Not All Who Wander are Lost: Navigating Teacher Literacy Education in a Pandemic

By Mona Beth Zignego
Cooperative Education Service Agency
& Kathleen Sellers
Miami University

Introductions and Questions for the Present

Literacy education requires teacher knowledge and experience of literacy learning and can be enhanced when in-service teachers receive ongoing training by literacy experts (Honeyford & Watt, 2018). Such training has been incorporated into the practice of many schools and school districts across the U.S. and in recent years has even been mandated by education policy in some states (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020). Like with so many educational endeavors, however, the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated many and sudden changes in literacy education practice. This essay shares our story, as one teacher literacy educator and her critical friend (Schuck & Russell, 2005), as we negotiated our teaching practice during the pandemic.

Though we initiated our research collaboration through a mutual interest in self-study and intended at the start of our writing to present our experience as a journey through *currere* (Pinar, 2004), the act of writing our story took us through and beyond *currere* to auto- and ultimately duo-ethnography. As Hasebe-Ludt, et al. (2009) explain, "if curriculum is *currere*, then autobiography is the theorizing of *currere*" (p. 31). As we reviewed more than a year of notes, artifacts, and memos from our self-study work in preparation for writing and examined this data in light of our personal educational histories and experiences, we found autoethnography helped us to see ourselves "more clearly … in relation to [our] circumstances, past and present, and to understand those relationships and their implications more deeply" (Hasebe-Ludt, 2009, p. 31). Yet, once we began to write, we realized that just as we had conversed honestly throughout our collaboration together, we needed to write our story as a conversation. Gómez (2013) explains that "duoethnography is a scholarly conversation. The topic is viewed through the researcher's eyes and communicated via a written dialogue" (p. 474). Likewise, to communicate our story accurately, we needed to write duoethnographically, attending to our respective experiences of regression, progression, and analysis in order to arrive at a collective synthesis (Pinar, 2004). Accordingly, in this essay we present our story by alternating voice between Mona and Kathleen, before ultimately joining together into one sythetical voice. Not only does this choice mirror our experience of critical friendship and *currere* during the COVID pandemic, it models the kind of reflective, caring practice that we hope all educators, and literacy educators in a particular way, might embody.

Mona

I am a teacher literacy educator and facilitate professional development learning in literacy for in-service teachers. I believe that teaching and learning should occur in a dynamic, interactive environment. Throughout my decades of teaching, I have relied heavily on human interactions, with verbal and visual feedback from participants, to inform my teaching practice.

My work changed fundamentally during the COVID pandemic, when my instruction, and that of the teachers I taught, moved online. This prompted intense self-doubt and professional questioning. My previous experiences seemed irrelevant to my new work reality, and that distinctive present shifted and altered as the pandemic raged on.

KATHLEEN

The pandemic left me unsure of my identity. When I met Mona, during a virtual conference of self-study researchers in the summer of 2020, I was, first and foremost, a Catholic high school teacher. I was entering my fifth year teaching, that threshold beyond which nearly half of American teachers never pass (Will, 2018). With the pandemic going strong, I knew a hard school year lay ahead, but I was resolved to cross that threshold in the classroom, just as I was resolved to continue, on schedule, my graduate studies in educational leadership, which had begun two years earlier. This is one key reason I was interested in collaborating with Mona. Though our areas of practice varied greatly, we were both committed to improving our respective teaching practice and sought a critical friend with whom we could share the journey. The pandemic, though, presented a fork in my path. Over the course of our first year of collaboration, my working conditions declined drastically, prompting me to leave my high school and pursue my doctorate full time. While this was my choice, and the right one, it still left me feeling unsure of myself. I could no longer say, "I'm a teacher," and the loss of that identity shaped the way I engaged as a student and critical friend.

MONA AND KATHLEEN

We began working together during a tenuous time for us both, far more so than we could have anticipated when we initiated our collaboration. Despite this uncertainty, we persisted in our work together, and that constancy created an anchor in the storm. In time, our collaboration grew into a real friendship, which revealed the depths to which care impacted our everyday practice as educators.

The Self in the Present

MONA

Currere asks us to examine the self in relation to the understandings derived from an educational experience (Pinar, 2004). Pre-pandemic, I was a seasoned classroom K4-12 teacher of 28 years. After decades in the classroom, I completed my doctorate in the fall of 2019 and, a few months later, started a new position as a TLE (teacher literacy educator). As a TLE, I taught in-service educators how to teach reading. I identified as a TLE and as an educator who was grounded and well-prepared to work in schools to troubleshoot, support, coach, analyze data, and provide comprehensive literacy support to in-service teachers in whatever way was needed. Then, the pandemic hit.

Overnight, my practice changed drastically. Teacher workshops and coaching sessions moved online, requiring I translate a lifetime of face-to-face teaching materials into a virtual delivery format, using digital platforms, skills, and technologies with which I was wholly unfamiliar. Schools' and teachers' learning needs changed too. Teachers were stressed in ways I'd never seen and focused on concerns besides literacy education. They began to raise questions about how to facilitate online, concurrent, and hybrid classes, even when the sessions were not about those topics. Teaching as I knew it was gone, yet I still expected myself to provide the same level of expertise in caring for and supporting in-service teachers.

This was complicated by the behaviors of in-service teachers I worked with. Many in-service teachers who complained about their students turning their cameras off and muting their microphones attended my virtual trainings with cameras off and microphones muted. I empathized with their frustration as I was unable to hear or see my online participants. I couldn't gather visual or auditory feedback to inform my next teaching moves or to connect with the in-service teachers as I once had. I was left feeling isolated, inept, and ultimately questioning my ability to facilitate learning for in-service teachers.

Kathleen

I was teaching full time during the first eight months of the pandemic. I experienced the overnight shift from in-person to virtual instruction. And like teachers everywhere, I found the transition jarring. What kinds of technology existed to facilitate learning virtually? How did the student-user experience vary from the teacher-user experience? What if they couldn't log in to class? What if they logged in but kept their cameras off? Were they even there? Many of these concerns became easier to manage with practice, but they continued to surface in the fall of 2020, when I began in fully-virtual instruction.

The Remembrances of the Past

Mona

To make sense of the present and improve our future practice, we often return to our past (Pinar, 1978, 2004). My elementary school experiences were unique. I attended a small, one room, ultra-conservative Catholic school. There was one teacher for first through eighth grade. The structure was hierarchical. It was a top-down, authoritarian, lecture-listen format with few, if any, interactions between me and the teacher. I was the only student in my grade, and I essentially taught myself through reading content and responding to tasks on worksheets.

This learning experience taught me that I needed to bring resources, critical thinking, and interactive teaching and learning experiences to my students and participants of all ages. Over the years, I have worked diligently to become a dynamic, responsive, reflective practitioner, and I became proficient at soliciting feedback from my participants, through their verbal and written responses, body language, and facial expressions. Or at least, so I thought. I had collected a lifetime of supplemental teaching materials, manipulatives, games, and activities created for face-to-face instruction.

Kathleen

I am the product of 18 consecutive years of Catholic education. I attended a thriving parochial school with a community of teachers that made me feel safe and seen. Each year felt like a new adventure with a new set of grade level teachers. Some were more traditional educators than others, but across grades and teachers, character was valued.

From my earliest years at the school, I remember our teachers celebrating our acts of kindness and compassion. Sister Marcia, my second grade teacher, was the most explicit. "Even if someone is mean to you, you have to kill them with kindness," she advised, and whenever she saw us doing a kind deed, she would send us to a fancy spiral-shaped jar, into which we got to deposit a kernel of popcorn (sometimes two or three if we were really excellent). Likewise, if we were unkind, we were instructed to remove kernels from the jar. The peer pressure this practice fostered was intense but effective. When the jar was full, we celebrated with a "popcorn party," with huge bags of movie theater popcorn. I was delighted by this experience and still remember the joy of seeing

bags of popcorn as big as my classmates and me. That kindness led to joy was a helpful lesson, which was taught beyond Sr. Marcia's class. As a school, we worked together to support international missions, study and memorialize the holocaust, and minister to the needs of our neighbors. When I entered high school, the academic expectations rose, but the commitment to community and character remained the same.

When I became a high school religion teacher, I looked back on my years of Catholic education for inspiration. So much of what I most valued in my education was the work outside the classroom—skipping recess to sing in choir, participating in science fair and student government, attending summer math camp hosted by my beloved fifth grade teacher, leading all-school assemblies and regional service projects, and listening to holocaust survivors tell their stories of WWII. I liked school well enough, and I remember many teachers fondly, but what I really loved was education about real things. Likewise, though I initially practiced more traditional teaching methods and struggled deeply to keep my students engaged, I eventually realized they wanted to do something real, just like I had as a student. So, as I redesigned our curriculum, I wove critical service learning into the entire learning experience. Each of my students would have the opportunity and support to study and respond to a need in their community, a process with which students engaged eagerly each school year, until COVID sent us home.

The Issue of the Present

Mona

As I entered the strange, new, virtual world of the pandemic, I found myself unable to continue to teach, interact, or solicit feedback from participants in my literacy trainings as I was accustomed. I needed to become proficient at using online platforms and resources, and all my supplemental teaching materials, manipulatives, games, and activities had to be moved into a format that could be viewed and used online. I invested tremendous effort in this task, yet I was unable to discern the level of satisfaction my participants felt toward my teaching, their learning, or the resources I was sharing. For the first time, I was unable to draw on my past experiences and content knowledge to support my work in the present. I was a fish out of water.

Early in the pandemic, I sought out and found a critical friend to collaborate with. Kathleen was a doctoral student at a university in the Midwest and an active classroom teacher. We met in the summer of 2020 and collaborated from then until this writing. Initially, we engaged in discussions aimed at constructing a classroom-based self-study of literacy instruction for in-service teachers. We wanted to utilize self-study methodology, as we felt it would allow us to delve more deeply into my TLE practice than we typically could achieve through traditional, isolated reflection or statistical analysis of data (LaBoskey, 2004; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2011). While we often discussed current research and theory, we just as often drifted into conversations about our daily practice. Ours was a safe (albeit virtual) space, where we could unpack our daily struggles without the constraints of social convention or professional expectations. We didn't have to sugarcoat our experience and could examine them more openly and effectively together as a result. In time, we realized we had created a Third Space (Bhabha, 1994; Flessner, 2014), which was safe, bounded, and productive for reimagining answers to questions and solving problems during this time of unprecedented uncertainty (Hulme et al., 2009; Sawyer et al., 2016).

Indeed, as the pandemic intensified in the fall of 2020 and our in-person interactions narrowed, our virtual collaboration opened up new space to address our problems of practice. Yet, as schools vacillated between in-person, hybrid, and virtual instruction, our research questions likewise shifted to reflect near-daily changes in instructional settings,

teacher needs, and administrative requests. During this time, Kathleen collaborated with me and allowed me to manifest my vulnerability and insecurity as my critical friend, partner, and support system within this safe space, practices consistent with effective *currere* and self-study scholarship (Baer & Cavill, 2020). Eventually, we chose the question, "How can teacher literacy education be facilitated for in-service teachers in the context of the pandemic?" to guide our inquiry.

As we worked together, we began to realize that my reluctance to let go of past habits was creating an obstacle to forging new ways in the pandemic present. I was processing the loss of what I once had—immersive, in-person instruction; five senses to inform my instruction, moment-by-moment. Now, I had black boxes and silence, as though I were teaching into the void. Yet, as the pandemic continued, the need for quality literacy education took on greater urgency and complexity. What had worked with in-person teacher literacy education required significant adjustments to deliver in remote and/or hybrid instruction, not only so that teachers could learn to teach literacy more effectively, but so that they could learn to also deliver that instruction in virtual and/or hybrid settings. My lived experiences in the past were not sufficient to inform and navigate the present world as a TLE. I feared failure and felt inadequate to the task of teaching in and for this new reality. My research partner helped me deal with the intense insecurity and isolation of the pandemic, as well as supporting my new virtual work, while providing an additional perspective.

Kathleen

From the beginning of our collaboration, Mona and I were committed to learning together. Ours was a partnership founded for research. This was an exciting prospect for me initially, because it was the first time I collaborated with a researcher outside of my university. While I still identified primarily as a classroom teacher, I was eager to improve my qualitative inquiry skills and expand my professional network. This kept me focused as we entered the fall semester and designed our research project.

While I was teaching virtually from the start of the school year, Mona was still largely in-person. This informed our initial IRB proposal, which involved collecting data on-site at a charter school where Mona was teaching. Shortly after completing the IRB application, our study site went remote, forcing us to reconsider our entire research design and making our application moot. This was the beginning of a cascade of changes that unfolded throughout the fall and winter of 2020, into 2021.

It seemed that each time Mona and I logged in to our regular videoconference, we both had significant changes to report about our professional contexts. Sometimes, those changes included coaching each other in educational software that we were learning. This was particularly challenging for me, as I had always been a slow-adopter of new technologies. So, I was delighted one evening to be able to introduce Mona to the Pear Deck user experience. These moments of joy and practical support buoyed us as the object of our inquiry continued to change. Yes, we eventually landed on a research question that made sense for our context, but that didn't change the fact that our context was demoralizingly unstable—school closures; lack of clarity about when, or how, they might reopen; policies that changed daily; and a demand for professional flexibility that was unyielding. The instability left us feeling unmoored.

This became particularly true for me when I chose to leave my school mid-semester to escape an emotionally abusive administrator, whose hostility toward me had intensified during the pandemic. This was the hardest choice I'd ever made as a teacher, because I knew it would hurt my students who I cared deeply about. Yet, I also knew that I could not continue being the teacher they deserved, being treated as I was; if I didn't

change, I would break. So, I made the choice to leave the classroom, and after I did, I didn't know how to identify. I was no longer a teacher, even though I deeply empathized with the struggle of teachers and continued to care about past students, and I was not, as yet, a traditional doctoral student. Who, then, was I?

Working with Mona, I was still a researcher, her critical friend. And, freed of the emotional turbulence of my former school, I was able to listen and consider more deeply what was going on with her professional life. It was during this time, in January 2021, that we settled into our research path. Mona began sharing dozens of digitized materials that she had created throughout the fall semester. Prior to our meetings, I would read and take notes on these documents, generating questions or topics for our discussion. After reviewing a digital slide deck that Mona had created and delivered in the fall, I wrote in our notes, "curious to see you lead the whole session with the idea of 'support.' Did your feedback bear out that sentiment was received? It reminds me of Nel Noddings [sic] Care Theory. She posits, among other things, that care is reciprocal and must be acknowledged by the cared-for" (5 January 2021). Not only was Mona showing signs of caring for her students, but even at a distance, I was beginning to notice them.

MULTI-FACED PANDEMIC NOTICINGS
MONA: FACILITATOR EXPERTISE AND CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

The delivery of this content information took on a new meaning within the pandemic setting. Skilled facilitation of learning, no matter whether the venue is virtual or face-to-face, should provide plenty of access points to information as well as opportunities for participants to participate and rehearse content with the goal of eventual learner autonomy (Fisher et al., 2016). My pandemic quandary was not only how to teach this, but also how to assess it. At first, I felt paralyzed with self-doubt and overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. I had never taught virtually or studied virtual literacy instruction. How was I to digitize all my resources and materials? How would I adapt my in-person activities for complete virtual instruction? And how would I know the engagement of participants if they had cameras off and were muted?

I still had a job to do, support teachers teaching kids to read. Only now, they were doing so in more challenging circumstances. Stasis wasn't an option, so I consumed research, connected with other educators, and attended trainings. Indeed, I attended any affordable training that I could find to support my work. Not only did this build my knowledge, but it helped me connect with my students' experience of virtual instruction and reflect on what makes for high quality teaching, answering the questions: What am I teaching? Why am I teaching it? How will I know if they have learned it? (Fisher et al., 2016). Clarity is essential in instruction, more so than ever during this pandemic time (Tomlinson, 2021). So, I narrowed down my objectives and urged my participants to do the same when they taught. I reflected on the "why" of what we were doing and created authentic activities that were directly transferable to teacher practices. For example, I provided digital versions of phonics activities that were traditionally done in person. My participants shared their gratitude for these resources in the chat feature, the exit tickets, and in follow up emails.

During trainings in which I was a participant, I began to engage with the intent of deeply noticing my experiences in the virtual setting so that I could transfer them to my own work as a TLE. This helped me realize I disliked both my camera being on and speaking out in large groups. What I enjoyed was being silent and anonymous, just soaking in the learning. Additionally, I didn't want to write my thoughts in the general chat where everyone could see, but rather I fancied direct messaging the facilitator. In my reflections with Kathleen, we discussed how, pre-pandemic, my assumption was that

I had read the feedback from the room simply by facial expressions and verbal feedback. Now, consciously putting myself in my students' shoes, I realized that I had not been equitable. Not all participants are comfortable or motivated to engage in that manner. Further, limiting the way I allowed virtual participation, constrained feedback to those few who were comfortable sharing in front of a large group.

This realization led me to revise my instructional strategies. I began to offer participants the option to direct message me in the chat. This change allowed me to receive instant questions, information, and feedback from in-service teachers in a way that was anonymous, low stakes, and not possible in a face-to-face setting. I also began to use technology, like Padlet and Jamboard, that allowed me to replicate some of my face-to-face activities in ways that were engaging, meaningful, and could also be anonymous. This added feature of anonymity was particularly appealing because participants could engage in learning on their terms, and I could solicit feedback to help me plan instruction. As I processed and accepted the changes going on around me and became fluent in virtual technologies, I learned how to translate my past experiences and present instructional process into meaningful insights that could inform my future work.

Kathleen: Seeing Care Clearly

Once I began looking for signs of caring, I saw it everywhere in Mona's work and the struggle she was experiencing transitioning to remote instruction. While she was hyper-focused on learning how to improve her practice in virtual mediums, she struggled to find satisfaction in the process. This was puzzling at first, because she continued to get lots of positive feedback from participants, and school leaders regularly asked for more support after being introduced to her. She was clearly valued for her expertise, yet virtual instruction continued to be unsatisfying. Why?

Nel Noddings (2009, 2012) theorized that care is part of reciprocal ethical practice. In classrooms, it is not enough for a teacher to say they care about their students or even for them to show it through actions. For care to be effective and to animate the student-teacher relationship, it has to be felt by those cared-for, generally students, and acknowledged by them to the one doing the caring, generally the teacher. Noddings (2009) gives in-person examples of this, like students physically acknowledging teachers, or refusing to do so, when they walk into a classroom. Imagine a kindergartener who runs up to hug their teacher randomly during the school day. Such spontaneous responses are part of a cycle of caring that must be completed for the carer to feel fulfilled. Absent such reciprocity by the one cared for, the carer does not know that their efforts to care have been successful, a situation that has ethical implications.

Like all teachers, me included, who have struggled during this pandemic to adjust to the sensory deprivation of teaching to blank and muted screens, the lack of visual and verbal feedback left Mona exhausted and full of self-doubt. Following her delivery of one PD, she wrote in our joint research journal, "Feeling like I am not cut out for this. Feedback was good, but hardly any participant interaction. I felt like I was just doing all the talking. … Just not feeling good about any of this right now" (11 January 2021). While much of Mona's commentary in our journal and throughout our conversations concerned how she felt she wasn't getting the data she needed from her participants vis-à-vis audio-visual cues, underlying this, I suspect, was a much more personal concern: teaching virtually had interrupted the care cycle as she had known it. The same in-the-moment audio-visual cues she had used her whole life to informally assess her students' engagement and comprehension also confirmed whether or not her students felt cared-for by her. Teaching into the void of blank screens and muted participants left her uncertain of whether she was doing right by her students. Indeed, in a journal memo

the same week, Mona wrote, "I care so much and the PD becomes so personal as I invest more and more time and energy. Finding balance is hard for me" (12 January 2021). If care theory is correct, which I suspect it is, for Mona to find peace of mind about and balance in her practice, she needed to find a way to complete the care cycle in the virtual learning environment.

MONA: CARE THEORY MAKES AN IMPACT

As I connected with Kathleen, she introduced me to Care Theory (Noddings, 2012). I came to understand that teaching and learning are closely tied to a cycle of care, and learning is a by-product of this relationship (Hinsdale, 2016). Within the pandemic context, I not only felt unable to care for my in-service teachers in my sessions, but I did not feel a reciprocal caring from them. This was most certainly contributing to my feelings of isolation, ineptitude, and being out of my element. Caring is connecting through relations, and I did not feel like I could engage in a relationship with in-service teachers I could not see or hear. So, I began to problem solve and troubleshoot as to how I could connect with my in-service teachers in this pandemic setting. I offered them options to engage in the chat that gave them safety and anonymity. I imagined them and what they might look like so I could better teach them, and I sent love and caring to them through the virtual space verbally and in writing throughout my presentations. I let go of my need to see and hear feedback to teach. Instead, I employed exit tickets, chat conversations, and follow-up emails to solicit feedback. As I connected with my participants in these new ways, the cycle was recreated without the visual or verbal cues that I was used to.

KATHLEEN

As I reflect on the past year and a half of collaborating with Mona, I realize that working with her gave me purpose and focus, as I grew into a new identity as a researcher and graduate student. My departure from teaching was traumatic for me, not only because I didn't know how to identify, but because the way I had been treated by my former administrator interrupted the kind and caring relationships that I had been taught and wanted to share with my students. Being able to help Mona in a safe, open, and unpolitical way soothed some part of who I am during this very turbulent time. I realized that care was operative not only in student-teacher relationships, but in my future life as a researcher and critical friend.

MONA AND KATHLEEN: THE PRESENT AS A RESULT OF THESE EXPERIENCES

As we write this, the pandemic continues. The recently-identified Omicron variant is causing a new spike in infections (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Our personal and professional lives have permanently changed because of pandemic events.

MONA

I am again able to draw from past experiences to inform my present teaching and life choices. I live and teach in-service teachers differently. I try to understand and care for humanity and the individual more clearly in my everyday life. I exercise self-care in ways that were foreign to my pre-pandemic routine. In my teaching practice, I consciously try to avoid putting unspoken expectations on educators to give me feedback in narrow ways. As one example, when interacting with in-service teachers as a TLE, I no longer expect people to speak out loud or interact with the whole group. I've realized it neither provides accurate feedback nor gives everyone a voice. Instead, I now provide

some content information and then provide time for participants to engage silently with material and then with the person next to them. I walk the room searching for those who have much to offer but might not volunteer to speak in a group setting. Once I find them, I validate what they have to offer the group and do a friendly cold call asking them to share their knowledge and expertise with the whole group—if they feel comfortable. I am looking to get accurate feedback from all my in-service teachers who are attending training, not just the ones comfortable sharing in a large group setting.

Mona and Kathleen

The critical friendship and self-study in which we engaged has resulted in a metamorphosis of sorts. We both are more at peace in our roles as researchers and educators. Working together to address problems of practice has helped us grow not simply as educators, but as people. Confronting ourselves together, in our Third Space, without judgment and with deep care has helped us realize that care is an essential part of our teaching practice—care for our students, care for each other, and care for those near to us, including ourselves. The pandemic pushed us to change, but working together helped us to change for the better.

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