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A Curriculum of Life

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“Curriculum of life” is a phrase that we began to use in the context of a school-based research project in order to describe an unusual and engaging approach to curriculum on the part of one of the schools in the study. Curriculum is a term used very loosely in education, sometimes to refer to official documents, disciplines, subject matter or content, plans, objectives, or student experiences. While curriculum of life may include any of these, it is unusual in that it is a view of curriculum as a dynamic relationship among teachers, students, knowledge, and contexts. In this article we demonstrate the concept of curriculum of life by providing examples of it in action and then analyzing central features and characteristics.

This article arises from our involvement in a three-year pan-Canadian national study on student engagement in school life and learning.¹ Here we focus on the story of Emily Carr Elementary School (pseudonym), a Nova Scotian school involved in the study. Located in an area where the majority of the children live below Canada’s official poverty line, Emily Carr Elementary School provided a concrete and extraordinary

example of the educational possibilities that can emerge from a pedagogy and leadership perspective based on critical practice and education for democratic transformation. The case of Emily Carr Elementary School illustrates a conception of “excellence” that is fundamental to education in a democracy.

Emily Carr Elementary, a school of approximately 350 students, is located in a suburban mixed working class and middle class community. Student-teacher ratio at the school is average for the district, which has no differential funding formula whereby disadvantaged schools received added support or resources, beyond an inner city school program which does not apply in this case.

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Emily Carr Elementary is an arts-infused school in which the official provincial curriculum is taught as extensively as possible through drawing on the creative arts, including visual arts, performance arts, music and crafts. While the arts are seen as another way of speaking, they are also seen as both objects and processes worth of study in and of themselves. As well, the school offers a number of supplementary programs including a pre-school program for four-year olds, a peer mediation and conflict resolution program, a community development project jointly organized by school staff and community members, a community-run breakfast program, reading buddies programs and reading clubs. Emily Carr Elementary engages in a surprising number of school-wide activities and programs, of which Town Hall is a good example. Held about once a month, this school-wide and community event is intended as an opportunity for students, teachers, parents and community to celebrate current work, to raise issues of concern to the school community, and to stage performances of present artistic projects.

The lives of many of the students and families at Emily Carr Elementary are far from easy. Most of the school population does not enjoy the automatic access and ease conferred by economic privilege; too many here suffer the attendant ills of poverty. Much of the work at the school attempts to recognize and account for social conditions in the community and school. A growing and explicit interest in critical practice and democratic education is embodied in aspects of the school-wide curriculum, in locally situated, on-going school and classroom discussions of the working of power, in the peaceful

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school project, and in a variety of projects intended to locate the school in and for the community. In other words, what has developed at Emily Carr is not the curriculum of excuses and diminished expectations too common in marginalized community schools, but a frank and forthright accounting for social conditions attended by a pedagogy of hope.

A few stories which illustrate school-wide curriculum and critical practice in action at Emily Carr Elementary will provide insights into what we mean by a curriculum of life.

On one occasion in a grade six classroom, one boy said to another, “Don’t be such a girl.” When several of the girls – and the teacher – took offense, the comment was taken up by the class. All words used to refer to males and females were written on the board, analyzed, and categorized according to connotations. The children were amazed at the sheer number of negative connotations used to refer to females in comparison to males; but, unconvinced that the way in which language is used can be a serious gender issue, and uncertain about whether language reflected or constructed reality, the class launched a study of gendered language, including a school-based research project. They took a survey of girls and boys to see how many found the male terms used in common sayings inclusive. The children tabulated their results and charted them in percentages and percentiles (thus also addressing proportion and graphing in their math curriculum), and

presented their findings at Town Hall. Children who had argued that the language included girls and women, learned through this research that the majority of boys and the vast majority of girls they surveyed didn't feel this way.

The "sun-glasses incident" is a case which illustrates curriculum of life embodied in the approach to discipline at the school. When it was discovered that a group of students in the school had been shop-lifting sun glasses from the local drug store, the incident became an opportunity for reinforcing the school values of responsibility and community-mindedness. In addition to the expected school response of a phone call and letter to the parents, members of the guilty group were engaged in a research and reparation project with the drug store. Students went, with the vice-principal, to the store to meet the proprietor and negotiate with him a means of repaying his loss – by cleaning the store, as it turned out. They also undertook a study of the extent and consequences of shop-lifting at the store, discovering in the process the sorts of goods stolen from the store and hypothesizing from that who might be shop-lifting and why. They learned that shop-lifting cost the drug store the equivalent of a full-time clerk's salary per month – a poignant discovery in a school community so troubled by high unemployment among families.



EN BREF

L'école élémentaire Emily Carr (un pseudonyme) en Nouvelle-Écosse participe à une étude pancanadienne de trois ans sur l'engagement des élèves dans leur vie scolaire et leur apprentissage. Cette école d'environ 350 élèves est située dans un quartier mi-prolétaire mi-classe moyenne où la majorité des enfants vivent sous le seuil de pauvreté. Cet article fournit des exemples « d'un programme d'apprentissage de la vie » qui permet de traiter de questions fondamentales, dont certaines controversées, qui touchent la vie personnelle, sociale et politique de l'élève.

Grounded in the immediate daily worlds of students as well as in the larger social and political contexts of their lives, curriculum of life breaks down the walls between the school and the world.

Fourteen Days in December, an annual event at Emily Carr Elementary, demonstrates curriculum of life as it was enacted in a school-wide curriculum. Each year the first two weeks of December are set aside to remark certain values the Christmas season supposedly celebrates, values which are also central to pedagogy at the school. For example, one year, the 14 Days celebration centered on the theme of peace, setting aside "a time to recognize that for children, and for us all, gentle ways are best...and to invite families in the [Emily Carr Elementary School] community to join their children in thinking about how we can work together to create a happier, safer world" (Emily Carr Elementary School newsletter); the following year, the theme was "gifts that can't be bought," centering on the values of helpfulness, friendship, caring, and community. Hence the themes of 14 Days in December brings to the foreground the central values and dispositions of the larger school project: that is, to build a community of inquiry grounded in questions of living well together.

In addition, for 14 days the school enacted a series of themes connected to social justice and care issues, introduced each morning during a Radio PEACE broadcast. The pedagogical bent of 14 Days is clarified by the nature of the themes and activities: on Purple Ribbon Day the Montreal massacre was remarked; on Common Courtesy Day, the theme of courtesy was considered in the classroom through art, reading and writing, and discussion, and in the school through "small acts of courtesy"; on Community Day children talked, drew, and wrote about their community and why it was important to them. The 14 Days culminated in a peace concert at which the peace posters were displayed, songs were sung, and so on.

As an example of the school-wide curriculum, 14 Days in December engages students in several ways. Most obviously, it includes abundant space for creativity and playfulness – it's fun. At a more profound level, its origins in the concerns of the school and community are engaging. This is a school that had, at one point in its history, a reputation for violence, and it is also a school that serves those communities most encumbered by the commercial demands of Christmas. Fourteen Days, then, directly addresses important issues in the lives of the children and adults the school serves. Perhaps most importantly, however, students at this school appear to engage in events like 14 Days because such events belong, at least in


part, to them. In other words, 14 Days is an expression of a community identity for which the students at Emily Carr Elementary School take proud responsibility.

What, then, do we see as curriculum of life at Emily Carr Elementary? As the principal of the school stated, the strength of the school does not merely lie in the fact that it has innovative programs or practices a pedagogy of care; its excellence arises from the fact that these programs are framed within the context of a critical practice which explicitly takes into account issues of power, difference, and marginality within all educational projects. By “curriculum of life” we mean a central, organizing stance that informs pedagogy, knowledge, school and classroom procedures and dispositions, evaluation, and how students, teachers, administrators and staff engage in the school. Curriculum of life is an approach to pedagogy that informs and gives coherence to often disparate aspects of school life. It is implicit in curriculum content and planning, in school organization and policy, in discipline, in school/community relations, in classroom and school-wide pedagogy. Grounded in the immediate daily worlds of students as well as in the larger social and political contexts of their lives, curriculum of life breaks down the walls between the school and the world. It is an approach that presupposes genuine respect for children’s minds and experience – without romanticizing either. It is an approach that is inconsistent with a deficit mentality common in many schools.

A common misinterpretation of curriculum of life is that it is similar to student-centered notions of making curriculum relevant or linking it to students’ experiences. We want to be clear that, while we intend the phrase to include an approach that takes students’ experiences seriously, we do not intend the often superficial constructivist notion of linking classroom activities to students’ personal interests. A curriculum of life centres on the possibilities for the co-construction and co-production of knowledge, rather than on knowledge as simply teacher transmitted or simply student created.

As the examples of the stories offered indicate, the curriculum of life makes explicit the kinds of issues usually associated with the “hidden curriculum.” Hence, it takes substantive and possibly controversial issues in the students’ personal, social and political lives very seriously; it does not avoid dealing with the controversial nor hide behind the pretense of neutrality. In short, it is an approach that finds the neo-liberal agenda in education problematic, since the latter does not encourage the critical and democratic transformation purposes of education.

The case of Emily Carr Elementary School illustrates a conception of “excellence” that is fundamental to education in a genuine democracy. It also shows the possibilities that can emerge from a critical pedagogy supported by democratic leadership. Yet, unfortunately, current school reforms in Canada have put a premium on the principal as manager and the curriculum as a fixed object to be delivered by teachers. These reforms have emphasized the need for common standards, standardized forms of evaluation, and narrow utilitarian conceptions of accountability, rather than supporting

issues of equity, difference and social justice.² Such reforms explicitly or implicitly promote an efficiency model that is structurally stifling, unprogressive and inconsistent with democratic values.³ For more schools like Emily Carr Elementary to emerge and flourish, it is imperative that the tenor of these reforms be resisted and redirected. 

1 William J. Smith, Lynn Butler-Kisber, Linda J. LaRocque, John P. Portelli, Carolyn M. Shields, Carolyn Sturge Sparkes, Ann B. Vibert, *Student Engagement in Learning and School Life: National Project Report* (Montreal, PQ: Office of Research on Educational Policy, McGill University, 1998).

2 See John P. Portelli and R. Patrick Solomon (Eds.), *The Erosion of Democracy in Education: From Critique to Possibilities* (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 2001).

3 See, Janice Gross Stein, *The Cult of Efficiency* (Toronto, ON: Anansi, 2001).

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