogy should not be used in a narrow sense to refer only to teaching methods because it is ‘deeply saturated with the values and history of the society and community in which it is located’. Karl Marx wrote in 1845 that we are what we do: “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production” (1845/2004, p. 42).

Recognising how curriculum and pedagogy have been dramatically changed by the forces of

neoliberalism and have commodified the way children and teachers individual behave, contribute, explore, interact and communicate requires a degree of cultural resistance by educators. Freire called this “conscientization,” an understanding of the complex ways in which the intersecting dynamics of power, desires and emotions shape our relationships to curriculum and pedagogy. As a cultural and transformative experience grounded in concrete material conditions “conscientization” involves critical consideration of a dynamic interplay of shifting power relations to others as well as to knowledge itself. “Conscientization” we suggest, encourages an agentic form of participation with curriculum and pedagogy; one in which the educator refuses to scroll past the various windows of the lives of those who become excluded but instead opts to peek into those lives and become antagonistic towards dominant ideologies. “Conscientization contemplates action and as we stare straight back into curriculum constructs that represent inform and feed the machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Our gaze in this paper offers ways to subvert the normativity of hegemonic curriculum as currently enacted in primary pedagogic spaces.

### ***Currere* as a disruptive tool**

In this paper we aim to critique the ‘out of sight, out of body’ with an understanding that the lack of representation in the data is ‘not out of mind but a daily reminder of how some populations are made absent or represented as what they ‘should not be’ (Vicars, 2006). Using Pinar’s autobiographical concept of *currere* (1975, 2012, 2020) as an analytical tool, we re/question ‘how can educators disrupt education systems that help to perpetuate ideologies that are already well established, to de/assimilate ideological challenges, and produce new ideologies in line with changing economic and social conditions (Apple 2019)? As emphasised and encouraged by Pinar (2012), the method of *currere* enables teachers to have a voice to influence the curriculum in such a manner that positively contributes to student learning and consciously seeks more equitable ways in which children learn. Teachers are empowered in the sense that they make better decisions, take initiative, and lead the curriculum that demonstrates their voices in the designing and delivery of teaching and learning in the classrooms that are attuned to issues of equity. Pinar (2012) advocates for a curriculum that represent a teacher’s true authentic self rather than following pre-planned activities planned by someone else outside of the teaching profession. Therefore, teachers should have the opportunity to take ownership of the curriculum. They should know what they are

teaching and assessing to enhance learning for academic performance and behaviour to promote better student attributes for their current circumstances and for life after school. Implementing the method of *currere* (Pinar 1994) as an autobiographical means to study the lived experience of individual participants in curricular conversation, involves regressive, progressive, analytical and synthesis to reveal an understanding of how the official curriculum struggles with representing diverse cultural and social positions. It could also be argued that as the official curriculum is constantly constructing pedagogies of inclusion and exclusion, the method of *currere* can scaffold children to ‘take the lead’ to be in essence liberated them from the “official” adult sanctioned policies that had them assigned to stratified and standardised ability groups (Boomer & Cook, 1992).

Rethinking literacy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century classrooms drawing on the practice of *currere* invariably involves getting caught up in debates about what is and is not appropriate literacy pedagogies and has to involve a consideration of why some teaching and learning practices are not included in, or recognized by the official literacy curriculum. An uncovering of the lack of acknowledgement of how students’ life world experiences inform their literacy practices often results in policy documents that overlook activities and texts that often mean the most to our students. The importance of reconsidering ways to re-textualise the spaces of the classroom with strategies for active and purposeful re-engagement of literacy is central to disrupting the limitations of the official curriculum. A capacity to rethink the salience of ideologies, identities and values and how literacy is inseparable from students’ motivations, involvements and interests has the potential to critically locate literacy, as a fluid social practice.

Before teaching from multiple perspectives, however, we must understand our own cultural locations and how those locations impact our perspectives and practices in the classroom. Pedagogy is situated, relational and hermeneutic and the frequency of these experiences often determine what constitutes ‘effective practice’. The challenge of making sense of what we do in the classroom can be a lengthy process that often involves spending thinking time away from those areas we naively came to designate and recognise as spaces where teaching and learning happens. Living with this understanding can mean struggling with all that which cannot be known. It involves grappling with shifting ideas, reflecting on the ways in which experience has shaped a

sense of self and making decisions as to how, in analysis what it means to teach when conceptualised as an act of disruption. Curriculum Theory emphasises that curriculum is a conversation and the conversation itself is knowledge in action when the teachers and student interact through sharing of ideas that connect to a curriculum content (Pinar, 2012). From that perspective how the student can use educational opportunities to expand and enhance that knowledge to make life meaningful is dependent on how the teachers scaffold and unpack the curriculum so that the student's prior knowledge harnesses learning from known to unknown (Carr, Mcgee, Jones & McKinley, 2005, Cashman, 2015).

### **Getting Stuck in...**

Markides (2022) has noted the scope of possibilities and problems that accompany writing in different ways and in our endeavour to untangle the complex meanings of the lived experience of the classroom, we have had to find a way to work through the webs of dominant institutional discourses that outline how our voices should be heard (Darder, 2020). It quickly became apparent that the views we had of ourselves as educators were shaped by being involved in 'critical communities of thought and reflecting on the dialogues that took place between our past and present selves. The storied vignettes in this paper reveal much about how we have rescripted our everyday pedagogical praxis and to 'interrogate the power dynamics...the evolution of my practice, the evolution of my pedagogy and the evolution of my core beliefs...to draw out of some events, dialogues and interactions that have brought [us] to this moment. (Markides, 2022, p.95). In our various attempts to situate biography to interrogate the links between the social and the individual, reflexivity has made known to us that

the outer is what we do with our minds and is usually associated with intellectualism, rationality and objectivity. The inner privileges subjectivity, intuition emotion and personal experience....we have learned to divorce the inner from the outer. We have learned to numb our emotions and to see everything in bits and pieces disconnected from the whole (Rendon, 2008, p. 7)

In the following storied vignettes, we share the emergent understandings that have been generated as a result of our thinking with theory (St Pierre, 2021) using the intimacies and transferences in the pedagogical exchanges of Currere (Grumet, 2016). Our reflective dialogic engagements with curriculum and pedagogy are offered as simultaneous forms of disruption

where we write-think-perform what can be described as a series of deeply personal, deeply pedagogical enactments of complicated conversations. The ultimate aim is to provoke and reimagine more inclusive literacy worlds for teachers and students that inspire a pedagogy of possibility and hope.

### **Vignette 1: Disrupting *at risk* labels**

To write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking.

Arnold Bennett

As I reflect now, that school year began, much like the others. The excitement of new beginnings, new identities, possibilities that one imagined. Then the inevitable heaviness of carrying the moral and ethical concerns that infuse a teacher's life, leaving them both burdened by the expectations of the system yet also excited by the possibilities of enlivening children's literacy learning worlds. Living in the middle. In between at times. Outside and inside. What I now have come to think of as a kind of critical curriculum *shape shifting* that I felt was required if I were to seek a sense of justice for children from culturally diverse and low socio-economic communities who always appeared to be regarded in deficit terms. The constant quest to disrupt all that appeared to limit, to reduce children's literacy learning in order to satisfy the standardisation of pedagogic practices.

I felt a great sense of urgency that year. A longing for newness, imagining curriculum alternatives and conceptualising learning and the possibilities of empowering children in new ways. For ten (long) years of my teaching career working in a school that was situated in a low socio-economic and culturally diverse community, I had been immersed in the deficit discourses and practices of naming literacy learners in particular ways. Assigning labels and implementing practices that in hindsight were downright demeaning. Unjust. Enacting those categories and practices in ways that haunt me still, all in the guise of providing 'additional assistance.' Children's social, cultural and literate identities constructed, erased, (re) constructed throughout their schooling lives by others in a system that overtly and perpetually defined them as 'not enough.'

Low.

Struggling.

‘At risk’

No hoper.

Poor kid.

Other?

That year compelled me to reimagine other ways that could disrupt the deficit labels and low expectations that were like an *absent presence*- so resolutely positioning children’s identities forever as ‘outsiders.’ Many (literally) ran away each day. Many carried the heartbreak that life’s circumstances served up to them and their families. Many presented each day, the potential of another identity waiting to be uncovered, created. It was all about potential, but required new ways of (re) conceptualising literacy curriculum, *thinking... imagining...* when approaching the same challenges. Where was I in all this? Where were the children in my class?

Let’s meet one, my Grace.

### **Disrupting existing in the literacy ‘at risk’ group**

The next year Grace was transferred to my class. She taught me many critical lessons, one of which was the power of seeing learning through the eyes of the child. Throughout our discussions, she recounted her experiences from the previous year where she was placed into a group during what was called ‘the two hour literacy block’ with four boys. During that time her literacy learning and experiences centred around completing various tasks in that small group, where they sat at a table positioned in the centre of the classroom and worked with a teacher’s assistant, rarely their classroom teacher (aside from setting their tasks and her checking’ their worksheets). Physically away from the *regular* class. In this group there was one boy who had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, two had learning disabilities and the other demonstrated challenging behaviours and was frequently (and somewhat exasperatingly/angrily) called over the loudspeaker to “...Please go back to your classroom!” which we all knew was *code* for “...Can you stop running away from school?” What messages do we send to children about their social and academic *status* when we make decisions about how to group children? How do these choices affect them, emotionally, their sense of agency, self-worth especially amongst their peers?



Children like Grace, who are determined to need ‘additional assistance’ were often relegated to an assigned table in the classroom, at times even removed and taken into other areas of the school to receive one on one or small group work. Activities such as rote learning high frequency words, reading (low) levelled texts and at times, colouring in pictures consumed much of Grace’s work that year. Sharing the other end of that double classroom space, I would often notice that group, watching the actions of the children. I always wondered how they felt being away from the regular group of children who I guess we could say were constructed in the world of schooling as the literacy *haves*. Those deemed to be able to participate in the *regular* literacy program.

### **The power of learning from children**

A *different* kind of engagement happens when literacy teachers shift from being the constant *evaluator* of children’s outcomes to one who is genuinely motivated to deeply understand children’s experiences, to inquire and empathise. It adds a deeply relational aspect to curriculum, one in which teachers can seek to understand not only children’s sense of identity but also understand their learning history. As Grace recounted experiences of being in that withdrawal group, she revealed to me such profound critical lessons (Noddings, 2006). Developing a sense of understanding of her emotions, her ideas (which were so heartfelt and creative!) we engaged in frequent discussions. Grace shared a range of insights about herself and her perceptions of learning. An unveiling of all that resides in the less examined world of literacy teaching and learning.

From the emotional aspects of her daily life where she struggled to make and keep friends... *it’s not easy to be alone. When I feel alone, and I want to have a friend, I find other people who are alone.*

To some months later where she had developed a sense of agency as a literacy learner...*everything has changed now. I am so excited. I love it. In this classroom many people help me, they are so so so so helpful. I have never had that many people helping me. Thanks for helping me understand.*

To becoming more strategic as a learner...*when I read, I talk to myself and say, 'I can do it' I say, 'Come on Grace don't stop, keep on going and don't give up.'* Now I am happy because I am confident and not scared.

A repositioning of the teacher as being attuned to the power of children's private worlds prompt us to reflect on how profoundly we can learn from children, if we create the spaces to do so. To address any hope of helping to restore and *re-story* Grace's identity as a literacy learner was the need to understand her history, to problematise it and create spaces for genuine dialogue. These pedagogic approaches are never part of any 'official' documented curriculum. Children who are constructed in deficit terms need to *unlearn* of all that they come to know about themselves as literacy learners. What was my role in ensuring Grace developed a sense of agency to enable her to fully participate in an intellectually engaging curriculum? The need to address issues of injustice that pervaded her learning life became critical to disrupt her literate identity, which was being positioned on the margins. *Literally. Metaphorically.*

Exploring the life world of Grace, taught me many critical lessons of teaching and learning literacy that stay with me today. In what turned out to be our last discussion together Grace presented me with a letter.

*Dearest Jenny,*

*I really tried to do my best this year but we are going to different grades. I will try my hardest to ask more questions and make more knowledge. If I change my thinking I know my learning will go like a rocket. Jenny you will never leave my heart. Please don't go out of my heart. I'm going to miss you and I am never going to forget this.*

*Loveness: Grace.*

Experiences of learning with children like Grace have taught me that seeking to counter the deficit social constructions of children's literate identities is central to enacting curriculum that embraces democratic, emancipatory literacy practices. The need to disrupt institutionalised ways of doing and being literate that positions children and their learning in reductionist ways need to

be of critical concern of teachers. Children categorised as ‘at risk,’ ‘struggling’ or ‘in need of intervention’ so early in their school life have profound negative consequences that are rarely examined.

### **Vignette 2: Disrupting the official curriculum: writing to relate**

One year, in order to understand my children more deeply and to address the lack of intellectual engagement in so many of their literacy learning experiences, I set up what I termed, ‘Our Thinking and Reflecting Journals’ where I decided I would write to the children each week and they had the opportunity to write or draw back to me. These were outwardly ordinary looking lined exercise books, but what was to reside *within* the pages was hardly ordinary. What became cultivated within the pages of the books were rich dialogic exchanges that sought to invite children’s intellectual, affective expressions, generate a deeper curiosity about issues in the world and develop their imaginations.

At the heart of introducing this new literacy practice was also the importance of creating spaces for children to be positioned as capable communicators whose insights were valued. Over time, their ideas soared! Reading and writing their journals was all they wanted to do each day. And interestingly, the more *conventional* aspects of their literacy development (that are usually the only focus of early *official* literacy curriculum) also greatly improved. Ideas flowed; curiosity deepened, greater approximations of more sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structure were frequently employed. Their wonderings reflected a desire to inquire. Activating their imaginative capacities deeply engaged them and (unsurprisingly) their actual reading levels and comprehension improved throughout this process. I came to understand from that year how important it is that we recognise the profound role teachers play in the development of children’s identity through the curriculum practices and choices that we implement. Seeking to know children *differently*, experience literacy as a social practice that opened up spaces where they could feel a strong personal and affective engagement in their learning. In effect, striving for an antidote to challenge ways of doing, being and becoming ‘school’ literate that were so narrowly defined.

What ensued throughout our dialogue recorded in the journals were ongoing opportunities for children to have an outlet to express their thoughts on their learning as well as their emotions. Not to mention an outlet for myself also! What freedom there was to be able to explore ideas, feelings and importantly grow from these as writers, thinkers and well ‘people.’ Through our weekly sessions of recording our thoughts in the journals I could attend more closely to her feelings and insights. I was effectively demonstrating that as her teacher, I valued children’s insights and also importantly that I was pedagogically and emotionally close. I guess some might describe that as being *present*.

This idea really became in essence, an ongoing ‘learning conversation.’ Through our reciprocal writing we could inquire into our experiences as learners, co-construct meaning and as their teacher I was able to inquire into ways that I could support their learning. Topics varied but usually comprised of current events, learning experiences or questions that arose during that week. Although this required much additional after work hours for me to respond to their entries, the fact that it became such a rich source of insights made it all worthwhile. It became this creative, ongoing pedagogical process of (re)imagining (re)constructing literacy curriculum. An uncovering of rich *possibilities* in our daily learning according to where our reflections took us.

Their capacity to generate creative insights, questions and wonderings fascinated me. My *critical lessons* were many but what stood out was in reality the simple notion that all we needed was as it turned out was that all we needed was

*a pencil*

*paper*

*a heartfelt desire to ‘go there’*

*the creation of space in the curriculum.*

Some of the intellectual and affective places that emerged in their entries included:

*... it was very interesting to find out what the word encounter means: to come across someone or something unexpectedly. I thought it meant something to do with shopping!*

*...what do you think of the natural world? I am staying in Ballarat soon and I can tell you it is full of history. There are historical goldmines there. I think the world is full of history, what would you say about that? I do hope you are able to answer my questions!*

*... I really connected when we were learning that Einstein struggled in school like me. I cannot believe that he became the best scientist in the world!*

*... I do believe that finding humour is important for learning...*

Always at play however is the constant *negotiating* of the documented curriculum with the lived experience of the everyday. The balancing of what was required to be taught and learned via the mandated policies and what I came to value as the ethical, moral imperatives of our work that were lived each day. The need to *go beyond* the constant quest to achieve predetermined standardised outcomes and instead embrace more complex perspectives. The ongoing inner conversations that are had never go away in these tensions; the *push and pull* of the mandated curriculum demanded equal attention be given to create more relational and liberatory ways of enacting curriculum.

### **Vignette 3: Disrupting the written word...dialogic explorations in reading the world**

Curriculum as a means by which we create moments of affective engagement has the capacity to enact social justice principles. Let me explain. When all in the literacy curriculum becomes about skills in mastering the ‘written’ word so many children are identified and self-identify as not being capable. It limits the potential engagement of the heart...the feelings of learning. Learning to read the world as an antidote to *just* the word was a way in which I sought to address issues of inclusion. Engaging hearts and minds with equal emphasis, and power.

Creating opportunities for children to engage in regular dialogue was for me was at the heart of not only activating their intellect and ideas but also elevated their status as capable and critical thinkers. Explicit moments to not only engage in sharing ideas but to reinforce that your ideas are valued. A level of engagement that is rarely, if ever, realised in the regular literacy classroom of ‘doing school.’ Never awakened in any real sense. Seeking to create spaces to embrace more openness, greater dialogue through the use of art works back then served to invite all to ‘read’ the images.

The use of artworks as a way of engaging all children to *read* images was intended to counter the endless diet of printed, levelled texts that were privileged. Artworks used as visual texts have a way of engaging all, inviting expression and response, inciting feelings. A way of making meaning that is not solely reliant on the cold hard reductive decoding skills that print demands. Bigger ideas that were more deeply ‘felt.’

An emphasis on affective engagements by reading images in artworks provided children with more embodied ways to express their ideas. Transgressing the *usual* (stratified) *business* of reading printed worlds that increase in complexity once a child has proven they are worthy of moving beyond the everyday high frequency words so omnipotent in their daily worlds. Why do we deny young children the rich vocabulary and ideas that present them with possibilities, alternative ways to imagine and perceive the world? Why do we persist in reproducing practices that erase any possibilities of being immersed in the pure adventure that thinking and ideas may invite?

I discovered that when curriculum practices are founded on amplifying the creative and imaginative capacity of children, the potential is enormous. How is it that children *diagnosed* by a previous teacher as ‘at risk’ or as ‘struggling’ to read/write possess the capacity to generate such deep insights and express questions they have about the world through dialogic engagements with each other and their teacher? Throughout the year we engaged in what became known as our ‘interesting discussions.’ So simple. So deep. So liberating. Many of the children expressed a range of insights, feelings and questions about the world. These included;

*Annie: I believe that observing art is like learning history because I learn about the artist and their life. I also learn about why artists paint about events during their lifetime. The painting “Liberation” by Ben Shan supports my ideas. I would like to learn and investigate other artists that are women.*

*Sian: I love the way Miro uses texture in his painting and I can’t believe that I am getting more information about his painting. I know that he sometimes gets ideas from his dreams, and I know*

*that he loves to use primary colours in his artwork and do abstract artworks too. I love the way he uses symbols in his artworks...*

*Aaron: I wish that you made me more work so I can think more, I like the way you make me think...I like the sculpture, it reminds me of a peace symbol.*

*Carlos: I never knew I knew so much about the elements of art for example I never knew what angular meant ...*

The desire to wrestle with ideas and to *pedagogically* follow my children's lead became part of the internal reflective conversations I had in planning their literacy learning. Recognising and embracing the role of dialogue, the need to have affective engagements in their learning became central tenets in any conceptualisation of literacy curriculum. Creating an intentional space for children to learn in more embodied ways, invite their expressions and most significantly come to know children more deeply, their histories and their experiences of being learners. I often wonder if all the discourse about effective teachers is purely and simply about all that is left inside our children? When all is said and done and they leave the teaching world of the classroom and us, what *remains*? What are the residues of their learning identities and lives with us?

#### **Vignette 4: Disrupting the heart and mind *divide*: Assembling agency in literacy**

Fast-forward four years. I am in a grade one-two classroom. There are even greater (is that possible?) pressures to increase the assessments of children's literacy skills. This pushed teachers into narrow unimaginative pedagogical corners, to reduce literacy as being only about what was *visible* when knowing in my heart anything that mattered never made it onto any prescribed developmental checklists. Moreover, there are now such pervasive (uncontested) discourses of using evidence related practices, of *diagnosing* and *fixing* that infuse everyday discussions of children and teaching. The use of 'data' is conceptualised as something that is factual, that can be observed, and that is constitutive of a child's identity; external to it. Frightening. Increasing amounts of children being as in need of intervention. Categories narrowed. Curriculum further reduced and simplified to discrete chunks of disconnected information.

No mention of the complexity of learning that is recursive, dynamic, non-linear and ever changing. The teacher's role in all this is similar to industrial models of schooling. The conveyor belt of literacy learning that diagnoses you in need of intervention at the mere chance that you did not correctly identify some disconnected word in a disconnected text in a disconnected experience. Schools like ours had *invested* much time, energy and money in setting up 'intervention' programs from the first year of school. Long before you have entered the building dear children, many of you will know the practice of being retrieved from your regular classroom, called perhaps across the room for all to hear, then taken into a room that is often silent and isolated where you will be required to read or write something that is determined by a particular scripted program...one that pretends all is happy like 'Jolly Phonics' (nothing jolly about the experience of being removed from your peers and re-assigned a separate space to be remediated). Publicly labelled as in need of fixing. Yes it is that visceral, felt. Perhaps your program will even offer you the opportunity to '*recover*'?

These are inherently designed to help you recover from what exactly?

*Your cultural heritage?*

*Your socio-economic class?*

*Your postcode?*

*Your apparent shyness which is mistaken for being at risk?'*

A critical capacity to question and imagine alternatives was needed now more than ever. I developed an approach with my children, which came to be known as C A T time, (Children As Teachers). This approach was underpinned by the explicit purpose of positioning children as experts of their own understandings, participate in literacy as a critical and social practice and in essence afford them ongoing opportunities to be experts in their lives. In these sessions children were taught how to participate in what was termed 'an interesting discussion,' where they could make decisions about the texts they read how they would help each other read. Simple. Powerful. It was the children who were the experts on their literacy learning. My expertise lay in explicitly structuring these sessions as well as the need to constantly challenge their fixed beliefs that it was their teacher who was the only source of knowledge and as such, their role was to passively listen.



## Discussion

### Disrupting traditional literacy pedagogy through *complicated conversations*

Central to the method of *currere* is the role of the *complicated* conversation, which can be conceptualised as the ongoing internal negotiation of the lived curriculum and the planned one. Pinar (2020) states that a complicated conversation occurs socially and subjectively through a shared and solitary academic study, sometimes spoken, sometimes silent. He points out that

*currere* emphasizes the everyday experience of the individual and one's capacity to learn from that experience (e.g., to reconstruct experience through thought and understanding and reflection in the service of understanding). Such understanding however partial and provisional – can be achieved by working through one's lived experiences, informed as that is by political, social and cultural legacies and events. Such understanding can, then help us reconstruct our own subjective and social lives. We are changed by what we study: such educational experiences encourage subjective and social reconstruction (2020, p.51)

Through ongoing internal *complicated conversations*, one can wrestle with the tensions that surround the everyday world of literacy teaching and learning. Issues that reside undercover yet operate so powerfully to create deficit constructions of children can be made public and critically examined. These include the *rush* to assign reading (and other) levels to children, which create harmful literacy categories, and practices that reproduce vulnerabilities in children from low socio-economic and culturally diverse communities. Mandated narrow assessment regimes pressure teachers to simplify literacy learning, especially with young children by reducing curriculum to a series of skills and sub-skills that rely on memory more than anything. Teachers and children are required to *live within* these curriculum constraints, that standardise and minimise 'ways of being literate.'

On so many occasions as a school leader I would move throughout classrooms and observe children self-identify as a specific 'reading level' "*I am a level 12...*" What often accompanied this was the fact that once reading levels were determined, they were then excluded from selecting texts from *other* boxes (that were not their levels and hence deemed to be inappropriate reading). What *critical* life long lessons do children learn about themselves and the world of

schooling from these practices? Their identity (self-worth...learning potential, trajectory...) is so intrinsically bound up in an arbitrary number. Pretty much decided from such a young age. That number takes on an agency all of its own. Working against these practices requires a deep level of critical consciousness; a reconceptualization of literacy curriculum that can be enacted in more imaginative, socially just ways.

To counter the persistent privileging of the 'cognitive' realms of learning in the literacy curriculum that is concerned mostly with memorisation of facts, we wondered with *currere* what the possibilities were in seeking to integrate more imaginative ways for children to express their ideas whilst learning to read the visual world of artworks? To transcend the endless closed questions that demand little more than closed, minimised, *correct* responses. What was the potential of our imagination as a means to explore other worlds, other vocabulary stemming from the need to nurture and contest the conceptualisation of children only in terms of their reading level? To disrupt practices that in essence teach children that their value and self-worth is tied up in their reading level. In essence as we reflect now, we sought to transcend the constant quest for *certainty*, the 'tick box' conception of curriculum as linear and predictable.

Literacy when conceptualised as a critical, social and ideological practice required that children learn to reading both the word and the world; as an act of resistance and empowerment. A constant seeking of children's perspectives reorganising ways to conceptualise the curriculum, the policies and practices that reproduce inequalities, this capacity to analyse to critique in order to discover who is privileged in the curriculum choices we make? Who is excluded? Developing a sense of preparedness to counter deficit constructions of children from low-socio-economic and diverse cultural communities

Efforts to counter these institutional practices are in essence a refusal to buy into deficit narratives and constructions of children's identities as literacy learners. The constant (re)negotiation of what curriculum *could be* occurs each moment throughout myriad interactions, encounters. What we now perceive as a kind of inner dialogue that in essence is a critical endeavour to seek alternative ways to learn literacy that transcend reductionist skill based views

of learning. Curriculum as a form of speaking back to the injustices of institutionalised literacy teaching, learning and assessment is inherent in the method of *currere*.

How rare it is that we honour children's expertise, demonstrate so visibly and viscerally a deep respect for their capacities, the potential they have to help each other navigate their ways through texts and understand them - make meaning - counter the competitive ways in which children are positioned consciously or unconsciously to achieve higher levels

Emphasising literacy as a critical, social practice has implications for how curriculum is designed. Reinforcing a pedagogical *orientation* to inquire, to critique, demands a capacity for children to be able to *feel* their way around ideas. Opportunities to record their thinking became routine. We listed ideas on charts (with their names in brackets) and this appeared to give them a sense of ownership and *permission* to change their thinking, challenge each other's ideas delight in them changing their mind or having another child question them. Wasn't this *life*? To be alive is to engage in robust discussion literacy learning became about having interesting discussions where we mapped what this could look like in our classroom.

Creating spaces for children to demonstrate their learning, highlight their funds of knowledge, activate their capacity to support their peers and position them as experts of their lives were central to this practice. Also in the mix were opportunities to embrace a diversity of ideas, bring us together as a community and enable all to fully participate. This transcended the practice of being grouped according to a specific literacy level or skill. All we required were interesting provocative sentence stems and questions as a means of inducting these (new) practices of learning and relating during literacy sessions. These enabled us to explore a topic of some personal or social significance. To being with these included, stems we could use after reading such as, is it fair to...? Do you think that..? Could you imagine...? What is another way to think about this? Time to engage in more substantive discussions with a partner, small group or as a whole group were explicitly structured into literacy sessions.

As the children became more proficient as communicators and thinkers, we found ourselves going deeper into then developing ways in which we could characterise how we could have

interesting discussions during our CAT time. These were kind of like ‘ground rules.’ Drawing on children’s expertise, they suggested the following to guide their discussions.

- Everyone needs to talk equally
- Ask each other questions and help each other if words are tricky
- Ask questions like, ‘what do you mean?’
- Make eye contacts with the person who is talking
- Say “I agree” or “I don’t agree,” but add ‘why’
- Ask each other interesting questions, for e.g., ‘what do you mean when you say...’
- Make sure your mind is organised to have an interesting discussion
- Keep ideas connected to make sure you keep the discussion growing, flowing, knowing and showing
- Make your ideas bounce off each other
- Talk equally and use a clear respectful voice

‘CAT’ time took on a life of its own. Children learned how to communicate effectively with all of their peers, how to question, clarify, inquire, and to use each other as resources. They then were able to use this time to focus on assisting each other with their writing and reading goals. Using these sessions children learned more deeply how to relate to each other, suggest learning strategies, try out ideas and most importantly feel a sense of self-direction in their learning lives that are constantly negotiated in the adult privileged world of school. Creating curriculum that (re) positions children as the experts of all in their literacy learning lives, that reinforces their opinions are valued came to be critical considerations. How could it be otherwise? How can we continue to ‘deliver’ curriculum as a pre-packaged set of facts void of any personal connection? The persistent metaphors and practices that reside so unquestioningly in the everyday literacy worlds need constant interrogation.

Seeking to be critically aware of how literacy practices impact so powerfully on the learning lives of children is central to pursuing more socially just orientations. Being critical through the ongoing interrogation of literacy practices, questioning how we can be more inclusive with the

language we use, the knowledge we present and the importance of having theories to frame our approaches are vital.

Challenging ‘official’ or sanctioned literacy approaches became the norm for me when making curriculum decisions. It can be considered analogous to changing trajectories for young children whose deficit status and potential to learn literacy is often decided soon after school entry, or more worryingly, prior to if they have attended the school to be assessed. Sanctioned literacies, especially in the early years literacy curriculum, usually focus on the individual privileging of learning as the memorising of facts. The narrow socially invented dimension of teaching and learning and the institutional ways in which curriculum is constructed requires teachers to pay close attention to issues of equity.

Questions around issues that surround ‘normativity’ what the curriculum effectively sanctions as standards to be achieved calls for critical imaginings for children who do not so easily fit into the linear trajectories mapped out for them and who consequently endure life in the low ‘at risk’ groups, who are assigned a lesser peripheral status. Never consulted with, materials surround them that are designed to remediate, fix and remind them that they are in deficit. Living in what I now understand to be a resistance to the simplification of literacy learning but rather embracing the complexities and relational potential of curriculum as lived everyday in literacy learning. The myriad daily moments in which teachers are challenged to both deeply understand the systemic inequities of children’s lives that are enacted in an uncritical approach to curriculum and design more critical and emancipatory

### **Sidebar : Disrupting to uncover other ‘matters’ that exert agency in the literacy classroom**

Thinking of what our journals, the outwardly *unremarkable* exercise book came to represent in the children’s literacy learning lives makes us reflect on the materials, the artifacts – all of the non-human remnants and assemblages that both reflect and that play a constitutive role in the literacy curriculum. How are they implicated in the literacy learning lives of children and teachers? What do they, could they (re) present in terms of access and participation? Can they be assigned a level of agency that remains under examined in the busy daily lives of teachers and children?

The presence of non-human, material artefacts of learning were reflected in the children's writing books, the charts and posters that adorned the classroom and these came to exert a sense of agency in themselves. The assemblage of charts, words, ideas as artefacts of our learning became traces not only of what we had learned yet also where we might 'go', what could be added to, how our ideas had changed and so on. Powerful visual reminders, (re)presentations of curriculum that went beyond the reproduction of disconnected vocabulary lists. Instead charts sought to include language and ideas that were linked to personally and socially significant ideas we had encountered. At times the children wanted their names recorded next to their ideas so as to invite further discussion and create ownership. Often we do not regard the power of non-human agents in the literacy classroom, the levelled text, the word chart, and the child's reading book box that contains specific materials that represent their levelled literacy lives. The ways in which space and materials are regulated in the literacy classroom can provide such insights into issues of participation and access.

### **Disruption as an invitation to reimagine through *currere*: concluding thoughts**

A disruption of literacy curriculum as a force of interrogating the homogenising of practices, the standardisation of learning that reflects linear conceptualisations of progress speaks to the need to keep critical questions alive in the daily world of literacy teaching and learning. Questions as to who gets access to the kinds of literacy experiences planned, who is excluded? (Bourdieu, 1989). When curriculum is conceptualised this way children become categorised as the *haves* and *have-nots*. At the heart of more socially just practices requires the constant engagement in *complicated conversations* to question normalised ways of doing literacy/becoming literate according to narrow standards. Also implicated are the rarely considered ethical concerns that need to be at the forefront of teaching and learning especially in the hotly debated world of literacy teaching and learning. Resisting the reproduction of vulnerabilities in learners requires an attunement to the critical and emancipatory ways in which curriculum can live by embodying more generative imaginative ways of teaching and learning that transcend the rote memorisation of disconnected facts and skills.

Embracing the uncertainty, the ambiguity of curriculum possibilities as an antidote to the prescribed (at times scripted) ways we plan literacy learning for children. What Maxine Greene has described as a wakefulness to the unknown, embracing possibilities an openness to being surprised, enthralled by children and all that lay unawakened in their potential. As we delved deeper into what makes for an interesting discussion (a focus area that remained a constant part of the enacted curriculum in the rescripted literacy sessions) we were reminded of Battiste's, (2013, p.31) comment on how:

Modern educational thought finds human consciousness too messy to be studied, which may account for why youth get the facts but not the discussion of what their own purpose is within the life in which they are submersed.

Ricoeur (1995) has regarded the interpretation of texts a profitable approach for the analysis of social action. In this paper we have situated our reflective texts as a form of landscape (Steedman, 1986), from which to venture into children's worlds and elucidate doubled understandings of their readerly/writerly (Barthes, 1974) relationship with the curriculum and the cultural institutions and practices of schooling. However, it must be acknowledged that we hope the readers of this text will enter in to a different kind of dialectical relationship and produce meanings derived from their positioned critical stances. Reading critically necessitates reading intertextually in order to interrogate the macro/ micro connections Reading critically involves a reading of the self in the world as offered by the world of the text (Freire, 1974) and reading critically can guide the reader to focus on issues of power, transformation and action; it promotes reflection and folds in complexity to the interpretation of text as it engages with the possibility of multiple perspectives and provides a space for alternative visions...of hope and transformation.

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