

OUR *CURRERE* JOURNEY THE IMPACT OF CURRICULUM MEMORIES ON IDENTITY

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Our *currere* journey started at a residential Welsh summer retreat. The three-day retreat took place in Aberystwyth, north Wales, with academic researchers, teachers, and *currere* experts in attendance. This created a unique opportunity for researchers and educators from across Wales to come together to discuss and reflect on the impact of curriculum on us and on education generally. The retreat provided a space for connection, reflection and analysis.

The *currere* process has allowed us to learn from looking inwards, helping us piece together our own diverse biographies, whilst exploring connections to and development of curriculum inquiry. Although this research has been based on three very unique personal narratives, we hope that the message is clear: we must acknowledge the power of our educational and curriculum experiences on our identities, sense of belonging, and futures.

STARTING WITH THE SPIDERS

Each attendee had their own room, with far-reaching views of the Welsh countryside. On the first morning, I found myself waking up to find that my private room wasn't so private. As my eyes opened, I saw a spider (!!). A spider sat still and calm on the other bed pillow. Although I had expected a weekend of connection and meeting new people, I hadn't quite prepared myself for this moment of surprise. Perhaps both in shock, the spider and I, both, remained still. I started to think to myself (as admittedly someone not too fond of spiders) "Ahhh, A SPIDER! What is that doing here? A spider should never be on a pillow! This is my room, Ahhh!" I swiftly hopped up and moved the pillow to the front door, hoping the spider would enjoy the outdoors more than my room. The spider didn't move, and it was in that moment that I first thought,

I wonder what that spider is thinking about me? (if they do that). If they do think, I bet it's asking the same questions as I did "Ahhh, A HUMAN! What is that doing here? A human should never be on my pillows! This is my room Ahhh!"

Perhaps I was the one who didn't belong there. I had labelled spiders as a negative thing, something that didn't belong in my space. As I walked back to "my" room, I started to feel out of place. I wondered who really belonged in that room more—me or the spider?

At breakfast I shared the story of my spider wakeup call with laughter, coffee, and croissants. Little did I know that my spider encounter would represent our *currere* journey and exploration of identity and belonging.

OUR CURRERE JOURNEY AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The *currere* approach encourages autobiographical reflection on individual and unique lived experiences to engage with curriculum inquiry. This *currere* piece provide insight into how past educational and curriculum experiences shape one's identity and sense of belonging, both in the moment and beyond. In this piece, we suggest that the *currere* process allows for deep reflection, critical thinking, and exploration of how our personal experiences can connect and provide insight into broader educational and curriculum conversations. This research process recognises the value of being experts by experience. As educators, we felt it was important to develop our self-awareness and understanding of our identities, exploring how our past educational experiences may have shaped our life purposes and careers. Pinar (1994) stated that this approach encourages exploration of “the complex relation between the temporal and conceptual” in relation “to the self and its evolution and education” (p. 19). We engaged in the *currere* process because we believe, “Education will transform the world. Self-education will transform education” (Abundantlee, 2016, as quoted in Baszile, 2017, p. vi).

THE PROCESS

Our interpretation of *currere* acknowledges Pinar's (1994) four steps but does not adopt a linear interpretation. Within each step we took an opportunity to deeply reflect and analyse our personal educational experiences. Our reflections specifically focus on the regressive and analytical steps and weave the progressive and synthetic elements throughout.

During our initial discussions about the curriculum and *currere*, we worked as a group to think of different potential focuses or themes that we wanted to explore. We decided that we would simply *look back* and write down any memories from our time at school that had stuck with us. We each worked individually to write down the first memories that came to our attention with the broad prompt being *memories of past school experiences*. We decided we would only record the first three memories that popped into our heads, with no specific focus on what type of memories/reflections they should be and no guidelines on how the memory should be presented (e.g., prose, poem, and no word limit). This was, however, contextualised by Baszile's (2009), recognition of the value of exploring our past stories as

All work is autobiographical. That is, we all bring our sorted histories, hopes, and desires to the project of curriculum theory, hooking onto familiar stories and creating new ones. And to the extent we are in dialogue, in conversation about these stories and the histories in which they are forever entangled, we produce, perform, and engage the “complicated conversations” that are curriculum theory. (p. 483)

At this point, you may be asking yourself, “Why do these memories matter?” or, “Why start there?” Truthfully, at the beginning of our journey, we asked the same questions. We did not know why it felt important to begin as we did; the reasoning felt cloudy, and we, as researchers, felt out of our depth. However, we all responded to the pull of our stories, to soak in these memories. A Poetter (2018) summarised, we felt we were “far removed from some of these occurrences now, the actual events,” yet the memories stayed with us. We resonated with Poetter's assertion that his *currere* “fragments keep chipping at me. They won't go away, they comfort and gnaw” (p. 3).

Our first recognition of the significance and so-what of all this was simply that these memories had stood the test of time, that our bodies and minds had held on to these moments. We started to feel excited to explore why, and so we ignored the present and started in the past. We hope you enjoy the journey to the so-what just as much as we have.

SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS

RESEARCHER 1

I DON'T BELONG HERE

School hasn't ever been easy for me. At a young age, it became very clear that I was not where I should have been. My big wow moment looking back is at a parents' evening in Year 4 (age 8-9) when my teacher told my mum, "She doesn't even know the difference between the spelling of God and good." I can still remember sitting there and silently protesting that there was absolutely no difference! I can remember my exact thoughts; "There is no difference. Why is everyone tricking me? This doesn't feel good." I remember the feeling of sitting in the chair, staring at the blue folder tray as my teacher continued to explain how far behind I was. I remember the way my insides churned with feelings of frustration and embarrassment. My self-esteem was impacted by this moment, as I felt like a failure and that I would not achieve anything moving forward.

LAST DAY—FIRST DAY: THE POWER OF A TEACHER

On my last day of primary (elementary) school, my teacher told me and my parents that I should be sent to a Special Educational Needs School, as she said it was unrealistic for me to get many, if any GCSEs (high school qualifications). To illustrate her point, she pulled out a file that contained pieces of my work dating all the way back to Year 2. One example that stood out was a monster (see the synthetic reflection in the conclusion for illustration) I had drawn in my maths book in Year 3. My teacher stated that this showed my lack of concentration and understanding (While I had been drawing, I was supposed to have completed the time-tables test). This meeting is a distinct memory for me, because I remember feeling deeply ashamed and confused. It left me feeling like I had no hope for the future, especially within a school. My parents were unable to find a SEN school for me and thankfully were able to get me into a local high school and decided to see how things went. One school transformed my whole life. I cannot explain the pride and surprise I felt when, at the end of the first day of high school, my form teacher told me I had been put into the top set, for everything (including English and maths!). I told her it must be a mistake, that I couldn't possibly be in top set. She sat me down, looked me in eyes and told me that I was worthy of being in that class and that thinking differently deserved to be celebrated. After having spent all my time previously in education with a Teaching Assistant working with me, extra support classes, being viewed and feeling like I wasn't good enough, I finally felt like I had hope. I finally felt like a positive educational future wasn't unrealistic.



MOMENT OF BELONGING

Throughout my turbulent educational journey, I craved the feeling of belonging, yet I never felt like I belonged when I walked into a classroom. I always felt uncomfortable, itching to get out. So, when I think of positive school moments, I think of sport. My most significant memory was sports try-out day. Throughout the school day, they had taster/try-out sessions for the schools' sports teams. I quickly signed up for every session offered to girls (not just because it meant that I would miss lessons—ok, maybe a little—but also because I loved it). I spent the whole day engaged in netball, hockey, athletics, and basketball. I remember feeling so at peace, and for one of the first times ever, I enjoyed an entire day at school. That day, I found my safe space within education and the curriculum. I finally felt like I belonged.

RESEARCHER 2

NOT BEING SEEN

At the age of eight, I was diagnosed with Perthes Disease—disease most commonly developed between the ages of 3 and 11, whereby an inadequate supply of blood can lead to the deterioration of the femoral head. This can result in misalignment between the femoral head and the hip joint. After countless hospital visits and doctor's appointments, it was decided that I would require surgery to ensure the femur and hip meet correctly, as well as having supporting screws and plates in place. Unfortunately, I had developed this disease in both hips, and therefore, required major surgery and a cast that would cover both legs and incorporate braces to keep the legs in place.

Spending the entire school year in a wheelchair was a daunting experience. I was afraid to be seen as different or noticed because of my disability. These feelings were magnified by the fact that I had missed the final month of the previous school year due to my diagnosis and surgery. Many of my friends and teachers were supportive throughout the first week of school, which did not feel as scary as I first thought it might. Then came a day that left me feeling very upset and not seen at all. On the Friday morning of my first week back at school, we made our way to the sports hall for a shared assembly.

I can still feel the sense of panic and dread set in when I realised my teacher had taken us out of the classroom to the staircase exit. I sat alone, speechless, and unable to comprehend the feeling of being forgotten. I began to cry. It was a simple mistake by the teacher, but it foreshadowed the battle I was going to face in the coming year. Reflecting back, I now see the irony of not wanting to be seen as different, whilst not having my different needs met by someone I saw as a source of care.

PERFORMATIVE BELONGING

Growing up slightly unpopular and overweight due to my time spent in a wheelchair and physical therapy, I never felt like I belonged. This was until a scheme of work in Drama exploring the Italian theatrical style *Commedia dell'arte*. The first time performing as “Zanni” (a funny, foolish character), I suddenly felt like I had found my place. My classmates laughed during my



performance and encouraged me to keep improvising. This freedom allowed me to take on a class clown role, whilst not disrupting the flow of the lesson. I felt myself become free and approved of. Whilst I did not wear a literal mask for the performance, I felt as though a metaphorical one had been placed on my face. I was suddenly given an opportunity to make others laugh and, through doing so, find my place where I belonged in school. It is easy to say in hindsight, but I genuinely believe that, without this moment, it would be difficult to say whether I would have continued to study Drama for so long into my time in education.

FROZEN IN TIME

I have always felt a drive to do well in school. However, I have always felt a longing to lean on past accomplishments out of fear of failure. This has remained throughout my time in education, and I can most closely place the first time I felt this fear to finishing A-Level (final high school exams) Drama. I had just finished my final performance and was walking home from a shared celebration with all of my peers. What should have been a happy moment quickly turned into panic and dread for what was to come next. I felt a sense of anxiety around leaving this experience behind and not being able to do a performance again (even though I knew that I would be doing just that on my undergraduate degree!).

Reflecting back, the belonging I had found in Drama was challenged in the face of my journey into Higher Education. I found myself thinking this over and over again during the summer months, almost saying to myself “I was good at this thing, so why would I want to stop doing this thing?!” Even now, I find myself confronting this anxiety. My most recent encounter was completing my PhD in July 2023. Immediately the focus was on *what next* when all I wanted was to focus on the accomplishment and stay frozen in that moment. Of course, this has not prevented me from making progress and continuing to experience new things. Instead, it feels like I have anxiety until I find my new place of belonging. I have taken on numerous identities through curriculum and school—disabled, class clown, high achiever. What memory does not account for is the gaps between these labels, and those are the moments I am afraid of. My anxiety of moving on from previous achievements is a fear of not finding another subject, institution, or identity to call home.

RESEARCHER 3

(UN)NATURAL SELECTION TIME

At the age of 10, the four children in my year at our small, rural, primary school were taken to the room where we had lunch (driven from the nearby city to allow the custard to develop a really thick skin!) to sit a test. There were only about 30 children in the whole school, which later caused my daughter confusion as she asked why we had such an age range in my class and was shocked when I told her it was the whole school. I was not really sure what the test was for, but a few weeks later, two of us (why not the other two was not clear to me) did another test in the same room. It turned out these papers, known as the 11+, affected the rest of my life, as I then received a letter telling me I had passed and would be attending the very traditional all-boys grammar school in the nearby city, with over 800 pupils. On the first day, this was a big shock itself (although not

quite as big as the first session in the outdoor pool), but so was being called by my surname for the first time in my life. But, from the first year, I started playing rugby for the school—being fast and scared of bigger players proved a winning combination as they stopped chasing me if I scored.

SPORT OR MUSIC?

At age 17, in the first year of sixth form at school, I had been an established member of the school chapel choir and the first team in rugby for some time. There had never been any tension between the two subjects. But, the moment arose where the choir were going on a tour in France and the rugby team on a tour in Wales on the same dates. At the time, it seemed an easy decision, and France won (perhaps planting a predisposition for red wines that I have nurtured assiduously ever since), but the consequences had short- and long-term impact. Short term, I was selected less for the first team in rugby! But, I had to let one side down. Longer-term, music grew in importance. Singing continued to be a significant part of my life, both within school and after. It even got me my first teaching job as a professional singer in a cathedral choir and associated teaching job—serendipity in action? Music as a subject also became my professional context, as a music specialist primary teacher—instead of a secondary school sports teacher as I thought while at school. After leaving school, sport continued to occupy my time for a few years, until my knees signalled that music was the right choice. The apparently simple, curriculum-focused choice at 17 resulted in a career direction I had not expected.

THE RE-UNION AND CURRICULUM

Over 40 years after leaving school, I went to a reunion of my school year groups, which included a school tour (of which more later), drink (I enjoyed the red wine, so thank you choir tour), and meal. At the inevitable ‘who are you?’ early stage of the day, I was struck by two things: one, that they remembered me at all (was I actually slightly insecure about those years?); and two, how they remembered me—athletics and rugby—aspects of the curriculum again. “You were really fast,” “You played rugby didn’t you,” “I dislocated my finger trying to tackle you” (for which belated apologies were offered!), and so on. This resonated with a reunion with my own class some 20 years earlier, where the curriculum labels of music and sport were the labels attached, echoing the dilemma between the two described above.

FINDING MEANING IN THE WHY

After we had individually written the *currere* pieces, we came together as a group to share and discuss our past educational experiences. During this process, each person highlighted key themes and connections that they felt were evident from each of the reflections, whilst engaging in continuous conversations to ensure correct interpretation and understanding. As we were analysing personal past lived experiences, it was critical to support the authenticity of the reflection and allow each researcher to control their own regressive narrative. With varying ages and different genders, we assumed that we may not have many similarities in our experiences. However, as we moved to the analytical phase of our *currere* journey, we soon realised that the key part was that

we all had random, but significant, memories immediately come to our minds. So, we began to ask the questions: Why are these memories significant? Have these experiences impacted who we are? Are these significant memories actually random after all?

OUR *CURRERE* TAKE-AWAY: THE SO-WHAT

Our experiences within school and curriculum spaces have shaped who we are. These significant moments have stayed with us, even after leaving the classroom or school grounds. They have become a deeply ingrained part of who we are. As highlighted by Weisbrodt (2023), school spaces hold these significant moments:

We.

Are.

All.

Human.

We all have our baggage. Our facades that we put up at first. Our fears that we hide. And school is a keeper of all of those things whether we want to admit it or not. (p. 83)

Engaging with the *currere* process has allowed us to stop and reflect on our own baggage and explore how this has shaped our lives. Even though all three of us attended different schools at different times and had very different memories, each of our significant moments centred around two key themes: belonging and identity.

Our reflections suggest that education and curriculum experiences are critical in shaping identities, impacting both how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. These experiences significantly influence our sense of belonging, as well as our future aspirations and opportunities. Schools and the curriculum are not neutral spaces; they play fundamental roles in identity formation. This is particularly influenced through interactions with others (Goffman, 1959), such as peers, teachers, and the curriculum itself. Understanding this complex connection highlights the importance of creating inclusive and reflective educational environments that nurture positive self-perception and feelings of belonging and foster long-term identity development (Lithari, 2019).

SYNTHETIC REFLECTIONS

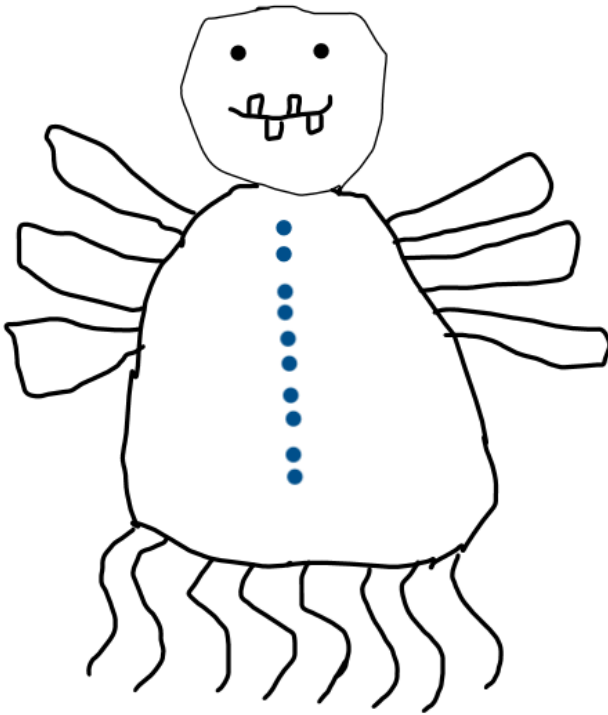
In this section, we provide small narrative reflections that highlight what we have discovered about how our past educational and curriculum experiences have touched our identities and life trajectories. The *currere* process has allowed us to learn from looking inwards, helping us piece together our own stories whilst exploring connections to and development of curriculum inquiry. Although this research has been based on three very unique personal narratives, we hope that the message is clear: we must acknowledge the power of our educational and curriculum experiences on our identities, sense of belonging, and futures.



RESEARCHER 1

I found the *currere* process to be deeply valuable, as it gave me the opportunity to connect my past with my present and my hopes for the future. It allowed me the space to pause and truly reflect on how my curriculum experiences have shaped who I am and my life path. This process reconnected me with my career ambitions and reignited my passion for creating more inclusive curriculum spaces. As highlighted in my reflections and the discussion, my experiences have been shaped by two key elements: the perceptions of others (especially teachers) and feeling a sense of belonging within a curriculum space (specifically in physical education/sport). It wasn't until I sat with these memories and engaged with my fellow researchers that I realised how much these moments had influenced my life. Considering I spent much of my life disliking education, it always seemed strange to me that I chose this career path, and now I think I know why. My motivations and passions in research and teaching tend centre around the importance of inclusion and celebrating differences. While teaching undergraduate students, I have often used an old friend to explore these issues; I would like you to meet my monster.

I have drawn my monster in numerous undergraduate classes. When doing so, I ask the future teachers, educators, educational psychologists, etc., the question, "What do you see?" We laugh and talk about my awful drawing abilities, and then I tell them the story of my monster: *I drew this in a Year 3 class, when we were supposed to be writing down our 2 times tables. My teacher came around and sent me out of the classroom as soon as they saw the monster. This then came back to haunt me on my last day in Year 6, when my teacher used it as an example of my lack of concentration and of my poor performance over the years.*



Then I ask the question again: "What do you see?" The answer: 2 eyes ($2 \times 1 = 2$), 4 teeth ($2 \times 2 = 4$), 6 arms ($2 \times 3 = 6$), 8 legs ($2 \times 4 = 8$), and 10 buttons ($2 \times 5 = 10$).

The students probably thought, "What is she on about?!" (I would probably think the same thing) at first, but it has often led to valuable conversations

about the curriculum, belonging, and inclusion.

I have carried my monster around with me since I was 7 years old. For a long time, I thought my monster was a bad thing, something to be ashamed of, something to hide away. It represented all the moments when I felt like I was a failure, that I did not understand school, and it didn't understand me. Just like my monster, I did not belong in a classroom.

Over time, without ever truly realising it, my "monster" began to guide my educational and career choices. These significant moments have fuelled my passion for creating a more inclusive and safe education system, with the hope that, one day, I can help other children feel seen and celebrated. It took a kind and caring teacher and finding my safe space within the curriculum (sport) to build my confidence, instil hope for the future, and help me see the beauty in my monster.



I am grateful for all that I have learnt during this *currere* process. I will continue to carry these significant moments with me as a reminder of how the past, present, and future come together; a reminder of the important, long-lasting impact of curriculum and educational experiences; a reminder of the importance of teachers and of feeling safe within school spaces; a reminder of how I got here and where I want to go. Finally, they remind me that not all monsters are bad.

RESEARCHER 2

I look back at that initial retreat and being introduced to *currere* as a method. Sat on a balcony overlooking the landscape of Aberystwyth, gathered with academics, researchers, and practitioners, I felt uncomfortable with the thought of reflecting back on my own experiences. Ironically, I always considered myself to be good at reflection and making links between my past and present experiences. I now deem these reflections to have been influenced by my need to reflect and what outcomes I wanted to achieve based on the reflective process, thus, not true reflection.

Currere has allowed me to spontaneously purge my brain—I use the word purge in the sense of getting rid of thoughts from my head and putting them into words on a page. Now, I come to reflecting on my reflections, putting greater clarity on what I may have been realising that sunny day (shocker I know given the typical weather in Wales) in Aberystwyth. I arrive at two main take-aways, how others see me through curriculum and finding my own sense of belonging within the curriculum.

Let's start with how others see me through the curriculum. My initial reflections demonstrated how sometimes I may not feel seen at all. Being bound to a wheelchair, although fortunately temporarily, and having my needs not considered left me feeling invisible. This contrasts with not wanting to be seen as different due to my disability. I can already identify a carefully balanced relationship that I hold with identity and curriculum.

I then bring these reflections to the subject of Drama and that Year 8 class on Italian comedic theatre. Being Zanni and having a mask to wear for others, I felt like I belonged. Making others laugh and having the approval of hearing their enjoyment as I made a fool of myself, I truly felt like I had found a place in the curriculum where I could be free. This sense of belonging, coupled with academic achievements in the subject of Drama, led me on a future career path that I later found to be misplaced. In hindsight, I do not know if I ever felt true belonging in the parameters of Drama. I have never been an avid theatregoer; this is usually an activity others would expect me to enjoy as someone who studied Drama until the age of 21. I now believe this sense of belonging to be the way that it made others view me. Being able to make others laugh brought popularity and a sense of accomplishment that I did not get from other areas of the curriculum.

To now this all seems like a slight dampener on the *currere* process—I reassure you that I found it extremely valuable and insightful! However, I must attempt to understand this everchanging relationship that I have with curriculum and my own identity. If we take the belonging I felt in the mask of Zanni, could it be that being good at something was enough to make me feel attached to it in some way? This brings me to the third of my significant reflections. Being good at something leaves me wishing I could remain frozen in time. This is a feeling I am still tackling and trying to understand. However, I feel that this perhaps demonstrates the dangers of curriculum and how others view us. I placed (and still to this day place) too much attention to how

others see me through the lens of curricular achievements. The fact that I was intent on becoming a Drama teacher all because I could make others laugh is baffling to me now, but ask 13-year-old me, and he would have been adamant that this was the path to follow. I guess what this leaves me with, as I bring my first chapter of *currere* to a close, is that relationships between identity, belonging, and the curriculum must be balanced. It can be as beneficial as it can be harmful to be viewed as a “Drama person” or a “Sports person.” Ultimately, being seen and heard is important, but it should not limit you to just one mask to wear for the rest of days.

RESEARCHER 3

The *currere* process has changed the way I look at things and think about research, especially what constitutes data. It has also made me look at things in a different way and reflect on how identity is formed, shaped, and remembered, including by the curriculum. It even changed the way I viewed and thought about a visit to my old school for the reunion mentioned above. Although much-changed, each person has specific memories evoked by visiting the different subject teaching rooms (e.g., the science labs), which even transcended the changed use of many—the sports hall is now two rooms for art, but many remembered sitting on the floor for assemblies and climbing wall bars. The visit made me consider how much I, and indeed the others, actually still *belong* there and how much that time and the curriculum shaped our identities.

It also made me consider the temporality of our curriculum memories. Are they frozen in time or still influential? None of these memories were apparent in myself or others on the reunion until revealed by the stimulus of a building or a person, just as our own memories were hidden from each other (and others) until revealed by the *currere* process. As we walked around the school, one small part of it remained hidden to those attending the school now but was vivid for all of us (perhaps because of the iced buns and chocolate—the school “tuck shop”—very small (hence the queue) and run by older pupils selling sweets and buns amongst other things. It was “hidden” because it no longer existed, but as the picture below shows, the sloping roofline remains (top rectangle in picture), revealing it to us. What I would have missed (I think, as *currere* was in my mind as we were writing this piece at the time) was the potential of the holes in the wall, concentrated in places but widely spread underneath the window (lower rectangle). A teacher from that time accompanied us and reminded us that these were formed by pupils queueing for breaktime treats and twisting coins (themselves something that future generations will not recognise) into the wall while waiting.



Although the building had gone (rather like any sporting excellence and ability to run fast I may have had), the holes in the wall remain as an embodiment of a memory, but is also a trigger to recall, or as a warrant to retrieve, individual memories. As such, they are seen by those who know but are unseen and unrecognised by others, such as current pupils who pass every day and do not even look at the holes, let alone realise what they are and represent—even the coin size has changed since that time!

THE END OF THE JOURNEY – BEFORE WE START ANOTHER ONE!

We suggest that, without the *currere* retreat, our memories, like the holes in the wall, would have remained present but hidden and unacknowledged. By looking inwards during our *currere* journey, they have been brought to the surface, and their influence recognised as significant influences on our lives then, now, and in the future.

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