Curriculum and the Life Erratic: The Geographic Cure

Leslie B. Nissen

Curriculum and the Life Erratic: The Geographic Cure lays bare the untold damage done to children who are forced to endure the toxic combination of “fermented parenting” (as author Leslie Nissen has termed it) and frequent family moves at the hands of alcoholic parents who perpetually seek the elusive Geographic Cure. While such parents deceive themselves that in the next new place, sobriety will prevail, their children know better. Alcoholics who chronically uproot their families for a fresh start usually carry along every reason to drink.

For the school-age children of such cure-seeking alcoholics, the torment of life with a volatile, unpredictable and chronically intoxicated parent is intensified by the anguish of being “the new kid” who changes schools at the whim of the parent. Highly mobile children, bearing an alarmingly long list of prior schools, may be part of a group which Nissen calls Geographic Cure Children, whose chances of finding help are nearly non-existent, despite their acute need for care.

The dilemma of this unique subset of Children of Alcoholics is examined via autobiographical, psychoanalytic and fictional lenses. Nissen also recounts her own urge to hit the road when diagnosed with cancer, and explores the Geographic Cure writ large, observing how the current “testing frenzy” and clamor for cures for low test scores dominate educational policy. Could teachers’ panic about accountability cause them to resent new students who appear at their classroom doors mid-year? Is education encumbered because, at the hands of policy-makers, educators are working the Life Erratic?
Curriculum and the Life Erratic
TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

Series Editor:
Shirley R. Steinberg, University of Calgary, Canada

Founding Editor:

Editorial Board

Jon Austin, University of Southern Queensland, Australia
Norman Denzin, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, USA
Rhonda Hammer, University of California Los Angeles, USA
Nikos Metallinos, Concordia University, Canada
Christine Quail, McMaster University, Canada

This book series is dedicated to the radical love and actions of Paulo Freire, Jesus “Pato” Gomez, and Joe L. Kincheloe.
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity--youth identity in particular--the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality.
What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
Curriculum and the Life Erratic

The Geographic Cure

Leslie B. Nissen
This book is dedicated to my brother, Geoffrey Burrell-Sahl.

Geoff, you were my navigator way before “that day with the map.” From the minute you were born, you were the glue that kept me from falling apart. You may have been the younger one, but your wisdom trumped all. There I was, thinking I was protecting you, but you ended up shielding me many times over. You had an uncanny ability to defuse the thorniest of situations. You were the family compass, steering us around treacherous storms with your intuition, warmth, and wit. It was you who kept us all on an even keel. Thank you and I love you.

P.S. I still think you are the funniest guy on the planet.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xi

1 Introduction: Curriculum and the Life Erratic 1
   Inset: Stevie, Age Seven 1
   The Geographic Cure, Curriculum Theory, and Psychoanalysis 3
   A Matter of Balance 5
   Wisdom Figures 12
   The Singular Set of Children of Alcoholics 16
   Overview of Chapters 2 through 6 19

2 The Confounded Life of an 80-Proof Home 21
   Inset: Officer Jake’s Steel-Toe Shoe 21
   Retreats of Substance 23
   Fermented Parenting 29
   Taking Over 35
   On Refusing to Talk About It 37
   An Air Raid a Day 41

3 The Unhinged Lives of Kids on the Move 47
   Inset: Ringo, Shut Up! 47
   Families Unmoored 49
   Transient Students Typically Defined 54
   The Long, Loud Sigh: Student Mobility from the School Perspective 58

4 Drinking and Driving (Away) 65
   Inset: Geography and His Sister 65
   Glass Castles and Geography Lessons 67
   The Buffer Has No Buffer 71
   On The Fine Art of Cigarette Removal 73
   Secrets and Lies, Good Moods and Goodbyes 76
   Whispers in the Roar 80
   Driving Away 83

5 “Hold Still” 85
   Inset: The Laundromat Lizard 85
   Charlie’s Angel and Mystical Whispers 87
   The Ken Factor 92
   The Golden Option 99
   Naming It, Claiming It 101
   The Doctor, The Cape, and the Red Letter “S” 103
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forget-Me-Nots and Contradictory Spaces</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So, We Were STUCK In This Plastic, Outdoor Elevator . . .</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding Chaos at Bay</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6 The Geographic Cure Writ Large</strong></td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inset: Stevie, Age 12</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I extend my most heartfelt gratitude to the following professors in Georgia Southern University’s Curriculum Studies Program. They are:

- Dr. Marla Morris, a scholar to the core, my academic mentor, who taught me how to think psychoanalytically, read critically, write autobiographically, and trust my own voice.
- Dr. John Weaver, whose classes in cultural studies were not just eye opening, but foundation shaking, and whose insights always proved to be invaluable.
- Dr. Daniel Chapman, who helped me carve coherent thoughts out of a block of indistinct deliberations, and who prodded me to “complicate” those thoughts beyond my comfort zone.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Mary Aswell Doll of the Savannah College of Art and Design, an exceptionally creative teacher and writer, who taught me about “wisdom figures” by being an incomparable one herself.

Two additional professors in GSU’s Curriculum Studies Program must be thanked as well: Dr. Ming Fang He, whose enthusiastic commitment to this field left a lasting impression on me, and Dr. William Reynolds, who opened my eyes by challenging what I thought I knew about educational policy.

Additionally, I am indebted to Dr. Michael Keith of Boston College (author of *The Next Better Place*) for graciously meeting with me a few years ago, and allowing me to pester him with questions as we compared notes about our childhoods. Mike: I’m proud to now call you my friend, and proud that we are both survivors in more ways than one.

I am thankful for Erin Martineau, formatting expert and proofreading guru, for her amazing professional expertise, and I am grateful to Sense publishers Peter de Liele and Michele Lokhorst, as well as Sense *Transgressions* series editor Shirley Steinberg, for supporting this endeavor.

Thank you to the following friends who had a HUGE impact on this project:

- Debbie Burnette, my doctoral program ally / think tank colleague / partner in crime / paper reviewer / and movies-trump-work buddy, for being there with me this whole time. Thanks also for taking one for the team; your wild goose chase for “the Bergamo video” remains a classic.
- Melodie Moore, for keeping me together when I was descending into *Perrla-Deleted-My-References Hell* while I was trying to wrap this baby up. Thank you also for being the first to read all the chapters in order, back to back, and for providing essential input.
- Heather Bilton, for not hating me when I “left” you (job-wise) in order to go back to work in a school, thinking I could more easily work on this book that
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

way. I know; I was delusional. You didn’t hold a grudge (for long) and remained a faithful supporter.

– Julie Gannam, because, if not for you, there would be no “finished” book; there would be no me at all. Thank you also for understanding that recovery takes forever.

– Dearest, dearest Jennie, thank you for saying “yes.” I would never have told the whole story in Chapter 5 without your blessing. Your courage is phenomenal.

More friends and colleagues must be thanked for supporting me in countless ways during my journey through these chapters, and through life: Syril Barnes, Angela Bohne, Amber Crump, Cindy Clifton, Domenica Devine, Julie Diebolt, Charlene Harrell, Carol Hendry, Grace Herrington, Charlene Jones, Katherine Johnson, Judy Newsome, Linda Oliver, Gayle Powers, Kathy Roux, Ruth Sales, Kim Sancomb, Sherrie Sauer, John Sutlive, and Rose Talbert (a.k.a “Miss Wose Tabbitt”). If I left out a name, please forgive me. I can still claim chemo brain for a while longer.

A grateful hug goes to Erin Tova Mullins, the young artist whose drawing was commissioned a few years ago for the cover of this book. Erin is older now, and is quite the budding actress. Remember her name.

If every single star in the galaxy blinked “thank you” in the night sky, their messages would still not adequately convey my gratitude to my family. I owe so much to:

– David Smith, Rebecca and Michael Panarisi and kids, Jason and Jennifer Smith and kids, plus my de facto siblings Debbie Fischer, Kathy Godfrey, and Michael Teasley, for putting up with books and papers all over the dining room when you visited us, and/or for tolerating my constant references to working on the book when we talked on the phone or visited. Thank you so much for not yelling “enough, already!” More importantly, thank you for caring.

– Monica Sippel, my heart sister (forget “ex”—forget “step”): I love you for listening, and for understanding why I had to go there. You genuinely understand the Life Erratic.

– Marlene Burrell-Sahl, my wonderful sister-in-law, for seeing my brother as the treasure that he is, and for creating for him the happily ever after that he has deserved for so long. You are a treasure as well.

Thank you Colleen Nissen, my beautiful and amazingly gifted stepdaughter, for being genuinely interested in my ideas for this book early on, and for encouraging me from beginning to end. Thank you for helping me categorize my bazillion references (when we were herding cats), for typing from many of those references, and especially for never thinking that I was too old or feeble-minded to be a graduate student. You totally rock. Also, I want your job when I grow up.

Thank you Sam Prevatt, my brilliant, generous-hearted son, for your exceptional proofreading eye, your suggestions, and your astute questions, all of which helped to make this book better than it ever would have been otherwise. The phrase, “I could
never have done it without you,” never rang more true than in regard to you. Thank you for your time, your input, and your gentle, get-on-with-it-already reminder that Papa would be proud of me. Thank you also for popping the question to Amy, the only woman on earth whom I would ever consider a perfect match for my son.

Thank you, Andreas Nissen, my husband and the love of my life. This expedition would never have been completed if not for your belief in me. You never doubted that I could meet the next task at hand, even when I had doubts. Thank you for meeting me at the diner late at night after class, and for understanding why my nose was always in a book at home. Thank you for letting me leave you notes that said, “Will you wake me up when you get up?” when I was trying to finish a paper. When cancer threw a monkey wrench into the mix, thank you for being willing to “run off” with me, and for being my caregiver—the hardest job in the world. Thank you for enduring the constant stream of “Helga matters” that I had to contend with, when Alzheimer’s disease consumed our lives and stole hers. When I was finally ready to put up or shut up, thank you for tolerating my need to (again) turn the whole house into my personal workspace. You made all the difference in the world, because you were always in my corner, every step of the way. I am forever grateful to you, and grateful to God for you.
There are people who can be defined by what they escape from, and people who are defined by the fact that they are forever escaping.

—Adam Phillips, *Houdini’s Box: The Art of Escape*

In the middle of a muggy, late October morning, a small, shy, second-grade boy named Stevie is called out of his class by Ms. Jones, a school administrator whom Stevie doesn’t know. Ms. Jones tells the child, “Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble. I just need to talk to you about something. Come walk with me.” Rain starts to fall as they walk through the breezeway between wings; they’re headed for the front office. Ms. Jones tries to make small talk about southeast Georgia’s version of fall weather, attempting to put the child at ease. Stevie does not respond. He pulls his cold little fingers away from her clammy hand as they walk. When they get to her office, Ms. Jones sits with Stevie at a conference table and picks up a large brown file folder full of papers. “Steven, we had quite a time trying to locate your school records! Goodness, you’ve moved around a bit, haven’t you?” She plasters a big smile across her face. There is lead in the air, upstaging the humidity.

The administrator presses on. “When your mother came to register you here at the beginning of the year, we put you in Miss Lacey’s class because she had the fewest number of students. But it looks like you need more help in math than she can give you.” Stevie’s facial expression changes from confusion to fear. The little color he had in his face drains away.

“Your records are finally here,” Ms. Jones says, “and we see that you had special math help last year at one of the schools you attended. I think you will be better off in Mr. Caison’s class. Wouldn’t you like to be one of his Terrific Tigers?” The woman’s forced cheerfulness makes the seven-year-old wince. His mom uses that kind of voice when she announces where the family will move next, or what her new job will involve. Stevie’s big brother, Josh, calls it *Mom’s Fake Happy Voice*, which, Josh explains, is quite different from *Mom’s Pissy Drunk Voice*.

Waterfalls tumble down Stevie’s cheeks. His head bows down in acute grief. The only time the little boy speaks during this entire session is when he murmurs, “Do I have to?” The woman’s lightning-bolt “Yes!” slashes through his heart. As Ms. Jones steers Stevie back across the breezeway to the first-grade wing, she chatters on about
how much he’ll like Mr. Caison’s class. Tears continue to roll, to the point that the child can barely see to walk. When they get to Miss Lacey’s door, Stevie wraps his arms around his teacher’s legs, and sobs. Certainly, the teacher’s unfailingly calm and nurturing demeanor has been a balm to his frenzied soul. But there’s more. Stevie’s teacher of five weeks has been the first stabilizing influence that the boy has known. The little routines that Miss Lacey puts into place during their school day offer a world of comfort for him. Consistency is an urgent, unmet need for Stevie, the Child of an Alcoholic. He craves something that he cannot even articulate. Haugland (2005) explains:

Predictability allows the person to prepare for what is coming and then, when it is safe, he/she can relax. Children have a limited ability to understand parental alcohol abuse and to predict changes occurring in family rituals and routines because of the drinking. (p. 238)

Stevie has never understood the continual upheaval going on in his life. However, it was beginning to look as though there might be many more happy days ahead with Miss Lacey. Josh, wiser at 13 and quite adept at reading all the signs, had been speculating that their mother “might actually stick to this job for a while.”

However, Ms. Jones wants Stevie in a smaller class with more opportunities for math remediation. As a school administrator she has worked tirelessly to boost the school’s math scores on mandated district and state tests. “Placing children with the right teacher is critical,” Ms. Jones pontificates in staff meetings. “Even in the lower grades, this is a high-stakes situation!” Indeed. The two-edged sword of “high stakes” cuts deep and wide. Teachers at Ms. Jones’s school believe that she doesn’t “get it,” but she actually does. It’s just that she has chosen the hill on which she’s prepared to die. There is unrelenting pressure from Ms. Jones’s superiors demanding that she get her school taken off the state’s “Needs Improvement” list. Her paycheck is generated in the world of the public school, described so aptly by Parks (1999) as “a place that today, ironically, remains among those most marred by rigidity and the hopelessly misguided cult of efficiency” (p. 272). And now that she sees the dismal report in Stevie’s records regarding his math performance, she has to act.

Ms. Jones directs Stevie, a bit too crisply, to retrieve his belongings out of his cubby. Miss Lacey tries unsuccessfully to blink back her own tears. The other children in the room are silent and sad. Miss Lacey whispers reassurances to Stevie as she tries to peel the boy away from her. Ms. Jones has had it with the tears and the melodrama. The child and this teacher both need to suck it up and get on with it. “Steven, come on. Be a big boy. Mr. Caison is waiting.” She ends up grabbing the pint-sized book bag herself, and tugs at the boy’s arm to haul him away. And here—right here where this scene is freeze-framed—is the central core of this book: the destructive manner in which the alcoholic parent’s quest for the Geographic Cure impacts school-aged Children of Alcoholics, and the systemic inadequacies that I see in education’s response to their needs.
INTRODUCTION: CURRICULUM AND THE LIFE ERRATIC

THE GEOGRAPHIC CURE, CURRICULUM THEORY, AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

A young girl strokes the tight braids
of her hair and thinks she is one memory.
—Tess Galagher, Moon Crossing Bridge

Stevie’s mother Kay, a twice-divorced mother of three, is overwhelmed with troubles that consume her thoughts and fill her glass. When the going gets tough, Kay gets going . . . out of the neighborhood, out of the workplace, out of the life of the latest boyfriend, or all of the above. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) defines this response to life’s problems as the “Geographic Cure”—the repeated attempts of an alcoholic to cure his/her alcoholism with a new beginning (Alcoholics Anonymous [AA], n.d., p. 1). When a drinker on the run is a parent, there are often devastating ramifications for the child. Growing up in the midst of endless change means living with chronic inconsistency, insecurity, and fear. That upbringing—with its inherent vicious cycle of life-altering changes—creates a host of problems for the Children of Alcoholics who are pulled along on the chase. Children of Alcoholics and the Geographic Cure are the subjects of this book; therefore, I choose not to use the familiar “COA” abbreviation, but to spell out the term instead. I spell out the term “Geographic Cure” with each use as well, as I do with other terminology that will appear soon. As a small show of respect for the children who live this life, I recognize the encumbrance of these terms, rather than fly past them. (Abbreviations do appear when they are part of direct quotations.)

The literal version of the Geographic Cure for Children of Alcoholics means being the perennial new kid, who, despite new living quarters, still has the old burdens on his back. Many times there is no second parent around to deflect the emotional (and sometimes physical) blows. As is also typical for Children of Alcoholics, the child has to “cover” for and “parent” the parent, take care of siblings, and make the best of each situation. The Geographic Cure adds another load to the already weighty burden of the Child of an Alcoholic: dealing with life on top of a sinkhole. Making the best of the situation means dealing with new situations, endlessly. New state, new city (or just a new apartment three blocks over), new relative to encroach upon . . . regardless of the particulars, the Geographic Cure means there is always a run toward the new, or at least, the different from this. The children in tow have to continually scramble to keep up, in every respect. The psychological impact of this life upon such children is profound, as is the lack of awareness on the part of many adults who encounter them.

Even if the physical address does not change, the figurative version of this search for a cure is the alcoholic’s sprint toward every new-and-improved plan that pops in his or her head. The alcoholic is sure that a fresh start is all that’s needed, and then he or she will stop drinking, once life is better. “When entire families organize themselves around the behavior of an alcoholic, individuals are continually kept off balance while anticipating drinking behaviors that are entirely unpredictable.”
(O’Rourke, 1990, December, p. 3). The alcoholic often changes jobs or starts and stops working frequently. She continually seeks out new friends, new lovers, new interests. If she’s a parent, she offers little stability to her children, if any. The only certainty that the Child of an Alcoholic can depend upon is that the parent will change horses mid-stream. Flimsy attempts at permanence melt away like ice cubes. Structure dissolves. Children under the care of these parents have no idea what the next day, even the next hour, will bring. An alcoholic mother very often mirrors one of the “borderline mothers” described by Christina Lawson (2004), who writes,

“No” is all that matters to borderlines. Laura’s mother could spank and scold her one minute and hug her next. One time she threatened to get rid of her, packed her suitcase, and later the same day told her she couldn’t live without her. (p. 27)

The ground shifts beneath Children of Alcoholics at every turn. Despite the fact that, as Alice Miller (1990) notes, children need “the respect and protection of adults who take them seriously, love them, and honestly help them to become oriented to the world” (p. 167), little protection is offered to many Children of Alcoholics. Their orientation to the world is skewed. Emotional distress increases each time another family relocation is added to the mix.

Within the Children of Alcoholics population, the faction whom I have named “Geographic Cure Children” comprises a school-aged group who grow up with an alcoholic pulling them wherever the grass is greener. When frequent moves are the norm, such kids are often viewed in schools as “highly mobile” children, but there is much more to the story than transiency alone. They are confused, traumatized children who pocket many terrifying secrets before opening their front door to face the world. While this study devotes some attention to the distressing life of a child who endures a chronically drunk parent at home, my particular focus is on how that dilemma weighs heavily upon the child at school. Considering that, for nearly 10 months of every year of their K-12 lives, students spend more waking hours at school than they do at home, educators are the adults most likely to help Geographic Cure Children make sense of the world. For this reason, the consideration of Geographic Cure Children as students dominates my writing. Children who are surviving a chronically unpredictable life with an alcoholic parent are often as neglected in school as they are at home. The standards-driven, “all of us on the same page,” high-stakes freak-out design of schooling in the 21st century means that the teacher who encounters this child has little time, if any, to explore what she might intuitively feel: The new kid with a permanent record as long as a ’57 Oldsmobile is a special needs child in the most vital sense.

My primary objective is to bring to curriculum studies a new thread of conversation that I have not seen explored within the field: the far-reaching impact of the Geographic Cure, and the understanding of curriculum as erratic text. Inherent in this study are implications for educators, education professors, counselors,
nurses, school social workers, and others who work with Children of Alcoholics. It is important, I think, to start this dialogue within the field of curriculum studies, where, as explained by Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (2002), the emphasis is on understanding, rather than developing, curriculum. In the tradition of the curriculum scholars from whom I’ve learned so much, I hope to encourage educators and community members alike to, as Pinar et al. (2002) phrase it, “reflect more profoundly” (p. 9) and consider what it might mean to work with highly mobile, highly fragile children.

My interest in this area took shape as I worked through the “infinitive form of curriculum” known as currere (Pinar, 2004, p. 4). This study is the result of my own currere: remembering my own Geographic Cure childhood, and imagining a future in which I begin a complicated conversation (playing on Wes Anderson’s (2004) movie title, The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou) about what I’ve termed “the Life Erratic.” In doing so, I gain a deeper understanding of my “submergence in the present,” where I am finding myself mobilized to speak out (Pinar et al., 2002, pp. 4–5). My study is not, however, about proposing new “methods” or “best practices” to address the issues. As John Weaver (2002) points out, methods can “stifle possibilities, even when they are meant to enlighten. This is one of the flaws of the Western world. We covet method and dismiss humans” (p. 169). I chose instead the path of theoretical research rather than suggesting practical curricular choices. Curriculum research involves deepening the knowledge that is pertinent to the making of such choices. I hope to add to that understanding in order to encourage relevant choices in schools. To my knowledge, the impact of the Geographic Cure upon Children of Alcoholics has not been explored in the curriculum studies field. I feel quite fortunate to be able to bring Geographic Cure Children into the light in this field, where there are scholars who care about the child-as-human, as opposed to the child-as-test-score. The issue is widespread, timely, and urgently in need of exploration. There are numerous Geographic Cure Children, like Stevie, in schools now, whose alcoholic parents continually pull the rug out from under them. The numbers (which I address later in this chapter) seem to be climbing every year.

### A MATTER OF BALANCE

The great thing in all education is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.

—William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*

For me, psychoanalysis is the lens through which the Geographic Cure can best be explored. Psychoanalysis blends well with curriculum theory; they have been fused together for decades. As far back as 1935, Anna Freud spoke about this unification while delivering a series of lectures to an audience of teachers in Vienna. She explained what psychoanalysis does for pedagogy, including providing “a criticism of existing
educational methods,” broadening “the teacher’s knowledge of human beings,” and honing the teacher’s “understanding of the complicated relations between the child and the educator” (A. Freud, 1936/1961, p. 106). The relationship between child and teacher would certainly be more meaningful if the teacher understood more about what motivates human actions and reactions to others.

Louise Tyler, wife of Ralph Tyler (who created the “Tyler Rationale”), also illuminated the pedagogical benefits of blending the two fields. This is surprising, since her husband’s work was “the model for the entire behavioral objectives approach that has dominated public school curriculum over the last forty years” (Pagano, 2004, p. 95). Ralph Tyler (1969) equated curriculum with linear steps, measurable goals, and specific evaluation procedures. In 1958, however, Louise Tyler published an article titled, “Psychoanalysis and Curriculum,” in which she stated that “curriculum theory, which is basically and primarily concerned with man and his nature, could profit from an application of some of the most significant insights that have been developed about man” (p. 447). She explained that teachers need to understand transference, because it would be “helpful if the teacher knows that [a student’s] first reactions are not under his control and that he is not responsible for them” (p. 456). Tyler used this example as part of her larger point, which was that, in education, “the concepts of the unconscious, of man’s instinctual nature . . . will be of service. These concepts may not provide solutions, but they may change our understanding of the educative process—if only to deepen our understanding of its complexity” (p. 456).

Several decades later, when Pinar and Grumet (2006) encouraged curriculum scholars to bring in fresh perspectives from outside of education, they included psychoanalysis as one of the fields to be considered. They referred to psychoanalysis as “the bridge between the arts and sciences,” because that particular discipline “combines the specificity and symbolic ambiguity of literature with the generalities and recurring patterns of the social sciences” (p. 112). Marla Morris (2006) explains: “Curriculum theorizing and psychoanalysis are natural bedfellows because both deal with the psyche and the world of the child” (pp. 125–126). Psychoanalytic thinking can contribute to the consideration of education as a process conducted between teacher and student rather than imparted by teacher to student. Deborah Britzman and Alice Pitt (1996) speak from a psychoanalytic perspective when calling for teachers to learn from their students’ learning. They recall Anna Freud’s investigation of learning itself, which “begins with a central concept in psychoanalysis, that of ‘transference,’ or the idea that one’s past unresolved conflicts with others and within the self are projected onto the meanings of new interactions” (Britzman & Pitt, 1996, p. 117). When considering the connections between transference and pedagogy, I am particularly interested in the ways in which teachers respond to children who come into the classroom mid-year, interrupting the existing classroom “vibe.” “Indeed,” Britzman and Pitt continue, “recent writing about pedagogy suggests that transference shapes how teachers respond and listen to students, and how students respond and listen to teachers” (p. 117).
In describing the purpose of psychoanalysis, Adam Phillips (2001b) uses language that echoes Pinar’s explanation of *currere*:

Psychoanalysis, Lacan writes in his Ecrits, “is a question of recollection . . . in which conjectures about the past are balanced against promises of the future.” In this balancing act, to be remembering is to be planning a future. And to call up the future is the project of psychoanalysis. (p. 375)

For conjectures about the past to be made, however, we sometimes have to take trips down some dark, scary memory lanes. For me, there is much still buried in the bushes along those lanes. I still hesitate sometimes to “go there,” especially when the road circles back to family and memories that seem better left under cover. Morris (2001) articulates this feeling precisely:

Memory gets stuck; it becomes lodged in the heart of the psyche. Repressed memory is located somewhere between the remembered and the forgotten; it becomes haunting and torments survivors because it never goes away. Repressed memory somehow gets intraphysically passed down to the next generation. (p. 37)

I learned much about transgenerational trauma from Marla Morris during my doctoral studies. When I was young I cared little about how my mother “Marcia” grew up, even less about how her mother grew up. But now I’m interested in my grandmother’s stifled Cherokee heritage, my grandfather’s fondness for a nip, and my mother’s appearance on the scene as a “change-of-life baby.” Their experiences have woven themselves into my understanding of an alcoholic mother and her melancholia. Drinking was the only remedy my mother knew. McDougall (1985) writes about Sophie, a woman much like my mother, whose alcoholism was “an attempt to take flight from intolerable affective states of anger and abandonment that she could neither contain nor elaborate. She had little tolerance for the mental pain caused by strong negative feelings” (p. 87). That is an apt description of Marcia, and, I would venture, many other alcoholics as well. Feelings of rage and abandonment encircled my mother’s life from the moment she came into the world as an unwanted baby. Those feelings framed her relationships with alcohol, and with my brother and me from the time each of us were born. Like her mother before her, Marcia did not meet Winnicott’s (1989b) criteria for a “good enough mother”:

What is needed . . . by the infant is not some kind of perfection of mothering, but a good enough adaptation, that which is part of a living partnership in which the mother temporarily identifies herself with her infant. To be able to identify herself with her infant to the necessary degree, the mother needs to be protected from external reality so that she may enjoy a period of preoccupation, the baby being the object of her preoccupation. (p. 44)

Unfortunately, where excessive drinking abounds, external reality seeps into the fold each time a new bottle is opened; the infant’s position as the mother’s top
preoccupation is usurped. My father was around when I was an infant, and I was shielded somewhat from Marcia’s depression and pain for nearly four years. However, my dad divorced my mother twice; their remarriage “for the sake of the child” could not be sustained. In the 1960s, judges hearing custody cases most often sided with the mother, and both court battles were no exception. Not realizing that she was pregnant with my brother Geoffrey, my mother signed divorce papers in Washington, D.C. and made a plan to haul me across the country to California. Marcia’s subsequent discovery of her pregnancy did not alter that plan. When my brother arrived a few months after we moved, no father was there to offset, for him, our mother’s depression. There was just an eight-year-old sister who tried to take on the role of buffer.

Via memory work, I make my conjectures about my past. And I can begin to see the bigger picture of how my early life experiences affect my relations with others. Psychoanalytic thinking is a critical piece of the puzzle that is currere: “Curriculum conceived as currere requires not only the study of autobiography, history, and social theory, it requires as well the serious study of psychoanalytic theory” (Pinar, 2004, p. 57). I have strong feelings about the usefulness of such study—I wish that some level of psychoanalytic theory could be required of both pre-service teachers and educators pursuing advanced degrees. However, as Pinar (2004) notes, within the field there is a history of “interest” in psychoanalysis, but that interest was largely squelched “as business thinking and political interests dominated the school curriculum” (p. 57). Yes, of course—the business model for schooling. I know it well, since I worked in a public school in Georgia, a state that wholeheartedly embraces that model. As I see it, this move toward business principles contributes to what Christopher Lasch (1979) calls the “Atrophy of Competence”:

Sweeping social changes, reflected in academic practice, thus underlie the deterioration of the school system and the consequent spread of stupidity. . . . Standards of teaching decline, the victims of poor teaching come to share the experts’ low opinion of their capacities, and the teaching profession complains of unteachable students. (pp. 127–128)

Highly mobile children are, indeed, often considered by teachers to be “unteachable.” This is why it’s important to think psychoanalytically, as Morris (2006) describes: “Thinking psychoanalytically means thinking in terms of relation-to-other. The ways in which one thinks about the other can alter the ways in which one thinks about the self” (p. 72). In my experience, the only consideration of self that is encouraged in most public school arenas is in regard to the question: “How am I doing with standards and test scores?”

Thinking psychoanalytically within a school setting does not mean that the teacher assumes the role of analyst. However, Parsons (2000) tells of one intriguing viewpoint regarding therapy that I think could also apply, in part, to pedagogical relationships. Describing therapy as “a symmetrical encounter between two individuals,” Parsons adds, “although the focus is on helping one of them, this does not mean the other has to be a different, special sort of person” (p. 11). Parsons writes
that therapy (and, I would add, teaching) “depends on ordinary human qualities like warmth, tact, and emotional sensitivity, and the therapist is simply someone with experience” who is trying to help someone else (p. 11). Teachers who can convey genuine warmth and concern for students stand a better chance of initiating and sustaining the complicated conversations about violence, marginalization, and hate that need to take place in classrooms, as well as discussions about drugs and their impact on families.

The notion of care seems to be absent in the current wave of school improvement efforts, which hammer down so hard on teachers that they literally don’t have time to build relationships. Cloninger (2008) asks:

[H]ow does the teacher’s internal state affect the culture in the classroom? What would a culture in the classroom look like if the teacher focused on loving students? The obvious and recurrent criticism regarding the role of love and empathy in the classroom is that such ideas are “touchy-feely,” “soft,” or “overly-sensitive.” Indeed the criticism is not only misguided but naïve, for it is precisely such an approach that is missing from so many learning environments across the country. (p. 196)

Educators rarely have the luxury of time on their side, with the pressures to keep up with every new initiative, strategy, and requirement (such as staying on the same page as their grade or subject-level colleagues). Therefore, it is incredibly difficult to focus on loving their students. States and school districts will not leave teachers alone for a minute. They keep “tinkering,” with the curriculum, as Noddings (1992, p. 3) describes. It’s the “tinkering” that drives teachers crazy, because not a year goes by without the implementation of another set of new initiatives. Workshops and trainings abound, drilling the newest objectives, standards, pacing guides, and discipline strategies into teachers’ skulls. Every year!

I agree with Noddings’ (1992) contention that the primary goal of schools should be to “promote the growth of students as healthy, competent, moral people. . . . We cannot ignore our children—their purposes, anxieties, and relationships—in the service of making them more competent in academic skills” (p. 10). For those Geographic Cure Children whose anxieties are well hidden, healthy growth and academic competency are not always visible on the horizon. If only there were time in the day to foster a sense of community in the classroom, and to help children learn how to care, and to be cared for. What really happens is that if it’s not one person tinkering with the curriculum, it’s another—or rather, countless others. Everyone is searching for The Next Big Thing in education, and, in the midst of it all, the child disappears. It’s defeating enough for a Child of an Alcoholic to find a profound absence of caring at home, yet schools are often just as devoid of care. Children should not have to “earn” care, but in many cases that’s exactly what happens. David Purpel (2003) lays out this fact starkly:

Schools are one of those places where dignity is rationed and affirmation has to be earned every day, where students have to struggle to be accepted and
valued, and where teachers and administrators dole out varying degrees of love, acceptance, and approval. Underneath all these negotiations and transactions is the fundamental message, however unspoken, that some people are better than others and that it is proper to devise ways to determine who is better and what the consequences are to be. (p. x)

No child should have to struggle to be accepted by teachers. Often struggling for any kind of positive connection at home, kids should find a safe haven in schools, where love and acceptance should abound. The real story, of course, is that compassion is an abstract word on the “character trait of the month” list. If kids who attend the same school all year have a tough time struggling for acceptance, imagine the uphill battle ahead of the child who arrives at his or her third school of the year.

Rebecca Martusewicz (2001) puts forth an image that sticks with me: “We can only move toward the good by recognizing and being awake to suffering, by leaning into it, and this requires considering others’ needs” (p. 106). This book is ultimately a call to action for educators to lean into and meaningfully reflect on the anguish of transient children whose only constant is that a parent gets drunk every night. School may well be the only venue where a child in distress might be nurtured. Ted Aoki (2005) uses the term “nurture” in many of his essays, while writing about trusting our instincts, insights, and intuition, telling us that “a truly educated person speaks and acts from a deep sense of humility,” and that “to be educated is to be ever open to the call of what it is to be deeply human, and heeding the call to walk with others in life’s ventures” (p. 365). If such truly educated people were the policy makers in education, maybe we’d finally see the notion of care taken seriously.

When children are not cared for, they also are not learning how to care. None of us who teach children, or who prepare others to do so, should assume that all children learn to care at home. Thomas Cottle (2004) writes,

Some children . . . are not exposed to the love curriculum. They never know about love. These are the psychological if not literal latchkey children, the ones home alone even when all sorts of people may be around. (p. 46)

I am quite ashamed to admit that decades ago I was one of those teachers who insisted that whatever was going on at home should be checked at the door. It took a couple of years before I came to fully understand that there were kids sitting in my classes who, at home, were devalued at best—or worse, truly unloved. Those problems cannot be neatly tucked away before the school day begins. Yet when I was first employed as a teacher, my position was that my students were not to even think about utilizing problems at home as an excuse for anything, whether implicitly or outright. After a while it finally dawned on me that I was teaching the way I was taught, with only a very few exceptions. I was expecting of those children what was expected of me, forgetting all about the part where leaving problems at the door was impossible.
INTRODUCTION: CURRICULUM AND THE LIFE ERRATIC

I’ve been on both sides of the street: first as a Geographic Cure Child, and then as a teacher who had to “deal with” transient children. This is why, as part of the process of currere, I employ an autobiographical slant in this book. I can best anchor a theoretical exploration of the Geographic Cure in, as Mary Doll (2000) phrases it, “curriculum’s connection to lived experience” (p. xiii). During my doctoral program, I realized that in fact I could only write effectively about a topic that seeped out of my pores. Autobiography is at the core of currere; self-knowledge is enhanced by autobiographical writing. Paula Salvio (2006), who extensively studied the life and mental illness of poet and teacher Ann Sexton, discusses Sexton’s narratives in which she recalled teaching college students about her particular writing process. Salvio puts forward the idea that Sexton’s pedagogical narratives about writing “combine to form a narrative of reparation that is used to recognize and work through ambivalent relationships with the lost object, in this case a ‘safe and secure home’” (p. 84). Such is the “lost object” for children of the Geographic Cure—there is little in their childhoods that would be synonymous with safe and secure. Salvio adds, “In exploring the possibility of reparation in writing and teaching, I consider the project of cultivating a ‘true self,’ for women who, like Sexton, have experienced . . . subtle, ‘as yet unnamed’ traumas” (p. 67). I grew up in a cloud of traumas, some named, some most assuredly not named, and even though I’m 58 years old, it seems to me that my “true self” is still germinating.

When I was young I secretly wrote in a diary, on a regular basis, about trauma in my life. My plan was to have an account, on paper, of what my existence was like, so that when I became a parent, I would remember how not to behave. However, there is much more to the process of currere than naming the hurt. Pinar et al. (2002) state, “Autobiography is considerably more than the ‘interpretation of lived experience’ . . . [it] is inextricably social and political” (p. 546). During those teen years, my expectation was that once I became an adult, I would get over the humiliating aspects of my story and tell the world what it was like to live a transitory life driven by alcohol-soaked decisions made on the fly. It seems to me now that my topic found me while I was writing in that diary. Pinar and Grumet (2006) state:

The autobiographical stories that currere tells appear in the first narration to bear the quality of truth; after all, they are the subject’s own statement about his experience. In the telling the subject gains some active mastery over what he may have experienced passively, an impulse Freud recognized common both to child’s play and to the artist’s creativity. The purpose of these stories is not, however, to lull the narrator and his audience into the neat resolution of happy endings. . . . Once the entries are recorded, they are read to reveal what other actions, responses, or interpretations might have been available to the narrator. (pp. 133–134)

As an adult, to look at what else might have been done or said is to be reflective and critical at the same time. There were a few years of woefully inept teaching behind me before I learned from an older teacher the benefits of reflection. Now,
when I mentor new teachers, I encourage reflective thinking and writing. It startles them, however, when I tell them I don’t need to see their reflections. I just want to inspire the process of looking back in order to look ahead. Madeleine Grumet (2004) explains why this is so critical: “The teacher who can be the critic of her own assumptions can welcome the diversity of her students’ experiences without defensiveness and denial” (p. 243). I urgently wish that in schools there would be far more recognition and welcoming of transient students’ experiences, and far less thinly masked exasperation at having to “deal” with a new child mid-year. For that to happen, teachers would need to be willing to truthfully reflect upon their own feelings about what it means to embrace the child who disrupts the “community of the classroom.” What an eye-opener it was for me to realize, early in my teaching career, that I was transferring all of my baggage about being the new kid years ago to the actual new kids who were brought to me in December, or, even worse, March.

Patrick Slattery (2006) remarks that as he works with pre-service teachers, he reflects upon his own (Tyler-dominated) undergraduate teacher training. Slattery explains that he continually calls to mind his own past experiences as he chooses textbooks, plans learning experiences, and decides what films to show and which guest speakers to invite. Looking back, looking inward, before moving forward and outward, is currere. Without question, my life under the influence of the Geographic Cure shapes who I am. However, what drives this project is the fact that I often recognized the impact of that Cure on children during the 28 years that I taught in the public school system. And while my research has shown me that problems related to highly mobile or transient students are gaining more and more attention as topical, global issues, the connection between student mobility and parental alcoholism is only rarely recognized.

WISDOM FIGURES

Fire ants had taken over the yard; their venomous mounds were like land mines, and we were careful to dodge them. The gun was never found. Daddy must have hidden it after the fight. We were looking for something that wasn’t there—and running from what was. Just like Mama and Daddy.

—Lauretta Hannon, *The Cracker Queen: A Memoir of a Jagged, Joyful Life*

The Consul dropped his eyes at last. How many bottles since then? In how many glasses, how many bottles had he hidden himself, since then alone?

—Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*

This book includes my own recollections about life with an alcoholic parent who frequently consulted Rand(om) McNally before plotting our next move. However, I also weave in stories from juvenile and adult fiction that portray life with a drunken parent. Mary Doll (2000), who encourages her readers to consider fiction a primary tool with which to uncover truth, asks, “Can that which is not fact (fiction, poesis)
provide as much insight into facts that stare us in the face?” (p. xvii). Literature is an integral component of a thorough exploration of the Geographic Cure. School personnel, counselors, and education professors could gain much insight by reading stories that provide a wide-open window onto the world of Children of Alcoholics. The books I discuss and others of a similar nature should, in my opinion, be part of teacher preparation requirements, as well as included in classroom collections of novels to be shared. With educators in mind I also draw upon memoirs of contemporary Adult Children of Alcoholics who describe their own erratic childhoods—particularly Jeanette Walls (The Glass Castle, 2005) and Michael Keith (The Next Better Place, 2004), both of whom, as children, lived life on the run with a drunk parent. These two particular books contribute, with precision and nuance, a painfully accurate description of life as a Geographic Cure Child.

While conducting research for my project, I was reminded of a novel that I read as a teenager, one which startled me with its grim frankness about alcoholism: Émile Zola’s L’Assommoir (1877/2007). The novel came back to me the minute I read the opening of Walls’ 2005 book, The Glass Castle, which begins with a passage about Walls riding (as an adult) past a dumpster in which her mother was scrounging for food. When I read that description, Zola’s character Gervaise, a 19th-century dumpster diver, flashed back into my mind. Until I was 16 years old, I was not aware of literary connections to my home life. I read L’Assommoir in my junior year of high school, when the school counselor, Mr. Brown, enrolled me (the new kid who could read well) into an independent study course for English. The English teacher, Mr. Withers, gave me a list of books to check out from the library, but also handed me a couple of his own copies of novels that were not on the list. L’Assommoir was one of those novels; I devoured it whole. I discovered that my mother was much like Gervaise and her husband Coupeau, who reassured themselves about their own drinking by contending that only hypocrites say they never drink. Zola’s characters were also certain that wine was harmless, and in fact healthy, and that wine would not make people drunk. At one point in her life my mother, six months out of a 28-day residential rehab program, began drinking wine with that very same justification. In her mind, the fact that she never returned to bourbon meant she was successfully “dry.” Nine or ten gallons of Gallo per week didn’t count. Today I wonder if Mr. Brown, who had already encountered my mother when she registered me for school, spoke with Mr. Withers before I began that class. Both the counselor and the teacher helped me make sense of my world on several occasions during my time at that school. Mr. Withers required me to write response papers for each book. In responding to Zola’s novel, I wrote volumes.

While Zola’s Coupeau and Gervaise were destroying themselves physically and emotionally with their alcoholism, their daughter Nana turned to prostitution as a coping mechanism. In my own case, I clung to books. Fiction and poetry were my floating bridges—they helped me get across each raging current. A handful of books (Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868/1947), first and foremost) were my most sacred treasures, stashed in a box during each move until we landed at the
next arbitrary spot. Once unpacked, those friends stood ready to offer not only a
means of escape, but advice on growing-up matters that I found in no other source.
For example, I learned right along with Amy in *Little Women* about the perils of
selfishness, and from her mother, “Marmee,” I discovered how important it is to help
people in need. I had few academic achievements, and was totally inept in math, but
I excelled in reading from the time I was four. This thrilled a teacher here or there,
prompting a few to give me books to keep. Having my “nose in a book” at home
often got me in trouble, after about the second or third drink for Marcia. My mother
might have been drunk, but she wasn’t stupid. She knew that books were my escape
routes. Therefore, even though she, when sober, loved to read, it angered her to see
me engrossed in someone else’s story.

How very fortunate for me that reading allowed me the emotional hiding place
I needed. However, it would have been exceedingly helpful for me to have read
about other children in my peculiar predicament. I would have benefitted greatly
from learning how my fictional contemporaries were dealing with their own parental
alcoholism issues. Doll (2000) writes, “My belief is that theory needs the wisdom
of writers [who are] the closest our culture can come to wisdom figures” (p. xviii). I
completely agree. I could have used more wisdom figures, earlier on.

A contemporary juvenile novel that was not around when I was a middle-school
child, but which could be a huge help to young Children of Alcoholics today, is a book
titled, *I Almost Love You, Eddie Clegg*, by Audrey Supplee (2004). This novel is a
first-person account of life with a drunken parent, written from the viewpoint of Asa, a
13-year-old girl. The book chronicles the backsliding of Asa’s stepfather, Eddie, who
falls off the wagon (again) after losing his job. In one chapter, Asa is told by her stepdad
to retrieve a bottle of vodka that he has hidden the back of her closet. The seal is
broken; the bottle is not full. Eddie explains to Asa the purpose of asking for the bottle:

“I probably won’t drink it anyway. Just wanted to look at it. Kind of a test,
you know? A pop quiz. To prove I can resist it.” He looked up again. “See?
Willpower.”

I waited for a silent count of twenty. “Want me to put it back now?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Leave it.” He swivelled back to his computer. (Supplee,
2004, p. 64)

In this novel Asa covers for Eddie and begins telling a string of lies, in order
to keep peace in the household, but also in order to manipulate Eddie into telling
a few lies for her in return. The themes of secrets, lies, and disappointments run
thick and fast through this little book. Children who live through days similar to
Asa’s would find, in effect, a friend who understands. If teachers read the book,
they might understand that secret-keeping and dystopic thinking constitute a crucial
skill set—survival mechanisms—for Children of Alcoholics. “Dystopia is critical of
feel burned many times over by hope, and Asa is no exception. Supplee’s novel provides a dead-on illustration of parental alcoholism, and there are other novels and memoirs that offer true glimpses into the harrowing experience of being a Child of an Alcoholic. This study is fortified with such literary glimpses, in order to provide a space for fiction and memoir to tell the truth.

I make no presumption that the general subject of Children of Alcoholics is anything new. The research on parental alcoholism is vast. Within the fields of medicine, sociology, psychiatry, and psychology alone, there is well over a century of research to be found about this particular addiction and its effect upon the children of those who are addicted. Yet there is not much work that specifically addresses the topic of school-aged Children of Alcoholics whose parents habitually relocate, nor the consideration of how those chronic moves affect the children’s experiences at school. Additionally, I have not found any research regarding spaces where curriculum theory and the Geographic Cure intersect. And yet, there is much to be explored about that intersection within our field. My hope is that I’m only beginning the conversation about what it means for a child to live in manic scramble mode at home, yet be expected to perform well at school. It is in the field of curriculum theory that perspective is recognized as a contributing research tool. Alice Pitt (2003) explains:

Research that explores in greater depth the lived experiences of groups of people historically marginalized within education in order to affect educational policy, practices, and institutional structures seeks to transform knowledge about such groups by eliciting, directly or indirectly, their perspectives. Here meaning is made from experience. (pp. 4–5)

Therefore, I use a few of my own lived experiences and the real or fictional experiences of other Children of Alcoholics to provide a greater depth of understanding of a child’s life ruled by pandemonium and instability at home. Additionally, I assert that pandemonium (read: defensiveness against low school performance as perceived by educational powers-that-be) rules children’s lives at school as well. Martha Whitaker (2006) explains:

Abusive curriculum stands in the way of well-intentioned teachers moving toward the challenging yet invigorating goal of making spaces for living a dream of community and social justice. . . . Like the emotional abuser described in psychological tomes, a curriculum that is exclusive and technical, grounded in theories of Western rationality, develops from intense insecurity and the need to control. The greater the sense of chaos and threat to the power of the status quo, the more tightly curriculum has been crafted. (p. 42)

Unfortunately, Geographic Cure Children are among the kids most vulnerable to this type of teacher-controlling school “reform.” Tight control is what drove Ms. Jones to pry Stevie away from the teacher who could best help him grow.
Dad is back. I mean, he called. He hasn’t been in touch with us in weeks. I really thought he was gone forever. I wish he WERE gone forever. I like it so much better when he’s out of our lives.

—Paula Danziger and Ann M. Martin,
Snail Mail No More

Geographic Cure Children do not exactly fall into our laps pre-identified, and parents most certainly do not bring their alcoholism to the attention of school staff. Since “most ‘problem drinkers,’ including those with children, do not seek professional help” (Cuijpers, 2005, p. 446), the task of estimating even a general number of Children of Alcoholics is a difficult process. Most current estimates put the number of Children of Alcoholics at 29 million, with 11 million under 18 years old (Cuijpers, 2005; Grant, 2000; NACOA, n.d.). It takes a caring, intuitive adult to open up possibilities for such children to identify themselves and seek help. Yet if Children of Alcoholics move in and out of schools frequently, the likelihood of the kids seeking help decreases even more.

A highly mobile child’s permanent record—or lack of one altogether—tells a story. The U.S. Census Bureau (2011) reports that in just one year, from 2009–2010, 37.5 million people in the U.S. moved from one household location to another. Of those 37.5 million, 69.3% moved within the same county, 16.7% moved to a different county within the same state, and 11.5% moved to a different state. The remaining 2.5% moved abroad. The top two reasons given for moving were “housing” (43.7%) and “family concerns” (30.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). There are no statistics from the Census Bureau on how many “family concern” moves were driven by spontaneous decisions of inebriated parents. However, from my own experience and from what I have observed during nearly 30 years in education, I feel that it’s safe to say that alcohol could have fueled some of those “family concerns.” When moving becomes a pattern, rather than an isolated or occasional instance, the children in those families have a very tough time. The increasing number of transient school-aged children has become the focus of research over the last two decades:

As the problems and opportunities that accompany moving have become more apparent, attention has broadened from individuals who initiate moves to the spouses and children who accompany them. . . . A crucial way in which these changes are played out over time involves the educational transitions and trajectories of the children of families that move. (Hagan, MacMillan, & Wheaton, 1996, June, p. 369)

Family relocations can be stressful for children even when alcohol is not a factor. Just the “new kid” dynamic alone can overwhelm a child. Winnicott (2004) tells us that “cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play” (p. 100), but because play is warped by both the volatility of the drunk parent and the isolation

16
of the child, cultural experience is stilted. Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, and Nessim (1993) describe the traumatic impact that moving has upon children:

A family move disrupts the routines, relationships, and attachments that define the child’s world. Almost everything outside the family that is familiar is lost and changed. Even a short move, which may allow the parents to maintain their network of supports and relationships, may force the child to change schools and friends. Thus, the child has to develop new friendships and adjust to a new curriculum and new teachers. A family move is especially stressful if it is not wanted or if the family has limited resources to deal with the move. (p. 1337)

When the adult making the decision to move also happens to be an alcoholic, the move is indeed quite likely to be “not wanted” and irrational. Additionally, the phrase “limited resources” takes on an even deeper meaning when there is only one parent, and that one parent is not making decisions with the best interests of the child in mind. Time, attention, and love are rare commodities. For children who lack these resources already, sporadic moves are earth shattering. This interweaving of family mobility and parental alcoholism produces the singular set of Children of Alcoholics who are Geographic Cure Children.

Certainly, professionals in the fields of education, school counseling, school nursing, social work, and community action groups are aware that parental alcoholism affects children. However, I am asserting that most of those professionals do not fully understand the fearful, confusing, shaky-ground life of Geographic Cure Children. Perhaps readers of this book who are likely to encounter Geographic Cure Children might discover in themselves a desire to know more about this phenomenon. Educators and others who work with children may not have read the most recent best-selling memoir of an Adult Child of an Alcoholic. They may, in fact, have only a vague notion of what Children of Alcoholics in general go through, and how many of those children’s basic needs are not being met. Understanding would be even more difficult when, for such children who are also transient students, interactions with adults outside the boundaries of immediate family are sparse and superficial. When interactions with adults occur, the family secret remains intact, guarded at all costs. This is why I hope to add to an understanding of such children in peril. My expectation is that I may find readers who become passionate about helping a Geographic Cure Child imagine his/her own future, beyond the immediate turmoil. Maxine Greene (2001) contends that imagination should be “central in education and scholarship. Imagination is the capacity to posit alternative realities. It makes possible the creation of ‘as if’ perspectives” (p. 65). Geographic Cure Children need educators who can help them develop such perspectives.

This is why I stand alongside Ted Aoki (2005) against, as he termed it, “a curricular demand for sameness [that] may diminish and extinguish the salience of the lived situation of people in classrooms” (p. 362). The greatest example that I see of this “sameness” stems from school systems’ alarm over the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which impacts transient children most
of all. While immersed in objectives and standards, with one eye always on the
testing calendar, many schools consider the mid-year newcomer as a nuisance, an
intruder even, and a test-average-buster. Few care one whit about that new child’s
lived experiences—especially when the school’s “Needs Improvement” alert level
is on red. What the policy makers seem to forget, as they push states into the much-
maligned newest versions of the Adequate Yearly Progress and Learning Objective
feeding frenzy, is that children are not going to learn until they feel the importance
of learning intrinsically. Greene (2009) writes:

I have suggested that the individual, in our case the student, will only be in
a position to learn when he is committed to act upon his world. . . . He may
be conditioned; he may be trained. He may even have some rote memory of
certain elements of the curriculum; but no matter how well devised is that
curriculum, no matter how well adapted to the stages of his growth, learning
. . . will not occur. (p. 164)

While many education professionals are quite familiar with the difficulties of
helping a child find that commitment to his/her own learning, I wonder how many
can imagine what it must be like for a child who is uprooted every time he begins to
take an interest in his world. For children who are perpetually new to a class, their
world is first and foremost about survival and adjustment during their dreaded “first
days of school,” which repeat like a stuck needle on a vinyl record album. When they
do remain in one place for some length of time, such children are often extremely
wary of trusting anyone, including themselves. There are Geographic Cure Children
whom I either personally know, or whose memoirs I’ve read, who did find within
themselves the desire to engage in the learning process. In those cases, as in my own,
there was an adult along the way who valued them, and who helped them decide to
trust that their world would eventually improve. One enlightened adult, somewhere
along the way . . . it sounds pedestrian, but it is the single best thing that can happen
to a Geographic Cure Child. Not that anyone needs to try to be a hero for these
children. A significant start for these kids would be to simply find a perceptive adult
who does not seem clueless, or helpless, in considering how best to interact with
them. If Geographic Cure Children can imagine life beyond the passed-out parent,
and can see value in taking a risk and investing themselves in their own learning,
they can take those commodities with them on the road. In targeting educators,
school counselors, school nurses, and community health workers, as well as those
who help such professionals prepare for their fields, I hope to increase awareness of
how the Geographic Cure impacts school-aged children, as well as the adults with
whom they come into contact—many of whom feel ill-equipped to help.

As part of my effort to deepen the understanding of the lived experience of
Geographic Cure Children, I have woven “insets” into the beginnings of Chapters
1 through 5 and the end of Chapter 6. These narrative vignettes illustrate the Life
Erratic, portraying an aspect of life with a parent who chronically searches, as the
title of Michael Keith’s book (2004) puts it, for “the next better place.” Stevie, whose
INTRODUCTION: CURRICULUM AND THE LIFE ERRATIC

story began this introductory chapter, is a composite of several children who attended the schools in which I taught. The insets in Chapters 2 through 5 are autobiographical. In Chapter 6, the inset appears at the end, rather than the beginning, bringing Stevie back into view. This last vignette appears at the end for a specific purpose: While I use my own personal accounts to illuminate life on the road with my alcoholic mother, Stevie opens and closes this book as my figurative call to action. His story is now, not decades ago. He and countless more children who are living at the mercy of the Geographic Cure need our attention today.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS 2 THROUGH 6

Chapter 2, “The Confounded Life of an 80-Proof Home,” surveys the history of substance abuse and the tradition of alcohol use/abuse in America, before narrowing the focus to parental alcoholism specifically. While homing in on alcohol, my intention is neither to discount the rest of the substance-abusing world (illegal drug users, prescription drug abusers) nor suggest that alcohol is not a drug. Children are being raised in mercurial conditions by parents who are addicted to all manner of chemicals, and in many respects my own use of the term “Children of Alcoholics” can be considered a shortened phrase for “children of alcoholics and other substance-abusing parents.” However, the downhill slide of a heroin or crack addict is often quicker and more noticeable to outsiders than that of the alcoholic. In most cases a person addicted to “hard” drugs cannot remain under the public radar for as long as someone who “drinks too much.” There are distinctions in the circumstance of a child whose parent consumes nothing illegal, and whose drug of choice is woven thickly through the fabric of modern society and is available in grocery stores. Thus, Chapter 2 lays bare the ensuing trauma of children who are secretly subjected to what I’ve termed “fermented parenting,” wherein turmoil and unpredictability rule the day.

In Chapter 3, “The Unhinged Lives of Children on the Move,” I set aside parental alcoholism temporarily to investigate family mobility and its impact upon school-aged children. The focus here is on the bleaker side of family relocation. Families with single parents or grandparents are more likely to move than families headed by two parents (Wood et al., 1993), and, for those children, the lack of relationships hits especially hard. Then, on top of everything else, school comes into play. When a child is brought to a new teacher mid-year, the teacher may either deliver a defeating blow (“Oh great. I’ll have to figure out where to put you.”), or she can be receptive and welcoming to the child for whatever short period of time they share. Chapter 3 considers the point of view of schools, for which the most common “student mobility problems” include difficulty in obtaining student records and teacher attitudes about having a new student thrust upon them at random points in a school year (Bainbridge, 2003; Million, 2000; Knight, Vail-Smith, & Barnes, 1992). Therefore Chapter 3 examines not just the manner in which mobility impacts the child’s school experience, but also the ways in which mobile children impact schools.
In Chapter 4, “Drinking and Driving (Away),” I tease out the unique and frightening issues facing children who inhabit the “and”: They are subjected to both fermented parenting and multiple relocations (at the whim of the alcoholic parent). The convergence of these two lines becomes my focal point. This chapter takes a close look at the emotional distress of children who cannot build a sense of identity of their own, yet who must help the alcoholic parents protect theirs. My contention is that these children’s trauma stems not just from the clank of empty bottles alone, nor from frequent relocations alone, but from the powerfully destructive merger of the two. Hall and Webster (2007) write, “The child who deals with additional major stressors beyond alcoholism in the home of origin depletes his/her coping resources even further” (p. 426). To bear the brunt of another new neighborhood, new school, and new level of secrecy is to endure “additional stressors” of mammoth proportions. This is why I contend that this subgroup of Geographic Cure Children are a distinctive, yet largely unrecognized group of fragile children who need our time and attention.

Chapter 5, “Hold Still,” takes a side trip down a highway on which I never expected to travel. It is in this chapter that I discuss the lived experience of being derailed by a catastrophic event—cancer—while deep in the middle of writing this book. During the time that I was writing about my illness, I came to call Chapter 5 “the cancer chapter,” but in reality it is an account of self-discovery that created an entirely different dimension to my examination of the Geographic Cure. It became evident to me, to a much fuller extent than I’d realized BC (before cancer), that my own “learned behavior” of Geographic Cure-Seeking is very much still entrenched in my adult self. This realization forced me to take a second look at my commonalities with cure-seekers in education who seem to be changing everything for the sake of change alone.

Chapter 6, “The Geographic Cure Writ Large,” emphasizes that supporting the Geographic Cure Child is uniquely problematic; it’s difficult to help a child who is flung into a class mid-year and then hauled back out again soon after. My hope is that an increased understanding of the problem among educators may lead to some complicated but necessary conversations about how we relate to such children during the time we have with them. I also assert that just as the Geographic Cure Child is forced to live the Life Erratic at home, where a cure-seeking parent is calling the shots, many teachers are forced to work the Life Erratic because cure-seeking “experts” are calling the shots. I discuss the similarity that I’ve observed between the reactions of Geographic Cure Children—mistrust, cynicism, disgust at the fake happy voice—and the reactions of teachers who are pulled along in the chase for educational cures. Like Ms. Jones, who wants Stevie and Miss Lacey to suck it up and get on with it, it seems to me that policy makers want educators to do just the same. How frustrating, when—just like Children of Alcoholics—what many teachers need most is to be able to “stay put” for a while.