

# WHAT I CARRY

## A CURRICULAR REFLECTION

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I did not realize how heavy the backpack was until I finally took it off. I carried my son Nick's drumline bag for almost six hours during the state competition—through the stadium, across the parking lot, during rehearsals, and up and down the Alamodome stairs. It was filled with everything a percussionist might need: water, snacks, extra drumsticks, bandages, safety pins, chargers, and a hoodie. We were not allowed to return to the buses, so I simply kept carrying it. Only when we arrived at the hotel and I took it off did my shoulders ache with relief. I had not known the weight until the moment it was gone.

I later realized the backpack was not the only heavy thing I had been holding.

I began my graduate work assuming philosophy would stay at a distance, belonging to scholars rather than someone like me, a community college instructor helping students write clear paragraphs and get through their first semester. But as the weeks went on, the readings felt surprisingly personal. They tugged at memories I had not revisited in years and asked questions I never expected coursework to ask of me.

A professor kept reminding us that theory is personal. I did not believe him at first. But slowly, as I read, the work became a mirror that showed me my story, my early attempts, my tenderness, and my questions with a clarity I could not ignore.

Curriculum theory became its own version of that backpack moment. I expected it to stay abstract and distant, yet it kept pressing me into contact with the details of my own life. Greene (1971/2022), quoting Schutz (1967), says that real understanding begins when we remain in contact with our own perceptions, a kind of “wide-awakeness” that invites us to notice what our experiences truly feel like (p. 157). As I read, memories returned differently, and I finally noticed what I had been carrying all along.

Pinar's (1978/2022) concept of *currere* helped me make sense of this uneasiness. The *currere* method encourages educators to move through the regressive, progressive, analytic, and synthetic phases of their own educational experience in order to see their lives as curriculum worthy of study. For me, working with *currere* meant returning to earlier moments in the regressive phase, imagining the teacher I hope to become in the progressive phase, analyzing how theory illuminates my experience in the analytic phase, and bringing everything together into a more complete understanding of the self I am becoming in the synthetic phase. Through this reflective process, I began to reinterpret what I carry as a teacher and as a person shaped by institutions that formed my beliefs about care, authority, and voice.

### RETURNING TO WHAT I CARRIED

Working with *currere* gave me the pause I needed to revisit earlier moments with honesty. Some surfaced more vividly than I expected. One of the heaviest weights I carried came in my early teaching career at a Christian school. I believed deeply in second chances, true second



chances that didn't punish students for struggling. One afternoon, I met with the principal about a student whose average was low. I suggested giving the student another opportunity to raise the grade. The principal looked at me and said, "Sara, your problem is that you care too much. You give your students the benefit of the doubt and believe in them when you should cut them off. They need to know their chances are gone."

I walked out of his office feeling small. I felt as if my instincts—checking on students, believing in them, offering room to grow—were signs of weakness. His words made me question whether care had any place in teaching. Looking back through the lens of curriculum theory, I see that moment differently. Noddings (2001/2022) writes that true care involves listening to the needs of the cared for and responding in a way the student recognizes as caring (p. 253). The principal did not listen to me, and he certainly did not listen to the student. Instead, he valued compliance, certainty, and a form of moral toughness that made no space for connection. That encounter reflected a philosophy of teaching that conflicted with who I was and who I was becoming.

### IMAGINING A DIFFERENT WAY OF TEACHING

Reflecting on that moment opened space for imagining a different way of being a teacher. When I arrived at Amarillo College years later, I felt the difference almost immediately. Here, care is not weakness. It is expected. The Culture of Caring asks instructors to meet students where they are and to offer chances rather than expecting them to succeed under rigid limitations. This approach aligns with Noddings's (2001/2022) claim that education should avoid coercing all children into the same pattern and instead ensure that learning is worthwhile both intellectually and emotionally (p. 256).

I remember one student who had fallen far behind after a family crisis. At my previous school, I was pressured to deny another chance, to hold the line. However, at Amarillo College, the conversation was entirely different. I was asked, "What support does she need? What barriers can we remove? What does care look like for her right now?" That moment helped heal the earlier wound. My instinct to believe in students and remain relational was not a liability. It was welcomed.

Valenzuela's (1999/2022) work affirms this shift. She writes that students expect teachers to care for them before expecting them to care about school (p. 285). At Amarillo College, I can feel this truth in our daily work. My natural way of being a teacher, one that prioritizes connection, is not a weakness. It is an asset. Curriculum theory helped me reinterpret my earlier experience not as inadequacy but as evidence that I belonged in a place where care is central.

### RE-READING MY STORY THROUGH THEORY

Rethinking my experience also reshaped how I understood culture and identity. For years, I used to say I was colorblind, meaning I believed that I treated all students the same. I thought that was the most caring thing I could do. Working with students whose racial and cultural backgrounds differ from mine has changed that. They do not want to be blurred into sameness. They want to be seen for who they are. Bowers (2017/2022) reminds us that relational thinking requires using examples from the cultures represented in the classroom itself (p. 404). I realized that I had been doing the opposite. I had been flattening difference instead of honoring it.



Valenzuela (1999/2022) explains that teachers often expect students to care about school in a technical way before teachers show care for them, yet students expect teachers to care for them first (p. 285). Authentic care requires noticing and honoring identity rather than erasing it in the name of equality. Looking back, I understand that claiming to be colorblind was not care. Care is noticing, listening, and honoring difference, not pretending difference does not exist. This realization changed how I approach relationships and the classroom community I want to create.

The same pattern appeared in my relationship with AI literacy. For a long time, I told students to avoid AI. I treated it as a moral issue and insisted they must struggle on their own. That approach troubled me. I spent energy policing instead of supporting learning. Eventually, I recognized that my strict stance resembled that of the principal who told me to stop caring.

The turning point came when I used AI to draft a Ministry Minute, a brief devotional message I prepared for my faith community. The draft did not sound like me. It felt hollow as though I had handed over my voice. That moment taught me an important lesson. AI itself is not harmful but losing one's voice is. Students need to learn how to use AI thoughtfully and remain authors of their own work.

Curriculum theory reframed this journey. Pinar (1978/2022) argues that curriculum should liberate those within it, freeing us from the rigid prescriptions that dominate schooling (p. 179). My earlier stance on AI did the opposite. Dewey (1897/2022) describes education as a continuing reconstruction of experience (p. 37). His perspective encouraged me to adapt to the world my students inhabit. Freire (1968/2022) insists that teachers should propose problems rather than dictate answers (p. 145). AI literacy became a problem to explore instead of a rule to enforce. Now, students compare AI drafts, evaluate suggestions, and reflect on authorship. Eisner (2001/2022) reminds us that the purpose of schooling is to help students do better in life (p. 261). AI is part of that life.

## A CURRICULUM OF BECOMING

Looking back through *currere*, I can see how these experiences connect. The backpack moment awakened me to the lived burdens that shape how we learn. The principal's words revealed how educational environments can distort care. Amarillo College helped me reclaim care as central to my identity. My AI journey showed me that I can grow and guide students toward learning that honors their voices.

These memories form a curriculum of becoming. Curriculum theory did not give me new stories. It helped me reinterpret the ones I had lived. Greene (1971/2022) helped me notice meaning in my perceptions. Pinar (1978/2022) gave me language for teaching as autobiography. Noddings (2001/2022) and Valenzuela (1999/2022) reminded me that care is foundational. Dewey (1897/2022) and Freire (1968/2022) urged openness and critical reflection. Eisner (2001/2022) reminded me to focus not only on learning but on life.

Engaging with curriculum theory did more than give me words for what I carried. It changed what I value in the classroom. I used to believe good teaching was mostly about clarity and discipline. Now I understand that it is also about presence, connection, and willingness to transform. My classroom is not just a place where assignments happen. It is a space shaped by relationships, including my own. I want to design curriculum that honors student experience, invites voice, and remains open to change. Care will remain my foundation, not because it is soft, but because it is necessary. As AI evolves, I hope to help students use it with integrity and



confidence. I am grateful for how engaging in curriculum theory helped me see my past, my teaching, and my future with new clarity.

I am still learning what to carry and what to set down. Caring is not weakness. Awareness is not softness. Flexibility is not failure. Evolving does not mean abandoning who I am. It means becoming more fully the teacher I am meant to be. When I shoulder the metaphorical backpack of my classroom with its policies, expectations, relationships, and tools, I try to pause and feel the weight. I may not always be able to put it down, but I can choose what stays inside.

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