

WHEN CURRICULUM BECOMES A STRANGER

KARYN COOPER *University of Toronto*

ABSTRACT. Prompted by a child's question, this reflective paper uses narrative to explore ways in which technical and standardized approaches to curriculum do little to help children and their teachers make sense of the complexity of the life world in which they dwell. These curricular approaches are perhaps symptomatic of a larger problem. This paper examines ways in which curricula mandated by the state have been traditionally used to implement social policies and to control what is taught, how it is taught, and to whom it is taught – that is to say, what conception of children is being promoted. In this context, teachers may often become handmaidens of the state, sometimes, though not always, unwittingly implementing social policies that may undermine the possibility for critical thinking in schools. Becoming an adult in western culture can involve estrangement from one's own childhood, and the curriculum of "traditional" schooling may serve to reinforce this estrangement.

QUAND LE PROGRAMME D'ÉTUDES DEVIENT UN ÉTRANGER

RÉSUMÉ. Cette réflexion, suscitée par la question d'un enfant, porte sur l'aide minimale que les approches techniques et standardisées d'un programme d'études apportent aux élèves et à leurs enseignants pour mieux comprendre la complexité du monde qui les entoure. Ces approches peuvent être les symptômes d'une problématique plus importante. Cet article examine comment les programmes mandatés par l'État ont traditionnellement été utilisés, d'une part, pour mettre en œuvre des politiques sociales et, d'autre part, pour contrôler le contenu enseigné, la méthode d'enseignement et les élèves, en d'autres mots pour promouvoir une certaine conception de l'enfance. Dans un tel contexte, les enseignants peuvent souvent être au service d'un état pour implanter consciemment ou non des politiques sociales risquant de compromettre la possibilité d'une pensée critique dans les écoles. Devenir adulte, dans la culture occidentale, peut impliquer une certaine rupture par rapport à sa propre enfance. Cette rupture peut être renforcée par les programmes d'études "traditionnels."

Childhood In a kit

I begin with a true story

I was walking to campus for an early morning meeting. New flowers punctuated nearly every yard. Rich hues of yellow, orange and red splattered playfully across the soft ground, replacing winter's seemingly impenetrable cover of snow. I felt the soft spring breeze sweep across my face, gently, like a mother's hand brushing sleep from her child's eyes.

The voice of a small child interrupted my thoughts. "What's a stranger?" She was so close to me that I had to wonder just how she got there. And indeed, how had I managed not to mow her down like some weed in the crack of the sidewalk? That look, her question, and the ease with which she slipped her hand in mine as she tried to get me to walk her to school linger still.

This little girl's question is an intriguing one. Perhaps this question resulted from a confusion about either her school experience or her lived experience, or a dissonance between the two. Through speaking further with her, I gathered she might have been confused by the way the concept "stranger" had been presented to her at school. Clearly, she was concerned about the concept of "stranger," not about the issue of her own personal safety. I wondered whether she had been introduced to the concept of "stranger" through a curriculum kit at school. If so, I could perhaps understand her confusion.

As a teacher, I was once obliged to attend a workshop on the use of such a kit. While the concept of "stranger" is a complex one, kits such as the one that was the focus of the workshop did little to address the complexity in any comprehensive way. Like many of my colleagues, I chose not to use it. Instead, I tried to integrate concepts such as the one of stranger into a curriculum built out of the children's experience of their everyday lives. This teacher practice is not always appreciated or endorsed by those who mandate school curricula. Many of us have grown up with the notion that we can reason our way out of the problems of life and devices such as kits offer us the assurance that this is so. Workshops on effective teaching and assertive discipline are examples of the "rational" approach to teaching.

"Kits" are simply pre-packaged curriculum materials that are in common usage across the curriculum in many countries. These kits may deal with a wide variety of topics such as historical events, subject-related genres such as poetry or novel studies, or sensitive issues like sexual abuse or safety concerns regarding not talking to strangers. Every attempt is made to make these products "teacher-proof" by providing step-by-step instructions and, in some cases, even teacher scripts. As such, these kits serve as a convenient method of teaching children efficiently, although not necessarily effectively because the voices of students are seldom present in these conveniently standardized units of instruction. Overworked teachers who may be bereft

of new and creative ideas find these prepackaged curriculum aides a valuable resource. The use of kits is not necessarily a harmful practice. Indeed, often the intentions behind them are good. Kits may help children understand and label their experience. However, the little girl's question made me wonder if such technical and generalized approaches to issues thought to affect children really do help them and their teachers make sense of the complexity of the life world in which they are already embedded.

At best, kits are merely surface outlines of the complex reality we experience, much the way a water beetle appears on the surface of a pond, seemingly unaware of the watery realms beneath its legs. The use of kits may be symptomatic of a larger problem within the "traditional" curriculum of Western schooling, as well as schooling in other parts of the world. Devices such as kits and other 'teacher-proof' curriculum materials exemplify the way curricula mandated by the state have been traditionally used to control what is taught, how it is taught, and to whom it is taught – that is, the oppressive reinforcement of the conceptualization of childhood – and to implement social policies. In this scheme, teachers often become the handmaidens of the state, sometimes though not always, unwittingly implementing social policies that may undermine the possibility for critical thinking in our schools and ultimately provide for the oppression of children in the Western world and beyond. Other scholars in the field of curriculum studies, for example McLaren (1989), suggest that in schools and teacher education programs:

. . . an undue emphasis is placed on training teachers to be managers and implementers of preordained content, and on methods courses that rarely provide students with opportunity to analyze the ideological assumptions and underlying interests that structure the way teaching is taught. (p. 2)

Other scholars such as Clandinin and Connelly (1995) have shown us, specifically through teacher stories, that many teachers feel repressed, and often oppressed, by policies which come down "the conduit". The work of Clandinin and Connelly focuses, although not exclusively, on oppressive social policies which affect teachers. However, social policies that affect children, specifically as they are implemented through specialized institutions such as schools, are still relatively in uncharted terrain. As Smith (1991) says:

. . . how is it that in spite of enormous public expenditure on formal educational programs for children and good rhetoric speaking on children's behalf, in actuality children are the most frequently abused and neglected of all the world's citizens, in countries like the United States and Canada as well as in the third World. (p. 188)

The ways in which the state implements constraining social policy through curricula is particularly important if one is interested in how children

everywhere have been oppressed. In the case of the little girl who asked me about strangers, the oppression is covert, not overt. Lessons in fearing strangers subdue her previous inclination to trust everyone, which she shows by the way she slips her hand into mine. The kit, as a quick device, derogates the child's understanding of the world as a friendly place. Curricula are community designs for a social order which the state produces to shape its citizens. Designs are structures which unfortunately can utilize kits – pre-packaged curriculum materials – to that end.

Facing the little girl on the sidewalk that morning, I found myself uncomfortably reliving the dilemma with which I had often struggled as a teacher, that is, the dilemma surrounding the transmission of cultural attitudes and values. While, this dilemma is visited on a more or less continual basis the world over, I pondered how I should behave towards the little girl so that I might not undermine what her teacher and parents had already told her and, at the same time, not betray my own beliefs about the questionable practice of identifying strangers as givers of harm. I knew that it is not usually strangers who harm children but those who are often closest to them: their parents, their extended family, or their family's friends.

Superficially, a kit such as the one about strangers may appear beneficial for children in our schools. Yet what is being transmitted through the use of such a kit and to what purpose? Ostensibly, the purpose of the kit is to prevent harm delivered by strangers. It functions, however, to also deflect attention from the harm done by parents, family, and paid attendants. And it does so because, in mainstream Canadian society, parenthood and parenting are deemed sacrosanct. Honor thy father and mother, the bible says. "This refusal to acknowledge the consequences of former harm and injury to the child permeates our society and is reinforced by religious teachings. For thousands of years, all religious institutions have exhorted the faithful to respect their parents" (Miller, 1990, p. 32).

Hendrick (1994) points out, "First, the history of children and childhood, is inescapably inseparable from the history of social policy" (p. xii). The general effect of social policies has been to create a perception of children as predominantly ignorant, dependent, vulnerable, untutored and very often threatening (p. xii). A closer look at the work of Hendrick (1994) allows us to explore ideas about the social construction of childhood. His deeply caring and compassionate work on the history of children, child welfare, and the social construction of childhood in England has resonance in Canada because many of our ideas and our institutions have been imported from, and modelled on, the British system.

The concept of childhood as a separate state comes late in history. The Industrial Revolution in nineteenth century England as Hendrick (1994) and Aries (1972) point out, indicates that childhood as a distinct stage in

the human life cycle did not exist. With industrialization, the custom of informally educating the young at home and through the local community gave way to the formal education of schools. The state now became an active participant in the education of children. Childhood was socially constructed to meet the needs and demands of industrialization. Hendrick remarks:

. . . the making of childhood into a very specific kind of age-graded and age-related condition went through several stages, involving several different processes. Each new construction, one often overlapping with the other, has been described here in the appropriate chronological order as: the natural child, the Romantic child, the evangelical child, the factory child, the delinquent child, the schooled child and the psycho-medical child . . . the introduction and gradual consolidation of compulsory schooling confirmed the trend towards the creation of the innocence. This understanding of the 'nature' of childhood was then subjected to scientific scrutiny and elaborated upon through further description and explanation by the Child Study movement. (Hendrick, 1994, p. 37)

Like textbooks and readers that came before, contemporary curricular devices such as kits are developed with a certain view of "the child" and childhood. However, many kits go beyond mere literacy and the acquisition of special skills by implementing various social policies which focus on issues affecting children's wellbeing – child welfare, child abuse and health practices. So what is the problem with this?

Nineteenth and twentieth century reformers have campaigned for policies which ensure that children are protected. But, as Hendrick (1994) reminds us, certain features of policies that purport to protect children have also been historically responsible for doing them harm. Hendrick gives examples such as the "Edwardian concern with 'national efficiency,' and the perennial interest in social discipline, the stability of the family, and an appropriately educated labour force" (p. xiii). The concern with social discipline, for example, has sometimes meant that children are censured, ridiculed, or otherwise punished because they are children. Schooling today may not always be so distant from such Edwardian objectives. Barbara, an undergraduate student in a pre-service language learning class I teach, recently wrote this story. Her story is reminiscent of the Victorian or Edwardian notions of childhood we read about in novels such as *David Copperfield*. Barbara entitled her story of schooling, *A Blue Bird*.

Our classroom was a perfect square with one doorway and two windows.

Desks were arranged in straight lines. Five desks across and six down. They were assigned to us on the first day of class. You did not change places! We had rules in our school.

We had dress codes. Girls wore dresses, boys slacks and long sleeved shirts. No T-shirts, shorts or runners were allowed.

The teachers followed code too. They wore only dark colors black, brown, navy blue with no accent and no pretty jewelry.

We followed a schedule. At 8:45 the bell rang and we ran to line up to enter school. At 8:50 we were allowed in if our lines were straight, one for boys and one for girls. By 8:55 we would be seated. At nine o'clock sharp, our door closed.

Once settled, we were instructed to stand for morning prayer, then seated. At 9:10 the morning announcements, made by the principal, would be heard throughout the school on the P. A. system. Classes would soon begin, each one lasting 30 minutes. Subjects taught were Arithmetic, Language Arts, Spelling, Religion, Social Studies, Health, Science, French and Physical Education. At 10:15 we had recess for 15 minutes that included line up time to enter the school.

Expectations in class were easy. Sit up straight, keep your head facing front. Fold your hands together on top of your desk, visible. Feet held apart and square under your desk. If you had a question your arm was raised straight above your head, held high, then you waited, until you were acknowledged and spoken to. You were not to leave your desk for any reasons.

The teacher lectured in front of our class. Sometimes she would walk up and down the aisles to see how work was progressing. We always had lots of exercises to complete. If you were slow, you stayed after school to complete class work.

Any disruption to the class due to talking out of turn, not answering properly or getting out of your desk would find you in trouble. Usually students were sent to the corners to face the wall. Some students became permanent fixtures with their desks moved up against the chalkboard. A student rarely dared to turn their head once seated there.

The occasion when I was bad in class still remains with me. My punishment was innovative. To kneel in a praying position on the heat register located at the back of the class. The register was about 36 inches high and about the same in length. Another boy shared in the punishment. We climbed up, not knowing. We positioned our knees on the grate and prayed. After awhile, we squirmed. Noticing that I had moved slightly off the grill, the teacher made me redo the punishment over recess. I had difficulty not moving so I again tried over part of the lunch hour. I had ample time to reflect.

Of course, not everyone had these types of experiences in class. Red birds were too smart to get into trouble. Blue birds only occasionally. Yellow birds were the real bad ones.

Heywood (1988), another historian, supports Hendrick's view that policies for children were not necessarily made with the children's best interests at heart. For example, when industrialists in the middle of the nineteenth century began paying cash incentives for high production, children could not participate because they lacked the stamina to keep up with production by machines. Because of their lower output, child workers ceased to be considered economically useful. They became superfluous. Industry needed

a place to “park” children until they were old enough to be workers. Public schools were the answer. In Heywood’s analysis, the mandate of the schools was to keep the children off the streets in order to train them to be good workers, but not to think for themselves.

Peikoff and Brickey (1991) state that from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century in Canada, it was a time in which social reformers, as in England, devoted more energy to caring for children than in any other period. However, they demonstrate that policy initiatives directed to child labour and compulsory education did not emerge because of enlightened attitudes towards children. Rather, the consequences of the emergence of industrial capitalism was largely responsible for the ideological change that transformed children from little adults into precious creatures in need of special attention and care. Heywood (1988) also argues that economic factors underlie the development of public schools as a better place for working class children. He says, that “from the *instituteurs*, the industrial lobby hoped, they [children] would acquire a basic instruction in the three R’s, and, most importantly, learn the discipline and values that would make them ‘good workers’ ” (p. 322).

The study of the history of childhood is the story of how adults have viewed and treated children. De Mause, a psycho-historian, states that “the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have just begun to awaken” (1975, p. 85). De Mause claims that the further we look back in history the worse the treatment of children becomes. Aries (1972) and Sommerville (1990) have painted varying pictures of how people in the past have treated children: from under-protection to over-protection; from being little adults to being virtually a different species; from being innately evil to being paragons of innocence.

In North America, as in other parts of the world, humanity seems to hold to a rather innocent, but perhaps erroneous, belief that going forward in time means going forward in social improvement, yet most historians agree that throughout history children have been abused and neglected. As long as we only deal superficially with the way children are treated in our society, the nightmare will continue. Perhaps as the little girl’s question that began this chapter suggests, learning to be made strangers to ourselves and each other is the biggest part of the nightmare.

Reflecting on the little girl’s question and curricular directions available through kits led me to consider what it is really like to be a child living in our Western culture, or in any culture. One is inevitably concerned over the messages children receive about being children and becoming adults, about the way messages presume differences between child and adult which make us forget that identity continuously unfolds throughout our lifetime. Orwell (1953) points out:

... the child lives in a sort of alien under-water world which we can only penetrate by memory or divination. Our chief clue is the fact that we were once children ourselves, and many people appear to forget the atmosphere of their own childhood almost entirely. (p. 59)

Becoming an adult in this culture may mean becoming estranged from one's own childhood, and the curriculum we learn at school often reinforces and perpetuates the estrangement. The little girl I met reveals the essence of this separation.

The child remembered

How wonderful and yet strange it is to be a child. To find oneself as a child in a marvelous world that is without history, a world ripe with potential. One's task as a child is to make sense of a pre-given world to make sense of its established social patterns, culture and traditions. The world gives one no status except as being an infant member of a social group. It gives no power except that which is given to the child by adults. As Schutz suggests:

Any member born or reared within the group accepts the ready-made standardized scheme of the cultural pattern handed down to him by ancestors, teachers, and authorities as an unquestioned and unquestionable guide in all situations which normally occur within the social world. (Schutz, 1971, p. 95)

While I largely agree with Schutz, I wonder whether a new member of a group always accepts without question the pre-given cultural patterns.

A story of an experience from Cara, a graduate student, exemplifies both a child's lack of status and power, her acquiescence to cultural patterns and her need to make sense of situations that unfold about her.

My Grandfather stood before me, his rail-like frame almost grazing the full height of the room. His cool clear eyes turning to ice, focused with laser-like sharpness, no longer on my mother, but on me. "Honestly, Emma, where are her manners?" His question seemed to hover above me, suspended in air on a fragile thread.

My Mother's eyes avoided my gaze. Instantly, I knew that she would not be defending me. And in that moment, she looked awkward, quiet, minuscule; her eyes veiled in a shroud of complacency. Only moments before, I had felt so invincible, so full of life itself, and this vitality had carried me forward as I burst into that room. I, the room-buster, child of five, had forgotten my manners. And with eyes much too wide, and tongue wagging tales to tell, had broken Grandfather's golden rules:

- *Silence is golden.*
- *Children should be seen and not heard.*
- *Do not interrupt adults who are in conversation.*

In enthusiasm over the little creature I had just seen outside, I had forgotten the rules, as sometimes I was wont to do. My grandfather's tongue was like a whip:

When Curriculum Becomes a Stranger

Did I know I was a rude child? Rude to interrupt grown-ups when they are speaking? Rude to butt in without being announced? Rude because I should know better?

RUDE, RUDE, RUDE

Well, what did I have to say for myself, my Grandfather bellowed? I stammered. "I" – "I" In a short space of time I had lost my I. Then my anger seemed to reclaim it, and I felt myself becoming real again. With red face and defiant eyes and all the strength in me I returned that ice blue glare. My words tumbled out of me: "Maybe I was rude, but it's still not fair for you to yell at me," I retorted. "Little people have feelings too."

A long silence ensued. Those freshly spoken words sat on me like paste, following me like a snail's trail as I slowly made my way out to the car. I glanced back, hoping, thinking, wishing, that someone would follow me.

I wondered what would happen next, for I knew I had broken yet another golden rule; I had lost my temper. I felt sad, yet somehow big – full of the truth I knew I had spoken only moments before. Finally my mother appeared. I pretended not to notice her as she hurried down the path towards the car. Perhaps she noted my indifference, perhaps not. She framed her words rather carefully, explaining that all would be fine again provided I apologized to my Grandfather immediately. I looked at her briefly and then with my index finger I began to focus on creating different patterns with the little dots that suddenly became noticeable in the upholstered ceiling just above me. (A child remembers)

This story calls into being what it feels like to be little, full of curiosity and wonder, but running amok of what seems to be the inexplicable rules adults have made to govern behavior. What we learn about ourselves, others, and our proper place in the scheme of things is not evidently always good for us. As a small child, not only could Cara not interrupt her grandfather and her mother, but she could not question them in an overt way. And so in school children learn not to question the teacher. Brizman (2000) Fine (1987) and Gardner (1991) are but three who remind us that school is often a place where serious conversation or questions are deemed inappropriate.

That chance meeting with the little girl on the sidewalk brought me back to the story of my own childhood, to its loneliness and pain, and then it made me think how our school curricula embody and promote oppressive developmental ideals (Lyle, 2000).

Children often wrestle with profundity. I remembered that as a young child I struggled with the meaning of, and significance in, Remembrance Day. There seemed to be so much sadness and quiet just before that day and on that day. I really did not know the reason for the veil of silence: it was a mystery. Now, as teacher, teacher-educator, and parent I think about how school reinforces this mystery.

At school we colored poppies. I remember one of my classmates getting into trouble because he colored his poppy yellow and not red. It really was not until much later that the symbolism of the red poppy was made clear to me,

after I finally summoned up the courage to ask my father. He told me a beautiful story about a young man who was a soldier and a poet. Because he was a poet, he could put into words the sadness of war and the great human suffering that everyone feels no matter which country eventually wins the war. My father said that each poppy represents the blood of someone killed in the war, be they father, son, or brother in someone's family, somewhere around the world.

Suddenly I understood the reason for the great silence that blanketed the Legion Hall every year and I also understood why I had been called a disrespectful child because I had drawn a happy face on one of those felt poppies handed out at school. Looking back, I now realize that my father had a different perspective to the dominant sacred story of war. He saw its suffering, not its glory. He also had a different perspective on life, particularly the importance of story as embodied knowledge.

As a child, I often felt like a prop in a play someone else (the teacher) had written. A five year old whom I recently met had a similar experience of school. She was telling her younger sister what school is all about: "Well, you sit on the rug. You color at your desk and then you sit on the rug and sometimes there are stories and you sit on the rug for stories." When her little sister asked, "Why do you sit on the rug?" the older child replied, "Silly, you just sit on the rug." The younger child, perhaps thinking this unusual, said "Is it a magic rug?" "No," replied the other, "It is just a rug for kids to sit on. Big people like teachers and stuff sit on chairs."

The five-year-old girl had to engage in an activity – sitting on the rug – that she made sense of in the best way she could. Sometimes, however, school children are forced to engage in activities that are so beyond their experience that they can make no sense of them at all. The little girl whom I met, in the incident described at the beginning of this paper, had her problems making sense of those in our midst who are our strangers.

When I was teaching grade two, a citizenship ceremony took place in the gymnasium at our school. The whole school was asked to attend on rather short notice. My class did not understand the concept of citizenship. There was not adequate time to discuss such a concept with them or to try to build the concept of citizenship through their experience. Neither was there time for a discussion among staff about whether it would be appropriate for children of this age to attend. Many of the grade two, grade one, and kindergarten pupils had difficulty sitting still through the ceremony. It occurred to me that my role may have been one of simply keeping the children quiet so that our school could announce that such a prestigious ceremony took place at our school. As far as I could tell this incident did little except give the children the message that their role is "to be seen and not heard," a cultural tradition, which, many would argue, is no longer operating in contemporary child-rearing practices. While teachers cannot be expected to explain the reasons for everything they do, it seems to me

that this five year old girl had difficulty making sense of her world for the same reasons my grade two students did: children are sometimes given little say apart from what adults grant them. Yet it would have been helpful to this five-year-old's cognitive development to know – or to be able to ask – the teacher why children sat on the rug and to that of my grade two children to have a discussion about citizenship. If we are open to listening to children's questions and struggling with their tangles and confusions, we acknowledge them as being reasonable beings and beings capable of reason. Indeed we may even learn from them!

Perhaps, as I suggested earlier, in looking into the face of the little girl whom I met on the sidewalk, I also remembered how I felt when, as teacher, I was expected to carry on traditions, or enforce rules that made no sense to me; or, worse, that made me feel as though I had somehow abandoned the child I once was. To become an adult and a teacher, I was trained, and had trained myself, to forget the atmosphere of my own childhood. Learning to be and being an adult in this culture may mean becoming estranged from one's own childhood. It may mean turning from our past as experienced towards a present that is outside our felt experience. We become an adult when we disconnect from the child we were; we arrive at what is named adulthood when we forget the journey we have been on. Perhaps being an adult means no longer asking oneself where one came from, where one is going, or who one is going to be. The "not-yet adult" and "adult" categories of stage development theories may contribute to a polarized and oppositional relationship between adult and child (Sloan-Cannella, 2000). After all, once adulthood is reached we know who we are; was not our childhood the preparation for that goal?

"What Will You Be?"

They never stop asking me,
"What will you be? -
A doctor, a dancer,
A diver at sea?"

They never stop bugging me:
"What will you be?"
As if they expect me to
Stop being me.

When I grow up I'm going to be a Sneeze,
And sprinkle Germs on all my Enemies.

When I grow up I'm going to be a Toad,
And dump on Silly Questions in the road.

When I grow up, I'm going to be a Child.
I'll Play the whole darn day and drive them Wild.

(Dennis Lee, 1977, p. 41) ¹

Not so very long ago, I was involved in a situation that brought me closer to understanding the little girl's questions. A close friend of mine was overcome with sadness in hearing the following news bulletin in the dead of winter. A dog had been hit by a car and was left to die at the side of the road. A passerby stopped to throw a blanket on the dog but many people passed by both on foot and in automobiles without stopping. Finally, someone stopped to attend to the dog but by that time the dog's paws were frozen to the ground. It is likely that the dog died not because it sustained fatal injuries by being hit by a car, but because it had been left to freeze to death.

My friend relayed this news report to me through tears. I immediately became angry, spouting off about the great inhumanity in our society, about how we treat helpless creatures and children, about the action that must be taken, about the hopelessness of the situation. My friend interrupted my tirade, saying "Just let me cry for the dog."

I have thought about this incident many times because other ugly moments remind me of it and because my reaction of over analysis of life situations appears to be a typical one. Possibly my friend has the right idea: first be aware of one's own immediate feelings (those which speak to us in the moment). It seems to me, based on my own experience as both a student and teacher, that traditional school curricula favours abstract thought, analytic reasoning and linguistic ability over the affective and perceptual domain. I have learned well to do this as I analyzed the solution rather than responded to the immediate feelings of sadness. Turnbull (1983) suggests that, in other cultures such as in the Mbuti tribe, the affective domain is much more widely understood, and given much more prominence in every stage of the life cycle and in the educational system than it is in our own (p. 18). As a result, the actions of the members of the Mbuti tribe are separate from their life experience. In their culture childhood is not regarded as a separate state. Unlike in the West, there is no abstract or oppositional relationship between child and adult because each individual life is part of the endless cycle of life.

Along with teaching children to favor their emotional responses less and to be made accepting of analytic responses, in Western education, and systems of schooling around the world, we teach children to be passive, not to question authority, and, perhaps, eventually not to question much at all. Lindfors (1987) focuses on the mismatch between the curious nature of children and the tendency of traditional classrooms not to sanction curiosity and questions of a more personal nature. She cites examples from both informal exercises and classroom observations regarding the kinds of questions asked by preschool-kindergarten children, primary children, and intermediate-level children. The questions at each level were categorized into the following three groups:

When Curriculum Becomes a Stranger

- (1) Curiosity: Does not focus on satisfying any outside source.
- (2) Procedural: Focuses on satisfying an external source; helps one do what one is "supposed" to do.
- (3) Social-interactional: a question form functioning mainly to initiate or maintain or clarify a relationship. (Lindfors, 1987, p. 288)

The results are rather disturbing:

Of the 159 preschool-kindergarten questions analyzed, approximately 45 percent (almost half) were social in nature, approximately 33 percent (one-third) were curiosity questions, and approximately 23 percent (less than one-fourth) were procedural. The situation changed dramatically at primary level. Here, of a total of 253 questions analyzed, the curiosity questions comprised only 19 percent and social only 14 percent, while procedural questions soared to 66 percent (almost two-thirds) of the total. The situation was similar at intermediate level, with 16 percent of the total (116) being curiosity questions, another 16 percent being social, and a staggering 68 percent being procedural. (Lindfors, 1987, p. 288)

The numbers in Lindfor's study figure importantly in a teacher's life.

My feelings of being a stranger on much of the educational terrain I have travelled may be largely attributed to the fact that on the one hand I have been educated to forget as, Lindfor shows 'the atmosphere of my own childhood' and that, on the other hand, childhood is a difficult time to know. As Orwell puts it "In studying childhood – or teaching children – one is up against the very great difficulty of knowing what a child really feels and thinks" (p. 59). But is it not difficult to really know how anyone feels? After all, are we not all, in one way or another, strangers to ourselves and to each other? I wonder if we do not often think that children's feelings are so different than our own because our cultural history has told us that this is so. Perhaps this is why in our modern world culture nothing is less explored and less valued than the child's point of view.

Towards a curriculum of childhood

The disjuncture between curricular materials as represented by the curriculum kit and the child's question about "What is a stranger?" perhaps reveals the connection between teacher disempowerment and child suppression. The child viewed the lesson on school safety from a child's perspective, specifically from the reality of her own lived experience. In this view, standardized pre-packaged curriculum materials point to a sanitation of experience to the extent that reality is reduced to outlines and scripts which may serve to disempower both teacher and learner. Thus, both children and teachers are part of an oppressive system, where teachers in this process are

neither oppressors nor the oppressed, but, along with the children they teach, are confounded by being pulled between external views of societal constructs and their own lived experiences which often run counter to the external reality of school and society. To honour the experiences of childhood is to become aware of the voice of the child, in order to be able to understand and to critically engage such questions as "What is a stranger?"

NOTE

1. From *Garbage Delight* (Macmillan of Canada, 1977). Copyright ©1977 Dennis Lee. With permission of the author.

REFERENCES

- Aries, P. (1972). *Centuries of childhood*. (R. Baldick, Trans.). New York: Vintage.
- Britzman, D. (2000). On the future of awful thoughts in teacher education. *Teaching Education*, 11(1), 33-37.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1995). *Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- De Mause, L. (1975). Our forebears made childhood a nightmare. *Psychology Today*, 8(11), 85-89.
- Fine, M. (1987). Silencing in public schools. *Language Arts*, 64(2), 157-174.
- Gardner, H. (1991). *The unschooled mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lyle, S. (2000). Narrative understanding: developing a theoretical context for understanding how children make meaning in classroom settings. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 32(1), 45-63.
- Hendrick, H. (1994). *Child welfare: England 1872-1989*. New York: Routledge.
- Heywood, C. (1988). *Childhood in nineteenth-century France*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University.
- Lee, D. (1977). *Garbage delight*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada.
- Lindfors, J. (1987). *Children's language and learning*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Toronto: Irwin.
- Miller, A. (1990). The search for the true self. In J. Abrams (Ed.), *Reclaiming the inner child* (pp. 126-138). Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher.
- Orwell, G. (1953). *Such, such were the joys*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Peikoff, T., & Brickey, S. (1991). Creating precious children and glorified mothers: A theoretical assessment of the transformation of childhood. In R. Smandych, G. Dodds, & A. Esau (Eds.), *Dimensions of childhood; Essays on the history of children and youth in Canada*. (pp. 29-630). Manitoba, Canada: Legal Research Institute of the University of Manitoba.
- Schutz, A. (1971). *Collected papers II*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Sloan Cannella, G. (1997). *Deconstructing early childhood education*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Smith, D. (1991). Hermeneutic inquiry: The hermeneutic imagination and the pedagogic text. In E. Short (Ed.), *Forms of curriculum inquiry* (pp.188- 209). New York: Suny.
- Sommerville, C. (1990). *The rise and fall of childhood*. New York: Vintage.
- Suransky, V. (1982). *The erosion of childhood*. Chicago: The University of Chicago.
- Turnbull, C. (1983). *The human cycle*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

When Curriculum Becomes a Stranger

KARYN COOPER is an assistant professor in the department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at OISE/UT. She has authored a number of articles and currently has two books forthcoming entitled: *Burning Issues: Foundations of Education* and *The Practical Critical Educator*.

KARYN COOPER est professeure adjointe au département d'étude des curriculums, de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage à l'IEPO/UT. Elle a publié beaucoup d'articles et elle est l'auteur de deux prochains livres intitulés : *Burning Issues : Foundation of Education* et *The Practical Critical Educator*.