



Falling Towers: A Letter to my Child's Teacher

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Abstract:

Using the epistolary genre, this editorial is embedded in a fictional letter written to a teacher. The discussion is spurred by a teacher writing a mark in bold felt pen directly on a student's drawing of the Eiffel Tower. This reflexive inquiry laments the deep wounding of the joy of learning by metrics, measurements and efficiency, while registering the imperative to change this path. Using the metaphor of the "tower" to theorize current damaging curricular practices, this editorial questions how, amidst the uncontrol and fear in a global pandemic, the challenging truths of unmarked graves, devastating climate disasters, global food insecurity, among other sufferings, teachers can imagine hope-inspired, healing-centred pedagogies and "assertive mutuality . . . [through] co-action, interconnection . . . [and] the capacity to act and implement as opposed to the ability to control others" (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 86). The task of recognizing, naming and dismantling towers—in essence, leaving one's home, and building new relational frames, while the world is falling—requires extraordinary hope, as shown in the articles in this issue.

Keywords: epistolary genre; measurement; curriculum studies; JCACS editorial

Effondrement des tours : une lettre à l'enseignant de mon enfant

Résumé :

Utilisant le genre épistolaire, cet éditorial se trouve intégré dans une lettre fictive adressée à un enseignant. La discussion est déclenchée par un enseignant après avoir apposé une note au feutre gras directement sur la reproduction de la tour Eiffel d'un élève. Cette enquête réflexive déplore la détérioration de la joie d'apprendre par la mesure et le rendement, tout en affirmant l'impératif de changer cette voie. En utilisant la métaphore de la « tour » pour théoriser des pratiques curriculaires actuellement dommageables, cet éditorial interroge la manière dont, au milieu de l'incontrôlable et de la peur suscitée par une pandémie mondiale, de vérités difficiles des tombes anonymes, des désastres climatiques dévastateurs, de l'insécurité alimentaire mondiale, entre autres souffrances, les enseignants peuvent imaginer des pédagogies inspirées de l'espoir, centrées sur la guérison et une « mutualité affirmée par l'action commune, l'interconnexion et la capacité d'agir et de mettre en œuvre, par opposition à la capacité de contrôler les autres » (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 86; traduction libre). La tâche de reconnaître, de nommer et de démanteler les tours—c'est-à-dire de quitter sa maison et de construire de nouveaux cadres relationnels, alors que le monde s'écroule—exige un espoir extraordinaire, comme le montrent les articles de cette édition.

Mots clés : genre épistolaire; mesures; étude de programme; éditorial JCACS

What is curriculum studies? At JCACS, the field of curriculum studies is understood broadly: as programs of study that provide roadmaps of plans and educative content; the perspectives and practices of teaching and learning; and the theorization of the complex structures within which teaching and learning occur. The latter is often smoothly acquiesced, where one thinks there's no possibility for change, and "let's just do the best we can in these circumstances" becomes the motto. Authors in this issue seek new paths. Astute recognitions and clear articulations of the concern are significant instigators of collective reform.

In this editorial, written in the form of a fictional letter to a homeroom teacher, a drawing of the Eiffel Tower by Finn (pseudonym), created for a Grade 7 class assignment, initiates a discussion of the "towers" communities operate within. Someone who lives in an ivory tower self-isolates and cannot see beyond their self-imposed boundaries. I imagine tower mindsets as holder-systems that look like layers and layers of cogwheel gears, their constant motion feigning sensibilities of automated security, community interdependence and assumed common values. Like the Eiffel Tower which required 18,038 metallic parts, 50 engineers and designers, 150 factory workers, 150-300 workers on the construction site and hosts six million annual visitors (SETE, n.d.), towers are complexly assembled, operational conglomerates. The metaphor of the tower is used in this editorial to theorize curricular systems and practices.

I have used the epistolary genre in other academic writings (Sameshima 2007; 2013, Sameshima et al., 2020) and I am reminded that the genre and form enliven me even before I fully grasp the possibilities of my content goals. This genre is familiar to me in that my journal writings have always been in letter form; and as I reflect on my relationships over the years, many of my deepest long-term friendships have been text-based and grown through letter, email or text message writings. Ardra Cole and J. Gary Knowles (2001) note that "when writing is inquiry and inquiry is writing we write *for* meaning rather than to *record meaning* (p. 213, emphasis in original). These authors highlight the significance of the communication form (i.e., narrative, visual, performative, etc.), concurring with Leon Edel (1984) that "the art of narration" plays a prominent role in the conveyance of the content (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 213). The research practices of fictive writing and other transmediating modalities are not claiming truths or discovering laws of nature but are actively generating and accessing nuanced descriptive systems of making meaning (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Eisner, 1981; Sameshima 2007).

October 25, 2021

Dear Donna (pseudonym):

I hope this letter finds you well. I apologize in advance for the length. I wanted to share with you the latest issue of the journal I edit, as many of the articles helped me to think through a letter that I started writing to you after the first “Live & Learn” session you hosted for parents last Friday. What a great treat, to gather with other parents in Finn’s class in an ongoing way! How inspiring to explore the meaning of “the ivory tower” together! The warm book club-like community gave me a flashback of “Fantastic Fridays” when I taught at the elementary level. Parents came into the class on Fridays between recess and lunch, and we did small reading groups and math-integrated hands-on activities. Having the parents regularly in the classroom and in close relation with one another and the class created such a supportive learning community. What wonderful memories of making apple pies and pancakes and children hand-sewing kimonos! Thank you again for organizing the sessions!

First, Finn is thrilled to be back in class with friends for his Grade 7 year. It’s hard to believe he did his last four months of Grade 5, and all of Grade 6, in remote schooling. I’m saddened to acknowledge how much time he spent alone in his bedroom in front of a computer monitor, how alone he was. I know his aloneness because I too was alone in a different room of the house—alone even amid frequently seeing people on screen.

Please do not feel you need to respond to all my reflections here. I look forward to our next gathering but know that as I’m writing, I am trying to make sense of things for myself. My ruminations are shared in the context of a provocative incident you are likely not aware of.

The incident that spurs my writing raises many unsettling thoughts for me, pressing for a nostalgic return to my own practices as an elementary school teacher and my wonderings in my current work in a Faculty of Education. Last week, Finn showed me the mark he received from the French language teacher for his binder cover page.

The French language teacher gave Finn a 10+ for the assignment, using a blue felt pen and writing the mark directly on the cover artwork. When I first looked at the piece of paper, I lifted it closer to my eyes because I thought the teacher had made a photocopy of Finn’s artwork. It was not. It was the original. Finn had done the line detail with an extra-fine gel ink pen. It was clear that the Eiffel Tower was drawn with dedicated planning, concentration and effort.



La tour Eiffel. Artist: Finn (pseudonym), 2021. Reproduced with permission.

I'm quite sure this experienced teacher intended no harm, but the grading, directly on the artwork with a felt pen, felt to me like a defacing, a vandalism of the art, and a devaluing of the effort. I looked at the work for some time and asked Finn if it bothered him. He seemed nonchalant, perhaps because he draws a lot and was not overly committed to this work. Or maybe the work became a task or common assignment after it was graded. I wondered if I was alone in my indignation, as a mother, a teacher, a teacher-educator, an artist. I had so many questions. How would a student feel about a low mark on the cover? How do we make assumptions on what the

assignment is out of? Why did the teacher put the grade on the cover? When looking at the cover page, the mark is now the first thing one's eyes are drawn to. Does this mark eclipse the pride of the making and the learning or the content itself? I wondered if the teacher expected Finn to feel more satisfaction in the work after the mark was added. Or was the grade something like icing on a cake? I realized that the artwork and the evaluation of the work were no longer separate steps of a lesson but part of the same whole and seemingly "normal" to both student and teacher.

Daeyoung Goh's (2021, this issue) review of Alex Moore's (2015) *Understanding the School Curriculum: Theory, Politics and Principles* describes how school curricula inevitably intersects with political and socio-economic interests. Finn's grade on the cover page demonstrates Moore's (2015) critique of an education system where a measurement design obscures a facilitated joy and learning for the sake of learning. Capitalist and impact agendas focusing on grades, commercial value and demonstrable socioeconomic impact undermine learning for curiosity and exploration. It is so important to value learning that isn't for a test. Unfortunately, with the pressures focused on end grades, both teachers and students, in their quests to be efficient and successful, will overlook wondering and wandering. This outlook of efficacy and means to an expected end stifle creative risk-taking, experimentation and all manner of discovery.

As mentioned, Finn did not have much to say about the cover page mark. I didn't press him because I see this marked artwork as evidence of another failing system. While the 2020-2021 global stressors have been momentous for even the most privileged adults to hold, the impacts of global towers falling upon children and other vulnerable populations are formidable. As the earth spins, none of us can turn away from the tragedies of Canadian colonial histories. Our identities of belonging and security are precarious when we recognize that the larger social group we are a part of actually has a different history than we thought (see Dissanayke, 2000). Concurrently, shock and disbelief continue to jam resets to our expectations as we awake to the realization our social communities or even family members have very different ideologies regarding acceptable behaviours, social responsibility and COVID vaccination. And yet, even as I wish to protect Finn, there is no turning from floods roaring and fires raging across the globe, forcing us all to change something, everything.

Bayo Akomolafe (2021), in his endorsement of Van Horn et al.'s (2021) *Kinship: Belonging in a world of relations*, a book series that highlights the interdependence between human and nonhuman beings, points out that it is not only the current tower systems that must fall but we, ourselves, as we are all connected. We are the towers:

At a time when the human is no longer tenable as a category unto itself, we will need the prophetic voices of these poets, philosophers, mothers, fathers, scientists, thinkers, public intellectuals, artists, and awestruck fugitives to kindle a politics of humility, to help us fall down to earth from our gilded perches, to help us stray from the threatening familiarity of our own image. (Akomolafe, 2021, top sidebar)

And what of our own image? Rachel Heringer (2021, this issue), drawing from Britzman, Levinas, Derrida and others, asserts that "philosophical and psychoanalytical theories point to the

fact that there is within each of us a natural resistance to the Other because otherness (i.e., alterity) interrupts the self and causes discomfort" (p. 90). How do we dismantle our tower selves, to be with and not above the Other? Wasn't the marking of the Eiffel Tower drawing a clear declaration of power? Where is the line between grading with posture and power and grading as pedagogical?

Like Akomolafe (2021), Aparna Tarc (2021, this issue) also exalts poets as shepherds to healing. She advocates for literary language "that teaches us to breathe and relearn the divine and primal stance that reading poetry attends to and demands" (p. 17). Nané Jordan and Barbara Bickel (2021, this issue) recommend "collectively [creating] spaces of attention and care for each other, restoring hidden, lost and forgotten gifts of creativity as educators" (p. 57).



Stacking Trees. Art and photo by Holly Tsun Haggarty, 2021. Reproduced with permission.

This photo, taken by my friend and educator Holly Tsun Haggarty, renders a lovely example of the point I'm trying to make about playing simply for the joy of making and, in so doing, generating gifts of healing. In the process of stacking wood pieces creatively in her woodshed, Holly is not thinking about efficient, space-saving wood piling. Her artmaking, I imagine, was creating self-care (enjoying the outdoors), curiosity (in balancing things), pleasure (in the autonomy of choice), satisfaction (placing the roof-like or hat-like pieces atop different piles) and possibly love (making representations of beings and homes). I'm wondering how this activity, the result, and the photographed outcome, may have looked if Holly knew that a teacher was going to give her a grade for this work. I can't help but consider the differences in freedom and constraint and pressures on

mental health in thinking about the making of Holly's towers and Finn's tower. As well, the freedom evidenced in Holly's photo makes me smile, perhaps because I imagine the central wood figure as a proud, pigeon-toed rooster peering out of the woodshed. There's something important here about makings that have residual impacts such as this photo imagined as a cheerful gift moving forward out into the world versus work that does not escape a transactional exchange between teacher and student (see Sameshima & Slingerland, 2015).

Mitchell Thomashow (1995) explains that when we "come to terms with apocalyptic anxieties in ways that are integrative and liberating, opening awareness not only to planetary distress," we are also awakened to "the hope inherent in our own capacity to change" (p. 149). He suggests that by acknowledging personal responsibilities and responses to planetary distress, "deep collective energies", "communities of empowerment", and groups "that work together to form reservoirs of strength and vision [can spring forth] hope and vitality, [and] the ability to work creatively to overcome the sleep of denial and forgetfulness" (p. 149).

This hopeful energy can fuel creative ways for co-making new towers with others. Nané Jordan and Barbara Bickel (2021, this issue) recommend studio residences of creative making and being in relationship with others as healing wayfinding. Latika Raisinghani (2021, this issue) writes of (un)learning, (re)learning and re(searching) with students in relational, caring educational environments, while Stavros Stavrou and Shaun Murphy (2021, this issue) promote *mijō-pimōhtēwin* (walking in a good way) in relation with the other, foregrounding factors such as self-awareness, learning new ways, and being thankful and humble.

Building new relational frames will require attentiveness to how we identify and name within our language. Greg Lowan-Trudeau and Teresa Fowler (2021, this issue) in discussing Indigenous environmental issues in Canada, draw particular attention to lexical choices such as ensuring the discontinued use of offensive terms in curriculum documents and naming environmental racism. They call out repressive tolerance techniques and the creation of critical façades and press for enactments of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) call to action. This naming, speaking of the issues, and articulating paths of transformation, are crucial in the curricular journeys of our lives. Bringing down our own safe towers will be challenging. As Kahil Gibran (1923) concludes:

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain . . . Much of your pain is self-chosen. It is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self. (p. 52)

I liken the French teacher's bold mark written directly on Finn's art to a colonizing flag staked to the earth, claiming ownership. The teacher's mark is not the end product or end result and therefore should not be on the cover page. I do not feel angry at the teacher or wish to be part of a cancel culture, and Finn is onto new assignments, but pointing to and continuing to speak of the damage we are part of creating in assessment practices will contribute to bringing down this tower. I close with an excerpt by Kathy Hytten (2010), in a letter thanking curriculum theorist, Maxine Greene. Her words aptly summarize Greene's call to daily personal action:

You inspire me to move beyond complacency and despair, to collaborate with others, to enter new conversations, to be creatively activist, and to embody my dreams for a better world in my everyday actions. Moreover, you remind me to support my students and colleagues on this journey as well. In your words, 'to engage with our students as persons is to affirm our own incompleteness, our consciousness of spaces still to be explored, desires still to be tapped, possibilities still to be opened and pursued' (p. 440). (Hytten, 2010, p. 21)

Best wishes for building joyful towers,

Pauline

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