Stacking Trees

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Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JCACS)
La Revue de l'association canadienne pour l'étude du curriculum (RACÉC)
Vol. 19, No. 1, 2021

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*T*he wood towers on the cover of this issue began as a household task, of trying to deal with the building debris that had accumulated around a cabin my family and I were building at our boreal property, and which was creating a tripping hazard.

"All the lumber scraps could be recycled—into roasted wieners and marshmallows," quipped my husband. "Why don't we pile them at the fire-pit?"

"I'd hate for them to rot," I frowned. "How about the woodshed?"

As I loaded wood chunks into a wheelbarrow, I was intrigued by the many shapes and sizes of the sawn-off lumber ends: squares and rectangles and triangles and polygons. I invited my grandchild Jacob (a pseudonym) to build "shapes" with me. I was thinking maybe a mosaic on the woodshed floor, but the preschooler immediately wanted to build a tower—"the *biggest* tower". So we began, playing with balance, creating a pleasing silhouette in the width and height of the growing structure.

"Actually, it's a tree," said Jacob, and we both thought that it was rather funny to be building a tree of wood from wood from a tree.

I think a bird will want to nest here," Jacob pointed at the triangular elbows. "Or a mouse," I gestured to the crevices. "Or a snake!" proposed Jacob, and he started acting out all the different animals that might like to live in or on the tree tower.

"Of course," said I, "with so many animals, we'll need more homes."

As we continued, Jacob dancing, and I building, it occurred to me how this task/game of stacking wood reflected the field of curriculum studies, its many issues and possibilities. For example, should stacking wood (a.k.a. curriculum) be about efficiently achieving an end goal (say, heat and light)? Or, should it be about setting a task (such as cleaning up wood clutter) and seeing what problem solving, or aesthetic novelties, flow through that task? Should the point of stacking wood (with grandchild) be something useful: about teaching a skill, encouraging a value? Is play, make belief, fun, a useful thing? Is there a right/wrong way to stack? Is it best that the stacking task be a solo or group effort? Does it depend on who's stacking? Is stacking stacked with privileges and oppressions, freedoms and constraints? Who gets to/has to stack?

Jacob scampered off to find his cousins, leaving me in contemplation as I continued the art work.

As family members passed by, I asked what they thought of my wood sculptures, and they offered opinions, particularly on the issue of efficiency and utility versus creativity. My hubby, coming over with another wheelbarrow full of wood ends, noted that my creations were cute, but I might have to let the toddler demolition crew knock down the towers to accommodate enough wood for winter—unless I were planning to build another shed. And then my son-in-law, hauling industrial garbage bags, weighed in. He queried why one assumes that efficiency and utility are antithetical to creativity. Can't a neatly stacked woodpile be just as creative as a messy one, or perhaps even more so? Does art demand that something be neither useful nor neat? Isn't necessity the mother of invention?

I was reminded that when I first went winter camping, I learned to stack wood off the ground, between two angled, closely spaced trees, and cover it with peeled birch bark, to prevent it from rotting. I thought that was so clever and inventive, not to mention generous, paying it forward for the next voyageurs.

What's my position regarding stacking wood as a curricular approach? I see that trees give and we receive—their abundance and flexibility and strength and renewal—and with these gifts we co-create, participate in the blessing of our landed life. Stacking trees. Curriculum as the sharing of gifts.