The Puzzle

By Mona Beth Zignego
Cardinal Stritch University
& Ivon G. Prefontaine
Gonzaga University

Throughout my (Mona's) life, jigsaw puzzles have come and gone. Puzzles came back in full force during Covid to battle the long, isolated days and nights. Going back in time, they were part of my early childhood experiences as I put them together with my mother and siblings. As a teenager, I put together thousand piece or more puzzles at parties or on rainy days, and now I engage blissfully in putting together puzzles with my grandchildren. Lately, puzzles entered my life in a new way in the form of pieces of myself that feel polarized and disconnected as though they don't belong together and can never fit together within my person.

We, Mona and Ivon, are teachers; we met seemingly by chance, connected by common interests about teaching's spiritual dimensions and a quest for answers related to those dimensions. We employ *currerian* mindfulness as a practice to deepen our understanding of the self, including the part of ourselves that teaches, and we view this practice as a journey rather than a destination. We both discovered that understanding of one's self can be revealed by sitting quietly, paying attention, and allowing a space for awareness to open up. We connected the stories of our teaching selves through the journey of our *currere* work (Pinar, 2004), and we wish to share these stories with you.

Our shared journey brought forth questions. Who is the self that teaches? The teaching self often presents as a strong, professional, confident, competent, teacherly persona. So how then does this teaching self connect to other aspects of the self that are not understood as teacherly? How does our teaching self connect to aspects we perceive as weak and incompetent, the parts of the self we feel are not teacher-like? How do the pieces of this puzzle fit together? And, if we willingly and knowingly connect the teaching self with aspects of the self that we find to be not teacher-like, will it strengthen our work? Writing the story of the self who teaches and

its connections to the elements of the self that do not typically manifest in the teaching space, yet help make up who we are, brought our journeys together and brought us peace, clarity, and understanding of who we were, are, and continue to become as teachers and as humans within each of our unique journeys.

The Past Teaching Self as Told by Ivon

I entered the teaching profession as a "non-traditional" student, leaving another career to respond to my calling as a teacher. For most of my career, I taught in a small, hybrid, K-12 school, engaging in a journey towards understanding and uniting the pieces of the self. In August, 2011, preparing to teach another school year, I journaled about feeling apprehensive, uncertain why. I usually experienced anticipation, nervousness, and excitement leading up to each school year, but this felt different. What made me feel this way? What imbalance was I experiencing between life and teaching? Were insights from a mindfulness practice emerging, e.g., recognizing myself as part of the whole, not an island? Who I am as a teacher is a puzzle continuously assembled and reassembled. Problems I saw myself as having no part in, I was a part of each time.

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Two months later, I re-read my journal. I acknowledged the ideas' importance and emerging significance. My mind, body, and spirit, in concert, were speaking. It took time to form spaciousness for wisdom to emerge. The full meaning is not yet there, but I have matured to recognize there is more to the words than I can understand.

I became attached to the small school where I taught and my role as a teacher. Teacher assistants and parents entered the classroom to be acknowledged as teachers and leaders in their own right. I imagined holding a higher moral ground, and my ego took center stage. My teaching felt distanced from my heart, and I felt like a caricature (Palmer, 2007). Pausing, I sought new questions. Is teaching a calling—a vocation—animating my spirit, giving me voice?

Had teaching turned into a job? If teaching is work, I could teach the same lessons for 15 more years and collect a full pension—a thought abhorrent to me then and now. If teaching is a calling and vocation, I needed to navigate and negotiate the real and imagined obstacles I encountered in different, compassionate ways.

Despite an appearance of confidence, I felt beaten down, fearful my teaching and the school were at risk. I had grown attached to narrow and specific futures, rather than aspirational spaces. Often, people "appear very confident [and] they may think they are making a big effort in the right direction, but without knowing it, what they do comes out of fear" (Suzuki, 2006, pp.

62–63). Did I have the volition to continue? I experienced a protective divide between who I was as a teacher and my practice, encouraged by organizational culture (Palmer, 2007). Despite recognizing school managers' divide-and-conquer traps, I was attached to isolation and its darkness.

I deluded myself with real or imagined wrongs inflicted upon me. I fled to an idealized future, lacking compassion. Blinded by ego and feeling victimized, I became trapped in the past, failed to live in the present, with an unachievable future, never making decisions. Suzuki (2006) proposed that "we should live in this moment" (p. 15). I attributed anger, despair, and non-decisions to others, justifying remaining outside the circle. I was an expert with knowledge, intelligence, and information, but no one listened. Instead of understanding how the person who taught was intertwined in a larger puzzle, I inhabited an island of misery.

I returned to a question I no longer asked: who was I as a teacher? "Seldom, if ever, do we ask the 'who' question—who is the self that teaches" (Palmer, 2007, p. 4)? The who question is spiritual and animating about how I am part of something larger. It is about diverse ways to respond to the heart's longing to feel connected that animates love for work and teaching (Palmer, 2007). To rediscover what animated my teaching, I chose to study who I was and was becoming as a teacher; to listen and respond to the teacher's voice within me honoring my true nature and asked what brings me to teaching today (Palmer, 2007). I reflected on a poetic line, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do/With your one wild and precious life?" (Oliver, 1990, p. 60). I tried to rekindle what brought me to teaching.

The Past Teaching Self as Told By Mona

Who was I as a teacher, indeed? My identity as an educator was in crisis. A teacher for over twenty-five years, I had a full-time job for a non-profit, coaching teachers and facilitating professional development in addition to adjuncting for a university. What I did not know, I asked other professionals and researched and/or attended trainings to build additional relevant content knowledge and confidence in my field. I worked

through problems of practice when they arose as I began to connect my practice to care theory to support my teaching during the pandemic, and I found critical friendships with other, like-minded practitioners to help sustain my work (Noddings, 2009, 2012; Zignego & Sellers, 2022).

My internal teaching self was constructed of all my past teaching experiences, and I drew from them to support my work. For example, I felt all the stress and anxiety as my practice evolved through the pandemic, and I constructed reflective tools to support my and other practitioner's work (Zignego & Sellers, 2022). Prior to that, I had worked through numerous curricular changes, administrative difficulties, parental situations, and simple day-to-day classroom content and management circumstances in the schools in which I worked over the years. I had taught essentially every grade from preschool through 12th grade and had added extra-curriculars like coaching field hockey and directing plays into my teacher persona. All the joys, knowledge, experiences, and struggles collectively contributed to the puzzle piece of my teacher self in numerous ways. I felt like I knew my teaching self after all the ups and downs of the past decades in the field. I felt grounded, established, competent, and confident— and then a family member became ill.

This illness was fraught with pain. For months I struggled to care for him as I continued to work. I attended numerous doctor appointments across two states to try to find answers to the pain he was experiencing. None were to be had. We would leave doctor appointments feeling completely broken, trying to keep up hope, trying not to despair, but ultimately losing heart. We yearned to be cared for, to be told answers, and to find solutions, but none were to be found. I felt so broken, flawed, and unknowing— and then I had to teach. Teaching for me consisted of coaching in-service teachers, facilitating workshops, conducting presentations, and teaching masters-level university classes. It was hard to disassociate from my personal life that felt broken and weak. How could I teach under these conditions? Who was my professional teaching self? I felt the lines had become blurred between my teaching self and my caregiver-self. The pieces refused to fit. When I teach, my teacherly self is confident and competent. I support my university students and I provide answers and resources for their important work.

How could I put this broken caregiver-self away and teach? I struggled to suppress the caregiver-self and pull up the teacher-self when class began. Between the teacher-self and the Caregiver-self, it was as though I were comparing apples to oranges. I could not come to grips with these parts of myself—they were so completely dichotomous. Then I received an email from a university student.

This student was going through her own struggles with illness in her family. She was in need of support—support that did not consist of course content and resources. She needed support in the form of excusing late assignments and allowing missed classes. She needed care and understanding. Suddenly the lines between the caregiver-self and the teacher-self were not so blurred, the pieces began to come together, and a deep compassion and understanding emerged, the likes of which I had never experienced before. I had developed a new teacher-self through connecting with this broken caregiver-self. The teacher-self that always had the answers was not enough in this situation, I needed this other broken and unsure part of myself that understood deeply what was involved in caring for another human who was sick.

The Present Teaching Self as Told By Ivon

Who am I as a teacher? I rephrase Mona's question into the present tense. When things do not go my way, I cast blame, rather than take responsibility. Almost a decade after exiting teaching K-12, I am wary of traps of my own making; I peer into thickets

for hidden meanings and sometimes become ensnared in the tangles, and more questions lie in wait (Poetter, 2020). In the *currerian* present I ask, "Am I no longer a K-12 teacher, since I left the K-12 classroom?" As I emerge from thickets and navigate tangles, I try to understand them better, negotiate them with grace, and serve each student well in a new role as a student-teacher supervisor (Palmer, 2007).

Mona's puzzle analogy is apropos. I assemble who I am in a *currerian* present, without guiding pictures or boundaries to reclaim a wholeness of who I am amidst the practice of teaching. I act with care and purpose to regain a radical sense—returning to my roots—of who I am as a person with agency, action, and meaning (Poetter, 2020). Through self-reflection and contemplation, new meaning emerges from past, sometimes buried, educational experiences and what I aspire to, re-membering who I am and what called me to teach, recovering identity and integrity in the process (Baszile, 2017; Palmer, 2007; Whitehead, 1929). In mindful spaces, I ask who is the self that teaches, and how I can share this self with student-teachers I supervise?

Understood as a puzzle, pieces of my self interact with others, interlocking, releasing, not quite fitting to inform who I am and who I am becoming. *Currere* is a reflective, contemplative journey of self-discovery and understanding in relation to others and "positioned in a particular historical moment" (Baszile, 2017, pp. vii–viii). I no longer see myself wholly as a K-12 teacher. Peering closer, I make meaning from pieces in thickets of re-membering. The *currerian* present is an unfolding space, complicated by interacting with others, incomplete recall of the past, and fleeting glances into an unknowable future.

I navigate the *currerian* present with care to give meaning to memories that inform an aspirational future. There is a rhythm where the present absorbs the past giving meaning to the present as I carry on—pressing forward—dislodging myself from being submerged in the present (Dewey, 1934; Pinar, 2012). In this rhythm, there are touchstone questions about what it means to be a teacher, what being a teacher means, and what becoming a teacher means so I might find a way to put the puzzle together. In assembling the puzzle, I continue to learn about myself as a situated knower, about the world around me, and about others who are entering the profession with their own aspirations and memories (Baszile, 2017). I am learning how to share these questions with each aspiring teacher I encounter.

The Present Teaching Self as Told By Mona

I meet with a teacher for a coaching session. She is tired, broken, worn-out, and questioning everything. Faced with a teacher shortage at her school, she subs during her prep periods, her students' specials (music, gym, art) have all been cut, and her class is a combined 1st and 2nd grade with twice the number of students she has ever had. I am again realizing that connecting with the parts of myself that feel broken and most decidedly unhelpful and unprofessional can provide support, care, and understanding for this teacher. I am learning about myself and others in this moment of my journey (Baszile, 2017).

I now realize that in the past I viewed myself as having two distinct selves: a caregiver-self and a teacher-self. This is untrue, as there are so many personas that we all hold. This truth speaks to me even more strongly than ever as I read Ivon's words in the previous section on seeking meaning from the obscured pieces of ourselves. Nevertheless, I viewed the teacher-self as strong, organized, confident, and knowledgeable and the caregiver-self as emotional, unknowledgeable, unconfident, and unmoored. I did not want to accept the caregiver as part of myself, and certainly, I did not want to accept it as part of my professional practice.

However, the merging and accepting of selves allowed me to understand the perspectives of those I worked with while bringing the elements of care and understanding more deeply into my practice. I feel such a deep, connected level of care for the university student who is battling her medical situation and with the teacher I am coaching who is struggling to work in impossible conditions. I attribute this to allowing the puzzle pieces to come together as my caregiver-self and teacher-self merge and inform one another. By acknowledging and accepting the caregiver-self, with all the elements that I found so deficient, I was able to provide deep understanding, empathy, and options.

Using *currere* as an avenue toward a deeper understanding of the self, through mindfulness, analysis, regression, and reflection, I found and continue to find clarity. I found an understanding of who I was in my differing selves in the alternate environments of personal and professional. This led to an understanding of the benefits of bringing those pieces together in my professional environment. This brought clarity to my caregiver-self through this analysis and interpretation of my teacher-self and caregiver-self. After this analysis, I was able to apply those understandings to my practice. I had only wanted to acknowledge one self—the strong powerful self. I wanted to hide the other self and render it obsolete. It was connected to negative, painful, experiences. I wanted that self to go away and certainly not to merge with my strong desirable professional self, but in the end, the strength was in accepting all the pieces of myself.

As I work within my present practice, I am meta-aware of caring for those I work with through connecting with parts of myself that feel as though they are disconnected from the teaching profession. I am allowing those parts to rise to the surface to provide care for those I work with. For me, care means offering what is needed for those who are suffering alongside content knowledge and resources for teaching. For the university student struggling with illness in her family, I provided options for assignments that could work with her situation. As I coach the teacher struggling within her practice, I listen, I empathize, I connect, I provide some resources to try to reduce her workload, and I tell her story. I let the pieces of myself become part of me, and like Ivon, they inform my new identity and my future in teaching.

The Teaching Self of the Future as Told by Ivon

All went to the university
Where they were put in boxes
And they came out all the same[1]

I struggle to write coherently about my future self. Puzzle pieces wait amid thickets and tangles, and I encounter them as questions. How do I guide a new generation of teachers into the profession? Although it appears counterintuitive, the future is predicated on re-membering to remember the past, enabling me to reconstruct the present and awaken a purposeful vision for a hopeful future (Pinar, 2012; Wagamese, 2016). Questions, thickets, and puzzles re-member the past, present, and future. I re-member Rilke (1993) advising the young poet "to live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer" (p. 27). The future arrives on its own, emerging from each present moment and re-membering the past.

Today, my teaching involves aspiring teachers and their mentor-teachers. I take care to engage with them, echoing Mona's ethic of care. What does care mean as my present and future self enters K-12 classrooms? Like Dewey (1934), she uses care

as a verb: to actively, practically, autonomously, and purposefully mind for others emotionally and thoughtfully. I choose to care for those I encounter and others who will be impacted by teaching future teachers. In these ways, my teaching attempts to create caring conditions (Palmer, 2007). How do I share this feeling with those I encounter each day in classrooms?

I re-member what called me to be a teacher: to make a difference. In conversations with student-teachers and mentor-teachers, I describe how teaching emerges from an inner source that evokes a sense of deep gladness with one's whole being, bringing happiness to others (Palmer, 2007). I describe what this means to me, how I experienced it, and how I continue to unravel its meaning to inform my teaching. I acknowledge there are challenges and suggest when we encounter them we ask, "Is teaching what I want to do? Will it make me truly happy?" These are questions for other future selves—aspiring teachers.

Instead of pursuing dispiriting, measurable, well-defined outcomes based on prescribed curricula and test scores, I ask aspiring and current teachers to embrace hopeful, ambiguous, ill-defined qualities that reveal who they are and their educational experiences to those they teach. (Pinar, 2012). I share how relationships inform teaching after listening to others describe their educational experiences and stories in relation to official curricula. I honor their subjectivities by caring for and listening to them to keep my subjectivities in check. Good teachers express who they are—their subjectivity—linking their lived curriculum with a planned one.

As I enter K-12 classrooms, I experience how schools remain unchanged since I attended.

I can argue that they feel more oppressive in many ways with new thickets for teachers to become lost in. Mentor-teachers ask student-teachers to perform and deliver lesson plans based on curricular outcomes, rather than engaging students in conversations that reveal what they learned and understood. They tell me this is the way we do things. As departments, they design tests all students write; therefore, they all teach the same things the same way, at the same pace. Homogenization and efficiency are cornerstones of 21st Century schools, intended to cram information into students and prepare them for standardized exams (Palmer, 2007; Pinar, 2012). Teachers recycle slideshows teaching from the front of a room, rather than circulating and engaging each student. How do we dismantle new and old walls—thickets—to meaningfully encounter each student?

Mentor-teachers appear interested when I describe how I eliminated tests, used projects, and offered each student a voice in their learning. People who teach differently often feel devalued, forced to measure up to norms other than their own (Palmer, 2007). I observe students taking notes verbatim. I describe how I suggested one student write notes as poetry and introduced ee cummings to them. Today, that student writes poetry and shares it with me. When we step away from imposed norms and order of how to teach, teaching and learning occur in "community—a dialogic exchange in which … knowledge [is] expanded, an exchange in which we are not simply left alone with our own thoughts" (Palmer, 2007, p. 79). When teaching is performed and curricula scripted, it strips each teacher and student of their subjectivity and social purpose, teaching and learning are understood as standardized (Pinar, 2012). Because mentor-teachers express concern over fallout, student-teachers tell me they avoid controversial topics such as climate change, conspiracy theories, certain texts, etc. I went where angels feared to tread. I ask/asked students and myself to search for and speak truths with care and respect for each other as they engaged in complicated conversations linking their lived

curriculum with the official curriculum (Palmer, 2007; Pinar, 2012). How do I counsel student-teachers to form and inform safe, caring spaces for mindful, complicated conversations where disagreements can and do arise?

I encourage and offer ideas for active learning and less note-taking. I let student-teachers know that teaching is a solitary profession and that teachers speak with each other about teaching only in passing, failing to touch the heart of each teacher's lived-experience (Palmer, 2007). Teachers' capacity to effectively communicate academic knowledge to their students can be hindered when they are isolated in classrooms. Engaging in adult conversations and enacting curriculum as a complex dialogue informed by academic knowledge, subjectivity, and the historical context is crucial for empowering teachers (Pinar, 2012). Based on this, how do I advise student-teachers that understanding each individual voice—student and teacher—is essential to teaching and learning?

Sometimes the student-teacher, mentor-teacher, and I are in a minority: white and Canadian-born. Many students are visible minorities and recent immigrants. Despite changing demographics, there is limited space for stories based on their personal experience to emerge and be shared (Palmer, 2007). With limited prior knowledge of Canada, how do these students make sense of our foreign, often colonial, history? I observe student-teachers who are immigrants to Canada. How does my future self demonstrate care when they struggle in their practicum? How do I overcome my feeling of being at odds with systemic inertia?

The Teaching Self of the Future as Told by Mona

As I think toward the future, I find myself feeling a bit uneasy with this new identity but all-in and engaged in what is to come. This is a different feeling than hiding or denying pieces and parts of myself. I feel interested, albeit a little nervous, in seeing what is to come and what new parts of myself emerge as life unfolds and as I interact with those I work with. As I notice care seeping into my personal and professional life, I have done much research on care theory in education, but for the future, I wonder about its implications for education as well as for the medical field (Noddings, 2009). Nel Noddings created care theory as a way to explain the reciprocal giving and receiving of care between the teacher and student, which is based on the teacher's moral responsibility to produce honest, upright adults (Noddings, 2015). Care theory can be a pathway to improve teaching and learning (Meyers, 2009; Newcomer, 2018; Noddings, 2012). For me, the more I embrace care within my practice, the more the puzzle pieces of myself come together, improving my self-care, my teaching, and perhaps more importantly working toward cultivating a world where people care for one another. As I see the benefits of care within my practice, I wonder about and reflect on the implications of care theory for the future.

I still have no answers for the family member who is ill. As we continue to see doctors, run tests, and look for answers, I ponder the future and wonder where my role is situated within this medical situation. As I relive the trauma of doctors sadly shaking their heads with no answers for us, I wonder how I can learn from this and help others. Is there a place for my voice? Is there a way to build awareness of care for those like me who are searching for answers? Can I be a voice for those who have no voice? As I consider the teaching world, I wonder and reflect—how do I provide care for our teachers and university students? How can the current system support self-care for teachers? How do I care for teachers and support their daily work? How do we as a society care for teachers? Last of all, what role do I have in this greater picture of society

in providing care to those I interact with? Through my own internal work, I can see there are puzzle pieces within our society at large that need to come together. In each moment, I have the power to help with this task through the provision of care for others. I can accept who I am and what is happening within my life and use it to positively interact with those around me.

Conclusion

There are so many parts of the self that we hold as humans. They feel so compartmentalized, yet we discovered through mindfully reflecting together about our separate journeys, they are not separate entities. They are part of who we are. We bring out different selves based on situations we find ourselves in, yet there is an interconnected web within us based on who we are (Van der Kolk, 2014). Van der Kolk (2014) tells us that internal leadership is essential to connecting all the parts of ourselves. This leadership consists of self-care, listening to what the body wants, avoiding self-sabotage, and acceptance of all the elements of the self.

This is crucial in connecting the elements that make up the constellation of who we are. MIT scientist Marvin Minsky (1988) found through his work that, within the mind, there is a society of different elements of the self. These different selves can work together in tandem to help and support one another.

In our past selves, we both felt uncertain about our abilities, experiencing an identity crisis as puzzle pieces became scattered. As we explored our past and present selves through a shared writing activity, self-reflection brought each of us new insights we could count on and fresh perspectives from our less-confident alter-selves to connect parts of ourselves meaningfully. Despite feeling uneasy, we are willing to engage our future selves to better understand how the pieces of our identities might fit together and how we can share the emerging puzzle with our future students.

We traveled similar paths in our search for answers for who we are and how we can bring all aspects of who we are meaningfully into our teaching. We both seek to make meaning of our four decades of lived experiences as teachers. We claim *currere* as a way to piece the parts of ourselves together to better understand ourselves and the world we live in. Bringing our journeys together brought clarity and a deeper understanding of the puzzle pieces that make up who we are and how we can contribute to the world meaningfully.

Endnotes

[1] This is from the song “Little Boxes” written by Malvina Reynolds in 1962. It was written as a protest against the homogenization of suburbia beginning to happen at the time. It appears we attend university and, at best, the changes are superficial. What would Malvina say today?

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