

# The Learning Home: An Ethnographic Case-Study of Curriculum, Place, and Design

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*The physical structure and the surroundings of the Learning Home are rather unusual. A forested hillock called Smrutivan acts as a backdrop to the Learning Home. Children are seen running about barefoot. Some are seen sitting under the trees or on their mats in the classrooms while some climb on the roof or the trees. Children at the Learning Home do not wear uniforms; they wear everyday clothes. There are no desks or benches in the classroom. Everyone sits on mats. The facilitators are not expected to teach in a didactic fashion. They give individual attention to every child, making sure every child learns. Textbooks are not used to teach lessons. Facilitators have the freedom to design their own lesson-plans, activities, and learning materials. They are trained in the pedagogical methods developed at Grammangal— Learning Home's parent organization. All classrooms are designed to face a central open space. There are three trees in the central open space.*

*One fine day at the Learning Home, a group of children noticed a crow tangled in kite-strings, stuck in one of the trees. The children, distraught at seeing the unsuccessful attempts of the crow to free itself, implored their facilitators to free the crow from its distress. Soon the entire school was caught up in the plight of the crow. The facilitators arranged to have the bird rescued. The children and the crow had to wait until the rescue team arrived. The facilitators decided that they would keep aside the lessons they had planned for that day. Instead, all the*

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*groups sat under the tree and worked on assignments that the facilitators designed around understanding and articulating the experiences of the crow. By the end of the day, the crow had been rescued. The entire school was involved in caring for the crow and tending to its injuries. With much joy, the crow was set free.<sup>1</sup>*

This dissertation is an ethnographic case-study of an alternative school in Pune, India, called the Learning Home. The aim of this study is to understand the constructs of curriculum, place, and design, and their interrelationships by examining the lived experiences of the research participants—the educators, facilitators, and children.

## Introduction

I attended a convent school for girls from kindergarten to tenth grade in Mumbai, India. My experience of schooling stands out as being an exceptionally unremarkable one. Marked by a sense of boredom, monotony, drudgery, and social disconnect, the experience of schooling seemed unending to me as I moved from one grade to the other. School did not seem to provide opportunities for creative expression, intellectual stimulation, or the necessary socialization. The disengaging nature of the pedagogical approach was only overshadowed by the teachers' constant thwarting of socialization. The expectation was that school was a place where you primarily came to study, and not to socialize. Lunch break was minimal and we were not allowed to talk to classmates during school hours. The friendships that were developed in one academic school year were often nipped in the bud, as students from all divisions would be shuffled every year. I often felt a deep sense of despair at having lost the chance to spend more time with my friends.

The need to connect with fellow classmates also extended to the teachers. I often longed to share more fulfilling and close relationship with most teachers. It seemed to me that very few teachers were invested in the personal growth of the students. Most teachers seemed to be focused on “completing the portion or syllabus.” I often felt that the teachers did not seem to be concerned with

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction is composed of narratives from my dissertation that are based on my research participants' lived experiences.

knowing me and my classmates as human beings endowed with unique talents, capabilities, and personalities. Maybe they were mere puppets governed by the system. I longed to experience a sense of ownership—for the school to belong to me, and for me to belong to the school.

I often tried to imagine that the school was more than what it was. The old wooden stairs, with each horizontal step sagging in the middle as a result of thousands of little feet walking over it would sometimes be an old castle in my mind. The multipurpose hall in my school was one of the most impressive spaces I had ever seen. The gigantic French windows with yellow stained glass rendered the hall in an otherworldly yellow glow. The wooden stage with the resplendent red velvet curtains silently invited me. I dreamed of acting in a play, or writing one where I would make my dramatic entry on that stage from behind those curtains. In my 10 years at that school, I did not see a single play being performed on that stage. I did not see any performance crafted by children, although on rare occasions, some students would dance to some popular Bollywood songs on the stage. My reflection on the multipurpose hall is evocative of my dissatisfaction and disappointment with my school on multiple levels. I often wondered if I was alone in my experiences of a mainstream school.

As a doctoral student, I delved into the literature on mainstream education in India. I saw my own experiences accurately reflected in the literature. One scholar/philosopher whose words have resonated with me since the early days of my research, is Rabindranath Tagore, Indian Noble laureate, poet, educator, philosopher, and freedom fighter. Tagore's work appealed to my cultural ethos and my epistemological orientation that draws heavily from Indian philosophy. In Tagore's work as an educator and writer, I also found a clear articulation and physical manifestation of my educational beliefs. Tagore's description of an ideal school mirrored my conceptualizations of the kind of school I would have liked to attend as a child. Describing the ideal school, Tagore says,

If we had to build a school that would serve as a model, we should see that it was situated in a quiet spot far from the crowded city, and had the natural advantages of open sky, fields, trees and the like. (Tagore, 2009, p. 118-119)

The thing that most appealed to me in Tagore's work were his focus on the learner in the educational process.

I believe that the object of education is the freedom of mind which can only be achieved through the path of freedom—though freedom has its risk and responsibility as life itself has. I know it for certain, though most people seem to have forgotten it, that children are living beings—more living than grown-up people, who have built their shells of habit around them. Therefore it is absolutely necessary for their mental health and development that they should not have mere schools for their lessons, but a world whose guiding spirit is personal love. (Tagore, 2007, p. 419)

In a serendipitous turn of events, I found Tagore’s words echoing in my mind as I visited the Learning Home—my research site.

## The Need for this Study: In the context of the Indian Education System

Although Tagore is celebrated as a philosopher, educator, and intellectual in India, his ideas on education have not been translated into mainstream educational practices. Similar to other countries, in India too the aim of education is to mass-produce students in a facility (read as school), in order to “meet the needs of industrialization” (Robinson, 2006). Paulo Friere (1993), educator, philosopher, and advocate of critical pedagogy, compared such education systems to a banking model. In the banking model of schooling or education, teachers view students as containers or receptacles to be filled by the narrative of knowledge. Tagore (1957) referred to such schooling as “education factory” where children have to “sit inert whilst lessons are pelted at them like hailstones on flowers” (p. 44). Educational practices in such pedagogical settings rarely focus on the needs of individual children. Deepti Priya Mehrotra, a political scientist and independent researcher from India, described the Indian mainstream education as follows:

Many mainstream schools expect standardization and docile conformity. The atmosphere discourages individual expression and self-directed learning. Teachers, often separated from children by a wide gulf, sit on a pedestal, proclaiming rules, spouting information, and evaluating students. Children pursue rigid, examination-oriented syllabi and compete with one another in a relentless race to perform. Camaraderie, cooperation, fun, and a love for learning are, unfortunately casualties. (Mehrotra, 2007, p. 26)

I find my experiences mirrored in Mehrotra's description of mainstream schools in India. Apart from the shortcomings Mehrotra mentions, another critique of contemporary mainstream education in India is that schooling operates with the promise to students and parents of assimilation into modern society with its competitive and consumerist values (Mehrotra, 2007). Education is often viewed as a route to upward social and economic mobility by parents and students (Thapan, 2015). In my opinion, the exam oriented model of learning and competitive atmosphere reflects the perception that success in schooling is directly associated with success in life. Padma Sarangapani (2003), an independent researcher conducted an ethnographic study in a village in India on construction of school knowledge. In her work, Sarangapani (2003) states that children and parents view schooling as a source of cultural capital due to access to learning English, general knowledge, and social adeptness. Sarangapani also found that the children considered schooling to be a means to secure government employment. Thus, a child's potential, interests, capacities, and talents have little to no value when schooling and education are focused on social, economic, and cultural gains. In contrast to the mainstream education, the educational philosophy of Grammangal/Learning Home is aimed at helping children become life-long learners by creating a love for learning in them. By creating their own curriculum and attending to every child with love, care, and commitment, the facilitators at the Learning Home help children 'learn how to learn' as opposed to teaching them standardized academic content that is often disconnected from their lived reality and created in response to economic needs.

## The Need for this Study: In the context of the American Public Schooling

I discuss public schooling in the United States in my research because understanding of the American public schools is vital to understanding the relevance of this study to the educational context in the United States. American schooling has been driven by national economic needs and the needs of the labor market and has "assumed to exist for the sake of job preparation" (Pinar, 2004 p. 17). According to William Schubert (2010), educators have been increasingly sidelined in favor of federal government officials and corporate leaders when it comes to education policy decisions. These non-educators, who have advocated for increased standardization prompted by economic gain (Noddings 2003), "want to boil down teaching and evaluation practices to a

scientifically grounded technology” (Eisner, 2002, p. 577). However, standardization ignores the lived realities, and contexts of the students, and teachers’ lives in the pedagogical space resulting in a sterile pedagogical atmosphere where teachers and students are drifting further apart as persons, and becoming “treatments” and “subjects” (Noddings, 1992, p. 7)

A critical component of the standardization process is the over emphasis on test scores, which are used to gauge the success of education reform. This results in the control of content and curriculum residing with the politicians as opposed to the schools (Pinar, 2004). Teachers and educators have lost control over curriculum, and have been unfairly turned into scape-goats asked to “clean up the ‘mess’ left behind by politics, culture, and history” (Pinar, 2004 p. xi). They are asked to deliver standardized content, thus denying them the opportunity to be change-makers, and key players in their students’ educational processes (Pinar, 2004). In contrast, the Learning Home is a pedagogical site that offers its facilitators and educators the creative agency necessary to design curriculum to meet the needs of the individual students.

In the context of increasingly rigid and standardized education systems, the study of the Learning Home demonstrates the possibility of a learning ecology where the well-being of the child and the satisfaction of the teacher are central components of the pedagogical processes.

## The Learning Home

My curiosity and academic interest in examining lived experiences that contrast with my schooling experiences are the motivations for this study conducted at the Learning Home, an alternative school in Pune, India. The Learning Home—a pedagogical site situated in the liminal space between a home and a school defies the conventional expectations of a *school*.

I first visited the Learning Home in June 2014 to conduct a pilot-study there. Grammangal’s education philosophy resonated with me. I felt instantly drawn to the people and the physical site of Grammangal/Learning Home . I found the physical set-up of the Learning Home intriguing and inviting, and an attractive departure from the mainstream schools in India. I found the curricular and pedagogical approach developed at Learning Home prioritizes the learning needs of students from varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The

Learning Home curriculum does not conform to all the dictates of mainstream education.

My personal experiences of schooling were a constant companion that informed my theoretical, interpretive, and analytical lens during this research. The search for students' experiences that differ from my own compelled my search for an alternative site of schooling. Hence as I started working through my pilot study data, and started conceptualizing and writing my dissertation proposal, I grew increasingly convinced that I needed to examine the lived experiences of the individuals at the Learning Home. By examining the lived experiences of my research participants, I hoped to learn about three constructs—curriculum, place, and design, as they are experienced by the individuals at the Learning Home.

## The Three Key Constructs—Curriculum, Place, and Design

The curriculum of/at the Learning Home—the focal point of this dissertation is informed by living curriculum (Kissling, 2012b, 2012a) and lived curricula, or curriculum-as-lived-experiences (Aoki, 1986/1991/2012, 1993/2012).

According to noted curriculum theorist Ted Aoki, “the term curriculum is many things to many people” (1978/1980/2012, p. 94). My conceptualization of curriculum in the context of this study is informed by the works of Ted Aoki (1986/1991/2012, 1993/2012), William Pinar (2004), and Mark Kissling (2012a, 2012b). I understand curriculum as the lived experiences of the individuals engaged in curricular encounters as they experience the educational philosophy—the ontological and epistemological positions undergirding the pedagogical endeavor, the curricular content, and the pedagogy at a site of learning. As is evident from my definition of curriculum, lived experiences are a central component of curriculum as I conceive of it. Such an approach to curriculum that places focus on lived experiences is not new. In his writing, curriculum theorist William H. Schubert (1982) brings into focus the work of Michael W. Apple, Madeleine R. Grumet, and Max van Manen who “argue compellingly for a greater depth and range of scholarly perspectives, for the centrality of lived experience, and for personal and public growth fostered through reflective curricular action” (Schubert, 1982, p. 226).

Since lived experiences are not specific to the pedagogical sites alone, but are experiences one encounters throughout life, and through life, the act of living is closely associated with curriculum. Drawing on Kissling's (2012b)

definition of living curriculum as an individual's "living course of learning experiences" (p. 35), I position curriculum as existing and operating on the spectrum of life rather than just classrooms. Kissling conceptualizes curriculum as a "lived course of learning" (2012b, p. 14) which implies curriculum is lived or alive. My interpretation of living curriculum is that life by itself is a form of curriculum, and curriculum as a notion is alive in itself.

In order to examine curriculum specifically in the context of the Learning Home classrooms, I draw from Aoki's (1986/1991/2012, 1993/2012), conceptualization of planned and lived or live(d) curriculum. For Aoki, planned curriculum is a definite plan of action, or an intended form of the curriculum. Planned curriculum denotes a singular, absolute, fixed educational experience. The lived curriculum on the other hand is curriculum as it is experienced and lived within a classroom. The lived curricula emerge in the multiplicities that are a result of the pedagogical site and the individuals existing, interacting, and meaning-making in that site. Lived curriculum is also influenced by the unique attributes, life stories, and lived experiences of the individuals in a particular location.

Aoki's ideas of planned and lived curriculum also helped me analyze my data in the context of design at the Learning Home—the second construct I examine in this study. The educators and facilitators at the Learning Home design their own pedagogical content with the intent of creating learning experiences—in keeping with the constructivist educational philosophy of the organization. Through this study, I hoped to examine the design process(es) at the Learning Home, and how the educators' and facilitators' creative agency affects lived experiences and consequently the curriculum.

The conventional approach to designing in the context of learning, such as instructional design (Carr-Chellman, 2011; Dick, 2011; Merrill et al., 1996; Richey et al., 2011) conceives of design as a streamlined, regulated process, without attending to the uniqueness inherent in individual contexts, people, places, or materials. As the educational philosophy of the Learning Home prioritizes the individual needs of children, and believes in facilitating learning by providing varied experiences, the design at Learning Home could not be analyzed from the prescriptive lens of instructional design. The study of design at the Learning Home inspires a conceptualization of design as a response, activity, or experience that emerges from the lived moments, realities, and needs of the individuals engaged in pedagogical processes.

The third construct I examine in relation with the Learning Home is place. I found it necessary to examine place in the context of living curriculum since living curriculum and place share an intimate relationship. While stating the importance of place in life and curriculum, Kissling (2012b) states, “curriculum is fundamentally placed as life is lived amid a particular set of relationships” (p. 14). I examined the Learning Home site as a physical, geographical location, as well as a socially, emotionally, pedagogically constructed site. For instance, when asked to describe the Learning Home’s physical location, most individuals referenced their experience of freedom. Thus, the physical site evoked a mental or emotional association. Miriam Kahn (2000) rightfully calls places as “emotional landscapes” (p. 195). Some of the questions that guided my inquiry and analysis were, ‘how can the Learning Home be understood as a physical site as well as a site that is perceived and experienced by the students and facilitators through their lived curriculum? How can the Learning Home site be understood as a curricular catalyst and container where physical, mental, cognitive, social, cultural, political, and geographical experiences emerge, and in the process affect the pedagogical site?’

Thus, in order to examine, the three constructs of curriculum, place, and design at the Learning Home, I crafted the following research questions:

The main research question that guided this study was, ‘what is the curriculum of/at the Learning Home?’ The sub-questions were:

- a) How can the Learning Home be understood as a place?
- b) How can design in the context of the Learning Home be understood? What are the design process(es) at the Learning Home?
- c) What are the interrelationships between the three constructs of curriculum, place, and design at the Learning Home?

## Methodology

I collected data at the Learning Home for my ethnographic study from January 27 to March 18, 2015, for 8 weeks. My main research participants were the educators, facilitators, and children at the Learning Home. The founder, Professor Ramesh Panse founded the parent organization Grammanagl in 1982 and continues to guide the educators and facilitators. The three educators—Prachi Natu, Sushama Padhye, and Prasad Manerikar hold different roles and

responsibilities at Grammangal—primarily designing curricular materials and content, and conducting teacher trainings. They act as mentors to the facilitators. The facilitators work in the capacity of teachers at the Learning Home. There were approximately 60 children at the Learning Home when I collected data.

The primary methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis. In addition to interviewing the founder and the three educators, I also interviewed 11 facilitators. I interviewed the students—who I refer to as children, in groups rather than individually. The interviews yielded a total of 24 hours of audio-recorded data. I translated this data from Marathi to English. The data from interviews and documents—in the form of Grammangal literature was translated from Marathi into English for analysis.

## Data Analysis process

I followed a detailed, iterative process of data analysis with seven stages that included pre-coding, finding themes or deductive coding, rearranging data based on similarity, second cycle coding or deductive coding, rearranging codes within themes, theoretical analysis, and finally descriptive and narrative writing. I used the softwares Nvivo, Microsoft Word, and Microsoft Excel to organize my data.

## Findings: Engaged Relationships—A Key Component of Engaged Curriculum

As I examined my interview and observation data, I realized that the two most dominant themes common to all my research participants were an experience of engaged relationships and personal growth. Wanting to find a word that best describes the nature of the facilitator-children relationships—marked by a sense of love, care, trust, concern, commitment, responsibility, collaboration, and freedom, I chose the word *engaged*. The word *engaged* aptly describes these relationships at the Learning Home because in their daily pedagogical practice, facilitators and educators *engage* with every child in order to create the most optimal and engaging learning experiences. They acknowledge the children and respond to their needs by *engaging* with every child. The engaged relationships at the Learning Home inform the conceptualization of engaged curriculum. As the

curriculum at the Learning Home prioritizes the children’s learning, and manifests engaged relationships, or in other words is engaged with every child, I refer to the curriculum at the Learning Home as engaged curriculum.

Engaged relationships—a critical aspect of the participants’ lived experiences is a common thread across the three constructs of curriculum, place, and design at the Learning Home. Engaged relationships, by being a part of the lived experiences of educators, facilitators, and children, is an important part of the context of design at the Learning Home. The attitude of care, love, and commitment that the individuals at the Learning Home show toward each other is also reflected in their attitude towards the physical structure of the Learning Home. Thus, by being a part of the curricular context, and by transcending to the physical environment, engaged relationships are closely associated with place and design, in addition to the engaged curriculum at the Learning Home.

## Re/Conceptualization of Design: An implication for Art Education

Examining the interrelationship between curriculum, place, and design suggests that design at the Learning Home in-dwells between planned and lived curriculum as exemplified by the crow’s story from the introduction. Aoki conceptualizes lived curriculum as “a plan more or less lived out”, while planned curriculum is the intended curriculum with its aims, objectives, and goals (Aoki, 1993/2012). For one of the facilitators, the planned curriculum on the day of the crow story was focused on certain grammatical concepts. On the other hand, the children’s concern for the crow and their emotional response to the crow’s situation was their lived curricula. In an effort to incorporate both planned and curricula, the facilitator asked the children to write an essay about the crow’s experience of being stuck in the tree, which included her planned focus on certain grammatical concepts. This decision to include the students concern for the crow into the lesson for the day was an act of design by being attuned to the place (in the form of the crow) and of indwelling the planned and lived curriculum.

The relationship between design, place, and curriculum explored in this study is unique to the Learning Home. The constructivism-based curriculum at the Learning Home emphasizes experiential learning, and offers the educators and facilitators freedom, creative agency, and engaged relationships. This creates

a space between planned and lived curricula for design and place to exist, operate, and sustain. Hence, a facilitator looking at stones in the Learning Home premises sees a learning material to be used to teach the children concepts such as weight or fractions. In contrast, teachers in mainstream schools, who are expected to deliver content from textbooks in a didactic manner, may not have developed the vision to recognize and use the potential offered by the place—in other words design. Thus, design, when conceived as reflective action or response to lived curriculum that incorporates the curricular potential of place, becomes emplaced in the pedagogical site.

I propose that this in-dwelling of design between planned and lived curriculum allows one to envision curriculum as design and reconceptualize one's view of design and designer in pedagogical processes. This study conceptualizes design as a creative response to curricular needs. When teachers recognize the curricular potential in place and use it as an emergent, intuitive, and spontaneous response to address curricular needs, design transforms from a standardized procedure into a humane and organic response.

Recognition of the facilitators and children as designers has implications for art education. The act of creating learning experiences, curriculum, lesson plans, activities, and learning materials involves creative agency, creative challenges, and creative satisfaction. Any individual who engages in these processes engages in design. This recognition contributes to the art education discourse by highlighting teachers and students' creative practices in the service of curriculum-making.

## Implications for Curriculum Studies: Design as Interpreting Curriculum

I use art critic and philosopher, Arthur C. Danto's conceptualization of art and non-art as inspiration for my conceptualization of curriculum informed by design and place. Referring to how Andy Warhol's work and the Pop Art movement altered the way art is construed and interpreted, Danto says,

What Warhol's dictum amounted to was that you cannot *tell* when something is a work of art just by looking at it, for there is no particular way that art has to look. . . . There is, of course, still a difference between art and non-art, between works of art and what I refer to as

“mere real things.” What Warhol taught was that there is no real way of telling the difference merely by looking.” (1992, p. 5)

Thus, an everyday object that may not look like art can become art by virtue of interpretation. The difference is conceptual and not visible. Danto’s work raises the question between art and non-art, offering a conceptualization of art based on interpretation. Similarly, the study of the Learning Home raises the conceptual question between curriculum and non-curriculum. As discussed in this study, curriculum and non-curriculum are differentiated by the virtue of interpretation through design. For example, tamarind pits are mere objects that are a part of the Learning Home site until they are interpreted as curriculum and used to teach counting. Thus, interpretation can transform a mundane non-curriculum object into curriculum through interpretation or design. The environment at the Learning Home offers the educators and facilitators a means to interpret local objects and place as curriculum.

I hope this study inspires teachers and educators to reflect on their pedagogical practice and conceive it as a creative endeavor centered on the needs of students. Additionally, I hope teachers and educators are inspired to use their own creative agency to recognize and interpret the curricular potential in place in order to design curriculum that responds to the needs of the students

## Conclusion

The central finding of this study is that the curricular experiences of educators, facilitators, and children are enriching and empowering when curriculum is understood as a creative endeavor centered on the needs of the children. Additionally, curriculum designed as a response to the people and place, creates a meaningful experience for everyone involved in the pedagogical encounter (Thatte, 2017, p. 259).

This study examined the specific context of the Learning Home with its unique individuals, physical set-up of the building, and location. However, the findings of this study can be extrapolated to other pedagogical sites including settings for art pedagogy. Creative agency and a curriculum that responds to the need of students enrich the pedagogical experience and empower students and teachers in other contexts.

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