Returning to the Elementary Classroom
Reflections from a Sabbatical Spent Co-Teaching with a First-Year Teacher

By Chloe S. Bolyard
Missouri State University

Prologue: Returning

It's the second day of the 2025–2026 school year and my first day back in an elementary classroom in more than a decade. I sit on a stool near a wall of windows in a century-old building, computer open on my lap, waiting for the arrival of the fourth graders with whom I will spend my sabbatical from my university where I am an Associate Professor of Elementary Education. I will be co-teaching alongside their first-year teacher, Megan, for the fall semester.[1]

After breakfast in the classroom, students settle into free writing in their journals before participating in a brief ritual that includes a "unite, connect, commitment, and calm" activity. Their teacher then leads them through a discussion of the classroom essentials matrix, reminding them: "I'm speaking, so eyes should be on me." Students are directed to "go back to [their] desks and come to the carpet again to meet the 'coming to the carpet expectations.'" They are expected to be at a voice level zero—silent.

For thirty-five minutes, Megan calls on students to contribute ideas to the first two columns of the district-required matrix poster, which displays "Be Safe, Be Respectful, and Be Responsible" along the left column and "Lining Up, Transitions, Whole Group, and Small Group" across the top row. I can feel the students' restlessness rising. To re-energize the room, Megan turns on a YouTube brain-break video—a freeze dance—and instructs students to stay at a voice level one (a whisper). I jot in my notes, "seems hard to whisper when dancing."

A wiggly student, recently moved to a different seat, is the first to begin dancing, his grin widening as others join in. For a moment, the room hums with movement and laughter before the teacher turns off the video. An hour into the matrix discussion, Megan reminds students of bathroom expectations then leads them down multiple flights of stairs for a break. In the hallway, a pair of students begins quietly playing rock-paper-scissors. "We're not playing games right now. Face forward," she directs them.

As my three observation hours end, I watch the class line up for recess, their sneakers squeaking softly on the tile. I feel both exhilarated and unsettled—so much of this feels familiar, yet I'm aware of how much I've changed since last being in a classroom like this. I wonder which of Megan's teacher moves, if any, trace back to the intro-to-teaching course she took with me years ago. I notice how my parenting lens—new since I last taught elementary students—shapes how I see these moments. And I can't help but note how student compliance seems to be valued over engagement and agency.

I close my laptop and exhale, thinking: What impact can I have here?

IMPETUS FOR A SABBATICAL

Ten years ago, I defended my dissertation, which centered on a guiding question that has continued to shape my work: How are veteran teachers navigating increasing accountability demands, and have they found ways to subvert the pressures I had succumbed to as an early-career teacher? (Bolyard, 2016). In that study, I shared both their stories and my own, using *currere* as both a method and analytic lens. Simultaneously, during my doctoral studies, I began to recognize how deficit beliefs I had held as an elementary teacher had shaped my practices—a consequence, in part, of the limited guidance and feedback I received during my teacher preparation program. This realization deepened my understanding that enactment matters—intentions and ideas about equity alone are not enough (Milner & Laughter, 2015). What truly shapes students' experiences are the ways beliefs and commitments are enacted—or fail to be enacted—in daily practice. With this awareness, I set out to guide preservice and in-service teachers more intentionally, a focus that continues to shape my course design and research (see Benedict-Chambers et al. 2025; Bolyard & Baker, 2021; Howard et al., 2024,).

This focus on intentional enactment and equity directly shaped the commitments I articulated at the time of my dissertation defense. Also at that time, I was offered an elementary teaching position in the district where I had previously taught, and in considering that possible future, I made the following commitments:

> I have an opportunity to return to the elementary classroom and define successful teaching *my* way… . Through critical reflection (Howard, 2003), I will continuously interrogate whether or not the experiences I am facilitating in my classroom are educative or miseducative (Dewey, 1938/1997). I will consider whether my actions "[enable] the choices of others and … [support] the human impulse to grow?" (Ayers, 2010, p. 36). Additionally, I will evaluate whether or not I am practicing an ethic of caring (Noddings, 2003) toward my students by treating them as whole persons and placing them above subject matter (Ayers, 2010).
> …This commitment demands a departure from my past teacher self, that part that bought into others' definitions of success that contradict my beliefs about the aims and purposes of education. It requires taking the time to honestly reflect and critically interrogate my decisions with students (Ayers, 2010). It requires constantly revisiting my beliefs and commitments about teaching and learning while evaluating whether or not my actions align with those beliefs. It means being aware of the symptoms that accompany the gradual acceptance of the status quo that devalues students as humans: a narrowing of the curriculum, less time for interpersonal relationships, a decreased focus on creativity and exploration, and an obsession with data. (Bolyard, 2016, p. 73)

I ultimately declined the elementary teaching position and accepted an adjunct faculty role that fall, which came with a demanding supervisory load, traveling to area schools to observe and evaluate practicum and student teachers. In Fall 2017, I began as a tenure-track Assistant Professor of Elementary Education, teaching core undergraduate courses such as *Teaching and Learning in the Elementary Classroom* and *Reflective Practitioner*, as well as graduate courses exploring curriculum and equity. Unlike my adjunct role observing candidates in elementary classrooms, my tenure-track role has involved no supervisory responsibilities, and most of my work has taken place on campus or online.

Being away from the elementary classroom for nearly 13 years has raised numerous concerns for me. Despite my ongoing research on teacher education issues—such as teaching self-efficacy, preservice teacher preparedness, teachers' noticing for equity, and beliefs about diversity—I've often feared that my students might perceive me as out of touch. For instance, in *Teaching and Learning in the Elementary Classroom*, I teach candidates to design 5E (Bybee, 2014) lesson plans that align with research-based practices. Yet, some express frustration that this work feels disconnected from what they observe their cooperating teachers doing in actual classrooms: "Dr. Bolyard, teachers don't write detailed lesson plans!" Similarly, I have wondered whether my course design for my master's-level curriculum course, *Contemporary Issues in Elementary Curriculum*, effectively supports practicing teachers in engaging with our guiding question, "How can elementary curriculum promote a more equitable, compassionate, and just society?" within the constraints and pressures they navigate in their own school contexts (Bolyard, 2025). My grad students often ask, "Okay, but how do we do this work without getting fired?!"

Looking back, I see my journey as one of continual negotiation between ideals and practice. This process began long before my tenure-track role and continues to shape how I understand, teach, and mentor teachers. It also left me with a persistent question: how could I reconnect with the daily life of classrooms to better align my commitments to equity, care, and meaningful learning with the realities teachers and students face today? This question—shaped by years of work increasingly centered on coursework, coordination, and institutional responsibilities rather than sustained classroom presence—became the impetus for my sabbatical.

Hopes and Fears for Returning

When I applied for my sabbatical, I imagined returning to an elementary classroom after more than a decade away. I wanted to enact culturally responsive teaching and see how Megan's learning—both in her undergraduate coursework and through the Grow Your Own (GYO) program I partially oversaw, which prepares local teacher candidates to return to teach in their home communities—manifested in her daily practice and interactions with students and families. I wanted to engage directly with district curricula, understand the demands on today's first-year teachers, and support Megan in becoming excellent. I hoped this experience would yield insights I could share with my teacher education colleagues to spark discussions about bridging the gap between theory and practice. My focus was utilitarian: identify gaps, document challenges, and bring practical knowledge back to higher education. I did not yet realize how much I would learn about myself.

Inspired by Poetter's (2012) *Teaching Again: A Professor's Tale of Returning to a Ninth Grade Classroom*, which chronicles his semester-long return to high-school teaching after years in higher education, I decided to situate my research in a fourth-grade classroom alongside Megan, a first-year teacher. I didn't want to merely observe or teach in isolation; I wanted to co-teach, to immerse myself in the work alongside someone navigating the first year's challenges. My guiding questions, reframed through *currere*, were: What do I learn about myself as an educator when I return to co-teach with a first-year teacher? How does this lived experience reframe my understanding of teacher preparation and culturally responsive practice?

Leading up to the sabbatical, I carried a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Questions from colleagues—"Are you excited for sabbatical?"—left me feeling guilty for not answering with a resounding "Yes!" I was nervous about my changing role and the lack of weekly structure: as the

primary researcher, the schedule, focus, and structure were all up to me. I worried about being viewed as an expert by the principal and teachers and felt anxious sitting in meetings filled with unfamiliar processes and acronyms. Underlying all of this was a persistent fear of being "out of touch." How could I help Megan be excellent if I did not feel excellent at navigating all the district's current practices?

Megan became both collaborator and mirror during this process, reflecting aspects of my own teaching identity and helping me notice assumptions, habits, and values I might not have seen otherwise. Her experiences as a student with ADHD, growing up near Ferguson during a time of social unrest, and navigating her initial teaching experience as a long-term sub following graduation shaped her relational and equity-focused approach. She had managed a classroom with intensive behavioral needs, limited administrative support, and little mentoring, and she saw her first year as a "restart"—an opportunity to shift her focus from behavior management to the craft of teaching itself, including assessment practices, student discourse, and experimenting with co-teaching strategies. Her journey reminded me that teaching is deeply relational (Howard et al., 2020), shaped by the personal histories educators carry with them (Garmon, 2005; Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014), the lived experiences through which they make meaning in practice (Chiner et al., 2015), and the community contexts that mediate how relationships are formed, constrained, and sustained. Working alongside her, I anticipated a reconnection with the improvisational, responsive, and embodied relational work of elementary teaching—forms of relational labor that are continuous and immediate in classroom life and enacted more reflectively and episodically in teacher education contexts.

Even as I navigated my pre-sabbatical anxieties, I imagined the possibilities of the semester ahead. I envisioned supporting Megan as she refined her instructional strategies, experimented with new practices, and made sense of learning from her teacher preparation program in the context of her classroom. I imagined how her experiences might illuminate the realities of first-year teaching and how our collaboration could spark new ways of thinking about the relationship between theory and practice. I looked forward to seeing students' learning unfold and wondered how I could contribute to creating a classroom environment that was equitable and joyful.

I approached the classroom with curiosity, a bit of trepidation, and a great deal of excitement, aware that I could not anticipate everything that would emerge, yet eager to reclaim, reimagine, and enact possibilities I had carried for over a decade. This progressive moment was about entering a space of potential, where questions about culturally responsive practice, teacher preparation, and my own role as an educator could meet the reality of the classroom in a way I had not yet experienced.

THE CONVERGENCE OF MY PAST SELF, PRESENT SELF, AND HOPED-FOR TEACHER SELF

From the first week of my sabbatical in Megan's classroom, it became clear that I was not simply observing teaching; I was inhabiting an analytical moment shaped by the convergence of past, present, and anticipated futures. This convergence was marked by ongoing uncertainty about my role and authority in the space. I entered as a participant-observer with the expectation that I would co-teach, support, and learn alongside Megan. In practice, however, my positioning shifted constantly—sometimes by choice, often by circumstance—and with each shift came the recurring question: *Am I doing this right?*

This instability in authority and belonging reflects what Googins and Angelone (2025) described as the dual identity of teacher educators returning to K–12 classrooms: teachers again, but not *only* teachers—changed by theory, scholarship, and institutional positioning in ways that complicate presence, belonging, and action. Rather than a linear narrative of growth, what emerged was an analytical moment in which my past teaching self, my present institutional positioning, and my hoped-for teacher self repeatedly collided, shaping how—and whether—I intervened, observed, or held back.

As I recognized classroom practices that ran counter to commitments to care, agency, and humanizing pedagogy—commitments emphasized across my institution's teacher preparation program and present in my own teaching of Megan as an undergraduate—I was drawn into a deeper inquiry: how do shared values hold, shift, or erode as teachers move from preparation into the daily realities of schooling? My attention, however, was not fixed on Megan. It was pulled toward the students living these practices in real time. As a parent and former classroom teacher, I felt a deep empathy for them and an unease about what these moments might mean for their learning, their sense of belonging, and the stories they were already internalizing about school.

That tension—between schooling done *to* students and schooling done *with* them—was not new to me (Safir & Dugan, 2021). It has threaded through my teaching life, resurfacing whenever efficiency and control are privileged over relational presence. On my first day, I watched familiar routines unfold: attention was secured through hand signals and call-and-response cues; expectations were made visible through a behavior matrix, voice-level charts, and ClassDojo projected on the board; transitions were rehearsed and reset until bodies were still, eyes forward, and voices quiet. These systems produced order quickly, yet they positioned students primarily as responders to directives rather than as partners in shaping classroom life.

My initial responses to these practices were evaluative. I wondered what Megan remembered from her preparation, what I had failed to disrupt strongly enough in my own teaching, and whether I should intervene more directly. Those judgments were quickly complicated by recognition, as the classroom structures I was observing reactivated my own teaching past, particularly my second year in the classroom, the most difficult of my career.

I recognized myself in what I was seeing. I, too, had relied on clip charts, isolated seating, and having students walk laps at recess in the name of order and accountability. That recognition did not absolve the practices I found troubling, but it reframed my stance toward Megan. It shifted my response from judgment to empathy, grounded in the understanding that early-career teachers often enact systems they did not design within institutional conditions that reward compliance and efficiency over relational care (Venet, 2021). Returning to the classroom forced me to confront not only how easily these practices narrow relationships, creativity, and care—but also how fragile preparation-era commitments become once teachers are accountable to pacing guides, observations, and disciplinary systems that leave little room for experimentation.

As these moments accumulated, I felt increasing pressure to respond. Yet responding raised new uncertainties about role and responsibility. Was I a co-teacher, a mentor, a researcher, or an informal coach? During a co-planned and co-taught inquiry lesson, the principal conducted an unannounced observation. After Megan transitioned her students to lunch, I briefly spoke with the principal about the lesson. When I later realized that this informal exchange had been referenced in an administrative conversation about Megan's teaching, I questioned whether I had crossed a confidentiality line. Megan's subsequent request that I not communicate with administrators about her teaching without her present crystallized this tension and required a recalibration of my role.

At the same time, this moment surfaced a deeper ethical dilemma embedded in the design of the research itself. To establish trust with Megan and create space for professional risk-taking, I had initially assured her that my research reflections would not be shared with her principal. That boundary was tested early in the sabbatical during a brief, somewhat awkward exchange as I accompanied Megan and her class to lunch, when the principal greeted me and asked, “How’s it going so far?” I recall responding, “I have a lot of thoughts,” aware in that moment of my uncertainty about what—if anything—I could appropriately share. My ongoing commitment to students’ learning and to the quality of their classroom experience, however, sometimes pulled against that boundary as instructional decisions unfolded in real time within an evaluative system. I honored that initial commitment, even as I became acutely aware that my institutional positioning carried weight regardless of context or intent, and that ethical responsibility in school-based participant-observation involves holding firm commitments while reckoning with their unintended consequences.

These uncertainties were not limited to administrative interactions. I also questioned my instructional role. Watching the principal guide Megan through structured pre- and post-observation conferences, I found myself wondering whether I was “doing co-teaching right” and whether my more informal, relational approach to feedback was sufficient or ethically sound. At times, I felt the pull to correct Megan’s practice directly; at others, I worried that doing so would undermine her confidence or replicate hierarchical coaching relationships I was trying to resist.

Despite this uncertainty, I did intervene—often quietly, sometimes impulsively, and always imperfectly. When students walked laps at recess or practiced silent hallway routines that cut into free time, I struggled to hold back my discomfort, not knowing when these decisions were mandated or chosen. When Megan confided that these practices made her feel like students were “prisoners,” my relief was matched by frustration at the systems placing her in that position. In these moments, I questioned whether my responsibility lay in supporting Megan’s survival within the system, advocating for students experiencing harm, or pushing against the structures themselves—knowing I could not do all three equally.

My role felt clearest when working directly with students. When Trenton lost Dojo points, walked laps, or struggled to regulate his body, I did not see him in isolation. I saw students from my own classroom—children I had not reached as fully as I hoped. That recognition guided my relational responses: sitting beside him in the hallway, offering fidgets, validating emotions, mediating peer conflict, and drawing on strategies learned through parenting to work *with* rather than *against* children. Yet even here, I questioned whether my presence made it easier for Megan to step back, or whether it modeled possibilities she could one day enact independently.

As my teaching responsibilities increased, I attempted to embody the practices I valued—planning math stations, using parallel teaching to create smaller instructional spaces where students could be more fully seen and supported, and preparing materials in advance to minimize chaos. I was conscious that these choices functioned not only instructionally, but also as a form of modeling: an effort to make certain habits of practice visible that might support Megan’s effectiveness and confidence over time, without positioning myself as an expert or evaluator. These moves were both instructional and symbolic—attempts to surface humanizing alternatives through shared practice rather than directive feedback. At the same time, teaching re-exposed my own limits. I became overwhelmed by noise, time, and logistics. I snapped at a student and immediately recognized the dissonance between my actions and my commitments. Inquiry lessons that were highly engaging yet shallow in learning reminded me that good intentions do not guarantee meaningful outcomes. These moments returned me, again and again, to the question of

whether I was enacting the teacher I hoped to be or simply rehearsing another version of the same compromises.

Across the semester, the question *Am I doing this right?* never resolved. Instead, it became generative. It surfaced in moments of hesitation, in recalibrations of role, in ethical pauses before speaking, and in the ongoing negotiation of authority and care. What this analytical moment ultimately reveals is that intervention was never singular, neutral, or straightforward. Each decision to step in—or hold back—was shaped by the convergence of past regret, present awareness, and future aspiration, alongside persistent uncertainty about role, responsibility, and impact.

My sabbatical, then, was not simply about supporting a first-year teacher. It was about inhabiting the unsettled space between who I was, who I am, and who I am becoming—as a teacher, teacher educator, researcher, and human being—within systems that both demand and constrain humanizing work.

Reassembling Commitments Through Presence

The synthetical moment brings me back—not to resolution, but to responsibility. After tracing my teaching past, articulating my hopes and fears for returning, and inhabiting the analytical tensions of co-teaching alongside a first-year teacher, I am returned to the commitments I made nearly a decade ago in my dissertation. What has shifted is not the substance of those commitments, but my understanding of how easily they can be diluted—not only in K–12 classrooms, but in higher education as well.

In my regressive moment, I named enactment as central: the belief that equity, care, and justice are not sustained through intention alone, but through daily decisions that shape students' lived experiences. During my years in higher education, I have continued to teach, research, and write in service of those commitments. Yet this sabbatical made visible a difficult truth: administrative responsibilities, program coordination, service work, and institutional demands have increasingly mediated my relationships with preservice teachers. While this work matters, it has also created distance—distance from the improvisational, relational labor of teaching, and distance from the sustained presence that allows commitments to be enacted, not just articulated.

Returning to the elementary classroom disrupted that distance. Working alongside Megan and her students reawakened the embodied, moment-to-moment attentiveness that first drew me to teaching. It reminded me that ethical teaching is not enacted through polished syllabi or well-designed assignments alone, but through presence: noticing when a student is dysregulated, when a teacher is overwhelmed, when a system constrains care, and when silence or inaction carries consequence. The question *Am I doing this right?*—which haunted the analytical moment—now sits differently. It is no longer a question about competence or correctness but about alignment. Are my actions—whether in classrooms or on campus—enabling choice, supporting growth, and honoring students and teachers as whole people *within the constraints of the systems I inhabit*?

The progressive moment revealed my hope that returning to teaching would yield practical insights I could bring back to teacher preparation. What I did not anticipate was how deeply the experience would call me to reconsider *how* I show up for preservice teachers. Watching Megan navigate mandates, evaluations, and compliance-driven systems made clear that preparation cannot stop at methods or ideals. It must include space for grappling with constraint, for naming ethical discomfort, and for practicing discernment in real time. It also requires that I, as a teacher educator, resist allowing institutional busyness to eclipse the relational core of *my* work.

In this synthetical moment, I am recommitting to a slower, more present stance toward teacher education—one that prioritizes sustained relationships with preservice teachers, creates room for uncertainty and ethical questioning, and foregrounds enactment over performance. This does not mean abandoning administrative or service responsibilities but rather holding them in tension with the work that first called me into this profession: teaching alongside others, noticing carefully, and remaining open to being changed by the encounter.

Currere does not ask for closure; it asks for return. When I think back to that first morning in Megan's classroom—closing my laptop, watching students line up for recess, wondering *What impact can I have here?*—the question now feels differently shaped. It is no longer about influence or correction, but about presence: how I show up with students, with teachers, and with preservice educators amid constraint. What I carry forward from this sabbatical is not a set of answers, but a reassembled sense of responsibility—one that holds past regret, present awareness, and future aspiration together and insists on staying attentive to care in places where it is most easily eclipsed.

Conclusion

This *currere* inquiry does not resolve the tensions surfaced through my sabbatical; instead, it returns me to them with greater clarity and responsibility. Co-teaching alongside a first-year teacher re-exposed how easily commitments to equity, care, and humanizing practice can be thinned by institutional demands when they are not sustained through presence. What shifted through this return was not what I believe about teaching or teacher preparation, but how I understand the conditions under which those beliefs are enacted—or compromised. Working in the classroom again reminded me that ethical teaching is lived moment by moment: in how we respond to students' bodies and emotions, how we support teachers navigating constraints, and how we decide when to intervene, remain silent, or sit beside someone in uncertainty.

While these insights emerged through my own return to the classroom, they echo broader questions facing educators and teacher educators working across institutional contexts shaped by accountability, efficiency, and compliance. The tensions between intention and enactment, presence and mediation, are not individual dilemmas but shared conditions that demand ongoing, collective attention. *Currere* does not ask for closure, and this experience did not offer answers I can neatly carry back to campus. What it offered instead was a reassembled sense of responsibility—one that holds past regret, present awareness, and future aspiration together and calls me to remain attentive to care in spaces where it is most easily eclipsed, whether in elementary classrooms or within teacher education itself.

Notes

1. All names, except for the author's, are pseudonyms.

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