Volume 9 **Issue 2** **December 2025**

NOT THE FINAL DRAFT

My dad died on a Friday in April
before

The first break of my conference
Where I was looking forward
To hearing J. Duncan-Andrade speak
Critical Hope
    Share support to "the rose that grew from concrete"* (Remember to cite Tupac)
THE Duncan-Andrade
    Breathing fresh air into a room clouded with new legislation

My dad died on a Friday in April
before

He cleaned out his three-car garage of things he thought he might need some day
(The cars and truck and camper were in the gravel driveway)
Weeks from moving within an hour of his four kids
All of us concerned with
How he could drive Mom with
    neuropathy
    and cataracts
    and a gun under the front seat

My dad died on a Friday in April
before

My green-eyed artist confessed to wanting to die in September
Fourteen times around the sun seemed like too many
(even if they aren't enough)

Making sense of the present journey
Through the past
Taking a machete to the overgrown places
The things we weren't allowed to speak
    The demons whispering in ears
    Afraid to sleep
    Tiptoeing by the living room

My dad died on a Friday in April
Before

Sarrah J. Grubb
Indiana University Kokomo

SEEDING RADICAL IMAGINATION, MOVING BEYOND SEPARABILITY, PROVOKING AUTHENTIC SELF EXPRESSION, AND GENERATING COMMUNAL PRACTICES FOR OTHERWISE WORLDS WHILE SITUATED ON THE PRECIPICE OF HUMAN DISAPPEARANCE

By Carolyne J. White and Leah Z. Owens
Rutgers University-Newark

Drawn from our winter break respite by an email noting the upcoming submission deadline for this journal, we read Karl L. Wheatley's (2024) article and encounter resonance: his reference to teaching toward ecological literacy with "courage to keep sticking my neck out and talking about the elephants in the room" and our shared need for "more social and professional support from people in a similar position" (p. 63). Inspired, we begin crafting place-based, ethico-onto-epistemological (Barad, 2007) vignettes that illuminate what taking action for Climate Justice looks like for us as citizens of Newark, New Jersey and agent provocateurs within colonial institutions.

We write from the ancestral lands of the Lenape peoples who were forcibly removed. Living stories of indigenous peoples around the globe inspire our work toward Climate Justice.[1] Here, we illuminate ontological inquiries into who we wound up being as human beings within the modernist worldview (the entire System of White Supremacy)[2] that privileges profit and progress[3] over life. We seek access to *otherwise* worlds (King et al., 2020) of authentic self-expression within local coalitions rooted in relationality (Escobar et al., 2024), ways of being and acting consistent with radically imagining, generating, and sustaining Climate Justice.[4]

While we agree that human culpability for climate crisis must be marked, with Kathryn Yusoff (2019) we refuse to whitewash the historical root of extraction and exploitation of living flesh—human and non-human—by adopting the word anthropocene. We cannot simply pretend that Climate Justice can be generated without acknowledging this horrific root and acting urgently for reparations. While scientific innovations are crucial for addressing climate crisis, without completing the pervasive inhumane practices inherited from our past, we will inadvertently continue to recreate them, continue to put all life at risk.

With Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021), we appreciate the enormity of the task before us: to hospice modernity enroute to enacting (midwifing) novel dispositions to face a world in crisis with maturity, humility, and integrity—to grow up, sober up and show up for ourselves and our communities. Machado de Oliveira alerts us to the crucial need to replace the Cartesian subjectivity of "I think, therefore I am!; I say, therefore it is!; I own, therefore I rule!" with "You are, therefore I am," or "We relate, therefore we are" (pp. 136–137).

OUR RELATIONALITY

We have been engaging together with the contested conversation of curriculum for 15 years, and our journey has recently included reading texts by Kathryn Yusoff, Sylvia Wynter, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, and Malidoma Patrice Somé out loud with Rutgers colleagues, members of the wider Newark community, and other beyond. Our practice of reading out loud emerged from Carolyne's participation with an international group that meets on Zoom every week to read the book, *Speaking Being: Werner Erhard, Martin Heidegger, and a New Possibility of Being Human*, by Bruce Hyde and Drew Kopp (2019). Here we share the intention we read at the beginning of the call to generate a shared context of ontological inquiry based on discovery rather than Cartesian Subjectivity:

Intention for the call: to practice both horizontal and vertical reading, that is, to read the text carefully—from beginning to end, getting what the text says—and to read it closely, that is, to be open to surprise and to then follow lines of flight that emerge from looking with wonder at what shows up in reading the text, all the while maintaining the ontological direction of the conversation such that each and every participant—whether reading or listening or engaging in the inquiry emerging from the reading—discovers something for themselves today, which they may or may not share on the call.

> "In a conversation with a thinker we must attend to four points, and more attentively to each point in the series, for the rigor of thinking lies in this attentiveness of listening, not in the effort (the forcing) of representational, conceptual grasping that wills to know. We must attend:
>
> 1) to what is said; for those today, this is difficult enough;
> 2) to what is not said;
> 3) to what is unthought, but is to be thought;
> 4) to what cannot be said, because it remains ever silent."
> --Martin Heidegger, GA 97, Anmerkungen I-V5
>
> The door for those of us today, for whom attending to what is said is difficult enough, is to notice when we are listening [interpreting] in ways that pull us away from attending to what is said, such as when we listen merely
>
> for what we already know, or
> for being entertained, or
> for associations and memories, or
> for contrasts and comparisons, or
> for judgments and evaluations.

This invitation to a novel disposition for reading may seems strange or even not needed. As skilled Cartesians, we assume we already know how to read effectively and may ask, "Why all this fuss about how to read?" To develop this novel disposition requires that we consciously bracket what we already know and cultivate a "beginner's mind" to enable discovery. We invite you to bring this disposition to your reading of our article. Note how often you are pulled away from the words by your habituated "will to know" reading. When this happens, simply return to

reading. Our experience has been that with practice we find ourselves within a field of wonder and discovery beyond conceptual grasping—a field for attending to what is unsaid and may be unthought but needs to be thought. After Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), we seek to braid sweetgrass with you that intertwines "science, spirit and story … [such that it may] be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other" (p. x).

LEAH: HURRICANE BERYL

> Facing the magnitude of the task of enabling a world without separability (between us and the land, and each other) requires more than a change of narratives, convictions, or identities. It also requires more than a mere intention to change. It requires an interruption of harmful desires hidden behind promises of entitlements and securities that people hold onto, particularly when they are desperate or afraid.
>
> —Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*

Through the open window, the sun shines the alarm on my face to wake. I rise from the couch without delay and proceed into the bathroom of my AirBnB to brush my teeth and wash my face. I pour water from a 1.5-liter bottle, careful to consume just the amount needed. The splash on my face provides a momentary respite from the stifling heat. In the last two years of extended visits to Jamaica, I had never felt this hot, I had never been out of running water or electricity longer than a few hours. I choose an outfit that reflects my newfound wisdom of the significance of protecting my melanated skin. I wait for my phone and tablet to power on. The phone has less battery power than the tablet. I turn it off, load my crossbody bag with both devices, and double-check I have all other essentials for the day. Hurricane Beryl not only dashes away all U.S. assurances extended through AirBnB policy but also forces me outside from sunup to sundown.

The temperature is a few degrees cooler outside than inside the loft. I greet Antonio[6] and inquire about his overnight security shift. On the ground level of the complex, I encounter Rocky, head of maintenance, and his staff, Dex and Victor. We exchange pleasantries, and I ask Rocky, specifically, "You good?" He replies, on cue, "Yah, mon. Give tanks," and then offers an update on the status of the power outage for the upstairs units, which continues to be shrouded in uncertainty. It's already been a week since the hurricane touched down. I offer to purchase drinks for them from the supermarket in the complex. Insultingly frigid air blasts my body as I walk through the automatic sliding door. I feel a dull ache in my right ear. I ask the security guard for permission to charge my phone; I make my purchase and proceed back into the heat. The men express thanks, and I leave them to find a place to eat my breakfast of a packaged cinnamon roll and small box of mango orange pineapple juice. Across the road, I sit on a boulder in the middle of a construction site, chewing silently as I gaze at the sea; I sit with the being of togetherness, desiring it without the force of a natural disaster.

CAROLYNE: 2024 40-DAY RUTGERS NEWARK ENCAMPMENT

> Just as we say "never again" with respect to the fascism that produced the Holocaust, we should also say "never again" with respect to apartheid in South Africa, and in the southern US. That means, first and foremost, that we will have to expand and deepen our solidarity with the people of Palestine. People … inside and outside the apartheid wall.
>
> —Angela Y. Davis, Freedom Is a Constant Struggle

> Ultimately, pleasure activism is us learning to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have on the planet.
>
> —adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism*

I sit on a bench outside the Rutgers Newark Law School with a student and her parents, meeting for the first time. United in our shared commitment to an end to genocide in Gaza, for a free Palestine, and demands for Rutgers' divestment from companies that support this atrocity, I ask this student what she is discovering. Without hesitation she says, "I am discovering new community." I, too, discover new community as my more-than-human companion Goldie and I walk here daily and encounter unexpected conversations that uplift and inspire. I am educated about the horrific daily realities of apartheid born from settler colonialism—violence and starvation, bombing hospitals and schools, killing women and children in Gaza—all made invisible as American complicity for genocide is cloaked in propaganda designed to dehumanize and desensitize us from our deep connection with Palestinian brothers and sisters, desensitize us from our humanity.

Our conversations often begin with, "What a beautiful dog … I love her keffiyeh … Can I pet her … Can I take her photo … What's her name?" These initial questions soon become crucial existential inquiries that create solidarity. Goldie deepens access to new community, access to pleasure activism (see brown, 2019), for all who are willing to be catalyzed within her loving presence.

On another day, I see three students sitting on a bench and ask to join them. They are enrolled in the MFA Creative Writing Program, and our conversation moves into sharing intellectual mentors who inspire our current scholarly projects. Paper and pen come out as we note new resources to explore. Conversations at the encampment point toward what I long to encounter more often in my classrooms: meeting students' parents; inquiry space unencumbered by past-based separation of students from each other and from their professors; release from carrying the emotional freight of grades and competition; students courageously unafraid of engaging in pleasure activism toward a new future where all human and nonhuman life is honored, a future bigger than who we wound up being as Cartesian subjects in a modernist world.

LEAH: RESISTING COLONIAL ACADEMIA

> Decolonizing authority is a conversation about power dynamics and is important to revolution, resistance, movement, and our activism because one would have to heal themselves from the idea of being subordinate in order to truly inherit their divine right to be seen as credible and free.
>
> —EbonyJanice Moore, *All The Black Girls Are Activists*

2:58 pm on an August Thursday. I tell myself I will join our virtual book club session solely as a listener. About halfway into the session, as a discussion break comes to a natural close, Altagracia delicately invites me to share anything on my mind. Tears trail down my cheeks as her sensing pulls the thread to my unraveling. My throat tightens; the most I can utter is that I have a lot on my mind and I chose to be present today because our collective reading brings me joy. I thank everyone for their care and concern.

At the end of the hour, I ask Carolyne if she has time to stay on Zoom. I tell her the source of my stress is that I have not secured a full-time job. She asks about searching for an academic position. I share that the narratives I tell myself and others are that this is something I want to pursue when I am older or that I do not feel prepared for navigating the politics of colonial academia. Our conversation evokes other, incongruous narratives. I am a co-founder of our activist-scholar reading group. I have been invited to write a book chapter on critical teacher leadership. I have been researching curriculum in segregated schools with two colleagues. Teaching, writing, and research are passions of mine. "Not knowing how to navigate the politics" translates into "I fear entering the system until I know everything about it; otherwise, I will fail." My desire to avoid disappointment, rejection, and failure is expertly navigating "my bus" down the gold-plated streets of modernity (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). I re-member that this is not a new struggle; it is an inevitable conversation encountered by all who engage critical ontological inquiry (Kincheloe, 2006), all who take their theory to the streets (Owens, 2020), all who risk believing in otherwise possibilities.

With a renewed spirit and excitement of what is possible, I plan to return to Jamaica on a "self-authorized sabbatical" to write and to continue exploring and practicing new ways of being in the world. Paramount to these endeavors is letting go of the colonial authority that imposes on academia standards for what is credible and who is an authority (Moore, 2023). For me to carry out the scholarship that I say is important to me presupposes that I hold myself to the standard of my central ethico-onto-epistemological foundations, which include my ancestors and indigenous ways of knowing. Holding these as my standards affirms my possession of "The Range," described as my education, my lived experience, and my ancestors qualifying me, authorizing me, and amplifying me (Moore, 2023, p. 114). Being grounded will protect me against colonial academia's attempts at spirit murder (Aya, 2022) and will carry me to the place where I can thrive while developing my research and praxis.

CAROLYNE: GENERATING INTIMACY IN AN ONTOLOGICAL INQUIRY COURSE

> A learning process is something we can incite, literally incite, like a riot.
>
> —Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

I'm teaching an undergraduate liberal arts course, Collaborative Leadership and Social Innovation, that utilizes ontological inquiry (see Baldev et al., 2013; White et al., 2020, 2023). Ten students are enrolled. One of them, Raymond,[7] sits in the back row every class session and rarely speaks words. His body speaks grins that leave me wondering if he is laughing at me, if he is cynical about the possibility of our course inquiry actually contributing to him as I say things like, "We will explore how we've all been infected by the entire System of White Supremacy" and explain that, rather than looking at racism or sexism or ecocide as individual societal phenomena, we will be examining the entire system that creates and maintains all of it.

It takes a few weeks for the classroom space to thaw from the cautious ways of being students develop to navigate their college classes for the grades they desire. When enrollment is small, students comment that they are surprised and intimidated because they can't hide. We engage activities to create sacred and brave space[8] that opens for all of us when a student shares,[9] speaks courageously about a vulnerable as-lived experience. That happens today for this class when a student who appears comfortable asking and answering questions tells us, "I feel like I don't belong here." Shocked by the incongruity of our perception of him and his internal dialogue, within cognitive dissonance wonder emerges.

We are about halfway through the semester, engaged in a conversation about what each of us most desire to contribute to the world. Raymond says, "I want to end poverty in the South Ward of Newark." Stunned, I say something like, "And you've been sitting on that this entire course? Wow!" As the semester continues, I find myself inserting connections back to his amazing commitment.

It is the day before our final exam session and students will share pages from the graphic novels they've created about their encounter with the course. I notice that Raymond submits his novel early on Canvas. I read it and discern needed edits (our course is writing intensive with an institutional expectation that students will enhance their skill with writing in English). An opportunity surfaces. I email Raymond and ask if he is willing to read his entire novel to the class and allow us to workshop it. He quickly agrees. A highlight of his novel is his acknowledgement that he was initially quiet, not talking or being part of the class, because he was not interested. It was not until he started "trying on" the course material in his life that he discovered the value of course practices such as authentic listening instead of arguing and the importance of using his voice to make a positive difference in the world.

LEAH: LAND RHYTHMS

> Condition your intellectual, political, and affective muscles for facing storms and running marathons and torturous terrains.
>
> —Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*

I start an ontology journal "as a way through"—to the next node on my professional trajectory, to the next stage of my life. In writing, I get lost in my imagination, make sense of the world, and contribute to social science disciplines. I prefer to produce writing that blurs the line between creative and academic (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Now back in Jamaica, I practice writing at the beach. This is usually preceded by a 40-minute walk from my room and an hour-long swim. When I am working on my tablet, I take care not to get so engrossed that I prohibit connection with others. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) describes a thought exercise where humans have to (re)create civilization after a global catastrophic natural disaster. I walk in the world as though Hurricane Beryl was that disaster for me. I don't want to return to a way of being that isolates me from others.

One morning, I arrive ready to swim only to find the beach inundated with brown seaweed. I sit at the bar, taken by the sea. I listen to the waves crash loudly; the same wind that moves the water sends the smell of sulfur deep into my nose. A local once told me that the presence of this seaweed means the sea is cleaning itself. I enter a space of curiosity regarding this phenomenon. I wonder what I can learn about and from the sea. The framing from which I approach this inquiry

is The Game Changer Intensive, a Climate Justice course offered by Pachamama Alliance. In the course, we "explore how human beings can play an important role in catalyzing a transformation at the species level from human supremacy to human responsibility and sacred reciprocity with the community of life" (Pachamama Alliance, 2025b, n.p.). At the intersection of teacher leadership, my primary sphere of academic interest, I am further committed to collaboratively shifting how we prepare teachers to facilitate the education of young people for sustainable futures.

CAROLYNE: SPEAKING POSITIVE OBSESSION

> Positive obsession is about not being able to stop just because you're afraid and full of doubts. Positive obsession is dangerous. It's about not being able to stop at all.
>
> —Octavia E. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*

I agree to join a small group of colleagues from around the country with a project to infuse Ontological Inquiry into k-12 curriculum in a California school district. One member of our group is an activist for Climate Restoration with a long history of working with politicians at high levels of influence. He also has years of participation with groups who engage in Ontological Inquiry. I speak in one of our meetings about my commitment to partnering Ontological Inquiry with Climate Justice and of our need to explore who we wound up being within the modernist world to gain access to new ways of being and acting beyond modernity, ways consistent with generating and sustaining Climate Justice. My communication does not appear to register for him. I encounter this reaction in conversations with many people and wonder why I am not heard.

I choose to repeat myself in another meeting of our group, and on this day, my colleague says, "I have tears in my eyes as I discover that I was holding Climate Justice and Ontological Inquiry as separate spheres where I participate. I didn't know what I didn't know about their crucial relationship." On this day, I discover that it may not be the case that people disagree with me or that I am not saying something powerfully. Rather than engaging my ever-present Cartesian meaning-making machine, I could choose to simply keep speaking this positive obsession until it can register; when that will happen is unknown.

LEAH: WELCOME HOME

> The hummingbird that has, for the course of its lifetime, been obsessed with forest fires and dragons and driven my attention outward now turns around, looks at me, and tells me to integrate body and spirit, space and time, form and movement. She wants me to work toward the dragons *within* me, not scorching forests; the settlers *within* me, not amputating arms; the Indigenous relations *within* me, not self-harming; and all other animals *within* me, shaking themselves out of indifference. I am slowly learning that rather than being "in" the spirit or the body, I can be "with" both, and everything they are entangled with. "Home" is much larger, more diverse, and more complicated than I thought it would be.
>
> —Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*

Marcia, a Jamaican woman in her mid-40s, arrives after work to her middle daughter's apartment—next door to her home and downstairs from mine—to spend time with her

granddaughter. Tash is in her early 20s and gave birth to Summer six months ago, right before the end of my last stay. I am chasing and being chased by Tahaylia, Marcia's 7-year-old daughter, in the gated parking space while Marcia, Tash, and the baby sit in the shade of the veranda. This time of intergenerational socializing in front of the house is a common late afternoon occurrence. I feel acceptance in this sacred space of Black womanhood. I offer without second-guessing if what I have is worthy. I am soft (Moore, 2023). I want to forever be soft like this. In being soft, I sense the hardness of separation that has been existing between myself and other human beings, other-than-human beings, and the land. In being soft, I release tension and trauma of the U.S. brand of White Supremacist Heteropatriarchy that runs through my body (Moore, 2023). I affirm being welcomed as well as welcoming. Where before I would wait to be acknowledged from the edge, I now actively search for portals, for connections, for relationality (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). Here, in Jamaica, I have built a homeplace (hooks, 1990) that I take back and forth with me to Newark and everywhere else I be.

I am Earthseed. Anyone can be. Someday, I think there will be a lot of us.

—Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

CODA

We have no ready-made answers for the global existential polycrisis of climate change, resource depletion, the disappearance of wild nature, decline of the world's oceans, proliferation of toxic chemicals, exploding inequality, massive deregulation, wars and the threat of extreme weapons, genocide, technological overload, and diminishing confidence in our political system. Richard Heinberg (2024) advises us to "fundamentally change our thinking" and "start with self knowledge" in order to address this unprecedented convergence of risk (p. 36). What does it look like to actually change our thinking? What if our self knowledge is already always encased within a modernist paradigm? What if generating Climate Justice requires what may initially appear to be strange, weird, or uncomfortable yet opens space for new possibilities in how we relate with the land, each other, and other-than-human beings?

Living in service to her commitment to Climate Justice today looks like Leah starting a communal Substack with four colleagues where they write in response to each other about public education, teachers unions, and labor activism from divergent standpoints. The Future of Our Schools Collective derives its name from a book written by one of the members, Lois Weiner, and uses critical lenses to advance research-informed and up-to-date analyses of attacks on public education. It serves as a conduit for Leah to express the interdisciplinary nature of her research as she weaves seemingly disparate conceptual tools into fabrics that can be used to wrap living beings in care (Owens, 2025). And her commitment opens her to new work as she accepts a position as the Ports and Policy Analyst for Newark's South Ward Environmental Alliance.[10]

Living in service to her commitment to Climate Justice today looks like Carolyne discovering joy on Newark sidewalks where she and Goldie encounter a wide array of citizens: folks who may not have homes, children, employees at Audible's national headquarters where in a few weeks they will allow employees to bring dogs to work, former Rutgers students, or construction workers adding to the Newark housing stock. Each encounter is initiated by Goldie's loving presence, metaplasm for interrupting the common practice of ignoring people we pass on sidewalks. Donna Haraway (2003) uses the word metaplasm for "the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remolding the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating" (p. 20). A recent

encounter begins with a young woman saying, "I know you. Is that Goldie?" as she lovingly pets her. I ask, "Didn't we meet at the Encampment?" She says, "Yes!" with a warm smile. Goldie and I extend our walk several blocks, savor reunion. An encounter at Military Park ends with a young man asking me to take a picture of him with Goldie. He coaches me to take additional ones so Goldie's whole body is captured with them looking into the camera. A week later this same young man walks by my stoop. Goldie barks, he pulls out his phone to show her their prior visit. These encounters disclose always already intimacy. Terry Tempest Williams (1994) advises that "our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land. We have taken our love inside and abandoned the wild" (p. 64). Intimacy is crucial for fueling activism toward Climate Justice and a world that works for all. We invite you to join us in playful wonder about practices you could invent that may catapult your Climate Justice activism. We would love to read what you discover on the pages of this journal.

NOTES

1. We define Climate Justice as a movement to replace the dream of the modern world that prioritizes progress and profit at the expense of life with otherwise worldviews that put life first. See Pachamama Alliance (2025a).
2. The System of White Supremacy includes all forms of socially constructed supremacy: racism, patriarchy, homophobia, religious supremacy, human supremacy, ecocide, the religion of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism.
3. With Prakash and Esteva (1998), "Consumption, the fundamental function of a schooled society is exquisitely learned through the ritual of schooling" and "faith in (unlimited) progress" (p. 92).
4. Stating our intention in a different register, Fred Moten (as quoted in Harney & Moten, 2012) writes, "The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've recognized that it's fucked up for us …, this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly" (pp. 140–141).
5. Translated by Drew Kopp.
6. People named in our vignettes have granted permission for the use of their proper names; if not, we indicate a pseudonym has been assigned.
7. Raymond is a pseudonym.
8. See Richardson (1993) regarding sacred space and Arao and Clemens (2013) regarding the importance of also creating brave space where we courageously move outside our comfort zones, are willing to be challenged, and accept that we may feel annoyed, angry, anxious, surprised, confused, and/or defensive as we engage our learning edges.
9. As explained by Hyde & Kopp (2019) the word "sharing" evokes speaking in such a way that "one's self and not merely one's story [is] made available, leaving the other touched rather than merely informed" (p. 2).
10. South Ward Environmental Alliance is a collaboration among residents and community-based organizations to focus upon place-based Climate Justice issues.

REFERENCES

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In L. M. Landreman (Ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators* (pp. 135–150). Stylus Publishing.

Aya, E. J. (2022). Spirit murder: Black women's realities in the academy. In C. J. Porter, V. T. Sulé, & N. N. Croom (Eds.), *Black feminist epistemology, research, and praxis: Narratives in and through the academy* (pp. 85–91). Routledge.

Baldev, S., Choi, T., Mahmood, B., Oslinker, R., Sumrein, F., Waqar, A., & White, C. J. (2013). Being leaders for socially just education: Engaging new politics of possibility. *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies*, *13*(6), 489–496.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

brown, a. m. (2019). *Pleasure activism: The politics of feeling good* (Emergent Strategy, 1). AK Press.

Escobar, A., Osterweil, M., & Sharma, K. (2024). *Relationality: An emergent politics of life beyond the human.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Haraway, D. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.

Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive planning & black study.* Minor Compositions.

Heidegger, M. (2015). *Gesamtausgabe 97, Anmerkungen I-V* (Schwarze Hefte 1942–1948) (P. Trawny, Ed.). Vittorio Klostermann.

Heinberg, R. (2024). From climate crisis to polycrisis. *World Literature Today*, *98*(2), 32–36. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/wlt.2024.a920893

hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. South End Press.

Hyde, B., & Kopp, D. (2019). *Speaking being: Werner Erhard, Martin Heidegger, and a new possibility of being human*. John Wiley & Sons.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Kincheloe, J. L. (2006). Critical ontology and indigenous ways of being: Forging a postcolonial curriculum. In Y. Kanu (Ed.), *Curriculum as cultural practice: Postcolonial imaginations* (pp. 181–202). University of Toronto Press.

King, T. L., Navarro, J., & Smith, A. (2020). *Otherwise worlds: Against settler colonialism and anti-blackness*. Duke University Press.

Machado de Oliveira, V. (2021). *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism*. North Atlantic Books.

Moore, E. (2023). *All the black girls are activists: A fourth wave womanist pursuit of dreams as radical resistance*. Row House Publishing.

Owens, L. Z. (2020). *Becoming BlackWomanTeacher: An autoethnographic illumination of teacher leadership development for critical democratic public education in Newark, NJ* [Doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University-Newark]. RUcore: Rutgers Electronic Theses & Dissertations. https://doi.org/doi:10.7282/t3-8snv-q553

Owens, L. Z. (2025, Jun 26). Somatic abolitionism as possibility for rethinking teachers' labor activism. *The Future of Our Schools Collective*, 4. https://futureschools.substack.com/p/somatic-abolitionism-as-possibility

Pachamama Alliance. (2025a). *Mission and vision*. https://pachamama.org/about/mission?_ga=2.253885056.945052819.1761595756-1708054761.1761595756

Pachamama Alliance. (2025b). *Step into your role as a game changer*. https://pachamama.org/courses/game-changer-intensive-8-week-online-course

Prakash, M. S., & Esteva, G. (1998). *Escaping education: Living as learning within grassroots communities*. Peter Lang.

Richardson, L. (1993, April). *Poetics, dramatics and sacred spaces* [Paper presentation]. Redesigning Ethnography: Responses to Postmodernist, Feminist and other Critiques Conference, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, United States.

Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 959–978). SAGE.

Wheatley, K. F. (2024). Finding the energy to help heal societies and ecosystems. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *8*(1), 55–63. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/276

White, C. J., Osorio, A. E., Eatman, T. K, & Weiss, M. J. (2023). Differentiating modernity (the system of white supremacy) and generating climate justice as publicly engaged scholars: What's ontological inquiry got to do with it? *Turning Toward Being: The Journal of Ontological Inquiry in Education*, *2*(1 & 2), 1–35. https://rdw.rowan.edu/joie/vol1/iss2/2/

White, C. J., Schiavone, F., Campbell, N., & Carson, D. (2020). Bearing witness to ontological inquiry: Being activists for radical democracy. *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies*, *20*(6), 565–574. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708620912804

Williams, T. T. (1994). *An unspoken hunger.* Vintage Books.

Yusoff, K. (2019). *A billion black anthropocenes or none*. University of Minnesota Press.

NAVIGATING NEOLIBERALISM
FROM TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM TO TEACHING TEACHERS

By Komal Waqar Ali & Jessica Louise Mills
McGill University

We first met in a classroom during our graduate studies at McGill University and connected through discussions about teacher professional development. Despite having different professional trajectories, we had both worked at schools in countries where proficiency in English was prized and seen as a gateway to socio-economic mobility (Manan et al., 2015) due to its global popularity as a language of access to different aspects of society (Phillipson, 2006). Both of us noted how neoliberalism had affected and shaped our educational contexts and professional endeavors.

To guide our discussion on neoliberalism, we drew from Sparke's (2013) definition that "neoliberalism names an approach to governing capitalism that emphasizes liberalizing markets and making market competition the basis of economic coordination, social distribution, and personal motivation" (p. 480). While this definition is broad, we narrowed it down by looking at how existing literature interprets its use within education. Specifically, we drew from Ball (2012) and Spring (2014) who both posit that neoliberalism has commodified education through privatization, the influence and participation of non-state actors, and hierarchization of the origin and development of education and learning materials. For us, long before we were formally introduced to neoliberalism in our graduate studies, we witnessed how the language of neoliberal governmentality, the notion that neoliberal policies seep into everyday life (Manan, 2021), shaped the discourse around teacher training and professional development.

In this essay, we look to the past to reflect on how neoliberalism has impacted our journeys as teachers and teacher leaders to better understand how to move forward. Guided by the principles of currere, we share stories from our time working in schools that have allowed us to make connections despite our different contexts and potentially make headway and room for new possibilities in the future.

KOMAL

Let's begin by "returning to the past" (Pinar, 1994, p. 21), by sharing our journey towards teaching. For me, it was purely accidental: Teach for Pakistan (TFP), the local chapter of Teach for All (TFA), held an information session at my university. As an avid reader, I was shaken by the idea that nearly half the children in Grade 5 in my country's public schools could not read a simple sentence in English (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi, 2024). I still had a few semesters before I could graduate and apply, but I wanted to do something immediately.

I joined a local educational technology start-up as a facilitator. We worked at a tiny primary public school, hoping to replicate Sugata Mitra's (2007) hole-in-the-wall experiment where we taught students digital literacy. Very quickly, we realized that students who didn't have a fair grasp of English could not navigate the internet, let alone read a Wikipedia article or watch a YouTube video. Yet, as public school students, they would be the least likely in Pakistan's stratified educational system to master English (Pakistan Ministry of Federal Education and Training, 2018).

Their proficiency in English would have repercussions beyond school; it would likely determine if they were first able to *enroll* in undergraduate studies and then if they would be able to complete their studies, as higher education in Pakistan is exclusively conducted in English.

JESSICA

My journey to becoming a teacher was more traditional. In university, I decided to pursue a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at McGill University with the hope of merging my passions for learning languages, travelling, and teaching. During the last year of my degree, I had the opportunity to complete a field experience in Hong Kong. Enamored with the experience of living overseas, after graduation, I accepted my first teaching position at a private school with a bilingual program in Taipei, Taiwan.

KOMAL

After graduation, I transitioned to TFP, a two-year Fellowship. In the same vein as TFA, TFP places graduates, referred to as Fellows, at underserved schools across major cities in Pakistan. As Crawford-Garrett and Thomas (2018) have noted in their critique of TFA, there was a distinction between what we were supposed to do and the teaching profession itself. While I had designed and facilitated learning activities at my prior job, Teach for Pakistan was my first experience of working in a proper classroom. I was placed at a low-cost private school, the type that is known for hiring and losing an endless series of unlicensed teachers (Srivastava, 2015). There, I taught English to grades four to six for two years. The language of instruction was Urdu, the national language, but the majority of my students spoke Pashto, as they were from the Pashtun ethnic group. Given that only seven percent of the Pakistani population have Urdu as their native language (Coleman, 2010), the majority of schoolchildren in public schools are not able to access primary or secondary education in the language they know best. The valuing of English or Urdu comes at the cost of devaluing local or indigenous languages (Tamim, 2021).

In my first month, I vividly remember one of my grade five students stuttering and pausing after every word in a reading assessment. Prior to my placement, I'd received some training on pedagogy and classroom management, but after meeting my students, I realized that simply following the curriculum would not address my students' needs, as many, if not all of them, were reading below grade-level.

I started educating myself on language and literacy instruction; as a former humanities student, wading through text was comforting in a way. I learnt about the components of literacy instruction, I looked up articles from practitioner teachers, and I collaborated with other Fellows who taught English. As part of TFP, each Fellow was required to develop student learning outcomes and unit plans based on the standards from the 2006 National Curriculum, but I found it to be grammar-intensive to a fault. How could my students identify nouns in sentences if they couldn't decode a word or comprehend the sentences themselves? I made the pedagogical choice to modify learning objectives for remedial instruction.

I'm grateful for my time as a Fellow, but ultimately, I left my Fellowship feeling critical of the TFA/TFP model, particularly their insistence on decontextualized "best practices" (Philip et al., 2019, p. 5) that didn't take my multi-lingual, underserved classroom into account and the

savior narrative that permeated our Fellowship (Crawford- Garrett & Thomas, 2018). As I got to know my students, I witnessed how drastically their linguistic background and socio-economic class shaped not only their current academic environment but their future academic trajectory as well. Two years of "leadership" without adequate and contextualized teacher training could not be expected to resolve the class stratification and inequality that is rife in Pakistani society and that ultimately affects the quality of education students in Pakistan have access to. The teaching and learning of English do not exist in neutral spaces; rather, as Manan (2021) asserts, English is "embedded in regimes that are organised by relations of social power, class privilege and economic polarisation" (p. 988). Tamim (2013, 2021) has chronicled the struggles of working-class students in higher education, attesting to the pervasive influence of English on their academic journey.

Our fluency in English did not qualify us to teach it in the public schools where we were placed. We needed contextualized and needs-based professional development that took our contexts into account. We were always expected to just teach for two years and leave the school to continue as it always had. My Fellowship motivated me to continue learning, so I enrolled in a graduate studies program in education.

JESSICA

In Taipei, I started teaching grade four and five ESL and electives such as art and health. We used a curriculum that was borrowed and minimally adapted from the English language arts program from Ontario, Canada. The borrowing of curriculum and teaching practices from the West (North America & Europe) aligns with the findings of a literature review by Tan and Chua (2015), which demonstrated that China borrows from the Western educational policies, curriculum, and practices to address the reality of neoliberal globalization. However, this borrowing is not unique to China, as it can be found across countries in the East (Tan & Reyes, 2016). Further, the school specifically borrowed from an English-speaking country, perpetuating the belief that native-English speakers have sole expertise over the language (Holliday, 2005, 2006). But, blindly borrowing curriculum and imposing it in this context undermines local knowledge and education (Wu, 2007). This type of policy borrowing contributes to the devaluation of local knowledge, teachers, and education.

Most of my students were wealthy; the parents needed to pay additional fees for their children to learn English from native speakers like me, furthering the idea that teachers from the West are more knowledgeable and have better pedagogical skills (Holliday, 2005). Oftentimes, we were told to conform to parents' expectations of what learning looks like. This entailed doing grammar drills, giving page-long lists of vocabulary, and testing them weekly, as this was the culturally accepted standard for good teaching. Meanwhile, the school told us to teach in ways that were distinctly Western approaches to education, such as doing project-based learning, collaborative projects, and learning through play—all distinctly student-centered learning activities (Tan & Reyes, 2016). Neoliberalism turns these pedagogical styles into commodities based on the demands of the global market where one is a more valued commodity than the other.

This push and pull highlighted the issues with the globalization of education (Spring, 2006)—how Western ideals have imposed themselves on Eastern educational contexts (Tan & Chua, 2015; Tan & Reyes, 2016). On one hand, the parents wanted Western (read: white) native-English teachers to teach English, as it was believed that they would be better at teaching English (Holliday, 2005; Sung, 2011)—a notion that falls into the falsely held belief that native speakers

are better at teaching English (Phillipson, 1992; Widdowson, 1994). On the other hand, the parents and some students rejected North American ways of teaching because they were very different from the cultural ideal. They also feared that it would not teach the students how to pass standardized college entrance English tests (Li et al., 2012), such as the IELTS or the TESOL.

My experience at private schools in Taiwan was my first inkling that education was more like a commercial service than a learning experience. My employment felt transactional in the way that I, "the imported good," was there to make a profit for the school. Education's neoliberal model means that private schools are selling what the parents (read: consumers) want (Brathwaite, 2017). After all, the school was just filling the parents' demand for foreign English teachers, right?

This feeling was amplified when I started working at an international school in Thailand. I worked with a wonderful team of teachers who, due to their passports being from the Global South, were paid less than a third of my salary. Their job title was that of an assistant; however, they nearly had the same responsibilities as me. Ethically, I had a lot of issues with it, and when I would bring up this disparity, I was brushed aside, and the issue was swept under the rug. Here, the discrediting of non-native speaking teachers as not as valuable as native speaking teachers (Phillipson, 1992; Thomas, 1999; Widdowson, 1994) was truly apparent.

At the same time, a previous colleague reached out to me about a leadership position at a private school I used to work for in Taipei. The position was to be a mentor teacher for the upper primary division of their bilingual program. I believed this would be a perfect next step that would allow me to improve my teaching and leadership skills.

KOMAL

I had a similar rationale for accepting my next job at an educational non-profit organization seeking to "reform" a public school in Karachi. In an attempt to address educational inequity, the Pakistani government launched public-private partnerships. A study by Bano (2008) discusses the efficacy of these alliances between governments and private individuals or entities, including NGOs. One of these was the Adopt a School program. While the adoption varied on a case-to-case basis, individuals or organizations could take over the management of the school and, thus, improve learning outcomes. The educational non-profit where I would work after my TFP Fellowship had adopted two public schools.

As a Fellow, my impact had been limited to the three grade levels I taught, and I knew that once I left things would go back to the way they used to be, as no structural changes had been made. My new position would have me supervising the entire English faculty, Grades 1-10, and I felt this was a chance to bring about sustainable change. However, while I had been able to forge connections and friendships with my colleagues during my placement despite being an outsider, it was so much harder here. I was an outsider sent to "correct" the existing faculty.

Simultaneously, in graduate studies, I was learning about professional development for teachers and starting to see professional development as a holistic process. As a teacher myself, I was now aware of what Hargreaves (1994) calls the "intensification of teaching," whereby teachers' workloads are continuously increasing due to bureaucracy and other pressures (p. 118). While I was there to provide professional development, I was mindful of the demands made on teachers and sought to alter my approach accordingly.

JESSICA

I felt the same way! I quickly came to realize that I didn't need to prove myself as being some strong leader-type intent on making changes that would increase teachers' workloads. Rather, I needed to listen to the teachers and see how I could help them mitigate the negative impacts of structural barriers. By reflecting on my time in their shoes, I started collaborating with them to find ways to surmount the structural issues that were imposed on us.

KOMAL

I completely agree. Public schools in Pakistan are often in need of repair; my own school required several months of renovation to make the school usable. If you have barely functional bathrooms, dimly lit classrooms, and a culture where innovation or even doing more than the bare minimum is not acknowledged, how motivated would you be to implement pedagogical change? Pair this with a system of reforms whereby best practices are simply imported into a context where the ground realities—and struggles—have not been addressed. In these scenarios, teachers' agency is compromised.

One example is a provincial initiative to improve reading skills by transitioning from analog to synthetic phonics. This is a huge adjustment particularly when you were taught the former. The initiative now lives on in the form of resources including scripted lesson plans that may be well-intentioned, but I wonder how many teachers are able to completely adhere to the script when teaching. I know I can't. I've always made adjustments to my lesson plans based on what was happening in the classroom. There may also be reasons as to why teachers may not want to transition to a synthetic phonics approach. I'm thinking of Manan et al. (2015) where the findings indicated that teachers in a low-cost English medium school chose to code-switch between English and other languages to help boost student learning. Is it realistic to expect teachers to teach from a lesson plan, especially if these are pedagogies and strategies that they're unfamiliar with?

JESSICA

It's not realistic to teach something that you're unfamiliar with without proper training. I struggled with this issue as a teacher as well, but I did the same as you and read as much as I could about pedagogy from teacher practitioners. In my case, the issue was that the curriculum was not truly meant for my ESL students but for native English speakers. Over the years, I learned to adapt my curriculum or, in some cases, create my own to meet the needs of my students.

KOMAL

That really resonates with me. The teacher education curriculum for a B.Ed. in Pakistan uses an ESL approach as well. When I began teaching pre-service teachers at a college in Karachi, I really struggled with how the course guidelines would not address Pakistan's linguistic diversity or the challenges of teaching English in multi-lingual classrooms where 93% of the population is

learning the language of instruction (Urdu) alongside English (Coleman, 2010). So, I brought in anecdotes from my own experiences or shared samples of actual student work.

Building communicative capacity is further complicated by the fact that, in many public or low-cost private schools, a period is only 30-40 minutes on average. Six or seven periods of English class aren't enough especially when you have students for whom school is the only space in which they hear English. Immersion may be a "recommended" practice, but for many of us, code-switching is the only way we could boost student learning.

JESSICA

I had a similar situation when teaching in the bilingual program. The students were not completely ready for full immersion, as they often didn't have opportunities to hear and use English outside of class. This made a marked difference between where the curriculum said the students should be in their language learning journey and where they actually were. As a teacher, I would adapt my lessons towards the students in front of me because I didn't feel the need to conform to the school's one-size-fits all mentality to curriculum. However, once I was a teacher leader, I found myself torn between implementing the curriculum and being a caring and empathetic leader (Green, 2014).

As a leader, it was my job to be the face of, "you need to follow the curriculum," while also wanting to encourage teachers' agency in adapting and modifying the curriculum. At first, I felt torn between what I thought my role was versus the kind of leader I wanted to be. Over time, I started acknowledging my agency as a leader and sought out ways to balance my decisions. When teachers would come to me and say that the curriculum was irrelevant or that it wasn't suitable for their students, first, I would acknowledge that it was definitely challenging for our students to meet the expectations similar to those who are fluent in English. Then, I would encourage them to adapt or modify the curriculum so that it was at-level and culturally appropriate for their students. If they were uncertain of how to go about making these changes, I would guide them through it. I would train them in how to make changes to lessons and facilitate workshops on teaching strategies, such as using the students' first language to help them learn English.

KOMAL

Yes, the curriculum is held up as an ideal and something I too was expected to follow, but given the achievement gap, I had to introduce remedial instruction alongside grade-level content. This was complicated by the differing levels of skill and English proficiency in my faculty. I also needed to hire unlicensed teachers because we didn't have enough public school teachers assigned to our school.

JESSICA

Simply put, the world needs more teachers (UNESCO, 2023). In Taiwan, there was increased demand for international teachers because of its Bilingual 2030 policy (Padgett, in

press). Specifically, there was a need for international, native-English speaking teachers but not enough applicants. The school where I worked also resorted to hiring unlicensed teachers from English speaking countries instead of hiring local ESL teachers. Often, this led to issues, as teachers were teaching full-time while learning most, if not all, aspects of their jobs. This resulted in a lot of teachers coming and going or passively not doing their jobs because it came down to "needing a [foreign] adult" in the room with students, which led to a lot of teacher-centric teaching and classroom mismanagement.

KOMAL

This is a challenge I faced as well. Most of my faculty were teaching in a teacher-centric way too and would simply transmit the knowledge to the students. This included dictating answers for comprehension exercises and not facilitating whole-class discussions when reading texts. This may have been the way they learnt and a strategy they were comfortable with. As teachers, it's sometimes humbling to sit down and reflect on how much of your teaching is shaped— both consciously and unconsciously—by the classrooms in which you learned. So, I was cautious about the policies I introduced and spent most of my first year trying to build a rapport with my teachers so that I could understand how they conceptualized teaching, what the pressing issues in their classrooms were, and how to best tailor support from there.

JESSICA

It's a slow yet rewarding process to work with teachers on their teaching skills. As a teacher leader, it often fell to me to train and work with the new teachers until they could meet the basic necessities of their jobs. To your point, I agree that the starting point of working with teachers was to build rapport, meet them at their individual starting line, and gradually build from there. I was initially told to give them everything they needed all at once and show them how to mark their students' work—essentially teaching them their whole job at the same time as being expected to continue on with the rest of my teaching and curriculum development responsibilities. As noted by Curtis (2013), teacher leaders are often given more tasks without being relieved of their normal duties. So, I had to choose. Do I give them everything in one-go, basically shake their hands and walk away so that I could do the rest of my job? Or, do I take my time to build rapport and build on their skills as the year went on? I chose the latter and ended up working way past my paid 40 hours per week.

KOMAL

Same. I'd initially resolved to conduct impromptu observations to help me understand my teachers' classrooms better, but some days, I would just end up checking lesson plans or handling other administrative tasks. Because this was a public school, the number of privately hired teachers was quite low. Public schools in Pakistan are open six days a week, which is a hard sell. Despite this, there were always things I felt like I should be doing. Towards the end, I also developed

chronic health issues and felt like I was undercompensated for the work I'd done. I don't know if being firmer with saying no would have necessarily resolved this, because the issue goes deeper than setting boundaries. It was about the implicit expectations and job responsibilities. When working in educational development, you have to be careful not to fall into the savior narrative, sacrificing yourself for the cause. Personal sacrifice can't fix structural issues.

JESSICA

I found it really hard to say no to all the extra demands. A few times, I nearly resigned out of exhaustion and feeling like the system was taking advantage of my motivation to help teachers. I remember taking a step back during our holiday break and realizing that, just like I did when I was teaching, I needed to find ways to circumvent the structural issues with my job. I really tried to empathize with the teachers and solve problems with them instead of imposing solutions on them. Using this same tactic, I started asking them what training and professional development they felt they needed. From that, I created a set of workshops that I would guide the teachers through, matching a speed they were comfortable with. The workshops were there to train teachers on the aspects of their jobs they felt they needed the most guidance in. They could also be tailored around the topics they were teaching in their courses, making them directly applicable.

KOMAL

Yes, I was doing something similar as well. Like you, I was breaking down instruction into specific, actionable things. I often pared down rubrics or reading assessments so that teachers wouldn't be overwhelmed with new information. Not everything could be done at once. When building reading skills, I started with building fluency and worked my way up to improving comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. None of my teachers were exactly alike in their skill-sets, so I had to develop individualized training plans as well and address their specific struggles.

JESSICA

The workshop alternative allowed me to be more impactful in a manageable way as well as individualize the learning. While I had my set of workshops that were common, I would tailor them to ensure they was directly applicable to the teacher in front of me.

Upon reflection, I realize that I had to find ways to navigate the system as a teacher and a teacher leader. I felt as if the higher my position, the harder it became to push back on the demands. This led me to wonder how we, as teacher leaders, could make space for this change within schools.

Recently, I've read of the "Structurated Model of Practitioner Inquiry" by Edwards and Kalan (2024, p. 58). This model calls for teachers to take action "to disrupt educational structures which impact teachers' practices in the classroom" (p. 65).

KOMAL

Agreed**.** Our classroom is where the resistance begins. It's also important to not get tunnel vision or let our classrooms become islands; there's a community outside the classroom. Forming community and meaningful partnerships with teachers and sustaining them is really where we begin working towards a different future. Holding space for each other and seeing each other as individuals disrupts neoliberalism's "one-size-fits-all" mentality regarding education (Portelli & Oladi, 2018, p. 380)

JESSICA

Exactly! Small acts of resistance can lead to bigger changes in the educational system (Bullock, 1987). I could envision this by sitting with the teachers in my group and planning how we would remove the limitations of the curriculum and address the learning needs of our students.

KOMAL

For me, it would look like forming learning communities with my teachers, ensuring that their teaching workload is reasonable and fairly compensated. We would be beginning a collective learning journey, rooted in resistance, and ultimately aiming for transformation.

CONCLUSION

Through utilizing the principles of currere, we found that, even though our contexts and professional journeys came about in different ways, we faced similar issues stemming from neoliberalism's influence on education and language teaching. By reflecting on our contexts, and the systemic issues, we were able to create opportunities for resistance. As teachers, we navigated issues around the curriculum and expectations being culturally inappropriate for our students by adapting our lessons and our teaching methods. As teacher leaders, we empathized with our teachers and negotiated ways to help them improve their teaching and teaching context and circumvented the structures imposed upon us.

REFERENCES

Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global education inc.: New policy networks and the neoliberal imaginary*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203803301

Bano, M. (2008). Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) as 'anchor' of educational reforms: Lessons from Pakistan. *World Bank.*

Brathwaite, J. (2017). Neoliberal education reform and the perpetuation of inequality. *Critical Sociology*, *43*(3), 429–448. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920516649418

Bullock, R. H. (1987). A quiet revolution: The power of teacher research. In G. L. Bissex, & R. H. Bullock (Eds.), *Seeing for ourselves: Case study research by teachers of writing* (pp. 21–27). Heinemann Educational Books.

Coleman, H. (2010). *Teaching and learning in Pakistan: The role of language in education*. British Council.

Crawford-Garrett, K., & Thomas, M. A. M. (2018). Teacher education and the global impact of Teach For All. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.417

Curtis, R. (2013). *Finding a new way: Leveraging teacher leadership to meet unprecedented demands*. Aspen Institute. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED541444

Edwards, W., & Kalan, A. (2024). Addressing the subjugation of knowledge in educational settings through structuration of teacher research. *The Canadian Journal of Action Research*, *24*(1), 56–80. https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v24i1.664

Green, M. G. (2014). *Caring leadership in turbulent times: Tackling neoliberal education reform*. Emerald Publishing. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=3316037

Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Holliday, A. (2005). *The struggle to teach English as an international language*. Oxford University Press.

Holliday, A. (2006). Native-speakerism. *ELT Journal*, *60*(4), 385–387. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccl030

Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi. (2024). *Annual status of education report Pakistan: 2023*. ASER Pakistan Secretariat. https://aserpakistan.org/document/2024/aser_national_2023.pdf

Li, H., Zhong, Q., & Suen, H. K. (2012). Students' perceptions of the impact of the college English test. *Language Testing in Asia*, *2*(3), Article 77. https://doi.org/10.1186/2229-0443-2-3-77

Manan, S. A. (2021). 'English is like a credit card': The workings of neoliberal governmentality in English learning in Pakistan. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *45*(4), 987–1003. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2021.1931251

Manan, S. A., David, M. K., & Dumanig, F. P. (2015). Disjunction between language policy and children's sociocultural ecology – An analysis of English-medium education policy in Pakistan. *Language and Education*, *29*(5), 453–473. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2015.1046882

Mitra, S (2007, February). *Kids can teach themselves* [Video]. Ted Conferences. https://www.ted.com/talks/sugata_mitra_kids_can_teach_themselves

Padgett, M. L. (in press). *Exploring English education in Taiwan: Perceptions and insights of foreign English teachers* [Dissertation]. University of Houston.

Pakistan Ministry of Federal Education and Training, (2018). *National education policy framework*. Islamabad.

Philip, T. M., Souto-Manning, M., Anderson, L., Horn, I., J. Carter Andrews, D., Stillman, J., & Varghese, M. (2019). Making justice peripheral by constructing practice as "core": How the increasing prominence of core practices challenges teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *70* (3), 251–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487118798324

Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.

Phillipson, R. (2006). English, a cuckoo in the European higher education nest of languages? *European Journal of English Studies*, *10*(1), 13–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570600590846

Pinar, W. (1994). *Autobiography, politics and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory 1972-1992.* Peter Lang.

Portelli, J. P., & Oladi, S. (2018). Neoliberal elements in Canadian teacher education: Challenges and possibilities. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, *64*(4), 378–392. https://doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v64i4.56375

Sparke, M. (2013). *Introducing globalization: Ties, tensions, and uneven integration*. John Wiley & Sons.

Spring, J. (2006). *Pedagogies of globalization: The rise of the educational security state*. Routledge.

Spring, J. (2014). *Globalization of education: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315795843

Srivastava, P. (2015, September 24). Low-fee private schooling: Prachi Srivastava responds to The Economist. *From Poverty to Power*. https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/low-fee-private-schooling-what-do-we-really-know-prachi-srivastava-responds-to-the-economist-icymi-or-these-other-summer-posts-on-the-private-sector-and-development/

Sung, C. C. M. (2011). Race and native speakers in ELT: Parents' perspectives in Hong Kong. *English Today*, *27*(3), 25–29. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078411000344

Tamim, T. (2013). Higher education, languages, and the persistence of inequitable structures for working-class women in Pakistan. *Gender and Education*, *25*(2), 155–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2012.752793

Tamim, T. (2021). Language, class, and education: Deconstructing the centre to rethink inclusivity in education in Pakistan. *Cogent Education*, *8*(1), Article 1897933. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2021.1897933

Tan, C., & Chua, C. S. K. (2015). Education policy borrowing in China: Has the West wind overpowered the East wind? *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *45*(5), 686–704. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2013.871397

Tan, C., & Reyes, V. (2016). Curriculum reform and education policy borrowing in China: Towards a hybrid model of teaching. In C. P. Chou & J. Spangler (Eds.), *Chinese Education Models in a Global Age* (pp. 37–49). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0330-1_3

Thomas, J. (1999). Voices from the periphery: Non-native teachers and issues of credibility. In G. Braine (Ed.), *Non-native educators in English language teaching* (pp. 5–14). Routledge.

UNESCO. (2023). *The teachers we need for the education we want: The global imperative to reverse the teacher shortage*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387001

Widdowson, H. G. (1994). The ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, *28*(2), 377–389. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587438

Wu, G. (2007). Why be confident about curriculum change? [Weishenme dui kebian chongman xinxing?]. In Q. Zhong & G. Wu (Eds.), *Reflections on education in China [Fansi Zhongguo jiaoyu]* (pp.164–166). East China Normal University Press.

Currere, Cups of Tea, and Curses
Navigating the Neoliberal Labyrinth of a Career in Higher Education

By Merris Griffiths
Cardiff Metropolitan University

Six years ago, I gave a lecture on the historical evolution of the UK's higher education (HE) system to a group of first year undergraduate students at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Wales. The session came in the aftermath of a professional upheaval, having taken voluntary redundancy from a previous job, and tracked both the growth and gradual erosion of the system from the 19th-century to that day. At times, the tone of the lecture was sharply critical of the neoliberal political long-game, angry at its consequences for those within the system, and unflinchingly passionate in its desire to preserve something of Newman's (1859/1996) *The Idea of a University*. A small group of highly engaged students approached me at the end of the lecture, wanting to ask questions. They understood the overarching narrative about the development of the system, but one of the group took my breath away by asking, "Has it changed students?" I will return to this question later.

The dynamic between the HE system and the people within it has fascinated me throughout the course of my nearly 25-year career in academia. Agitated ruminations over cups of tea, watching droplets of condensation bead down café windows in stormy seaside locations, has prompted many conversations about and reflections on how my understanding of HE has often been profoundly at odds with the reality of working in the sector. My deep-seated unease with the evolution of the system has lurked, like a dark spectre—an uncomfortable misalignment of value systems that often generates inner conflict.

Engaging in *currere*, which I view as a structured form of reflective practice, provides a useful framework within which to attempt to disentangle the feelings of cognitive dissonance so frequently felt during the everyday "doing" of my job. Partly, my sense of inner conflict is rooted in my positionality as a working-class Welsh woman and the first in my family to obtain a university degree. One consequence of this foundation was and is a genuine conviction in the transformative potential of education, alongside a general sense of naivety about the power-dynamics within the HE hierarchical system, the significance of social capital, and the existence of a meritocracy. In parallel with a self who perpetually questions the legitimacy of the system, the myriad reshaping forces of external pressures have often resulted in an unsettling combination of frustrated weariness, crippling despondency, flashes of renewed energy, and a stubborn optimism that positive change may still be possible.

Currere and "Doing Agency"

"Doing agency" offers a useful starting point in thinking about how it may be possible to maintain one's (true) self whilst navigating the so-called neoliberal labyrinth of HE, because it facilitates an all-important sense of autonomy and professional integrity. Drawing on Schwab (1969), Smith (2022) frames the "achievement of agency" in terms of "choice and action," which, in turn, lead to "defensible decisions" (p. 107). Whilst Smith connects this specifically with

theories and practices of curriculum and pedagogy, this framing can be extended to include broader organisational infrastructures, policy frameworks, and the political agendas that dictate the nature of the affordances and constraints that are experienced by academics on a daily basis.

During the course of my career, when reflecting on the evolution of the system and trying to manage/accommodate change, I have often felt that these broader agendas to which the sector must speak have inflicted untold damage on what it means to achieve agency, both for academics and their students. Neoliberalism has been evident since the early part of the 20th-century (Bockman, 2013), but its current incarnation is rooted in the 1970s/80s, and is not without its consequences for individuals and organisations (Ball & Olmedo, 2012; Jones & Ball, 2023). One consequence of the ideology is the corporatisation and marketization of universities (Bockman, 2013). This is spun as a necessity to improve efficiencies, ensure value-for-money, hold universities to account across the full spectrum of their core activities, and generate comparable sets of key performance indicators to inform consumer choice-making (Collini, 2012). The irony, however, is that it undermines the very things for which HE should stand, such as pushing boundaries, being creative, and generating new knowledge. Under a neoliberal regime, teaching and research activities feel reduced, restricted, and homogenised, because their "value" is measured and determined in ways that mainly seek to serve a political agenda.

Smith (2022) draws on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) definition of agency as the interplay of reproduction and transformation when individuals respond "to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (p. 108), which would arguably include the problems caused by ideological frameworks. Having worked within the HE sector for a lengthy period of time, I have found that agentic "doing" can present constant challenges, because it is informed by a range of different experiences, motivations, intentions, and reactions that shift, change, and build incrementally. Using *currere* as an opportunity to pause and think about one's own professional timeline can help to build an understanding of the schema and default positions that define one's personal career-map. This may be re-drawn from week-to-week, month-to-month, and year-to-year, but it can facilitate a form of navigation that builds resilience and enables survival, irrespective of whether professional possibilities may or may not be felt.

Forde (2023) explores "how *currere* can be applied to (re)kindle one's agency and (re)write one's self" and positions it quite broadly as an "autobiographical method" (p. 1). My own interpretation is similar in that, through reflective practice (especially journaling), I have sought to address my latent anxiety about the jeopardy of losing myself within a system that does not always align well with my core values and moral compass. Indeed, Smith (2022) extols the benefit of engaging in *currere* as "reflective work centred on the aim of making sense of our values" (p. 109), which can help to reconcile past, present, and future. It is therapeutic to think deeply about one's feelings in response to the gradual yet perceptible evolution of a problematic system and one's place within it. HE often demands game-playing, resistance, compliance, and 60-hour working weeks, which can be complex, confusing, exasperating, and exhausting. Long-term reflective practice has enabled me to recognise patterns, make predications, and psychologically prepare, whilst ultimately allowing me to feel able, in some way, to "do agency" and curse less.

Neoliberal Complicity? Thinking About and Making Sense of Oneself

Smith (2022) presents Pinar's (1975) four stages of critical self-reflection, to provide a neatly structured approach to *currere*,

1. The Regressive – remembering/re-storying episodes from our past
2. The Progressive – imagining our future
3. The Analytic – analysing and comprehending our "now"
4. The Synthetic – constructing new "knowings" (ways of understanding, being, and acting that enable us to better understand the relationship between choices, actions, and their consequences in working towards desired aims). (p. 108)

My own *currere* account, as presented below, seeks to apply this four-stage process to the mapping of a personal career timeline, in order to make sense of my position within the HE system and to reflect on how my "choices" and "actions" (in response to systemic challenges over a quarter-century) may shed light on my "now."

THE REGRESSIVE: GREAT OAKS FROM LITTLE ACORNS GROW?

Forde (2023) notes that "we return to our past experience and examine how it came to constitute our present" (p. 2) but also acknowledges that deeper understanding of self may only be accessible with "the passage of time" (p. 3). This is an important point, because it is often difficult and sometimes too painful to fully comprehend what is happening when one is in the midst of it. Hindsight can be liberating, when dots are joined between past experiences and present challenges, to enable the establishment of new understandings.

My fascination with the design, function, and interplay of systems is unequivocally anchored in my personal experiences. I emerged as a "product" of a particular school system that had thrown my sense of identity into flux (particularly in relation to "Welshness"). Feelings of "injustice" were later (re)contextualised during my undergraduate studies, where I learnt to interrogate policies, question the reasons for change, and understand how and why things evolve in particular ways. Knowledge, in this sense, became a source of inner strength, enabling me to appreciate that, whilst most external factors are out of my own control, they often provide underlying explanations that support sense-making.

At the beginning of my career, the habit of reflective practice was formed early through my initial training as a lecturer in Education. I maintained a punishingly unhealthy schedule for the first seven years in the job, with perfectionist tendencies fuelling brutal self-criticism until an inevitable health crisis forced re-evaluation. In taking a step back, I consciously perceived myself as someone who was very serious about the importance of education and of being a good educator but also acknowledged that the system often (curiously) did not seem to appreciate these attributes. I also felt that, for reasons of self-preservation, I needed to find ways to walk my own path in an authentic and honest way. Gradually, I came to realise that the possibilities for "doing agency" are often hidden within the frameworks of the system; being able to recognise the processes of neoliberalisation can empower one to work around them.

To add to the breadth of my growing understanding of the HE system, I switched disciplines by moving from a School of Education into a Department of Theatre, Film & Television Studies (TFTS). This was an eye-opening culture-shock for a number of reasons but was also the point at which I became aware of the perceived "value" of different disciplines within the neoliberal landscape. Working in Education, I had never needed to defend the legitimacy of the discipline area. However, becoming a lecturer in Media & Communication Studies required frequent counterarguments to accusations of its low value as a so-called "Mickey Mouse" subject.

Indeed, this negative rhetoric persisted under the UK's recent Conservative Government when, in 2023, then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak aggressively pledged to "crackdown on rip-off degrees" (UK Government, 2023, n.p.).

It was during my time in TFTS that I came to fully appreciate the horror of neoliberalism and the destructive market forces that are allowed to run unchecked within HE. During a twelve-year timeline, I lived through a perfect boom-and-bust narrative-arc, which has had a profound shaping influence on my perception of the system. When I first joined the Department, the discipline areas were beginning to burgeon in terms of student recruitment, with very few competitor HEIs running similar courses. This triggered pulses of intense pressure during times of over-recruitment and understaffing, with large class-sizes and immense assessment-loads, until a reasonable staff-student ratio was struck. Simultaneously, however, things were changing in the broader HE landscape. In response to "market analyses," other HEIs began to offer similar provision, thus, widening consumer choice and diluting the recruitment pool. Then, prior to the significant increase in student tuition fees in 2012, the university experienced an exceptional year for student recruitment. What followed was a three-year period of assured income-generation from a large body of registered students and a feeling of relative financial stability, which then was gradually overshadowed by an alarming drop in the recruitment of subsequent cohorts as a result of, amongst other factors, higher fees.

I likened this time to watching a tanker appear on the horizon, slowly increasing in size as it journeyed irreversibly towards rocks, with no workable mechanism to change direction because the whole ship had long-since been rendered rudderless by neoliberal reform of the system. Despite efforts to correct the direction of travel, the inevitable consequences of dwindling student recruitment (in the form of restructuring, portfolio rationalisation, and staff redundancy) generated feelings of deeply unsettling dread. My response to this was to financially prepare and wait. When the moment eventually arrived, I opted to "jump ship" by applying for voluntary redundancy and "doing agency" rather than running the risk of drowning in the wreckage. Seven years ago, this narrative-arc felt unusual and unfortunate, but the post-pandemic, post-Brexit, socio-political context of HE in the UK has made this situation routine. In the last year alone, numerous academic colleagues have been "at risk" of redundancy, demonstrating that the business model for HE is little more than basic supply-and-demand.

THE PROGRESSIVE: BLUE-SKY, YET CLOUDY, IDEALISM?

My lengthy account of The Regressive stage in the *currere* process is deliberate, because the experiences I had in the earlier years of my career have powerfully shaped my current thinking. This, in part, explains why I struggle when "looking forward to what is not yet present" (Forde, 2023, p. 4). The Progressive stage in the *currere* process invites us to imagine our future (Pinar, 1975, as cited in Smith, 2022, p. 108), but my experience of redundancy has made me acutely aware that, no matter how good one is at one's job, a professional future is not guaranteed and is, therefore, difficult to conceive. Contemporary commentaries about UK HE present a sector in deep crisis (e.g., Mintz, 2021) with no prospect of constructive government intervention.

My struggles with and huge reservations about sector-change can make it difficult to formulate and/or commit to any long-term plans. Forde (2023) suggests that his tendency to allow himself "only a very limited planning horizon" may, in part, be explained by his "perceived lack of agency" (p. 4). I feel a similar sense of reticence, possibly as a result of working in so-called

low-prestige (arts and humanities) subject-areas, which are often seen (by successive governments and, sometimes, HEI senior management teams) as irrelevant or disposable. In the context of Wales, the political tone relating to attitudes about the role and value of HE became particularly combative during the time when Leighton Andrews was Minister for Education & Skills (2009-13) (see Andrews, 2014). This tone still resonates in contemporary commentaries that seek to draw attention to the contradictions in Welsh governance (e.g., Healy, 2021), and it is challenging to maintain energy whilst trying to wade through the resultant quagmire.

However, engaging with other people's accounts of *currere*—such as Forde (2023)—can be helpful in unlocking common experiences, fears, perceived limitations, and potential solutions. Thus, I dare to dream! In trying to imagine a future HE system and my career within it, I would like to see a (re-)focusing of purpose, to (re-)prioritise teaching and research in ways that permit a sense of autonomy and freedom—where lecturers design their own teaching without interference from those who do not teach, and where researchers shape their own expertise in ways that are not dictated by the distracting "trends" set by external funding agendas.

Furthermore, I imagine recapturing some of the values espoused by Newman (1859/1996), who saw "the University" as the ideal arena for a liberal education—a place to nurture the ability to think and permit freedom of thought, to appreciate education for education's sake (where it is seen as a good in and of itself rather than a means-to-an end), and to have as its ultimate goal the holistic transformation (for the better) of individuals for the long-term benefit of society. I would also like to image a future in which the pace is more measured, to allow ideas to percolate, to create more time for students to make (intellectual) connections, and to create space for slow-burn research that is more nuanced and complex than the pressures of Research Excellence Framework (REF) cycles currently allow.

THE ANALYTIC: VISIBILITY IS A TRAP?

I regard The Analytic as potentially the most dangerous stage in the *currere* process because, in "analysing and comprehending our 'now'" (Pinar, 1975, as quoted in Smith, 2022, p. 108), there is a risk of getting stuck, of living forever in a reflective echo chamber of one's own making and being unable to make progress. Given the particular neoliberal constructions of accountability that characterise the HE system, which function to maintain power and control by surveilling both academics and their students, one can sometimes feel trapped (Foucault, 1977). Drawing on Paul and Beierling (2017), Forde (2023) notes that the autobiographical demands of engaging in the *currere* process require "courage" on the part of an individual (p. 5). Recalling and reflecting upon experiences can be a complicated and emotive undertaking, triggering residual feelings about "episodes from our past" (Pinar, 1975, as quoted in Smith, 2022, p. 108). Further, sharing these reflections publicly can feel high-risk and exposing.

Time is important here, in allowing space to sift, process, reflect, and revisit but only when one is ready to do so. I have found it empowering to draw on past experiences as a way to rationalise the present. The post-pandemic, post-Brexit era is bringing with it a new set of challenges that appear to be pushing many UK HEIs to an unsustainable breaking point. Having an appreciation for and an understanding of what came before generates strength and wisdom, in the sense that I am aware of possible trajectories in senior management decision-making and can maintain measured responses to situations and people as sector-wide precarity evolves and

deepens. I am clear about what I do *not* want to be or become on the basis of what I have witnessed in the past and, therefore, feel stoically capable of holding-steady in stormy seas.

"Comprehending our now" (Pinar, 1975, as quoted in Smith, 2022, p. 108) connects with understanding the insidiousness of neoliberalism. HE is a business, playing target-driven numbers games in the name of competitive edge. Where HE Open Days used to be about course content and assessment methods, they now function as a shopfront of helium balloons and free pizza. "Success" (which is a relative concept, see Heslin, 2005) is measured by the reach and circulation of snappy social media content and league-table positions, whilst costly mechanisms such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and REF arguably demand time and resources that would be better spent on actual teaching and research. An understanding of the past (be it one's personal story or bigger socio-historical narratives) provides explanations for why the HE sector is in its current state and certainly accounts for my own hesitant relationship with the "now."

THE SYNTHETIC: RECOGNISING PATTERNS AND MAKING CHOICES

The final stage in the *currere* process requires a connecting of the dots to build new understandings. For Forde (2023), this stage provides "a means of exercising (his) agency" (p. 6), which may be akin to achieving a form of self-actualisation. Exercising *my* agency, such as actively choosing voluntary redundancy, enables me to take charge of my own destiny (or at least conjure the illusion that this is the case). However, for me, the priority is self-preservation, especially in terms of safeguarding my health, and I acknowledge that this sometimes manifests as a tendency to self-sabotage. I continue to wrestle with fear, apathy, and disillusionment, as the long shadows of past experiences cast doubt on the future.

New "knowings" about the present should ideally be easily locatable in terms of ethically sound and transparent decision-making practices that are justified and clearly explained. Choices, actions, and consequences should not be at the mercy of volatile external factors, especially hostile politics. The boom-and-bust narrative arc recounted here serves as a powerful illustration of how situations can play-out within a broader context that is completely out of one's control (such as student recruitment, HE funding formulae, and staffing costs). The HE system deserves greater stability, so that its activities can be less reactive. Whilst the relationship between choices, actions, and consequences is difficult to navigate, I have found that the habit of reflective practice has a cumulative effect that is generally positive in terms of building insights and understanding.

For me, constructing new "knowings" is about drawing together the accumulated knowledge of the past and using it to build trusted relationships with others in the present, to facilitate and support open dialogue. The most significant revelation during the experience of redundancy was the power of honest conversation with colleagues, which rendered an unsettling situation tolerable. Sharing common experiences can be reassuring, and a collective articulation of worries can help one to feel less alone, so it is important to resist potentially divisive rhetoric and gas-lighting in favour of cooperation, integrity, and collegiality (Forde, 2023). This drive for common good may well have been what Newman (1859/1996) had in mind as a positive consequence of a liberal education.

Closing Remarks

Forde (2023) sees the practice of *currere* as "an ongoing engagement with our lived experience such that it remains limber, such that our past does not simply accumulate and become compacted" (p. 9) The importance of remaining "limber" and not allowing oneself to be paralysed by that which cannot be controlled is a realisation that I have come to in recent years. It is the small, consistent, authentic acts of "doing agency" that have enabled me to maintain a professional identity that feels true-to-self. My view of the HE system and my place within it is driven by a personal desire to support students, myth-bust, ask the difficult questions, and call-out the many little injustices that perpetuate inequalities. I have learnt the rules in order to quietly rebel against them and, thus, "do agency" in a way that aligns with my values.

Returning to my student's question about whether changes to the system have "changed students," there is ample evidence to support this likelihood. The marketization of HE has created the consumer-student (see Dearing, 1997) who expects to receive the end-product of a degree-level qualification because they have paid for it (Bunce et al., 2017). The enormous financial commitment of attending university often means that students (especially those from working-class backgrounds such as my own) must work full-time in order to support themselves which, ironically, makes it difficult for them to attend classes. Such circumstances may explain the functional way in which many approach their studies, where focus is placed on doing well in assessments rather than experiencing education for education's sake. Students' agency, as learners, is straightjacketed by financial pressure.

By association, neoliberalisation of the system has also changed academics. The negative impacts of increased workloads have eroded the good will that, historically, enabled the system to flex and adapt. The demands and distractions of external agendas often make it difficult to commit to the now, and the short-term, cyclic nature of change breeds scepticism. My tendency towards romanticism and my Welsh mind-set mean that I may also be guilty of "hiraeth," longing for an HE system that probably never really existed. I once believed that it was possible to change whole systems from within. Past experience, however, has taught me that this is not possible, because the system is so much bigger than the individual and/or a single institution. HE is only one small thread in a socio-political tapestry that is beginning to unravel. Systemic change, therefore, and the possibility of "doing agency" becomes about small acts of rebellion and little wins, rather than all-out revolution.

In this article, I have attempted to trace the evolution of my time in the UK (Welsh) HE system by utilising the principles of *currere* as a sense-making structure. The corporatisation of universities has demanded that those working within the system must manage and accommodate accelerating cycles of change, which can be difficult to reconcile. *Currere* provides opportunities to pause and think, which can be useful when processing the now. Past experiences certainly offer opportunities to recognise and predict patterns, which help one to maintain a sense of autonomy, agency, and inner peace in a bilious sea of corporate slogans. Taking time to understand the frameworks that govern the system facilitates its steady navigation, and authentically sharing experiences with colleagues can draw out collective concerns that mitigate individual worries.

The habitual thinking and reflection that has occupied my mind throughout my career has not only functioned as a means to find ways of continuing to work within the system (where there has often been an urge to run for the hills) but has also been a necessary means to self-soothe, rationalise, (attempt to) accept, and circumvent (where possible) its most paralysing elements. Knowing the reasons why, being able to account for things in the context of an evolving timeline,

recognising patterns, correcting (re)written narratives, and calling-out contradiction become ways to navigate change that also protect one's sanity. Armed with a quiet stillness borne of deep thinking and anchored somewhere in a whirlpool of reeling disillusionment, it is possible to find an individual path that still feels authentic and honest. If I did not believe this to be true, I would not still be present in the system. For now, in mournful lament, I drink tea and reflect.

References

Andrews, L. (2014). *Ministering to education: A reformer reports*. Parthian Books.

Ball, S. J., & Olmedo, A. (2012). Care of the self, resistance and subjectivity under neoliberal governmentalities. *Critical Studies in Education*, *54*(1), 85–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.740678

Bockman, J. (2013). Neoliberalism. *Contexts*, *12*(3), 14–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504213499873

Bunce, L., Baird, A., & Jones, S. E. (2017). The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(11), 1958–1978. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908

Collini, S. (2012). *What are universities for?* Penguin.

Dearing, R. (1997). *Higher education in the learning society*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office. http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1997/dearing1997.html

Healy, J. (2021). The neoliberal university in Wales. In D. Evans, K. Smith, & H. Williams (Eds.), *The Welsh way: Essays on neoliberalism and devolution* (pp. 138–149). Parthian Books.

Forde, K. (2023). *Currere*: The agentic (re)writing of the self. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *7*(2), 1–10. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/246/146

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Penguin.

Heslin, P. A. (2005). Conceptualising and evaluating career success. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, *26*(2), 113–136, https://doi.org/10.1002/job.270

Jones, B. M. A., & Ball, S. J. (Eds.). (2023). *Neoliberalism and education*. Routledge.

Mintz, B. (2021). Neoliberalism and the crisis in higher education: The cost of ideology. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, *80*(1), 79–112, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12370

Newman, J. H. (1996). *The idea of a university*. Yale University Press. (Original work published 1859)

Smith, K. (2022). Ambulare. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *6*(1), 107–115. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/209/98

UK Government. (2023). *Crackdown on rip-off university degrees* [Press release]. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/crackdown-on-rip-off-university-degrees

APPLICATION OF ANDRAGOGY WITH GRADUATE STUDENTS

By Somanita Kheang
Ball State University

As I sit in my office today reflecting on my journey to becoming a tenure-track faculty member at a research university in the U.S. in my early 30s, I can't help but recall the vibrant yet tumultuous landscape I navigated as an international student during my master's and doctoral studies in Thailand and the U.S. that began in 2012. Every step of that journey shaped not only my academic paths but also my perspective on resilience and adaptability in an unfamiliar world. Born and raised in Cambodia, where Khmer is the official language, my international educational experience began during my master's degree study in Thailand where I first encountered the principles of adult education. This experience paved the way for a study exchange in the U.S. in the fall of 2013, which allowed me to further explore the term "andragogy," defined by Knowles (1980) as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43), and how it is used to facilitate the learning of adults. During this time, I became acutely aware of the distinct learning needs and experiences of adults—an insight that would later shape my academic and professional pursuits.

In this article, I weave together my personal and professional journeys and provide academic insights to argue that the application of andragogical principles has the potential to empower graduate students. By transitioning from conventional pedagogical approaches to more adult learner-centered strategies, we can foster dynamic educational environments that support and enhance the learning experiences of adult learners. Through this narrative exploration, I aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse on effective adult education in an increasingly globalized context.

REGRESSIVE MOMENT

The idea of becoming an international student in the U.S. once felt like a distant dream—something my 10-year-old self could hardly imagine. I vividly remember the confusion I felt attending nightly English classes, wondering why I needed to learn a language so different from the Khmer spoken at home. When my mother's relatives, who had immigrated to the U.S., visited, I eagerly approached them with questions about life and school in America: "Do you speak English every day? What is school like? Are people kind? How do they greet each other?" Their replies, a mix of accented Khmer and English, only deepened my uncertainty. They spoke of long commutes and early mornings—realities far removed from my childhood world—and I left these conversations questioning whether I would ever fully grasp the education system or culture I so admired from afar.

After finishing high school in 2007, I pursued undergraduate degrees in Finance and Banking and English Literature in Cambodia. My curiosity about the U.S. education system continued to grow, but the vast and fragmented information I found online offered little clarity at the time. Receiving a scholarship to pursue my master's degree in Non-Formal Education at Chulalongkorn University—the Harvard of Thailand—in 2012 broadened my understanding of educational contexts, especially in relation to Thailand and Cambodia. However, I soon realized that comparing the education systems of these two countries was complicated by their vastly

different historical and political backgrounds (Kheang, 2025; Kheang & Ratana-Ubol, 2014). This growing awareness set the stage for a pivotal experience that would reshape my understanding of education and learning.

A transformative moment occurred during a 2013 study exchange in the U.S., where I enrolled in adult education and English courses while serving as a graduate assistant at Lindenwood University, a private institution in the Midwest. Immersed in this vibrant academic and social environment, many of the childhood questions I had carried began to find answers. I encountered a culture characterized by warmth, welcoming gestures, and inspiring examples of lifelong learning. One unforgettable example was an 82-year-old doctoral student who became my partner on a group presentation. Her unwavering dedication—commuting over an hour and a half to attend evening classes, meeting regularly with me to plan assignments, and sitting side by side in class—was both humbling and inspiring. Her kindness radiated in every interaction; she even baked cookies to celebrate her birthday with the class, inviting us all to share in her joy. Witnessing her perseverance and commitment to excellence at an age when many would have long retired deeply moved me. Though she sadly passed away before finishing her dissertation, her spirit continues to inspire my own lifelong learning journey. Her example embodies the resilience and passion I aspire to nurture in all adult learners, fueling my commitment to design inclusive and supportive learning environments where no adult learner is left behind.

These experiences profoundly inform and shape my current teaching. I vividly recall the confusion and yearning for connection I once felt, and they motivate my dedication to creating classroom spaces where adult learners feel genuinely understood, respected, and empowered. My teaching approach is shaped by this lived experience—not through abstract theoretical distinctions but through empathy, inclusivity, flexibility, and responsiveness. I strive to honor each student's unique background and aspirations, cultivating learning environments that balance rigor with support and encourage meaningful, self-directed growth in new and dynamic ways. This profound connection between my past and present work grounds my teaching philosophy and inspires the intentional application of andragogical principles—an exploration I continue in the next section.

WHAT IF ANDRAGOGY WERE APPLIED TO SUPPORT GRADUATE STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS?

Andragogy, defined by Malcolm Knowles (1980) as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43), has been broadly referenced in European countries since the 1960s, as noted by Dusan Savicevic, a student of Knowles at Boston University (Knowles, 1994). Although Knowles did not coin the term "andragogy," his use of andragogy resulted in pivotal contributions in three key areas: (1) teaching adult learners; (2) conducting research in adult education; and (3) engaging with trainers, researchers, educators, and adult learners across various disciplines in the workforce since the 1960s (Kheang, 2018).

During my coursework, I observed that my adult education instructor, Dr. John Henschke, who was a student of Malcolm Knowles, embodied the principles of andragogy by adopting an empathetic and facilitative role, rather than that of a traditional instructor who primarily focused on lectures, testing, and grading. He emphasized that andragogy was fundamentally about understanding students as individuals and recognizing their aspirations in both educational and career contexts. This approach was exemplified through the introduction of the learning contract, which invited students to articulate the grade they believed they deserved based on their

performance and efforts. This was the first time I felt a sense of agency in my academic journey; I confidently expressed my desire for an "A" grade and substantiated my reasoning. The learning contract consisted of five main elements that each student had to complete and submit to the instructor for review: (1) learning objectives (What would you learn?); (2) learning strategies/tactics (How would you learn it?); (3) timeline (By when would you learn it?); (4) evidence (How would you know you learned it?); and (5) validation (How would you know it was the right choice to meet your learning objective?) (Knowles, 1991). This contract not only allowed the instructor to gain insights into my goals but also demonstrated a genuine commitment to understanding my learning process. In this environment, I felt respected, heard, and valued, with my educational needs and perspectives acknowledged. This practice undoubtedly reaffirmed my status as an adult learner.

As I was preparing for my own journey as an adult educator, I was deeply inspired by the principles of andragogy that have informed and enriched my educational experiences. I envision creating an inclusive and responsive learning environment where adult learners can leverage their strengths, articulate their aspirations, and actively engage in their educational journeys. By facilitating meaningful conversations and fostering a collaborative learning atmosphere, I aspire to empower my graduate students in the same transformative way that I experienced during my own education (Freire, 1970/2005; Kheang, 2019, 2022a).

After graduating with my first doctoral degree (EdD) in andragogy from Lindenwood University in Missouri, I chose to pursue a second doctoral degree (PhD) in Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development at North Carolina State University. My goal was to become a faculty member capable of teaching students not only the fundamentals of educating adults but also the intricacies of conducting educational research. I aimed to empower them to achieve their educational aspirations and become leaders, educators, researchers, or practitioners in their chosen fields.

CURRENT SITUATION: PEDAGOGY VS. ANDRAGOGY

Upon graduating with my second doctoral degree in 2023, I joined the University of the District of Columbia as a visiting assistant professor of adult education and then Ball State University in 2024 as a tenure-track assistant professor of educational studies. In my role, I have had the privilege of teaching and working with graduate students—both master's and doctoral students—who are adult learners returning to school to reach their defined goals. Some seek to become faculty members, while others prefer careers in industry, and still others aspire to leadership or management positions in non-profit and for-profit organizations within their communities.

Having witnessed how adult learners are educated in various settings and disciplines due to my diverse educational and professional backgrounds in Cambodia, Thailand, and the U.S., I have seen how traditional pedagogical practices often fall short in supporting the learning experiences and success of graduate students. I am not the first to have noticed this problem. The ongoing concern regarding traditional pedagogy practices has been a part of the conversation on education since the 1920s. For example, Eduard Lindeman (1926), who was an adult educator in the early 20th century, observed that students who have

> "completed" a standardized regimen of education promptly turn their faces in the opposite direction… . For him, this life for which he has suffered the affliction of learning will come to be a series of dull, uninteresting, degrading capitulations to the stereotyped pattern of his "set." (p. 4)

Learning should occur naturally, even while being guided and measured by curriculum standards designed to facilitate the learning of adults. Adult learners learn and thrive in a fun, critical, creative, and positive environment, where the instructor acts as a facilitator, helping students discover and engage with what they need to learn (Henschke, 2013; Knowles, 1995).

Transitioning from a pedagogical mindset—shaped by my early educational experiences—though, has been a gradual process. This evolution began with my empathy for adult learners who may struggle with self-directed learning while navigating uncertainties and balancing responsibilities outside of school, such as work, health issues, and family obligations. Many learners still rely on instructors to tell them what they need to learn, as this is what they have become accustomed to since elementary school. Some need guidance and support to recognize their unique strengths, harness critical thinking skills, and use their experiences as valuable tools in the learning process. This support helps them to feel more confident in becoming self-directed learners (Henschke, 2013; Kheang, 2022b; Tough, 1979). Moving forward, my mission is to discern when traditional pedagogical practices may be appropriate while primarily applying andragogical methods. This flexibility will enable me to accommodate my students' needs and foster their development as self-directed learners, which ultimately supports their comfort and confidence in the andragogical learning process.

The shift from pedagogy towards andragogy embraces a dialogic approach to learning and knowledge, as articulated by Freire (1970/2005, 1989) and Knowles (1980), and is informed by educators' experiences in the classroom (Dewey, 1938). Freire (1970/2005) introduced the "banking" concept in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critiquing a pedagogical system he deemed misguided. He described education as an act of depositing information, where students are passive depositories, and the teacher serves as the depositor. Rather than engaging in genuine communication, the teacher issues directives and deposits knowledge that students must simply receive, memorize, and repeat. In this "banking" model of education, students' engagement is limited to receiving, storing, and recalling information, ultimately reducing them to mere containers of knowledge. Freire (1970/2005) also argued that this method stifles creativity and transformation, which leads to students' lack of true understanding of what matters in their learning. He stated, "Apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human" (p. 72). Knowledge, he explained, arises through invention and reinvention, fueled by the ongoing, hopeful inquiry that human beings pursue in relation to themselves and the world around them.

Freire (1970/2005) further elucidated how the "banking" concept operates within traditional pedagogy through several key observations: (1) the teacher teaches while the students are taught; (2) the teacher possesses all knowledge while the students know nothing; (3) the teacher thinks for the students rather than with them; (4) the teacher talks while the students listen passively; (5) the teacher disciplines while the students are disciplined; (6) the teacher makes choices that the students must comply with; (7) the teacher acts, creating the illusion that the students are also acting; (8) the teacher selects the program content without consulting the students, who must adapt; (9) the teacher conflates their authority over knowledge with their professional authority, opposing student freedom; and (10) the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the students remain mere objects.

This view of pedagogical practice is in line with Stenhouse (1985) who asserted that pedagogical methods typically involve traditional practices, such as (1) delivering lectures; (2) the teacher controlling what and how students learn; (3) assessing students through tests and quizzes to determine comprehension; and (4) viewing teachers as the primary source of knowledge, expecting students to follow instructions. Recognizing that learning is a lifelong journey and that teachers are also learners, Freire (1998) thus proposed "critical pedagogy," wherein educators engage in dialogue with students, which allows for a reciprocal learning experience happen during the learning process. In this model, students are not merely passive recipients of information; they are encouraged to recognize their realities and act upon them.

Knowles (1994), likewise, argued that those teaching adults should adopt the role of facilitators rather than traditional teachers. Instead of concentrating on what to teach, they should understand the unique learning characteristics of their adult students. Knowles (1980) identified six key assumptions regarding adult learning: (1) adults are self-directed learners; (2) adults bring prior experiences to the learning process; (3) adults have specific learning needs and goals; (4) adults are ready to learn and address challenges that arise; (5) adults seek to understand why they are learning something and prefer learning the knowledge and skills that are immediately applicable; and (6) they are motivated by internal factors, including a desire to change their circumstances and enhance their quality of life.

Furthermore, Knowles (1995) established eight components of the andragogical process design to facilitate active involvement in adult learning. These include: (1) *preparation* (understanding who the learners are and planning appropriate lesson content and teaching techniques); (2) *climate* (creating a relaxed, trusting, and collaborative learning environment where learners feel comfortable expressing their concerns); (3) *planning* (collaboratively setting learning objectives and processes that reflect learners' experiences and needs); (4) *diagnosis of need* (mutual assessment between learners and facilitators); (5) *setting of objectives* (negotiating learning objectives together); (6) *designing learning plans* (using learning contracts and projects sequenced according to learners' readiness); (7) *learning activities* (implementing diverse instructional methods, such as inquiry projects, independent study, and experiential techniques); and (8) *evaluation* (encouraging self-evaluation alongside constructive feedback from peers and instructors).

Transitioning from pedagogical to andragogical practices requires time, effort, and patience. I recognize that my students face similar challenges in adjusting to my andragogical teaching methods, so I am committed to working with them to address any issues and concerns they may have. My ultimate goal is to empower them to become self-directed learners so that they can take charge of their own learning and are able to embrace their strengths as they navigate their unique paths toward success in their educational journeys.

SYNTHETIC STAGE: MY ROLES AS AN ADULT EDUCATOR

As an adult educator, I utilize andragogical methods to guide my teaching, research, and service. My teaching philosophy emphasizes a mindful awareness of who my students are, with a dedicated focus on adult learners. Recognizing that adults bring unique life experiences, learning preferences, and motivations, I structure my teaching to promote self-direction and practical application, so that my students receive experiences that are closely aligned with their needs and learning goals.

I aim to align my teaching, advising, and mentoring practices with the qualities of effective teachers practicing andragogy, as described by Henschke (2013). He emphasized the importance of qualities such as humor, flexibility, patience, sensitivity, and a desire to instruct. Rather than employing pedagogical methods suited for younger students (Knowles, 1994), I foster a learning environment where adult learners can laugh and learn from their mistakes, feel empowered to draw on their backgrounds, engage actively, and establish clear connections between their learning and their personal and professional lives.

To embody these andragogical commitments, I intentionally cultivate a classroom climate marked by warmth, openness, and mutual respect. For example, I often begin online sessions with light humor or relevant anecdotes that help ease tension and build rapport, inviting students to share their fun facts, own stories, or challenges related to the topic. My "desire to instruct" manifests through enthusiastic, clear explanations combined with an eagerness to facilitate rather than dominate learning. My patience is evident when I allow students the time and space to wrestle with complex ideas during discussions, encouraging multiple perspectives without rushing to judgment. Flexibility is demonstrated through my willingness to adjust assignment deadlines or modes of participation in response to students' life circumstances, while sensitivity shows in how I notice subtle cues—such as a student's withdrawal from discussion—and reach out privately to offer support or encouragement. These practices create an inclusive, psychologically safe space where learners can take risks and bring their whole selves to the educational experience.

In my advising and mentoring sessions, I employ the "question-asking" method to help students identify their learning needs, goals, and challenges. For example, instead of dictating what they should do, I ask them about their objectives and how I can support them in their educational journeys. I also take an active interest in my students' career goals, which informs the guidance I provide for their learning and research.

Central to my teaching is the collaborative development of personalized learning plans. Depending on the courses I teach, students create learning contracts that detail their learning objectives, learning strategies/tactics, timeline, evidence, and validation for their success. These contracts act as living documents that we regularly revisit throughout the semester to assess progress and adjust goals as needed. For example, in a recent doctoral seminar, one student focused their plan on examining equity in adult education programs through case study analysis. This approach helped the student enhance their literature review skills and make meaningful connections between the coursework and their professional role in a community organization, increasing both motivation and practical relevance. Another student prioritized developing research methods and interview skills to support their dissertation writing, which informed their assignment choices and guided their requests for specific feedback. These personalized plans empower students to take ownership of their learning by linking academic content or objectives to their personal and professional experiences, while enabling me to provide targeted and meaningful support.

In courses where flexibility is more limited, I promote collaborative learning environments where students act as facilitators and support one another. For example, in one of the online courses that I recently taught, each student was assigned to serve as a presenter responsible for summarizing chapters and developing thought-provoking questions for class discussions. They were also tasked with engaging thoughtfully with their classmates' responses to these questions. Additionally, students reflected weekly on course content and its applicability to their personal and professional endeavors through a "learning summary journal," which I collected every five weeks.

These dynamic and interactive practices encourage students to become active co-creators of knowledge, helping them build critical thinking and communication skills in a supportive environment. During synchronous discussions, I listened attentively and interjected with probing questions that invited deeper reflection, such as, "How might your professional experience shape your interpretation here?" or "What alternative perspectives might challenge this viewpoint?" By balancing guidance with space for autonomy, I fostered student empowerment and engagement.

As a result, my graduate students expressed enjoyment of these andragogical methods in their final evaluations. Some shared their surprise at how their perceptions of the learning process have shifted; they expected traditional lectures but found themselves more engaged and in control of their learning within the course objectives. Many students appreciated my empathy, understanding, and flexibility in teaching and advising adult learners. For example, one of my students wrote in the comment section of the final evaluation submitted to the university:

The instructor is encouraging and supportive in her comments and online interactions. She responds quickly to messages and is flexible in understanding the demands of adult learners who often work full time and manage family responsibilities. Her expectations are high but reasonable, and the engaging materials and assignments make for an easy-to-follow online course. I thoroughly enjoyed this instructor.

Another student mentioned, "The instructor provides excellent feedback and clear instructions, making it easy to understand the material and improve. She is always eager to help and readily available for assistance." One student emphasized, "The instructor did a fantastic job facilitating this course! I had everything I needed to successfully complete the course, and any questions I had were promptly answered." Additionally, another student recognized the motivation aspect, stating, "I appreciated the instructor's support and motivation for students."

Reflecting on my use of andragogical teaching methods to enhance graduate students' experiences and satisfaction, I echo the three indicators of student success proposed by Kheang (2018): (1) teachers' beliefs, (2) teachers' feelings, and (3) teachers' behaviors. My beliefs center on the individuality of my graduate students. I maintain confidence in their ability to achieve learning goals when afforded appropriate support and recognition of their uniqueness. This belief guides me to trust their learning capacities and to help them realize their full potential—primarily through reflective questioning.

Teachers' feelings encompass my sensitivity and empathy toward students' progress and achievements. For example, I observe students' absences or silence in discussions and reach out to express concern for their experiences and satisfaction. When necessary, I offer assignment extensions, particularly for students facing health challenges, work-life balance issues, personal loss, or caregiving responsibilities.

Teachers' behaviors involve the varied instructional strategies I employ to engage students, such as discussion of textbooks and readings, storytelling, and delivering brief interactive lectures when appropriate. I also provide students with options for demonstrating their learning, fostering critical and creative thinking. Depending on course content, students may submit assignments as Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, or video recordings. Furthermore, I encourage students to leverage diverse technologies to enrich their learning experiences. For example, as long as I can access their submissions, students may use alternative formats such as Zoom recordings, Flipgrid, or VoiceThread. This flexibility empowers students to adopt a creative and proactive role in their learning process (Halverson & Shapiro, 2012; Henschke, 2013; Osadchyi et al., 2021).

As I continue to develop as an adult educator, I recognize that andragogy does not eliminate traditional teaching responsibilities such as lesson planning and lecturing. Rather, it provides a

renewed perspective on adult education that honors adult learners as self-directed individuals and leverages their prior experiences to facilitate new learning (Isenberg & Kheang, 2024; Knowles, 1994; Tough, 1979). My role is to facilitate students' learning journeys and to serve as a resource guiding and supporting their growth and success.

REFERENCES

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Collier Books.

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). Continuum. (Original work published 1970).

Freire, P. (1989). *Education for the critical consciousness*. Continuum.

Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom.* Rowman & Littlefield.

Halverson, R., & Shapiro, R. B. (2012). *Technologies for education and technologies for learners: How information technologies are (and should be) changing schools*. Wisconsin Center for Educational Research.

Henschke, J. A. (2013). *Building blocks for the adult learning experiences*. Adult Education Faculty Works. https://irl.umsl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1081&context=adulteducation-faculty

Isenberg, S., & Kheang, S. (2024). *A descriptive content analysis of 32 unpublished doctoral student dissertations from 1995 to 2019 that incorporated John Henschke's 1989 instructional perspectives inventory instrument in the research design* (ED673724). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED673724.pdf

Kheang, S. (2018). *Guidelines for U.S. teacher leaders in adult classrooms to enhance international undergraduate satisfaction* (Publication No. 10809700) [Doctoral dissertation, Lindenwood University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/guidelines-u-s-teacher-leaders-adult-classrooms/docview/2036959023/se-2

Kheang, S. (2019). Intersection between andragogy and transformative learning. *Proceedings of Adult Education Research Conference, USA*. https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/papers/30

Kheang, S. (2022a). Towards discovering new identity: Transformative learning experience as an international student in Thailand. *Proceedings of Adult Education Research Conference, USA*. https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2022/papers/5/

Kheang, S. (2022b). A journey towards discovering novel ways of teaching and learning. *The Currere Exchange Journal*, *6*(1), 15–22. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/204/100

Kheang, S. (2025). Lifelong learning for rural adults in Thailand and Cambodia. In J. D. Johnson & H. L. Harmon (Eds.), *Handbook on rural and remote education* (pp. 297–310). Elgaronline. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035307722.00026

Kheang, S., & Ratana-Ubol, A. (2014). Proposed guidelines for organizing non-formal education to enhance career development for unskilled workers in the Kingdom of Cambodia. *Journal of Education Studies*, *42*, Article 1. https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/educujournal/vol42/iss0/1

Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy* (Rev. ed.). Prentice Hall Regents.

Knowles, M. S. (1991). *Using learning contracts: Practical approaches to individualizing and structuring learning*. Jossey-Bass.

Knowles, M. S. (1994). *Conversations on lifelong learning: A series of conversations with leaders in the field of adult and continuing education* [DVD Interview]. University of Alaska, Special Collections Research Center (SCRC), Syracuse University.

Knowles, M. S. (1995). *Designs for adult learning.* American Society for Training and Development.

Lindeman, E. C. (1926). *The meaning of adult education.* New Republic.

Osadchyi, V. V., Valko, N. V., & Kuzmich, L. V. (2021). Using augmented reality technologies for STEM education organization. J*ournal of Physics: Conference Series*, *1840*(1), Article 012027. https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1742-6596/1840/1/012027/pdf

Stenhouse, L. (1985). *Research as a basis for teaching: Readings from the work of Lawrence Stenhouse* (J. Rudduck & D. Hopkins, Eds.). Heinemann Educational.

Tough, A. (1979). *Adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning* (2nd ed.). Pfeiffer & Co.

SHOULD I LET MY TOES CROSS?
THE JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS THROUGH CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY

By Margaret Bailey
University of Oklahoma

I often find myself staring at my feet, particularly my third toe, which seems to be moving closer and closer to my second, looking as if one day soon the third toe will completely cross over the second. It's a peculiar sight, one that many would consider a minor deformity. This condition, medically known clinodactyly and commonly called overlapping toes (Hagedorn et al., 2013), is more than just a physical trait; it's a symbol of my heritage, a connection to my grandmother, and a reminder of my African American lineage. My grandma had this same toe overlap, and she wore it with a sense of pride, a badge of honor tied to our family's roots.

LOST CONNECTIONS: FEELING THE WEIGHT OF CULTURAL ERASURE

My grandmother, Maddie Lou Skinner, was born in the early 1930s in Texas. She married my grandfather in the 1950s and went on to have eight children, later raising two of her grandchildren after one of her daughters passed away unexpectedly. Maddie Lou worked hard and achieved what many in her neighborhood could not—she owned a home in North Tulsa. Though it was not in the best part of town, it was her own, a testament to her perseverance and dedication. After her husband passed away in the early 1980s, my grandmother held on to her home. She managed the upkeep, paid the property taxes, and ensured that the petty neighborhood crime did not encroach on her serene haven. While Maddie Lou did not engage in the violence or gang activity surrounding her oasis, she was deeply involved in her primarily Black, low-income neighborhood. She attended church every Sunday and shopped at the Piggly Wiggly every Saturday afternoon. Fried chicken was her specialty, and she knew exactly how to affix the aluminum foil onto her TV antenna to catch her morning and early afternoon programs. If you lived near 52nd St. N, you knew Maddie Lou, her chicken, and her kids.

I was young when I first noticed my grandmother's overlapping toes. She never let them stop her from wearing sandals in the summer or slippers around the house. Those toes were a part of her, and she embraced them fully. They didn't hinder her from standing over the stove to make dinner, expertly frying chicken and baking cornbread, or walking down the aisles at church as an usher, greeting everyone with a warm smile. Maddie Lou moved with a grace that belied the quirks of her feet, her steps steady and assured. Her toes, a physical manifestation of her resilience, were always on display, a testament to her comfort in her own skin. On weekends, as we sat in the back seat of my mom's car taking grandma to run errands, my siblings and I would giggle at the sight of those toes. They seemed so entertaining to us then, a source of innocent amusement. We would whisper and laugh, pointing them out as she slipped into her shoes. But even in our childish teasing, there was an unspoken respect for our grandmother, who, despite her small physical imperfections, stood tall and proud in everything she did. Those toes became a symbol of her strength and authenticity, a reminder of the woman who wore them without a hint of self-consciousness.

Growing up, my mother worked tirelessly to shield me from the negative stereotypes and hardships often associated with our race and people who called our side of town home. She believed that, by providing me with a buffer from these harsh realities, she could offer me a better chance at success and acceptance in a world that often judged us unfairly. In her quest to protect me, she enrolled me in schools on the opposite side of town from where we lived. In those academic spaces, I was one of the few Black students. My mothers decision to send me to a school on the south side was rooted in hope that the new environment would offer more opportunities and less prejudice. She emphasized the importance of behaving in a manner that would not draw negative attention. Inadvertently, this protective strategy distanced me from many aspects of my heritage. I missed out on the rich cultural traditions, stories, and communal experiences that form the backbone of African American identity. Family gatherings and neighborhood cookouts where our culture was celebrated were few and far between, replaced by activities that would help me fit into the predominantly white spaces we occupied.

My formal education, too, seemed designed to assimilate rather than celebrate diversity. The curriculum rarely included the contributions and histories of people who looked like me. Instead, it promoted a narrative that glorified a singular, often exclusionary perspective. This educational approach stripped away layers of my cultural identity, replacing them with a sense of otherness and a constant reminder that I needed to conform to succeed. Classrooms and textbooks lacked the representation and affirmation of Black excellence and resilience. Teachers, though well-meaning, often glossed over or entirely omitted the significance of Black history beyond slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. This erasure left me with a fragmented understanding of my heritage, one that was pieced together from the occasional family story or the few books I found on my own that celebrated Black culture. As a result, I grew up with a sense of disconnect, feeling neither fully accepted by the mainstream culture I was immersed in nor fully connected to my own. This disconnect left me yearning for a deeper understanding of and connection to my roots, a desire to reclaim the parts of my identity that had been suppressed in the name of protection and assimilation.

RECONNECTING: IMAGINING INCLUSIVE AND CULTURALLY SUSTAINING CLASSROOMS

As an educator, I grapple daily with the weight of the impact my teaching can have on students' identities and cultural expressions. The thought of inadvertently contributing to the erasure of a student's cultural identity troubles me deeply and stirs a profound sense of personal unease. My role at a higher education institution comes with the immense responsibility of not merely advocating for inclusion, acceptance, and authenticity but actively weaving these values into the very fabric of the educational experience.

For me, creating such an environment goes far beyond adding diverse content to the syllabus. It means embracing culturally sustaining teaching methods that honor and build upon each student's unique background and experiences. This approach involves more than just recognizing cultural differences; it's about actively engaging with and celebrating these differences in a way that enriches the learning experience for everyone (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). One of the ways I hope to achieve this is by incorporating students' cultural experiences into the curriculum. This might involve integrating texts, examples, and perspectives that reflect their backgrounds or encouraging students to share their own stories as

part of our learning process. By doing so, I aim to make the classroom a space where diverse voices are not only heard but also valued and integrated into our collective understanding.

Another key aspect is fostering a classroom environment where students see their cultural identities as assets rather than barriers. This means using pedagogical strategies that are responsive to diverse learning styles and needs and providing support that helps students bridge any gaps between their cultural contexts and academic expectations. It also involves being mindful of the power dynamics in the classroom, ensuring that every student feels respected and empowered to contribute their perspectives. Specifically, leaning on the work of Paris (2021), I am to let go of many white-centered ideologies, ways of thinking, and related educational policies and practices, to embrace new ones that are shaped by unique relationships, affiliations, identities, and personal experiences.

In striving towards these goals, I recognize that creating a truly inclusive environment is an ongoing and often challenging endeavor. Crafting such a space requires me to continuously reflect on my teaching practices, confront any biases that may arise, and adapt my methods to better support all students. Yet, as I work to help others find and embrace their authentic selves, I find that this journey also contributes to my own sense of wholeness. By guiding students in their quest for authenticity and self-expression, I too am able to gain greater insight into my own identity and purpose (hooks, 1994). This mutual journey toward understanding and empowerment strengthens our connection and reinforces the belief that our personal and collective growth are deeply intertwined. Although achieving a perfectly inclusive environment remains a challenging and sometimes elusive goal, I am committed to this journey with the hope that my efforts will not only help each student feel valued and empowered but also contribute to my own sense of fulfillment and wholeness.

RECONCILING: ANALYZING THE COMPLEXITIES OF INCLUSION AND AUTHENTICITY

As an adult, I now recognize my mom's pure intentions in shielding me from negative stereotypes and hardships. However, I also see how these actions distanced me from my cultural roots. I appreciate how difficult her decisions must have been, especially as I prepare to start my own family. Reflecting on my experiences, I realize that, once you separate from your culture, it's hard to reconnect. This has made me think critically about my choices and the values behind them. To firmly root myself back into my culture, I believe I must actively participate in efforts that uplift and celebrate it. The question of whether to "fix" my toes is not just about aesthetics or comfort. It's about identity, heritage, and the internal struggle of reconciling these with the pressures of modern society. On one hand, I worry that leaving them as they are might eventually affect my gait, a practical concern that cannot be ignored. On the other, altering them feels like erasing one of the last remnants of my cultural inheritance.

This internal conflict draws me closer to the work of one of my favorite Black Feminist theorists, Patricia Hill Collins. Collins articulates the concept of the "outsider within" status that many Black women experience, a notion that resonates deeply with my situation. As an individual who is both part of and apart from my culture, I navigate the complex space between embracing my heritage and conforming to societal expectations (Collins, 1986). Black Feminist Theory (BFT) emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, acknowledging that my identity is shaped by multiple, overlapping social factors, including race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Collins (1990) asserts that Black women's experiences cannot be understood through a single lens

but must be examined through the intersecting systems of oppression that impact their lives. My overlapping toes, though seemingly minor, symbolize a broader struggle for acceptance and self-definition within a society that often marginalizes Black women. These toes are not merely a physical characteristic; they are an integral part of my story, my history, and my identity as a Black woman. Collins' work underscores the importance of embracing our full selves, including the parts that society may deem undesirable or inconvenient (Collins, 2000). My overlapping toes are a manifestation of this idea, representing the tension between societal norms and personal authenticity. They serve as a constant reminder that my identity is multifaceted, and that true empowerment comes from acknowledging and valuing all aspects of myself, even those that deviate from conventional standards of beauty and propriety.

This concept of embracing the full self is crucial in understanding the broader implications of BFT. As Collins (1998) discusses, the power dynamics within society often force Black women to compartmentalize their identities, presenting only the parts deemed acceptable by mainstream culture. However, the act of embracing and integrating all aspects of one's identity, including those parts considered unconventional, is a form of resistance against these oppressive structures. My overlapping toes challenge societal expectations and norms, compelling me to confront the dissonance between who I am and who society expects me to be. In doing so, they push me towards a deeper understanding of myself and my place within the cultural and social landscape. They remind me that the journey towards self-acceptance and empowerment is inherently tied to the broader struggle for social justice and equality. By fully embracing all aspects of my identity, I practice a form of resistance that aligns with the core principles of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000). This approach advocates for a holistic and intersectional understanding of identity and empowerment. As I apply these principles and work for the benefit of the entire Black community, I reconnect with my cultural roots and find my place within it.

FUSION: INTEGRATING IDENTITY, PEDAGOGY, AND THE JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS

I have talked to a surgeon. There is a simple procedure to get my toes fixed. It's an outpatient procedure that only takes about 45 minutes. The procedure involves taking the knuckle out of my third toe and fusing the bones back together in a straight form. The recovery involves one week on crutches and three weeks in a walking boot. Though all surgery has risks, this one seems pretty minor. However, solidifying the connection to my roots in a way that uplifts my community while allowing me to embrace the pieces of myself I have picked up along my journey carries many risks and a long recovery. This fusion of identity is more complex than a surgical procedure; it requires an ongoing commitment to integrating my cultural heritage with the diverse experiences that have shaped me.

I recognize the oddity in feeling compelled to keep a minor deformity as one of the only ways to stay true to myself. Nevertheless, this small physical characteristic serves as a poignant reminder of my heritage and the strength of my lineage. It is a tangible link to my grandmother and the resilience she embodied. Embracing this aspect of my identity, however unconventional, is a form of reclaiming and honoring my cultural roots. Moreover, the danger of embracing my heritage as a Black woman in academia is ever-present. Academia is not always welcoming to those who challenge the status quo, especially when it comes to issues of race and identity. The call to help others find themselves, to encourage authenticity and cultural pride, may not be universally embraced. This path involves navigating spaces where my efforts to uplift and

empower others might be met with resistance or even hostility. Nevertheless, I realize that this is a risk I must take.

The true fusion lies in this intricate balance—honoring where I come from while confidently stepping into my future. By choosing to retain my overlapping toes, I am embracing a tangible reminder of my heritage, acknowledging the strength and resilience embedded in my lineage. This decision is a step toward healing the cultural disconnection I have felt, forging a path that respects both my ancestral roots and the person I am becoming. In doing so, I aim to contribute to the broader narrative of cultural preservation and empowerment, knowing that the journey toward authenticity, while fraught with challenges, is essential for both personal and communal growth. For now, I have decided to keep my toes as they are. While I may choose to have the surgery in the future, for the time being, I will use my overlapping toes as a foundation to embrace and lean into this work of cultural reclamation and personal authenticity.

REFERENCES

Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. *Social Problems*, *33*(6), 510–532. https://doi.org/10.2307/800672

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (1998). It's all in the family: Intersections of gender, race, and nation. In N. A. Naples & M. A. Ferree (Eds.), *Rethinking the family: Some feminist questions* (pp. 83–102). Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, *1989*, Article 8. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Identity politics, intersectionality, and violence against women. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Hagedorn, T. J., Dufour, A. B., Riskowski, J. L., Hillstrom, H. J., Menz, H. B., Casey, V. A., & Hannan, M. T. (2013). Foot disorders, foot posture, and foot function: The Framingham foot study. *PLOS ONE*, *8*(9), Article e74364. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0074364

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465–491. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Policy*, *45*(1), 93–115. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654312443567

FROM MARGIN TO CENTER
CURRERE AND THE EXPERIENCES OF A BLACK WOMAN PROFESSOR

By Shawnieka E. Pope
Miami University

THE REGRESSIVE MOMENT: THE WEIGHT OF PROGRESS AND BLACK WOMANHOOD IN THE ACADEMY

My journey to becoming a professor at a predominantly white institution (PWI) has been shaped by powerful moments of resistance, resilience, and self-discovery. Reflecting over my own remarkable school experiences offers moments of understanding the ways in which my steps towards the Academy had always been ordered. Growing up as a Black girl in a world where my existence was often rendered invisible or problematized, I learned early to navigate spaces that were not created with me in mind. Numerous racialized incidents informed the ways in which I show up in the world as a Black woman—and as a Black woman in the Academy. I attended K-8 in a predominantly urban public school system. My teachers looked like me. I felt affirmed. I felt smart. I felt capable. The educational environment that had once nurtured and affirmed my capacity and potential then changed in ways I couldn't fully anticipate—it would no longer look, feel, or even carry the same familiar essence. My mother decided to send me to a predominantly white Catholic high school, hoping it would provide new opportunities for my growth. However, the transition from my familiar primary school to this unfamiliar setting was anything but smooth. It brought with it numerous challenges and moments of difficult adjustment.

The sense of representation and belonging I had once taken for granted felt worlds away in my new school environment. There were no Black teachers, and in my graduating class, I was one of only ten Black students. I'll never forget my junior year in English class when Mrs. Taply, the guidance counselor, walked in and called on my classmates—who were all white—to join her, one by one, in her office. Day after day, I sat quietly, watching as they left the room with her until, eventually, I was the only student left. I waited for Mrs. Taply to come for me, but she never came. I eventually discovered what those meetings with Mrs. Taply were about—she had been providing my classmates with information about the ACT and SAT exams, details about college tours, and comprehensive college admissions checklists. When I learned the nature of her meetings with my white peers, I was conflicted. How could she overlook me? Didn't she know about my accomplishments? I was consistently a high honor roll student, a proud member of the National Honor Society, and deeply involved in countless extracurricular activities, including community service. Yet, somehow, I never made it onto her radar as a student worthy of her guidance or seen as capable of attending college. And if I *was* on her radar—as I was a well-known and popular student—what allowed her to justify not offering me the same support? I replayed those moments in my mind—the way she looked me in the eye each time she entered the classroom, knowing full well I had the potential to excel in college, just as I thrived in high school, despite the systemic barriers designed to diminish my spirit.

Interestingly, later that year, I finally received my summons to report to Mrs. Taply's office. It was not to discuss the college application process or how to register for the SATs. Instead, she invited me to participate in a parade. The parade highlighted two Historically Black Colleges

and Universities (HBCUs) whose football teams were featured in an annual football classic in my hometown. At that moment, my academic abilities were not considered, and I felt reduced to tokenism. I wasn't considered a viable candidate for college readiness. My Blackness was seen as valuable solely in the context of representing two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in a parade celebrating their athletic teams—trope that still captures the experiences of Blackness, similar to when Black athletes are told to just play ball and shut up.

These lessons were shaped by a society that, as Bettina Love (2019) poignantly articulates in *We Want to Do More than Survive*, consistently sought to constrain my joy, imagination, and potential. Love (2019) writes, "Our complicated identities cannot be discussed or examined in isolation from one another. These identity complexities, which create our multifaceted range of beings, must matter too" (p. 3). Yet, like so many Black girls before me, I found ways to dream beyond the confines of a world where educators like Mrs. Taply sought to limit me. As a first-generation college student, I navigated the process of registering for the SATs and ACTs on my own. With no one to guide me or explain the steps, I took it upon myself to learn and understand the complex world of college admissions. Against human made obstacles, I became one of only two students who were directly admitted into my undergraduate program. Then, just two weeks after turning twenty-one, I walked into my very first college class. The feeling of standing on the edge of all I could become, imagining myself in that classroom, was more joyful than I ever could have dreamed. It was a moment where pure pride and possibility were well within my grasp. I belonged! School was both a site of possibility and pain. The joy of learning often collided with the realities of being a Black girl in predominantly white spaces—spaces where my intellect was questioned, my body was scrutinized, and my voice was marginalized.

Patricia Hill Collins' (1990/2009) *Black Feminist Thought* gave me the words to make sense of the contradictions I often experienced. Collins notes,

> In 1905 Fannie Barrier Williams lamented, "The colored girl … is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term 'problem' and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelopes and obscures her." Why are African American women and our ideas not known or believed in? The shadow obscuring this complex Black women's [sic] intellectual tradition is neither accidental or benign. (p. 5)

Collins' work helped me see those contradictions as part of a bigger picture—one shaped by systemic oppression and the unique ways Black girls and women understand and navigate the world. Collins' work not only validated my experiences but also affirmed the knowledge I already carried within me—knowledge born from my own life and the lives of the women who came before me. I was fully aware of my accomplishments and potential even as an elementary school student. Yet, instead of fostering environments where I could thrive, the educators in my secondary school seemed intent on diminishing both who I was and who I could become. I found myself fighting to matter—a battle no teenage girl should ever have to bear. Unbeknownst to me, these moments would shape me into the educator I would one day become. These moments would ensure that, as an educator, every student I connected with, whether in class or walking across campus, would feel they mattered.

My decision to pursue Academia wasn't a planned choice—it felt like fate. It was the result of careful intention and unexpected opportunities. I was drawn to the possibility of creating spaces of representation where Black students could see themselves reflected in the curriculum and feel

affirmed in their intellectual pursuits. Milner (2021) asserts, "All students need and deserve to encounter and experience a curriculum that highlights and reflects the life experiences of people of color, women, and other marginalized groups" (p. 6). I entered into the Academy without full awareness of its challenges. I would learn that this predominantly white space and its occupants had the potential to harm me as a person and as a professional. As Milner (2021) argues, the work of equity and justice in education requires not only a commitment to transformative practices but also an understanding of the systemic barriers that hinder such transformation. The systemic barriers of power and privilege within the Ivory Tower would seep down, almost like epigenetics or muscle memory, serving as a mechanism to embolden the students in my classroom, who then, knowingly or unknowingly, continued to perpetuate the harm. It's a bittersweet thought—despite facing harm, some students offer me a window seat with a full view of the positive impact I have on their learning and the shift in their worldview. From this vantage point, I dare to imagine my own liberation—the hope that one day, the presence of my Black womanhood will shift beyond superficial tolerance and be fully accepted and deeply respected within the Academy.

Imagining Liberation: The Progressive Moment for Black Womanhood in Academia

As a Black woman professor at a PWI, I am constantly imagining what could be. What if students saw beyond my Blackness and were inspired by my story, my qualifications, and the decades of experience I bring to the table? What if they could feel the joy I experience when I teach? What if they understood that I view it an honor to stand before them, preparing them to be effective and compassionate practitioners? What if students held me in the same esteem as they do my white colleagues? What if students understood that, despite their anti-Black attitudes towards me, I have been called to teach them? This is my calling, my purpose. It's spiritual. Cynthia Dillard's (2022) *The Spirit of Our Work* resonates deeply as I consider the spiritual and ancestral dimensions of my work. Dillard reminds me that teaching is not merely a profession but a calling—a sacred act rooted in love, care, and the pursuit of justice. Dillard (2022) asserts that there is "beauty and wisdom embodied in the spirit of some of the most important people in the lives of any community: Black women who teach" (p. xiii). Her words inspire me to envision a classroom where all students can bring their whole selves, where their identities are not only acknowledged but celebrated—a classroom where white students embrace and hunger for diverse curricula, engage in humility, and are committed to curating a space in collaboration of true belonging for everyone. I imagine this collaboration could lend way to unspeakable joy.

In this vision, Gholdy Muhammad's (2023) *Unearthing Joy* provides a pedagogical framework. Muhammad's emphasis on cultivating joy, identity, and criticality in the classroom aligns with my aspirations to create learning environments that affirm the humanity of all students while centering the experiences of the most marginalized. Muhammad (2023) encourages "the pursuit of joy—helping students uplift beauty, aesthetics, truth, ease, wonder, wellness, solutions to problems of the world, and personal fulfillment" (p. 17). Furthermore, they assert, "Joy is the ultimate goal of teaching and learning" (p. 17). I imagine a curriculum that not only addresses and disrupts systemic inequities but also uplifts the stories, contributions, and resilience of Black communities. This is a space where we can dream, create, and resist—a space where we can thrive. I imagine this space could also address and disrupt the inequities I navigate as a Black woman

professor. I imagine a classroom that uplifts and honors my story, my contributions, and my humanity.

My vision reaches beyond the classroom, addressing the deep, intertwined roots of racism, sexism, and oppression that affect not only Black girls but also Black women. As Bettina Love's (2023) *Punished for Dreaming* illustrates, the systemic barriers that impact Black students are deeply entrenched in policies and practices that devalue their lives and aspirations. To address these barriers, I imagine an institution that moves beyond performative diversity initiatives to actively dismantle structures of oppression. This requires reimagining institutional policies, reallocating resources, and centering the voices of those most impacted by inequity. True transformation demands that institutions not only acknowledge historical and systemic injustices but also commit to actionable steps toward equity, such as developing anti-racist curricula, hiring and retaining diverse faculty, and fostering spaces where marginalized voices are valued and heard. Love explains:

> The field of education saw a resurgence in calls for anti-racism and equity in the spring of 2020 when the world watched George Floyd die … . School districts and colleges around the country rushed to tap diversity, equity, and inclusion—or DEI—leaders to form task forces, committees, and working groups to tackle the issue of racism. But they did not address the real problem: despite good intentions, the work of racial justice is at best elusive without substantive commitments from institutions. DEI approaches that leave intact harmful structures are window dressing for Whiteness. (p. 215)

The hope for systemic change feels harder to hold onto in the socio-political climate of 2025, where resistance to equity-focused practices and the politicization of education seem more relentless than ever. In fact, many Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts and policies have already been dismantled in various spaces, including within educational institutions. Despite these challenges, I hold onto the belief that sustained advocacy, collective action, and the resilience of those committed to justice can ignite progress, even in the most adverse conditions. Institutions must confront the reality that equity is not a fleeting trend but an urgent and enduring necessity for the betterment of all.

THE ANALYTICAL MOMENT: NAVIGATING PRESENT REALITIES

The realities of being a Black woman professor at a PWI are complex and multifaceted. On one hand, I carry the privilege of being in a position to influence and shape the educational experiences of my students. On the other hand, I am acutely aware of the challenges that come with navigating an institution steeped in whiteness. As Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2009) reminds us, the intersection of race, gender, and class creates unique challenges for Black women in professional spaces. These challenges manifest in various ways, from the constant need to prove competence to the microaggressions that undermine authority. I have experienced students calling me by my first name and challenging my syllabus and instructions. I had students confront me in class during instruction. When I addressed these behaviors, different sections of the room would erupt in laughter. These moments prick my soul in the most unimaginable ways.

Yet, in defiance, I draw strength from the collective wisdom of Black women scholars who have paved the way, reminding me that my presence in this space is an act of resistance. Cynthia

Dillard's (2023) focus on the spiritual dimensions of teaching offers a powerful counterbalance to the dehumanizing aspects of academia. Her work is a reminder for me to ground my interactions with students and colleagues in love and care. This feels especially important in a PWI, where the relentless focus on metrics and outcomes often overshadows the relational and deeply human side of education.

The Synthetical Moment: Merging Past, Present, and Future Black Womanhood in Academia

Reflecting on my journey, I see how the past, present, and future intersect to shape my identity and purpose as a Black woman professor at a PWI. My experiences as a Black girl navigating predominantly white spaces—including being overlooked by a guidance counselor who ignored my gifts and accomplishments—continue to fuel my commitment to creating inclusive and affirming educational environments. Navigating college as a first-generation student further deepened my understanding of the systemic barriers Black students face and the resilience required to thrive in spaces not designed for us. As a Black woman professor, these experiences ground my dedication to embody the principles of joy and justice in my pedagogy, and advocate for systemic change within my institution. Cynthia Dillard's (2023) emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of teaching resonates deeply with me, reminding me to center love and care in every interaction with my students and colleagues. Her words remind me that this work, though challenging, is a sacred calling—a labor of love that honors the spirit of our ancestors and paves the way for future Black women professors. It is not easy, but it is necessary.

Coming Full Circle: Reflections and Aspirations for Black Women in the Academy

Navigating the academy as a Black woman professor at a PWI is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge because of the systemic barriers and inequities that persist within these institutions—barriers that manifest in isolation, tokenism, and the often-unspoken expectation to prove one's worth. Yet, it is also an opportunity to imagine and create transformative possibilities. This journey is one of resistance, resilience, and radical hope—a journey that affirms my work. It is about more than navigating; it is about thriving. It is about building bridges where none exist, fostering authentic connections, and amplifying the voices of those often silenced. It is about creating classrooms where all students—not just a select few—can see themselves reflected, valued, and empowered—where the guidance counselor comes to see every student!

To be a Black woman in the Academy is to embody a dual role: one of scholar and one of advocate. It is to disrupt the status quo while holding space for the dreams of those who come after us. It is to stand as a testament to the brilliance and tenacity of Black women, despite the odds. Most importantly, it is to believe that, through our presence, our work, and our collective efforts, we can reimagine higher education as a place where joy, justice, belonging, and liberation are not just ideals but lived realities.

REFERENCES

Collins, P. H. (2009). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd illustrated reprint ed.). Routledge. (Original work published 1990)

Dillard, C. B. (2022). *The spirit of our work: Black women teachers (re) member*. Beacon Press.

Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon press.

Love, B. L. (2023). *Punished for dreaming: How school reform harms Black children and how we heal*. St. Martin's Press.

Milner, H. R., VI. (2021). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms* (2nd ed.). Harvard Education Press

Muhammad, G. (2023). *Unearthing joy: A guide to culturally and historically responsive curriculum and instruction*. Scholastic Teaching Solutions.

AN ENGLISH-SPEAKER-OF-OTHER-LANGUAGES (ESOL) EDUCATOR'S *CURRERE* OF LONELINESS

By Shuvo Saha
University of Alberta

As a pupil and an educator of English-Speakers-of Other-Languages (ESOL), I have found it challenging to interpret my educational experiences. Especially after reading historian George Mosse's (2000) notion of education, I wonder if I have pursued education as "an open-ended process without set goals" (p. 184), wherein self-improvement is the aim. I also struggle to understand the full scope of my self-improvement. This lack of understanding about my education, as both a learner and an educator, has left me feeling educationally isolated, although my educational journey has been filled with the presence of classmates, teachers, colleagues, administrators, textbooks, societal values, and pedagogic practices. Curriculum theorist William Pinar (2011) posited that techno-scientism based neoliberal education bleaches subjectivity from curricular discourse. This dissociates an individual with the curriculum and education at large. In this article, through the autobiographical method of *currere*, which considers individuals' educational experiences (Pinar & Grumet, 2015), I aim to examine my own educational experiences and derive insights from my educational loneliness. In doing so, I document my lived experiences as a student and an educator following *currere*'s first two of the four-stage mechanisms, namely regression and progression. Then I psychoanalytically interpret these experiences in light of the other two stages, analysis and synthesis.

SEEING MY EDUCATIONAL LIFE REGRESSIVELY

Pinar and Grumet's (2015) prompts for regression guided my revisit to the educational past. In regression, an autobiographer focuses on their educational experience and "takes special notice of … past life-in-schools … past life-with-school-teachers and … past life-with-books and other school-related artifacts" to probe what is "not ordinarily seen" or what is "taken-for-granted" (Pinar & Grumet, 2015, p. 73). The purpose is to review "the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present" (p. 71). Accordingly, I begin my *currere* by regressing to the pre-2004 educational phase of my life when I began schooling. As will unfold in the following section, at this stage I barely had the language and contextual relevance to process and comprehend loneliness, because my father was still alive and he protected my bubble of connection and fulfillment. Therefore, all my life experiences during this period made me perceive loneliness as an alien feeling that I could not describe. To visually depict the foreignness of loneliness to me, I have presented my educational experiences from the pre-2004 era under the subheading "The pre-2004 Era" appearing in a relatively less familiar font AMATIC SC. The period from 2004, when my

father passed away, until 2023, marked my growing acquaintance with loneliness. So, for example, the final numeral in the year of the subheading "200 5: The Epiphany" is detached from the others to signify my eventual alienation. The feeling gradually amplified between 2006 and 2019, resulting in the year component of the subheadings appearing as "2 0 0 6" and "2 0 1 9." As for "2 0 23", the early part of the year signified isolation that, later in the year, transitioned to a more connected feeling. However, because I started writing this *currere* in 2024, I have placed prior events in the regression stage.

The Pre-2004 Era

The Running

"Run fast, Shuvo, so that no one can catch you," I can hear the inner me saying as I sprint across the school playground. My heart is pounding, but I cannot stop running. I don't want to stop—I don't want to get caught. This run is special. I can feel the presence of a new friend—the fresh morning air. The faster I run, the more it envelopes me. I am now way beyond my playmates' reach, but I still have a companion. This friend is not always with me, but it is always there when no one else is around. This friend shows up when I am running fast. Being at school every morning is worth it. Who wants to miss playing *chor-police*? Isn't it exciting to keep running away as a *chor* and make the police chase the thief?

The bell is ringing. Time to say goodbye to my airy friend. Everyone is heading to the classroom. Time for the first class of the day. I wish I could stay a little longer here in the playground, far from the lecture that the teacher will start delivering in five minutes, oh no, ten minutes; actually, I don't know when the teacher will be at their table in the classroom. What's wrong with running a bit more? The teacher will be late anyway. Running is better than sitting in the classroom for the teacher's lecture, gazing at the sky through the rusty iron bars of the large window. The lectures are so boring. I have no choice but to follow the others to class. I don't want to get caned. It hurts. I would rather go to the class.

Getting Spanked in Grade 4—I'm not alone

The math teacher is not coming today. Yay! We won't have to study for the next 45 minutes. I can go out in the playground and enjoy. It's so quiet out there! Everyone is in their class. The calmness is fascinating. This playground is so crowded and noisy when all the students are outside the class! But what if a teacher comes in to substitute for the regular teacher? What if Jollad Sir finds me outside? He'll spank me to a flatbread. I better stay inside.

See, you think of the devil, and the devil is here. Jollad Sir is here for the remainder of the class time. Let me concentrate on his lesson. I'll get a beating if he asks me to solve a problem, and I fail to solve it.

Oh no! My attempt to hide hasn't worked. I have to go to the blackboard. Now, I have to solve a problem. My heart is racing like a drum. I know how to solve this problem. I am trying to calm myself down. My mathematical brain is going blank at the fear of being caned with each second sprinting by. Anxious, helpless me, standing in front of the whole class, has accepted defeat in solving the problem. Before any more thoughts can play in my mind, my body is shivering at the sudden shock of being whacked on the bottom. I can feel two strong blows, yet I am calming myself down. I don't have to be embarrassed—others are also getting spanked. I'm not alone.

200 5: The Epiphany

The clock says it is just 10 minutes to three pm. Since breakfast, my personal study session has been slow—not satisfactory. My 17-year-old body is not feeling one hundred percent either. I'm hungry, I think. I know my body well. My energy level is dipping as usual. I am convincing myself that this happens when I haven't eaten for some time. The lunch hour is long gone. But why don't I have an appetite? I don't feel like eating. Listening to the radio isn't interesting, although it has been on for a while. TV isn't attractive either. If *baba* were alive, *maa* would have been home now. I would be done with lunch by now, and *maa* would be having her afternoon nap. Maybe we would have a guest drop by. *Maa* wouldn't mind offering them tea, perhaps lunch as well. The guest is *Narayana* (an epithet of God Vishnu) and ought to be treated well.

Where are those guests, relatives, *Narayanas*? Since *baba* passed away, not a single visitor has been here at this hour. Why don't they come to visit me? I have no one around. It's so empty. So many people used to be around when *baba* was there. Everyone has deserted me.

2 0 0 6: In the Physics Class, Still Not in the Physics Class

The view of the window leading onto the street is captivating. Perhaps it feels more alluring than what it actually is. Everything else is appealing when you are in a physics class super disengaging. The teacher is trying his best by lecturing and drawing on the blackboard, but I cannot hear anything other than the lecture. I don't know why I have to study the lesson. The lesson and I are poles apart—as if I'm the only soul in the classroom who is lost. I'm with 60 students and the teacher; still I'm alone. The lesson is not for me, and I'm not for the lesson. I belong to life outside the classroom—on the street where the rickshaw puller is singing and pulling the rickshaw, in the tree branch near the window where a crow is resting in the scorching summer heat. I feel like a stranger in the classroom. I'm just on my own.

2 0 1 9: Alienation at Faculty Evaluation

I am forcing my static eyes to roll over the 10 evaluation criteria. The appalled eyes are stuck. My dear students, who I had assisted both during and outside the semester's consultation period on lessons such as topic sentences and APA citations, have accused me of not being available for consultation! According to their evaluations, I haven't put any effort into teaching paraphrasing and essay writing using a variety of audio-visual aids. A good percentage of the students have blindly ticked the box that says the instructor did not use technology while teaching! I'm now searching for the basis for the accusation that I did not cover all of the content of the syllabus. My memory is flashing back to the moments when I was referring the students to the course delivery plan once a week throughout the term to help them keep track of the course's progress. The more I see the treacherous digits in the evaluation paper, the more perspiration trickles down my forehead inside the air-conditioned office. My senses are slowly being numbed by feelings of shame and betrayal. I keep wondering how, even after my selfless teaching efforts, they could return the poorest faculty evaluation scores I'd ever received. Let me place the evaluations inside the envelope, cast the packet into the dark locker, and get busy with the official work needing to be completed. But who do I share this with? My colleagues would judge me to death if they came to know about this. It is suffocating to keep it to myself. I have no choice but to repress it. I'm alone in my journey to redeem myself.

2 0 23: Library for Life

It's not even 5 pm, and it's getting dark—a common scene during the Canadian winter. The weather app is showing that the temperature is below zero outside. The dullness of the day has found a perfect match in the cold darkness. My craving to talk to the first person of the day is mounting. How does my voice sound? Let me check. *Aaaaaaaa uuuuuuu*. It feels like I'm hearing my voice for the first time after ages. It is so empty all around. The curtain is certainly not blocking the view outside. It's been sleeping on the sidelines since morning. I can count the number of humans I have seen today on one hand. I can't stay home any longer.

I knew the university library would be a good place to see some lives. It is such a fulfilling feeling. The group of students on the sofa must be undergrads still in their teens. Their cascade of laughter shatters the silence of the library's quiet zone. They sprawl across the chairs. No issues even if we don't interact. Human presence counts. I've got company. It's not as desolate as it was at home.

MY EDUCATIONAL LIFE IN PROGRESSION

After regressing, I will now "free associatively" ascertain my current "intellectual interests" (Pinar & Grumet, 2015, p. 76) and the loneliness surrounding them. As an educator, I specifically consider the emotional and intellectual aspects of my teaching experience and my relationships with students and colleagues, as suggested by Pinar and Grumet. I also imagine a future as an academic at this stage of *currere-izing* my lonesome educational experiences. As such, the eventually parting numbers in the subheading "20 2 4: Pedagogy of the Unknowns" portrays the development of my loneliness from a state of optimism and connection. Conversely, subheadings with a tightly knit composition, such as "2027: Voiceless Murmur" and "2030: Solitude," symbolize hope within solitude.

20 2 4: PEDAGOGY OF THE UNKNOWN

This term, the 300-level pre-service teacher preparation course is being offered in a different format. We, the two TAs, are assisting the professor to conduct the classes. What an opportunity to learn about teaching firsthand from a professor! I've been doing a happy dance in my head since the start of the term. This is my chance to close the socio-cultural gap in my understanding of North American undergraduates. I think I'll get to understand the students more than I did last year—how they respond to a brown, male TA's presence in the classroom, what teaching-learning style they prefer, what they don't appreciate. I'm going to learn all these in a scaffolded style, under the professor's supervision.

This week's class has been different from the last three weeks. What is Winnie the Pooh! Is this a character, a situation, or an institution? What is the socio-political connotation of "I heart Canadian oil and gas"? The professor and the students look like they are on the same page except for me. I know the meme they are talking about, but I'm clueless about Winnie the Pooh. Why do people discreetly mention their love of Canadian oil and gas? I feel like a stupid stranger here. I don't know anything about Canadian socio-cultural references. So, what's my role in this class?

2027: VOICELESS MURMUR

The closer my PhD defense is approaching, the louder the whisper is getting. All those hopes, expectations, and passions are murmuring, "How will Shuvo get an academic job now? When will he get permanent residence? Will he return to Bangladesh? What is he going to do for his mother?" With the whispering turning into clamoring, I miss out on hearing others. It is all too much to digest. I can't compromise on the quality of 200-plus pages of dissertation revision. The committee has worked hard to let me reach this stage of the research. The taste of success is sweet but comes at a high price. It's like mouth freshener cooling down the inside of the mouth but

leaving the tongue paralyzingly sweet. For the next four months, I must forget that I have a tongue. I have to block out all those murmurings. I don't want to feel lost in this shrilling cacophony of pleasing people. Let me get the degree first.

But would I really get a job at a university? Would I get one in Alberta? Clueless. I don't know, but I can't return home now. Breathing feels heavy thinking of returning to the same dusty, humid, crowded city. How would I be able to address my chronologically senior colleagues as "Sir," and "Madam" in my emails? Who would I have coffee with discussing *currere* and Aoki's brilliance? All these years of PhD learning will be trashed, consigned to the same traditional curriculum, learning objectives, assessments, and grades. This is going to be the death of my PhD. I'll be a dead body rotting in broad daylight, attracting insects with no one to bury me, my curriculum soul. This is becoming overwhelming. Let me go back to the literature review chapter. I can't leave out reviewing Bamberg's recent article.

2030: Solitude

I'm loving this part of life. A tenure track faculty position, personal office space to work and study, *maa* at our place in Canada, a life partner at work—all supporting my endeavor to publish a book based on my PhD dissertation. My voluntary role as a loneliness and emotion education specialist at the community radio station is making a difference. The listeners are now more aware of the characteristics of loneliness. They are spreading awareness regarding addressing loneliness and alienation among their friends and family.

I'm intricately connected with my support system—*maa*, classroom teaching, research, my partner, my community. Still, there is a transparent curtain between me and all these relationships. None of them compete with each other but interact for mutual growth. A warm solitude exists. This solitude is composed of an orchestrated symphony. The melody of solitude is about to shift, as I'll be out with my human companions for a summer retreat in the woods, a space to absorb the melodious solitude of mother nature.

Analysis of the Regressive and the Progressive

Moving on to the analysis stage, I analytically describe "the biographic present, exclusive of the past and future, but inclusive of responses to them" to ascertain "how … the future [is] present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both" (Pinar & Grumet, 2015, pp. 77–78). As the following sections demonstrate, my *currere* exhibits a discursive and complex relationship between the past and the future and marks the omnipresence of the present in the future and the past.

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF PAST AND FUTURE

My past and future are in constant interaction through my lived experiences. The relationship is like a sand-filled hourglass, where both ends are identical but constantly connected by the flow of sand, which represents my lived experiences. My future aspirations are direct responses to past experiences. The experiences of being deserted by relatives in 2004 and of a panic attack on a desolate evening in 2023 were the background of my desire in 2030 for emotional support from my mother and the imagined community. Similarly, my desire to continue growing academically through research publications has roots in my fondness for running as a child. Running used to provide me with what psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott (1958) termed an "ego orgasm" (p. 419). According to Winnicott, children reap orgasmic pleasure when they physically participate in games. The pleasure that I acquired from running motivates me for the same through academic reading and writing in my biographic future and stirs my future drive to publish. Moreover, my future wish to have a retreat in the woods links to my past way of life. When I used to run in the school playground, I found companionship in the fresh morning air; it was a sign of my "longing for company … for relief from unhappiness at being alone" (Mendelson, 1990, p. 339). The comforting connection that I formed with nature in the past continues into my future. This imagined connection with nature ultimately helps me cope with loneliness.

The future-past relationship is complex beyond these apparently linear conditions. Normatively speaking, the 2004 experience of being abandoned should not have sculpted my future aspirations, as even in the absence of relatives I resided in a tight-knit community, a quintessential trait of Old Dhaka. Still, I was alone because, in social psychologists Cacioppo and Patrick's (2008) view, I lacked quality connection with the community. Thus, the future depends not only on the experiences of the past, but also on the nature of those experiences. This explains that my aspiration to be a part of Canadian academia might have emerged from my disconnection with the Canadian teaching-learning culture.

Although the past and the future are interconnected, the experience of loneliness is discursive rather than correlational. This means that a past experience of loneliness does not predetermine future experiences with it. This is evident in my own life: I felt alone in the absence of connection with a proximally closer community in Bangladesh, yet I feel a sense of fulfillment in my desire for a social connection with an imagined community in Canada. Psychoanalyst J. Roof (2022) explained, "the human subject is never in command of itself, is never self-same, its unconscious always infused with the plethora of dynamically structuring vectors beyond itself" (p. 778). This intrinsically unstable human condition explains my varying experiences of loneliness in the past that I will continue experiencing in the future.

THE OMNIPRESENCE OF THE PRESENT

My present is present in the future multidimensionally. First, my current educational experiences scaffold future professional preparations. For example, my role as a graduate teaching assistant provides me with the opportunity to get acquainted with the socio-culturality of a Canadian undergraduate classroom under the professor's scaffolded approach. To me, this scaffolding is like being in an "internal environment" with the support of an introjected mother (Winnicott, 1958, p. 419). According to Winnicott, the shelter of an ego-supportive mother or caregiver creates a favorable environment for children that orientates them to solitude. The scaffolded graduate teaching assistantship experience similarly sows the seeds of my professional growth as an educator in North America for a future time when I will be on my own in the classroom with my curriculum. The supportive learning atmosphere inspires me to envision a future life quilted with multifarious support systems. Thus, my present resides in my future. My present also crafts a lonesome future for me as an educator. Culture and context-specific materials, such as the "Winnie the Pooh" meme or the "I heart Canadian oil and gas" sticker, are unfamiliar to me. Their usage as teaching-learning materials makes me feel like an outsider in a classroom where I am meant to offer teaching assistance. The experience reminds me of my position as a person originating from the Global South who is on an eternal journey toward understanding North American culture. This, in turn, affects how I imagine an isolated future for myself as an educator in North America.

My present feeling of being pedagogically ostracized in the classroom replicates some past feelings I have had. I had a similar sense of exclusion during a high school English grammar class, where the teacher's rapid teaching pace left me behind. I grew up learning that a good learner is "unacceptable as he is, and in order to be acceptable, both to himself and to others, he must be like" the better ones (Pinar & Grumet, 2015, p. 15). Therefore, I followed what the "better" students were doing: working on the assigned exercises without asking any questions. This estrangement of my true self led to a feeling of isolation that was amplified later in 2005 during the alienation from my relatives. Thus, the current feeling of being on the educational margins was already scripted in my past experiences.

THE SYNTHESIS

In the final stage of *currere*, I assemble responses to prompts such as, "What is the meaning of the present?" and "What conceptual gestalt is finally visible?" (Pinar & Grumet, 2015, p. 78). Regarding the first prompt, the present has educative value in that it offers newer meaning to lived experiences from the past that can be projected into the future. For example, my present feeling of aloneness as a teaching assistant sheds light on my "estrangement from Self due to modeling" (p. 13) as a sophomore. Speaking from a critical perspective, the estrangement that cultivated my loneliness is not innocent. It has roots in the human capitalist education system (Kress & Lake,

2015). According to Kress and Lake, this model of education treats students as a source of human capital to be educated and exploited for economic gain. Educational institutions that conform to this form of education push students and teachers to model, for example, political heroes, cultural ambassadors, and better-performing peers (Pinar & Grumet, 2015). My past, in light of the present, suggests that, as I conformed to my institutional norm of modeling "good students," I experienced a system-induced self-estrangement and eventually loneliness.

As to the second prompt, the three previous stages of my *currere* derive a bilayered understanding concerning loneliness. First, loneliness is a complex and evolving concept. It is also a discursive experience that shifts in form and meaning across different life stages. For instance, loneliness was an alien feeling to me in my childhood. It transformed into a sense of abandonment after my father's death and later into a professional alienation in the Canadian classroom. Second, the transformation of loneliness is not necessarily a linear process of decline. The building blocks of my future aspirations include my ego-orgasmic joy of running alone and pain of professional disappointment in 2019. These experiences have taught me to differentiate between loneliness and a chosen solitude. Hence, my imagined future is not one of complete connection; rather, it is a solitude that values a sense of self yet is intricately connected with other significant elements of my educational life. Thus, loneliness, in all its forms, has been a transformative process that has led me to a more intentional and fulfilling way of being.

REFERENCES

Cacioppo, J. T. & Patrick, W. (2008). *Loneliness: Human nature and the need for social connection*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Kress, T. M., & Lake, R. (2015). Afterword: The politics of *currere* in alienating times. In W. F. Pinar & M. R. Grumet (Eds.), *Toward a poor curriculum* (3rd ed., pp. 245–255). Educator's International Press.

Mendelson, M. D. (1990). Reflections on loneliness. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, *26*(2), 330–355. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00107530.1990.10746662

Mosse, G. L. (2000). *Confronting history*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Pinar, W. F. (2011). *The character of curriculum studies: Bildung, currere, and the recurring question of the subject*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pinar, W. F., & Grumet, M. R. (2015). *Toward a poor curriculum* (3rd ed.). Educator's International Press.

Roof, J. (2022). Posthumanism and psychoanalysis. In S. Herbrechter, I. Callus, M. Rossini, M. Grech, M. de Bruin-Mole, & C. J. Muller (Eds.), *Palgrave handbook of critical posthumanism* (pp. 773–792). Palgrave Macmillan.

Winnicott, D. W. (1958). The capacity to be alone. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *39*, 416–420.

THE SUNKEN SPACE
A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

By Blake A. Thompson
Michigan State University

HOW I GOT HERE

As an undergraduate at Savior University (pseudonym), I took a social justice course that set me on the path I still walk. My Social Justice professor, in my junior year, introduced me to topics such as redlining, disparities in Black women's maternal health, and the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. As a 20-year-old Black male, I wondered why these historical events, concepts, and prevailing issues were new to me. I knew I hadn't been the most involved student throughout my time in school, but this history was novel. My time in this class was a brief moment in the sun and is one type of awakening I will explore in this "process of self-actualization" or *currere* (Baszile, 2015, p. 122). I will interrogate my experiences as a Black male teacher in the Deep South, schooled within neoliberal institutions yet determined to bring the hidden narratives from across the African Diaspora to Black students and, therefore, prevent them from being victimized by the same curricular omissions that oriented my thinking.

A few years into a Ph.D. program, I realize that my schooling and development as an alternatively certified teacher contributed to my dysconscious, or uncritical, orientation by sustaining an ignorance about systemic marginalization. Now, I see how Champion All Students' (CAS, pseudonym) placement of me in a teaching role without a systematic orientation towards the socio-historical foundations that situate public schooling was a problematic, harmful, and violent act against the children and community. Hence, if I apply that same critical lens to my experience of professional development three years later, I see the deficiencies in my teacher praxis. In reflection, my academic and professional careers have positioned me to perpetuate the interests of an existing social order devoid of sociological, historical, philosophical, or political realities in the education of Black youth in historically marginalized communities (Shujaa, 1993; Warren & Venzant Chambers, 2021).

THE ARRIVAL OF THEORY

EPISTEMOLOGIES OF IGNORANCE

Ignorance is usually thought of as a state of not knowing (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Yet critical scholars argue that ignorance, or not knowing, is actively maintained by systems designed to subjugate the knowledge base of racialized peoples (Malewski & Jaramillo, 2022; Mills, 2007; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Therefore, ignorance is necessitated by settler-colonial nations, as it limits the development of a critical consciousness that would be detrimental to the norms of the intensely stratified society (Patel, 2019). For example, enslaved people in America were subject to anti-literacy laws that maintained their ignorance of law, placed limits upon their imagination, and supported the spread of manufactured and obedience-oriented religious doctrine. The

infamous Brown v Board decision is heralded as a moment of progress, yet 70 years later, it has proven to be a tool only to perpetuate the interests of the federal government in their need to preserve their ideas of democracy and racial capitalism (Bell, 1995). Tools like curriculum create the potential to transform the realities and imaginations of humankind, but they are also used to eclipse liberatory thinking. Schools more often promote knowledge and norms that serve the interests of the white-centric, capitalist, and patriarchal civilization we inhabit (Montoya et al., 2016; Sheurich & Young, 1997).

Tuana (2004) notes that "ignorance is not a simple lack. It's often constructed, maintained and disseminated and is similar to issues of cognitive authority, doubt, trust, silencing, and uncertainty" (p. 194). Official knowledge is reproduced within schools by way of curriculum, and teachers can be, simply, conduits of authority. Such official narratives are detrimental to youth of color because they are whitewashed, sanitized, and uncritical narratives heralded as Truth. This active production of ignorance and others like it "teaches us ignorance, under the guise of truth, following contemporary interests and priorities" (Malewski & Jaramillo, 2022, p. 48). Furthermore, this active production of ignorance systems works to reify such narratives to develop and maintain an unknowing citizenry. As previously referenced, schools are prime conductors of particular knowledges "intended to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relationship" (Shujaa, 1993, p. 330).

I employ Epistemologies of Ignorance to engage with the curricular choices made by K-12 schools that disconnect history from the contemporary actions of schools and dissuade educators who would critically interrogate the educational system that has been championed as an equitable pathway to opportunity. This allows me to reflect upon my experiences as a novice teacher through a lens of what was and was not uplifted in my teacher development curricula. These curricula created particular knowledges that led to pedagogies and pedagogical enactments in service of marginalizing *othered* knowledges, narratives, or realities.

CURRICULUM AS *CURRERE*

A curriculum isn't just a set of physical materials passed on to teachers or created by educators. This conception of curriculum, as a product, negates the reality that pedagogy informs curriculum and isn't limited to slides, handouts, or grades. As I'll later show, curriculum is a process that communicates a pedagogical stance built from particular socialized worldviews or epistemologies (Pinar et al., 1995; Sheurich & Young, 1997). As noted in Smith (1996, 2000), Kerr defines curriculum as encompassing the "learning planned and guided by the school (or organization) … inside or outside the school" (p. 19). A part of my personal development as a teacher was the realization that curriculum is dynamic, flowing through the nexus of student and teacher knowledges.

Similarly, curriculum isn't limited to students in schools but encompasses any learning process with aspects that overtly and covertly orient those existing within its space (Apple, 1990; Null, 2011). In education, curricula used to develop K-12 teachers in neoliberal spaces provide students with learning experiences that seek to recreate the existing social order. In other words, teachers are developed to re-create democratic values, social efficiency, and social mobility (Labaree, 1997). Schools exist to convey the knowledge that serves the interests of reinstituting the existing social order as opposed to creating a new social order in the psyches of youth (Shujaa, 1993). Further, Scheurich and Young (1997) note, "if a school's standard operating pedagogical

method is culturally congruent with the culture of white students but not with the cultures of students of color," then institutional racism is being reified through a carefully constructed curriculum (p. 5).

Rather than using and creating curriculum as a tool of social maintenance, I hope to continue developing my praxis to regard curriculum as a socio-political project in service of fugitives seeking a "new social order" (Shujaa, 1993, p. 333). For education to be a revolutionary act for Black youth, educators must realize the political, social, and economic aims of neoliberal education organizations and realize their place within the either the continuation or dismantling of such aims. American education was originally outlawed for Black people and is continually used as a tool of domination, assimilation, and neglect (Au et al., 2021). Young people are schooled within a context that preys on their subjugation while their educators, with good intentions, can become perpetrators of such cognitive abuse upon youth. Social justice education programming and curricula that "passively construct Black people as having 'lost rights; versus that of white people violently wrestling them away" creates a dysconscious consumer of information (Joseph, 2018, p. 71). While learning in state-backed schooling institutions, I was unconscious of what was being done to me. Now, I realize what school was doing to me as an educator of Black youth.

Jordan Peele's (2017) film, *Get Out*, theorized a "Sunken Place" where Black people are left at the mercy of whiteness within their daily lives. Sharf's (2017) conversation with Peele, revealed how he developed the notion of the Sunken Place. Peele said, "As I'm writing it becomes clear that the sunken place is this metaphor for the system that is suppressing the freedom of black people, of many outsiders, many minorities. There's lots of different sunken places" (Para. 4). In this paper, I define Sunken Space as the orientation of educators while attempting to teach, learn, and lead in neoliberal academic spaces that center the self as a result of professional development, organizational norms, and one's socialization. I'll later show the limitations and potentially violent nature of such teacher education curricula that trapped me in a Sunken Space. Furthermore, I'll contrast lessons learned in fugitive, nonformal spaces that directly contradicted the official curriculum, as taught by my school's leadership.

My experiences lend me to reflect upon the ways non-traditional teachers are developed within Sunken Spaces, in the U.S. and specifically in the South, to embody white-centric ideologies, capitalism, and anti-Blackness in their pedagogies while reproducing such values in instruction. The Sunken Space I'll explore was intentionally crafted by schools and neoliberal schooling organizations that serve Black youth in the Deep South. I posit that these institutions, microcosms of society, enact ahistorical and dysconscious ideology to develop teachers of Black youth who will maintain epistemologies of ignorance. Such teacher development entraps teachers in Sunken Spaces that harm, neglect, and render them conduits of antiBlackness, epistemologies of ignorance, and reifying the existing social order (King, 1991).

I liken my formal schooling and professional development experiences to a Sunken Space, rather than a Sunken Place. The first idea governing this adapted concept is from Warren's (2021) definition of space as "what people do when interacting with other humans within these institutions, why, and the rules or invisible social codes governing how those people (choose) to interact" (p. 110). The other concept is Haynes and Cobb's (2022) definition of Sunken Place as a "feeling powerless to resist the harmful dehumanization encountered, while attempting to teach, learn, and lead in white academic spaces" (p. 428). I've combined these two concepts to explore and analyze my former pedagogical approach as an alternatively certified educator, schooled within K–12 neoliberal schools and organizations. Drawing from these two concepts, I conceptualize "Sunken Space" as the K-12 schooling apparatus that situates the pedagogical

stances of educators in dysconscious, meritocratic, and white-centric ways that seek to recreate the existing social order within their students intellectually, socially, and materially. I utilize this concept to (1) describe a few of my experiences as an alternatively certified teacher in the Deep South and (2) theorize my subjectivities as oriented by neoliberal schools and organizations. I examine my subjectivities as I entered, existed within, and continue to awaken from the Sunken Space. Thus, the Sunken Spaces I'll explore are within K-12 schools and adjacent organizations that serve minoritized youth and eclipse and stifle political or potentially revolutionary pedagogical stances in service of white-centric ideology.

This *currere* reflects upon the curriculum I endured, as a novice teacher, that created a Sunken Space that was challenged through my pedagogical and curricular endeavors with Black youth and nonformal Black Education Spaces (Baszile, 2006; Kpetay & Lozenski, 2021). Conversely, it traverses narratives that sought to establish a new social order by listening, learning, and collaborating with my students and a local community organization seeking to re-orient Black educators.

METHODOLOGY

Typically, an autoethnography investigates the question, "What am I learning by examining my identities, power, privileges, and penalties within one or more cultural contexts?" (Hughes & Pennington, 2018, p. 5). This reflexive project is a *critical currere* that deconstructs the power and privilege I assumed and employed as an educator of Black youth in the Deep South as I ran through my teacher orientation process. Similarly, a critical autoethnography is explained as "politics of positionality (Madison, 2012) that require researchers to acknowledge the inevitable privileges we experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity" (Boylorn et al., 2013, p. 15). Using critical *currere* as a methodology to reflect upon my experiences provides the tools examine my development of Black youth within institutions designed to reinforce settler colonial norms.

Additionally, Marx's (2022) critical mapping methodology serves as my reflexive process to uncover, interpret, and represent the evolution of my teaching praxis over a decade-long journey as an educator in K-12 schools. The data from personal notes from my time at CAS's Institute and the Orleans Parish Panther Party (OPPP) along with narratives I've recalled from a few moments in my 10-year career as an educator articulate the need for teacher development outside of neoliberal spaces. The data from this project come from the personal notebook I used to capture information during my Institute experience, reflecting upon critical moments in my teaching career, and my notes from a fellowship with the OPPP. I've created the data from raw notes taken from development sessions and inductively used counter-narratives or voice to affirm or challenge the dominant narratives taught in my formal development experiences (Krippendorff, 2019). Other data used were reflections, unwritten, that remain embedded in my thinking as central to challenging the ways I was formally oriented to teaching.

While contrasting my different teacher development experiences, I will examine the ways the Sunken Space has held me, pedagogically, in its grip. Analyzing self-generated data using notes from formal development sessions and narratives from my experiences as an educator, I elicit narratives showing shifts in my pedagogical and curricular stances. Concurrently, my informal development experiences have provided me space to develop a political and critical

consciousness, seeking to move my praxis beyond schooling toward an education that serves the material, political, and social needs of Black youth.

CURRERE

The following collection of narratives span my teacher development journey through multiple schools. I utilize the pseudonyms Claiborne Day School (CDS) and Champion All Students (CAS), a teacher training organization whose curriculum facilitated an egocentric, dysconscious (King, 1991), and/or Sunken Place pedagogy for teaching. Alternatively, my experiences learning from those deemed my students and the Orleans Parish Panther Party (OPPP, pseudonym), in a summer fellowship for Black educators, have oriented my pedagogical stance in alignment with the ecosystem of classroom spaces, creating moments of pedagogical awakening for me. Although Haynes and Cobb (2022) spoke to the development of graduate students seeking positions in the academy, I liken the Sunken Place metaphor to the formal teaching development experiences I endured over my tenure as a secondary high school teacher.

MARION, ALABAMA

ENACTING AN EGOCENTRIC PRAXIS

As a novice teacher, CAS championed me as an agent of transformation. My first year in the classroom, I tasked my 8th-grade students with presenting a project in our Ancient World History class. They researched, prepared, and practiced for a few weeks to "master" the project-based assessment. A few students adhered to the task with moderate *success* according to the rubric I chose to guide the assignment. After each presentation, I reminded students to make eye contact with the audience rather than reading off of notecards. After a few presentations, I admonished a male student for not looking at the audience, preparing himself in a way that would show attention to the rubric, and learning from his classmate's mistakes.

Before I had time to reflect on my brash comments to this student, his classmates came to his defense and let me have it. I don't recall the words, but I vividly remember the feeling—warmth in my chest, blood filling up the skin in my hands, a light sweat emanating on my forehead—all from the lashing I was receiving from his classmates. Or was it something inside me that disagreed with how I responded to the presentation of that young man? But what did I do, as the leader of the space? I defended my actions. Little did I know that I was drowning in the ideas of achievement, long-term goals, motivation, and all of the things CAS wanted young people to attain without working to develop my pedagogical stance as an educator of Black youth. The pedagogy of CAS manifested through my words, actions, and values within the classroom, but it was my responsibility to critically examine the tools used to orient me. My ego, unexamined, placed me in a position of power with a dysconscious orientation to promote individualism and meritocracy without pursuing a classroom space that acknowledged the experiences or social capital of my students.

Unlearning an Egocentric Praxis

Same moment. Here's how it ended. The students, as my teachers, helped me realize the necessity and centrality of the ecosystem established in the classroom. A class full of 8th graders, in a town of about 3,400, had been in class together for as long as they were in school. The relationships they cultivated were sibling-like, which made my entrance as the "leader" of the classroom a bit tumultuous. In all honesty, I didn't know what I was doing. With good intentions, I was then unaware of my "role as a cultural actor … in a world with sociopolitical roots historically cut and carved by European colonial governments" (Ishmael, 2015, p. 86). I didn't feel the need to prove myself to these *students* nor anyone because of my accomplishments. Ego. My students quickly taught me that there was work to be done on my end. They banded together to show their solidarity and to protect their own from an invader, outsider, or just another teacher who won't last the year (McNess et al., 2015). I received a verbal thrashing by my students. It wasn't nice nor quick, but it was necessary.

Up until that point, I was never challenged to critically question my positionality, privileges, or beliefs as a Black man or educator. I communicated, verbally and non-verbally, to students that they too could "succeed" if they just "took responsibility for their own learning, rose above deeply internalized lessons borne from inequity and hardship and worked hard" (Ishmael, 2015, p. 88). What I hadn't considered in my harshly worded feedback was what he *had* done to prepare. Maybe he did practice his presentation. Or maybe he didn't practice. Regardless, as his teacher, what was my role in supporting him? I know now that one way to create a space supportive of students is simply to listen to the students in the room. Ladson Billings (1995) offered culturally responsive pedagogy as an approach to creating an intellectual environment by understanding that the classroom space is one of reciprocity that embraces the varied skillsets students bring to the classroom space.

So, I had to learn that they would defend their classmate with their pedagogies of what a classroom looked, felt, and sounded like. Coles (2021) reflects, "It is my experience that Black youth are not simply sitting in U.S. classrooms as uncritical receptors of anti-Black pedagogy, but that they are learning into and leveraging their Blackness as a tool of resistance and refusal" (p. 36). I realized that I had much to learn from my students. As they were the ones whose pedagogical orientations around community, collaboration, and communication would help awaken me from the egocentric development I'd received. Ultimately, I apologized to the student presenter, and I apologized to the class.

New Orleans, Louisiana

Re-learning the Ecosystem

This story comes from a summer of sociopolitical development. Outside of the egocentric gaze of western schooling, the OPPP has developed curricula for Black educators and Black youth in New Orleans since 2015. While rooted in the teachings of Amilcar Cabral and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), Maurice Bishop and the New Jewels Movement, along with Walter Rodney's (1990) "Guerilla Intellectualism" (p. 111), our daily work in the fellowship involved learning, conversing, and serving the local 9th Ward community. From hosting workshops on growing fruits and vegetables with youth and adults at the OPPP House to

informing Black people in the 9th Ward about the free food pantry provided, our time positioned us beside working-class Black New Orleanians rather than above them. The previous and upcoming intentionality of the use of lower-case and upper-case letters, "i/I," has been a tool to show my development in becoming an educator in solidarity with the larger community, instead of positioning myself as a savior of a community.

Far from a notebook, my iPad was my new mode of writing notes during my studies as a PhD student. The first revolutionaries introduced were Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC. Lectured about the unique methods of colonization in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, we came to realize the foundational tenets of their orientation towards revolution. i wrote " 1) assess the landscape→ how colonization has shaped the land. 2) what does the enemy want? (strengths and weaknesses) 3) Assess your people + their needs." Using the framework laid out by the PAIGC, we would examine the intent and impact of the public charter schools in New Orleans. Then, introduced to Walter Rodney's guerilla intellectualism, I reflected on how, in my experience, disconnected the schools were from the communities they served and vice versa. In an interview I conducted with Gina Simone, current executive director of the OPPP, she articulated her reasoning for including him in the fellowship curriculum for Black educators,

He (Walter Rodney) was very clear about teachers and slash, mainly academics, but also teachers. He was like, yo, you're enemies of the people unless proven otherwise. Folks is gonna see you as enemies of the people because you work for the fucking state. (personal communication, 2023)

This advice articulates a pedagogical stance of positioning oneself amongst, as opposed to above, the students, their families, and the community at large. The existing ecosystem is a space that has learned well to look upon state actors with a side eye, so it becomes the responsibility of educators to rebuild trust.

IN REFLECTION: THESE STORIES

My priorities shifted from one that overvalued data in student knowledge acquisition to those of creating a space that was communal, collaborative, and purposeful beyond a spreadsheet. Although academic growth was important, it became a given when students were able to feel comfort, relatability, and a sense of purpose in our ecosystem. The content we learned connected students to their histories and current realities while our relationships developed to transcend a transactional teacher-student dynamic.

THE SUNKEN SPACE AND AWAKENING FROM ITS GRIP: A DISCUSSION

Similar to Daniel Kuluya's experiences in *Get Out*, I only realized my paralysis in the Sunken Space when I was able to awaken from it. In the film, he somehow realized the television and spoon tapping against the teacup placed him in the Sunken Place, so he *picked* cotton from the couch to become deaf to the continued indoctrination. That he uses cotton is an intentional symbol of using the master's tools to free himself. My experiences of awakening were that of disregarding the tools of the master as sources of liberation. Discovering a pedagogy oriented towards Black youth took the form of listening, learning, and applying the tools demanded by my students and offered by the OPPP. Ultimately, I realized "they were the prize" rather than myself (Kirkland,

2021, p. 66). Positioning myself in solidarity with students and the community has helped me see the ways I needed to shift my engagement with Black youth.

The Sunken Space created by my former K-12 school and CAS enacted a particular curriculum for teachers that oriented our gaze away from the community and towards ahistorical and neoliberal visions for Black youth. The administrations in these schools communicated a vision of college and career readiness while creating epistemologies of ignorance regarding the social foundations of schooling. They uplifted this vision as a liberatory belief, but the spaces behaved as microcosms of society as they ignored the self-determination or material realities of students. Although there were moments of democratic decision-making regarding school policies, teachers conformed to the will of the school leader since disobedience may have led to dismissal from "at-will" teaching positions. CAS positioned me as a savior of youth in dire need of my leadership, when in actuality my students' critical orientations should have been leading me. CAS and CDS normalized antiBlackness by "preparing youngsters for lives of marginality and servitude," within the existing social order, and by orienting teachers to maintain such aims (Rickford, 2016, p. 7).

The Sunken Space in K-12 schooling normalizes an ahistorical, meritocratic, and individualistic curriculum for teachers designed to reify the current social hierarchy rather than transform it (Chapman & Donor, 2015; Shujaa, 1993). The institutions withing which I worked dropping contextless adults, bolstered by dysconscious teacher programming, in historically underdeveloped communities to instill "mythical hope … described as a false narrative of equal opportunity emptied of its historical and political contingencies" (Barthes, 1972, as cited in Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 183). Similarly, my narrative in Alabama communicates "an individualistic up-by-your-bootstraps hyperbole that suggests if urban students just work hard, pay attention, and play by the rules, then they will go to college and live out the 'American Dream," otherwise known as "hokey hope" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 182). These foes of material change or social transformation for Black youth, via education, were built into the curricula that positioned me in its favor.

SANKOFA: CONCLUSION

Amilcar Cabral (as quoted in Borges, 2021), a decolonial revolutionary of the PAIGC, proclaimed, "Weapons are not sufficient to liberate a country. The greatest battle we must engage in is against ignorance. Only when men and women understand this can they overcome their fear" (p. 145). Thus, I argue that K-12 schools and organizations explicitly create ignorance of theoretical concepts or pedagogical stances that would otherwise create a space that allows for critical interrogation of teachers' praxis. Teacher educators and teachers must become aware of the Sunken Spaces they are being oriented within and locate nonformal education spaces to counter such pedagogical epistemologies and ontologies.

In community with OPPP and critical youth, I've been able to rethink my actions, pedagogy, and orientations towards educating Black youth to fundamentally disrupt, challenge, and re-imagine formal schooling. These Black Education Spaces (BES) (Warren & Coles, 2020) both in my own classroom and in the community—the students, the teachers, the authors, the revolutionaries who inhabited those spaces—aided me in becoming an educator who develops the sociopolitical orientations of youth (Hope et al., 2023). As schools are microcosms of society, the education of Black youth has been and remains a political act (Rickford, 2016). In realizing and

refusing the Sunken Space, I see a path forward in my continued development and the development of educators seeking to establish new realities for Black people.

REFERENCES

Apple, M. (1990). *Ideology and curriculum* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Au, W., Brown, A. L., & Aramoni Calderon, D. (2016). *Reclaiming the multicultural roots of U.S. curriculum: Communities of color and official knowledge and education*. Teachers College Press.

Baszile, D. T. (2006). Rage in the interests of Black self: Curriculum theorizing as dangerous knowledge. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *22*(1), 89–99.

Baszile, D. T. (2015). Critical race/feminist *currere*. In M. F. He, B. D. Schultz, & W. H. Schubert (Eds.), *The SAGE guide to curriculum in education* (pp. 119–126). SAGE.

Bell, D. A. (1995). Serving two masters: Integration ideals and client interests in school desegregation litigation. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical Race Theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 5–19). The New Press.

Borges, S. V. (2019). *Militant education, liberation struggle, consciousness: The PAIGC education in Guinea Bissau 1963-1978*. Peter Lang.

Boylorn, R. M., Orbe, M. P., Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2013). *Critical autoethnography: Intersecting cultural identities in everyday life* (1st ed.). Left Coast Press.

Chapman, T., & Donnor, J. (2015). Critical Race Theory and the proliferation of U.S. charter schools. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *48*, 137–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.991670

Coles, J. A. (2021). "It's really geniuses that live in the hood": Black urban youth curricular un/makings and centering Blackness in slavery's afterlife. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *51*(1), 35–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2020.1856622

Duncan-Andrade, J. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, *79*(2), 181–194. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.2.nu3436017730384w

Haynes, C., & Cobb, F. (2022). I write you from the Sunken Place. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *35*(4), 425–437. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2021.2003900

Hope, E. C., Anyiwo, N., Palmer, G. J. M., Banalas, J., & Smith, C. D. (2023). Sociopolitical development: A history and overview of a Black liberatory approach to youth development. *American Psychological Association*, *78*(4), 484–495. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001119

Hughes, S. A., & Pennington, J. L. (2018). *Autoethnography: Process, product, and possibility for critical social research*. SAGE.

Ishmael, S. (2015). Dysconscious racism, class privilege, and TFA. In T. J. Brewer & K. deMarrais (Eds.), *Teach For America counter-narratives: Alumni speak up and speak out* (pp. 85–94). Peter Lang.

Joseph, V. (2018). Heritage knowledge in the curriculum: Retrieving an African episteme [Review of the book *Heritage knowledge in the curriculum: Retrieving an African episteme*, by J. E. King & E. E. Swartz]. *Heritage & Society*, *11*(1), 70–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032X.2019.1567047

King, J. E. (1991). Dysconscious racism: Ideology, identity, and the miseducation of teachers. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *60*(2), 133–146. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.2307/2295605

Kirkland, D. E. (2021). A pedagogy for Black people: Why naming race matters. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, *54*(1), 60–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2020.1867018

Kpetay, S. T., & Lozenski, B. D. (2021). "To their benefit": Tracing (Pp)an-Africanism through nonformal Black educational space. *Educational Studies*, *51*(5), 476–495. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2021.1969933

Krippendorff, K. (2019). Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology (4th ed.). SAGE.

Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, *34*(1), 39–81. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312034001039

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Association*, *32*(3), 465–491. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465

Madison, D. S. (2012). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Malewski, E., & Jaramillo, N. (2022). Epistemologies of ignorance with/in curriculum studies. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *12*(2), 35–70. https://janeway.uncpress.org/ijcp/article/id/839/

Marx, S. (2022). Mapping as critical qualitative research methodology. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, *46*(3), 285–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2022.2110231

McNess, E., Arthur, L., & Crossley, M. (2015). 'Ethnographic dazzle' and the construction of the 'Other': Revisiting dimensions of insider and outsider research for international and comparative education. *Compare*, *45*(2), 295–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2013.854616

Mills, C. (2007). White ignorance. In S. Sullivan & N. Tuana (Eds.), *Race and epistemologies of ignorance* (pp. 11–38). State University of New York Press.

Montoya, R., Matias, C. E., Nishi, N. W. M., & Sarcedo, G. L. (2016). American chimera: The ever-present domination of whiteness, patriarchy, and capitalism … A parable." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *48*(9), 872–883. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2015.1068683

Null, W. (2011). *Curriculum: From theory to practice*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Patel, L. (2019). Fugitive practices: Learning in a settler colony. *Educational Studies*, *55*(3), 253–261. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2019.1605368

Peele, J. (Writer & Director). (2017). *Get out* [Film]. Universal Pictures, Blumhouse Productions, QC Entertainment.

Pinar, W. F., M, W. J., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. M. (1995). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. Peter Lang.

Rickford, R. (2016). *We are an African people: Independent education, Black power, and the radical imagination* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.

Rodney, W. (1981). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (6th ed.). London and Tanzanian Publishing House. (Original work published 1972)

Rodney, W. (1990). *Walter Rodney speaks: The making of an African intellectual*. Africa World Press.

Sharf, Z. (2017). 'Get Out': Jordan Peele reveals the real meaning behind the Sunken Place. *IndieWire*. https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/get-out-jordan-peele-explains-sunken-place-meaning-1201902567/

Shujaa, M. (1993). Education and schooling: You can have one without the other. *Urban Education*, *27*(4), 328–351. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085993027004002

Smith, M. K. (1996, 2000). What is curriculum: Exploring theory and practice. *The Encyclopedia of Pedagogy and Informal Education*. www.infed.org/biblio/b-curric.htm

Sullivan, S., & Tuana, N. (2007). *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*. State University of New York Press.

Tuana, N. (2004). Coming to understand: Orgasm and the epistemology of ignorance. *Hypatia* [Special Issue: *Feminist Science Studies*], *19*(1), 194–232. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2004.tb01275.x

Warren, C. A. (2021). *About centering possibility in Black education*. Teachers College Press.

Warren, C. A., & Coles, J. A. (2020). Trading spaces: Antiblackness and reflections on Black education futures. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, *3*, 382–398. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2020.1764882

Warren, C. A., & Venzant Chambers, T. T. (2020). The imperative of social foundations to (urban) education research and practice. *Educational Researcher*, *49*(5), 369–375. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20923289

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 69–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006

TO BE FREE
A BLACK MALE EDUCATOR'S QUEST & THE SHARED INTELLECTUAL DILEMMA OF BALDWIN, DU BOIS, AND WRIGHT

By Paul Collins
Florida A&M University

Liberating the body is a powerful thing within the context of a system designed to dehumanize based on skin pigmentation, where Whiteness is codified as superior. The aforementioned is a most cynical ploy enacted on those of Black/African ancestry. Scholars direct our attention to critical junctures in U.S. history, such as 1619 and Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, as critical points of entry into a world where skin color and ancestry relegate people to the bottom rungs of a socially constructed, racialized hierarchy designed to perpetuate the most sinister of atrocities—stripping away the humanity of others to rationalize bondage and servitude (Hannah-Jones, 2021; Tatum, 2017).

James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright are three prominent intellectuals of African ancestry who, during their lives, chose to do something not done by most formerly enslaved Africans during the 20th century. They acted upon the urge to leave the United States of America. Although not the first or only men classified as Negro or what is more commonly referred to contemporarily as African-American or Black men to do such, they do represent a uniquely small minority of descendants of the formerly enslaved to find this strategy a remedy to their life's circumstance. I have always been intrigued by the clarity gained through years of study, writing, and teaching that ultimately led such reputable American intellectuals to decide they had had enough. These prominent 20th-century literary intellectuals would ultimately exit the United States of America to take up residence in other countries. What drives such a desire and, ultimately, the radical initiated action? Through the *currere* method, I examine this within the context of my own lived experience as an educator inspired by these historical figures to do likewise.

CURRERE

The autobiographical approach of *currere* to curricularizing has been a valuable tool of meaning-making in the field of curriculum studies for quite some time. As an introduction to and definition of the method, Pinar (2019) states, "The Latin infinitive of curriculum—*currere*—I invoked in 1975 to emphasize the lived experience of curriculum, embodied potentially educational experience that is structured by the past while focused on the future" (p. 50). To study such experience, he devised a method in four moments or phases.

In further unpacking the method of *currere*, in the first-regressive phase, one returns to the past or to aspects of it: for instance, one's school experience, the experience of an influential teacher or text, or one's ongoing relationship with an academic discipline. In the second, the progressive moment, one imagines their future in a personal, social, and political way. In the third, the analytic moment, one studies these texts and the experiences they engender to understand better what before might have been obscured by one being submerged in the present moment. In the fourth, synthetic phase, one pulls oneself together so as to act anew in the private and public worlds

one inhabits. This subjective coherence becomes plausible as a new site from which one can again reinitiate the *currere* cycle (Pinar, 2019).

I, along with other scholars in the curriculum field, continue to interrogate the question of how my life history matters in the understanding of my academic writings. It remains risky to write about ourselves in our shared academic world (Morris, 2019). The very topic of this manuscript speaks directly to how my identity shapes and has shaped my work in the educational field. The following questions helped in this process. Does who I am matter in my production of knowledge? Is it important to know who the writer is as a person? Should I strive to erase myself from my iterations and analysis? We must resist the ivory tower's historical politic of traditional academic scholarship being totally about the erasure of I/scholar (Collins, 2022). By relying upon *currere*'s four channels of inquiry—regressive, progressive, analytic, and synthetic—I am equipped with a method of processing the impact of James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright's decision to lose faith in the United States of America's ability to do right by Black folk to the point of physically removing themselves from this country's landscape.

Speaking of removing oneself from this country's landscape, I pinned the following words to my daughters while living abroad in pursuit of my own wellness and sanity after being a Black male educator for over two decades. I entitled the letter, "Hey Black Girl Magic—Father to Daughters," stemming from a writing technique invoked by Richard Wright that later inspired Ta-Nehisi Coates (Coates, 2015; LitCharts, n.d.). Inspired by Wright's poem, "Between the World and Me," Coates connects to this literary work of the early to mid-20th century, ultimately borrowing the title for his own critically acclaimed early 21st-century book written as a letter to his own son (Coates, 2015). Below are those iterations stemming from an impetus to exit my homeland just as Baldwin, Du Bois, and Wright had done decades before. The letter begins:

> Girls, I don't believe it wise to move through life in an unexamined fashion with blissful ignorance. Actually, although some people do live like that and benefit from such blissful ignorance, you don't have that luxury. Keep reading. I am going to elaborate on that point so that you know exactly why I find it important that you know and understand who you are. I know that you are probably saying to yourself, "Well, that's not fair." Well, I'm also going to teach you about an old truism that your grandparents taught me a long time ago that goes like this—"life ain't fair." Blurry, vague, and unclear? Well, my beautiful Black princesses, things will come even more into focus as you read along.

"But daddy, we're not black … we're brown. Why are you calling us "Black princesses"? This was a question that I asked myself repeatedly as a young boy. Not the princess part, but the taken-for-granted black labeling of me when my skin complexion is actually brown. No answer persuasive enough to make good sense of why people called us Black ever came until I went off to college. Why? Why did we call ourselves something and not know why? During this pre-internet era, there were unpersuasive attempts at answers from family and others but nothing that triggered a lightbulb moment of understanding in my mind. Now, back to the letter.

Girls, this is one of the important things that I want to tell you. This is one of those things that you really don't have the luxury of not deeply understanding. You will struggle with making sense of the senseless killing of Ahmaud Arbery. This was just an incidence of disregard for the life of a person categorized as Black in our country. Eldest child, in your teens, you are old enough to ask the right questions and question why White men, like in the case of Ahmaud Arbery, killed the Black young man like his life did not matter. Keep asking the right questions. Don't shy away

from knowing. You are not afforded that luxury. It would be dishonest to tell you that this is where such atrocities ended. One day, you will come to realize that there are many more. You come from an extremely resilient people.

At the tender age of four, the youngest has already begun to ask about skin color. She wants to know why folks say "Black people" and why folks say "White people." Interesting.

REGRESSIVE – AN EMERGING PATTERN

Upon reflecting, I realized that I had not been an avid reader throughout my childhood and a large portion of my collegiate experience. So enthralled with sports, I would read what was assigned and was able to make good grades by doing well on what was required, thereby maintaining athletic eligibility. It was only after attending a campus lecture sometime between junior and senior year of college that I was challenged and the spark lit to become more knowledgeable about the world and my place in it by reading more than what was required. The invited lecturer to our campus was Kwame Ture. Formally known as Stokely Carmichael, he, like Baldwin, Du Bois, and Wright, had also chosen to reside outside the United States, in his case choosing to live in Guinea, West Africa. Kwame Ture's presence yielded a fully packed auditorium with an accompanying overflow audience. The energy in the large university campus room felt electric that night.

The former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader's rhetorical tools and oratorical skillset captured the audience's attention. At one point, he asked the audience to raise a hand if they were Christian. I was one of the overwhelming majority who raised my hand. Nearly the entire room raised their hand in response, not prepared for his follow-up question. He then asked how many had read the bible in its entirety. This question left the huge, jam-packed with less than a dozen or so hands still in the air. This line of questioning on that night was the spark that lit a fire in me intellectually and began my quest for greater knowledge of the world and my place in it.

Growing up in a Christian family split by the congregations of the Southern Baptist and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches, all I knew was the dogmatism imbued in the ideological responses to the existential quandaries of life, death, and how to comport oneself in between those occurrences. My mother's side of the family attended the Baptist church within walking distance from the rural housing project in which I was raised. My father's side of the family attended the AME church just a short car drive away to the small town to which the housing project was annexed. Although my mother was a regular attendee of the Baptist congregation, my father was nomadic in his church-going practices. He might be found at either church or another church on any given Sunday. Ultimately, my parents settled into the Baptist congregation. I had many questions about religion as a child that went unanswered. I took much of this theological naivete on to university life and into that room on the night of that collegiate lecture. The next day, I went to a local bookstore and purchased some of the first books of my life that were not an academic requirement. The journey of self-discovery through literature had begun.

What follows is a series of three selected "fragments," or story-bits, that delve deeply into my childhood educational experiences with the intent of using *currere* to present a deeper discussion of my lived experience and meaning-making as an educator (Poetter, 2017). I am hopeful that revisiting my experiences with these particular Black male scholars with significant

literary impact on the world will be revelatory in the progressive, analytic, and synthetic phases of my *currere* journey.

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT #1: OFF TO FRANCE GOES JAMES BALDWIN

Arguably one of the most impactful writers of the 20th century, James Baldwin's writing continues to reverberate in modern academic circles and public thought. I found it fascinating that a Black, gay man could have such a powerful impact on the socio-political culture of a country via his typewriter. Even more intriguing was the courage it must have taken to uproot himself from his own country and, with meager means, relocate to a foreign land with a foreign language. Once my motivation had intersected with a new thirst for knowledge sparked during my undergraduate and graduate years of university life, the work of literary scholars such as James Baldwin became essential reading. Feeling extremely behind in any kind of sophisticated understanding of what had been written about my people, those who have been historically socio-politically classified as Blacks, I continued to frequent bookstores in pursuit of reading recommendations. The recommendations were many and overwhelming, but the works of James Baldwin were a part of the many recommended readings provided.

Also powerful and intriguing was the biographical commentary found in audio and video archives about James Baldwin. To hear Maya Angelou speak of him or to see him in conversation with Nikki Giovanni poured into my visual and auditory senses like fresh paint on the canvas of my mind (Giovanni & Baldwin, 1971). When speaking of Malcolm X, I vividly recall watching a video interview of James Baldwin where he expounded on how living in the United States challenged him so mightily. He told the reporter that he was deeply challenged by America because it was killing his friends. This was the type of sensibility, boldness, and candor that James Baldwin possessed during the racially tumultuous years of the 1950s and 1960s. It appeared that he did not fear the repercussions of the media or the physical harm that was possible when he told the reporter with such conviction on nationwide television, in essence, that the dominant culture in the country might hate El Hajj Malik Al Shabazz (Malcolm X), but he was his friend.

There are several notable revelations in reflectively analyzing James Baldwin's impact on me as an educator, academic, and one socio-politically classified as a Black man. He, like I, grew up in a Christian family. Both Baldwin and I could not find comfort in the application of the Christian doctrine as practiced in the United States, like the most segregated hour of the week being on any given Sunday when most attend church. Unlike me, Baldwin was vocal and visible in challenging those socio-politically classified as Whites to prove that they were really practitioners of Christianity. His television appearances and public debates of the 1950s – 1980s rendered Baldwin's positions on religion and American life readily apparent.

These were the same challenges I struggled with as a child and through the early stages of my collegiate experience in the early 1990s. The liberation theology of some religious movements of the north has been slow to spread to the southern regions of the United States (Cone, 1970). As a high school senior preparing to depart for college, I can vividly recall the day in church when my childhood pastor had all high school seniors stand for some going off to college instructions. A summation of the overall message was that we find a church to attend while away in college. If the church used the King James Bible, then the church was fit for worship. I found this pastoral wisdom good counsel and did adhere. In being obedient, I visited a variety of churches in proximity to the university. As an impressionable college freshman who started college at a Predominately

White Institution (PWI) before transferring to a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), I was fresh from the incubator of my small, rural, southern town upbringing where my high school was about 95% and my church congregation 100% Black.

This context opened the door for the discovery of James Baldwin's frequent repetition of an undisputed American truism regarding the most segregated hour of the week in America, being on Sundays. Naïve to such an observation of our country's segregated racialized worship practice, I did not discriminate in my nomadic Sunday church-going practices during my first year of college as I heeded the instruction of my hometown pastor. Being able to report successful attendance at church on Sundays was also a sign of obedience to the ritual, which was deeply important to my parents. Their worries about the plethora of things that could go wrong while away from home engaging in university life were lessened by my church-going practices. While the fear of going to hell was lessened, the new awareness of racially segregated religious practices had been experienced, leading to many questions. Although I never experienced anything overtly inappropriate during my nomadic journey amongst several all-White church congregations, the curiously inquisitive kind glances, awkward feeling, and futile attempt to ignore my being the proverbial elephant in the room were undeniable.

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT #2: THE RENOUNCED CITIZENSHIP OF W. E. B. DU BOIS

How fascinating it must have been to be the first person of African ancestry to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, arguably one of the country's most prestigious universities then and now. In a quest to understand better the historical implications of Harvard's first Black Ph.D. earner, I also discovered that W. E. B. Du Bois' disenchantment with the United States ultimately led to him renouncing his citizenship and relocating to Ghana, West Africa.

My first knowledge of W. E. B. Du Bois came through a college debate highlighting the philosophy and ideas of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Once again, the cognitive dissonance of such provocatively new ideas being debated sparked a deep interest in the two powerful historical figures. This led me on a path of discovery that nurtured my intellectual curiosities regarding the history of those in the United States of African descent.

Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, W. E. B. Du Bois was ultimately responsible for a voluminous number of publications (Asante, 2008). It appears almost criminal to have not been exposed to one with such literary impact through my public schooling experience. Perhaps, it is not so surprising when I think of knowing so little about Martin Luther King Jr., that, during middle school, I had to be disabused of the notion that his name was not Martin Luther "The King" by a group of Morehouse College student volunteers who visited our school during Black History Month. As a middle schooler of the 1980s who had successfully matriculated through the elementary school years, I thought that Martin Luther King was actually a king who had been killed. After all, who was commonly called by their first, middle, and last names? This was baffling to me. Carter G. Woodson writes about this kind of miseducation (Woodson, 1933).

Du Bois was a great defender of the souls of African people and an answer to many critiques of the inherent inferiority of Blacks post-enslavement (Du Bois, 1903). He gave us the first scientific and systematic study of the Black community. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* was one of the first sociological studies of its kind written in America (Du Bois & Eaton, 1996). W. E. B. Du Bois was critical in internationalizing the African diasporic struggle for freedom. He was able to connect the American experience of African oppression to the African experience in

South America, Africa, and Europe (Asante, 2008). He was a central figure in the movement of Pan-African Congresses that initially convened in Manchester, England. Many of the young African intellectuals, such as Kwame Nkrumah, that joined the older Du Bois at these meetings would soon become leaders of their countries.

A reflective analysis yields that, with all that has been stated and is known of W. E. B. Du Bois, the question of why he renounced his citizenship remained fascinating to me. Here we have the first Black to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, having also studied internationally in Germany, who was one of the most respected intellectuals of his era. With all of the accolades of a historian, arguably one of this country's first sociologists, a progressive organizer, and a public intellectual, W. E. B. Du Bois ultimately found his country of birth untenable and a place where he no longer wanted to claim citizenship. This one fact has resonated over the years as the highest of indictments against one's own country. After achieving the highest levels of academic success from one of the country's preeminent institutions of higher learning and living well into his nineties, W. E. B. Du Bois concluded that there was no American dream for the Blacks.

I was able to reflect deeply on the weightiness of such a decision during a visit to the W. E. B. Du Bois Mausoleum, which was his last residence located in Accra, Ghana. The mausoleum is the final resting place of Dr. Du Bois and his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois. Is this what it takes to be free? This question reverberated through my mind as I walked the mausoleum grounds. Is this what it takes to be free?

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT #3: RICHARD WRIGHT GOES TO PARIS

A historical marker can be found in Natchez, Mississippi, communicating to anyone passing through that the noted African-American author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Richard Wright, was born in the first decade of the twentieth century near Natchez. Natchez is also where he spent his early childhood. Wright's lifelong quest for freedom ultimately led to his departure from the United States of America to reside in Paris, France. Born the son of a sharecropper and a school teacher, Richard Wright's start in this world resembles mine but in a different historical timeframe. I was born approximately sixty years after Wright to a father whose family fled the state of Mississippi in pursuit of a better life beyond the plantation fields where his family sharecropped during the early twentieth century. My mother, like Richard Wright's mother, would work her way up from being a migrant field laborer to becoming a teacher.

The traumas of Richard Wright's childhood were such that any sense of formalized schooling did not occur until around the age of twelve. The gradual continued relocation of Wright from place to place, the departure of his father from his matriculation to manhood, and the traumas of being raised as the descendants of enslaved Africans in the sharecropping Jim Crow South heavily shaped Wright's outlook on life. His mother's departure from Mississippi and brief stints of residence elsewhere ultimately landed the family in Chicago. Wright would learn of the challenges of the mean streets of yet another city and its challenges of poverty and white supremacy. Through all of this, Richard Wright would go on to become one of the most notable American writers of the 20th century.

Once again, I was forced to grapple with yet another prominent historical, intellectual figure of African ancestry who had, upon thorough analysis, concluded that the pursuit of well-being must occur in a foreign land. Most telling is the fact that Wright, like James Baldwin and W. E. B. Du Bois, acted on the existential crisis of a loss of faith in their country of birth, relocating

to foreign countries to take up residence. Richard Wright spent time living in Mexico before ultimately moving to France, where he would live out the remainder of his life. He died in 1960 at the opening of a very turbulent decade in his native land.

THE PROGRESSIVE: FORECASTING

After more than 20 years of being one of the scarce few African-American male educators in the United States, I began to imagine the "what ifs." I was disenchanted with the direction in which my profession was headed, and some qualified Black males are taking their talents to foreign lands and wondering what if (Etheridge et al., 2019). It was tempting to be optimistic about the next 10 years. Yet, there appeared to be no signs of empirical evidence to support such optimism, so much so that I found myself in the same intellectual and existential crisis as James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright. In responding to this crisis of well-being, I, too, departed my home country to take up residence in a foreign land. As Baldwin had chosen during the 20th-century a life in France and Turkey, Du Bois in Ghana, and Wright in France and Mexico, similarly, I delved into the life of an expatriate in the United Arab Emirates as a 21st-century Black man.

Black storytelling through the use of *currere* can assist in illuminating the trend of African-American expatriate-ness as a multi-century historical phenomenon. Perhaps more work in this area of scholarly production can be a force in highlighting what factors create the need for such a pattern and what might be done to mitigate against the need for such. From one perspective, the notion of African-American "brain drain" in the educational field becomes apparent. With the increasing challenges of life in the United States, the increased gap between the wealthy and the rest of the country, and the disproportionately negative impact of such on the African-American community, the loss of intellectual capital to the life of expatriate-ness presents yet another challenge. How must such challenges be approached? Baszile (2015a) notes regarding the addition of voices, in her work of critical race/feminist *currere*, "the others who are invited into the conversation represent the voice/s that have been absent, ignored, misconstrued, distorted, repressed in the curriculum/s that shapes our lives—the curricula of schooling and media, in particular" (p. 120).

Being a bright-eyed, optimistic college student filled with the passion I thought adequate to change the world, my introduction to the literary ideas of James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright was transformational. After all, it was Kwame Ture's (formerly Stokely Carmicheal) lecture appearance at my university during the mid-1990s that started my journey into the world of Black literature. Imbued with much irony is the fact that Ture, too, ultimately departed the United States of America to take up residence in Guinea, West Africa. How does this nourish one's well-being? Years from now, I envision being well into my 3rd decade in the educational profession, advocating for schools to be institutions of progressive change. I would like to envision fledgling Black male educators not having to look abroad for the solace that should be found in their native land (Etheridge et al., 2019).

THE ANALYTIC: BEING MINDFUL OF THE PRESENT

I write this manuscript as a university faculty member having recently returned to the United States. In this moment, an analysis must be brought to bear on the conundrum of the Black

male educator exodus to be expatriates using their expertise in foreign lands (Etheridge et al., 2019). As was noted in my regressive moments, well-known historical intellectual and literary leaders of the African-American community have found expatriate-ness to be the choice for a better existence during life in the 20th century.

Through the use of *currere*, it becomes clearer that, with such limited numbers of Black male educators, viable global opportunities at better life circumstances abroad challenge the chances of increased Black male educator numbers. This raises further questions about how long it will take for the United States to mature as a society suffering from a legacy initiated by the maltreatment of the natives of this land and the forced enslavement of Africans through the transatlantic slave trade.

SYNTHETIC: I AM

In this exploration, the method of *currere* has allowed for educative pauses where I reflected, intending to gain insight into the lives of James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright (Kuhnke & Jack-Malik, 2021; Poetter, 2020). Specifically, I wanted to interrogate the trend of these three well-known intellectual figures who ultimately chose to leave their home country of the United States of America to reside in foreign lands. I wanted to use the method to deeply examine my more than 20 years in education as a Black male educator—who has also been known as one of the approximately 2% of Black male educators in the field, especially within the context of my sharing the experience of leaving the U.S. to live abroad in search of a deeper understanding of what it means to be free (Chillag, 2019).

While living and working abroad, I often noted this experience as a time when I felt most free from the stigma associated with blackness that was pervasive in my country of birth. Abroad, I was able to walk outside and through a major city at any time of the day or night and not feel the sense of timidity that accompanies doing such, especially at night, as a male classified as Black in the United States. How freeing it felt to not feel oneself to be deemed suspicious while walking through neighborhoods or city streets in the deep of night. The unwritten rules of not being in certain spaces during the hours of the night due to the possible negative implications, whether real or imagined, is a freedom-limiting fear that I know all too well, having been reared as a Black male in the United States.

The glaring missing ingredient to life as an expatriate in the United Arab Emirates was the absence of the commonness of violence that comes with the terrain of U.S. citizenship—especially gun violence—especially school shootings. Much of the senseless gun violence is becoming more tolerable and normalized in my home country. The United Arab Emirates has been a global exemplar as one of the safest places to live. To make the point quickly, picture an African-American female in her mid-twenties riding her bicycle through the streets of any major U.S. city at approximately 10 p.m. in the dark of night, appearing not to have a care in the world. My expatriate teacher colleagues did so as common practice. When asked if they would be out in that manner while back home in the United States, their answers were consistent—"no"—with variations in the degrees of intensity that could be as intense as "absolutely not" to an explicative being placed in front of the "no" in communicating such.

I had a similar experience in the mid-1990s during my collegiate years when completing a summer abroad program in Japan. I could ride the Japanese monorail system for hours in a country where I could not speak the language and minimally read the signs and feel a level of safety and

freeness that I had never experienced doing the same in my home country. Where it was not uncommon to step onto public transportation or on an elevator and note the gentle clinching of purses or the looks of fear by others in my home country, I did not experience such during that summer in Japan. For the first time, other African-American males and I could sit in conversation for hours, simply discussing how good and freeing it felt to not be deemed a likely perpetrator or victimizer or guilty until proven innocent on sight simply because of the high melanin concentration of one's skin.

I realize that memories are not exact; reconfigurations of experiences can occur as time passes and become fictionalized, at least to a degree (Poetter, 2012). Even so, we live in troubled times in the midst of social unrest tearing at the fabric of socially just democratic life as the gap between the haves and have-less continues to widen. These troubled times demand voices from the numerical margins of our profession. Bringing the counterstorytelling as a dimension of Critical Race Theorizing (CRT) to the conversation, Baszile (2015b) helps to highlight the importance of the need for more voices from the numerical margins stating,

> Knowledge, of course, is never neutral, which means it is always a story of some kind produced by a situated knower. Given the storied nature of knowledge, it seems implausible to me to suggest that stories do not matter or they are somehow less significant in knowledge production and meaning-making than those things we call facts, data, and evidence. These things, in fact, cannot survive without being couched in some kind of narrative. In academia, for instance, we refer to our narratives as paradigms. CRT, in this respect, is no more or less about storytelling than any other paradigm. What it is, however, is far more transparent about its politics of counterstorytelling. In this vein, it does not pretend to be neutral, objective, or apolitical. It embraces the realization that knowledge comes from thinking and feeling bodies, from bodies that are raced, gendered, and sexualized, among other subjectivities, from bodies that are located in hierarchical relations and places of difference. (p. 239)

Change can be initiated through storytelling, and *currere* is about the theorization of storytelling (Morris, 2019). This exercise is not simply theorized storytelling for academic romanticism. On the contrary, *currere* is a tool for critically positive individual and social change so desperately needed in our field.

REFERENCES

Asante, M. K. (2008, November 17). *Du Bois and Africa: The convergence of consciousness* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcwD_3Y_DxM

Baszile, D. (2015a). Critical race feminist *currere*. In He, Schultz, & Schubert (Eds.), *Sage guide to curriculum in education* (pp. 119–126). Sage.

Baszile, D. (2015b). Rhetorical revolution: Critical race counterstorytelling and the abolition of White democracy. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *21*(3), 239–249. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414557830

Chillag, A. (2019). Black men make up only 2% of teachers in the US. A group named 'Call Me MISTER' wants to change that. *CNN*. October 7, 2019. https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/05/us/iyw-black-men-teacher-shortage-solution-trnd/index.html

Coates, T. (2015). *Between the world and me*. Spiegel & Grau.

Collins, P. (2022). Using *currere* to process being on a profession's endangered species list: A Black male educator's journey and pursuit of well-being. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *6*(2), 7–17. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/186

Cone, J. H. (1970). *A Black theology of liberation*. Orbis Books.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of Black folk*. A. C. McClurg.

Du Bois, W. E. B., & Eaton, I. (1996). *The Philadelphia Negro: A social study*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Etheridge, J., Simmons, T., Lewis, J., Woods, X., Bailey, H., Ruffin, W. Johnson, J., Carter, A., Davis, D., Etheridge, J. A. (2019). *Going global: The life changing experiences of 10 courageous Black men*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.

Giovanni, N. & Baldwin, J. (1971). *Nikki Giovanni and James Baldwin in conversation on "SOUL!"* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pg2t5b0m2d4

Hannah-Jones, N. (Ed.). (2021). *1619 Project*. One World.

Kuhnke, J. L., & Jack-Malik, S. (2021). Roofs, nesting instincts, and student evaluations of teaching during a pandemic. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *5*(2), 44–52. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/155

LitCharts. (2025). *Between the World and Me summary and analysis.* https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/richard-wright/between-the-world-and-me

Morris, M. (2019). *Currere* or the erasure of I: Does it really matter who the scholar is? *Currere Exchange Journal*, 3(1), 5–17. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/10

Pinar, W. F. (2019). Currere. In J. Wearing, M. Ingersoll, C. DeLuca, B. Bolden, H. Ogden, & T. M. Christou. (Eds.), *Key concepts in curriculum studies: Perspectives on the fundamentals* (pp. 50–59).Taylor & Francis Group.

Poetter, T. S. (2012). *Teaching again: A professor's tale of returning to a 9th grade classroom*. Information Age Publishing.

Poetter, T. S. (2017). Curriculum fragments: Theorizing while practicing an educational life and building a *currere* oriented representation of an educational "I". *Currere Exchange Journal*, 1(2), 1–11. https://www.currereexchange.com/uploads/9/5/8/7/9587563/1poettercejv1i2.pdf

Poetter, T. S. (2020). The thicket. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *4*(1), 1–15. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/128

Tatum. (2017). Donald Trump and the legacy of Bacon's Rebellion. *Journal of Black Studies*, *48*(7), 651–674. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934717713758

Woodson, C. G. (1933). *The mis-education of the Negro*. Associated Publishers.

NAVIGATING THE LATEST CULTURE WAR
INSIGHTS FROM THE *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE ON CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM DESIGN

By Chloe Bolyard, Milana Hainline, Rebekah Mann, Madison Mielke, McKenzie Pon, & John Dove
Missouri State University

Being a teacher in the United States in the 2020s means experiencing moments of being celebrated during the shift to online schooling and the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic only to quickly face intense scrutiny following the George Floyd protests (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). Teachers find themselves at the center of a culture war, with shifting targets ranging from debates over pronoun policies and perceived religious infringements to concerns about critical race theory (CRT), book bans, and making white students feel guilty (Berkshire & Schneider, 2024). Despite the swirling debates, teachers are rarely asked about their experiences: "What is teaching like right now? How can we support you beyond the extra jeans pass? Can you care for your family? How is your mental health?" Being a teacher blends awe, pain, hope, tears, stress, burdens, and excitement. This paper shares the experiences of six Midwest educators, the Currere Collective, navigating culturally responsive curriculum amid the current culture war. The discussion is organized as follows: defining culturally responsive curriculum in the current sociopolitical context, exploring the origins of the Currere Collective, examining insights from our sharing, and discussing communal *currere* efforts as support for teachers today.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULAR WORK IN 2025 AND BEYOND

A culturally responsive curriculum centers students' lived experiences as vital resources for learning (Milner, 2010; Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005) while affirming and sustaining their cultural heritages and evolving identities (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). It is co-created dynamically by educators and students, challenging hidden norms and inequities by intentionally including marginalized perspectives and diverse ways of knowing (Bishop, 1990; Eisner, 2002; Gay, 2018). This approach fosters critical consciousness, empowering students to identify and address systemic inequities (Freire, 1970; Milner, 2010) and encourages teacher reflexivity to disrupt biases and inequitable practices (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). By leveraging students' community cultural wealth and recognizing culture as dynamic, it creates inclusive, engaging, and socially just learning experiences (Gay, 2018; Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005).

However, implementing culturally responsive curricula faces significant challenges in today's polarized educational landscape. The perennial question, "What knowledge is of most worth?" (Spencer, 1860) sparked debates long before public schooling in the U.S. However, some argue that current ideological battles impact teachers on a previously unseen scale (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). Equity-oriented educators urge teachers to teach in culturally responsive ways to support all students' success, yet federal, state, and local efforts to eliminate culturally responsive pedagogy have been pervasive since the first Trump administration (Fuchs, 2020; Dutton, 2021; Ranschaert, 2023). For example, in 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a

law limiting race-based discussions in schools (Farrington, 2022). By January 2025, 861 anti-CRT efforts were introduced at various government levels (CRT Forward Tracking Project, n.d.). This tension, compounded by pressures to raise test scores and emphasize academic excellence, often portrays social justice discussions as incompatible with educational success—despite evidence to the contrary (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

The cultural climate of the past five years has been incredibly hostile toward teachers. In 2020, protests against mask mandates and online schooling erupted at local school board meetings (Khazan, 2021), with media highlighting unrest and violence (Cottle, 2021). In Missouri, where the five authors of this paper teach, the Attorney General filed lawsuits against districts enforcing mask mandates (Schmidt, 2021). Soon after, anti-CRT protests became dominant at school board meetings (Dorman, 2021) and continued for months in districts where three of the authors teach (Riley, 2021a), with some advocating for classroom cameras to monitor teachers (Riley, 2021b).

Teachers also faced book bans (Hixenbaugh, 2021), firings for addressing racism (Pendharkar, 2021), and investigations for showing movies with gay characters (Hernandez, 2023). Over 160 teachers lost their jobs due to political controversies (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). In Southwest Missouri, near where four of the authors teach, a teacher resigned in 2021 after parents objected to a pride flag in his classroom. A neighboring district declined to renew a teacher's contract after she taught, *Dear Martin* (Riley, 2022), a novel by Nic Stone depicting a teen's attempts to process experiences with racism.

As a result, teachers fear community backlash and job loss (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024; Ranschaert, 2023), leading them to self-censor and interpret policies cautiously (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). They are uncertain how to navigate teaching "divisive concepts" (Pollock et al., 2022, p. 17), which now include topics like race, gender, sexuality, identity, and equity, often because they are believed to provoke discomfort, guilt, or other emotions for some students (Stitzlein, 2024, p. 2).

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT: THE NEED FOR A *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE

This challenging landscape highlights the need to equip educators with the tools, knowledge, and support for engaging in culturally responsive curriculum work—a focus of ELE 711: Contemporary Issues in Elementary Curriculum, taught by Chloe each spring. The course's guiding question asks, *How can elementary curriculum promote a more equitable, compassionate, and just society*? Students explore curriculum definitions, the effects of standardization, and balancing equitable teaching with high-stakes testing. Topics include defining success in schools, using literature to reflect diverse experiences, and addressing hidden and null curricula in social studies. Students investigate bias in curriculum, its impact on students in poverty, and equity-centered, trauma-informed education strategies, with a focus on LGBTQ-inclusive and anti-racist curricula.

Students engage in weekly interactive discussions via Padlet or Google Slides to synthesize media and learn from peers. Throughout the semester, they conduct an equity audit of a curricular unit using Jess Lifshitz's (n.d.) *Crawling out of the Classroom* and NYU Steinhardt's Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecards (Metro Center, n.d.).

In Spring 2024, Chloe hosted optional Zoom sessions for students to discuss course topics, alternating between structured formats and open forums. During these sessions and in assignments, students raised concerns such as, "How do I do this work and not get fired?" and "What is my

district's policy on LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum?" These questions inspired Chloe to propose the *Currere* Collective to explore these challenges. Goals included the following: 1) addressing questions about equitable curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation, 2) reflecting on aligning practices with values and course-correcting when needed, 3) building confidence to create change within our roles, and 4) supporting one another.

THE *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

I, Chloe, invited five ELE 711 students to co-author a *currere* paper addressing questions raised during the course. All five graduate students agreed. The *Currere* Collective includes five teachers (Milana Hainline, Rebekah Mann, Madison Mielke, McKenzie Pon, and John Dove) and me. Rebekah Mann, McKenzie Pon, and I hold tenure spanning Missouri and Arkansas. Our diverse backgrounds, cultures, identities, and teaching experiences shape our daily teaching practices. Below, each author introduces themself.

MILANA HAINLINE, SECOND-YEAR TEACHER, 2ND GRADE; BENTONVILLE, AR

As a second-year teacher, this is my third classroom. After the 2024-2025 school year had started, I was moved to another grade level. I was then almost moved to a different school at the end of the year due to numbers but was able stay at the last minute. My future position for next school year is not guaranteed, since I am still the last hired. Although this can add some incredible stress, I am passionate about teaching. I enjoy finding ways to support and teach equity in my classroom. With the *Currere* Collective, I hoped to find ways to appropriately use my voice to address curricular issues within the realm of equity and inclusivity, as well as find ways to confidently incorporate my ideas in my lessons without fear of being told to stop talking because I am young.

REBEKAH MANN, 11TH-YEAR TEACHER, 1ST/2ND GRADES GIFTED EDUCATION; SPRINGFIELD, MO

I am in my 11th year of teaching. Throughout that time, I have worked in five locations and positions, spanning kindergarten through 12th grade, using various delivery methods, including in-person, virtual, and summer camps in English and/or French. The past three years have been spent in gifted education.

My overall goal with the *Currere* Collective was to regain my confidence as an educator to teach outside the box. During my first five years of teaching, I was in a school with a staff of highly religious and conservative individuals. This time coincided with my husband's years in graduate school and massive student loan debt repayment. I was the sole financial support for our family and felt I couldn't rock the boat for fear of my family's stability. Unfortunately, that fear has stuck with me, and I hoped this would be a healing experience in order to be a stronger advocate for my students, colleagues, and myself.

MADISON MIELKE, FOURTH-YEAR TEACHER, 5TH GRADE SCIENCE; WRIGHT CITY, MO

I am in my fourth year teaching in a semi-rural school district outside of St. Louis. I have taught third grade and all subjects of fifth grade, but this is my second year teaching fifth grade science. I knew I wanted to be a teacher since I was in first grade, and my goal is to become the best teacher for all of my students. My passion is to help students become interested in what they are learning to create lifelong learners. My school district does not purchase any kind of curriculum for teachers to follow, so it is up to each grade level or teacher to create the curriculum that they will be teaching as long as the content follows the state standards. Because of this, I have the freedom not many teachers have to create a science curriculum that includes different voices, stories, and experiences from cultures, locations, and identities. The *Currere* Collective is important to me because I know that, to become the best teacher I can be, I first have to understand myself and the world around me to create an inspiring, inclusive, and socially just curriculum that grabs the attention of every single student in my classroom.

MCKENZIE PON, SIXTH-YEAR TEACHER, 2ND GRADE; SPRINGFIELD, MO

In my first years as a teacher, I spent much of my time witnessing the inequities in education and quickly realizing how much of an uphill battle it would be to address them. I learned early on that advocating for students and speaking out against systemic injustices often came with personal consequences and even retaliation. These challenges remained as I progressed in my career and became tenured, but my commitment to fostering equity and inclusivity deepened. The intersection of being an Asian American educator in an interracial relationship continues to shape my journey, reminding me of the importance of advocating for justice despite the fear and resistance. Teaching demands resilience and adaptability, and while the challenges of this work remain significant, I believe that advocating for justice and change is essential for creating a better future for our students.

JOHN DOVE, FIRST-YEAR TEACHER, 6TH GRADE SCIENCE; SPRINGFIELD, MO

As a first-year teacher, I find things challenging, to say the least. There are plenty of obstacles to navigate, but I remain passionate about teaching all students. There have been times when I have felt the system was trying to kill my passion for teaching, especially as a queer educator (Howard & Dove, 2023). With that being said, the intersection of being queer and an educator has greatly impacted my life. Teaching takes your entire being, and when part of me is being told to stay silent, it affects my ability to do my job well. This is something I share with my students in some ways, as I live in a place where many queer students fear for their safety. Despite the stigma these students already face, I am told directly by superiors not to use students' preferred pronouns, have conversations around LGBTQ+ topics, or even have a safe space sticker visible in my classroom. The systemic inequities present against queer youth may be rampant, but I do what I can to build resilience in my students and show them that I see them for who they are. I am still learning to navigate resilience as an educator, but I believe that The *Currere* Collective is a step towards change.

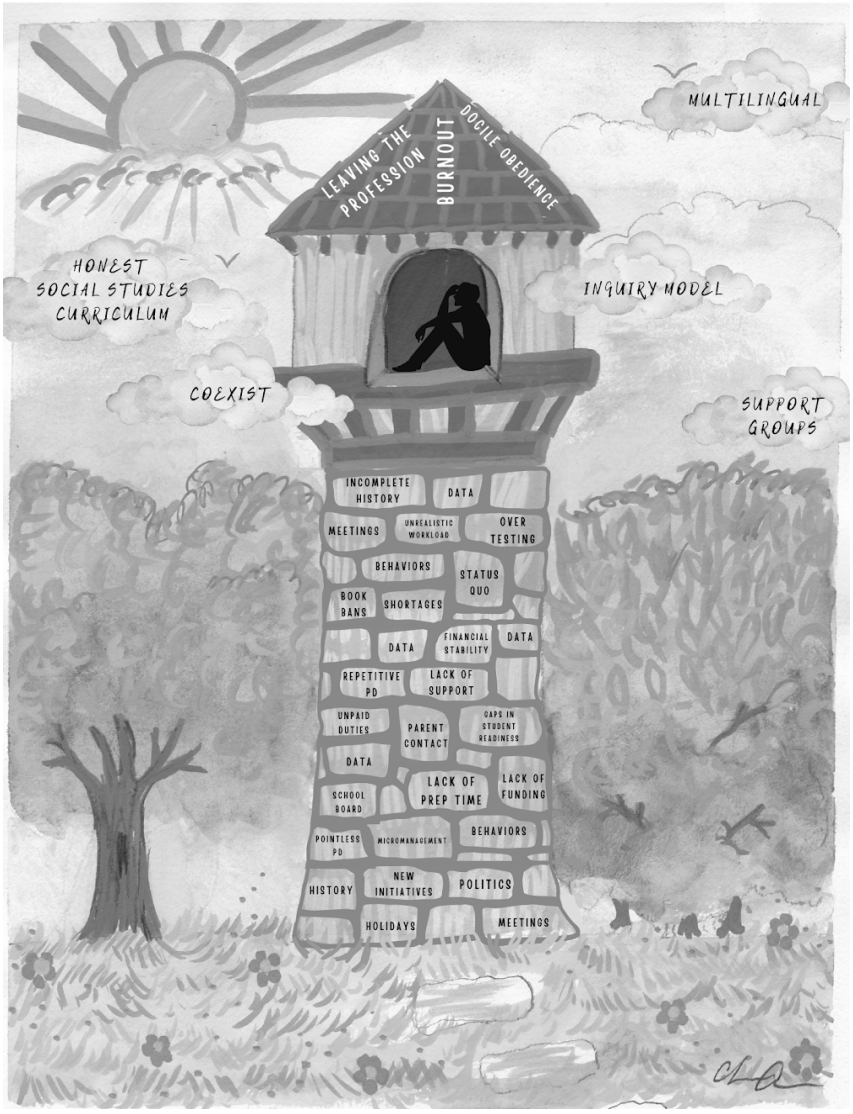
THE *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE TIMELINE, AGENDA, & RESULTING THEMES

The *Currere* Collective met synchronously on Zoom 2024 according to the timeline below. Discussions were guided by the question: How do elementary educators in the Midwest design and implement culturally responsive curricula during the current culture war?

Dates	Meeting Outline
July 10	● Create norms for collaborative work ● Identify strengths and roles of each author ● Debrief feedback from the *Currere* Exchange Conference ● Create interview questions for the Regressive Moment interview ● Establish discussion protocol for 90-minute interviews: ○ Each individual speaks for 10 uninterrupted minutes ○ Open discussion with the remaining time
July 29	● Regressive moment interview addressing the following question: ○ What has socially just curriculum looked like for you as a P-16 student and into your role in education now?
August 15	● Review the regressive moment transcript for errors. ● Progressive moment interview addressing the following questions: ○ Imagine a year, five years, and 10 years from now—where anything is possible—what does your teaching look like regarding a socially just curriculum? ○ As you consider the future, what fears come up for you? ● Discuss emerging themes.
August 29	● Review the progressive moment transcript for errors. ● Analytical moment interview addressing the following questions: ○ What does your work regarding socially just curriculum look like now? ○ How is the present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both regarding socially just curriculum in your work? ● Discuss emerging themes.
September 13	● Review the analytical moment transcript for errors. ● Synthetical moment interview addressing the following questions: ○ Given your reflection over the last three interviews, where are you now in understanding of what it means to do socially just curriculum work? ○ How does this understanding align with the kind of teacher you aspire to be? ○ What are your general reflections on the *currere* process as a whole? ● Discuss emerging themes.
October – December	● Solidify themes ● Brainstorm ideas for allegorically capturing our narratives ● Write up findings

Our meeting transcripts revealed four key themes: 1) navigating tension between teacher aspirations and educational constraints, 2) envisioning inclusive futures and aspiring to be the teachers we needed and our students deserve, 3) confronting the absence of support and unseen struggles in education, and 4) embracing courage by rejecting the status quo. Below, we use allegory, poetry, and images to represent and interpret these themes while protecting the anonymity of the authors who are current classroom teachers. To honor the sensitive nature of the school-based narratives and the vulnerabilities they shared, direct quotes are included sparingly.

NAVIGATING THE TENSION BETWEEN TEACHER ASPIRATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL CONSTRAINTS: THE TOWER



Note: Original image created by Tina Collado and Rebekah Mann. Used with permission. Poem written by Rebekah Mann (2024).

Confined to a tower
With a narrow view,
Curious and wondering
What more they can do?

How could this place,
That they dreamed of being
Be so dark and rigid,
With a lack of seeing?

Each new year,
Comes with more expectations
But nothing comes off
Their plate of dedication.

What can be done,
For this teacher dreamer?
How can they be
A student reacher?

Use the students to
Guide the profession
So, question the curriculum
Until there is progression.

The students deserve
To discover the world
Hands-on, immersive,
And unfurled.

Keep chipping away at
The bricks of the tower
Eventually, you'll discover
How you possess power.

ENVISIONING INCLUSIVE FUTURES AND ASPIRING TO BE THE TEACHERS STUDENTS DESERVE: UNDERWATER TEACHER DREAMER

Note: Original image created by Madison Mielke. Used with permission.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel longs for the world above, believing it holds something better than her underwater life. She is willing to sacrifice everything to belong to it, much like many teachers are drawn to education, feeling a calling to guide and inspire young minds. Ariel's desire to escape her father's control reflects the restrictions many teachers faced in school, where decisions often ignored cultural diversity and student interests. For many members of the *Currere* Collective, these experiences became the motivation to enter the profession, striving to bring inclusivity, depth, and critical thought into the classroom.

Ariel's siblings are content with their lives under the sea, while King Triton dismisses her dream as reckless and cannot understand her needs. Similarly, many in the *Currere* Collective recall their unmet needs in school, whether due to learning differences, mental health struggles, or challenges at home. These experiences fuel the drive to become educators who provide the support they once lacked, ensuring students feel seen, heard, and valued while advocating for equitable access to resources.

As Ariel collects artifacts to prepare for her new life, teachers also dedicate years to gathering knowledge and resources to create inclusive classrooms that honor diverse cultures. Just as Ariel hoards knowledge, educators collect books and materials that reflect students'

backgrounds, aiming to be the teachers they once needed and empowering students to embrace their unique identities.

Finally, Ariel sacrifices her voice to gain legs, symbolizing her desire for a new identity and belonging.[1] Similarly, teachers embark on their journey with a vision for their classrooms, sacrificing time, comfort, and identity to create spaces that inspire and nurture growth. Ariel and teachers undergo transformative journeys that require courage, sacrifice, and determination, striving to break free from traditional constraints, champion inclusivity, and foster emotional well-being. Ariel says, "I just don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things could be bad." Similarly, how could the world of education, which teachers work so hard to be a part of, be anything but good?

Confronting the Absence of Support and Unseen Struggles in Education: I Need Assistance

Note: Original image created by Fiona Badley. Used with permission.

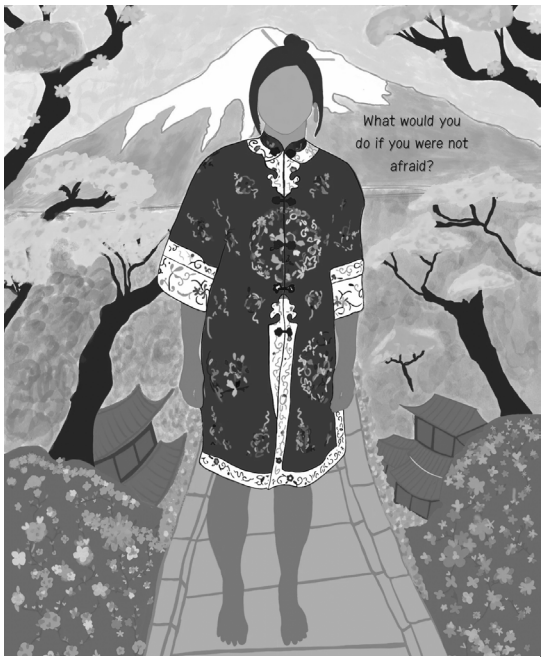
I couldn't find my way out. I had been wandering for what felt like years along this path of pins and needles. The chains around my bloodied ankles groaned and ached with each step, but what else was there to do? Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something in the shadows … a surveillance camera? Do I dare give in to this glimmer of hope to be saved from here? Foolish as it may be, I got up and ran toward the camera, injuring my feet further on the rough ground. As I collapsed beneath the monitoring camera, I gasped out, "Please! Help me! Please!" The lens focused on me, and I waited with bated breath. But nothing happened, so I again pleaded, "Please help me! I need assistance!" The camera focused once more, then shut off. The despair I felt would have crushed the strongest support beams if I could have felt anything. So I sat there, crumbling on the ground, echoing my last feeble words into the abyss. "Help…help…help…"

The grim imagery above reflects the lack of support many authors expressed during our *Currere* Collective meetings, a theme central to our discussions. Support can make or break a teacher's success, and one of the most crucial forms of support is from school and district leadership. Administrators have a significant impact on teacher well-being and productivity. During our *Currere* Collective meetings, many authors shared similar experiences in teacher preparation programs focused on equitable teaching practices. However, they encountered resistance or outright refusal from school leadership when attempting to implement these practices.

The frustration of facing barriers can make the job feel hopeless, leading to the question: Why do teachers who become administrators abandon the mission of supporting ALL students?

Society expects teachers to carry the world's weight, as seen in slogans like "teaching is my superpower." Teachers are cast in various roles—heroes, villains, martyrs—yet the one thing often overlooked is that teachers are human. Despite this, we are expected to thrive on less every year. Some families and policymakers abandon us, and the road we walk is arduous, but the people supposed to support us—our school administration—often turn away. The teacher shortage is no mystery when you speak to teachers about their struggles without adequate support. Instead of support, teachers face scrutiny, as seen in comments like, "If kids are on a device above 40 minutes a day…we'll get in trouble." Teachers are met with judging gazes, obstacles, and a lack of trust. The question remains: Is there a way forward from this cycle of struggle?

Embracing Courage by Rejecting the Status Quo: What Would You Do If You Were Not Afraid?



Note: Original image created by McKenzie Pon. Used with permission.

The teacher grazes her hands over the title. "Mulan" is etched in brilliant gold, and the pages are still crisp. As the students sit eagerly awaiting the tale their fearless leader has just brought forth, the educator cannot help but take a deep breath. This tale is what is needed right now. It is as if each time it is read aloud to a new group of students, she is reminded of what she desires to do—break the educational barrier. The teacher begins to read:

> Once upon a time, a girl understood the Chinese practices of being a woman. She knew how to greet others, how to sit, and the proper conversations to discuss during an evening meal. It was as if her job was to please everyone but herself.[2]

The teacher pauses. It hits too close to home. She continues,

> After many years, it seemed that poor Mulan felt the pressure to please. She could not fit that mold completely. She would respectfully bow her head and repeat the motions that society told her to—though, in her eyes, some things just did not seem necessary. Other young girls around her seemed to get it. They knew what honor meant and how important their families were to them. This black-and-white notion of what it meant to bring honor seemed to make sense to everyone but herself. However, as time passed, Mulan could no longer bear to remain confined within the structures of her society.
>
> She took a risk. In the mirror, she cut her hair and changed into her father's clothes. Behind closed doors, she practiced her fighting skills. She understood what was more important to

> her than following the rigidity of her village. Something lay ahead that affected more than just herself, and it was that very thing that she would fight for.

The teacher paused again and began to look around the room at students' eager faces, waiting to hear more. What had this teacher allowed the education system to turn her into? Breaking the chains of the norm to do what was best for students—something bigger than herself. The parallels were too similar. How silly yet beautiful to begin seeing hope within the children's books in her classroom. The teacher could not help but skip ahead. She needed more hope. She needed a sign. Something that reminded her to keep going.

> When word had finally spread that Mulan had left in place of her father, the village became a sea of whispers. How could a girl leave for something so scary? Couldn't she be killed? What if the emperor found out about this? The questions came from every direction. However, while adults ran their minds silly, little girls began to have very different conversations. They began to believe they could fight, too. Little girls realized they could not only be women who bring honor to their families but could do so in unheard-of ways. Mulan had not even returned, yet young girls acted like they already had. The norm was changing because Mulan was doing something bigger than herself.

With that, the teacher paused again and breathed in and out. This classroom was as much a place for change as any other. Perhaps she could break that educational barrier and impact something bigger than herself.

Just as Mulan defied societal expectations to honor her family, many educators today challenge the status quo to foster classroom equity. Drawing from personal experiences, they encourage hard conversations about identity and empower students to express themselves. As Madison noted, "What we were taught when we were young is not the whole story," emphasizing the need to expand the narratives shared with students.

Like Mulan's impact on the girls in her village, teachers inspire students to embrace their identities and dreams. McKenzie described "being a voice for my students, having authentic conversations, and promoting them as global thinkers who take action in the world." These dialogues foster empathy and challenge traditional narratives.

While Mulan's story serves as a powerful allegory for educators challenging the status quo, we also recognize the complexity of invoking her narrative—particularly given its retelling by Disney. The symbolism resonated deeply with our discussions, yet McKenzie, an Asian American educator, felt it was important to critically engage with the cultural implications of using Mulan as a representative figure. The following reflection contextualizes her personal connection to the story while also addressing its limitations and layered meanings within this collective project:

As an Asian American educator, I have complex feelings about Mulan. I recognize the valid critiques that Western retellings of her story, especially in commercial forms, often simplify Chinese culture or present it through a lens that isn't fully authentic. Yali and Kaiju (2021) discuss Anjirbag's (2018) argument that, although Disney aimed to present *Mulan* (1998) as a multicultural and diverse story, the film still carries colonial perspectives in its portrayal. They point out that the animation style contributes to framing the culture as "other," subtly reinforcing cultural separation and difference. These concerns matter deeply, particularly as I work to ensure that students experience culturally accurate and empowering representations.

At the same time, Mulan holds personal significance for me. She was the first strong Asian character I ever saw—brave, clever, and determined. She wasn't a sidekick or background figure. That visibility meant something in a world where I rarely saw myself reflected. As an adult and educator, I now see how, even in her rebellion, Mulan was constrained by the systems around her. She had to take on the identity of a man to be heard, to act, to make a difference.

I see this mirrored in education, especially for women and educators of color. We are often asked to suppress parts of ourselves to be accepted or seen as "professional." But like Mulan, many of us reach a point when staying quiet is no longer an option. We take the risk not just for ourselves, but for equity, justice, and the students watching us, wondering what they might dare to do if they weren't afraid.

The question, "*What would you do if you were not afraid?"* drives educators to confront systemic barriers and initiate critical conversations. As Rebekah said, "Questioning creates change … if we don't do it, we're not going to make anything better." However, a lack of institutional support often complicates their efforts. McKenzie highlighted this, sharing, "People just aren't aware of what's actually going on in classrooms. My hope is to keep advocating for these issues."

Educators cultivate dialogue and reflection to create equitable spaces where students and families feel seen. Milana underscored this: "Reflection can't happen just once a year. It needs to be constant to ensure all students feel valued."

Mulan's story reminds us that challenging societal norms can inspire transformative change. Similarly, educators can help future generations engage in meaningful, necessary conversations that foster understanding and action.

LESSONS TO CARRY FORWARD FROM THE *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE

Through our *Currere* Collective conversations, we asked how elementary educators in the Midwest navigate designing and implementing culturally responsive curricula amid the current culture war. After four meetings focusing on the four moments of *currere* (regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical), we identified four themes: 1) navigating the tension between teacher aspirations and educational constraints, 2) envisioning inclusive futures and aspiring to be the teachers we needed, 3) confronting the absence of support and unseen struggles, and 4) embracing courage by rejecting the status quo.

These themes reflect the complex landscape of teaching for social justice in 2025, as discussed in the literature (e.g., Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024; Ranschaert, 2023). The first three graphics depicted a lone teacher navigating dangerous environments—a tower, underwater cave, and bed of needles—symbolizing barriers like politics, data overload, unpaid duties, over-testing, book bans, whitewashed curricula, lack of funding, restrictive demands, and insufficient support.

In contrast, the fourth image, inspired by Mulan, showed a teacher facing a towering mountain with the caption, "What would you do if you were not afraid?" This question challenges educators to overcome their fears and embrace the difficult work of creating culturally responsive curricula. The ideals in these visuals—multilingualism, inquiry-based learning, honest social studies curricula, support groups, diversity, inclusion, and validation—serve as a guiding vision for teachers striving for meaningful change.

While asking teachers to be more courageous may seem simple for those not in PK-12 settings, it is not easy when one's job is at risk (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). The advice to "Shut your door and teach what you know is right" overlooks teachers' grim realities (Ranschaert, 2023).

Teachers need strategies to work within current challenges to uphold their ethical commitments. One such strategy is finding a support network with like-minded colleagues (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). Groups like the *Currere* Collective can be crucial in supporting educational justice work. Our final *currere* meeting reflected on how the collective process impacted us individually and as a community, highlighting the potential of communal *currere* as a powerful tool for supporting teachers engaged in social justice work:

> **Milana**: The *Currere* Collective has shaped the way that I view education and has shaped the things that I allow in my room, whether an administrator tells me to do them or not to do them. I think this process has allowed me to go, "Okay. What from my past self and past education was good? What did I want to change? And how can I apply that now?"
>
> **Rebekah:** After college graduation, I remember that feeling of excitement for teaching. My plans of a grandiose vision of incorporating world languages into my lessons for enrichment quickly got swallowed up by the never-ending list of expectations… . The feeling of overwhelm was inevitable. You begin to think, "I have no time for a passion project. I have no time to do anything except for everything they're asking me to do, and there's not even enough for that." The *Currere* Collective has been a safe place where there can be intellectual conversation that I haven't been getting in other areas, and it's very necessary for me. It has fed my soul as an educator to have these conversations and is reviving the preliminary aspirations.
>
> **Madison:** Administration and the school board like to tell me to "remember your why," but every teacher needs to go through the *currere* process. Remembering why we do this is one thing but remembering what kind of teacher we *want* to be and what we are doing in our classrooms that do *not* align with that wish is another … . I haven't thought about the teacher I want to be since college, when I was daydreaming about the classroom I didn't have yet … . Now, I am in the thick of it, and it has taken four years for someone to stop me and make me remember my teacher daydreams.
>
> **McKenzie:** Through this reflection, I have realized that I am not alone in facing many of the challenges I have encountered. Listening to others' experiences has highlighted common struggles and introduced me to new perspectives and issues I hadn't previously considered. This collaborative process has inspired me to think about ways to improve my practice within my classroom and school. It has also reinforced my commitment to continuous growth, not only for myself but also for the benefit of my students and the broader community.
>
> **John:** And so, when I'm here, meeting with the *Currere* Collective, it's like I get to remove myself a little bit and just think about … the broader scope of socially just curriculum work … about how meaningful it feels to collaborate with other educators—such as the *Currere* Collective members, who I respect greatly—and it feels like something is being done.

Teachers described the *Currere* Collective as an opportunity to gain a "balcony view" (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024, p. 11) that allowed them to go above the "dance floor" of teaching's endless demands and critically evaluate their current practices concerning their teaching

philosophies. They characterized the meetings as a "safe space" that fostered "intellectual intimacy" and provided a sense of shared struggle, starkly contrasting the isolation they often experience.

Conclusion

In this paper, we detailed the impact of the latest culture war on teachers' efforts to implement culturally responsive curriculum practices. Specifically, we shared our experiences as six Midwest educators comprising the *Currere* Collective. Together, we navigated the tension between our teaching aspirations and systemic constraints, envisioned more inclusive futures, confronted the lack of institutional support, and embraced the courage to engage in hard but necessary conversations for educational justice. The *Currere* Collective emerged as a supportive community of like-minded educators, fostering intellectual intimacy, mutual encouragement, and a reinvigoration of our ethical commitments to social justice in education. We united through our shared dedication to equity and genuine desire to advocate for meaningful change. As Venet (2024) recommended, "If you feel stuck or lost about how to make change, start by connecting to others" (p. 253).

Notes

1. Although The Little Mermaid is being used as a recognized narrative, we are not endorsing the cultural portrayals of the position and view of women, whiteness, and the exotic "other" (Lacroix, 2004).
2. All text, including the retelling of the Mulan story, was written by Milana Hainline.

References

Anjirbag, M. A. (2018). Mulan and Moana: Embedded coloniality and the search for authenticity in Disney animated film. *Social Sciences*, *7*(11), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7110230

Aronson, B., & Laughter, J. (2016). The theory and practice of culturally relevant education: A synthesis of research across content areas. *Review of Educational Research*, *86*(1), 163–206. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315582066

Berkshire, J. C., & Schneider, J. (2024). *The education wars: A citizen's guide and defense manual*. The New Press.

Bishop, R. S. (1990, March). Windows and mirrors: Children's books and parallel cultures. In M. Atwell, & A. Klein (Eds.), *California State University reading conference: 14th annual conference proceedings* (pp. 3–12). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED337744.pdf

Cottle, M. (2021, September 6). America's school board meetings are getting weird—And scary. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/opinion/coronavirus-masks-school-board-meetings.html

CRT Forward. (n.d.). *CRT Forward Tracking Project*. https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/

Dorman, S. (2021, May). What is critical race theory? *Fox News*. https://www.foxnews.com/us/what-is-critical-race-theory

Dutton, J. (2021, June). Critical race theory is banned in these states. *Newsweek*. https://www.newsweek.com/critical-race-theory-banned-these-states-1599712

Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.

Farrington, B. (2022, April 22). Florida Gov. DeSantis signs bill to limit discussion of race. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/education-florida-discrimination-campaigns-presidential-elections-942f021c3070e7d1cdfb59d2351b6a75

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Fuchs, H. (2020, October). Trump's attack on diversity training has a quick and chilling effect. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/us/politics/trump-diversity-training-race.html

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.

Hernandez, J. (2023, May 16). Florida is investigating a teacher who showed a Disney movie with a gay character. *NPR News*. https://www.npr.org/2023/05/16/1176334055/florida-investigating-teacher-disney-movie-gay-character-desantis

Hixenbaugh, M. (2021, October 8). Southlake, Texas, schools restrict classroom libraries after backlash over anti-racist book. *NBC News*. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/southlake-texas-anti-racist-book-school-library-rcna2734

Howard, A. K., & Dove, J. (2023). Navigating challenges in a non-open and affirming practicum placement: A case of a queer-identifying student in Education. *Journal of Educational Supervision*, *6*(2), 10–28. https://doi.org/10.31045/jes.6.2.2

Khazan, O. (2021, August). Parents are losing their minds over masks in schools. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/08/are-schools-requiring-masks-students/619777/

Lacroix, C. (2004). Images of animated others: The orientalization of Disney's cartoon heroines from The Little Mermaid to The Hunchback of Notre Dame. *Popular Communication*, *2*(4), 213–229. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15405710pc0204_2

Lifshitz, J. (n.d.). *Crawling out of the classroom*. https://crawlingoutoftheclassroom.wordpress.com/

Metro Center. (n.d.). *Culturally responsive curriculum scorecards*. NYU Steinhardt. https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/ejroc/services/culturally-responsive-curriculum-scorecards

Milner, H. R. (2010). *Culture, curriculum, and identity in education*. Palgrave Macmillian.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, *31*(2), 132–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.

Pendharkar, E. (2021, September). He taught about White privilege and got fired. Now he's fighting to get his job back. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/he-taught-about-white-privilege-and-got-fired-now-hes-fighting-to-get-his-job-back/2021/09

Pollock, M., Rogers, J., Kwako, A., Matschiner, A., Kendall, R., Bingener, C., Reece, E., Kennedy, B., Howard, J. (2022). *The Conflict Campaign: Exploring local experiences of the campaign to ban "Critical Race Theory" in public K–12 education in the U.S., 2020–2021*. UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

Racelis, T. L., & Parkhouse, H. E. (2024). Locating our role in the struggle: Lessons from the past and present on teachers' persistence, solidarity, and activism for the common good. *Education Sciences*, *14*(1), Article 56. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14010056

Ranschaert, R. (2023). When shutting the door won't do: Teaching with the specter of community backlash and the implications for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *74*(4), 371–382. https://doi.org/10.1177/00224871231180831

Riley, C. (2021a, August 8). Springfield schools leader calls critical race theory a distraction. *News-Leader*. https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/education/2021/08/08/springfield-schools-leader-calls-critical-race-theory-distraction-grenita-lathan-district-education/5504051001/

Riley, C. (2021b, July 28). Critical race theory opponents urge Springfield, Missouri, parents to fight back, support classroom cameras. *News-Leader*. https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/education/2021/07/28/critical-race-theory-opponents-urge-springfield-missouri-parents-fight-back-classroom-cameras-school/8074174002/

Riley, C. (2022, April 7). Greenfield, Missouri, teacher Kim Morrison accused of teaching critical race theory loses job. *News-Leader*. https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/education/2022/04/07/greenfield-missouri-teacher-kim-morrison-accused-teaching-critical-race-theory-crt-loses-job/7264924001/

Schmidt, H. (2021, December 7). Missouri AG threatens to sue school districts, health departments for enforcing mask mandates. *OzarksFirst*. https://www.ozarksfirst.com/news/missouri-news/missouri-ag-threatens-to-sue-school-districts-health-departments-for-enforcing-mask-mandates/

Spencer, H. (1860). *Education: Intellectual, moral and physical*. D. Appleton and Co.

Stitzlein, S. M. (2024). Shaping new aims and practices of teaching controversial issues in response to conservative critics. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 44, 45–67. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11217-024-09961-4

Venet, A. S. (2024). *Becoming an everyday changemaker: Healing and justice at school*. Taylor & Francis.

Yali, C., & Kaiju, C. (2021). Appropriation, rewriting and alienation: A postcolonial critique of Mulan. *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, *9*(3), 82–90. https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v9i3.5226

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 69–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006

SALTING THE CURRICULUM
DANCE AS A LIVING *CURRERE* INTO IDENTITY, KNOWLEDGE, AND BELONGING

By Carolina Bergonzoni
Cape Breton University

The concept of "curriculum-as-lived" (Aoki, 1993, p. 257) has been a visceral reality for me from a young age. The inner landscape of my body has always been my lived curriculum. Pinar's (1994; Pinar et al., 1995) conceptualization of *currere*, derived from the Latin word meaning to run the course, frames this relationship between our identities and our presents, pasts, and futures. *Currere* implies dynamic movement and relational movement. Rita Irwin (2006) suggests that *currere* is not a rushed endeavour but a deliberate "walking the course" (p. 77), a notion expanded upon by recent scholarship on walking as attunement to earthly curricula (Lyle et al., 2021). This dynamic and relational movement mirrors the body's process of becoming—a site of inquiry where the curriculum is lived and felt.

My journey as a dancer and educator has underscored the body's capacity to navigate the world as a compass and a GPS (Snowber, 2014). Dance, for me, is more than movement; it is a practice of orientation, connection, and self-discovery. Through phenomenological and somatic methodologies, I view the body as a repository of knowledge, an entity that "knows where our mind may not be able to lead us" (Snowber, 2007, p. 1452). This "felt sense" precedes linguistic articulation, embodying insights stored in the bones and organs.

In this article, I define what I mean by body, contextualize where I come from, and conclude with the notion of dance and the body as sites of living inquiries. Dance is the channel for learning about the world and me. I focus on my practice of centring and foregrounding dance as a way of knowing, reflecting, and listening. I use dance to inquire into the depths of my own lived and living experiences.

LIVING INQUIRY THROUGH DANCE

This paper is a moment of pause along my path toward coming to be and becoming whole. It is a moment of stillness in this nonlinear, perpetually evolving journey that is constantly changing. It is in the midst of this unfolding, ever-evolving journey that I keep returning to spirals. In its geometric form, a spiral is defined as a "shape or design, consisting of a continuous curved line that winds around a central point, with each curve further away from the center" (Oxford Learners Dictionary, n.d.). What I love the most about dance is feeling my body and gravity, falling and recuperating, the dizziness caused by spiralling and the quick-shifting of my weight. Turning and spiralling make my body tense as I must relinquish control. When I spiral, I feel the air in my hair and the ground supporting me. I love the spiralling, the feeling in my head as never-ending whorls and questions flutter in and out of my consciousness.

Dance affects my way of knowing and makes a difference in how I perceive, move, and live. Dancing is my way of being; dance makes me who I am. When I dance, I am open to the unknown, allowing its beauty to take over in a courageous act. When I dance, I experience a

moving understanding of the self and the whole being. This understanding, a "felt sense," refers to the possibility of knowing through the body in motion as a process that precedes "the language-formulation process" (Williamson, 2018, p. 78). It is the deep sensation, a wordless awareness of how experiences resonate in our bones and organs.

How did I learn before I found dance? Dance taught me to get in touch with my body, and my body taught me who I am. My body knows more than I think. My body knows when a situation or something feels uneasy, such as when I need to take a break from writing, a meeting, or screens. My body knows when I should be more careful and when I can truly relax. My body gives me signals—perspiration and heart palpitations before a panic attack or light-headedness and body weakness before fainting. When I first fainted and had my first panic attack, I didn't know that what I was feeling and sensing were signs. Through practice, although I wish I didn't have to go through it, I've learned that these are all ways my body talks to me. This knowledge is one of the most important discoveries I've ever made. It allows me not to faint in public as often as I used to, and it allows me to slow the onset of a panic attack. Dance and the body are a site of inquiry and research.

DEFINING "BODY"

I reclaim the word "body" as a holistic representation of being. My experiences—from fainting and panic attacks to teaching dance—illustrate how the body signals, learns, and negotiates its way through the world. These autobiographical truths, stored in my tissues and reflected through my scholarship, underscore the body as a site of re-search and inquiry. As Snowber (2005) writes, "There is an art to listening to our lives. Research is not only an outward endeavour, but it travels in the realm of re-searching our own lives, knowledge, passions and practice" (p. 346).

Language reveals the reality that we *are* bodies. We commonly say, "I am tired," rather than "I have a tired body," yet we often do not fully honour and acknowledge that we are bodies. I pursue phenomenological and somatic scholarship grounded in arts-based methodologies to understand the body and ourselves. Living, writing, dancing, and researching phenomenologically and somatically means to bring the body, my body, which is who I am, into everything I do and to show who I am fully. To be somatically present to my scholarship means giving the space needed to look at the research from within and from a distance to find threads and connections. It is about learning patience and allowing time for reflection on processes. The process of yielding and sensing words moving through the body and resonating, as if the body were a speaker, requires time. To refuse to operate within the time framework of our society is a pedagogical and political act of self-love. The same is valid for reclaiming the joy of dancing and the importance of moving for pleasure.

We must recognize that we, as the body, are the researchers and the research subjects. I use the word "body" to refer to the wholeness of human beings. I do not intend to stress the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body nor to use the separation of *Körper* and *Leib* introduced by early phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1952/1989). The understanding of the body I offer moves beyond the distinction between the body as an object (*Körper*) and the body as a subject or the lived body (*Leib*). I reclaim the word "body" as the totality of my identity. I do not believe we need a new word and concept: the origin of being a body is in the body itself. When I introduce myself and say, "I am Carolina," I use a shortcut to say that I am the body in front of you.

I am the physicality, the presence, the breath of what we call the body. However, the definition of the body and who I am can become interchangeable. Think about the clothes we wear daily and how different they are depending on the task we are about to do. Most people wear business casual clothing when they go to work; their identity becomes that of the worker. I wore formal clothes when I needed to be the academic and pink tights and a unitard to be the dancer. I have changed, or wanted to change, my body to "fit" better within specific identities. I lost weight because I wanted to be "the dancer." I wanted to have prescription glasses in grade 4 because that would make me "the smart kid." We must acknowledge that the physical appearance of this body, who we are, is always charged with political, social, economic, and other issues.

Our bodies are porous, with spaces for knowledge, memories, learning, breathing, and dancing to pass through. Our bodies are places for knowledge to be uncovered, created, and re-created. My body re-members through the membranes of tissues and cells. Listening to my body also means reflecting and revealing the autobiographical truths stored in my bones, organs, and tissues. Carl Leggo (2004/2019) writes, "Autobiographical writing is motivated by epistemological curiosity, the desire to know and be known, and know how we know and are known" (p. 144). Through autobiographical writing, I realized that, before starting my doctoral research, I tried to hide and move away from who I truly am, following an ideal of "objectivity."

My scholarship exists in the spaces between disciplines, dissolving boundaries to embrace transdisciplinarity. Drawing from curriculum studies, phenomenology, dance, and somatics, I engage dialogically with diverse methodologies and epistemologies. This approach aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2006) critique of disciplinary lines that restrict possibilities for inquiry. By inhabiting these interstitial spaces, I create room for *both/and* perspectives, honouring the complexities of embodied knowledge.

WHEN I GROW UP, I WANT TO BE A TEACHER

My inquiry is my story, the story of my body. I employ autobiographical writing to learn to read my life (Leggo, 2004/2019, p. 144). I carry teachers in my bones, flesh, and blood. With my grandma, aunty, and mom all involved with education, it was inevitable that I wanted to be a teacher since I was a child. My mom, Miriam, is an educator and has taught for as long as I can remember. My paternal aunt, Andreina, was a teacher; she stopped teaching in a public school to specialize in research on pedagogy and train future teachers. My paternal grandma, Nina, was an elementary teacher. In talking with my family about memories of my relationship with teaching, my parents recalled how much of a law-abiding child I was. They laughed, remembering that at 6 years old, I would give myself a timeout when I thought something I did was wrong. I have been reflecting on how my law-abiding nature might have shaped my formative years as a dancer and a scholar. The studies in philosophy and dance that I was first exposed to required rigour and discipline. Perhaps the struggle I first encountered when I began improvising and approached philosophy and dance as ways of being, learning, and living, not just disciplines, had to do with my serious nature and my ethic around work and rules.

My family talked about my love for desks. Everyone I spoke to remembered how I would transform any desk into a teacher's desk (see Ahmed, 2006 on the philosopher's desk). A tactile, visual, and sensorial component to the desk appealed to me from a very young age. At my grandma's house, there was a desk that both my cousin and I used to practice dictation, mathematics, and reading. One day, my grandma gifted me a school textbook, and I began teaching

to a group of pillows. I would set up my classroom with the pillow students facing a blackboard, and according to my aunt, I would transform the student's desk into a teacher's desk. My lesson was delivered with chalk, and I handed out assignments for the students to complete. I am an only child, so I had to be creative in this process. I would complete the assignments and then code-switch to be a teacher again to mark them.

When I went over to my aunt's house in the afternoon after school, there were always notebooks of different colours and patterns and assignments that needed to be marked. I would look at them with fascination, and with great interest, I followed my aunt's hands as they browsed through the pages, marking them with blue and red pens. Naturally, I also wanted to mark it with different colours, pens, and codes. At that point, Andreina would provide me with pencils and papers; with great determination, I would fill the papers with scribbles.

Photo of the cover of a book
Photo Courtesy of Andreina Bergonzoni, author of the book.

Da grande voglio fare la maestra (*When I Grow Up, I Want to be a Teacher*) is a book curated by my aunt and published in 2001. She left her teaching job to work at the Instituto Regionale di Ricerca Educativa (IRRE), the regional institute for educational research in Bologna, Italy. She had the opportunity to curate a book on teachers' professional identities. After choosing the title, she thought that I—her little niece—would be perfect to illustrate that concept. She chose a photo of me for the cover: a blurry black and white photo shot when I had transformed my cousin's desk into a teacher's desk to practice how to be a teacher.

FINDING DANCE

I have always been in dance school, but I didn't always love dance. I clearly remember being quite unhappy about dance during my first class. However, dedication and commitment to activities are a significant value in my family, so I finished the year. My parents asked if I wanted to continue, and I said yes; this pattern continued for about five years. I didn't want to go, but my friends were going, so why not? By the time I was 11, I realized I enjoyed being in the dance studio, and I began going 3-4 times a week, attending workshops during the weekends, and enrolling in summer sessions.

When I was 16, my dance teacher, Simonetta, asked if I wanted to become her assistant. I was excited to start a mentorship with my teacher, but I also felt very unprepared and full of questions about her choices. I would spend most of the class time asking questions that were not fully answered, so I started looking for possible answers elsewhere. I am sure this is when I consciously became curious about pedagogy and teaching practices. My mom believes that I realized I wanted to be a teacher when I started teaching dance. She believes it has to do with the possibility of seeing how the transmission of knowledge affects others. After all, I had real people before me, not pillows. I was teaching in an embodied way, through the body. We were learning by doing, by being, by moving.

My curiosity and desire to better understand dance pedagogies have guided me since then. In 2011, when I attended my first formal training in dance pedagogies, I realized that dance was a way of being and expressing and that everyone could be taught to attune to their body. However, I must admit that this perspective shift was not easy. I didn't know how to talk about dance in a way that wasn't "technical," the way I was taught; I didn't know how to appreciate or critique choreographic work that wasn't based on a ballet aesthetic or on technical moves. Even though I didn't have the terminology then, I understood curriculum as dynamic and improvisational, learning to focus on "the process of a person coming to form, not content" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 593).

Throughout my adult life, I have danced my way in and out of institutions. I've engaged my whole being with research by writing the dance and dancing the writing at the crest of the in-betweens. I approach research, teaching, and learning as living inquiry. I perceive myself as a "somatic conductor," a doula of encounters and experiences. I desire to bring the body into everything I do, including my pedagogy. I bring our *being* and not just our *doing* into scholarship. I hope readers and audiences connect with their own bodily stories as I share insights from my body—insights I discover and rediscover in my bones, skin, breath, brain, organs, and membranes. To attune to the body through practice and training provides us with forms of knowledge that cannot be fully articulated through linguistic means. Phenomenology, somatics, and dance improvisation are all experimental practices: a way of doing research and, most importantly, a way of being. Manning and Massumi (2014) describe the act of thinking as doing and define dance as "a thinking in movement" (p. vii). According to them, the task of philosophy is to create new concepts that unfold beyond the limit of the thinkable. In my research, I employ etymology as a strategy to unearth latent and hidden meanings of words and go beyond the limit of the thinkable. Etymology can cultivate and provide insights on "how certain words came into existence and how some words may have lost some of the original meaning that still echo in the present meanings of these words" (van Manen, 2014, p. 325) and of the phenomenon I study. Etymology becomes a way to rediscover vibrancy and reverberations in words to better describe my body's relationship with the endless possibilities of feeling, sensing and moving simultaneously.

I explore a written language that comes from the experience of these possibilities. As a dancer and phenomenologist, I write with my whole body. I improvise in movement, then *write from the body* (Snowber, 2016, 2018), letting the words come through me. When I write from my dancing body (Bergonzoni, 2024), I allow the words to arrive, and I let the dance(s) bring me to a liminal space, a space that is unknown. Writing becomes a transformational practice in which what the body has learned and continues to learn cannot be separated from the body itself.

FINDING *HO.ME*

Moving across continents and disciplines, I grappled with questions of identity, community, and feeling at home. These reflections culminated in a phenomenological investigation of arriving and settling in new landscapes, embracing the tensions of dislocation and belonging. I have explored the relationship between home and the body for the last seven years through dance, poetry, and writing. My body, life, and personal experiences are the site of inquiry, not merely a topic or object of inquiry. As such, I am questioning the embodied curriculum of arriving in a new place, connecting with its water, rocks, and landscape. What does it mean to arrive in a community of humans and more than humans and try to reclaim a place and a space?

My research on home and how home feels in the body began in 2017 through a residency program at The Dance Centre in Vancouver (BC). I started the research phase of what then became *Ho.Me* (Bergonzoni, 2022). Five dancers, both disabled and non-disabled artists (Sarah Lapp, Peggy Leung, Harmanie Rose, Cheyenne D. Seary, and Adam G. Warren) from All Bodies Dance Project, joined me in exploring the idea of feeling at home in our bodies. We started the research by asking ourselves what was familiar and unfamiliar, and we worked with choreographic constraints to develop movement material. *Ho.Me* is a place of inquiry and the outcome of some of my thoughts on home, belonging, and dance aesthetics. The title, *Ho.Me*, plays on the Italian meaning of "ho me" which can be translated to "I own myself" or "I have myself."

At that time, we took a break from rehearsal for a few months, and in that span of time, I became a Permanent Resident (PR) of Canada. On my way back from a trip to Italy, when I flew back to Vancouver - as a permanent resident for the first time - the officer at the border checked my PR card and said: "Welcome home!" I looked at them with a confused look—I was coming back from Italy; I was coming back from home. This moment of rupture made me question the familiarity of the notion of home, opening a phenomenological investigation into what it is like to feel at home. Until then, I didn't realize I was living two lives, 10000 km apart. I began questioning what felt like home to me, and I felt lost, confused, and unable to answer. When I first moved to Vancouver, I was a young woman full of expectations, fears, and overconfidence all mixed. It took me eight years, six apartments, a heavy breakup, a marriage, endless hours in between consulates, lawyers and paperwork, becoming a permanent resident, becoming a citizen, and countless tears to even attempt to call this place home. It was then that I began a practice of poetically responding to the prompt "I come from..." or "I am from..." and then dancing this "poetic list."

Seven years later, I question what it's like to be home, find home, and belong. Physically, I have landed in this new place where I really want to make a home. I am in Sydney, on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, but I continue to feel disembodied, discombobulated, and out of my body. I am an Italian (legally) turned Canadian who had just moved from *all the way* out West to *all the way out East*—a peninsular girl trying to understand an island culture, a woman who is

constantly reminded that she is not from here. None knows my father, and none can wrap their head around my "Canadian-ness" that comes with a thick Italian accent.

It is ten years since I left Italy, 6 months since I left Vancouver. It is the first time I have lived without human company in seven years—just me and my dog, Avon Barksdale. No partners or roommates in the house. I am sitting on a couch that doesn't feel like mine. I have not actually arrived, let alone settled.

Be and Longing: A Curriculum of Salt

As I have shown through autobiographical and embodied inquiry, the body becomes a vessel for understanding identity, memory, and becoming through dance. I feel a longing for being, becoming, and belonging. While I am deeply aware that I cannot force this process, I am very much trying to rush through it.

When I left Italy in my 20s, I was in a state of rage, despair, hope, and temporality. After my first month in Vancouver, I knew I would never return. I never once thought this feeling would change until I relocated to Nova Scotia in the summer of 2024. It was the moment that I stepped into the Atlantic, when my lips felt the saltiness of the Ocean, that I was brought back home. After that, I visited Italy, and for the first time in 10 years, I missed everything about it.

I felt reconnected to the water and the land in ways I hadn't experienced in the 10 years I lived in Vancouver. When I came back from my short visit, I rushed to get a tattoo of San Luca, the most iconic place in my hometown, Bologna, and the two sisters, the mountain landmark of Vancouver, in an attempt to grapple with what it is like to belong in multiple places.

The smell, taste, and experience of being in salt water grounded my quest for belonging, enlivening the living curriculum of my inner landscape—a salting curriculum. The salt embodies the essence of my living curriculum; salt stings on open wounds, but it also preserves, enhances, and transforms (Charlemagne, 2024). This curriculum of salt invites an attunement to the embodied memories and sensations that ground us in our humanity.

References

Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press.

Aoki, T. (1993). Legitimating lived curriculum: Towards a curricular landscape of multiplicity. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, *8*(3), 255–286. https://scispace.com/pdf/legitimating-lived-curriculum-towards-a-curricular-landscape-3d8vce8msk.pdf

Bergonzoni, C. (2022). *Ho.Me* [Video]. https://summit.sfu.ca/_flysystem/fedora/2022-12/Bergonzoni_HoMe_AD.mp4

Bergonzoni, C. (2024). Teaching into the excess: The sensing practice of dancing-reading-writing. In R. Bourgault & C. Rosamond (Eds.), *Disruption and convergence: Generating new conversations through arts research* (pp. 161–168). Brill | Sense.

Charlemagne, D. I. J. (2024). "Salt preserves": A curriculum of salt in *The Autobiography of Mary Prince*. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *54*(2), 156–181. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2024.2385316

Husserl, E. (1989). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy* (Second book, R. Rojcewicz & A. Schuwer, (Trans.). Springer. (Original work published 1952)

Irwin, R. L. (2006). Walking to create an aesthetic and spiritual *currere*. *Visual Arts Research*, *32*(1), 75–82. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20715404

Leggo, C. (2019). Four reasons for writing (and not writing) autobiographically. In R. L. Irwin, E. L. Hasebe-Ludt, & A. Sinner (Eds.), *Storying the world: The contributions of Carl Leggo on language and poetry* (pp. 144–157). Routledge. (Original work published 2004)

Lyle, E., Latremouille, J. M., & Jardine, D. (Eds.). (2021). Walking: Attuning to an earthly curriculum / Marcher: S'accorder à un curriculum Terrestre [Special Issue]. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JCACS)*, *18*(2).

Manning, E., & Massumi, B. (2014). *Thought in the act: Passages in the ecology of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.

Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. (n.d.). https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/

Pinar, W. (1994). *Autobiography, politics and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory, 1972-1992*. Peter Lang.

Pinar, W., Reynolds, W. M., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. M. (1995). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. Peter Lang.

Snowber, C. (2005). The mentor as artist: A poetic exploration of listening, creating, and mentoring. *Mentoring & Tutoring*, *13*(3), 345–353. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611260500107424

Snowber, C. (2007). The soul moves: Dance and spirituality in educative practice. In L. Bresler (Ed.), *International handbook of research in arts education* (pp. 1449–1456). Springer.

Snowber, C. (2014). Visceral creativity: Organic creativity in teaching arts/dance education. In J. Piirto (Ed.), *Organic creativity in the classroom* (pp. 253–266). Prufrock Press.

Snowber, C. (2016). *Embodied inquiry: Writing, living and being through the body*. Sense Publishers.

Snowber, C. (2018). Living, moving, and dancing: Embodied ways of inquiry. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *Handbook of arts-based research* (pp. 247–266). Guilford Press.

Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Routledge.

Williamson, A. (2018). Falling in love with language. In S. Fraleigh (Ed.), *Back to dance itself: Phenomenologies of the body in performance* (pp. 78–98). University of Illinois Press.

THE IMPACT OF IN-BETWEEN SPACES AND OUTDOOR PLACES
AN EDUCATOR'S *CURRERE* REFLECTION

By Janet L. Kuhnke
Cape Breton University

> When we hold an image of what is objectively "the fact," it has the effect of reifying what we experience, making our experience resistant to reevaluation and change rather than open to imagination. (Greene, 1995, pp. 126–127)

I began writing using the *currere* methodology twelve months ago, in the winter months. I wanted to understand more fully an educators' experience of teaching and living in "in-between-outdoor spaces." These are the spaces we physically walk to, from, and through where we are practicing clinically, teaching, writing, researching, grading reflections/assignments and facilitating discussions with learners. I also reflect on similar outdoor spaces where persons experiencing homelessness live and encamp.

I wanted to explore ways of creating during this time, as my performative act (Fels, 2015) and within my teaching practice in an effort to become a better educator. To develop this work, I leaned into what Cordi (2019) importantly described as "asking good questions [which] is at the heart of good teaching" (p. 82). As well I reflected on what Pinar (2012) stated about the role of *currere* and self-reflection "as a sensibility … [that] can become precious to educators committed to their—and their students'—ongoing self-formation through academic study" (p. 45).

FRAMEWORK: A PERFORMATIVE INQUIRY

To create this *currere*, I leaned into what Fels (2015) describes as performative inquiry, knowing that the actual act of creating *currere* is a moment of awakening. During this process, I wondered if I was prepared for the changes and renewed understandings that might ensue (Greene, 2001). Fels (2015) states that performative inquiry is all around us if we choose to look, live, and engage with an element of curiosity. Performative inquiry focuses on the "opportunities and possibilities of learning that emerge as participants engage in arts-based activities" (Fels, 2015, p. 2). In turn, the inquire is also about "who or what calls us to attention" (Fels, 2015, p. 2). For me, performative inquiry provided the space to move and think past the "critics … the loop in my head, telling me what I failure I am" (Brown, 2018, p. 32), and instead reach toward resilience and self-compassion (Brown, 2018).

Through the *currere* process, I instead wanted to focus on interrupting the present, re-envisioning my propensity to rapidly, physically move myself, my body, into the next class or project and not take time to navigate the uncomfortable space of growing and being otherwise (Greene, 1995). Instead, I wanted to self-reflect, not be fearful and instead engage and be part of the "dance of life" (Greene, 1995, p. 60). I also wanted to be thoughtful in my connectedness to outdoor spaces where I create through photography while on long hikes. Greene (1995) stated that this "participatory involvement with the many forms art can enable us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily

routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed" (p. 123). "This kind of engagement is something that I wanted for every lesson" (Cordi, 2019, p. 83).

THE REGRESSIVE STEP

In this step, Pinar (1975) reminds us to go back into our educational experiences. I reflected on my long history of journalling and photographs taken on hikes and art created during the previous year. I reflected deeply about the joy of working with many learners whose paths I have crossed in online, hybrid, and face-to-face experiences. As well, I explored the academic spaces where I work with and live alongside university students—street health clinics, classrooms, laboratories, and in community mobile health vans. During these times, I wondered what was occurring to me as an educator who for the past years has spent much time researching, teaching, and writing on diverse topics such as eating disorders and well-being, the evocation of shame, and the importance of prevention of drug injection abscesses for persons using intravenous substances.

Moreover, I wondered if I was learning and liberating my imagination (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) within these spaces where I contribute to curriculum, write course objectives, and translate new knowledge into student learning activities (Pinar, 2012). I wondered how I was reconstructing myself as part of our professional calling, which I understand to be a "communicative process that requires the psychosocial and intellectual education of the self-reflexive individual" (Pinar, 2012, p. 227). Was I becoming the educator I envisioned (Dewey, 1938)? This was important to consider, as at times I found online education forums difficult and depersonalized, as I preferred to engage within face-to-face space where learner-teacher interactions grow my understanding of how learners learn through social interactions (Pinar, 2012).

I also wondered about how I was learning from the outdoor spaces in which I engaged daily through hikes into wide-open spaces (Kimmerer, 2013). I wanted to interrogate my being in outdoor spaces and understand more fully how I was changing as an educator. This was especially important when I noted that, when I physically moved away from the computer, online classes, curriculum review meetings, and completing email interactions, physical tension within dissipated (Berg & Seeber, 2016).

Furthermore, I wanted to understand envisioning the future in "in-between spaces." This became of great interest as I recognized early that, when I was not answering email or grading student arts-based reflections and assignments, I was full of wonder, questions, and creative actions (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). Therefore, to understand outdoor space and the relationship to academia, I searched the literature and talked with peers about tension-filled times in the academy. When outside walking, I often reflected on whether I was caught in a familiar circle of complacency (Kawall, 2006) or of my "imagination being switched off" (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 164), well aware of work-life balance. I wondered if I was ready to engage with self in uncomfortable conversations of being renewed (Greene, 2001). I yearned to educate in an environment where we embraced Greene's (2001) notion "that there is always more to be found, horizons to be breached, limits to be broken through, always untapped possibility" (p. 206).

Reflecting on my Creative, Physical Self

As an imaginative person, I wondered how I could utilize my childhood love of creativity as a medium to express my hope for change. I wondered if I could "catch inspiration" to improve my attention and purpose as a reflexive practitioner (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 167). This is important as Macy and Johnstone remind us of how, when taking a holiday or going for a trek into nature, inspiration and a renewed sense of [academic] production can occur. Therefore, I wondered how I could move my journaling, creative art, hiking, and doodling into *currere* to encourage other educators. Furthermore, Schon (1983) stated that when participants realize "that they actively construct the reality of their practice and become aware of the variety of frames available to them, they begin to see the need to reflect-in-action on their previous tacit frames" (p. 311).

To understand the physical aspects of walking and going on hikes as an educator, I rested for a time by re-reading my journals and examining photographs taken. In my notes, I regularly noted that I always wanted to work in the arts and be an artist. I also always wanted to dance, yet as part of my family's faith it was not encouraged. I remembered my public-high school teachers as minimally encouraging in my theatre, art, and band classes; this lack lustre reassurance did not rapidly push me to study the arts, though my creative heart was there. I also may have been discouraged by my inability to articulate my vision aloud. At the same time, I was caught in the demands of needing to learn a trade (I was told to be a nurse, social worker, or teacher), gain a profession, and live in the practical reality of needing to earn a wage "to pay my bills" (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, January 2024).

Finally, I further reflected on my deep yearning to articulate the impact of living in outdoor "in-between spaces" on my body as an educator. I am aware that I am living in an aging body, and I know that "bodies both reflect contemporary discourses … and, in turn, construct social meaning of identities" (Mandell & Kamenitz, 2021, p. 73). I wondered how I carried tension within myself; I knew childhood tensions to be reduced and or resolved when hiking across the hay fields and through the deep woods with my Dad. I remember my body, energy-rich and fluid in the motion of hiking with my Gramma down the farm paths, swimming in the pond, and playing sports in the winter. In these times, I was connected to my inner strength and my holistic self (Kwee & Launeanu, 2019).

The Progressive Step

In this step, Pinar (2012) reminds us that "one looks toward what is not yet the case, what is not yet present" (p. 46). I envisioned my teaching experience being enriched, deeply intertwined, and threaded tightly with my relationship to the land (Kimmerer, 2013; Morris, 2003). Macy and Johnstone (2012) describe this time as important to give us space to catch an "inspiriting vision … to overcome obstacles" (p. 163). For example, as an educator, I considered how to reconstruct (Pinar, 2012) academic tensions of managing overlapping meetings, contributing to curriculum changes, pressures to obtain grants and funding, and the request to teach in overtime. It is here I imagine a work-life balance that supports sustainability as an academic (Pinar, 2012). In my journal I reflected the following:

> When filled with tension, I realize stepping away from the computer as powerful. I know the physical benefits of going for long walks with my dogs deep into the woods, far from

> my angst of trying to write the perfect lines in the syllabus so the students will understand the content and assignment. I know taking my camera helps be think deeply about the role if images and learning. (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, September 2024)

I imagine the time in outdoor spaces as those that embed a "way of reflecting in practice" that I see as essential to developing improved "problem-solving skills" (Tanaka, 2016, p. 185). I envision a space where being outdoors promotes health, and it not just a "walk to release academic tensions, disappointments, and pain" (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, October 2024). I envision outdoor spaces or the "in-between spaces" as therapeutic, where I as an educator gain perspective on issues, yet I know this balance is challenging at times to achieve (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, November 2024). In turn, I imagine a future, where academic institutions understand and celebrate outdoor spaces as essential to maintaining and improving psychophysiological responses (National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health, 2013).

Space is defined as "the dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move" (Oxford Languages, 2025, n.p.). To understand this further, I studied the works of the architect Thomas Heatherwick (2023, 2024). He advocates for the creation of buildings and communities that are healthy and enduring and encourage climate awareness. He promotes the use of old building spaces to create new and inviting buildings. He discusses the importance of creating spaces that are welcoming, colourful, and that bring humanization to our living, working, and playing spaces (Gentleman, 2023). I envisioned this as applying to the academic spaces in which we teach. Heatherwick (as quoted in Gentleman, 2023) also states that "boring buildings … cause mental health problems [and can] aggravate conflict" (para. 8). Whereas re-envisioning older spaces and planting trees, blooming plants, and natural light bring forth wellness and create an ambiance that people can live and practice within comfortably (EcoHealth Ontario, 2017; Hassen, 2016; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018).

I knew that in my practice these are the spaces between the university and clinic buildings built of steel, aluminum, wood, and concrete, and between these hard structures are sidewalks—overhead and paved pathways. What occurs for and in us when we physically move from inside our offices or clinics to outside spaces? Are we the same, or are we changing as a result? Do we research and educate in these spaces? What occurs within us as educators and researchers? I understand that the value of outside spaces is critical to health and wellness (Woodgate & Skarlato, 2015).

For me the study of outside spaces was important as I work alongside a team that supports persons experiencing homelessness. I see people without safe, warm housing and food. I wonder how they view outside spaces without coats, boots, dry socks, and mittens—feet macerated in broken down shoes and boots with the winter winds, rain, and snow pounding. In thinking of persons experiencing homeless, I am challenged as the solution is complex. In contrast, I recognize that I have a home and trails on which to hike; it is a place, not of steel and concrete, but it is within the moss on the trees and paths, the thickly colored bark on trees, alongside the sound of water pouring down the mountainside over the boulders in the creek and into the open spaces.

Schon (1983) states that the yearning to learn, artistically, includes delving into the search for an "epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict" (p. 49). It is the quietness gleaned from nature's space from which I yearn to learn and grow my perspective (Dewey, 1934).

In response to this want, I reflected on my journals full of short prayers and poems visioning change. This step in *currere* is important, as it is a time to understand our formation. Kimmerer (2003) describes this as the times of "digging my boots into the hill, [to] gather my strength and lunge for the next handhold, a clump of stems above me. A thorn plunges deep in my thumb, but I can't let go. This is my anchor" (p. 151). In reflection, I think of pauses in life, in my daily work, in my home and creative spaces, and I reflectively wrote:

FLUIDLY-BEING

It is 'in' the 'outside' from which I learn
Where in my boots
I hike and breathe
These are my alleyways
My walkways and paths
Not of concrete, pavement or wood
But of soil, moss, and tangled tree roots
Covered in snow and ice
Saturated in rain
It is here, where-
I think and breathe
And as the fog rolls
In and along
Gently caressing
My face
I become otherwise
I am blessed
(*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, November 2024)

As an educator working toward understanding, my journals and poems offer a place to release tension—a tension I have carried in my shoulders into the online calls, the planning meetings and team retreats; my strain is rarely released in these settings. My question is, can this tension be managed, understood, and moved to a creative way of being? While I help with development of skin and wound care programs, build curriculum for adult learners focused on eating disorders, body dysmorphia, I wonder when my curiosity lives? Where is the space to explore and create?

Similarly, as classes come to a close, grades are submitted, and I review student feedback, I wonder what more I can learn. Similarly, as research project funding is completed and projects become sustainable, I ask what is next. Do I rush into the next project and agree too quickly? Instead, how might I create the much-needed spaces to thoughtfully question and explore next steps. Where do I spend time to think about the greater good of a project? How do we help each other? How do we help those suffering and experiencing homelessness? I wonder, in these moments of speed (Berg & Seeber, 2016) am I less flexible, inclusive, or respectful?

THIRD STEP: THE ANALYTICAL MOMENT

In this step, Pinar (2012) reminds the learner to "examine both the past and present … where we attempt to discern how the past inheres the present and in our fantasies of the future" (p. 46). As part of this journey, I often feel as though I am wrestling with the "culture of speed in the academy" (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. xv). This includes the pressure to obtain more funding to support dissemination of research learning and to attend the next conference (Berg & Seeber, 2016). I know I carry this tension in my body; sometimes I feel like I am immersed in a barrel of molasses, slow, dark and extracted from reality. When the communications arrive from the grant office: "Sorry you were not approved for that grant/award, please try again on the new round of applications" (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, March 2024). I want to reply, "but I yearn to collaborate and meet peers who research and study in similar fields, and this was important to me" (*Author's Reflexivity Journal,* Dec 2024).

Figure 1: A Broad View of In-between Outdoor Spaces

In is in these moments I want to "stop" (Applebaum, 1995). For the stop to occur, I wonder who brings the stop to fruition? Is it me? Then I wonder, if the stop occurs "what lies hidden in the depths?" (Applebaum, 1995, p. 81). In response I take a long walk with a hot cup of coffee to release the tension in my body (Kwee & Launeanu, 2019). I take my camera and snap an image of the snow on the bows of the fir and maples branches, raw to the freezing cold (See Figure 1). I stand in wonder, the snow melting in my coffee cup. I wonder if I am missing the bigger picture of academia that is occurring around me?

Here I stand alone, far from those living on cold concrete, unhoused, with inadequate clothing and footwear.

I taste the snow on my tongue, each flake cold. I think about those not drinking warm fluids and who do not have meals? I am moved to tears and cry (Author's Reflexivity Journal, December 2024).

DANCING IN THE WOODS

While creating this work, I experienced an unexpected return of a heightened sense of being in a complicated relationship with my body (Brown, 2018). Alongside living in the tensions of academia, I returned to find a deep sense of safety within my body that only occurs in outside spaces (e.g., walking, hiking, in the woods, by the creeks) but not dancing—never dancing. Here, I am reminded that I am intact, whole, resilient, far from the pressures I hold within my body. In

the deep snow I am grounded (Courtois & Ford, 2016; Mandell & Kamenitz, 2021). I wrote in my journal:

My feet methodically move in the snow trying not to trip over the ever-turning roots heaving in the frost, my old green plaid jacket ripped and torn is my shroud, my camera by my side. Here, I am secure. I hike with renewed energy; I wanted to dance. I see wild hare tracks travelling purposefully across the snow (See Figure 2). I wonder if I too can move this fluidly, free.

Figure 2: Firmly Grounded

I touch the tree bark and withdraw my hand; I try earnestly again and again, afraid of falling. I wondered if it would bear my weight. Would it hold me? Then I did it, I grabbed hold of the tree trunk and gently swirled my body in 360-degree circles at its' base. I nearly fell in my efforts.

Again, I tried to swirl at the tree base, my mittens holding my hand firm. My arm aching my body weight and size, the trunk did not fail me. In these moments the tensions dissipate, and warmth smothers my soul. I danced. (Author's Reflexivity Journal, November 2024)

Figure 3: My Dance Begins, the Trees My Partners

This is my dance of health, my performative act, alone in the quietness of the woods. Here, I am free-floating, dizzy with the motion of circling. My boots plod a circle of calmness, the snow padded into a predictable path; here, I am safe far from the tensions of life (See Figure 3).

When I pause, stop in the snow, I can hear the Brown Creepers calling. When I wait, stand still, not moving my head or hands, ever so silently they come nearer; their song brilliant clear and their "brownish heads … hidden against a tree trunk" (Cornell Labs, 2024). These are the healing moments in life. The space in-between the demands of education and research where we think, create, and heal. These meditative moments are intertwined with movement, photography, and journaling practices in which I immerse myself.

THE SYNTHETICAL STEP: NEXT STEPS ALONG THE PATH OF ACADEMIA

In the synthetical step, we are in the present (Pinar, 2013). We focus on issues to be attended to and attend to "one's embodied otherness" (Pinar, p. 46). In this step, I wondered how

this *currere* contributes to my academic work and professional growth and if it illuminated areas from which to grow (Pinar, 1975).

ACADEMIC PAUSES AND BREATHING: MAKING USE OF OUR BODY

One way to grow authentically as an educator is to provide a space for change and to enact change (Cordi, 2019). This includes recognition that the intertwining of the physical walking and dancing (we may do as part of our *currere* and reflective practice), with the need for outdoor spaces that can support the mental health and well-being of our peers, staff, and academics (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2024). As I want to become a more authentic educator (Cordi, 2019), I believe engaging myself and peers in outdoor spaces may be an enacting of our embodied response to being in the in-between spaces in academia.

This is important, as recent research has focused on the physical health of academics and staff (teachers), especially when many of us moved our face-to-face teaching into online and hybrid formats (Eubank et al., 2023). Of note in the research are the reported high burnout and stress rates in academia and health care professionals (Madigan et al., 2023; Smith, 2023; Taylor & Tello, 2024).

Berg and Seeber (2016) call this a paying attention to our embodied selves, including our use of pauses and breathing while we teach, as these can become the spaces in which we can learn to engage and live as educators. This step is like the sunflower turning at the exact movement of the sun, where the sunflower becomes a "representation of the sun" (Applebaum, 1995, p. 70). It is this pause, this moment of physical health and wellness that I see needing change and revisiting (Cordi, 2019).

Berg and Seeber (2016) remind academics to engage in healthy ways of being. We need to embrace their oft quoted line, "self-care is not an indulgence. It is an essential component of prevention of distress, burnout and impairment" (p. 71). This includes the knowing and utilization of what they describe as "conscious transitions to class" (p. 42). This can and should be applied to include outdoor spaces where we mentally prepare to teach and support learners. We need to heed the physicality of our beings and the influences on how we arrive to our classroom teaching and clinical work. Berg and Seeber (2016) discuss terms like silence, stillness and discuss the act of "holding the space" (p. 42). I am sensing a wave of hopefulness as I now see peers enacting these elements in the classroom and in online meetings. Maybe I can do this as well? I did wonder where they learned to say, "let's just pause and reflect," "let's honour this moment," and "can we just pause to reflect before we start" (*Author's Reflexivity Journal*, April, November 2024).

In response, I took six photos to express stillness and efforts to gain a broader perspective. I wanted to physically stop, pause, in a moment of learning (Applebaum, 1995). This is important, as educators are often immersed in the daily, details of snowflakes and the intricacies of bark (Kimmerer, 2003). Yet, taking steps away allows us to create one's "stop" and provides a space to breathe. One step back, if I wait, I might see the sun melt the snow, taking the nutrients to the roots, where more growth will occur (Kimmerer, 2003). Then again, taking further steps back, can create an in-between space. It is tempting to rush forward, up the trail, to the next project, or instead just step back to think and wonder (Applebaum, 1995). Overtime, just stepping back grows one's perspective.

4a Being and immersed in the details

4b Thinking of change

4c Do I move backward or forward. I pause, stop, and breathe.

4d Four steps back from the tree, my perspective grows.

4e Five steps back, I wonder about possibilities.

4f Moving along and breathing, stops can occur.

Figures 4a-f: The Spaces In-between and Growing Perspectives

Dewey (1934) discusses the importance of experience and art. This includes the importance of allowing the process [of creativity] to work itself out fully (p. 229). In reflexive work it is important to not be focused on the end product but the process, which is the changing and growth of an educator. For example, while walking in the morning, winter light, one can live a life of hope and possibilities (Pinar, 2013). Yet, it did not dissipate my sense of being in a position of privilege, of having, of not being without, especially when working alongside persons experiencing homelessness (Community Action on Homelessness, 2022). This research is still in progress and nudges up against my assumptions about the complexity of persons experiencing homelessness; it

is rarely one factor that contributes to the issue. It is several of which I am still coming to understand.

In turn, these moments can be our performative acts in society and in our communities (e.g., journals, photographs) (Dewey, 1934). Fels (2015) states that "reflection through performative inquiry is a collaborative pedagogical act that benefits educator and learners individually and reciprocally" (p. 18). It is those learners, educators, and researchers who make up the institutions where we practice, the communities where we contribute.

Taking dance steps with trees was an unexpected joy, a bringing forth of new possibilities, a new way of releasing the embodied tensions we may carry within. It was through peer feedback, research participants' comments, and student feedback that these moments of being and living in the "in-between" space provided me a space and place to "question, learn and reflect" (Cordi, 2019, p. 86).

As an expression of reflexivity, methodologically framed within the *currere* steps, the embodiment of one's life as an academic is enriched as a result of something unexpected, a renewal of hope. Our practice as educators and researchers is not a straight, narrow, restrictive path. It is one of curiosity, kindness, insight, and expectedness, if one is open.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In this *currere*, I grew in my understanding of embodiment as an educator. It is within where I hold the inner battle of managing teaching workloads. And through time and engagement in the creative process (Dewey, 1934), I know I can now dance in the in-between spaces. This is, and was, joyful. I now regularly dance in solitude between the trees, imagining the trunks as projects and classrooms in which I must engage. Yet, in the in-between space, how I carry or embody my tension is mine, individual, and is a space where I can continue to "personally unravel … those assumptions" (Brown, 2018, p. 33). *Currere* provides a methodology to unwind past assumption and beliefs and provides a place to light new possibilities (Pinar, 1975, 2012).

REFERENCES

Applebaum, D. (1995). *The stop*. SUNY Press.

Berg, M., & Seeber, B. K. (2016). *The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy*. University of Toronto Press.

Brown. D. (2018). On *currere* storytelling, and body-positive curriculum. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *2*(2), 30–34. https://www.*currere*exchange.com/uploads/9/5/8/7/9587563/5brown.pdf

Community Action on Homelessness. (2022). *Faces of homelessness*. https://www.endhomelessnesstoday.ca/

Cordi, K. D. (2019). Remembering to be real: Not planning but finding authentic teaching – A *currere* reflection. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *3*(1), 82–87. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/13

Cornell Labs. (2025). *All about birds*: *Brown Creeper identification.* https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Brown_Creeper/id

Courtois, C. A., & Ford, J. (2016). *Treatment of complex trauma: A sequenced, relationship-based approach*. Guilford Press.

Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. Perigee Books.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.

EcoHealth Ontario. (2017). *Greenbelts: Connecting to place and the ecological determinants of health*. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c3cebfd45776eee4408f72d/t/5cd0e9dfe5e5f06d008a0c53/1557195234267/CO-Eco-Project_Greenbelts_2019-02-13.pdf

Eubank, J. M., Burt, K. G., & Orazem, J. (2023). The faculty aren't alright: Faculty stress increased over the first year of COVID-19. *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, *34*, 1–18. https://ices.library.ubc.ca/index.php/workplace/article/view/186779

Fels, L. (2015). Performative inquiry: Reflection of a scholarly pedagogical act. In W. Linds & E. Vettraino (Eds.), *Playing in a house of mirrors: Applied theatre as reflective practice* (pp. 151–174). Sense Publishers.

Gentleman, A. (2023, October 25). *Thomas Heaterwick's war on boring buildings: 'I've never gone against the whole industry before.'* https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/oct/25/thomas-heatherwick-war-on-boring-buildings-ive-never-gone-against-the-whole-industry-before

Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination.* Jossey-Bass.

Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a blue guitar*. Teachers College Press.

Hammoudi Halat, H. H., Sami, W., Soltani, A., & Malki, A. (2024). Mental health interventions affecting university faculty: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC Public Health*, *24*(1), Article 3040. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-20402-2

Hassen, N. (2016, December). *The influence of green space on mental health and well-being: A scoping review of reviews*. Wellesley Institute. https://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Green-Space-Scoping-Review-of-Reviews.pdf

Heatherwick, T. (2023). *TED: The case for radically human buildings* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhb0P5GGpys

Heatherwick, T. (2024). *Humanizing our cities with Thomas Heatherwick-Wired health* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLhXzUEhdyA

Kawall, J. (2006). On complacency. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *43*(4), 343–55.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2003). *Gathering moss: A natural and cultural history of mosses*. Oregon State University Press.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions.

Kwee, J. L., & Launeanu, M. (2019). Practical strategies for promoting embodiment in eating disorders and treatment. In H. L. McBride & J. L. Kwee (Eds.), *Embodiment and eating disorders* (pp. 342-357). Routledge.

Macy, J., & Johnstone, C. (2012). *Active hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy*. New World Library.

Madigan, D. J., Kim, L. E., Glandorf, H. L., Kavanagh, O. (2023). Teacher burnout and physical health: A systematic review. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *119*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102173

Mandell, N., & Kamenitz, L. (2021). Women moving into later life: Aging bodies, changing identities. In V. Zawilski (Ed.), *Body studies in Canada: Critical approaches to embodied experiences* (pp. 72–91). Canadian Scholars Press.

Morris, N. (2003 July). *Health, well-being and open space: Literature review*. OPENspace. https://www.lakeheadca.com/application/files/5014/4138/4287/healthwellbeing.pdf

Rugel, E. (2015, March). *Green space and mental health: Pathways, impacts, and gaps*. National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health. https://ncceh.ca/sites/default/files/Full_Review-Greenspace_Mental_Health_Mar_2015.pdf

Oxford Languages. (2025 Jan 15). *Space.* Oxford University Press.

Pinar, W. F. (1975). *The method of "currere"* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Research Association, Washington, DC, Unites States. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED104766.pdf

Pinar, W. F. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.

Smith, A. P. (2023). The well-being and physical health of university staff. *World Journal of Pharmaceutical and Medical Research*, *9*(9), 7–12. https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/162175/3/article_1693371442.pdf

Taylor, L., & Tello, K. T. (2024). Exploring the relationship between wellness behaviors and burnout amongst university faculty and staff. *Journal of Healthy Eating and Active Living*, *4*(3), 162–173. https://doi.org/10.51250/jheal.v4i3.96

Twohig-Bennett, C., & Jones, A. (2018). The health benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes. *Environmental Research*, *166*, 628–637. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2018.06.030

Woodgate, R. L., & Skarlato, O. (2015). "It is about being outside": Canadian youth's perspectives of good health and the environment. *Health & Place*, *31*, 100–110. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2014.11.008

IMAGE CREATION AS SELF-CARE
TEACHING WRITING COURSES DURING THE PANDEMIC

By Peaches Hash
Appalachian State University

FALL 2017

Peaches is preparing to teach her undergraduate Rhetoric and Composition (RC) courses for the first semester since she completed her English Master's degree in 2012. She starts her Educational Leadership doctorate program with a concentration in Expressive Arts the same semester, and already, the curriculum makes her nervous. It is only August, but her first Expressive Arts course calls for her to be vulnerable and expressive, concepts she feels uncomfortable using in the classroom. Meanwhile, the activities she designs for her RC students feel like they belong to someone else. *What do I value in teaching writing?* She thinks to herself. She is a fish out of water, flailing for a pedagogy beyond her reach and wondering if she should return to the familiar, yet restrictive water of teaching high school English.

A knock on her office door startles Peaches. She certainly is not expecting anyone and has a lot to do. Her body tenses as a woman with white curly hair dressed in an array of colorful clothes walks in, her long skirt swishing. Peaches smirks, knowing this woman is likely affiliated with Expressive Arts; she dresses like many of her class members that semester, full of vibrant textures that seem to proclaim, "Here I am!" Peaches is wearing her typical jeans and t-shirt in which she blends in well everywhere except that Expressive Arts class.

"Hi. Can I help you? The art department is across campus..." Peaches begins tersely. She cannot imagine ever being as busy as she is at this moment and hopes to send this colorful figure on her way.

"Oh, no! I'm here to see you!" The woman exclaims. "You can call me Beth. I was sent to chat with you a little bit about planning your RC courses. How is it going?" The woman pulls up a chair and smiles widely.

Peaches is accustomed to her department providing mentors, and she knows she needs any help she can get. She responds honestly to Beth, "I'm a little overwhelmed. I taught high school for five years after getting my Master's, and while I feel like I had some innovative ideas for engaging students with the arts (Hash, 2021), I'm just not sure how they will be received by college students. I want them to have a real educational *experience* in my course (Dewey, 1934/2005), not just passive learning."

Beth smiles, the lines in her face deepening with her full grin. "Oh, I remember that feeling well. You see, I'm an arts-based researcher and a writing teacher, and I put a great deal of pressure on myself to make my curriculum, as bell hooks (1994) would describe, pleasurable."

Peaches's eyes well up. She has not even started designing arts-based curriculum, and this woman sitting across from her seems to have it all figured out. She looks fulfilled by her career.

"I have an idea," Beth continues encouragingly. "Why don't I show you some of my art? It could help you think about your RC pedagogy. Metaphorical images can assist in orienting our ideas, but they can also, as Maxine Greene (1997) notes, enable "us to cross divides, to make connections between ourselves and others, and to look through other eyes" (p. 391).

"Oh wow, ok!" Peaches exclaims. She has not made her own art in years and is feeling stressed that she will soon have to for her Expressive Arts course.

Beth pulls her chair closer to Peaches and opens a small booklet. "This is a story, too. You may find the format odd. I wanted to find a way to blend the factual and imaginative worlds (Romano, 2000)." she explains. "A few years into teaching RC courses, as virus forced the university to move all courses online. I had no clear vision for how my arts-based curriculum could work online, and I really started doubting myself."

Peaches's eyes widen. "I can't imagine ever doing that," she states, "It's hard enough just planning for this semester when everything is normal!"

"Well," Beth replies with a gleam in her eyes, "You might be surprised what you're capable of." She begins to read:

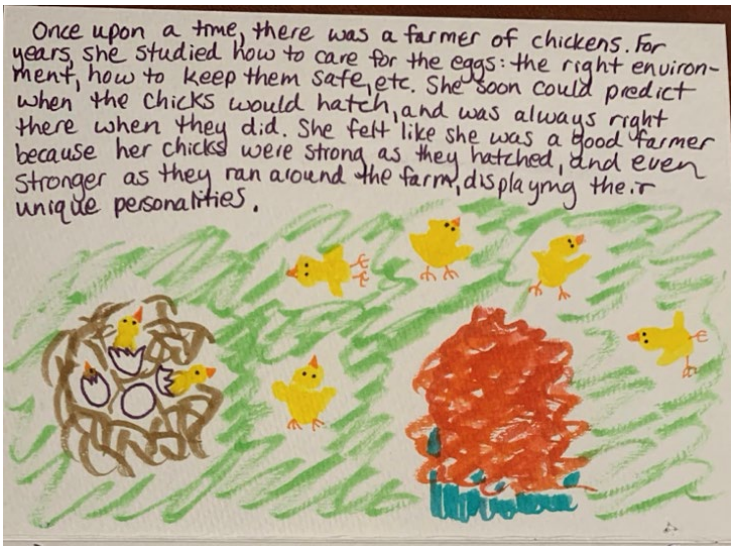


Image 1 Caption: Once upon a time, there was a farmer of chickens. For years, she studied how to care for the eggs: the right environment, how to keep them safe, etc. She soon could predict when the chicks would hatch and was always right there when they did. She felt like she was a good farmer because her chicks were strong as they hatched, and even stronger as they ran around the farm, displaying their unique personalities.

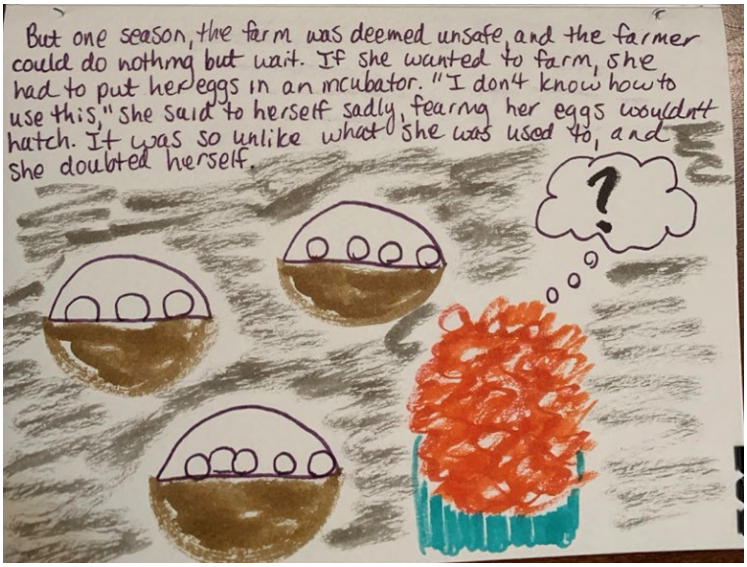


Image 2 Caption: But one season, the farm was deemed unsafe, and the farmer could do nothing but wait. If she wanted to farm, she had to put her eggs in an incubator. "I don't know how to use this," she said to herself sadly, fearing her eggs wouldn't hatch. It was so unlike what she was used to, and she doubted herself.

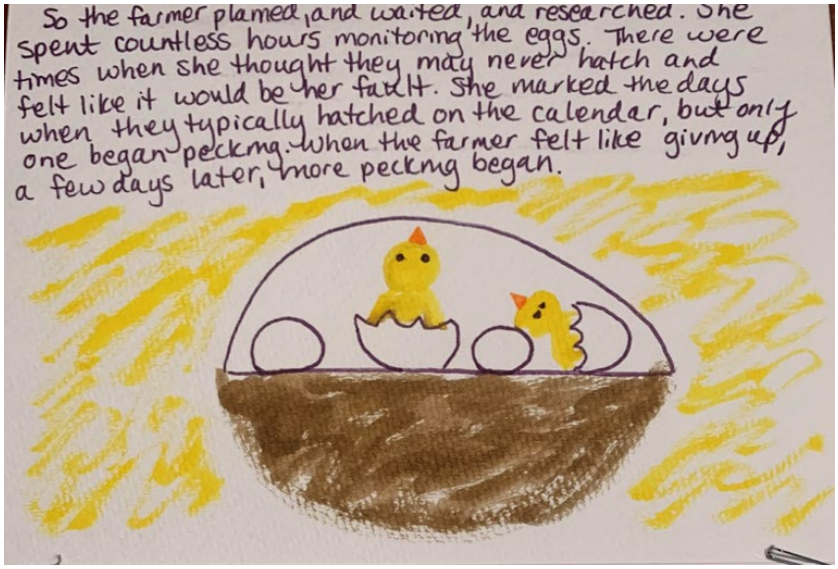


Image 3 Caption: So, the farmer planned, and waited, and researched. She spent countless hours monitoring the eggs. There were times when she thought they may never hatch and felt like it would be her fault. She marked the days when they typically hatched on the calendar, but only one began pecking. When the farmer felt like giving up, a few days later, more pecking began.

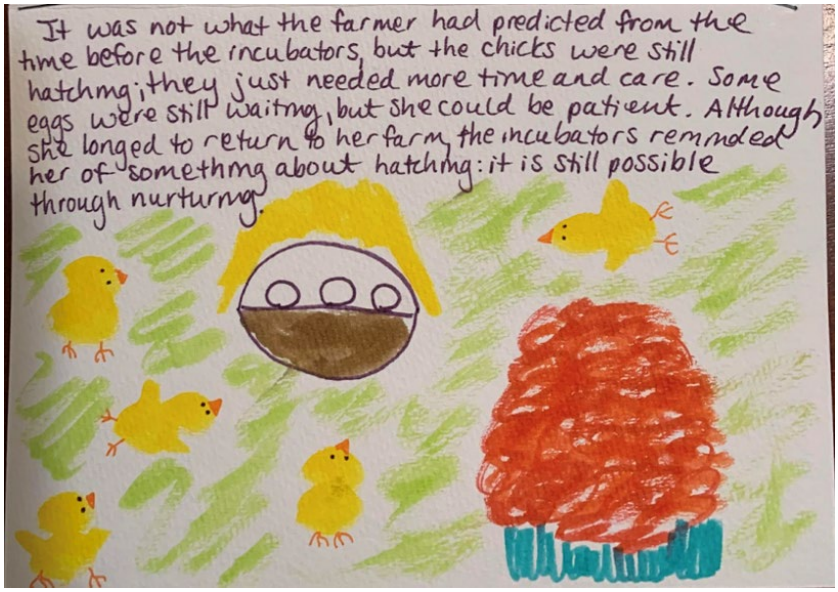


Image 4 Caption: It was not what the farmer had predicted from the time before the incubators, but the chicks were still hatching; they just needed more time and care. Some eggs were still waiting, but she could be patient. Although she longed to return to her farm, the incubators reminded her of something about hatching: it is still possible through nurturing.

"What did you think?" Beth asks.

"I love the hair you gave her!" Peaches says with a laugh, touching her own red curls.

"Me too," Beth continues, mine used to be just like that. "Did you notice anything else?"

"I thought it was an interesting metaphor about teaching during a nontraditional time. It seems like the images you created represent this new relationship with yourself and your surroundings" (Helmers & Hill, 2004). You could still find confidence in your teaching once you adapted to the new environment," Peaches explains.

Beth murmurs in agreement, but Peaches continues, "But why did you make it about chickens? You were this important college instructor. Weren't you afraid it would take away from your ethos?"

"Well," Beth replies, "I ask my students to take creative risks (Romano, 2013), which means I have to be willing to do so as well. But also, I wanted people who didn't have the same experiences as me to understand. Composing metaphors can help me as the writer see the world differently and prompt me to "discover new relationships and how they might be articulated" (Berthoff, 1981, p. 7), but it can also help readers identify with my experiences even if they don't have the same ones."

"Yeah," agrees Peaches. "That makes sense. I obviously haven't taught online, but seeing the change from green outside to the gray inside with the incubators, I can tell what a hard transition it was. Everything looks stagnant and lifeless."

"Very true," Beth says.

Looking at the pictures, Peaches gets more excited. "The images really help tell the story. I can see nuances in them that the words don't convey. The chickens are all over the place in the beginning, and you're just observing and content with it. Then, the question mark before they've hatched in the incubator makes a contrast of feelings too. But then you put the yellow light around the incubator in the last two pictures, like nurturing could create the warmth needed for hatching."

"I love hearing what you as an audience member are getting from the story!" Beth exclaims. "Meanings occur when we create them but also can change when we think about them" (Berthoff, 1981).

"The moral is really encouraging too," Peaches adds. "I always had my high schoolers identify morals and themes. I like the whole 'Situations may look different, but creative problem-solving can still get results.'"

"Oh yes," Beth replies, "Kind of like moving from teaching high school to higher education…"

Peaches laughs for the first time in days. "Okay, I get it. You're pretty good at mentoring."

"Why, thank you!" Beth says with a smile, picking the booklet up to put in her bag.

"But wait," Peaches says abruptly, "This isn't just an inspirational story."

Beth looks confused. "It isn't?"

"Well, no," Peaches continues. "Why don't the readers ever see the teacher's face? Why did you hide her?"

Beth is quiet for a minute. "I suppose I wanted it to look like she was observing the chickens."

"But," Peaches continues, "I would have been able to connect with her more if I'd seen her face. In the third image, you eliminate her entirely to get a closer view of the chickens. What about her?"

Beth looks down at her art. She created it long ago, but the images bring back feelings she tried to repress. Feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and exhaustion flood her body like jumping into icy waters as Peaches looks at her imploringly.

"Who cared for her? Who was helping her hatch?" Peaches asks softly.

Beth's eyes begin to water. "I guess," she says slowly, "She cared for herself. She made this art to help process it all and to remind her that it all came out ok."

"I still think she deserved the same care she wanted to give her students," Peaches states.

"You're a very insightful person," Beth says, beginning to compose herself.

"Thank you," Peaches replies. "You know, this has given me a lot to think about. I want to do so much for my students, and I think I will, but maybe I need to stop being so hard on myself, too. I haven't even started on my Expressive Arts project because I've been designing this RC

curriculum. I also have not been focusing on things in my life outside of my job and school like I should."

"Oh, what an excellent idea. To be honest, caring for myself is something I still struggle with," Beth admits.

"Are our offices nearby? Maybe we can make some art together?" Peaches asks.

"Actually," Beth says apologetically, "You won't be seeing me around here. I've worked in this department for years, but it's time for new adventures. You will see me again though, of that I am certain."

Peaches looks up with disappointment in her eyes, meeting Beth's. It's so sad to meet someone you connect with and then then have them leave, Peaches thinks. It's also unusual to run into someone in my same department with the same shade of dark green eyes and the same springing curls.

"I'm sorry, dear, but it's time for me to go," Beth states, her smile widening, "But I'm going to think about what you said often, and I hope you'll do the same for me."

'Of course!" Peaches exclaims, "Thank you!"

The two women stand and hug, Peaches noting for the first time how close in height Beth is to her own five feet and eight inches.

Beth makes her way out of the building. As she opens her purse for her keys, she finds the keycard she used to get in. Her picture is smudged almost beyond recognition, an old picture she was too lazy to update, back when she had red hair and fewer lines on her face. The keycard still works after all this time. She lifts it to toss in the trash thinking that this is the last time she will use it. She pauses to look at the name on her card: *Peaches Elizabeth Hash*. Her younger self's words from earlier echo in her mind: "Who cared for her? Who was helping her hatch?" Maybe Beth should hang onto the card. One never knows when they might need reminding to care for themselves.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I composed this piece as a way to process my experiences of teaching during the pandemic. I have used art as a way of knowing both in personal practice and in my classrooms for years (Allen, 1995) but never to deal with an experience that was so challenging for me. Originally, I created the visual metaphor of the chicken farmer, which was an expressive arts exercise; I was drawn to art-making's therapeutic and empowering qualities, providing the power to create and transform our experiences through constructive inner vision (Shore, 2009). After I finished making it, I felt that my imagination was, as McNiff (2015) stated, put "into action" (p. 1). I took my experience and changed it into something new, the metaphor, to reach a wider audience. My metaphor extended past my original personal intentions for practice, and I saw that the art called my attention to aspects of my experience I might not have noticed otherwise (Eisner, 2008). After all, as Pearson and Wilson (2009) wrote, "Feelings are often experienced as if stored or held in layers. There is a distinction between the original or primary emotion and the overlaying or secondary emotions" (p. 137). My art was not just about teaching my students; it was about my internal struggle as an educator as well.

I then decided to expand on my piece with the *currere* inspired frame story of two versions of myself: The former graduate student before the pandemic who was nervous about teaching and my imagined future self as a retiree in my department. This allowed me to analyze my feelings,

which became a source of information. In the classroom, feelings can help students "climb out of survival mode" (Souers, 2016, p. 31), leading to empowerment, but as an educator, I have been resistant to express my own feelings, especially during the pandemic. I realized, though, that my feelings were a form of information and once I expressed them, I could consider what they were trying to teach me and how I could transfer the information into the classroom (Brackett, 2019). My written *currere* serves as an internal dialogue of analysis (Leavy, 2018). As two versions of myself spoke to each other, I saw that my experiences were not just a linear story of caring for my students but a complex experience of how I lacked support myself but did not understand how to provide self-care. This is especially clear when the younger version of me realizes that the artwork never depicts the farmer's face and that she is even nonexistent in one frame. Without the visual image evoking the emotional response, I am unsure if I would have come to that insight (Leavy, 2015).

Ultimately, depicting my lived experience through *currere* allowed me to "write back" (Elbow, 2003, p. vii) against the linear narrative that I was a teacher whose students struggled but found success during the pandemic. Personally, I was struggling and could have used a "Beth" for guidance and encouragement. I could have also used a "Peaches" to encourage a deeper look at my artistic expression (my personal experience). Brackett (2019) stated that "where there is an emotionally skilled teacher present, students disrupt less, focus more, and perform better academically" (p. 20); thus, an emotionally skilled teacher better supports students in navigating their own emotions. By working through the emotions I experienced during my most difficult time teaching, I hope to offer my students artistic opportunities to express their emotions. Additionally, Micciche (2007) noted that enacting emotion through creative practices can sharpen students' composition skills. Through future uses of metaphor, visual images, and *currere* writing, I hope to strengthen the ways I support student learning.

References

Allen, P. B. (1995). *Art is a way of knowing*. Shambhala Publications.

Berthoff, A. E. (1981). *The making of meaning: Metaphors, models, and maxims for writing teachers*. Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Brackett, M. (2019). *Permission to feel: Unlocking the power of emotions to help our kids, ourselves, and our society thrive*. Celadon Books.

Dewey, J. (2005). *Art as experience*. Penguin Group. (Original work published in 1934)

Eisner, E. (2008). Persistent tensions in arts-based research. In M. Cahnmann-Taylor & R. Siegesmund (Eds.), *Arts-based research in education: Foundations for practice* (pp. 16–27). Routledge.

Elbow, P. (2003). Foreword. In D. Jacobs & L. R. Micciche (Eds.), *A way to move: Rhetorics of emotion & composition studies* (pp. vii–ix). Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Greene, M. (1997). Metaphors and multiples: Representation, the arts, and history. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *78*(5), 387–394.

Hash, P. (2021). Enhancing an epic: Using drama-based activities to teach the odyssey. *English Journal*, *110*(3), 47–52. https://doi.org/10.58680/ej202131067

Helmers, M., & Hill, C. A. (2004). Introduction. In C. A. Hill & M. Helmers (Eds.), *Defining visual rhetorics* (pp. 1–24). Lawrence Erlbaum.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. The Guilford Press.
Leavy, P. (2018). Criteria for evaluating arts-based research. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *Handbook of arts-based research* (pp. 575–585). Guilford Press.
McNiff, S. (2015). *Imagination in action: Secrets for unleashing creative expression*. Shambhala Publications.
Micciche, L. R. (2007). *Doing emotion: Rhetoric, writing, teaching*. Boynton/Cook.
Pearson, M., & Wilson, H. (2009). *Using expressive arts to work with mind, body and emotions: Theory and practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
Romano, T. (2000). *Blending genre, altering style: Writing multigenre papers*. Boynton/Cook.
Romano, T. (2013). *Fearless writing: Multigenre to motivate and inspire*. Heinemann.
Shore, C. (2009). The art of healing and the science of art. In K. Luethje (Ed.), *Healing with art and soul: Engaging one's self through art modalities* (pp. 2–13). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
Souers, K. (2016). *Fostering resilient learners: Strategies for creating a trauma-sensitive classroom*. ASCD.

CONFRONTING THE QUESTION OF SOLIPSISM
PERSONAL ESSAY AS A FORM OF SCHOLARLY WRITING

By Maria Piantanida
Scholar-Practitioner Nexus

"I wonder," says my friend and academic mentor, Noreen, "would I read this if I didn't know you? I wonder about the risks of solipsism and whether writing from personal experience risks naiveté. Why would someone want to read it?"

The "this" was a compilation of personal essays I had written about resistance to authentic engagement in learning. Drawing upon 50-plus years of experience as a learner, teacher, and itinerant curriculum worker, I had interwoven personal anecdotes with theoretical literature to explore the multiple dilemmas associated with resistance and engagement. Much of my thinking about the topic had been nurtured through decades of conversations with Noreen. So, her response gave me pause. What message was she trying to convey?

Was she obliquely suggesting that my writing lacked sufficient conceptual merit to be made public? Or worse, was she saying it was just plain boring? Was she puzzled by what audience I had in mind for this mix of the experiential and theoretical? Perhaps she was wondering where such writing could be published, because it definitely would not meet the review criteria of many refereed academic journals or publishing companies, nor did it seem suited for the general public. Where did this odd little duck of writing fit in?

In thinking about Noreen's critique, I was reminded of James Moffett's (1983) explanation of the structure of discourse as having three elements—a speaker (writer), a listener (reader), and a subject. He goes on to offer a detailed analysis of how various forms of discourse are shaped by the distance between speaker and listener as well as by the level of abstract representation of the subject. In terms of distance, Moffett posits a continuum from interior dialogue occurring within the speaker to shared dialogue with a small group of known listeners to a general, unknown audience. He lays out a similar continuum regarding abstraction from concrete experience to the highly symbolic language of mathematics and science.

Within the continuum of distance, the question of whether some unknown audience would want to read my writing was less relevant to me than the question, "Did you, Noreen, want to read it—not as a favor based on our friendship, but because you found it compelling in both substance and style?" Yet, in sharing my writing with Noreen, I shifted from Moffett's notion of "intrapersonal communication" to "interpersonal conversation." I was, consciously or not, calling upon her to serve as a proxy for some general, unknown audience. In that capacity, it is entirely reasonable for Noreen to think not only of her own response to my writing but also how that writing might be judged by a broader community of educational scholars. As a teacher, Noreen takes very seriously her responsibility to help students develop their ideas so that they meet criteria of scholarly respectability. This, however, presents a conundrum. Within scholarly communities, long-standing traditions define what counts as knowledge and the format in which knowledge is shared. Because the genre of personal essay does not conform to traditional scientific criteria, Noreen's questions of naiveté and solipsism go to the heart of judging the merits of such writing.

This brings to mind a recent experience during a course I was taking about iconic music albums. The second class focused on the work of Bob Dylan, who was awarded the 2016 Nobel prize in literature. Quite frankly, I've never been able to relate to Dylan's nasal, almost atonal style

of singing, and so never bothered to listen carefully to his lyrics. With great enthusiasm, the course instructor pointed out the richness of Dylan's cultural imagery, the subtlety of his commentary on social conditions, and his genius in adapting and blending various music genres. Gradually it dawned on me that I knew so little about music in general and Dylan's genre in particular that I had dismissed his work out-of-hand. However, just because I don't like the way Bob Dylan sounds doesn't mean he wrote bad music. If I want to critique the quality of Dylan's music, then I must have sufficient knowledge of the art form to offer an informed opinion. So, too, must those who are in the position of judging the scholarly quality of personal essays. What hallmarks distinguish good scholarly personal essays from naïve, solipsistic rambling?

Although the concept of solipsism has a weighty philosophical meaning, in common parlance it connotes a quality of self-centeredness or self-absorption. Returning to Moffett's discursive elements of "speaker, listener, and subject," solipsistic conversation tends to be one-sided as the speaker prattles on about the trivialities of their life. The written equivalent would be a tedious account of some life experience filled with details of interest only to the author. Too often, the only purpose such writing seems to serve is self-promotion or an airing of grievances. In short, the writing lacks educative intent—either for the author or a broader unknown audience.

In discussing the genre of non-fiction, life-writing, noted memoirist Patti Miller (2007) explains:

> The personal essay is a genre closely related to memoir in that it often includes the writer's personal memories, but it is quite distinct in that memories are not included for their own sake, but at the service of an idea. Personal essays explore ideas and use a variety of elements—facts, imagination, humour and memories—to enhance that exploration. (p. 13)

The focus on exploring ideas is the safeguard against solipsistic self-absorption. Writing itself becomes a form of inquiry, for as E. M. Forster (1927) relates in *Aspects of the Novel*, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" (p. 152). One hallmark of scholarly personal essays is making this thinking process visible. As essayist Phillip Lopate (2013) contends:

> In the best nonfiction, it seems to me, you're always made aware that you are being engaged with a supple mind at work. The story line or plot in nonfiction consists of the twists and turns of a thought process working itself out. This is certainly true for the essay … which follows an organizing principle that can be summarized as "tracking the consciousness of the author." (p. 6)

Lopate's allusion to "a thought process working itself out" brings me back to the issue of naiveté. The starting point for a personal essay is an account of a puzzling or troubling experience. Through the writing, the author portrays how they have struggled to make meaning of the experience. Of course, someone reading through the lens of scientific writing might think,

> For heaven's sake, there is a tremendous body of literature about this topic. Why don't you just read that? In fact, if you're going to write about this subject—if you're purporting to study it—you're obliged to begin with a review of literature. It is naïve to write as though you are the first or only person who has encountered or thought about this troubling situation.

Unquestionably, literature contributes to the scholarship of personal essays, but it serves a different purpose. Rather than a preliminary framing of an inquiry's significance, it is an integral part of the inquiry—part of the twists and turns of the author's thought process. The intent of the writing is to illuminate the author's efforts to make sense of their experience. As Miller (2007) puts it:

> What is it like for anyone to be in the world? This is the vast and private knowledge that each one of us has—and the great mystery. No one else can really know what it is like for you to be here on this planet. Others could conceivably know everything that has happened to you, your entire history, but they still could not know how you experience being here. For me, this is the starting point for autobiographical writing and reading: a desire to express how one experiences the mystery and the journey of existing—its shape, its texture, its atmosphere—*and a consuming curiosity to know how other people experience it*. (p. 10, emphasis added)

Consuming curiosity is a key sensibility the essayist brings to the writing—a desire to wrestle troubling ambiguities into clarity, to examine "what am I thinking and why." The essayist has an obligation to portray that struggle with sufficient verisimilitude that listeners/readers, too, become curious about the struggle and its outcome. Jerome Bruner (1986) in explicating narrative as a way of knowing, describes verisimilitude as a rendering of experience with sufficient fidelity to be recognizable as "true to conceivable experience" (p. 52). In a personal essay, the conceivable experience is both the precipitating trouble and the author's struggle to understand it. If the writing itself offers only thin generalities or cursory interpretations, then the essay offers little evidence of serious curiosity. In short, the banality of thought makes it just plan boring.

This brings me full circle to Noreen's concern, "Who would be interested in this sort of intimate look into the inner workings of the author's mind? What contribution can such personal struggles make to the discourses of education?" In considering these questions, I'm drawn to William Schubert's (2023) view that:

> All educators need to ponder matters that pertain to curriculum because they matter so much. This especially includes teachers. Too often teachers are omitted from the curriculum equation and are overshadowed on deciding curriculum matters by school or district leaders, policymakers, and evaluators or testing specialists. To leave teachers behind is akin to leaving the Prince of Denmark out of Hamlet! (p. 14)

Schubert goes on to say:

> Teachers are positioned to address scholarly ideas and constructs in complex situations because they engage directly with the ongoing transformations of practice—its spontaneity, flow, continuing reposition, imposition, and situational nuance. (p. 14)

Although Schubert's primary focus is on teachers and curriculum, I extend his ideas to any professional working in the complicated contexts of education. It is one thing to study the world of practice as an "objective" outsider. Studies of this sort yield what Donald Schon (1983) characterized as "rational technical knowledge." In his now classic explication of the importance of reflection in professional practice, Schon (1983) observes:

> Increasingly we have become aware of the importance to actual practice of phenomena—complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-conflict—which do not fit the model of Technical Rationality… .
>
> From the perspective of Technical Rationality, professional practice is a process of *problem solving*. Problems of choice or decision are solved through the selection from available means, of the one best suited to established ends. But with this emphasis on problem solving, we ignore problem *setting*, the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen … . In order to convert a problematic situation to a problem, a practitioner must do a certain kind of work. He [sic] must make sense of an uncertain situation that initially makes no sense. (pp. 39–40)

Writing scholarly personal essays offers a mode of inquiry through which educational practitioners can do just the type of intellectual work that Schon is describing. And, in doing so, they can offer important insights into the nuances of educational matters. When studied from afar, nuances are obscured, and policies that seem like a good idea in the abstract can lead to unintended and counterproductive outcomes. Through scholarly personal essays, thoughtful practitioners can navigate the discursive distances described by Moffett. Introspection can move toward metacognitive reflection, private struggles can shed light on public issues, and idiosyncratic situations can yield theory—theory crafted not in the highly symbolic language of mathematics and science, but in compelling conceptions of professional wisdom.

REFERENCES

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, Possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.
Forster, E. M. (1927). *Aspects of the novel.* Harcourt, Brace.
Lopate, P. (2013). *To show and to tell: The craft of literary nonfiction*. Free Press.
Miller, P. (2007). *The memoir book*. Allen & Unwin.
Moffett, J. (1983). *Teaching the universe of discourse*. Houghton Mifflin.
Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
Schubert, W. H. (2023). *Curriculum matters: What teachers should know and do*. UNESCO.

WRITING THROUGH THINKING EXPLOSIVELY

By Arisandy
Arizona State University

Researchers in narrative and identity studies have recognized the correlation between narrative and self. De Fina (2015) argues that narrative is the main vehicle to express identity, while identity can also be shaped through narrative. In this view, narrative and identity are "mutual presuppositions" (Gallagher, 2014, p. 403) that come together and influence each other. Taylor (2009) claims that narrative creates identity. This assumption comes from the fact that identity is shaped through social interaction, and narrative is an inherently social activity that people engage in to affect and be affected. In the context of education, Sears (2011) posits that young students who have moved from context to context have multiple identities. The findings revealed that narrative serves to integrate the multiple aspects of the students' identities. These scholars use the theories of identities in the postmodern world, which are multiple, shifting, and fragmented aspects of the self, identities that are not fixed and are always changing.

Although referring to the theories of identities as multiplicity, researchers in narrative studies still view that narrative and identity are the unity of different fragments. For example, Ochs and Capps (1996) argue that narrative activity is crucial to recognizing and integrating repressed selves. From this perspective, narratives are a collection of different fragments of lived experiences that create a meaningful set of understanding. Even though narrative is seen as a collection, it is also partial, as not all elements of a self can be covered. Mackenzie and Poltera (2010) argue that self-narratives are used to organize and integrate different experiences to understand the self, action, and world. Both the collection and integration of different fragments of self and experience view the fragments as an inward process that groups and reduces them to the ideation of so-called identity. On the other hand, Braidotti (2014) argues that identity does not exist. Instead, we are always becoming as nomadic subjects that are entangled with the different elements of life we experience. Derrida (1972/1990) also argues that existence is influenced by the different social contexts that shape the "Self," similar to how word formation in a language is prone to changes due to differences and fabrications. The self becomes in motion and is difficult to call an identity or a reduced self. The self is a plateau that has "bricks" of different elements that are entangled (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Through these discussions, I argue that narrative and self are not inward processes that lead to a grouping process, like coding in qualitative research. Instead, it is an outward process, like an explosion that pervades in messy directions. In writing a narrative about the self or learning about the self through narrative, there are different involvements of negative and positive feelings and emotions that explode in messy directions, influenced by different actants (Bennett, 2010) beyond merely human-based social interaction. Thus, it is important to see that the nuclear core of the reactions is not composed of one ingredient called human. It is more than human. The rhizomatic self (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) cannot be reduced through the term "self-integration," since after our explosion (i.e., creation and birth) our self is always in pieces that are difficult to collect, as the process is always expanding, like the universe after the Big Bang. Thus, the self comes in multi-form, as a multi-self. The multi-self is multi-directional and multi-dimensional, which is always uprooted and messy (Carlson, 2023).

Emerging from theories of assemblage and immanence through the lens of rhizomatic plateaus (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), distributive agency (Bennett, 2010), and nomadic becoming (Braidotti, 2014), this paper proposes the concept of explosion as an approach to narrative inquiry, focusing specifically on autobiographical inquiry, or *currere* (Pinar, 1994), which involves a mix of lived experiences, history, and possibilities. Explosions are emotional with affect, like Spinoza's *affectus* in Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Explosions affect and are affected.

What I hope this work will do is offer scholars in narrative inquiry and educators an understanding of multi-self not as either a totality or an integration of all different aspects of experiences like "I," but more like "they," which is always plural, inherently different, uncertain, and rhizomatic. Janks (2009) shows how different narratives and practices can demonstrate the hybridity and multiplicity of students as diverse identities instead of sameness and "markedness." They come with their multi-self that cannot be reduced or integrated into a collective story. Consequently, they come with their multi-narrative of multi-self. The multi-self and multi-narrative can implicate multi-modality to articulate their self-being.

In the next sections, I will look back at the history of explosions derived from my lived experiences of an external explosion entangled with internal explosions. Likewise, I will present the assemblage of the explosions through different lived experiences that explode. Then, I will raise the issue of the explosion in writing as a scholar and educator. In the final section, I will conclude and discuss the implications of my educational practices and research in thinking explosively.

HISTORY OF EXPLOSION

The Big Bang theory has become the most widely accepted explanation for the universe (Silk, 2000), positing that the universe originated from a singular entity that exploded, creating diverse objects. The term "Big Bang" stems from the observation that the universe is expanding, causing objects to move away from each other. The original explosion initiated the expansion, creating a diverse array of objects from a single point of origin. If we consider this single entity to be "God," then we are, in a sense, fragments of that divine entity. For thousands of years, humans have searched for God. I believe we should stop looking for a separate entity and instead look within ourselves, as the explosion that created the universe also created "us."

In addition to creating humanity, the singularity explosion also initiated an influx of knowledge (Silk, 2000). Saldaña (2015) referred to this as an "explosion of knowledge" (p. 95) that sparks a human curiosity to understand our existence. We analyze distant objects in space and, within our limitations, theorize different concepts to find evidence. Scientists like Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking became famous for their work on the theory of relativity, which posits that time and space are relative. While this concept sounds simple, it's quite complex. During my own science studies, I focused on astronomy to answer the questions bursting in my mind. I read multiple pieces of literature to understand how the universe works, yet I understood very little. The word "relative" created a sense of relativity in my own mind, as its meaning depends on how people perceive it. For example, people can have different perceptions if I say that "taste is relative" or "beauty is relative." Similarly, space and time are relative, depending on our context. The time and space on Mars aren't the same as on Earth. I may be in the U.S. having dinner at 6:00 p.m., while my parents in Indonesia might be having breakfast. Time and space are relative, but the fact is that we all perform actions simultaneously, regardless of where we are. For instance,

we all have tried food, whether we like the taste or not. Could this way of thinking be considered an influx of knowledge?

The influx of knowledge and human curiosity moves at a pace similar to the universe's expansion. Since the explosion of Einstein's theory, we have continued to develop our knowledge, albeit within limits. I use the word "limitation" because humanity's ability to travel beyond Earth and the Moon is still very restricted. When Neil Armstrong first landed on the Moon during the Apollo 11 mission in 1969, people expected that traveling to the Moon would become easy in the near future. However, the U.S. decided to stop the mission. Fifty years later, the U.S. resumed its lunar mission after public interest had waned. Conversely, the push to explore Mars seems more appealing to private companies like SpaceX. In this way, the momentum toward the Moon has dimmed as the enthusiasm for Mars exploration expands. One explosion can lead to another.

The explosion of topics and interests is also a part of scholarly life and writing. For example, topics like ChatGPT are currently trending as topics for research papers or as assistants for writers. However, topics like feminism, which was brought to the forefront by Mary Wollstonecraft's (1972) publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, have lasted for a long time. The feminist movement's momentum also spread to the LGBTQ+ community, advocating for gender equality and equity. Judith Butler (2002) challenged the ideas of heteronormative gender, discussing concepts like gender performativity. Similarly, Donna Haraway (2016) expanded this "fire" by raising the topic in the *Cyborg Manifesto*, which intertwines feminist theory, cyborgs, ableism, and affinity. This intellectual explosion is wild and limitless, much like the expansion of the universe after the Big Bang.

The topics discussed here are diverse but not separate; they are entangled. For example, feminism can travel beyond its traditional limits in sociology to the scientific world, where it can be affiliated with masculinity. Feminism has also touched the medical field, where nursing is often associated with women. The universe works similarly. Its objects are diverse and spread out, yet they remain entangled. Earth is entangled with Jupiter through the solar system's gravitational pull. The Milky Way Galaxy also entangles Earth with Proxima Centauri b. Perhaps, through the concept of a "wormhole," Earth is connected to other galaxies or even another universe in the theory of a multiverse. In short, explosions spread and entangle, causing them to grow in intensity. Beyond the physical, an "explosion" can also be something that happens inside a living being. This hidden explosion is an innate part of being a creature. All creatures are created with inner entities. Humans have emotions that motivate their actions, and I believe animals and plants do as well. Animal mothers feel a need to protect their babies. When their babies are threatened, they explode with instinctive action to protect them, even at the cost of their own lives. I once saw a video on Facebook of a mother deer attacking three dogs to protect her fawn, ignoring her own safety. It made me feel a profound sadness and reminded me of how my own mother used to take me to kindergarten and wait for hours until school was over. When I walked too close to the street, she would pull me back and keep me close. As I write this, I feel an internal explosion of emotion through my tears.

An internal explosion can be triggered by external factors. What happens outside an individual can affect them. As humans, we become entangled with others as a nomadic subject (Braidotti, 2014). A nomadic subject moves and encounters different subjects in an unplanned way, with no finality. A self has been fragmented since birth (i.e., the explosion). These fragments meet other external fragments and become entangled. Therefore, a self is not formed in isolation. We become subjects when we are acted upon by and respond to others (Butler, 2001). We cannot exist as a fully independent subject throughout our lives. According to Jane Bennett's

(2010) distributive agency theory, humans, non-humans, and other-than-humans all exist in a space and time where each is connected and has its own role and agency. In this theory, entanglement goes beyond human-centric actions. It's similar to the universe, in which all materials are intertwined. The planets in our solar system need the Sun to shine on them and organize them, preventing them from colliding with each other. Earth needs the Moon to be habitable by keeping Earth on its axis and stabilizing the climate. The explosion of the singularity of the universe created a diverse range of objects, elements, and entities. This is reflected in the reality of humans being diverse in myriad way. We experience emotions of failure, sadness, excitement, anxiety, doubt, and love. Even in ignorance, humans still have feelings toward others that have developed implicitly.

POP CORN

Popcorn, taken by Author, 2024

I cannot fully recall the memories of the times when my parents took me to the theater in Palembang City. I still can see a glimpse of the seats, people, and the movie but fail to retrieve the details. My parents seldom took me to the theatre as they were busy making money to support my uncles, cousin, and siblings. It was an explosion of our family expenses when my grandmother brought my father's two youngest brothers to live with us for their education. They were 8-10 years older than my oldest sister. My grandparents, on my father's side, had nine children. It is such an explosion in human creation and costs. My parents needed to pay my two uncles' tuition and living costs.

Having uncles at home did not help much because they could not do much with household stuff. They could not clean the house or even cook when my parents were not home. I cannot blame them completely as they might also be the products of gender performativity (Butler, 1998) that puts men with privilege in the home. They just knew how to work to get money for the home, which was not their responsibility at the time. A few years earlier, my father's oldest brother came to our home, bringing his oldest daughter, my oldest cousin, for the same purpose. He wanted my parents to help his daughter's education. My father is a person who is nice to anybody and seldom says no to helping people in need, especially family. He is also known as the person who cares about education more than the other siblings, even though he did not finish school because he wanted to be self-employed.

My parents had different businesses. My father used to run a small grocery store. Meanwhile, my mother ran a fish cake store and small grocery store at a home that used to be my oldest sister's. Regardless of their multiple money sources, having many people go to school simultaneously was a burden for them. They never told us how hard it was to work day and night to ensure that everybody was cared for. The focus was on education and food. We did not expect them to pay for our leisure time, such as going to the theatres in my hometown. They would not do it. This condition explains why I had my first popcorn when I went to the theatre with my college mates. It was too expensive for parents with exploding expenses. I decided to make my own popcorn. I went to the grocery store (i.e., not my family's because we did not sell popcorn; We sold corn for poultry only). I was captivated by the explosions that happened continuously during the cooking process. The kernels went from being a small amount to a big amount. I also thought of the same process experienced by rice and other grains when being cooked rather than heated. A scope of rice can produce rice for two, three, or even four plates (depending on the "greediness" or hunger levels). The explosion, in this sense, helps humans' existence. Without the explosion, humans may need more grains to sustain their lives. Having more grains means more farms, labor, open fields, and sustainability issues. Explosion is entanglement.

TOUCH ME NOT/JEWELWEED (*IMPATIENS CAPENSIS*)

In the back of my home, there was a field with bushes where I used to play with my childhood friends. We used to play soccer, catch grasshoppers (*Omocestus viridulus*), and climb the trees to steal the mangos (*Mangifera indica*) and water apples (*Syzygium aqueum*), which tasted very sweet. The theft made the owner of the land kick us out when they noticed our presence. We used to roam around to explore the field's diverse things. There were green snakes that were not poisonous but very cute for the kids to catch and play with. We also picked up golden berries (*Physalis grisea)* that tasted like passion fruit (*Passiflora edulis*).

Among all the exciting things to do in the field, there was a unique experience with the plant named *celetup* (the local language) or touch me not (American name) or jewelweed (*impatiens capensis*). The unique thing is the seedpods that explode when they are squeezed or pressed. It was fun and satisfying to do it. We were excited when our parents allowed us to play around the field. Our satisfaction with playing with the seedpods helped spread the seeds for the next generation of the plant. We acted like bees taking the nectar of plants and helping them to produce fruits simultaneously. Yet, without our help, the plant could still spread the seeds naturally. Beyond that, we had fun exploding the seedpods, and we invested in the explosions in the future.

Writing this section requires me to recall childhood memories with my friends and other children I have not met for years. The memory-recalling process that I am experiencing now exploded all memories about my childhood, causing me to remember the faces and names and counting them. Now, I am missing them and the old times. I am exploding. Explosion is memory.

BROKEN GLASS

That Sunday, my husband and I decided to take a one-day road trip to the Grand Canyon. The round trip took an entire day of driving. Around 8 p.m., we were famished, having skipped lunch because we were so busy driving. We stopped at Panda Express and chose our favorite, the orange chicken. We decided to eat at home, as all we wanted was to be in the comfort of our house. When we got home, we were exhausted and starving. We prepared the Panda Express dishes on the table while our dogs looked excitedly on, waiting for us to drop some food. I noticed something was missing from my meal. "I need my sriracha," I said, leaving the table to get the bottle from the pantry. I accidentally touched and dropped the soy sauce bottle. It was an explosion in the pantry! My husband stopped eating and came to see what had happened. Glass pieces from the bottle were scattered everywhere, having flown in different directions. We tried to clean up the mess, making sure we picked up every single piece. We were sure we had succeeded until a piece of glass pierced my foot. At that moment, we began to feel uncertain about where all the broken glass could have gone.

An explosion creates fragments that move in messy and unpredictable ways. It is impossible to be sure where all the pieces have moved. After the Big Bang, the elements of the universe moved and expanded in chaotic and unknown directions, without a hierarchical root system like that of a plant. This movement is rhizomatic, like the burrows of rats (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). I believe the self contains fragments of an explosion that are difficult to fully and definitively collect. Thus, the self is always partial. The partiality of the self is connected to the partiality of the narrative that the self can express (Ochs & Capps, 1996). We can attempt to gather these fragments, but it is a task that is never complete. Its wholeness is impossible. Explosion is unsureness.

"Fragments" painting by Author, 2025

MIND EXPLOSION

One day, a classmate's responsive statement to our professor's explanation stunned me.

"Wait a minute. There is an explosion in my brain now," she said with full energy. Her choice of the word "explosion" matched her paralinguistic expressions. Based on my observation at the moment, I describe the situation in the poetry below.

She turns her head to the professor
Her eyes widely open
Her voice tone increases
Her fingers try to note down things
She has a lot of questions

Andrea explained the sensation she was feeling when she said "explosion." She said it felt like a "train running and rushing in all kinds of directions with TONS of possibilities." She thought of myriad, limitless possibilities for knowledge. It was not only she who exploded with curiosity. I also experienced the explosion when I heard her saying the word explosion. . The sensation was explosive. I was curious about what she meant by the explosion. I was stunned by how we frequently mention explosions consciously or unconsciously. I ignored it previously.

When an explosion happens, it creates a distinct sensation that involves emotions and actions. The self is addressed and responds to this sensation (Butler, 2001). The response can be positive or negative, depending on one's personal history.

In my first year as a PhD student, I was so excited to start a new academic journey. I was about to explode with excitement to step into my first class, which was a quantitative research design course. I met the professor and new friends in my cohort, which consisted of 11 students from different backgrounds. We talked with and learned about each other in the introductory week. The next week, I had my first week of a different class. It was a transdisciplinary class, which made perfect sense as to why students in my program were from such diverse educational backgrounds. My feelings were different this time. I experienced an explosion of information from all the different fields. It was all new to me, and the information seemed to be coming from too many directions. I felt both confused and curious. In one of the weekly readings, I came across articles on STEM, which is not my area. I was curious but struggled to make connections, and I became frustrated. In class, I was anxious about not being able to completely master the material. I told one of the professors that I couldn't grasp all of the concepts, that it felt too sudden, like an explosion. She responded, "You don't need to know every single detail. All you need to know are bits and pieces from the different areas." That made me feel better, but the shock of the explosion remained, as I was in a vulnerable situation, pushed outside my own zone of knowledge. Explosion is vulnerability.

HEART EXPLOSION

Explosions can also happen in the heart. In the summer of 2023, I lost my dog, Cinder. She was the most sociable pet that I have ever had. My husband adopted her from a shelter. She was only eight months back then. She had some past trauma and used to hide under the piano when we watered our garden or held a broom. When I first began dating my husband, she went with us everywhere. My husband did not want to leave her alone at home. In addition, he wanted to introduce his dog to me. At first, I did not feel comfortable, as I come from a Muslim family that forbids dogs in the home. When I was a kid, I petted my neighbor's dog. My mother saw and wanted me to swipe my hands on the soil seven times. That rite is common among Muslims. I tried to pet Cinder to start a bond with her. She licked my leg. It was a slimy lick that did nothing to ease my discomfort. Every weekend, I visited my husband's apartment and started feeling comfortable petting her and being licked by her. In the summer of 2021, before our marriage, we

went on road trips along the East Coast, from Maine to Virginia. Cinder traveled with us in the car. We shared our bed with her even though some hotels had queen-sized beds instead of king-size ones. After our marriage, we decided to add more dogs to our family so Cinder could stay home and play with her siblings. She did not feel comfortable sharing things such as toys, but she finally did it.

Happiness with her ended in the summer of 2023. In the blue sky, the thick trees, the 75F temperature, the green backyard with her toys, and the peaceful neighborhood of Cleveland, we exploded. Since taking her to the animal hospital the morning before, we had been in tears. I believe she felt the explosion in our hearts as dogs are good at reading human emotions. In the hospital, the vet put the first dosage on her leg. She was quiet and numb. That was the function of the shot. The second shot was on her back. In a minute, her eyes started to change in color, her heart stopped working, and her breath stopped. She could not even breathe her last breath as it was so quick. The process was quick, but the pain lingers. I am writing this in pain and exhaustion of explosion, my heart. I dared myself to dig into the trauma of losing her. Her red eyes keep spinning in my mind even when I sleep. Her red eyes symbolize the explosion in her veins, which makes blood spread in the eyes. She might not feel the pain, but we did instead. This explosion can be triggered anytime; we do not know when the flame will dim.

Rest in Love. Cinder Johnson (01/26/2011-06/13/2023), taken by Author, 2023

An atom consists of protons and electrons. Removing protons or electrons from the nucleus results in an explosion. An explosion is not always a positive thing; it can also be negative. When I talk about my negative experience of losing Cinder, I focus on the painful aspects, creating an internal explosion of sadness, regret, anger, and depression that dominates my story. This explosion is a result of putting the positive experiences aside. However, if I remember the good things I had with Cinder, the joy, happiness, and fun are what remain, enabling a different kind of explosion.

We exist in a liminal space between positive and negative explosions. Being on the border of these explosions brings tension, violence, and constant flux (Anzaldúa, 2022). Just as protons and electrons constantly interact to form different bonds and compounds, the self is inherently shaped through the interaction of negative and positive stories that ignite these explosions. Explosion is tension.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored how various, interconnected concepts and ideas come together in an entanglement that resonates with my personal experiences. In this view, entanglement arises from the complexities and interplay between the narratives I have presented. Humans are entangled with other humans, as well as with nonhumans and more than humans.

Therefore, an explosion can never be the result of a single entity or story. Each individual carries multiple narratives. To create an explosion requires an atomic reaction at the core, where both positive and negative elements exist to generate energy. As a result, an explosion occurs through the destabilization of these positive and negative energies. In this paper, I have presented both of these energies to demonstrate the power of narratives and create meaning that moves beyond the simple binary of positive and negative experiences.

IMPLICATIONS

The concepts explored here have implications for education and research, particularly in how we treat students. Students are far too diverse and dynamic to be reduced to simple categories. Therefore, educators and researchers must listen closely to their narratives without making immediate judgments or interpretations, as described by Pinar's (1994) concept of *currere*. I challenge the traditional practice of viewing narratives as an inward reduction—collecting and grouping lived experiences—and instead advocate for an outward expansion that begins with an inward explosion, leading to unpredictable, multidirectional paths. I introduce the concept of "explosion" not as data or a method, but as a nomadic, rhizomatic, and agentive process of emergence rooted in posthumanist theories of assemblage and immanence.

This approach recognizes that knowledge is not static but continually generates new insights and directions. Instead of falling into the binary of positive and negative experiences, which leads to judging and labeling students, we should blur this binary by seeing both narratives as part of a complex multi-self. Both positive and negative experiences have existed immanently within the self since its creation. Students from marginalized groups, for example, should not be viewed solely through the lens of negative experiences. They also bring diverse narratives of joy, happiness, love, and fun that outsiders may not see, and vice versa. Understanding a student's history, lived experiences, and constant search for meaning leads to authentic and deeply reflective educational work.

REFERENCES

Anzaldúa, G. (2022). *Borderlands: La frontera*. Aunt Lute Books.

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.

Braidotti, R. (2014). *Metamorphic others and nomadic subjects*. Tanya Leighton Gallery.

Butler, J. (1998). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. In H. Bial & S. Brady (Eds.), *The performance studies reader* (pp. 186–196). Routledge.

Butler, J. (2001). Giving an account of oneself. *diacritics*, *31*(4), 22–40. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1566427?origin=JSTOR-pdf

Butler, J. (2002). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.

Carlson, D. L. (2023). Writing as uprootedness: Onto-epistemological considerations for qualitative research. In D. L. Carlson, A. M. Vasquez, & A. Romero (Eds.), *Writing and the articulation of postqualitative research* (pp. 83–93). Routledge.

De Fina, A. (2015). Narrative and identities. In A. De Fina & A. Georgakopoulou (Eds.), *The handbook of narrative analysis* (pp. 349–368). Wiley.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Derrida, J. (1990). *Margins of philosophy* (A. Bass, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1972)

Gallagher, S. 2014. Self and narrative. In J. Malpas and Hans-Helmuth. *The Routledge companion to philosophical hermeneutics* (pp. 403–414). Routledge.

Haraway, D. (2016). *Manifestly Haraway*. The University of Minnesota Press.

Janks, H. (2009). *Literacy and power*. Routledge.

Mackenzie, C., & Poltera, J. (2010). Narrative integration, fragmented selves, and autonomy. *Hypatia*, *25*(1), 31–54. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01083.x

Ochs, E., & Capps, L. (1996). Narrating the self. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *25*(1), 19–43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.25.1.19

Pinar, W. F. (1994). *Autobiography, politics and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory 1972-1992*. Peter Lang.

Saldaña, J. (2015). *Thinking qualitatively: Methods of mind*. SAGE.

Sears, C. (2011). Integrating multiple identities: Narrative in the formation and maintenance of the self in international school students. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *10*(1), 71–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240911399262

Silk, J. (2000). *The big bang*. Macmillan.

Taylor, S. (2009). *Narratives of identity and place*. Routledge.

BLACK BEARS AND VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

By Melissa Bishop
University of Prince Edward Island

Je vois mes amis! Bonjour! Je suis tres content de te voir! As students enter our French Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), I cheerfully greet each child, along with siblings, parents, and even family pets, using "Je vois" (I see) followed by their name. This ritual became routine during emergency pandemic teaching, as educators, parents, and students gathered in their virtual classrooms from the (dis)comfort of home. One student excitedly shouts out: *Mme, Mme, Mme, look! My Nana came for a porch visit on the weekend, and she brought me ours* (bear in French). Our VLE classroom had been discussing hibernation and the habitats of living things. The child squeezing the stuffed bear had become enthralled with bear habitats and shared this newfound passion with their Nana over a nightly FaceTime call. Tiny hands clasped the middle of a stubby, chocolate-coloured, stuffed bear. Its doe-like eyes and leathery black nose grew more prominent as the child thrust the bear too close to the webcam lens to make out clearly. *Oh wow, je vois un ours!* I call out to the myriad of kindergarten faces, all leaning close to their webcam lenses, hoping to get a clearer view of the stuffed bear held up by their classmate. Despite our physical distance through the glitches, a frozen screen, and a dimly lit room, I felt our shared joy in that virtual moment. These experiences of synchronous teaching cause memories to resurface. The same excitement of being *seen* by an adult through a screen mirrored that of my sister hearing her name called and feeling *seen* some 30 years earlier.

I am transported to a late 1980s living room, its wood-paneled walls and brown-and-orange floral couches bathed in morning light. A sizeable octagonal coffee table dominates the space, and the plush brown-and-beige carpet, both soft and scratchy, presses against my toes. With a bowl of cereal in hand, I shuffle to my usual spot on the floor, settling in front of the floor-model television. The wood-burning stove, framed by a handmade stone backsplash, radiates warmth and the faint scent of a campfire. Between slurps of milk and soggy Wayne Gretzky ProStars cereal, my sister and I, clad in fuzzy pyjamas, hang onto every word from the woman with bright red lipstick. Her magic mirror reflects the unseen audience, and she recites the same two words, followed by a name: "I see James, I see Sara, I see Amanda." A delighted shriek breaks the moment: "That's my name! She sees me! She said my name!" My younger sister's gleeful outburst marks the highlight of our Saturday morning — the chance to hear our names called on *Romper Room*. I linger in this memory, recognizing the echoes of those childhood Saturdays in my present-day teaching. Just as we once waited eagerly for acknowledgment, my students light up at the sound of their names, affirming the simple yet profound joy of being seen.

Moments like these played out in the VLE over the school year. Warmed by the connection we nurtured and despite pandemic measures that drastically changed the spaces we inhabited, I was seeing elements of humanness—a rehumanizing perhaps (Lyle & Caissie, 2021)—in a virtual platform that was novel, strange, and unmapped territory reaching beyond the borderlands of what teaching once was. I noted that my desperate attempts to build a sense of humanness, care, and compassion in the seemingly paradoxical virtual space became realized in moments of shared joy. In considering the future and sustainability of VLEs for young learners, I spent time in deep contemplation and introspection in moments of joy, frustration, anger, sadness, and excitement. I

pondered if our shared joy was pure joy or, perhaps, a joyful expression of respite from the instability that infiltrated our lives.

Here, I draw upon my VLE curricular experiences, taking up Pinar's (1975) method of *currere*, engaging in a researcher-as-participant role, and flowing through and among four moments: the regressive, progressive, synthetical, and analytical. Through this process, I critically examine the interconnectedness of my past educational experiences, contemplate an imagined future composed of my past experiences and future desires grounded in the "historical, social, cultural, and political contexts through which they emerge; and … synthesize my thinking across these moments" (Baszile, 2017, p. vi). The interconnectedness of each moment shaped my internal teacher dialogue, a dialogue that drastically changed at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following sections, through my *currerian* experience(s), I invite you to ponder teachers' narratives, how they bump up against socio-political narratives and the tensions embedded within the VLE.

BLACK BEAR CUBS: EARLY VLE EXPERIENCES

After several years of teaching in VLEs from kindergarten to post-secondary, I noted the changes in how I imagined the future of VLEs, particularly for kindergarten learners. The imagined future of the VLE took on several transformations, as did I, as I moved between and among several imagined teacher personas. I meditated on what may come (Pinar, 1995) and looked toward what was not yet present in VLEs and the temporal changes over three years.

In my first year of VLE teaching, like a bear cub in early spring, I stumbled through the VLE, persisting. Consistent guidelines for teachers, parents, families, adult supporters, and students were lacking. By the second year, I had a strong understanding of navigating the platforms, as did students. In the third year, it became evident that successful implementation of VLEs required more support. I sit in quiet contemplation, imagining the potential futures of VLEs for young learners. As I ponder, I remember the phrases repeated in coffee shops, classrooms, teachers' lounges, and in several of the Ministry of Educations' public statements: *students are behind*; *we need to catch them up*; *COVID ruined learning, my kid/niece/nephew/grandchild/etc. is behind*. Each of these deepened the cut as I imagined the future of VLEs, the potential to be a sustainable educational experience where students, for health, wellbeing, or familial circumstances, could benefit from a well-designed virtual learning environment. I had embraced creating a curriculum of care (Noddings, 2015), teaching with compassion and humanness in a space that was not familiar, and yet there was a sense of disgust for teaching and learning in VLEs. In this moment, I began imagining the future of VLEs and reflected on the scribbles from my teaching notebook.

My teaching notebooks are spaces where I jot, scribble, doodle, and make anecdotal notes of inspiring, thought-provoking, challenging, and sometimes seemingly ridiculous ideas. As I read through the memories, I noted the expanse of imagined futures I recorded and what the VLE could do and possibly become. However, with each anecdotal musing, the "students are behind" catchphrase appears over and over with a scribbled arrow pointing to my familiar handwriting; what *if they are ahead? What if the social skills they have developed in the virtual sphere and the knowledge of digital privacy (VPNs, etc.) far exceeds their peers in the traditional classroom environment? What if we can do education differently, embedding much-needed technological skills with a human element, and expose students to deep learning in the VLE rather than rote*

repetition? What if students who continue in a VLE apply their tech skills (amongst others) and leverage technology for social justice or develop their skills to be drivers of change (i.e., water crisis, education of girls worldwide, the unhoused, or precariously housed)? What if these students have the technology skills to leverage and bring awareness to social justice issues that they are passionate about? I saw students who had learned to engage in critical digital literacy, saw injustices worldwide, and advocated for change. *What if they are the generation to drive change if they are guided rather than perceived as empty slates to be filled with seemingly democratic (Apple, 2018) mandated curricular knowledge positioned as the worthiest?*

What if, like the black bear cubs changing with the temporal seasons, the season for VLEs is now? Of the imagined futures, I hold tight to the possibility of hope and change within the virtual learning experience, where learning is facilitated and embodied rather than strictly a space for knowledge dissemination.

BLACK BEARS & VIRTUAL TEACHERS: SOLITARY, MASTERS OF ADAPTATION

According to Ontario Parks (2023), black bears are solitary animals that are masters of adaptation, characteristics I found within myself as I transitioned to the VLE and transformed our tiny home office into a makeshift classroom. Like the black bear, I taught alone, miles away from my colleagues who, only weeks before, had been 15 feet across the hall. Once a collaborative endeavor, teaching became isolating and solitary as educators began to fumble around the virtual space, preparing lessons for this novel teaching experience. I reminisced about the cream-colored cement walls in a staffroom spotted with second-hand furniture and union posters. No longer were there collegial chats about upcoming events, and the collective lunchtime smells once emitted from the two microwaves perched precariously on a rickety table were replaced by a bleach-like smell. The once full staffroom brimming with educators, now abandoned and left in the wake, accompanied an anxious feeling coupled with hope.

Despite the warming nostalgia, I eagerly adapted and embraced the VLE, optimistic about its potential and implications for future students and educators (Caprara & Caprara, 2022). My optimism was met with frustration as I began consuming as much literature as possible to determine the best possible practices for students; however, the research was sparse, particularly in regards to VLEs and the three- to six-year-old students I taught. In this regressive moment, I began to reflect deeply on my educational experience and overlay it with the present VLE teaching conditions (Pinar et al., 1995). I built my VLE program by drawing upon mandated curricular outcomes to plan student learning experiences. I embraced the nostalgia and sought ways to connect with teachers worldwide, building a collaborative network missing from the VLE. We engaged in deep reflective practices to master VLEs for our school district's youngest learners.

Engaging in an introspective pause (Adams & Buffington-Adams, 2020), a solitary practice, I unlocked the multilayered lived experiences embedded in my VLE teaching with a sense of possibility. Although not without challenges, the VLE required significant adaptability from educators—a skill many educators, I like to think, inherently possess. I began to build a repertoire of digital skills in the first few months of VLE teaching with like-minded educators who saw the possibility of teaching and learning online in the early years. However, worry clouded my excitement in seeing the VLE come to life in a semblance of classroom community. I had the privilege and ability to adapt to the VLE quickly. I had a reasonably reliable Wi-Fi connection, a laptop, and three monitors, all haphazardly connected by HDMI cords. I could *see* students on a

large TV monitor while presenting lessons on another. I was fortunate to continue to have an income, easily accessible food, and a yard in which to exercise or enjoy the fresh air. My living conditions mirrored some families I saw in my daily teaching interactions. However, other families struggled to meet their basic needs during this tumultuous time. As colleagues and I shared our concerns alongside the possibilities, the layers of our conversations revealed a deeper level of impoverishment than we had realized was present in the physical classroom. *Seeing* first-hand the makeshift workspaces of students provided a deeper insight into the lives of families as their child(ren) entered the synchronous VLE from living rooms, kitchen tables, and car seats as students accompanied parents on deliveries or to work. Many students shared tiny spaces with multiple siblings. I witnessed older children thrust into caregiver roles, taking charge while parents worked. Although I was fortunate enough to easily adapt and cope with the seemingly solitary nature of the VLE, it was readily apparent that student and educator experiences were quite varied.

Shifting my contemplation to the progressive, I examined the adaptations students and their families would need to make as we progressed through the school year in the VLE. Some families were fortunate to have access to a cottage, others remained in tiny apartments, and yet others moved into intergenerational homes to survive. Students whose families owned cottages in rural areas sent pictures and videos after driving to the "dump" (garbage landfill) to watch the black bears as a part of our bear inquiry. One student noted, "*Mme there's beaucoup (a lot) ours in the dump this year*." In stark contrast, I was also privy to students' homes, where I saw bare cupboards and refrigerators filled once every few weeks with a trip to the local food bank. I received emails from parents as student absences and the demand for parents to work multiple shifts increased. I was acutely aware of the perpetual anxieties of students, families, and teachers as they coped with being physically distanced from each other. In these moments, I began to imagine the future of VLEs and pulled at the threads of what appeared to be a democratic curriculum that had been purported to be beneficial for all (Apple, 2018). However, the standardized curriculum set forth to create a collective consciousness willfully ignored the visible differences and needs evident in the VLE.

BLACK, BARE CUPBOARDS: POVERTY & POLICY

Black bears are known for their hibernation habits, gorging on food in the autumn to sustain them through a winter sleep. I likened this to my experiences harvesting crops from the garden and preparing them for the long winter ahead. In stark contrast, synchronous learning placed me in the homes of impoverished students whose families struggled to fill cupboards with food. These students, much like the black bear, went without meals to make their food staples last longer. They relied on community gardens in the spring for berries and root vegetables in the autumn. Families relied heavily on food banks, free resources, and donations to ensure their children had a semblance of a meal each day. I excavate the political and institutional narratives guiding decision-making processes in this synthetical realm. I reflect on how we (students, educators, parents) are tethered to political and institutional decision-making narratives that directly impact student and teachers' well-being, including hunger and black, bare cupboards.

The political and institutional narratives that guide the decision-making processes in Ontario VLEs derive from Policy and Program Memorandum 164 (PPM 164, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). PPM 164 requires teachers to provide 300 minutes of learning opportunities, including small group, individual, whole group, and independent work grounded in the Ontario

Curriculum. The document further states that synchronous instruction for Kindergarten programs must consist of 180 minutes, while grades one to three must include 225 minutes. The memorandum indicates that, to ensure educators are well-equipped, teachers will receive training in remote learning strategies to effectively use digital tools, pedagogy and assessment, student and staff mental health and wellbeing, and differentiated instruction in the virtual classroom.

The policy favors synchronous learning while minimizing the importance of asynchronous learning. As I reflect(ed) and pull(ed) at the threads embedded in the policy, flexibility in instructional modes that responded to student needs was not evident. Specific to my situation, kindergarten teachers were to embed play-based learning and inquiry-based learning in their programming seamlessly. However, the lack of flexibility in the curriculum delivery modes disadvantaged me and other early years teachers (McKay & Redford, 2021; Ramu et al., 2022), leading many teachers to revert to digital worksheet-based activities in their VLE programming. Digging deeper into the policy and its implications, the focus on synchronous learning with little flexibility ignores research indicating daily synchronous learning requirements exceed the recommended screen time for young learners (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2019; Trembley et al., 2016). Although PPM 164 addresses screen time and instructional elements of online teaching, the policy does not directly discuss the well-being of students and teachers.

Conversely, Caprara and Caprara (2022) argued that teachers are in a precarious position when synchronous learning is favored but purported as optional—parents can opt their child out of synchronous learning in favor of asynchronous learning in VLEs. Pulling apart the entanglements of synchronous vs. asynchronous learning, I noted that students who learned asynchronously became disconnected from peers and missed opportunities to build relationships in the virtual sphere. However, students who chose synchronous learning contended with the guidelines proposed by the Canadian Paediatric Society (2019) regarding screen time. It became clear that, at an institutional level, the capacity to provide virtual learning on a mass scale, attend to diverse student needs, follow screen time guidelines, and meet the ethical standards of care required further development (Barbour et al., 2013).

SURVIVING THE WINTER: ANALYSIS & POSSIBILITY

Like the Romper Room Story of my childhood, students and teachers are now *seen* in the VLE in a way that was not previously present. We exposed our vulnerable selves through a camera view into our homes. Students and teachers living in poverty, with food insecurity, mental health challenges, and in need of support bared their vulnerable selves to what felt like the whole world. Being vulnerable also opened space for understanding, connection, empathy, and care—all elements that were not evident in the policy documents that guided the VLE implementation process. Bleary-eyed, I would call out to students in hopes of letting them know they are seen. At times, the tears pushed the boundaries of my eyes as parents lost steady employment, struggled to provide necessities, or those who, despite all attempts, could not access services for their child, overshadowed the curricular outcomes and PPM 164 directives.

As I work towards the analytical, a space I currently occupy, I consider the synthesis of acting in the world (Pinar, 2015). While the VLE posed numerous challenges, it also revealed unexpected joys. I witnessed students' resilience and creativity, learning to embrace the VLE as a space of possibility. I carry these lessons with me as I continue to teach, although now in a post-secondary space, and I begin to draw parallels between emergency remote teaching and offering

asynchronous programming for adults. What is clear to me is that teaching virtually requires flexibility, unlike the in-person classroom, while also maintaining a connection and developing a community amongst learners.

REFERENCES

Adams, S. R., & Buffington-Adams, J. (2020). On/beyond *currere*. *The Currere Exchange Journal*, *4*(2), 63–70. https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/69

Apple, M. W. (2018). *The struggle for democracy in education*. Routledge.

Barbour, M., Archambault, L., & DiPietro, M. (2013). K–12 online distance education: Issues and frameworks. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *27*(1), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2013.759452

Baszile, D. T. (2017). On the virtues of *currere*. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *1*(1), vi–ix. https://www.currereexchange.com/uploads/9/5/8/7/9587563/2taliaferrobaszillecejv1i1.pd

Canadian Paediatric Society. (2019). Digital media: Promoting healthy screen use in school-aged children and adolescents. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, *24*(6), 402–408. https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxz095

Caprara, L., & Caprara, C. (2022). Effects of virtual learning environments: A scoping review of literature. *Education and Information Technologies*, *27*, 3683–3722. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10768-w

Lyle, E., & Caissie, C. (2021). Rehumanizing education: Teaching and learning as co-constructed reflexive praxis. *LEARNing Landscapes*, *14*(1), 219–230. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v14i1.1034

McKay, M., & Redford, K. (2021). Reflective inquiry on early years pedagogy: Distance learning and teaching in the post-COVID-19 era. In I. Fayed, & J. Cummings (Eds.), *Teaching in the post COVID-19 era: World education dilemmas, teaching innovations and solutions in the age of crisis* (pp. 465–474). Springer Nautre.

Noddings, N. (2015). *The challenge to care in school* (2nd ed.) Teachers College Press.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2020). *Policy/Program Memorandum 164: Requirements for remote learning.* https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-programdirection/policyprogram-memorandum-164

Ontario Parks. (2023). How to be a bear wise visitor [Blog post]. https://www.ontarioparks.com/parksblog/black-bear-safety/

Pinar, W. F. (1975). *The method of "currere"* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Research Association, Washington, DC, Unites States. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED104766.pdf

Pinar, W. F. (2015). *Educational experience as lived: Knowledge history, alterity*. Routledge.

Pinar, W. F., Reynolds, W. M., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. M. (1995). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. Peter Lang.

Ramu, M., Shaik, N., Arulprakash, P., Jha, S. K., & Nagesh, P. (2022). Study on potential AI applications in childhood education. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*, *14*(03), 10375–10382. DOI: 10.9756/INT-JECSE/V14I3.1215

Tremblay, M. S., Carson, V., Chaput, J. P., Connor Gorber, S., Dinh, T., Duggan, M., Faulkner, G., Gray, R., Janson, K., Janssen, I., Katzmarzyk, P., Kho, M., Latimer-Cheung, A., Leblanc, C., Okely, A., Olds, T., Pate, R., Phillips, A., Poitras, V., Rodenburg, P., Sampson, M., Saunders, T., Stone, J., Stratton, G., Weiss, S., & Zehr, L. (2016). Canadian 24-hour movement guidelines for children and youth: An integration of physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep. *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, *41*(6), S311–S327. https://doi.org/10.1139/apnm-2016-0151

"The Daily Grind" and Duality of "Going Back Home"

By Jody Googins & Lauren Angelone
Xavier University

In spring of 2024, my colleague, Lauren, asked me, Jody, if I would be her friend … her *critical* friend, to be more specific. Lauren was about to embark on her fall semester sabbatical from her teacher educator position at Xavier University. During that time, she was going to teach in a 6th grade classroom, and she was going to enact a self-study (LaBoskey, 2004). She had done some research and reading on ventures back into a K-12 classroom space for teacher educators, specifically those engaged in self-studies, the experience of going back "home," and she came across some literature about the benefits of having a "critical friend," someone who could be a source of feedback and help to address the concerns found in "the difficulty of assessing one's own practice and reframing it" (Schuck & Russell, 2005, p. 108). Lauren had decided that one way she wanted to gather data for her study was through daily blog posts, and she wondered if I would be willing to read the posts and critically engage in her reflections and experiences. I immediately agreed.

I was drawn to this experience for several reasons. First—like Lauren—I believe that spending time in K-12 classrooms is essential for university-based teacher educators. So many of us lose touch with the "daily grind" (Jackson, 1968, p. 1) of the lives of K-12 teachers, with the highs and lows of classroom life with children and young people and colleagues and administrators and parents. Going back into the K-12 classroom can provide essential learning for those of us who have jumped into higher education spaces. In my doctoral work and for much of my scholarly journey since, I have engaged in reading about teacher educators returning to the classroom (Christenbury, 2007; McDonough, 2017; Michie, 2019; Peercy, 2014; Poetter, 2012; Scherff & Kaplan, 2006; Spiteri, 2010). Like Lauren, I, too, had an itch to return to K-12 teaching, but here Lauren was actually *doing it*! I wanted to hear about the experience and could think of no better way to do that than to read her daily blogs.

Second—Lauren and I had spent time together troubling the theory-to-practice divide that exists in teacher preparation programs. We both consider ourselves critical scholars, and we both have engaged in curriculum theorizing, but we also both formerly were practicing K-12 teachers and subsequently have taught methods classes for several years, and we see the theory-practice divide often. That there is a tension between the theoretical foundations of our programs and the daily practice of K-12 teachers is not new knowledge; troubling how we can do better for our students—our pre-service teachers—has driven both of us during our time in higher education. So, I wanted to see how Lauren would balance that tension, that duality that she would surely experience. How would she be able to take her critical stance and transfer that into critical pedagogy in her sabbatical classroom, all while meeting the demands of that space, the demands of her host teacher's very real, very important obligations as the teacher of record?

Finally—I knew that Lauren and I would get a chance to write about this experience and share what we learned (and are still learning). Lauren's self-study and the fall we spent knee-deep in her experiences speak to Pinar's (1994) question that drives *currere*: "What has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?" (p. 20). I knew Lauren would come away from her time in the classroom with not only practical ways of applying new knowledge but also some

ideas about teachers' lives and how we can prepare our university students to step into these spaces better equipped to be in it for the long haul.

Pinar (1994), through *currere*, urges us to consider the past, the present, and the future to synthesize our experiences, to interrogate our "relation to the Self, and its evolution and education" (p. 19). Through the *currere* method, a teacher-scholar can deeply consider Pinar's (1994) foundational question: "What has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?" (p. 20). Poetter (2024) uses the concept of "Curriculum Fragments" to do this work. Poetter (2024) defines curriculum "as a dynamic, experiential happening among living things such as human beings, and not merely as a static, scripted, sluggish entity that forms the basis of lesson plans and scripted activities in schools and college classrooms" (p. 1). Poetter asserts that curriculum—"teaching and learning and educating and thereby becoming more richly human"—is deeply personal and educative and informative and life-giving. When Pinar (1994) writes about the *currere* method, how we engage in our educational past, present, and future to achieve a synthesis of sorts, he likens our memories and musings, the words used to describe them, to photographs. Poetter's (2024) "photographs" are his fragments, "relatively short bits of experience, happenings in the world, narrate[d] … as stories" (p. 3). These fragments—short, biographical bits—give form to the humanity of curriculum, our lived experiences *as* curriculum, and illustrate how to enact the method of *currere*.

In this essay, we (Lauren and Jody) share Lauren's blog posts as fragments and Jody's comments as "reflective interludes" (Poetter, 2024, p. 5). Homing in on the recurrent threads of "the daily grind," as theorized by Jackson (1968), and the concept of teacher educator/K-12 teacher duality, as explored by McDonough (2017), Lauren's fragments (blog posts) illustrate her educative experiences, and Jody's "reflective interludes" (Poetter, 2024, p. 5) help to synthesize the data, to elicit "the meaning of the present" (Pinar, 1994, p. 26), and—for us—"deeper knowledge and understanding, of both [our] field of study and that field's symbolic relation to [our] evolving biography" (p. 27).

"The Daily Grind"

August 28, 2024

Lauren: Blog Post

This is how I remember it was being a science teacher—always dragging in materials. Stuff is so important! Today was ice vs. dry ice observations. Here was my morning:

4:30am - Alarm goes off.
5:00am - Meet friends to run - speedwork for Queen Bee training.
6:10am - Grab coffee to go from Starbucks.
6:20am - Lurk outside of Graeter's until it opens at 6:30am. The lady let me in a few minutes early, yay! Buy dry ice for today's observation (can't buy it the night before or it will just be gone; Graeter's is the only place in the area that has it). Use PTA funds and make sure I don't get charged tax.
6:35am - Rush home to shower.
7:20am - Arrive at school. Throw down materials.

7:30am - Writing in content areas PD. Some good ideas, but meh in the morning when you are trying to get ready for the day.
8:05am - Set up for dry ice observations. Needed a hot plate to add thermal energy to both ice and dry ice.
8:10am - Students start arriving.

Starting to regret choosing this unit, but it went well and was highly engaging, encouraging good observations and questions. But I am so tired.

On grading - Over the past week, I also graded a few things, which reminded me just how much I dislike grading the same thing in the same way over and over again. I much prefer to sit with an individual or group and discuss work. Thankfully, I only have one class of 32, but I remember the days of grading 125 of the same thing and thinking, even if I spend one minute on each one, that's over two hours of my time. What does this mean for my work with teacher candidates? A philosophy of assessment is essential. What are you trying to do with each assignment that is graded. Do they all need grading? Self-grading, peer grading, what else is beneficial? Perhaps this is less of a concern for Primary majors since they may have just one or two classes of students, but for those in 6th and up, they likely have 4-6 classes. The time is too much, but also when the time is too much, the quality is low. I'm a fan of completion grades for things that I think are important to do/participate in, but not as important that there are right answers yet. In my own methods class, I moved quickly from grading their big lesson plan at the end to meeting on each section as we covered it and helping students make choices and changes. By the end they were a joy to grade because I had been intimately involved in the process. How to do this with kids in science?

JODY: COMMENT

Lauren,

The schedule you provided from 4:30am to 8:10am is EXHAUSTING, and yet it is what I remember as well! Not dry ice, obv, but the rushing around that can only occur within a specific time period. Yes - I understand the after-thought of - Should I have really chosen this for my first unit? But I love that you chose to lean in on this first lesson. It sets a tone, really.

So - what I am really thinking about now is the notion of time. How to most value it, how to be efficient but also personalized, how to set it aside, how to calm our own angst around it. I think your discussion around grading is important. I think your discussion around running around to prep is important. And each of these topics merits our attention with teacher candidates. But I am left thinking about what I wrote to you on Sunday - is there a work-life balance? How do we teach this? How do we balance quality feedback and attention to students, while saving ourselves? How can we realistically set our teacher candidates up for the actual elements of the job and for success simultaneously?

I have no answers, but I love the questions.

NOVEMBER 12, 2024, AND NOVEMBER 13, 2024

LAUREN: BLOG POST

The Honeymoon is Over

It was a good run. It's November and I only have 10 days left at [this school]. I feel comfortable there and feel like I'm doing good work and will miss it so much, but I finally feel ready to go back to [my institution].

There's so much to unpack about this day. I really feel the impossible work of teachers. The amount, the emotion in it, and the constant noise (literal and figurative) that surround a school day. I don't think I could do this full time again … or I do, but I think I would be the old grouchy teacher.

1. Test corrections and reflecting on what was learned

   Students completed test corrections and the average score on the test is now an 83%. I feel like the corrections and reflections were fair. I would make a lot of edits to the test (and will for Mrs. Y to use soon). I also realized that, when teaching over multiple years, you get better at constructing usable tests and also pointing students to the right concepts during instruction to help them be better at the tests. This does not make the test invalid (statistically, it's not valid either), rather it is a way that teaching starts to align as a whole in a way that makes students successful in that particular classroom. I'm not sure this success would translate to the state tests, however. Yesterday, when the grades were published in Canvas (not the final grade, but parents didn't know that), the parent of a student in my class emailed. She wanted to know if he could retake the test (she didn't know about the corrections yet). I used his corrections and gave him full credit instead of half credit for each one. I'm not really sure why I did that … to appease the parent?

2. A student issue right at the end of class

   Ugh - this student is in trouble in several classes but not usually in science because he likes it. I mentioned him before and I have noticed that it's a trend since Mrs. X is gone, but also I feel like the way I tried to teach today was less hands-on and less interesting to him. Today, he was being destructive with scissors. Before I could register what he was doing - Mrs. W told him to stop doing that and to put the scissors away. It's important to note here that she did this before it registered with me. It's so hard to be trying to walk a class through an activity with accuracy and enthusiasm, with 32 students. There is ALWAYS someone whispering or poking at something or whatever and you have to tune it out to deliver … and I can tune it out to a certain extent, but it also throws me off just a bit and has me tripping over reading things or giving instructions at times. IT IS SO HARD. I know I got better at this, and it makes me feel like I have ADHD, and maybe I do, but I think it would be a challenge for anyone. So, then I'm tuning out the noise further, and we are finishing up the activity. It's another computer simulation with a very loud noise when you click on something. Everyone is doing it together, so it should be quiet except when we all move to the next thing. This student's computer is constantly making the noise as he clicks around however he sees fit. Yet, I still ignore that. Class is nearly over, and I look over. He starts being destructive again with the scissors, and I take away his recess telling him that he can make it right then. He starts shouting, and I respond. I don't even believe in taking away

recess! I can't remember exactly what was said after that aside from me saying I would be contacting his dad, but he got mad, and Mrs. W asked if we should add disrespect to the email, and I said yes. Not my best moment, but also the disrespect was kind of unreal. And teachers deal with much worse. I'm not sure I would sign up for that for 34 years. At least I know that his homeroom teacher is in daily contact with the parents and they are supportive or that would cause even more stress.

3. Teacher camaraderie that comes from these difficult student issues

As soon as this happened, Mrs. W texted the team. I actually leaned over to her and said I wasn't even sure if I could take his recess today, but I just reacted. Right away the team is saying that they will contact the parent and put it in the online system for documentation. Mrs. W and I both sent details, and I sent a picture of the folder. I am slightly embarrassed, but also I know this is not some unusual situation with this student. It's just the first time that I've had an issue like this, and again, I feel the weight of being the professor who should be amazing in all the things. I am not, and I feel a little like giving up. After class, I stepped out in the hall, and Mrs. Z was there being supportive and incredulous at the situation. I offered to call the student's dad, but she said that she would take care of it. The teacher who has him right before lunch said that she would make sure he did what he was supposed to do (to make it right) and then stand on the wall at recess. I felt very supported by the teachers, and I remember how teachers get through all of this. I felt more a part of the team today than I had before. In my shame, they said, it's not you, and we'll help take care of it. And maybe it IS me, but I needed to hear that and feel that. Teaching is so much. It's so much planning and grading and teaching, but even if you think you have that figured out, it's noise and lack of attention, and then parents are mad and then a student acts up and it's just. so. much. All in just one period.

[Thank god it was pajama day, so at least I was in my pajama pants.]

Rollercoaster of Teaching

What a difference a day makes! Today was great... the student came to me and apologized immediately. (The principal called home last night. I appreciate the support and realize how protected I am from parents.) I thanked him for apologizing. I said if he's bored, I have a cool science book on my desk that he can look at in those moments before starting to destroy anything. He seemed back to himself, so that was good. Word from the teachers in the morning was that there was an even bigger student issue in the afternoon. A student got mad and ripped a paper in half and tried to run away. What a day!

In class, students worked really well on the new project together. They are researching a water contamination issue in Ohio, and they seemed really invested, for the most part. It's the kind of high-level thinking activity that I think is great for advanced students.

I brought in a game as a reward if they worked hard, but I forgot to tell them about it until halfway through class. Something started going wrong with Canvas (on their end), so for the last 10 minutes, we played the game. Students had fun, and it lightened the mood. Ended on a much better note!

I am working on thank you gifts for teachers and notes for students for my last day. I decided on little bundt cakes for teachers with thank you notes and a multi-color pen for students. I plan to write each of them an encouraging note. I will miss this place!
[Add on - team meeting this morning was talking about Tier 2 students. It's hard to think of those students that need some help, but not as much as students on IEPs and whatnot. There are SO MANY things to think about, and this is another very important one to add to the list of many important ones.]

JODY: COMMENT

I am thinking about this post, paired with your November 12th post. This is aptly named "Roller Coaster of Teaching," lol. I read this in my email when you posted last week, and I thought about the drama of the previous day with the scissor/student episode. I thought about how emotional I am (I know this is not about me, but I get my teacher feelings going when I read your posts!!). I am working very hard as I age to be less reactive and emotional and instead to take deep breaths and let things settle a bit. But the last two days' posts have me thinking about those teaching days when events or disturbances would just throw everything for a loop! Of course, this still happens to me now! (Case in point: the faculty assembly meeting) Throughout this semester, we have discussed just how conflicting everything in teaching is. We have also talked about how it often overtakes one's personal life, how it enters the personal space. When I think about these last two days with you, and really many events over the semester, it makes me think about how many things come at teachers and how fast they come … And then go! Just the emotional ups and downs of working within a bureaucracy that is fraught with contradictions, alongside working with children and their families, all while teachers are working to separate the public and the private, is conflicting.

DUALITY OF IDENTITY

AUGUST 9, 2024

LAUREN: BLOG POST

Dr. Lauren

I'm not sure what bearing this has on my RQ, but I think it deserves its own post. Some background … when I finished my PhD, I got a job working part time at a junior high. I was also adjuncting part time at [a university]. I was self-conscious about having a PhD and what other teachers might think about it, so I decided to just go by Mrs. Lauren to fit in better. Philosophically, I'm opposed to this, knowing that more women do not use their title than men and that someone might use a man's title without having the sort of negative feelings they might have toward a woman. Also, I think it's good for kids to see a female who has a doctorate. But, I guess at that time, fitting in and having teacher camaraderie was more important to me and honestly, my ego is not that tied up in requiring people to use a certain title. At the end of the year, a student who had

found out that I had a PhD said, “Mrs. Lauren, why don't you go by Dr.? You earned it.” That has stayed with me.

So, when I was visiting the school at the end of last year, the teacher just introduced me to the class as Ms. Lauren. I didn't say anything, but it was on my mind. This summer, as we were planning, she asked what I wanted to go by. I explained that I didn't really care, but that at [my institution] with students, I go by Dr. Lauren. Both teachers, Mrs. X and Mrs. Y were there, and they said, “You're like Dr. Biden! You should go by Dr.!” So, I decided that I will go by Dr. even though it does make me uncomfortable in this setting. I am completely used to it in a higher ed setting. I made a little name tag for my desk, and the office asked me to fill out one of those About Me pages to hang in the hallway. I used Dr. for both, but I was still feeling a little unsure.

Last night was the family picnic at the school. Students and families came to have hot dogs and play and meet their teachers. Mrs. X used Dr., but it sounded like she was also uncomfortable saying it (or was it just me?). She used it to introduce me to another teacher, and I was like, just Lauren for peers and Dr. for kids. No families really asked, but some seemed a bit confused. I am definitely overthinking this, but apparently, I do not like feeling like I stand out, even if it is a perceived positive. I just think it will be a barrier for me fitting into the school culture … which had me thinking of something [my colleague] said, “You can never go back home.” The first time I heard this phrase was from a teacher who had left my school (I got her position) and went into administration. She wasn't all that happy about it and was thinking about coming back but said the same thing. “You can never really go back home.” I've thought about it a lot as someone who still identifies first as a teacher. I think of those years fondly and there's always something in the back of my mind telling me that I could go back if I wanted/needed to. But can I? Even in this short term, dipping a toe in, capacity? [My colleague] said that we are changed by our experiences, especially the transformative theoretical work done in a doctoral program, and we just aren't the same so when we go back, it's not the same. Home isn't the same either. And so what will it be like to go back, as Dr. Lauren? I can go by Mrs., but I am Dr. Lauren. I am not just teaching, I am writing and theorizing about my time back in school. As much as I want to experience the joys of classroom teaching and the camaraderie of the profession again, I am an outsider, and I'm not sure even getting a full-time job in a K-12 school would change that.

Jody: Comment

I read this post last week, and I have been thinking about it. I am co-teaching a class this semester with a colleague who is not “Dr.,” so I am self-conscious about calling myself Dr. while I am standing next to her! And I have grappled with the Dr. label for so long. I wrote a short essay about it a few years ago. (I am going to try and dig it up.) My English teacher roots had me thinking of Romeo's “What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet,” where Shakespeare says names are irrelevant. I thought of this next to John Proctor's proclamation: “How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!” in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, which posits that a name is EVERYTHING. These literary illusions don't really get to THIS particular issue, though, do they? Really - it's about power, feminism, humility, identity, and all of the personal feelings and tendrils wrapped around these notions.

I wrote in my last comment that you are living a dual life, and this post only adds to this puzzle. Mrs. X's lack of comfort is unfortunate, but it doesn't change the fact that you ARE Dr.

Lauren! You are HER!!! (Does this hearken the "He is HIM" language of young people?? I hope so!) I don't want to speak for you or others here, so I will leave this part in first person: I wonder when I will ever be able to simply stand strong and proud in my accomplishments, strengths, and successes. Why is it so hard for me (women) to project our power instead of apologize? Even in this environment where you are a guest and feeling like an outsider: you are an EXPERT in the field; not to mention - you are really nice and helpful and collaborative and innovative. I hope you settle into your power in this environment.

SEPTEMBER 19, 2024

LAUREN: BLOG POST

Epic Fail from the Tech Professor

Today before school and during plan was a lot more of discussing Kitchen Chemistry and then making last minute changes that really challenge me as someone who likes to carefully create and then execute a plan. Thankfully the next unit is different content between the advanced and regular classes, so I can really create the plan for advanced and take that off their plate while they create the regular classes' work. I am designing a 4 week plan for Earth's Cycles. Both Mrs. X and Mrs. Y think they are boring standards, so I feel motivated to make it fun and meaningful.

Yesterday, Mrs. X wanted to give a pretest on the metric system. Mrs. Y created a 4-question pretest in Canvas, but Mrs. X wanted to use the post-test as the pretest. This was quite a bit longer and more detailed. She wanted it to be digital and auto-graded. The way [this district's] systems work is complicated. They have Google, but not Google Classroom. Instead, they have Canvas. If they want a digital quiz, they can use a Google form, but it won't be auto-graded. They still have to grade it and put it into TAC. If the quiz is in Canvas though, it is auto-graded and then can be synced up to TAC. Since I know Canvas well (and told Mrs. X that I was an expert), I offered to create a quiz that could be auto-graded. I created it yesterday and shared it with Mrs. X.

First, Mrs. X still had the old quiz in, and the students started the four-question quiz. I was watching them and told her I thought this was the wrong quiz. We got that figured out, and they started the new quiz. In my quiz, I used matching, fill in the blank, and multiple fill in the blank, so that the entire quiz would auto-grade. The first thing I noticed is that some of my "multiple fill in the blank" questions weren't working, but some were. I investigated and realized that the ones where I had a decimal point were not working. Apparently, the decimal point messes up the formatting somehow. That wasn't a me problem, but then I had to fix the problem. I made changes to the original quiz and broke those questions up into several multiple-choice questions. I reuploaded this to Mrs. X's class and realized that, since one class had taken it already, it didn't just add a new one, it replaced the one they had taken, but their answers were still there, the quiz format was just different and they all look like they have a lower score. That's fine, I plan to use fudge points and go over each one to fix that mistake. As I looked at each one, I realized that I did not predict very well what a 6th grader might type in for a fill in the blank. First, they spelled a lot wrong, and I couldn't predict all of their misspellings. Second, I made a blank for a number and included the units so that they wouldn't have to include the units, but then they did include the units. Lastly, on some, I thought I had included the right answer plus a bunch of different possible answers, but only the possible answers were there. I also think I noticed that Canvas also counts

capital letters as different from lower case in fill in the blank! What a nightmare. So, I fixed as much as possible for her next three classes but will be "hand" grading each one to account for my mistakes and the limitations of Canvas.

A few things I learned is that, though I was trying to recreate the test with fidelity, fill in the blank is not best for use with 6th graders. Next time, I would create multiple choice instead. Or, I would have them write a short answer and just hand grade. It might have been better to focus on the content outcomes for matter and include a few metric questions.

JODY: COMMENT

Okay Lauren … This week was a doozy! I have so many thoughts, and I read them all in a row, so I hope I don't forget some of the particulars.

I can't stop thinking about the conundrum of time, planning, the standards, activities, technology, chaos, 6th grade, and all the things in between. In reflecting on all you have written in the last two weeks, which I digested in one sitting, it seems like the chaos began with trying to spend time executing a unit from Teachers Pay Teachers not created by ANY of the people teaching it. I have continued to go back to this! As educators working in teacher prep programs, we want to make sure we teach candidates that their time is valuable and that there are many great resources out there for them and that not everything needs to be created from scratch. HOWEVER, not all resources are created equally AND one should never just take someone else's unit/lesson and drop it in! Your reflection about a "dress rehearsal" connects here. If what we are doing doesn't fit with all the relevant elements, it might be destined to fail or at least be chaotic. When we are planning, I think of all that must be considered: the curriculum (standards), the students in our classrooms, our own philosophical orientation to teaching, our values and how they are present in our decisions, and so much more.

I am glad you can focus on the Earth's Cycles. Because life in [your school] 6th grade is a little crazy!

CONCLUSION

William Ayers (2001) says "A life in teaching is a stitched-together affair, a crazy quilt of odd pieces and scrounged materials, equal parts invention and imposition" (p. 1). In her time during sabbatical, Lauren so quickly flipped the switch into that "life in teaching," the "crazy quilt" of her experiences. As Lauren and I dialogued through sabbatical, we both couldn't help but linger on her reflections about that life, about the near-constant pull to be "teacher-ing" at any possible moment alongside the push and pull of her dual identities. Lauren describes the chaos of her days, illustrating how she contends with the sheer volume of obligations, decisions, steps, time constraints, student issues, and complicated relationships, which all, of course, harkened her back to her own early days as a K-12 teacher. And she describes how she was so often conflicted about her role in that space, as a teacher educator, as a former K-12 teacher, as a scholar, and more. This essay includes just five of Lauren's 78 posts, but her experience was rife with questions and reflections around the lived curriculum of teachers: the demands, the doubts, and the joy of that space. "What has been and what is now the nature of our educational experience?" What an apt

question that Lauren and I, along with teachers in the field, will continue to grapple with as we contend with the chaos and duality that a life in teaching certainly includes.

References

Ayers, W. (2001). *To teach: The journey of a teacher.* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Christenbury, L. (2007). *Retracing the journey: Teaching and learning in an American high school*. Teachers College Press.

Jackson, P. W. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. Teachers College Press.

LaBoskey, V. K. (2004). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings. In J. Loughran, L. M. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell, *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 817-870). Kluwer.

McDonough, S. (2017). Taking a return to school: Using self-study to learn about teacher educator practice. *Studying Teacher Education*, *13*(3), 241–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2017.1365700

Michie, G. (2019). *Same as it never was: Notes on a teacher's return to the classroom*. Teachers College Press.

Peercy, M. M. (2014). Re-learning the intensity of teaching: Using self-study to examine my practices as a teacher educator. In D. Garbett & A. Ovens (Eds.), *Changing practices for changing times: Past, present and future possibilities for self-study research* (pp. 164–166). Tenth International Conference on Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices.

Pinar, W. (1994). *Autobiography, politics, and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory, 1972-1992*. Peter Lang.

Poetter, T. S. (2012). *Teaching again: A professor's tale of returning to a ninth grade classroom*. Information Age Publishing.

Poetter, T. S. (2024). *Curriculum fragments: A currere journey through life processes*. Routledge.

Scherff, L., & Kaplan, J. (2006) Reality check: A teacher educator returns home. *Studying Teacher Education*, *2*(2), 155–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/17425960600983189

Schuck, S., & Russell, T. (2005). Self-study, critical friendship, and the complexities of teacher education. *Studying Teacher Education*, *1*(2), 107–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/17425960500288291

Spiteri, D. (2010). Back to the classroom: Lessons learnt by a teacher educator. *Studying Teacher Education*, *6*(2), 131–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2010.495890

THE BELLY OF THE WHALE
WHO DARES TO CERTIFY?

By D. Joe Ohlinger
Purdue University Fort Wayne

STORY

My name is Joe. Maeve and I felt the draw last night in our courtyard staircase. The night air was filled with the reverberating hush and swish we knew to be the surf. There was cool wind and a slightly acrid smell. Was it the quiet time after the evening meal, the absence of revving cars and buses, their horns and tires sirening, or was it the tempest, coming out of the west, pushing the waves assertively into the shore that made the sound of the swell so compelling? We decided to go visit the ocean post dusk. This was a clandestine activity. Mama was working late. It was essentially Maeve's bedtime, but this was a high priority—like art supplies, fresh fruit, and dancing … we needed the experience. Maeve likes forays outside of the "special world of childhood." I shrugged off the irresponsible parent voices; this was good curriculum. We walked to the corner and turned into the wind, the two blocks to the beach. The sky was telling a dramatic story—black purple, horizontal gates squeezing a dying ember of pale yellow. The earth's rotation would put an end to that soon; besides, high above us a crescent moon was gathering its own luminescence. The San Francisco pedestrian walkways are a sacred space. This is a code that is vigorously followed; cars will stop and wait patiently for pedestrians—even a greying, long-haired man and a Kindergarten girl with clothes flapping in the wind, rushing to the indomitable dark of the dunes and ocean beyond. On the other side of Ocean Beach there is no sidewalk, just the steep embankment of a three-story dune. We crossed the last street and clambered past the traffic light, similar to Lucy's encounter with the lamp post in C. S. Lewis's (1950) *Narnia*. We padded up and up between two bluffs and felt the full weight of the wind and the sound of surf. Like vertigo, the ocean pulled us to discover its secrets in the dark. There was something terrifying about being next to so much energy in the darkness. It was a hundred-or-so-yard walk to the threshold. We couldn't make out details in the sand, so we glided into this soft, yielding terrain, the last light of a fretful sky and the reflected white-tops of waves showing us the way. When we arrived within the foam's reach, it seemed, impossibly, that the ocean had become intimate. The darkness that hid the expansive seascape now showed us only a coyishly lapping invitation. Sound defined this demesne, and touch—the buffeting wind and sloshing shore. We stood there, silently, for many long moments, evolution's prodigy looking back at its womb with only our toes touching the fecund immensity before us. I was trying to sense the connection, understand why there is such lure and excitement coming here to this margin, this boundary. Perhaps the pull of our nighttime ocean walk was a longing to meet some emissary from the deep. After a time, I felt satisfied, like reaching the end of a story, and felt it was time to say goodnight and go back to the brightly lit little box we called home.

At the end of the year, Maeve encountered another boundary, sponsored by her school: the Kindergarten graduation ceremony. I chose a seat near the center aisle, perhaps 10 rows back, thinking this would allow me a good gander at her and that she could see me, too. I was early. Like the seagulls that descend and mob the possibility of food, so that all can be seen on the ground is a flurry of white and gray feathers, and screeching, gaping beaks, the parents began standing up

one by one, smartphones in hand, to capture the moment. Soon, all I saw was a line of black coat backs. This was one of life's absurd moments for me. I looked left and right, laughed, and wondered if I should start elbowing my way into the fray, so that my daughter would see me advocating for her. Many onlookers were holding their phones above their heads, like the paparazzi. There was an urgency about it, a need to capture this moment, to record it. I imagined what the children saw … a quickly forming conclave, an array of black phones with red glowing indicator lights. Did I see the ubiquitous camera smile start to bloom across the stage? Yes, crooked, frozen, Stepford smiles on a hundred 6-year-olds mimicking their parents' urgency, soaking up the hidden curriculum of this ceremony. Through shoulders, I glanced my daughter's face, smiling as well. This feverish crowd was taking this threshold moment and turning it to stone.

CAMPBELL

Campbell (1949/2008) uses the iconic image of the swallowing leviathan to introduce a pivotal stage in a hero's journey—the turn towards inner work. All would-be heroes and heroines need to follow Jonah through two vicious rows of razor teeth into the dark, cavernous belly of the whale. To the outside observer, and to the literalists, the hero appears to die. If we stayed in the literal realm we might hope the hero could be saved. The scene would morph into a quest for escape, to see whether the hero could cut themself out, emerge, kill the whale and return to the world—like so many action films depict the hero-story arc. We are afraid of our hero "self" dying. In understanding the story metaphorically, such a feat would be complete folly. Campbell explains how, metaphorically, dying is the margin we need to cross to do the serious inner work. The mouth and teeth of the whale are gates to be passed, for the worthy, in order to continue the metamorphosis inside (Campbell, 1949/2008, p. 77). The opposite rows of teeth represent the contradictions and dualities that make up our epistemology, and we need to pass, move beyond these toothy threshold guardians. The monster leviathan becomes the womb, the inner landscape, the container where the real traveling is done. These images also symbolize a "death" for the ego of the hero, a necessary event for him or her to go deeper into the curriculum. Campbell also uses the image of the temple entrance to illustrate this idea. The pillars are carved with the images of fearsome guardians, like the teeth in the mouth of the whale. For the hero, "the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation … the hero goes inward, to be born again" (p. 77). Whether whale, temple, cave, hole, or myriad other spaces, these images convey "in picture language, the life-centering, life-renewing act" (p. 77), which is a far cry from a supposed gory death.

A similar scene from the film *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) now makes more sense. In the scene, Luke's mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, is seen dueling Darth Vader. At one point Obi-Wan stops fighting, turns off his light sabre and allows Vader to kill him. Later we see Obi-Wan return in a kind of spectral state, and it is made known that, although he has died, he is more powerful than he was before. Another familiar symbol of crossing the threshold and entering into the inner world is the rabbit hole that swallows Alice in Carroll's (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.*

CURRICULAR IMPLICATIONS

This is about a boundary between the outer, literal world, and the inner world. We fear the teeth, but the belly of the whale is exactly where we want to be, for it is the hero's second womb.

Curricular implications are tentative and imaginative. The stage implies a certain amount of deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge. There is also the sense that the hero/learner needs to enter into a zone of uncertainty. There are no stated objectives written on the board. There is no syllabus with dates, rubrics, and assignment descriptions. There is no "treatment specification" (Schubert, 2009, p. 80) when entering the cave.

One way this might inform teaching and learning is by focusing on the *conditions* inside the whale, the inner sanctum of the temple, or the dark fecundity of the cave as accoutrements of the learning environment. I've been on several retreats with mythologist Michael Meade in the redwood forests north of San Francisco. In Mendocino, the "work" we do is in a 1920s era lodge. The main room is partitioned into smaller spaces through the use of benches, tables, and tapestries. There is a large fireplace at one side. The outer seats are raised. We are packed in there, ready to be baked. There is a concerted design to our gathering space on the retreats. All energy is focused in that space; it doesn't leak out. Meade's words, "This is an alchemical vessel," struck a chord. It was a space for listening and speaking—for sharing, unscripted, from the heart, for "instant community." In that space were made text-to-self and text-to-world connections. Myths have a pedagogic function, and the stories we listened to evoked the thresholds, conflicts, emotions, insights, and testimonials of our lived experiences. We were doing autoethnography in real time. We were swallowed by Mendocino—removed from contact from the outside world, called in day after day to bear witness to ourselves and each other. It was not really a "retreat" in the sense that you relax and meditate—it was one kind of "hard work." van Manen (1986) describes learning spaces beyond the physical in *The Tone of Teaching*. In his description, the physical space takes second stage to the psychological, emotional, tonal, and arguably spiritual vessel that teachers create through their words, touches, even glances, and also through the way curriculum and ways of being are embodied. Meade often talked about the need for "instant community" in a mass society. We need to create community in the places and spaces available to us in the modern world. Today's classroom seems like such a space, but it can be found in even more ephemeral moments.

I recall walking towards a party on the top floor of the Hyatt in New Orleans. The AERA Division B post-meeting party had no music, no drinks, and no raucous revelry, although there was revelry of a different kind. Isabel and I walked into a scene, a space that immediately spoke to our senses as having the timbre of gravitas, as that most courageous of actions was apparent—vulnerability. Two elders, Dr. Grace Lee Boggs, who had just received the Ella Baker/Septima Clark award, and her introducer, Dr. Vincent Harding, social activist, and civil rights leader, were leading a conversation of sorts. The lights were low, people were seated around a table, but these details blurred as the focus was on the story being unfurled as people shared intimate tales about their childhoods, parents, and struggles. In this vessel, participants shared their narratives in real time. No one told us what to do. After several people spoke we knew that we needed to answer three questions: What is your name, and why were you named this? What is your mother's mother's name, what is her story? What is the important work you are doing now? The prompts were simple and designed. We were invited, in the sudden present moment, to reconceptualize our lived experience.

CRITIQUE

Our diplomas, certificates, awards, honors, medals, degrees, and other official artifacts testifying to our skills, abilities, mastery, and legitimacy represent our modern gateways. We dress

in robes; we walk across a threshold upon a stage; we receive a degree much like the scarecrow receiving his "diploma" from the Wizard of Oz into his straw hand (Baum, 1900). Theosophical interpretations of the scarecrow say that he represents our intelligence and intellect. All through the story he feels stupid until his audience with the wizard, who despite the pomp and circumstance has the decency to point out that, as the one who comes up with the clever plans to save his companions, he had his smarts *inside* all along. The message seems to be: We don't need external validation in the form of wizards, teachers, degrees, and awards. Certifying on external authority that is not derived from one's "inner being," Schubert (2009) declares, does not have integrity: "Really, who dares to certify? Who really knows what is embodied in another, derived from any experience—school or non-school?" (p. 23). The running of the race/maze that begins in Kindergarten continues all the way up through higher education and the acquirement of terminal degrees.

HIGH-STAKES KINDERGARTEN

The scene at my daughter's Kindergarten graduation intensified as the children's songs, a part of the ceremony, were reaching an end. Maeve's threshold moment—to commemorate her first year in public school—was obscured to me by this mob of parents who were going to preserve this experience, whether their neighbor liked it or not! Getting the video, acquiring the picture, grasping for the diploma: These are the pinnacle moments that reflect … meaningful learning? The spaces that children encounter in their Kindergarten vessels are microcosms of society. Instead of descending into learning, our culture and education system wants to ascend through competition, ranking, sorting, and certification. Perhaps we don't descend, let go of our ego selves and ego culture, because there is no discernable goal and outcome. Schubert wonders, "If education is to release wonder, imagination, speculation, and a quest for meaning and growth in unknown directions, then how can purposes be established in advance?" (Schubert, 2009, p. 72).

POSTLUDE

A decade after Maeve's Kindergarten graduation, as I work on my case for promotion to associate professor, I am encountering yet another threshold. A lot of work goes into the business of recording my worth as I catalog the evidence of things I've done for my external reviewers. I will not walk across a stage but will receive a medal in the form of a title—associate professor—if I am successful. While this is a moment to acknowledge the meaningful work I've done, the totality of the experience has the timbre of performance.

How do *I* measure my worth? I feel as if I am still at the gates, allowing myself to be chewed by those rows of teeth, or dying on the vine, as a mentor, Denise Taliaferro Baszile, remarked at a conference. Even if I receive my certificate, I still feel, secretly, that I haven't dived through that shoreline to plumb the depths of what it means to educate. I can certify myself, but I am still convinced that I haven't done what is necessary to pass the teeth. I want to go back to that ocean edge and jump in, disappear into the depths, the adventure.

REFERENCES

Baum, L. F. (1900). *The wonderful wizard of Oz*. George M. Hill.

Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces* (3rd ed.). New World Library. (Original work published 1949)

Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice's adventures in wonderland*. MacMillan.

Lewis, C. S. (1950). *The lion, the witch, and the wardrobe*. Harper Collins.

Lucas, G. (Writer/Director). (1977). *Star wars: Episode IV – A new hope*. Lucasfilm; Twentieth Century Fox.

Schubert, W. H. (2009). *Love, justice, and education: John Dewey and the utopians*. Information Age Publishing.

van Manen, M. (1986). *The tone of teaching*. Heinemann.