

Becoming-Curriculum in Maria Speth's *Mr. Bachmann and His Class*

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DIRECTED BY AN AWARD-WINNING FILMMAKER MARIA SPETH (2021), *Mr. Bachmann and His Class* is a school-based documentary about a sixth-grade class and the retiring teacher Dieter Bachmann at Georg Büchner School in Stadtallendorf, a German city shaped by historical and contemporary waves of migration, leading to a diverse mix of citizenships among its residents. Speth spotlights Bachmann and his sixth-grade students in the documentary to reveal his unconventional teaching practice. In a discussion between Bachmann and his colleague, Bachmann is described as E.T. among teachers in the school (Speth, 2021). The constantly changing activities of learning and teaching in his classroom are construed as unusual, yet they epitomize Sellers' (2013) becoming-curriculum, which is characterized by Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) philosophical concepts of rhizome, lines of flight, and multiplicity. In this paper, I examine the concept of becoming and Sellers' becoming-curriculum and identify how Bachmann's classroom embodies becoming-curriculum using Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts.

Toward Becoming-Curriculum

In Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*, they presented several philosophical concepts as imaginaries, in which one of the imaginaries is becoming. The notion of becoming for Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is not about becoming anything specific. Instead, becoming is the very dynamism of change toward no particular goal or end state (Stagoll, 2010) and is about happenings of the in-between in flow of "becoming-*something*" (Sellers, 2013, p. 79). As becoming is imperceptible, what Deleuze and Guattari are concerned with is not *what becoming is*, but *what becoming is related to* (Sellers, 2013). To better understand becoming, I suggest viewing becoming with its relations to three other Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts: rhizome, lines of flight, and multiplicity.

Becoming is *about* and *is* rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Semetsky, 2006). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) proposed rhizome as a perturbation of the conventional arborescent thought. The arborescent thinking supports binary logic, representing linearly ordered and

directed systems of thinking (Stewart, 2015). In contrast, rhizome, biologically, is “a form of plant that can extend itself through its underground horizontal tuber-like root system and develop new plants” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 231), representing a freely or even chaotically ordered approach to thinking. An example of the rhizome in the real world is the internet (Sellers, 2013). Further, “a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). This notion justifies the resemblance between rhizome and becoming, as becoming is “what happens *in-between*” (Sellers, 2010, p. 563). Like a rhizome, becoming with non-linear order, and without beginning and ending, opens endless possibilities of thought, concept, and activity.

Becoming is connected to lines of flight (Adkins, 2015; Masny, 2013; Sellers, 2013). Characterized as connectivity, lines of flight are movements of change and operate through deterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Sellers (2013) explained deterritorialization as, when we enter any space of thinking our ongoing thoughts change it, and this creates “a simultaneously deterritorializing movement” (p. xvii). In other words, lines of flight are the movement of leaving and reengaging with a territory. A useful example to understand lines of flight is that of the community choir, suggested by Lines (2013). The musical territory of the choir includes the melody, rhythm, and harmony of the choral pieces, emotional aspects of choir practices, the mental learning patterns of rehearsals, physical demands of choir performance, and others. By leaving and reengaging with territories, participants gain a fuller understanding of the dynamism of the choir (Lines, 2013). Since deterritorialization signals constantly changing territories, lines of flight, like a rhizome and becoming, have no ends or destinations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and are thus always in the middle.

Becoming and multiplicity are the same (Adkins, 2015; Grosz, 1994; Sellers, 2013). A multiplicity is not a collection of discrete parts but involves “continuous multidimensional expansion, generating and bringing together an infinite variety of thoughts, thinking and ideas, many times over — engaging with a variation of variables” (Sellers, 2013, p. 15). To indicate a multiplicity, Sellers uses tildes (~) to structure a multidimensional mode of composition. One of the examples used by Sellers (2020) is a multiplicity of curriculum-related concepts, “learners~teachers~content~knowledge~environment” (p. 25). Since becoming is always qualified as becoming-different (Sellers, 2020), it opens to a multiplicity of thought, concept, and activity.

Connecting to the Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987) notion of becoming, Sellers’ (2013) becoming-curriculum bears resemblances to a rhizome, lines of flight, and multiplicity. First, like a rhizome, becoming-curriculum does not form a linear structure that directs to specific educational outcomes and does not support children’s binary development, like “an incompetent child developing into rational adult, or a novice becoming expert” (Sellers, 2020, p. 25). Instead, it perceives children as young human beings of monadic singularity more than merely developing into adults (Sellers, 2013). Second, like lines of flight, becoming-curriculum is not about fixed content and is always in the process of deterritorialization (Sellers, 2010). Predetermined goals of any educational activity in becoming-curriculum are only the points to be passed through, constituting lines of flight. Third, by assembling multiplicities, becoming-curriculum constantly changes through the connections made among curriculum-related concepts, such as learners, teachers, content, knowledge, environment, and subject matter (Sellers, 2020).

These concepts stand in stark contrast to the traditional “banking concept of education” (Freire, 2000, p. 72), where knowledge is viewed as a static deposit to be delivered by the teacher and stored by the learner. In such a model, the curriculum is linear, hierarchical, and oriented toward rigid outcomes. Becoming-curriculum, by contrast, displaces these assumptions by foregrounding students’ subjectivities, relationality, and the unpredictability of thought-in-motion.

By moving the educational focus from assessment-driven outcomes to flowing with a multiplicity of movements of becoming-curriculum, like students' ever-changing interests, the activity of learning and teaching can become more productive and meaningful (Sellers, 2020). By and by, becoming-curriculum abandons specified educational goals or outcomes, instead opening up new territories for thinking differently and endless possibilities of thought and activity through deterritorializing a multiplicity of movements.

Becoming-Curriculum in *Mr. Bachmann and His Class*

Situated in the small industrial town of Stadtallendorf in central Germany, the Georg Büchner School where *Mr. Bachmann and His Class* was filmed is the product of successive waves of migration. During the Second World War, the town hosted explosives factories staffed by slave labourers, including Jewish women and children brought from concentration camps. After the war, it became home to refugees and displaced persons. As industries were rebuilt, guest workers were recruited to fill labour shortages, as Germans no longer sought this type of work. Each wave of migration reshaped the town's demographic composition, so that by 2017 (the year of filming) Mr Bachmann's sixth-grade class comprised students from 12 different countries, with most being the children of factory workers (Chen, 2021). That same period coincided with the broader migrant crisis in Germany when almost one million migrants arrived and far-right, anti-immigrant discourse gained momentum through the Alternative for Germany party (Hertner, 2022).

Against this volatile backdrop, none of the students in Bachmann's class reported experiencing discrimination due to their cultural and religious background, nor were they judged or criticized for expressing their opinion (Chen, 2021). "They all know that they can just be themselves in front of Mr Bachmann" (Chen, 2021, p. 168). These positive dynamics in Bachmann's class can be attributed to not only the multicultural environment of Stadtallendorf but also Bachmann's embodiment of becoming-curriculum. The following sections will explore how Bachmann's class embodies becoming-curriculum in terms of rhizome, lines of flight, and multiplicity and consider how this approach may serve to protect, empower, and support immigrant students.

Rhizome

A rhizome represents a freely ordered approach to thinking and has no end. Like a rhizome, Bachmann's learning and teaching activity does not have a predetermined design or process, nor a specific educational goal or outcome. In one of Bachmann's music lessons documented in the film, Bachmann exposes his fluidity in choosing a piece of music to be played with his class. Bachmann directly expresses his opinion to this class, "[the music] doesn't turn me on" (Speth, 2021, 01:09:12), and intends to have his class play another exhilarating piece of music. This moment exemplifies his refusal to be constrained by preset materials or rigid learning outcomes.

Further, in a storytelling activity, Bachmann asks Ayman to sit next to Ferhan and help her polish her story, but Ayman decisively rejects this suggestion without any reason. Yet, Bachmann is eager for his explanation and says, "we've still got two hours. . . . That's part of it" (Speth, 2021, 02:03:13). Although Ayman gives his excuse within a minute, Bachmann's insistence on Ayman's explanation demonstrates that he values everyone's expression and would freely adjust the educational goal of activities, such as from learning German to learning to express their inner voice. Such free adjustment also exists in their conversation during one

of the last lessons of the day. When Bachmann asks his students about their daily routine, his follow-up questions move the conversation from the topics of their family and ideal marriage, to a controversy over the views of patriarchalism and feminism. It is obvious that Bachmann does not intend to discuss the issue of feminism by initiating a discussion of their daily routine, but his freely ordered teaching leads to endless possibilities of thought. Thus, the three examples of Bachmann's learning and teaching activities show his refusal to follow predetermined and specific educational goals and, in turn, epitomize the rhizomatic thinking and becoming-curriculum.

Lines of Flight

Lines of flight focus on the emergent new flight paths rather than predetermined pathways of curricular flight (Lines, 2013). Lines (2013) argued that the problem with the present music education system is that modular and insular music learning is confined to “the mastery of certain music-centred goals and objectives” (p. 25). Modern music education pinpoints the music piece or composed work with the emphasis on perfecting students' skills in music making. This predetermined pathway focusing on the production of the music piece has suppressed what lines of flight seek: a more fluid form of music production, like improvisation (Lines, 2013). Instead of following this predetermined pathway, Bachmann consistently encourages his students to improvise. He invites students to accompany him with the music “Eulenspiegel” (a reference to the prankster in German folklore) that Bachmann composed for one of his favourite stories “Eulenspiegel and the Children.” While Hasan improvises on the drum set, other students improvise on the bass guitar, piano, and djembe to accompany Bachmann. Through these improvisational practices, Bachmann's classroom becomes a space where the curricular structure is continuously disrupted and reimagined. Each improvisation enacts lines of flight that open new possibilities for sound, interaction, and expression.

The act of improvisation is also the process of deterritorialization. As mentioned, deterritorialization occurs when lines of flight leave the territory they transmute and build another territory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Students deterritorialize the movement when their initial territorial “Eulenspiegel” is transmuted while improvising, and they begin to execute new musical materials in lines of flight away from the initial territory. Simply put, improvisation highlights music's fluidity and translucence (Lines, 2013). As such, not only Bachmann's pursuit of new flight paths, i.e., improvisation, embodies lines of flight, but also the activity of improvisation in Bachmann's music lesson identifies what Sellers (2010) explains: becoming-curriculum is always in the process of deterritorialization.

Bachmann's enactment of lines of flight extends beyond music education into broader classroom moments that challenge fixed curricular expectations. Around the 72-minute mark of the film, during what is formally designated as an English lesson, a student named Jamie refuses to assist his classmate, Hasan, and attributes her academic struggles to poor learning ability. Rather than reprimanding Jamie, Bachmann redirects the moment by acknowledging the challenges Hasan faces as a recent immigrant still acquiring the language. He then facilitates an open dialogue in which students reflect on their experiences with exclusion, identity, and belonging in Germany. This moment becomes lines of flight away from the disciplinary boundaries of English toward an emergent curriculum grounded in inclusion and lived experience. Importantly, this line of flight is not simply a change in lesson content. It is about escaping a pre-scripted function of the classroom and allowing something new and relational to emerge. In this case, the lesson deterritorializes from a focus of learning English to a space where students can recognize and respond to one another's experiences with empathy and understanding. Such moments illustrate how becoming-curriculum is not limited to artistic

or expressive subjects but can occur whenever fixed curricular structures are disrupted by desire, relation, and subjectivity.

Multiplicity

Sellers (2010) asserted that the conventional adult-biased curriculum neglects students' expressions and understandings while becoming-curriculum opens to ongoing possibilities for a merging and converging of children's ideas. Although students may not have a theoretical understanding of curriculum, they often inform curriculum by communicating their willingness to participate in the activity (Sellers, 2013). Observing and listening to students' expressions of words and actions as a curriculum resource are required for the purpose of seeking a multiplicity in becoming-curriculum. In Bachmann's classroom, his responses to students' ideas frequently appear. After inquiring about the parental decisions regarding their participation in the parent-teacher conference from the students, Bachmann asks, "How about some more schoolwork?" (Speth, 2021, 00:19:11), and all students unanimously say no. Bachmann then decides to do a review of the day with his class rather than persisting with the predetermined activity.

Furthermore, Bachmann observes students' fatigue and disinterest from their postures and facial expressions and decides to let them go home earlier if they can solve the last mathematics question. It is evident that Bachmann always embraces his students' ideas and expressions and adjusts the learning and teaching activity accordingly. With involving the constantly changing connections between a multiplicity of curriculum-related concepts, like students' interests and subjects, becoming-curriculum epitomized in Bachmann's classroom opens possibilities and new directions for learning.

Supporting Immigrant Students through Becoming-Curriculum

While Mr. Bachmann's approach does not always follow predetermined educational goals, this does not imply a lack of purpose or rigor. On the contrary, becoming-curriculum, as embodied in his classroom, serves to protect, empower, and support immigrant students by creating an inclusive and relational space where their voices, experiences, and expressions help shape the learning process. Sellers (2010) argued that "what children have to say and do about curriculum... immediately commands not only acknowledgement but also respect" (p. 563), a principle clearly practiced in Bachmann's willingness to let student interests and responses guide the direction of classroom activities. His openness to improvisation, refusal of rigid outcomes, and attention to students' emotional and social states, reflect what Sellers called "a doing that is generative of further(ing) possibilities" (p. 564), rather than a pre-scripted set of objectives.

In a sociopolitical context where many of Bachmann's students live with the effects of cultural displacement or marginalization, such an approach can be seen as deeply protective. Sellers (2010) emphasized that "children thrive within the complexity of their spontaneous play(ing) where linear processes are not necessary to the fruitful play(ing) of generative learning~living experiences" (p. 574), highlighting how becoming-curriculum embraces the complexity of identity and learning rather than simplifying or controlling it. Bachmann's approach, by recognizing students' agency and humanity, challenges the adult-dominated curriculum that often renders young, and especially immigrant, voices invisible. Instead, it "welcomes young children's understandings into ours of becoming-curriculum" (Sellers, 2010, p. 575), enabling students not just to be educated but to become authors of their own meaning

and belonging.

Conclusion

Drawn from one of the concepts in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*, becoming is the complex intermediary integrating different forces in motion rather than systematic, ordered linear specifics (Sellers, 2020). Despite its unclear, unformulated, and elusive definition, becoming is interconnected with other Deleuzo-Guattarian imaginaries and concepts (Sellers, 2013). Understanding the concept of becoming from the perspective of other imaginaries is advised to avoid its elusiveness. Becoming is *about* and *is* rhizome, lines of flight, and multiplicity. In Bachmann's classroom, like a non-linear rhizome without beginning and ending, he does not predetermine but freely adjusts the learning and teaching activity's process and educational goals. Like the focus of lines of flight, he pursues new flight paths of improvisation and encourages his students to experiment and create freely. Like what a multiplicity suggests, he always embraces his students' voices, expressions, and lived experiences as curricular sources rather than privileging an adult-centered curriculum.

Importantly, Bachmann's enactment of becoming-curriculum does more than illustrate abstract theory. It has tangible protective and empowering effects for his immigrant students. Becoming-curriculum creates inclusive and relational spaces that honor students' agency and identities, particularly in contexts shaped by migration, marginalization, and sociopolitical tension. In this way, Bachmann's approach not only resists rigid curricular expectations but also enacts a form of education that fosters belonging, affirmation, and meaning-making. Becoming-curriculum may be inexplicable, but in Bachmann's classroom, it becomes visible as a profoundly human, responsive, and liberatory practice.

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