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# On Getting Lost, Finding One's Direction, and Teacher Research

While getting lost in a book is a good thing, losing one's sense of direction in education generally, and the teaching of literacy specifically, isn't. Unfortunately, it's easy to get lost in both education and literacy these days. Before we address some of the most common reasons for this, we wish to tell our story and explain how it is—despite the tenor of these times—that we have managed to keep our direction. For those of you who feel lost, the good news is that you are neither the first nor the only ones. From what we can tell, it's a pandemic of historic proportions.

Arthur Combs tells the story of his experience at the University of Florida in setting up a demonstration school (1999). He said it was a heady experience. Not only did the University allow him to design the school, he was also permitted to select and hire the faculty. Further, the University provided money so that teachers could meet during the summer to plan the curriculum and decide what kind of furniture they wanted. If teachers wanted tables and chairs instead of desks, they got them. They also chose the number of bulletin boards, the carpeting, and whether they wanted a theater section built into the room for group meetings and dramas. Of course, they were free to select which, if any, commercial programs and materials they wanted, including the option of using children's literature as the core of the literacy curriculum. According to Combs, it was a wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime experience. The problem came in the fall, he said, when the parents sent them the wrong damn kids!

While humorous on one level, there is a real lesson here: It's easy to get lost when we try to shape students to fit our school rather than trying to shape school to fit our students.

Carolyn Burke (personal communication, July 1, 1980) makes a similar point by maintaining that too often we build curriculum on memory rather than on inquiry. Inquiry evolves from using the child, or in the case of middle school, the adolescent, as our curricular informant (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). That's what's wrong with most, if not all, commercial programs. Students rarely, if ever, are expected to make real contributions to the existing knowledge base. Even in the more innovative programs, they are expected only to "discover" what is already known. Instead of taking their place on the front line of knowledge construction, they find themselves on the sideline. Under these conditions, it's little wonder that so many students see their school experiences as irrelevant and respond with perfunctory efforts.

At the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in Indianapolis, a school that we and a group of public school teachers from the Indianapolis Public Schools created, we've tried to build curriculum from the inquiry questions of learners (Harste, Leland, Schmidt, Vasquez, & Ociepka, 2004; Pierpont, 2005). When things are going as planned, students are given time each day to pursue their own inquiry questions on their own topic. Teachers select broad themes for class-based focused studies so that within the themes, students can pursue topics of particular interest to them. One of the earliest themes we explored was "Celebrating In-



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dianapolis." Individual students explored the history of the Indianapolis 500, what Indianapolis looks like from the perspectives of art and music, its role in the Civil War as well as the Civil Rights Movement, and numerous other topics. We were amazed by what we all learned! Did you know, for instance, that at one point in time, Indianapolis was thought of as the literary capital of the United States? James Whitcomb Riley and Mark Twain pushed hard to have the literary world accept books written in dialect, arguing that such texts were more reflective of and sensitive to the culture and life experiences of American readers.

We learned a lot about learning from these early forays into inquiry, including the idea that choice is central to the learning process. It is the element of choice that allows students and teachers the opportunity to make curriculum critical as well as culturally responsive. Students who were not being well served in other schools transferred to the Center for Inquiry and bloomed. They explored important themes like "What does it mean to be a learner?" Starting out the year with serious inquiry into how people learn involved them in conducting in-depth interviews and looking for patterns in what people told them. Instead of being pushed through yet another prepackaged or canned curriculum, they were able to see a whole new range of possibilities for what school was all about. Maybe that's why a second CFI opened in Indianapolis, and maybe that's what prompted calls from parents who couldn't understand why, after a family move, their child suddenly hated school! "Where," they asked, "can we find a school like CFI in New Jersey?"

We also found that the more relevant our themes were to our learners, the more effective our curriculum became. To that end, we started to identify children's books and adolescent novels that raised what we saw as important social issues in need of discussion and research: guns, homelessness, bullying, gangs, racial and sexual discrimination (Harste, Vasquez, Lewison, Breau, Leland, Ociepka, 1999; Leland & Harste, 2002). We used many of these books as read-alouds and others as text sets for literature discussions. What we learned was that most of the focused studies we became engaged in evolved from the reading of these books. As a follow-up to discussions about books that focused on racial discrimination, for example, some middle school students designed a mini-inquiry project and found that it took African American customers an average of 15 minutes longer to be served in an upscale mall than it did Caucasian customers. Discrimination wasn't treated as an artifact of history but as an ongoing issue that affected each of them daily. Further, by airing their findings, these students took some initial steps in creating a more just and equitable world, both in their school and in their larger community.

Building curriculum with students doesn't mean that we don't front-load the curriculum with what we see as important. What may not be clear in this regard is that we've learned to focus our efforts on putting in place the social practices that surround "being literate," rather than worrying endlessly about "being literate" per se. These social practices include conscious engagement, acceptance of alternate ways of being, and embracing responsibility to inquiry and reflexivity (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, in press). Conscious engagement means that we are actively opening up spaces in our classrooms for discussing topics that have been either taboo or taken-for-granted. Accepting alternate ways of being entails giving value to multiple perspectives, text sets, and curricular invitations that allow students to explore topics from a variety of angles and in a variety of forms, including art, music, language, movement, and drama. Embracing our responsibility to inquiry is an attitude. It is accompanied by the dual beliefs that every question can be researched and that you have a right as well as a responsibility to collaborate in the construction of new knowledge. Reflexivity means that we use ourselves and others to both rethink and reposition ourselves to interact with the world in more just and equitable ways. When these processes are front-loaded, we don't have to worry about literacy, even when broadly defined as the ability to mean across all sign systems. Said differently, we found that literacy takes



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care of itself when we focus our attention on putting in place the social practices that sustain conscious engagement, multiple perspectives, inquiry, and reflexivity.

Given our experience, inquiry is the only sure way for students and teachers to find and maintain direction. Education really is inquiry—at every level. We see curriculum as a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be. In a former document, we argued (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1986) that there are really three curricula. The *paper curriculum* is the document on paper, your official plans. The *enacted curriculum* is the curriculum that results from your putting those plans into practice. The *real curriculum*, however, is what happens in the head of the learner. The tension among these curricula is what fuels teacher inquiries.

Someone once said that teaching was like sailing a ship on high seas; what one has to learn as skipper is how to rebuild the ship as it moves full-steam ahead. This entails knowing what you believe as well as believing that at least one tenet in your existing theory is wrong; your job as a teacher-researcher is to find out which one is wrong by testing each tenet daily in practice. In other words (to complete our metaphor), it means rebuilding your ship plank by plank as you sail into Monday morning.

As educators, we feel like we have been rebuilding our ship through all of our professional lives and we're sure we will continue to do so. Here are some lessons we've learned:

1. Never value programs over people. This is Arthur Combs's message as well as Frank Smith's (1971). Their advice is sound, if not new, but given all the quick fixes out there (Accelerated Readers, Leveled Books, Teaching to the Test), it's advice that obviously bears repeating. In each of these quick fixes, it's not people running the show, or even really books; it's skill levels. Choice, interests, and why people read in the first place are left trailing in the dust. The key to avoiding the trap of quick fixes is to remember that curriculum is too important to be left in the hands of those who rarely come in contact with students.
2. Don't use "scientifically based research" as your daily guide to practice. "Scientifically based research" is, unfortunately, our current government's mantra. The problem with it is that experimental researchers study very narrow topics (like phonemic awareness), and while their findings may be useful, they address just one small part of a much larger process. Very few of us read to see how many words we can sound out, or write to see how many words we can spell correctly. Some of us are not even aware that our meanings are made up of sememes, much less phonemes. To be an effective teacher of literacy, you need to have a theory of language and literacy, a theory of child growth and development, a theory of curriculum, and more. Researchers—particularly experimental researchers studying reading and writing—tend to focus their studies narrowly so that they can maintain control of laboratory conditions. (We might add that they also tend to take themselves way too seriously, a fact that could explain how they have gained control in the government.)
3. Don't fall into the trap of doing a little of everything—perhaps badly—every day. Given all the pressures and mixed messages out there, it is easy to fall into the trap of trying to do it all—½ hour of grammar, ½ hour of reading comprehension skill development, ½ hour of work on fluency, ½ hour of reading aloud, ½ hour for writers' workshop, ½ hour for in-depth literature discussions, etc. Although he was referring

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to the curriculum as a whole, Donald Graves calls the result, the "cha-cha-cha curriculum" (1982)—reading is over, take out your math books; math is over, take out your social studies; social studies is over, take out your spelling; and the "cha-cha-cha" continues. His point is dead on. Too often curriculum planning is additive; rather than getting rid of anything, we try to cram more into an already overloaded day. Our experience tells us that students learn more from one quality language encounter than from a quantity of half-baked experiences. The more seamless the curriculum, the better. Take the time to do what you choose to do well.

**All decisions about literacy and the teaching of literacy are, in the final analysis, moral decisions.**

4. Avoid taking the stance, "If it's working, don't mess with it!" While this attitude is rooted in experience, it is important to remember that "whether or not something is working" is never a sufficient criterion for maintaining a practice. Worksheets worked. So did Nazi prison camps. It's easy to get lost when you're not clear about where you wish to go, or if you've not come to the realization that all decisions about literacy and the teaching of literacy are, in the final analysis, moral decisions. Sticking with the so-called "tried and true" can be a seductive trap for any teacher, but especially for those who have won teaching awards or other recognition (and really do think they have teaching solved). There is nothing more dangerous than educators—be they parents, teachers, curriculum developers, administrators, researchers, legislators, or theorists—who think they have everything figured out. Curriculum needs to be written in pencil. Laminating teaching centers, curriculum guides, or the items that go on your bulletin board is inherently a bad idea and all too often signals that inquiry has stopped.

5. Keep your classroom door open. While at an intuitive level, closing your classroom door makes some sense (it allows you to do your own thing), at another level, it's anti-professional and anti-intellectual. Knowledge is socially constituted. To be a teacher or a researcher is to agree to participate in a learning community, one part of which is sharing. This principle applies to young and old alike. Language researchers like Gordon Wells (1986) found that most of what young children know about language, they learned from being in the presence of others. A similar situation exists relative to the teaching of literacy. As professionals, we have an obligation not only to share, but to question and to confront, as well. This entails actively adding our voices to the conversation rather than doing what many teachers are so good at doing: "being nice." The *result* of keeping your classroom door open is growth for you and the profession. The *benefit* of keeping your classroom door open is that you will never have to work alone again.

There are lots of ways to get lost when it comes to teaching literacy. Given the context of our times, we have shared some of the ways we've found to maintain our direction. We agree that avoiding the traps takes "chutzpa," which we define, following Leo Rosen's model (1968)[1], as that quality enshrined in teachers who, having elected not to follow blindly or simply do as they are told, dare first to dream and second to teach and research. Few people understand that it is being a philosopher that gives you the right to be a teacher and a researcher, not the other way around. In fact, one of the most common ways to get lost is to censor everything, including yourself. Too many people in our profession edit their dreams before they even dare to have any themselves. The silver lining in our getting lost was a rediscovery of teacher-

[1] It was Rosen who first set down in print the famous definition of "chutzpa" as "that quality enshrined in a man who, having killed his mother and father, throws himself on the mercy of the court because he is an orphan."



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research and its centrality to the educative process. Unlike "best practice" advocates who ask us to implement programs because they worked for someone else, the teacher-researcher paradigm provides a set of social practices for outgrowing our current knowledge. It is a call for thoughtfulness, for testing our best ideas publicly, and for putting students and the social practices that sustain literacy at the center of curriculum. If our literacy agenda for the 21st century is to prepare agents of texts rather than victims of text, then we can hardly settle for less.

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