

NIGHTMARE AT 20,000 FEET: *CURRERE*, TEACHER EDUCATION, AND THE INVITATION TO IMAGINE OTHERWISE

By Lori Turner Meier

East Tennessee State University

There is something about the somatic experience of airplane travel that resonates deeply with me. In my rural childhood, the dream of and fascination with aviation was a regular family hobby despite our inability to remotely afford air travel. We spent sweltering summer days at local air shows, built model planes and rockets, and dreamed of what it must be like to travel like the rich and famous on an airplane.

I was an adult before I was able to experience that first rush of adrenaline, which quickly morphed into a brief chapter of apprehension and an urgent need to understand the physics of flight that eluded me. Years later, I'm grateful to have shaken off that fear and have logged many hours hurtling through the atmosphere snacking on peanuts and Diet Coke, learning about the world. Concurrently, many hours were spent pondering how this engineering marvel and strong metal hull was such a deeply somatic space, often-used metaphor, and site of lived educational experience for me.

A REGRESSIVE TAKEOFF

At dusk, nestled in my narrow window seat, headphones in (*introvert note: this is the universal sign of not wanting to chit chat with one's neighbor*), I let the droning and humming of the engines wash over me. The sublime sense of quiet and the ethereal beauty outside my window takes over. Immediately I'm transported to a view of silent twilight and thinking that I must have arrived on the edge of the universe. Everything becomes peaceful and eerily contemplative.

In the quiet of my airline ride, I gaze outside the window towards the wing and wonder if anything might be there. Would a rare atmospheric phenomenon greet our path? Even more, could something nefarious be plotting to harm this journey? And I wonder how many unsuspecting passengers can also see ... what I'm questioning if I am even seeing.

"There! There. Right there. That creature...messing with a panel on the wing. It was just there. Did you not see it? No, I'm fine. It must just be my eyes playing tricks on me."

It doesn't take too much analysis to consider where this regressive moment and early imagery is formed, takes root, and begins to breathe deeper meaning into my present lived experience. Enter a Mr. William Shatner (*you remember, Captain Kirk from Star Trek*); he acted in some episodes of the classic television show, *The Twilight Zone*, in the 1960s. Although I was born years after the series aired, my dad made sure we were versed in popular culture moments that were appropriately related to science fiction, the cosmos, and his own childhood space-age dreams. *The Twilight Zone* series provided the viewer with short stories interwoven with dramatic literary and visual twists, turns, and most embedded with unexpected parables.

Created by Rod Serling, these televised stories embodied the fantastic and the frightening. My favorite tale and inspiration for this *currere* reflection was titled, "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet," was written by Richard Matheson, and aired on *The Twilight Zone* in 1963. This classic episode explores a single passenger, Mr. Robert Wilson (played by Shatner), who is convinced he sees a creature sabotaging the flight

by messing with a panel on the airplane's wing. Meanwhile, as his urgency to notify the pilots and save the doomed flight grows, he quickly realizes that no others on the plane are able to see it. They deem him the irrational threat instead when he takes action to confront the creature on the wing. The episode concludes with Mr. Wilson being detained and escorted off the flight. As he is being taken away on a stretcher, he knowingly glances at the "yet undiscovered" but fully pried-open wing panel and smiles knowing that he may now rest in the assurance of his truth and evidence.

MIDFLIGHT: THE "NIGHTMARE" THAT IS NOW THE PRESENT

I find it peculiar and delightful having now fully adopted "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" as a reference for my professional life in education for nearly two decades. *Twilight Zone* moments have indeed become standout fragments of my childhood, and some key episodes and plots I regularly put to use as metaphors and visual images in personal and professional discussions to illuminate the challenges that I see in schooling, teacher (mis)education, one's life in academia, and the dilemmas of the present in education.

At times, I have used the classic black-and-white photo image from that episode of a young William Shatner looking out his window at the creature on the window with alarm as my subversive social media protest post or changed profile photo when things seemed to be ridiculously out of sorts in the educational spaces I inhabit. *Does anyone else not see what is taking place? Right there, just right there, see it?*

As I wrap up my fifteenth year in teacher education at the university level (and 20+ years in education overall), I vulnerably admit that one thing has remained consistent. I feel more and more like the passenger played by Mr. Shatner each year—gazing out the window and mystified at the lack of urgency for the metaphorical gremlins on the wing.

Berliner and Biddle (1995), nearly three decades ago, spoke about their fear and outrage regarding "organized malevolence" and the "manufactured crisis" that was underway by opponents of public education through myths and disinformation. By 2003, after decades of accusations about the national failing of schools, teachers, and the programs that prepare them, Taubman (2009) stated, "the language of crisis was driving educational reform" (p. 11). Taubman (2009) reminded us of the "almost overnight" and "metastasizing" discourse of standards that fueled school (de)reform efforts in the years after 2001, sharing what he experienced as the erosion of robust theoretical writing on educational topics once informed by the humanities, arts, and critical pedagogies to one that shifted quickly, almost imperceptibly, to reflect what he suggests are "terribly askew" views of testing, accountability, and audit culture (p. 4).

Pinar (2012) equally rebuked "the early 20th-century remaking of the school as a business, a scheme in which teachers first became factory workers, children the raw material, and the curriculum the assembly line producing saleable products" (Pinar, 2012, p. 6). He even called it an "absurd situation" (Pinar, 2012, p. 6) and the "nightmare that is now the present" (Pinar, 2004, p. 14), a line from his first edition that I've connected to my beloved *Twilight Zone* memory for years now, thinking it couldn't get any worse.

And so, we now find ourselves in the continued mess that is leading into 2023, the ongoing deprofessionalization of the field is joined by renewed legislative censoring and surveillance of teachers and teacher educators. In my state, the use of mandated scripted curriculum has increased exponentially, and the continued testing and accountability mania inflicted on teachers and children has intensified to a space where they are expected to be compliant and yielding without voice. In my context, elementary teachers are provided a script for many content areas that must be read with fidelity (*no additions*

and no deletions). While many educators recall the intentional art and craft of designing learning experiences and lessons for and alongside learners that promoted student choice and voice, that craft seems to be vanishing. Elements of social studies education have been deemed divisive or entirely illegal, the mention of other non-majority religions is silenced, and classroom libraries are regulated and monitored with entire families and individuals forced out of representation in children's literature.

Indeed, given this environment, I am often prone to continued languishing within a mirage of academic freedom that my colleagues across campus (i.e. chemistry, biology, humanities) seem to enjoy in reality. Over the years of this *currere* adventure, I have continued to revisit one piece of "wisdom" I was given in my early pre-tenure years that "*there is no academic freedom in teacher education*" . . . , and yet I still look out the window over the wing and tell myself that there must be a way to negotiate the boundary between the broad academic study of education, with its vast collection of scholarship, and the current curriculum narrowing and credentialing process of schooling. There, in a third space, perhaps we can attempt to speak to the transformative powers possible in the elementary classroom spaces and lives of our pre-service teachers while concurrently remaining fully aware of the harmful impacts of state-driven credentialing and the joy daily removed from the classroom. But the creature creeps closer, and the narrative shifts. The dominant messaging returns, and time is diverted to the overwhelming noise of high-stakes and high-stress teacher performance measures and data-driven accrediting demands. Compliance is the expectation, and the removal of most foundational studies of curriculum theory and historical/contemporary educational scholarship becomes so commonplace that most don't even notice they are missing. And yet, there is this nagging feeling that we are committing educational malpractice by not speaking louder as to what we are witnessing while juggling mixed messages and gaslighting that often takes place when truth is spoken to power.

So, I find myself daily wrestling with my own lived experience and *currere* as a recurring existential dilemma, one that regularly bounces between the regressive, the progressive, the analytic, and the accompanying feelings of nostalgia and potential future promises of what could be versus what I see as the reality before me. I return to Pinar's (1975) original premise that I must continually examine "*what has been and what continues to be the nature of my lived experience*" (p. 2) and that "the running of the course—*currere*—occurs through conversation, ongoing dialogical encounter among students and teachers in classrooms but also within oneself in solitude" (Pinar, 2020, p. 51). And as Sophia Greco (2022) suggests, I begin to ask myself anew, "What does it mean to be a teacher within spaces that actively reproduce existing relationships of power and oppression?" (p. 20).

Similar to Greco, I think how rare it is these days to encounter a deeply engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994) in elementary teacher education or K-5 educational spaces. I am consistently, as hooks (2003) suggests, at "odds with the environments wherein we teach" (p. 91), and the good fight (*which I am fully aware has been fought more valiantly by so many before and around me*) has become acutely painful and grievous. I return to a trusty beloved quote, "Fellow educators—are we not lost? Do we know where we are, remember where we have been, or foresee where we are going?" (Huebner, 1999, p. 231) and add to this lament—fellow educators, do we still not see what is happening on the wing?

LANDING: AN INVITATION TO IMAGINE A CONTEMPLATIVE OTHERWISE

In the handful of days each year when I am fortunate to travel to contemplative spaces (*like the Currere Exchange Conference and the Bergamo Conference*) to share in beautiful dialogue and community with fellow curriculum studies travelers, I am reminded of the wonder and opportunity that is available to me within the scope of curriculum studies that informs, supports, and counters these notions and nightmares. It's as if all the William Shatners from across a broad educational spectrum gather in one room to share their experiences of their own "flights in peril," our shared social actions, and attempts towards engaged pedagogy, and work towards transformation surfaces in the form of autobiography and compelling, qualitative narratives of reflection and liberation.

In those spaces, I regularly return to *currere* as a method to explore the self, work in teacher education, and as a process and pedagogical tool to be used with my undergraduate and graduate students. Within the affirming work and community of *currere*, I feel grounded to challenge orthodoxy, reconnect with my authentic self, explore and engage tensions in teacher education, and develop and renegotiate my own pedagogy of teacher education. As Loughran (2006) urges, "teacher education should be a place where challenging simplistic notions and practices should be normal for it is where the seeds of change for the profession surely reside" (p. 14).

Curriculum studies, and *currere* specifically, can also serve as a vehicle to encourage a more humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 1968/2018) for young teachers and the recently languishing teacher educators who work with them. From using *currere* in ways that encourage pre-service teachers to explore their own identities and memories of education to opening up dialogue about defining and challenging orthodoxies in ways that feel emancipatory, finding authenticity in dehumanizing times, and beginning to imagine otherwise, *currere* seeks to align our critical consciousness to educational experience. Segall (2002) suggests that "it is not student teachers' inability to imagine otherwise that restricts the possibility of educational change but teacher education's inability to provide them 'otherwise' experiences that break with the traditional, the expected, the obvious, and the taken-for-granted" (p. 167).

As I again reflect on the power of *currere* for self and in the classroom looking forward, I find myself drawn to the work of scholars who advocate similar contemplative pedagogies that begin with an inward focus for students that seeks connection and insight (Hill, 2020). Framing *currere* as a contemplative curriculum studies practice provides us a method to explore the self first. A place to seek out what we can call the bass notes of our identity, purpose, meaning, experiences, and challenges. Laura Hill (2020), speaking to the concept of contemplative inquiry, suggests, "Whatever your discipline, it is one of our cumulative roles as contemplative educators to demonstrate the importance of slowing down while standing alongside students" (p. 113).

Perhaps, using *currere*, we can begin with these simple questions while standing alongside students. What is the nature of your lived educational experience? What kind of problems do you want to solve? What kinds of joy and experiences do you want to bring to others? What joy do you want to experience yourself? How might we imagine otherwise? Pinar (2011) suggests that only by seeking meaning of self through the lived experience of curriculum can curriculum be truly experienced, enacted, and reconstructed. He continues, "the educational point of *currere* is, then, intensified engagement with classroom life, supported by the cultivation of a consciousness that remembers the past with an eye on the future while focused on the present" (Pinar, 2020, p. 52).

The method of *currere* becomes an accessible space for young and veteran teachers to engage in the complicated conversation and scholarship in a manner that introduces a path to question structures and systems, power and privilege and consider what knowledge and whose knowledge is of most worth. Moreover, I believe it provides an introspective beginning space to consider their authentic selves, revisit the notion of wonder and possibility in learning, and consider their own feelings within their lived educational experience. *Currere* becomes an invitation to an ongoing contemplative practice as well as an invitation to imagine otherwise.

REFERENCES

- Berliner, D. C., & Biddle, B. J. (1995). *The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America's public schools*. Addison-Wesley.
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic. (Original work published 1968)
- Greco, S. (2022). Embracing a pedagogy of love and grief. *Peitho: Journal of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric*, 24(2), 20–21. <https://cfshrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Peitho-24.2-2.pdf>
- Hill, L. M. (2020). Contemplative pedagogy in times of grief and uncertainty: Teaching in a global pandemic. *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 7(1), 103–123.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.
- Huebner, D. E. (1999). *The lure of the transcendent*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Loughran, J. (2006). *Developing a pedagogy of teacher education*. Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F. (1975). *The method of currere* [Paper presentation]. American Educational Research Association (AERA), Washington, DC, United States.
- Pinar, W. F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory* (1st ed.). L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Pinar, W. F. (2011). *The character of curriculum studies: Bildung, currere, and the recurring question of the subject*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pinar, W. F. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F. (2020). *Currere*. In J. Wearing, M. Ingersoll, C. DeLuca, B. Bolden, H. Ogden, & T. M. Christou (Eds.). (2019). *Key concepts in curriculum studies: Perspectives on the fundamentals* (pp. 50–52) Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351167086>
- Segall, A. (2002). *Disturbing practice: Reading teacher education as text*. Peter Lang.
- Taubman, P. (2009). *Teaching by numbers: Deconstructing the discourse of standards and accountability in education*. Routledge.