

MORE ACTION, PLEASE

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PROLOGUE

Pinar (1994) assures us that the currere method allows for the “viewing of what is conceptualized through time...so it is that we hope to explore the complex relation between the temporal and conceptual” (p. 19). This story is based on my past experiences as a novice teacher and my current experiences as a teacher educator. I am seeking the links between my younger self, the students I teach now, and our joint futures in the world of education. It is a work of ficto-currere. McDermott McNulty (2018) defines ficto-currere as text that is “fictionalized autobiography—an effort which engages the currere process” and creates a narrative that “blends and blurs the lines between what is true (or real) with that which is imaginatively constructed” (p. 2). Parts of this narrative really happened, parts of this narrative are still happening, and parts of narrative should never happen again.

ELEVATOR MUSIC

She headed to the elevator too tired to worry with the stairs. It had been a long class where she once again felt like she needed better answers to student questions earnestly asked. Pressing the elevator’s call and floor buttons was no small feat as bag, papers, and coffee mug all seemed to be conspiring to prevent her progress. Why is everything such a struggle today, she fumed to herself as coffee dripped down her hand. The Muzak was unusually loud she noticed. What is this song? I know this one. Elvis maybe? But she had no time to finish the thought, as the doors finally opened at her floor forcing her to focus on swimming her way out of the elevator against the tide of waiting undergraduates and down the hall to her office.

Settled in with a new coffee, she spread the chart papers out to review the student project ideas again. Teacher Leadership was a required course for sophomore preservice teachers, and she had taught it for several semesters now. It was one of her favorites because the main goal was to provoke students into exploring what Poetter (2019) suggests are the ways teachers can and should be creators not just mere enactors of curriculum. But it was also a challenging course to teach since students, in the field placement days, observed “real” teachers, and what they say during those outings rarely matched up with what she was encouraging them to explore in class. Students routinely expressed their fear and frustration that what they were seeing teachers do was online, textbook, and standards-based instruction. This type of instruction was “required” for the state tests and mandated for teachers to follow since many districts were heavily invested in diagnostic programs to track student progress toward meeting proficiency targets. Students simply did not see where there was room in the school day for the creative, teacher-based curriculum planning she advocated for in class. Their questions were hard to refute: How are we supposed to rock the boat when we will be new teachers with little power? I will need to keep my job you know. If the state testing matters so much to my evaluation, then I’ll have to pay a lot of attention to my student’s scores.

Even so, it had been an enjoyable semester so far. Along the way, she felt grateful for the thoughtful discussions and the willingness of the students to trouble how teacher leaders can adapt curriculum to address needs within the local community they serve. The discussion on this day, however, had her rattled for reasons she couldn’t quite

pin down. All semester, she had pushed the students to truly think of themselves as researchers once they became teachers, encouraging them to study their craft—the art and science of teaching—and take an active role to share these findings with their fellow teachers, other educators, and those outside the field.

As they reviewed the drafts of ideas for the course's final group project, which required them to assume the role of a team of middle school teachers developing an integrated curricular unit addressing a community need or social justice issue, she once again stressed the importance of working collaboratively across content areas and for them to think creatively about how to assess student progress beyond testing for skills mastery. It was at this point that Kaylee, a bright student and frequent critic of thinking outside the box, challenged her.

“Why does this have to be a group project? My mom says the best thing for me to do is ‘close my door and teach.’ Because teachers don’t work together on this stuff because they don’t even get time to plan together anyway.”

Lots of nods and knowing glances in Kaylee's direction ensued, which encouraged her to continue. Kaylee went on to lament about how professors only seem to talk about things like creating culturally relevant curriculum, running democratic classrooms, and confronting social injustice, but rarely offered students the opportunity to actually practice any of those things in an authentic way. Other students started chiming in to ask why in class there was just talk about how to run a collaborative classroom, integrate curriculum, engage in teacher-based action research, and create professional learning communities, rather than these things being what they did for their course work. Realizing things were getting away from her quickly, she offered a counter.

“Well, I learned how to do all of those things along the way over the arc of a career. Teaching is a profession where you learn on the job, you know. I didn’t learn all of that in my classes.”

All twenty-two pairs of student eyes locked on her, and she could feel the question behind the stare. Why not?

“Well, if all the doing of teaching is learned after I start the job, what’s the point of getting a degree in teaching then?” Kaylee asked, “I could’ve just majored in math and biology and done the Teach for America thing after graduation.”

She didn’t have the energy to mount a comeback, and it was time to wrap up anyway. She lamely threw out, “Good discussion today; we’ll pick it up Thursday,” as a class ender. But Kaylee's point stung and stuck in her brain. Why get a teaching degree indeed? Why not just major in your content area and then complete an alternative licensure option like Teach for America? Defenses of traditional multi-year teaching preparation programs jumped around in her thoughts.

Even so, her mind drifted back to a scene from her first years of teaching, and she felt the familiar sense of regret. She had been teaching for four years and had just moved from the middle school to the high school. She was assigned three bells of American Literature with a total of about 90 students. Being new to the high school, she hadn’t been a part of the previous year’s meetings where agreements about course content had been made. The other American Lit teacher explained that all the classes read Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because it was a “classic” as well as being “culturally relevant” as it allowed teachers to address issues of racial diversity and social class. This type of planning was pretty typical of the district. While there was a basic course guide for teachers who shared the same class, which laid out a yearly timeline for addressing the state standards, teachers mostly did their own thing.

First quarter had come and gone, so she had already learned that, unlike her middle school colleagues, the high school teachers didn't engage in any formal discussion about the students, what they were doing, or how it was working. Still, she was grateful the other American Lit teacher had at least given her a starting point by sharing unit resources for the novel. She enthusiastically reread *Huck Finn*, got her background readings about Twain, satire, parody, and the time period set, and looked forward to starting the unit. Things seemed to go well. Group discussion showed that students were reading the novel without the usual threats of basic comprehension quizzes. The first set of reflective essays indicated that students were making connections between the themes of the novel and the background material. And, most promising of all, several boys who happened to be on the football team and who she usually had a hard time getting engaged were willingly participating during in-class readings, as well as Socratic seminar time. Life was good.

But, a few weeks later during hallway duty when supervising locker bay transition at dismissal, she found all was not as well as it seemed to be. The student population for the high school was overwhelmingly white. A little less than half the students were on free and reduced lunch, the district proxy for measuring students in poverty. The surrounding area was rural transitioning to suburban. All of which meant, in classroom dynamic terms, that most of the 90 students in her sections were white and fell into the lower socioeconomic class status category. Only a handful were students of color. She had worried about this disparity when she first learned she would be teaching *Huck Finn*, but when she had tried to raise the issues with colleagues, all she got were shoulder shrugs and "we've always taught the book" reassurances.

On that day, standing in the hallway, she heard them before she saw them.

"Hey, Nigger Jim, how about you carry my gym bag to practice?"

Turning the corner, she saw this taunt had been hurled by Steve, a lanky boy who drove a pickup complete with gun rack and Confederate flag sticker in the back window, at Daniel who was the lone African American student in her 3rd bell class.

Straightening up as he slung his backpack over his shoulder, Daniel turned to face Steve and respond, "Sure thing, Huck, right after hell freezes over."

She knew immediately as they walked away without noticing her standing there that this wasn't the first time. She knew that every time they read the N-word aloud in class, every time they talked about the character of Jim, every time questions about racism came up during discussion, Daniel was being mocked in the most racist of ways by this group of boys. That was why they participated in group discussions—why they were reading the novel. They were using the language and storyline to torment Daniel. And, they were doing it with her help because she had failed to pick up on what was going on.

The memory still turned her face red and hot as she finished the coffee that had gone cold. She had been angry, guilt-ridden, ashamed, and frustrated at the time, and she was still disappointed now for not having done better by Daniel and the rest of the students. Her anger with her colleagues also came flooding back—the indifference on Carol's face when she confided in her later the next day.

"Yeah, it happens," Carol had said. "We've all that that kind of stuff come up at one point with some groups of kids."

"Wait, you knew this was a thing? Stuff? It's not just stuff between the kids, Carol. It is straight up racism...it's worse than 'stuff' between 'some groups' of kids." She'd asked, "Why didn't you tell me? I could have been ready or at least been on the lookout?"

“Don’t worry about it so much,” Carol shrugged. “You live and learn. Now, you’ll be ready next time. Trial by fire is the best teacher.”

Teachers learning on the job, sure, she thought as she recalled this exchange, but what about the Daniels in their classes?

Her colleagues had given her no professional learning community to turn to for guidance and certainly no sharing out of past learning about how to address the issues in the novel with the students they were teaching. Her teacher preparation program hadn’t equipped her to handle tough moments like this one either. And while it was true no education program could address every teaching situation, she couldn’t shake the feeling that, if she’d spent more time practicing lesson building and actually teaching kids as an undergrad and then debriefing with professors and in-field teachers, she would have been better prepared for developing the *Huck Finn* unit in ways that were more culturally relevant for the small-town, low-diversity population she was serving.

She had spent four years in a traditional teacher education program at a highly respected and accredited university. The faculty and coursework in her subject area were top notch. Faculty in the department were well known and respected in the field. Learning theory, pedagogy, and content instruction could not have been better. But when it came to the act of teaching, she recalled doing a lot of watching and talking rather practicing teaching herself—well, other than her very short twelve weeks of apprenticeship during student teaching—just like her current students, she realized.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. She laughed at herself. I’m Kaylee questioning the point of the program, its structure, and how it serves me as a practitioner.

The laughter left her as she pondered, What about all the Daniels in classrooms today? What about all the new teachers? What is the consequence of not training teachers any differently?

She respected and was honored to work at her university. It regularly earned awards for undergraduate teaching. The university was also committed to training future teachers to confront social injustice and to empower them to participate in democratic society. And yet, she had to admit, when it came to the actual practice of learning to teach, the program was still steeped in the watching, talking about, and limited apprenticeship model she had experienced decades ago.

There were a few differences she could identify. She and other faculty certainly tried to tie course materials to the students’ field placements more. The field block classes required students to do more observations of teaching in the field too. And, most important to her, there was a student led conference each semester requiring students to develop a culturally relevant curriculum unit based on a social justice issue. This was the project her class was working on. They never teach this unit to real students in an actual school setting though, she mused, they just talk about it with their peers and faculty. She was getting tired, and it was getting late. Still, the loop kept repeating in her mind. Her students needed a sustained practice of teaching beyond just the semester of student teaching their last year in the program. It is not enough. She was feeling frustrated again. It wasn’t for me, and it’s not for them.

What can be different? How can we change this? Mind jumping, she gathered her things and worked her way to the door. She didn’t want to think about what her impact on Daniel had been and perhaps even continued to be. She thought about the work of Goodlad (1994) and others who argued for a model of teacher training akin to the training medical doctors received. Although, she thought, doctors and teachers are both

facing a dehumanization of our professions, enduring calls to standardize practice and take the possibility for human error out of the equation. In both professions, we now find ourselves trying not to be human while still cultivating care and compassion and serving our students as well as the larger society. These were human endeavors that were being automated with robot-like precision. The ridiculous irony was giving her a headache.

Halfway to the elevator, she dropped her bag, and her handouts on Dewey skittered down the hallway. As she scooped them up, Ellen Lagemann's (1989) quote on the page caught her eye, "[I] often argued to students, only in part to be perverse, that one cannot understand the history of education in the United States during the twentieth century unless one realized that Edward L. Thorndike won and John Dewey lost" (p. 185). What would happen if the ideals of Dewey, Woodson, and other educational progressives were to have their moment to shine in earnest? She had this debate often with students based on the quote. This was the crux of their push back about the gap they saw between teachers in the field preparing students for standardized testing and the type of creative curriculum making she argued for in class. Something lightened in her step as she pondered this more. In terms of teacher education, what kinds of experiences could we offer that would give our preservice teacher students authentic, and sustained opportunities to really practice creative teaching? A way to break the cycle.

Her mind was picking up pace with a new loop. At the very least, we could have students complete a yearlong (or maybe even two?) residency as their student teaching requirement not just 10 or 12 weeks. There could be elementary and secondary schools connected to university teacher preparation programs. She remembered reading about Goodlad's (1994) idea to have "centers of pedagogy" in the vein of Dewey's concept of laboratory schools. Didn't she write a paper about his for her doc program ten years ago? Where was that file? For Goodlad (1994), there could be a reciprocal learning between university faculty, secondary teachers, and preservice teachers who were all participating in research about best instructional practice with students and families involved as well. She also recalled that laboratory schools had been up and running at many universities, including hers, before the standardization movement in American education took hold.

She arrived at the elevator making mental notes to pull her Dewey and Goodlad materials out when she got home. She was feeling a little more hopeful now. Had I been able to practice the art and science of teaching in a collaborative environment such as the laboratory school model perhaps I could have crafted lessons for *Huck Finn* and fostered a classroom learning community to prevent what happened to Daniel in the hallway that day. If not, at the very least, I may have been better prepared to move forward with the class the next day to address the incident after collaborating with my peers and faculty mentors. I could have benefited from the collective experience of my professors and colleagues.

Now in the elevator, she punched the down button, the Muzak caught her attention again. Same song. Suddenly it clicked, Elvis. She sang the song's chorus along with the tune coming from the crackling speakers,

A little less conversation, a little more action, please
 All this aggravation ain't satisfactioning me
 A little more bite and a little less bark
 A little less fight and a little more spark (Davis & Strange, 1968)

Less talk, more action, indeed.

References

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