

## Planning, Living, and Adding to our Plates: K-3 Educators' Experiences of Curricula in Virtual Learning Environments (VLE)

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### Abstract

Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) have interested scholars since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with much of the research focusing on secondary and post-secondary instructors and learners (Brown, 2010; Dabbagh, 2007; Fuchs, 2020; Proserpio & Gioia, 2007). With the onset of VLEs in elementary education due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuation of synchronous virtual learning thereafter, VLEs have become commonplace in K-3 contexts across Ontario. Yet, as we contend with the ubiquitous nature of technology in early elementary, a paucity of literature exists regarding teachers' and early childhood educators' (ECE) experiences of planned and lived curricula (Aperribai et al., 2020; Ferdig et al., 2020; Muldong et al., 2021) in VLEs. Adopting a narrative methodological approach, I reflected on themes unearthed through narrative interviews with five educators (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, 1996, 2000). Early narrative analysis suggested four narrative threads: time, parent relationships, classroom community, teacher presence and engagement, and technological barriers. Each thread explored how teachers navigated the entanglements of planned and lived curricular experiences in VLEs. Further, the threads exposed critical elements to be considered in future VLE policy and curricular reform in the K-3 context.

**Keywords:** Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), elementary education, narrative inquiry, curriculum inquiry, teacher education



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## Introduction

As a result of the increased number of students accessing Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) in recent years, educators have added online teaching to their repertoire of skills. However, how teachers navigate curricular expectations alongside the entanglements of lived curricula (Aoki, 1992, 1993, 2005) is an under researched area. As a former elementary teacher, my career began in a small community in central Ontario just north of the provincial capital, Toronto. Before this, I had roles as an educational assistant, child and youth worker, and middle school teacher. In each of these roles, I embraced the non-traditional settings where I served children and youth who did not fit into the hegemonic, Westernized schooling framework. From youth expelled from high school classrooms to kindergarten students requiring a modified daily schedule, I witnessed the struggle to access curricula that appeared ever out of reach for those voices already muted. With the implementation of VLEs, disparities became increasingly evident as Westernized and hegemonic pedagogical practices filtered from the in-person classroom to the VLE. To date, no comprehensive narrative studies have explored the curricular entanglements from the standpoint of teachers.

Motivated by the paucity of research and my personal teaching stories in early elementary VLEs, I engaged in a narrative inquiry to unearth dominant threads in teachers' stories. Motivated by the paucity of research and my personal teaching stories in early elementary VLEs, I engaged in a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990) to unearth dominant threads in teachers' stories. Two overarching questions guided my inquiry:

- a) How do teachers describe their experiences with planned curricula in the early elementary VLE? and
- b) How do teachers describe their experiences with the lived curricula in VLEs?

I explored teachers' experiences of curricula in early elementary VLEs. A narrative analysis of field and research texts unearthed four dominant threads: parent relationships, classroom community, teacher presence and engagement, and technological barriers.

## Context

As the COVID-19 global pandemic emerged in Ontario, virtual learning environments (VLE), spaces where students access education synchronously and asynchronously through a learning management system (LMS), became commonplace in K-12 education. As early elementary teachers (kindergarten to grade three) *pivoted* to emergency virtual instruction, they advocated for appropriate training to support effective pedagogical practices, access to culturally relevant materials, professional development, and technological infrastructure. Their requests mirrored scholars' findings (El Mhouti et al., 2017; Govindasama, 2001; Sims, 2008; Sri & Krishna, 2014) indicating that teachers require appropriate training and resources to provide rich curricula to diverse learners worldwide. Mseleku (2020), Assunção Flores and Gago (2020), and Ferdig et al. (2020) underscored the need for elementary and secondary teacher professional development for instruction in VLEs with the exponential increase in students accessing education through VLEs.

Much of the scholarly research regarding VLEs during the COVID-19 pandemic focused, as did I, on learners' mental health and well-being. However, as I delved into the research literature to improve my practice, I noticed minimal research exploring kindergarten and primary teachers' curricular experiences in VLEs. It is here where the seeds of my research puzzles were planted. Through narrative approaches, my research brought together the voices of teachers to determine how kindergarten and primary teachers navigated curricula in VLEs. This research is critical to support the development of VLE pedagogy for current and future kindergarten and primary VLE educators. Further, attending to teacher voices permitted information sharing that could inform VLE policy development in early elementary VLEs.

### **Methodology**

In examining how virtual primary teachers describe their experiences navigating the curriculum as planned and lived in the Ontario virtual classroom, and in alignment with critical approaches, I chose to adopt a narrative methodological approach to delve deeply into the storied lives of teachers in VLEs.

Narrative methodology provided a framework to explore, understand and construct teachers' storied lives (Bhattacharya, 2017; Clandinin & Caine, 2008), allowing me to understand how teachers construct meaning by (re)storying their lived experiences. As narratives are social creations, approaching teachers' narratives from a critical perspective exposed the power dynamics embedded in VLEs (Clandinin, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005; Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). Smith and Sparkes (2005) reinforced this concept by asserting that "narratives do not spring from the minds of individuals but are social creations" (p. 3). Narratives that maintain societal norms, practices, and systems of marginalization reinforce the dominant narrative (Rudman & Aldrich, 2017).

As I approached the narratives with a critical lens, I was cautious of dualistic views presenting themselves when either privileging the individual voice or drawing collective understandings (Trahar, 2009). To combat dualism, I employed a three-dimensional approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which allowed me to attend to the multiple layers embedded in teachers' storied experiences while honouring diverse teacher voices and how their narratives bumped up against social and institutional narratives. Taking up Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative approach, I attended to the entanglements of individuals' storied lives within social, institutional, and political narratives while attending to temporality, sociality, and place embedded within teachers' lived experiences.

### **Results**

Preliminary analyses of teachers' narratives across temporal, social and place-based dimensions indicated (a) parent-teacher relationships became entangled differently than in the physical in-person classroom; (b) classroom community highlighted the need for intentional social-emotional learning opportunities; (c) teacher presence in the VLE impacted the engagement with students; and (d) technological barriers further highlighted disparities in public education in the VLE.

## Parent-Teacher Relationships

Complex relationships surfaced as parents, students, and teachers engaged in synchronous learning experiences. Each teacher identified strategies to support parents as they navigated the newness of VLEs with their child(ren). Teachers discussed the importance of parental support, particularly in the kindergarten environment, as three-, four-, and five-year-old learners required direct physical support. However, what ensued was an entanglement of challenges between lived experiences. Parents wanting to support their child's learning often prompted correct answers for their child in response to the teachers' questions. These interactions lead to tensions between parents and educators as lived curricular narratives bumped up against each other.

As evidenced by one teacher, having a balance between autonomy and parental support became a scaffolded exercise as the school year unfolded. This teacher asked parents to check in on their child(ren) every ten minutes to ensure they were focused and following along. This was met with both positive "the parents were so supportive," and parents who indicated the VLE was too stressful for their child. The positive and negative sentiments were threaded throughout each educator's narrative, highlighting the changing dynamic in the teacher-parent relationship.

## Classroom Community

Unearthed across teachers' narratives, classroom community became a significant focus. Teachers spoke of the tension in their attempts to build a classroom community during the early implementation of VLEs. This was particularly difficult for early elementary teachers and learners. As stated by one educator, their relationship was very good with parents, however, children had challenges making meaningful peer and teacher relationships in the VLE. The classroom community presented as quite different than the traditional physical classroom. They attributed the difficulties to the lack of physical presence and wondered if children saw them as *YouTubers* rather than live people engaged with each other in real-time. However, as time passed, students became agents in their learning and building of classroom community. As evidenced in teachers' narratives, the longer students engaged with the VLE synchronous learning experience, they began to see each other and their educators, as individuals housed in a different space in real-time.

## Teacher Presence

In exploring the planned curricula embedded in teachers' narratives, I questioned how teachers planned for their lessons and if they noticed any differences in planning in the VLE. Across narratives, yet individual to each educator, it surfaced that planning lessons in the VLE paralleled planning lessons in the in-person classroom with the exception of time. Each teacher noted that planning takes time in the in-person space. However, more effort and time are needed to come up with more strategies to support early elementary children in VLEs. One teacher, Indra (pseudonym), noted, "Because you're not there physically, they can only see and hear your voice, but they can't feel your presence." The concern around feeling teacher presence in the VLE filtered into later discussions of unreliable equipment and steady internet connections that, if faulty, interrupted the feeling and presence teachers worked tirelessly to establish.

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## Technological Barriers

Technological barriers appeared as a prominent thread in teacher narratives. This thread encompassed students' and teachers' technological challenges with software, hardware, and WiFi connections. With interruptions in WiFi, teachers indicated their ability to attend to and be present in the VLE became problematic. Building relationships with parents and students in the VLE became problematic as students' frustration levels increased and student engagement and presence decreased. Contending with technological challenges, including outdated hardware and software, impeded on the quality of instruction teachers felt they could provide to early elementary learners. Teachers described solutions to support students and families as they navigated, although they felt their voices regarding access to appropriate technological tools were unheard.

### Summary

Preliminary findings suggest deeper entanglements with planned and lived curricular experiences in early elementary VLEs. Continued adoption of VLE models to deliver educational experiences requires further exploration of teachers' narratives with planned and lived curricula. Further, a deeper analysis of the narrative threads embedded in teachers' storied experiences offers insight into future policy and VLE reform.

### Author's Contributions

I acknowledge that I am the sole author of this conference proceeding and the research project's principal investigator.

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### Ethics Statement

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### Conflict of Interest

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

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