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LITTLE CAT FEET

Sandburg’s fog came in
On “little cat feet”
Silently

My kids STOMP up the stairs
“I am here!”
“I am memorable!”
“I am ANGRY!”

My kids BOUND up the stairs
“I am here!”
“I am memorable!”
“I am HAPPY!”

Can tell who is coming into the room
Just by the cadence
of
the
foot
falls

I am bemused at their blithe steps.

My feet like the cat’s
creep.sneak.slide.pad
Trained to check the
Weather of the tv room
By the position of the La-Z-Boy
Trained to keep to the
Shadow at the end of the hallway

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Guitar Lessons
Confessions of a Catholic School Cowboy

By Dennis Parsons
SUNY/Oswego

Getting in Tune

Staten Island's St. Peter's High School for boys was run by De La Salle Christian Brothers. Many of them had softened by the time of my 1971 arrival, ground down by my predecessors, save for a few hard-nosed, hard drinkers. Perhaps the promise of a life of contemplative study, sandwiched in between the daily whacking of teenage boys into submission, wasn't quite what they had imagined for themselves.

For my senior year, I opted for the Integrated Studies Program, an interdisciplinary course of study where the flavors of art, music, philosophy, history, math and science simmered in one pot and taught by Brother Stanislaus Krysiak. Eighteen of us met after homeroom in an addition attached to the back of the Brothers's residence, the 1857 Nicholas Muller House. We had guest lectures scattered throughout the year but spent the entire day as a group with pipe-smoking, beret-wearing Brother Stan. Eschewing the brotherly black calf-length robe (Habit) and white clerical collar (Rabat), Brother Stan preferred a coat and tie. He spun his record collection of folk songs and classical music or recited e. e. cummings and Ferlinghetti poems. We sat in a circle, legs splayed in metal chairs or sprawled out and dozing on the decommissioned church pews that lined the perimeter. It took a good deal of energy to gauge Bother Stan's mood each day. He was most certainly medicated, a shadow of the man who, as legend would have it, once held a student by the neck, feet dangling outside a fourth-floor window. It was somewhat reassuring that our classroom was on the ground floor. A post on The St. Peter's Alumni Facebook public group (n.d.) is teaming with stories triangulating the abuse. In 2020, Thomas Barnes posted a photograph of the 1977 Integrated class. An earlier alum, James E. Morton responded, "Brother Stan was crazy. Choked us and carried a 2-foot section of a garden hose that he used to beat his students. He was the only teacher I truly feared. Class '70." Responding to the Barnes post, John Eadiccio describes witnessing Brother Stan pick up and throw a desk across the room, the flying object crashing against the wall with the kid still in it.

Corrigan (1988) writes about his life at a suburban London private school as a working-class kid in the 1950s. He recounts suffering symbolic and physical violence meted out by his peers and by his Masters. His teachers were responsible for the

> hurting of the body, the random violence of the cuff against the ear, the slap around the face, the book thrown hard into the face, the twisting of the arm … and there, at the end of the chamber of horrors, the cane. (p. 146)

At Peter's, we had Brother Kevin, who delivered us to religion by way of an extremely hard "no look" kick to the shin while appearing fully engaged in discourse with a student to the left or right. I may not have seen it coming, but I most definitely felt it when it arrived. All the fun was not

reserved for the frocked. One piece of lore followed a diminutive lay history teacher, Mr. Victor T. Carasaniti Esq., who had to jump up in order grab hold of a student's neck. He must have been even more infuriated and frustrated when he discovered in his clenched fist a clip-on tie.

For the first week of our Integrated Studies course, Brother Stan had us out engaging in what could have come from the pages of Eliot Wigginton's (1972) *Foxfire* on oral histories, home remedies, butter churning, hog tying, and log cabin building. There was a stand of woods behind the Staten Island campus buildings where we were sent to forage for sticks and rocks to fashion survival tools, bespoke makeshift hatchets (natural twine, flat triangle-shaped stones), and modern flails. We'd certainly starve, but at least we'd take no prisoners.

INTRO: THE CURRICULUM

The Integrated Program became a refuge for aspiring artists, writers, dabblers, and others who perhaps had their fill of straight academics. Stand-alone music and art classes were virtually non-existent in our high school curriculum. Across public schools, in times of budget cuts, save for affluent districts and magnet schools, the arts are always first to go, a clear sign that they have no real value. I would eventually come to put away these childish things: sketchpad, drawing pencils, paints and brushes.

For its part, The Integrated Studies Program stood on the fringes of the traditional discrete-subject high school curriculum. For my part, electing an integrated course of study was not an insignificant leap into the unknown. I was aware at the time that such a path might close me off from certain trajectories, careers that require continuous math and science courses. I had already received that message as an incoming freshman. I was tracked into Earth science instead of biology and placed into entry-level remedial algebra.

Brother Stan and I clashed, more like collided. My challenges lobbed during class were clear, though failed, attempts at undermining the idol worship I observed from some of the other, less indifferent classmates. For his part, Brother Stan delivered a liberal education steeped in classic and contemporary literature and poetry with emphasis on individual choice and personal responsibility. There was no diversity to speak of. Shirley Jackson's (1948) "The Lottery," might have been the only woman writer. Lewis Carroll's (1871/1902) bizarre (for the uninitiated) "Jabberwocky" was a yearly mainstay, as were the ribald drinking songs of the British Isles. With some elements of the philosophy of Paulo Freire's (1970) and the perils of the Banking Concept of Education (1970), at the end of each year Brother Stan presented to select students the coveted "broken spoon award," representing liberation from spoon-fed knowledge. I went home empty-handed.

Aside from fashioning primitive survival tools, we tried our hand at printmaking and painting. The materials were left out and around the room for our experimentation. I painted a watercolor of a Van Gogh self-portrait, mimicking the striations of multiple colors for the face, reddish beard, blue jacket, and cornflower straw hat. I made a stamp by carving "Neil Young" on a 4x5 inch piece of linoleum. We were invited to bring in our own music for class response. Again with the Neil Young (1972), I chose "Alabama" from his *Harvest* album. In the song about the southern state's legacy of enslavement, Brother Stan pointed out the line, "Swing low down in Alabama," borrowed from "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," the African-American spiritual that

doubled as a visual reference to public lynchings. For the midterm, we were required to write a fifty-page paper bringing the many disciplines to bear on our understanding of a certain epoch. Rapt by Chaucer's (ca. 1400/1987) *Canterbury Tales*, I chose the Middle Ages. The same length was required for the final paper, where likewise we were to use knowledge in the disciplines to cast our eyes to the future. I had to take off work at the A&P to finish mine, turning it in only hours before graduation. I was shocked when I didn't get my diploma on time, failing to hold back tears during the family celebration at a local Chinese restaurant.

1ST VERSE

Growing up in a predominantly working-class neighborhood with working class parents, I had one foot squarely in each world—a divided self in terms of labor and academics. By junior year, I was working evenings and Saturdays. I switched to the graveyard shift in college, thinking I could satisfy both halves by keeping a 'round-the-clock pace. I struggled. Yet there was a part of me that was determined not to wind up on the shop floor like Paul Willis's (1977) working-class lads and my own father.

A couple of years prior, two of my closest-in-age siblings, a sister and brother, pooled their money for my sweet sixteenth birthday present, a sunburst Harmony guitar. By way of a string of city buses, we had retraced the steps to the borough of our birthplace, over the Verrazano back to Brooklyn, where we met up with a family friend, a few years older, who brokered the deal and whose attention I sought. On her bed in her family's 61st apartment, my sister looking on, she showed me where to place my hands. As soon as I got my birthday gift home and started plucking, my older brother, with whom I shared a bedroom, instantly regretted his role as my music benefactor.

Figure 1 1 Author, Integrated Studies, 1975 Yearbook photo by Mark Sedutto

Throughout my life, the guitar helped me stand out while providing decent cover, a shield of wood and wire against the world. The guitar saved me—from myself, from the crushing weight of adolescence, from high school—and got me through college. It was literate practice though it would never receive such honors or status equal to words on the page. While a few years would pass before I would write my first song, the seeds were sown—the beginnings of self-expression through music and identity formation through an artform practiced individually as well as in a community.

CHORUS: BROTHER STAN TAKES US ON A FIELDTRIP

For nearly 70 years, The Back Fence held sway on at the corner of Bleeker and Thompson before raising a surrender flag in 2013 to the pummeling waves of inflation by NYC real estate greed. Few places of its kind remain. The Back Fence, surrounded by a façade of wooden pickets, was a steady club venue in the spring of 1975, despite the 60s folk revival having come and gone. Danny Herlihy and I ditched out of our Integrated Studies field trip, a West Village self-guided walking tour where we were to "record and write of our experiences making use all of our senses." We slipped inside the nightclub and took two seats at the bar, almost caught, ducking and turning away when we saw Brother Stan through the glass doors standing on the corner. He must have spotted us.

Inside the club, a small stage rose about six or eight inches, just enough to be above the frenzied crowd that existed only in our minds. The floor was covered in strewn sawdust. Unbeknownst to me, I would develop a lifelong bond with the stringy wood fibers, but that story is for another time. One or two draughts in and Danny got up the nerve to ask the bartender how we might go about auditioning, which, as it turned out, was a simple matter of stopping in and showing the manager what we got, which at the time at least was not a lot. Neither of us could sing, and my guitar playing was entry level at best. It was mainly the *idea* of being in a band, and to attract women. What followed was so typical, canonical even, that it should have predicted our catapulting music careers.

We met over at Dan's house, together with Terence, who had been my friend since young childhood. Terence and I were learning how to play guitar at the same time, both together and separately. He was a year younger and had a good voice, where mine was reedy and untamable. Pot was passed around. We attempted a song. I can't remember which, but as soon as we started up, I looked across and there was Dan, an unplugged borrowed bass on his lap, which he never ever, until precisely this moment, attempted to play. He was bringing us his best Rick Danko from The Band—eyes closed, face winced with pain, head bobbing to the imaginary bass line he was thrumming. No sound but plenty of passion. We didn't follow up on the audition. It's too late now. The Back Fence, in its current iteration, is a corporate, French-inspired tearoom with other locations, two in Florida and one in Houston. Dan is gone too.

THE BRIDGE

In terms of worldview, I didn't know back then that I was already painting myself into a corner, though I cannot say I had much control of the brush or choice of color. "Our past is still there in our present," writes Eribon (2013, p. 223). So "we remake ourselves," we recreate ourselves," but "we do not make ourselves, we do not create ourselves," he continues. Raised in Brooklyn until the mid-60s, moving to Staten Island as a pre-teen, there I was thinking I was unique—not special, just a little different from everyone else. In truth I was just like about every other white kid in that particular time and place. Who, adolescent boys in particular, wants to be told they are sliding into the runnels of an already carved path, one not necessarily predetermined, but not too far off? The idea that as I was writing a story that was also being written for me was inconceivable and clashed with my notion of the self-actualized individualist. To perceive my experience as a predictable rite of passage—my core identity as a social construct informed by race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and generation—would have crumbled my little

world. The school curriculum was of no help. Otherwise, I might have even examined my own white male, able-bodied, heterosexual privilege.

In the early grammar school years, and increasingly in high school, I cast myself as outsider. Welcome to adolescence. None of us fit. Again, not special. I had a reciprocal relationship with trouble—sometimes it found me, and other times I did the looking. That's not only how I remember that time in my life, but it's how I continue to act in this world—a solitary man against a system that is bent on grinding me down. I took pride in my own outsider status. Some schoolmates suffered far worse than anyone: the handful of Black students, and the few among them awarded scholarships to keep alive the basketball winning streak, or those whose sexual orientation, students and teachers alike, we obsessed over and ridiculed.

Truth be told, I was never alone; I only felt that way. A small band of us marched the hallways, a scattered platoon clad in flannel shirts underneath the required necktie and sports jacket or optional sweater. At times we had to surrender, relenting to the highly flammable, extremely toxic, polyester shirt trend, garish prints with the wide and sharply pointed collars. Ugh. Clothing stores didn't stock straight collars or straight-legged pants in the 70s. On the platform shoes, however, I would not budge.

2nd Verse: Radio as Curriculum

Repelled by disco, protesting with my feet, I wore my construction work boots proudly. I didn't get punk rock either; it felt like there was nothing *to* get. Angst. Anarchy. Nihilism. That much I got. Mostly, I saw only nonsense—screaming spectacle. White kid problems. Bang your head against the wall? See if I care. Torn fabric and safety-pinned garments; I sewed my tears shut by hand with brightly colored thread and covered the holes with contrasting flavorful blocks of patterned fabric. Besides, I didn't need any tips from punk on how to sing and play badly. I was not aware that these movements, disco, punk, and the burgeoning hip-hop scene yet to reach the shores of Staten Island from the Bronx house parties where it originated, were each in their own way outcries against a racist, classist, heteronormative establishment, an establishment in which I myself was a stakeholder. Who was I trying to kid? Beneath all the patches, the work boots and moccasins, the beads and fringe, the Army & Navy Store military jackets with the sergeant stripes, beat the heart of a barely left of center Kennedy Democrat.

I was running out of corner to paint myself into, and yet I was put off and showed further intolerance for the homoerotic, gender-bending, androgynous play of David Bowie, The New York Doll's, and other glam rock bands. While the band Kiss was just play-acting; these players were for real. Their talent was obvious, so why couldn't they just play it straight? I enjoyed some of the Prog rock—*Yes* was my very first concert in Madison Square Garden—but that type of music was too complex. Mostly I listened to what I, myself, might be able to play. With all of that narrowing and closing off routes, I felt I had no other choice than to embrace or be absorbed by the influences of the West coast singer-songwriter folk rock musician. No big surprise. I just wanted to be a cowboy, the pretend kind.

The musical path, which I thought at the time—as a suburban white kid in the 70s—was of my own choosing was circumscribed. I found the identity I felt I was searching for in the music of Willie Nelson and The Eagles with their western narratives. I was enthralled with the western tableaux portrayed Henry Dilz's photograph on the back cover of The Eagles' (1973) *Desperado* album. Standing over the fallen band, and against the natural order of things, were the roadies,

managers, producers, and art director. Wielding shotguns and wearing sheriff badges, they look off in the distance or stare defiantly right into the lens. The subjugated band members were playing dead, laying side-by-side in the dirt, lifeless and strung together with rope. Those were my heroes, and the heroes were turned into victims. It would be decades before I would learn that the gunslingers they were modelling and about whom I fantasized were either former Confederate soldiers like the James and Younger Gang, or they were cast as such in the media. Some were deserters, namely the Tennessee Kirkland Bushwackers, or North Carolina's Henry Berry Lowery, and some among them were saboteurs fighting The Lost Cause, enslavers of Black bodies, long after the ceasefire at Appomattox (Dyer, 1994; Settle, 1977; Tennessee v. Kirkland et al., 1866; Townsend, 1872; Williams, 2018).

Through these musical personas, I embraced the profoundly lonely cowboy, prone to anger and violence. Their lessons came all the way from California, Texas, Tennessee, and Oklahoma, reaching NYC over the airwaves of WHN (1050 AM) Radio Station. The high and lonesome sound, the nasally tenors, the sweet sounds of fiddle and steel guitar mixed with static enveloping the cab of my 63 Chevy pickup. As imagined in the figure of "The Red Headed Stranger" who was "wild in his anger" so "Don't cross him, don't boss him," Willie Nelson (1975) warns of the inevitable, read as justifiable, violence to come. Living in a city where I never felt I belonged, cowboy identity fed my outsider-ness, my perceived otherness, my aspirations of rugged individualism, and the love-deprived or scorned hero as victim. The feeling echoes in Warren Zevon's (1976) line, "Poor, poor pitiful me," and, as Willie continues, "he's riding and hiding his pain." I aspired to be more like Townes Van Zandt's (1972) Pancho, of "Pancho & Lefty," chased through the desert by the Federales, no more bullets left in my pistola. However, I feared a closer resemblance to Lefty, whose bent moral compass might lead one, albeit in desperation, to turn his friend in to the authorities for immunity and a cash payout.

I paid no attention to the criticism of the singer-songwriter movement. Critics railed against the sound that was wafting out of Laurel Canyon and beyond. There was a slew of criticism by those averse to the West coast singer-songwriter and country rock genres (Bangs, 1988, 2008; Christgau, 1972; Marsh & Swenson, 1979). On The Eagles, Christgau writes that it is "no accidental irony that such hard-rock professionals convey their integrated vision of self-possession and pastoral cool by way of a dynamite corporate machine." All of the bravado and the history of marginalization of women and people of color and normalization contained within country music is unmistakable and inexcusable.

3rd Verse: Scanning the Horizon

Growing up, looking west for inspiration fit an identity tied up in this cowboy myth. I modeled my identity as the saloon visiting, gunslinging, bronco-taming, into the sunset riding Western hero—in short, a cartoon character. During the 70s there was a revival of western wear, and I was all in. With work money, I filled out my wardrobe with Wrangler brand, Dee-Cee or H Bar C pearl-snapped shirts, unaware that I was investing in a cowboy persona that justifies white dominance and white violence, the project and byproduct of manifest destiny. What I was listening to and aspired to play and one day create myself reaffirmed my biased worldview. The music I was enjoying was gender normative and marginalized women. My kind of music promoted and provided the soundtrack for white supremacy. The sound was colonialist, appropriating culture with little or no acknowledgement of the art and talent and language and history extracted from

people of color. What I did not understand until much later in life were the behind-the-scenes workings, the discrediting and the erasure of other identities in how the 20th Century cowboy myth was able to flourish (Cox Richardson, 2020; Nelson Limerick, 1987). Just like the explorer myth in the centuries prior, he simply has got to be first and alone. In the 1970s and beyond, these just were not the thoughts and imaginings rattling inside the head of a white high school kid, born in Brooklyn, raised in Staten Island, one foot in the city and one foot in the country.

4TH VERSE: RELAXED RULES AND OPPRESSION ARE OFTEN FELLOW TRAVELERS

Schools simultaneously deny yet rule *through* the body (Grumet, 1988). Cranny-Francis (1995) recounts a story of being able to tell if a woman was raised in a convent by how she clenches her hands by her side as she walks. Eribon (2013) experiences class intimidation when a fellow student *does not* shield his mouth with his hand when speaking. My awareness of power relations performed on the body preceded my reading of Foucault (1975), who provided a framework and language for analysis. My tangles with authority preceded high school. Having been practically raised by nuns, during daylight hours at least, I know the feel of the ruler as I complied with an outstretched hand. I experienced the public shame and humiliation, having wet myself when that same hand raised attached to this body was ignored. From my twelve years "on the inside," I learned the inscriptions authority and power makes on the body. But from Brother Stan, I also learned the "contradictions of control" (McNeil, 2013), the subtle ways in which authority reveals itself, in spite of or because of all the informalities. Quite like McNeil's analysis of high school classroom discourse, with Brother Stan, we kept our part of the bargain, most of the time, by not being overly disruptive, tolerating the boredom of the painstakingly slow pace, in exchange for less work, less rigor, settling for a much less vibrant curriculum. Our epistemological and ontological challenges were permissible so long as we submitted and did not oppose or try to undermine Brother Stan. Those willing to stroke his ego did well. I did not because I would not, could not. I should have been nurtured by Brother Stan but would not yield to the idol worship. Others would fawn and fall into his favor, but I refused. Which is not to say that I was not seeking the approval I never received. In truth, I was not putting in the academic work, choosing the "real work" of physical labor valued by my working-class identity. As a result, I was digging myself in deeper, similar to the social reproduction of Paul Willis's (1981) lads who were determined to end up on the shopfloor. It took me nearly a decade as a postal worker to climb out of that hole. For that to occur, I had to create distance from my working-class identity, though not so severely as Eribon (2013), who as a young gay man felt he had to leave his hometown of Reims, completely cut ties with his family for decades, in an attempt to expunge any remnants of the stain of working-class.

The afternoon in the West Village was significant for a number of reasons, together with all the moves that brought me to that moment on Bleeker and Thompson. Brother Stan created a non-traditional classroom and showed us curriculum outside of school, off the school grounds, and away from the confines of a provincial, isolated island culture. Brother Stan was teaching us how to find curriculum in the world, in the architecture, and in the sights, sounds, and smells, the diversity, and the vibrant thrum of Manhattan. We were encouraged to explore the seedy sides of the city, the freaky little headshops and record stores, the dirty, grimy, pre-Guiliani, pre-Disney city. And yet, despite the program's progressive offering, especially in contrast to rest of our high school, the lack of convention and loosely coupled authority (he had to have seen us hoisting away

at the bar), Dan and I shrugged it off, all of it, ditching school for the promise of a Rock-n-Roll life. Music had a much greater hold than school, a greater pull.

Without guitar and the beginnings of being a singer songwriter, I likely would not have survived high school mostly because music allowed me to practice literacy on my own terms. I would have liked to believe that I was able to see the contradictions of freedom and determinism, the hypocrisy in the patriarchy, the racism and sexism in the worlds of folk, rock, and country (Goodall, 1991). I would hope. Instead, I replaced one idol, religious authority, for another, as personified in the figure of the white male cowboy rock god that I aspired to be, and to this day, were I to be honest, still do. That's the unfinished business that I can no longer live with and so have much to work through.

Coda: The Remaking of the Boy: Teacher and Curriculum as Mavericky

Like the cowboy in me, I cannot even claim exceptionalism as an educator. In fact, writing this piece has made me aware of the subconscious influences of the St. Peter's Integrated Studies Program on my own past, present, and future teaching. The use of daily journaling, writing to learn, and writing across the disciplines have their beginnings for me in Brother Stan's Integrated Studies Program, and yet it never once dawned on me that my philosophy of teaching and learning was spurred by my senior year high school experience. I designed and am current steward of Literature, Art & Media, a graduate literacy course with emphasis on multiliteracies and student choice. Among projects that could just as easily fit into the integrated curriculum are the assemblage of identity-boxes drawing on the art of Joseph Cornell and the curriculum of poet Charles Simic via Platt (1998); choices that involve immersion in a specific mode or genre, multimodal forms of expression (poetry/ modern dance, for example); and the study of artists as advocates for social justice, culminating in social justice curriculum projects. These loosely designed assignments bear a strong resemblance to some of my senior year high school work. Could it be that a major chunk of my career has been a subconscious apology to Brother Stan, a homage or a vindication, seeking redemption for my earlier sins—the sin of adolescent hubris and lack of compassion and understanding for what Brother Stan was trying to do?

I continue to dress the cowboy. It seems my generation of men will never grow up enough to become the fathers and grandfathers who wore coat and tie at dinner, fedora required before leaving the house, a "fit" that even transcended social class lines. That's what John Prine (1973) sang about with his own grandfather, the carpenter: "Grandpa wore his suits to dinner/Each and every day/No particular reason/he just dressed that way." Umberto Eco's (1983) essay on wearing blue jeans, explores clothing as armor, as "semiotic devices, machines for communicating" and how through our clothing we relate to the world. Warriors lived their lives externally, whereas "Monks were rich in interior life" their habit "released it" gave the body freedom to forget about itself" (pp. 194–195). I am not here to forget, and I refuse any longer to relinquish my body in order to pay homage to the mind.

Figure 2 Brother Stan, photograph by Mark Sedutto

Outro

Following right along with the trend of corporatization and militarization of schooling and education, St. Peter's now has a president, who as it happens is my former history teacher. Recently, the building that once housed the De La Salle Christian Brothers was razed. Our Integrated Studies classroom is gone. The demolition makes way for a sports field that will eventually be a fully enclosed sports center. Plans for the ground floor of the main campus building "include new classrooms for a sea cadet/ROTC program, a new business center and a state-of-the-art technology center" (Knudsen, 2025, n.p.). All of the Christian Brothers are gone. Though they may continue to haunt some of us, they no longer inhabit the grounds of St. Peter's in any physical form.

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

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Prologue: Returning

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

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

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

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

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

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

IMPETUS FOR A SABBATICAL

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hopes and Fears for Returning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REASSEMBLING COMMITMENTS THROUGH PRESENCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

Notes

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

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WHAT I CARRY
A CURRICULAR REFLECTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

RETURNING TO WHAT I CARRIED

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

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

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

Imagining a Different Way of Teaching

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

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

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

Re-reading My Story Through Theory

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

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

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

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

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

A Curriculum of Becoming

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

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

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

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

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

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Staying Rooted

Using *Currere* to Connect Multicultural Center Practices With Faculty Teaching in Student Affairs and Higher Education Courses

By Erica Campbell
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Regressive: If It Wasn't for ODA, Learning Homeplace

My undergraduate experience at Miami University was so-so, largely because I did not fully understand the culture of attending a historically white institution. Not all HWIs are the same, but Miami, an original public Ivy institution, felt different. Why? Whiteness. The institution was created with the intent to serve white, upper-middle-class to wealthy students, and the intersection of race and class in the classroom, along with what was institutionally promoted at the time, shaped much of my experience. There were some highs but far more lows. I received C's when I knew I had produced A-level work. I was doubted when I was sick and out of class for nearly a month because my absence coincided with Green Beer Day. I do not drink, but that didn't matter. Moments like these accumulated and made it clear that something was missing. This was not high school, nor was it my neighborhood, church, or community spaces that centered Blackness and affirmed marginalized identities. It all came down to the persistent feeling of needing to be affirmed, both inside and outside of the classroom. I needed something different, an outlet that felt grounding and affirming.

The summer before my senior year at Miami, I decided to stay in Oxford and take classes. A peer I had known since high school told me she was working in the Office of Diversity Affairs, ODA. I asked her to make a connection, and toward the end of the summer I was hired. I continued working in the office through my senior year. At the time, I felt unsure about what I wanted to do next. I had an administrative background through the business school, but corporate America did not feel like my calling.

Working in ODA, I experienced mentorship from people who were genuinely committed to my development, people who saw me as important. ODA offered space, the freedom to show up as myself, all of who I was. I remember the ability to beat an African drum pulled from the bookcase with a friend, dancing freely, without being chastised. We were welcomed. Smooth jazz often played in the background. People moved in and out of the space, checking in, encouraging one another, investing in my success. I often wondered where these people had been when I first arrived at Miami University, but I was grateful to have found them.

ODA was warmth, generosity, and a commitment to love and justice. It was home—a home I knew I wanted to stay connected to even beyond my undergraduate years. At the time, I did not know where this sense of home would take me, but I now understand that it set me on a path that would deeply shape my work as a scholar-practitioner and faculty member. ODA became my career, my research focus, and my passion for supporting others. It taught me an ethic of care before I had language for it. It taught me homeplace before I knew what to call it.

Progressive: Back to the Future, Reimagining the Classroom

Returning to Miami University as a professor in the Student Affairs in Higher Education program has been a joy. This joy is rooted in the opportunity to imagine and reimagine the classroom as a space of possibility and transformation, one where graduate students preparing to support college students can experience learning, belonging, and affirmation. I imagine the classroom as a space that reflects the ethos of a multicultural center (MCC), a place where people are welcomed, where music might be playing, where creativity is present, and where assignments mirror the planning of programs or workshops that are cultural, engaging, and grounded in justice and inclusion.

Most importantly, I want students to feel at home and comfortable showing up as themselves. Relationships should extend beyond scheduled classroom meetings, intentionally disrupting the capitalist standards that plague higher education today. Hence, the classroom becomes a place where students have a voice, where they can dialogue about life, work, identity, and their experiences in higher education alongside their peers and with me as their professor.

The physical classroom itself might offer a flexible environment, with movable seating and tables that invite conversation, collaboration, and shared learning rather than rigidity or hierarchy. I also imagine the classroom as a brave space, one where students feel supported and challenged at the same time and where minoritized students do not have to perform in order to belong, despite knowing the pressures to do so elsewhere within a historically white institution. This is not a space students avoid or endure nor one they must leave to find a sense of home elsewhere. Creating such an environment requires continued attention to culturally relevant pedagogy and creative teaching practices that honor students' lived experiences.

This imagining is deeply informed by my own experiences of being seen by faculty. As an undergraduate student, one faculty member was intentional about making sure my voice mattered in spaces where I often felt overlooked. Later, during my doctoral program, another faculty member modeled what it meant to create academic spaces where my presence and perspective were valued. Even something as simple as her calling me "sunshine" made me feel seen, as if I were a bright light in her classroom. Ultimately, these experiences contribute to how I understand the classroom as a brave space and shape the kinds of learning environments I strive to cultivate. Whether these faculty members realized it or not, they embodied what it meant to be faculty grounded in multicultural center values.

Analytical: Multicultural Centers as Curricular and Pedagogical Spaces

As I reflect on my becoming as a scholar during my PhD program, and now as a faculty member, I am better able to understand how multicultural centers function as curricular spaces. These spaces shape the knowledge and development of students who access them, the staff and administrators who work within them, and the scholars who research them. Multicultural centers are not simply places of support; they intentionally cultivate environments where social identity development, academic support, resource support, leadership development, and programming serve as meaningful sources of learning and growth (Patton & Hannon, 2008; Wilson, 2016).

Engaging the literature on multicultural affairs offices and centers helped me name practices I had long experienced but could not yet fully articulate. For example, multicultural center staff are often positioned as mediators between students and campus administrators (Young,

1991). Understanding mediation as a central function of MCC work helped me make sense of the relational and advocacy-based labor embedded within these spaces, particularly as students navigate power, privilege, and systemic oppression. This understanding also pushed me to think more critically about the classroom itself as a site of power. My undergraduate experiences of being doubted, misread, and academically undervalued did not occur in isolation; they were produced within classrooms shaped by surveillance, authority, and unspoken expectations about who belongs and who is seen as credible. Faculty can hold significant power in these spaces, power that can reinforce harm or serve as protection and advocacy for students navigating historically white institutions. My work in multicultural centers can help me to recognize these dynamics early on, shaping how I understand the ways power operates through curriculum, grading, evaluation, and classroom dynamics.

Looking back through my own scholarship, I have also come to understand the importance of not separating identity from educational work. I am who I am, and that matters. As I have written elsewhere,

> working intently with minoritized students in a multicultural center allows you to see where historically white institutions fall short of supporting students, faculty, staff, and even yourself. It is with our standpoint that Black women MCC administrators should see themselves as valuable to HWIs. No one can examine higher education institutions like us, because of our standpoint. (Campbell, 2025, p. 96)

In this work, I also came to understand that “I could remain true to myself both inside and outside of a MCC at an HWI” (Campbell, 2025, p. 95). Together, these realizations affirmed for me that identity is not something to be set aside in professional or academic spaces, but rather something that fundamentally shapes how care, leadership, and resistance are enacted within multicultural centers and translated into classroom practice.

SYNTHETICAL: TEACHING WITH MEMORY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND CARE

At this point in my journey, the experiences that first shaped me as an undergraduate in the Office of Diversity Affairs, deepened through my work as a practitioner and later theorized through scholarship, now converge in my role as a faculty member. Returning to Miami University is not simply a full-circle moment, but a site of responsibility. The values I first learned in ODA, care, affirmation, advocacy, and community, now demand intentional enactment in my teaching. As Pinar (2020) reminds us, “the educational point of *currere* is, then, intensified engagement with classroom life, supported by the cultivation of a consciousness that remembers the past with an eye on the future while focused on the present” (p. 52). For me, this means that multicultural center praxis cannot remain situated in memory or theory alone, but must actively shape how I design curriculum, engage students, and exercise power within the classroom, as I remain accountable to myself and to students within historically white institutions.

Rather than attempting to directly replicate a multicultural center within the classroom, I carry forward its ethos by allowing it to inform how I understand my role as faculty. This involves creating learning environments where students are not required to perform for legitimacy, where their identities are not treated as disruptions, and where dialogue, reflection, and relationality are central to the learning process. Baszile reminds us that the purpose of *currere* is not simply

reflection, but transformation, noting that "the hope is that it does bring about self-transformation and as such it will shape one's public work toward justice" (Baszile, 2015, p. 125). In this sense, *currere* becomes a call to align who I am, what I value, and how I teach. Through this process, I come to understand multicultural center work not as a closed chapter of my past, but as a living curricular influence that continues to shape how I teach, how I lead, and how I show up for students in ways that intentionally connect pedagogy with justice.

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Teaching Without Trauma-Informed Preparation
A Journey of Experience, Reflection, and Advocacy

By Frannie Tunseth
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Over the past eleven years as a professional educator, I have had the privilege of wearing many different hats: classroom teacher, interventionist, administrator, mentor, and, most recently, teacher educator. Experiencing education from these multiple vantage points has reinforced my understanding of the challenges educators face and the gaps that exist in teacher preparation. As a result, I have come to understand the importance of advocating for systemic changes in how preservice teachers are prepared and supported. This understanding did not emerge all at once but developed gradually over time. In my early years, I believed that strong classroom management and engaging lessons would be sufficient to meet my students' needs. However, as I encountered increasingly complex emotional and behavioral realities, I began to recognize that something deeper was missing—not only in my practice, but in how I had been prepared for the profession. What initially felt like gaps in my own teaching began to reveal themselves as gaps in my preparation. This realization marked a turning point, shifting my perspective from refining instructional strategies to rethinking the very foundations of effective teaching. It was through this shift that I came to view trauma-informed practice (TIP) not as an instructional add-on, but as a necessary lens through which all teaching should be understood.

This evolving perspective has shaped my current work and passions, particularly my commitment to urging universities to critically evaluate and more intentionally incorporate TIP into preservice teacher preparation programs. What was once a personal realization has become a professional imperative, influencing not only how I teach but how I think about preparing future educators for the realities of today's classrooms. Despite the growing recognition of trauma's impact on students (Cole et al., 2013; Frydman & Mayor, 2017; Magruder et al., 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014), there remains a noteworthy gap in the literature regarding how universities are equipping teacher candidates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to effectively implement TIP in the classroom. This gap is particularly concerning given the increasing prevalence of trauma in students' lives and the critical role teachers play in creating supportive, responsive learning environments. Without intentional integration of trauma-informed approaches into teacher preparation, preservice teachers risk entering the profession underprepared for the complex emotional and relational dimensions of teaching.

My own experience as a preservice teacher, who completed a clinically accompanied teacher preparation program in the 2000s (Jacobs & Burns, 2021), lacked a focus on TIP, which left me underprepared to navigate the complex emotional (McLaughlin et al., 2014) and behavioral (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Perfect et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2022) challenges many students face. While the theory emphasized in my preparation program taught me about teaching strategies and content, it didn't adequately prepare me for the impact of trauma on student learning and behavior (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Shonkoff et al., 2012). In many ways, my idealized vision of teaching did not reflect the realities of the classroom, where trauma can deeply affect a child's ability to engage (Webb et al., 2022), learn (Cantor et al., 2019, Shonkoff et al. 2012), and build and maintain

healthy relationships (Latham-Mintus & Brown, 2018). As I entered the classroom, I quickly learned that teaching required far more than the strategies outlined in textbooks; it required an understanding of the deeply human elements of my students' lived experiences. This realization highlighted a critical gap in my preparation—the need for preservice teachers to be equipped with the knowledge and tools to recognize (Reddig & VanLone, 2024), understand (Bell et al., 2013), and address (L'Estrange & Howard, 2022) trauma in the classroom. This gap is not unique to my own experience but reflects broader systemic challenges in education. Many teachers enter the profession without adequate preparation for the realities they will face, contributing to widespread burnout (Ingersoll, 2003; Kyriacou, 2001), unaddressed social-emotional needs of students (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007), and persistent academic disparities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). Additionally, some students are exposed to traumatic events within the very school environments meant to support them (Finkelhor et al., 2015), further complicating the work of educators. Given these realities, *currere* provides a valuable framework for critically reflecting on my own trajectory and examining the ways in which teacher preparation must evolve to meet the needs of today's classrooms.

The *currere* I present in this article reflects my ongoing journey of professional growth, resilience, and commitment to educating the whole child, particularly through a trauma-informed lens. Drawing from my own experiences and reflecting through the lens of Pinar's (1994) method of *currere*, I examine and contrast my preservice teacher education with the lived realities of the classroom, especially as they relate to trauma. Through vivid examples—such as encountering student trauma, navigating grief, and adapting to diverse emotional needs—I illustrate how preservice teacher education programs have traditionally lacked an emphasis on TIP (MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Reddig & VanLone, 2024; Young & Schepers, 2023). This lack of preparation sends novice teachers into the profession with insufficient support to enact TIP within their classrooms, highlighting the urgent need to integrate TIP into teacher preparation.

The Missing Piece: Navigating the Classroom Without Trauma-Informed Preparation

The faint scent of freshly sharpened pencils mingled with the soft echoes of children's laughter as I stepped into my first classroom on the first day of school in 2014. Rows of carefully arranged tables gleamed under fluorescent lights, a testament to the countless hours I had spent organizing, laminating, photocopying, and preparing for my students. This space, my "garden of kindergartners," felt full of possibility, poised to support my students' growth. Yet beneath its polished surface were challenges my preservice teacher education had not equipped me to handle—most notably, the reality that many of my students would arrive each day carrying burdens far greater than academic struggles.

When I transitioned into my first in-service teaching role, I stepped into my kindergarten classroom confident in my preparation to deliver content and support my students to succeed on their benchmark assessments. The real classroom, however, quickly demanded far more. My first year of teaching became a delicate balancing act—pouring energy into helping students master foundational skills while grappling with moments my training had never prepared me to face.

As a new kindergarten teacher, I dedicated myself to helping students develop foundational skills and progress toward academic standards. I celebrated measurable successes—students mastering phonics, recognizing letters and numbers, or learning to write a simple sentence. It was

a moment of triumph when a child who had once stumbled through counting to five proudly soared all the way to twenty. My heart swelled with pride the day a kindergartener, who had initially struggled with fine motor skills, confidently wrote their name for the first time. By early October, my classroom was buzzing with energy, and I eagerly invited colleagues in to witness the magic of a reader's workshop already in full swing, a testament to the rhythm and routine we had built together. These moments reassured me that my work was making a difference.

One moment, though, stands out vividly because of the way it interrupted my early sense of success. A student approached my desk with hesitant steps, clutching a crayon drawing tightly in his hands. His small voice carried words that struck me like a blow: "I hate you," he muttered as he thrust the paper toward me. Puzzled and concerned, I unfolded the page to reveal a chilling scene. The drawing depicted me—lifeless, blood pooling around my body. Red crayon streaks emphasized the violence of the image, and its simplicity made it even more haunting. My breath caught as I held the drawing, its edges crumpling under the weight of my trembling hands. Hurt, fear, and uncertainty surged within me. I retreated to the bathroom, locking the door behind me as tears blurred my vision. In that moment, I questioned everything—my abilities as a teacher, my connection with this child, and whether I had the capacity to make a positive impact on his life.

Nowhere in my preservice education had I been prepared for this moment. My coursework had focused on crafting engaging lessons, aligning objectives with standards, and implementing best instructional practices. Nowhere had we discussed how to respond when a child expresses anger or trauma through unsettling behaviors. Nowhere had we been taught what to do when a student's actions reveal pain far deeper than academic struggles. The unspoken message of my teacher preparation seemed clear: if every instructional objective aligned perfectly with standards, if assessments seamlessly measured outcomes, and if activities were sufficiently engaging, then students would learn, and academic success would follow. This approach reflected a "knowledge-for-practice" model (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), where theoretical knowledge about planning and instruction was prioritized, yet meaningful connections to the complexities of classroom realities were structurally unsupported.

One of the most common pedagogies I experienced in my program was delivering simulated lessons for my undergraduate peers. These simulations took place in sterile, controlled university classrooms where feedback was superficial, polite, and devoid of the unpredictable realities of students' human emotions, needs, and behaviors. My simulated students never presented me with tears, trauma, or emotional outbursts; there were no moments that required more than content knowledge or a flawless transition. The preservice focus on technical skills left essential elements of TIP—empathy, adaptability, and responsiveness—as mere afterthoughts. In these simulations, it was easy to believe that teaching could be reduced to a tidy sequence of objectives and rubrics, overlooking the complexity and relational demands of the actual classroom. This gap between theory and practice became painfully evident as I faced moments that extended far beyond lesson planning.

During my second year, two district counselors entered my buzzing classroom, their somber expressions delivering unspoken weight. A note revealed the news: two children in our school had passed away. That morning, I sat with my students in a circle, my voice steady despite the lump in my throat. "Your friends won't be coming back to school," I explained, bracing for their reactions. Their blank stares and quiet sniffles filled the room with a heaviness I had never experienced as a teacher. Some students avoided eye contact, others fidgeted nervously and a few asked questions I did not feel equipped to answer. I remember pausing, searching for the "right" words, only to realize that my preparation had never given me language for moments like this.

In the days that followed, the weight of that moment lingered. I found myself second-guessing how I had responded—wondering if I had said too little or too much. I began to notice how grief surfaced in unexpected ways: through irritability, withdrawal, and sudden emotional outbursts. It became clear that my role extended far beyond delivering phonics instruction; I was now helping children make sense of loss, even as I struggled to process it myself. Their blank stares and sniffles highlighted my unpreparedness for grief. I was teaching phonics while these children were wrestling with loss—worlds that had never intersected during my preservice teacher education. This moment marked a turning point in my thinking. I began to understand that trauma was not an isolated incident or extreme circumstance but an ever-present and often invisible force shaping my students' experiences. More importantly, I realized that my effectiveness as a teacher depended not on how well I delivered content but on how well I could respond to the human needs in front of me.

While these two milestones stand out as defining moments, the daily struggles of the classroom were equally profound in shaping my understanding of teaching. Outbursts over seemingly minor frustrations, chairs flung in fits of anger, and the all-too-familiar "room clears" to ensure the safety of others became routine. These moments tested not only my patience but also my ability to remain composed and compassionate under pressure. My experiences—both extraordinary and everyday—revealed the stark limitations of my preservice teacher education. I could teach children to count to 100, but I was unprepared to guide them through trauma, heartbreak, or the weight of emotions they could barely articulate. It was through facing these realities that I began to realize that teaching was not solely about academics. It was about educating the whole child—seeing my students as complex, emotional beings and meeting their needs with empathy, resilience, and a willingness to adapt. Simply stated, my preservice teacher education had prepared me to teach lessons, but it had failed to prepare me for the most essential part of teaching: understanding and responding to the human experience unfolding before me.

Every day felt like a battle for equilibrium—a fragile balance where my students and I were not thriving but merely surviving, wrestling with challenges that went far beyond the curriculum. My preservice training had never addressed how to build relationships with students navigating trauma, how to regulate my own emotions in response to distressing situations, or how to create an environment where students felt truly safe. I had been trained to teach standards but not to support the whole child. Without trauma-informed preparation, I was left to navigate these moments through trial and error, learning only through experience what should have been foundational knowledge from the start. Over time, this trial-and-error approach began to transform my practice. I became more attuned to my students' emotional cues, more reflective in my responses, and more willing to pause instruction in favor of connection. What once felt like interruptions to learning, I began to see as essential entry points into it. This shift—from prioritizing content delivery to prioritizing student humanity—fundamentally reshaped my identity as an educator.

Reimagining Teacher Preparation: Building Bridges Between Theory, Practice, and the Human Experience

I dream of a future where teacher preparation is transformed, where every aspiring educator enters the profession not only equipped with content knowledge but deeply attuned to the emotional and human complexities of the classroom. In this future, theory and practice are not

separate entities but woven seamlessly together, guiding teachers to see their students as whole beings with stories, struggles, and strengths. TIP is not an afterthought, but an intrinsic part of every course, embedded in the very fabric of preservice teacher education.

Imagine a world where preservice teachers do not wait until their final year to step into a classroom for an extended time but begin their journey alongside students from the very start. Their coursework breathes life as they apply their learning in real-time, guided by mentors who model what it means to teach with both skill and heart. They learn to recognize the silent struggles of children, to create spaces where every student feels seen, valued, and supported. No longer do preservice teachers feel unprepared for the unpredictable human moments that arise in classrooms—they are ready, because they have been immersed in the reality of teaching all along.

In this vision, universities and schools are not separate institutions but partners, working hand in hand to cultivate teachers who are not only knowledgeable but deeply compassionate. Future educators learn in environments where reflective practice is the norm, where storytelling and case studies illuminate the profound impact of trauma and resilience, where their own emotional growth is nurtured alongside their professional development. They emerge not just as teachers but as changemakers, ready to shape learning environments where every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to thrive.

I dream of a world where teaching is no longer reduced to lesson plans and assessments but recognized as the relational, dynamic, and deeply human endeavor that it is. In this world, teacher preparation is not just about mastering pedagogy but about cultivating the kind of presence that transforms classrooms into places of possibility and hope. This is the future I see—one where the missing piece is finally found and where education becomes the force for healing and empowerment that it was always meant to be.

At the Intersection of Theory and Practice

As I reflect on my journey through the unique intersection of being both an inservice teacher and a teacher educator, I find myself in a space that is as challenging as it is illuminating. This dual role offers a rare vantage point—one that reveals the missing gaps in teacher preparation while immersing me in the lived realities of K-12 classrooms. What is striking is not only how clearly I can now name these gaps but how long it took me to understand them. Earlier in my career, I internalized these challenges as personal shortcomings, believing I simply needed to try harder or plan better. Now, I recognize them as systemic issues, shifting my focus from self-correction to advocacy and change. It is within this space that I find myself compelled to not only analyze what we are doing in teacher education but to imagine what we could be doing differently to prepare future teachers more effectively.

My own experiences as a preservice teacher mirror many of the gaps that persist today: a curriculum heavily weighted toward theoretical frameworks but disconnected from the unpredictable, deeply human realities of classroom life (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As an inservice teacher, I was left to navigate behavior management, trauma, and equitable instruction largely on my own, without the foundational support my preparation should have provided (Brunzell et al., 2016). The "knowledge-for-practice" model of my teacher education emphasized what I should know about teaching but offered little guidance in how to apply that knowledge meaningfully or adapt it to my students' complex needs (Ball & Cohen, 1999).

Now, as a teacher educator, I see how these missing gaps persist. In my role teaching two courses, I have witnessed the continued emphasis on rigid lesson planning, standards alignment, and theoretical models; while TIP, relationship-building, and adaptable pedagogy remain at the margins (Garwood & Vernon-Feagans, 2017). Preservice teachers are still being taught that immaculate lesson plans equate to effective teaching, despite growing research that underscores the importance of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed strategies in creating inclusive, effective learning environments (Wolpow et al., 2009).

What is clear to me is that teacher education, as it currently stands, is not fully preparing preservice teachers for the realities they will face. The gap between theory and practice persists, leaving new teachers underprepared for the relational and emotional dimensions of teaching (Zeichner, 2010). This dual role as an inservice teacher and teacher educator compels me to advocate for change—change that prioritizes intentional integration of TIP, experiential learning, and space for preservice teachers to engage in reflective, adaptive teaching.

Ultimately, this unique positionality is not just an opportunity but a responsibility to illuminate the missing gaps in our current systems, critique the structures that sustain them, and reimagine a future where teacher preparation truly bridges the divide between theory, practice, and the human experience of education.

Bridging the Gap in Teacher Preparation

The gap between theoretical instruction and the lived realities of the classroom reveals a critical need to better prepare future educators for the emotional, relational, and often unpredictable aspects of teaching. This disconnect emphasizes the importance of embedding TIP into teacher preparation programs to equip educators with the tools needed to navigate these complexities. This realization, however, is not new; scholars have long critiqued the ways in which teacher education privileges content knowledge and pedagogical frameworks while neglecting the human complexities that define classroom life (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Zeichner, 2010). Yet, despite this knowledge, the field continues to emphasize standardization over adaptability, theoretical mastery over student-centered teaching, and immaculate lesson planning over the ability to navigate student trauma and emotional needs.

My own journey illustrates these gaps in stark detail. As a preservice teacher, I was immersed in a world of lesson planning templates, theoretical discussions, and philosophical debates about pedagogy. Yet, when I stepped into the classroom, I found myself unprepared for the realities that shape students' learning experiences—the impact of trauma, the challenge of behavior management, and the necessity of building trust before meaningful instruction could occur. My teacher education program had equipped me with abstract knowledge, but it had not taught me how to respond when a student shut down in the middle of a lesson due to anxiety, when a child erupted in frustration after experiencing instability at home, or when the weight of my students' lived experiences made content delivery feel secondary to emotional support. Research on trauma-informed teaching highlights the need for in-service teachers to be equipped with strategies for recognizing and responding to student trauma, yet these approaches are rarely central to preservice training (Brunzell et al., 2016; Craig, 2016). The absence of this preparation is not merely an oversight—it is a systemic issue that leaves in-service teachers ill-equipped to meet the realities of their students' lives.

Now, as both an in-service teacher and a teacher educator, I see these same patterns playing out in the preparation of new teachers. In the courses I teach, preservice teachers are taught how to align instruction with state standards, how to design structured lesson plans, and how to analyze student data. But what remains largely absent from the curriculum is how to build relationships with students, how to implement TIP, and how to manage the inevitable unpredictability of teaching in real time. The literature supports the need for teacher education to include clinical experiences that immerse preservice teachers in authentic classroom settings before they begin teaching independently (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, these experiences must be more than observational. They must be structured in a way that allows preservice teachers to engage with the full complexity of teaching, including the social-emotional dimensions that shape student learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Without this, we continue to send new teachers into classrooms unprepared for key practices that are fundamental to effective teaching.

Moreover, my experience as a graduate teaching assistant has illuminated another critical issue: the limited agency of teacher educators in shaping curriculum. As a teacher educator, I am expected to prepare future teachers, yet the structure of my role—delivering a predetermined curriculum with little space for innovation—mirrors the very problems I critique. Teacher educators, particularly those in early career or adjunct positions, often lack the authority to integrate experiential learning or TIP into their instruction, reinforcing the same rigid structures that limit K-12 teachers (Korthagen, 2017). This systemic issue not only affects preservice teachers but also stifles meaningful reform in teacher preparation itself.

To truly prepare future teachers, we must move beyond a model of education that prioritizes theoretical mastery and standardization at the expense of human connection and adaptability. A reimagined teacher preparation program must embrace a clinically based curriculum that integrates trauma-informed pedagogy, fosters reflective practice, and prioritizes relational teaching alongside content delivery (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Garwood & Vernon-Feagans, 2017). Preservice teachers must have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with students, practice addressing behavioral and emotional challenges, and reflect on these aspects as integral to their teaching, rather than as secondary considerations.

Ultimately, rethinking teacher education is not just about improving instructional strategies, it is about shifting the very foundation of how we prepare educators. Future teachers must be empowered with not only pedagogical knowledge but also the skills to navigate the deeply human, often unpredictable realities of the classroom. This requires a commitment to integrating theory and practice, creating robust university-school partnerships, and fostering a model of teacher education that sees adaptability, empathy, and trauma-informed care as essential components of effective teaching. Only through this reimagining can we hope to cultivate teachers who are not only prepared to instruct but who are equipped to connect, support, and inspire the students they serve.

CONCLUSION

Looking back on my experiences in the classroom, I realize that the most profound lessons I learned were not about curriculum design or instructional strategies, but about the emotional realities my students carried with them each day. The outbursts, the withdrawn silence, the moments of deep frustration or unexpected breakthroughs—these were not simply behavioral challenges to manage but reflections of my students' lived experiences. My preservice education

had prepared me to teach academic content, but it had not prepared me for the complexities of supporting students who had experienced trauma. These moments were not just deviations from the curriculum; they were the heart of teaching itself. Each challenge, each moment of uncertainty, reinforced a truth that my preservice education had overlooked: teaching is not just about delivering content but about responding to the human experiences unfolding in the classroom. Trauma shapes the way students learn, engage, and connect, yet teacher preparation programs often fail to equip future educators with the trauma-informed knowledge and strategies necessary to support their students holistically. Without this preparation, new teachers enter classrooms unprepared to recognize, understand, and respond to the emotional and psychological realities that deeply influence student success.

My roles as a classroom teacher, interventionist, administrator, and now teacher educator have provided me with a unique opportunity to advocate for change, illuminate these critical gaps, and share the lived realities of teaching with future educators. I have witnessed firsthand how trauma impacts students, how unprepared teachers struggle to navigate these challenges, and how intentional TIP can transform classrooms into spaces of safety and healing. As a teacher educator, I see the urgency of integrating trauma-informed pedagogy into teacher preparation not as an elective or isolated module but as an essential, embedded component of how we train future educators.

To bridge the gap between theory and practice, preservice teachers need meaningful, clinically based experiences that allow them to engage with trauma-sensitive strategies in real classrooms. Universities and K-12 schools must work together to create programs that prepare educators to build relationships, foster resilience, and respond to student trauma with empathy and skill. By centering TIP in teacher education, we are not just improving instructional approaches—we are ensuring that every child, regardless of their experiences, has access to an environment where they feel seen, supported, and capable of success. This belief is grounded not only in research, but in my own transformation over the past 11 years—from a teacher focused primarily on instruction to one who understands that meaningful learning begins with connection, safety, and trust.

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You Will Be Rewarded for Separation and Call It Growth
A *Currere* in Three Scenes

By Todd Edwards
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Act 1: Sunday Morning, 1975

I was maybe six, maybe seven—the age when you still sit cross-legged in your pajamas with a bowl of cereal balanced in your lap, close to the TV screen.

My parents didn't go to church. Neither did I. What I knew about God came mostly from television—the same place all latchkey kids from the 70s learned about everything. We were one of the first houses in Middletown to have cable, part of a pilot program. Thirty-two channels. A brown plastic cable box with beige push buttons mounted on top of the TV.

That Sunday morning, I was flipping through channels. Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. Dak tari. Wonderama, maybe. The less exciting Sunday programming. I was looking for something—anything—more interesting than what was on.

What I found was a man's face, filling the entire screen. A tight closeup. Eyes wet, tears tracking down both cheeks.

I stopped pressing buttons.

Behind him, tones from an organ swelled. A woman sat at the keys, pressing each note slowly, deliberately, letting it reverberate before moving to the next. Her eyes were closed. She played with the gravity of someone performing a sacred duty in a televised cathedral.

The man spoke. His voice cracked with emotion.

"This church does so much. For so many people. But there is only so much we can do alone." He closed his eyes. The organ grew louder.

"Pray with me now. Dear Jesus, we are blessed to have this ministry. The good we do, we do through you, Lord. And we pray to you, Father, to be able to do more. To be more. To have more so that we can give more."

The camera cut to images of children. Small faces. Dark eyes. Thin arms. Dirt on their cheeks. They looked at the camera without smiling.

"These children are hungry. They are lost. They need to know Jesus. And we can help them. With your support, we can help them."

I felt something tighten in my chest. I didn't have a word for it yet. It felt like being needed. Like being seen by someone who didn't know I was there. Like being told I could matter. "Please. Call this number now."

A phone number appeared at the bottom of the screen. White numbers on a dark blue field. I started crying.

The phone was in the basement. Push-button, beige, with a curly cord. I could reach it from the couch where I sat watching the screen.

I picked up the receiver and pressed the numbers carefully, one at a time. My eyes were

still on the television. The man was still praying. The children were still there.

I pressed the last button and waited.

A sound. Rapid. Staccato. Harsh.

Not a ring. Not a voice.

I hung up. Pressed the numbers again. My hands were shaking now.

The same sound.

I tried a third time. A fourth.

Is everyone calling?

Did I do it wrong?

I didn't know that long-distance numbers needed something else—a one first, or a zero, or some other code I had never learned because I had never needed to know. The phone was something that rang and you answered. It was not something you used to reach out into the world. A fifth time. A sixth. My breath was coming faster now, uneven.

Did I break it?

Am I in trouble?

A seventh time. An eighth.

What about those children?

I tried nine times. Maybe more. Each time the sound was the same. Each time I got more upset.

Finally, I gave up.

I put the receiver down. I buried my head in the couch cushions and cried.

I don't know how long I stayed there. I don't remember if I told anyone what had happened. What I remember is this: I had been called to do something. I tried. I did not know how. And no one came to help me figure it out.

Act 2: Max Currant's Funeral

I knew the funeral home. I had been there before—once for a classmate who died in a car accident in high school, other times over the years as the people I grew up with started dying in the ways people die when they're young: accidents, overdoses, sudden illness.

The place reminded me of my Uncle Wendell and Aunt Velma's house in Hamilton. Wood paneling. White carpet, slightly yellowed. White curtains with a print of flowers, slightly yellowed. It felt like a window had never been opened in the place. Ever. The ceilings seemed low somehow. Just a hint of claustrophobia, a whiff, as I entered.

Max Currant was dead. Lung cancer. He was my age. I hadn't seen him in years. Max had been one of those guys in high school—tall, six-four, with wavy blonde hair and big horse teeth and a laugh that filled a room. Later he grew into himself: deep voice, mirrored sunglasses, high fringed leather boots. He was the kind of person who seemed comfortable in his own skin in a way I never quite managed. He was tight with my best friend Rich. Max and I were never that close, but I orbited him. I wanted his approval the way you want approval from someone who represents something you're not sure you can be.

I was a straight-A student. I worked harder than anyone I knew. I also did my best to raise hell on weekends.

I was trying to live in two worlds at once. One world said, "School is a waste of time, trying makes you a sellout, a conformist, a wimp." The other world said, "Put your head down, work

your ass off, follow orders, prove yourself."

I never quite fit in either.

I was nervous as I drove to the funeral home. Would I see anyone I knew? Would they recognize me? I was hoping to reconnect, to offer support, to stand in a room with people who knew me before I became whoever I was now.

I didn't expect to see Max's wife and kids. I didn't even know he had kids.

His wife was standing near the front of the room, greeting people. I recognized her immediately—we'd once been in the same history class. I remembered her as being smart, funny, and insightful in ways that didn't always get rewarded in school—the kind of person who probably wasn't going to college, who probably wasn't leaving Middletown.

I approached. Offered condolences. Started to introduce myself.

She said my name.

She remembered me.

I was stunned. After all these years, after everything that had happened, after all the distance I'd put between myself and that world—she knew who I was. Not as a professor, not as someone who'd moved to Oxford, just as Todd. She remembered me as the person I'd been when I sat in the back of that classroom. I felt seen. Honored. Like maybe I hadn't disappeared completely.

Her kids were standing nearby. Young. Middle school, maybe high school. They had Max's height, his features. One wore a Kiss t-shirt. I didn't know what to say to them. *I'm sorry for your loss. Or, your dad and I used to hang out. He was a good guy.* Everything sounded wrong in my head before I could say it out loud. Their mother asked what I was doing now. The question people ask when they haven't seen you in decades.

"I teach," I said. "Math. At Miami University." Her face shifted slightly—interest, maybe, or just politeness.

"Oh," she said. "At the Middletown campus?"

"No," I said. "In Oxford."

There was a pause. Just a beat. But I felt it.

"Oh," she said again. "That's nice."

One of her kids looked at me. Then looked away.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It's good. I walk to work. The students are—"
I didn't know how to finish the sentence.

"That's great," she said. Her voice was kind. Genuinely kind. But something had shifted. One of the kids said something to her I didn't catch. She nodded.

"We should go," she said. "It was really nice to see you."

"You too," I said.

"Take care, Dr. Edwards," she said.

I watched them walk away. I stayed a few more minutes. Signed the guest book. Looked at the photos of Max on a table near the casket—him laughing, him with his kids, him younger than I remembered. Then I left.

I didn't see Rich. I didn't reconnect with anyone else. I drove back to Oxford and didn't tell anyone where I'd been.

ACT 3: A THURSDAY NIGHT IN HAMILTON

That whole semester, I carried around a quiet dread that I wasn't reaching my students. They were loud, scattered, funny, exhausted—working-class students balancing jobs, families, and school. I cared about them more than I expected to and doubted myself more than I wanted to admit. Thirty years into teaching, I still hadn't mastered classroom management, mostly because I never really believed in it. I believed in people. I believed in conversation. But some weeks, even that conviction wavered.

I drove to campus that Thursday night—the last night of the semester—feeling like I'd failed them.

I opened the door.

On the board, in big letters: *We love you, Dr. Edwards.*

And beneath it: a table overflowing with homemade food. Not store-bought. Not last-minute. Family food.

One student brought her mamaw's biscuits and gravy—made every Sunday. Another brought her aunt's flan from Mexico. Someone else handed me snickerdoodles made from her mom's handwritten recipe card and said, "Dr. Edwards, this is what home smells like when things are good. I wanted you to have that."

Something in me cracked. I cried. They cried. It was absurdly tender for a Thursday night. I told them how unsure I'd been feeling. They told me no professor had ever said anything like that to them.

For a moment, the roles fell away. No "students." No "professor." Just people.

After class, three of them walked me to my car, carrying leftovers like a little procession. On the way, they asked me about my personal relationship with Jesus. I told them I was not a man of faith—something younger Todd would have never imagined saying out loud in southwestern Ohio. Then, right there in the parking lot, they asked if they could pray for me.

Nobody had ever asked me that before.

I didn't know what to do, so I did the only thing that felt honest—I said yes.

They put their hands on me. Six hands. They encircled me. One prayed out loud under the yellow sodium lights while the other two bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Three Hamilton students praying over a math professor from Middletown who now teaches in Oxford.

I felt honored.

I felt confused.

I felt seen.

And yes—I felt violated.

That word matters. Being seen that fully, without armor, crosses a boundary even when it's loving. Even when it's genuine.

It was beautiful. It was disorienting. And I haven't stopped thinking about it.

WHAT THESE THREE ACTS SHARE

William Pinar calls this method *currere*—the running of the course (Pinar, 2004). Not curriculum, but *currere*: the lived experience of moving through time, returning to moments that won't let go, examining them from different angles until patterns emerge.

I keep returning to these three moments because they show me something I couldn't see

while living inside them. They map a single pattern across my life. A child wants to help. He doesn't know the codes. He tries anyway. He fails alone. A man attends a funeral. He is briefly recognized. The codes shift. Distance reasserts itself. He leaves. A professor receives care from students. They bypass all codes. He consents. It feels like violation because there are no barriers to manage.

These aren't just memories. They're evidence of how institutions—religious, educational, professional—promise connection while teaching separation. Mike Rose (1989) writes of students who live on the boundary between worlds, never quite belonging to either. These three moments show me I've been living on that boundary my entire life—not despite my education, but because of it.

The televangelist promised: give and you will help. But you had to know how to give. You had to have access.

The funeral home promised: come, remember together. But recognition dissolved the moment institutional markers appeared. Oxford. Professor. Dr. Edwards.

My students promised nothing. They simply offered. And that's why it unsettled me.

For decades, I believed the story the university tells about itself—that higher education is about becoming your full self, about freedom through knowledge, about transcending the limitations of where you came from.

And in many ways, that story is true. The university gave me tools, language, opportunities my eighteen-year-old self couldn't imagine. It let me become someone I wanted to be. But it also taught me—quietly, persistently, powerfully—to separate.

To separate from people who didn't have degrees.

To separate from ways of knowing that don't count as knowledge.

To separate from the working-class cadences and certainties that shaped me.

bell hooks (1994) names this plainly: upward mobility through education often requires separating from your origins, learning to perform a different class identity, calling that transformation freedom.

To call that separation *growth*.

To call that distance *professionalism*.

To call that transformation *becoming educated*.

The university doesn't just give you knowledge. It gives you identity. And identity, in this system, is produced through sorting. Bourdieu (1984) showed how educational institutions don't simply transmit knowledge—they transmit cultural capital, teaching us to recognize and enact class distinctions that feel like personal preferences.

You learn what counts and what doesn't.

You learn who you are by learning who you are not.

You learn to maintain boundaries—between expert and novice, between educated and uneducated, between Oxford and Middletown.

And you are rewarded for it. With status. With salary. With the quiet comfort of being on the right side of the line.

That Thursday night in the parking lot, my students didn't ask for my credentials. They didn't ask where I taught or what I believed or whether I belonged. They saw me. They cared. They acted. And I felt violated because I had spent decades learning to prevent exactly that kind of encounter.

Not because it was harmful. But because it was unmanaged.

Because it crossed boundaries I'd been taught to maintain.

Because it reminded me that those boundaries aren't natural—they're institutional. And I had become their keeper. Britzman (2003) writes about how teachers learn to maintain professional distance, how we construct boundaries that protect us from the vulnerability of genuine encounter.

My Hamilton students are training to be teachers. They will stand in classrooms like the ones I sat in as a child. They will teach kids like young Todd—kids trying to figure out which world they belong to, kids working harder than anyone they know, kids who don't yet understand what they're being asked to give up.

And I don't know what to do with that.

I don't know if I'm preparing them to disrupt the system or to reproduce it.

I don't know if their certainty will serve their students or constrain them.

I don't know if the boundaries I've learned to maintain are wisdom or cowardice. I do know this: the separation I've experienced wasn't accidental. It was structural. It was rewarded. And I participated in it long before I had language to name it.

Pinar says the synthetical moment of *currere* is where understanding emerges—where past, present, and future converge into meaning.

But I don't have a tidy synthesis.

What I have is this: three moments across 50 years that keep circling back. Three encounters with institutions that promise belonging but deliver codes I didn't know or couldn't accept or learned too well.

And a growing awareness that the university—this place I've called home for decades—asks the same thing every institution asks: choose sides, maintain boundaries, call separation by another name. I'm still here. I'm still teaching. I still care about my students more than I expect to. But I see it now. The cost. The sorting. The quiet, persistent separation we call becoming educated. And I don't know what to do about it except to say it out loud.

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Walking Our *Currere*

The Four Black Scholars' Creation of Counterspace through Black Placemaking in the Academy

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Regressive

Shawnieka

I completed my master's degree 20 years prior to returning to school as a doctoral student. I navigated both undergraduate and graduate courses as a non-traditional adult learner. I did not have any expectations of community or building community. I worked full-time and had young children during my undergraduate and graduate programs. Honestly, given that I perceived myself to be older than my peers and with the additional assumption that I shouldered more responsibility, I didn't believe community to be a vital part of my academic journey at that time. I worked a third-shift job, attended courses during the day, and spent time with my children. I believed navigating my programs was a very individualized journey. I did not engage in campus life, and I did not pursue opportunities to connect with my peers. Many people establish long-standing friendships and community during their undergraduate years. This was not my experience.

Pursuing my PhD was the last of my childhood dreams. My sole purpose for pursuing my doctorate was shaped by my clinical experiences as a social work practitioner and therapist. My experience in the clinical setting offered me insight into a critical public health crisis—one that was not represented in public discourse or even available in existing literature and scholarship. My decision to pursue my PhD was to address the lack of scholarly representation within marginalized communities, especially in literature centering the narratives of Black girls. So, once again, as I enrolled in courses, I believed this doctoral journey would be yet another individualized academic experience. However, I experienced an immediate shift in my understanding of how vitally important community would be for my persistence and academic success at the doctoral level.

The very first class exposed my flickering confidence and self-doubt. I questioned my capacity, my belonging, and my grit to navigate the rigor. The design of the first course, Introduction to Doctoral Studies, created built-in opportunities to collaborate with other students. It was at this moment that I discovered the absolute power of community. My guiding worldview during my previous educational experiences sharply shifted, and I actively sought community with my new peers. Unfortunately, I also learned that, even with newfound community, our sense of belonging on campus would require us to create a nuanced space that attended to our needs as Black doctoral students, a space that would become our counterspace. bell hooks (2015) and Bettina Love (2019) call this counterspace a home—in essence, a space that offers Black people a refuge, a sanctuary where they are able to show up as their authentic selves, whole, nourished, and

supported. I soon realized that the notion of community would be insufficient; we needed a counterspace to hold, nurture, and embolden our Blackness and other collective identities and our ability to persist.

TYAIRA

It was not until I reached my master's program that I was taught by Black women … plural … more than one. That was when I realized that I too could earn a Ph.D. and perhaps even be the first Black professor for a Black girl as they were for me. This is not because I did not know they existed, but because I finally saw and experienced, first-hand, the #BlackGirlMagic, a term coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 centering the achievements, resilience, and promise of Black women and girls (Lamar-Becker, 2022). In October 2020, I began full-time work at the institution, and with this came the benefit of a tuition fee waiver. I figured that, since I had the benefit, I would take the program for a test drive to see if it would be a good fit. In Summer Semester of 2021, I took a Critical Gender and Sexuality in Education course with doctoral students as a non-degree student. I passed the course with an A and received words of encouragement to apply to the program. Fast forward to the first night of classes. It had sunk in that this was for real this time around. I was a doctoral student. In reflecting on my past educational experiences, I knew that I wanted to be intentional about connecting with my peers. This intention turned into reality as my peers and I would fill our class break time with conversation, getting to know each other. This soon turned into the cultivation of our counterspace.

PHILIP

Prior to entering my doctoral program, I had little to no understanding of the social and psychological demands doctoral programs required of students. Although I sought guidance from two mentors who had graduated from the same institution, their experiences could not fully prepare me for entering a space into which no one in my immediate family had endeavored to venture. During my Introduction to Doctoral Studies course, I became acutely aware of how academic confidence and legitimacy were conflated. As classmates articulated their ideas with ease, I began to question my belonging in that space, interpreting my inability to articulate or duplicate my thoughts in the same manner as my peers as being not being ready or worthy of occupying the same space with other doctoral students.

As the day progressed and I moved to the following class, I noticed the presence of other Black students—a contrast to the isolation I had envisioned. A brief exchange over shared institutional history became an entry point into relational connection. What began as an informal invitation to study together emerged from a recognition that persistence in the doctoral program demanded collective support that the institution was structurally incapable of providing its minoritized students. This realization marked my earliest encounter with the conditions that facilitated the cultivation of a space of belonging, intellectual vulnerability, and shared cultural identity within a broader, hegemonic campus environment.

Lakisha

As a High School teacher with a master's degree, I had never envisioned myself obtaining a doctoral degree. It was the year 2020, and a colleague who became my close friend saw the work I was doing with my students. She was in the last haul of obtaining her Doctoral Degree, and she encouraged me to pursue Ph.D. as well. The thought of obtaining such a distinguished degree seemed so out of reach for me. Research and writing were activities that I always enjoyed. In the course of obtaining my bachelor's degree, my friends would often consult with me for guidance when they were tasked to write an extensive paper. I knew writing was a strong suit for me, but writing at such a high academic level did not align with my personal capabilities.

The feeling of contentment in my current position as a teacher would soon dissipate. While sitting in a monthly steering committee meeting for a program I was assisting with at my high school, the university personnel began discussing the need for someone with a Ph.D. to teach the class I was teaching. Saddened by the news, I called my friend, who had completed her doctoral degree and was now teaching at a university. Once again, she encouraged me to pursue the degree, stating I would love what I am doing even more because there would be meaning behind my work. After receiving an email with the information about the program she completed, I was excited, and I had a newfound confidence to apply to the program. What began as a tentative application turned into a letter of acceptance.

Consistent with the way I completed my master's program, I understood that, if I were to survive a Doctoral studies program, I had to connect myself to a community. From the first day of orientation, I searched for someone with whom I could build mutual support. There was a young lady with whom I had crossed paths during virtual meetings and graduate fairs. Instinctually, I thought she would be the person with whom I would build community. However, my expectations were deflated when the question was posed and she explained that she worked better alone. A space to affirm each other's strengths and mitigate vulnerabilities had become an independent expedition. Entering class for the first time, I did not have an expectation of community. One isolated conversation created a false reality that I was on an island all alone. Contrary to my own beliefs, both of my professors believed in community, and unbeknownst to me, there were three other doc students who were looking for that same community I was seeking. We connected for many reasons and on many levels. The authenticity of support and our desire to see each other succeed fuel our becoming what I call "My family."

Progressive

With each passing week, we would have an opportunity to spend moments in class in dyads learning one another's stories and our whys. Soon, these brief opportunities to connect within class time would not offer enough time to fully engage in community with one another. The engagement would end abruptly as our professor would transition to new content and material. There would be this palpable yearning to finish conversations, unpack course content, and learn one another's gift and skillsets. Although opportunities to engage presented themselves in each class, we longed for more. Conversations shifted during our in-class moments to discussing scheduling study time together during the weekends. These conversations would take place at the end of each weekly class. We considered where, when, and how often we should connect in community. We brainstormed which spaces on campus would make sense, would meet our needs as doctoral

students. We wondered which space would be invitational for each of our visible and invisible identities as Black scholars and individuals. How would this space offer full belonging within the historically white space? We were certain that the space must offer not only physical comfort but also psychological comfort and safety as well.

Pinar (1975/1994) offers the Progressive lens as part of the *currere* method. He asserts that, "We look … at what's not yet the case, what is not yet present" (p. 24). As Black doctoral scholars, we considered the ways in which we curate our unapologetic belonging on campus. Our initial strategy was to utilize the spaces on campus that affirmed our identities as doctoral students. The campus library made perfect sense, as it represented knowledge production and offered a space that would provide accessible resources. While the campus library in theory would serve as an information hub, the policies would offer the collective unforeseen barriers. Physically the library offered generous accommodation. However, the policies governing how students access the space proved difficult. The identified group study spaces had time constraints that disrupted the collective's continuity of engagement. Specifically, group rooms were assigned in two-hour increments. Two of the four members of the collective drove a great distance to utilize the campus information hub, and only having access to group study spaces for a few hours of time was pointless. After that initial planned study session at the campus library, the collective needed to reconsider not only the physical space, but we had to re-imagine, or envision, transformational space where not only our identities as doctoral students would be welcomed warmly invited our Black identities equally. A progressive moment invites us to imagine the Black doctoral collective establishing a scholarship and other mentorship opportunities to help future Black doctoral students attend conferences and create pathways to connection at their prospective historically white institutions.

Analytical

As mentioned above, our collective consists of four Black doctoral students—three women and one man. We convene within a historically white, undergraduate-dominant institution. We theorize our counterspace (Solorzano et al., 2000) through Black placemaking, understanding placemaking as the ongoing labor through which minoritized groups transform hostile institutional environments into livable places in which to reside. Black placemaking is not simply about occupying space but producing sites of endurance, belonging (Tinto, 2017), and resistance within academic structures not designed for Black doctoral life.

Within this collective, placemaking functions as a relational and intentional process that resists doctoral socialization norms, such as isolation, competition, and individualism. The gendered composition of our group, rooted in Black feminist epistemology, as it is led by Black women, further disrupts patriarchal and hierarchical academic norms. As such, our collective leans into the aspect of relationality, ethic of care (Tinto, 2017), and shared accountability as central tenets to our scholarly persistence in the academy. This form of placemaking challenges racialized and gendered expectations of professionalism and intellectual legitimacy by creating a place where Blackness, faith, vulnerability, and joy are not relegated to the margins but are central to our success/thriving.

In the analytical phase of *currere*, this analysis supports our experiences to interrogate how our collective practices function within a historically white institution. Instead of recounting personal narratives in this section, this section acts as a theorizing space on how Black placemaking

has emerged within the collective to labor toward our collective relational commitment. This collective does not solely operate as a place of support but also as a fugitive place where it exposes academe's norms and becomes a place to create a path toward Black survival and success. Through this lens, Black placemaking becomes a conduit through which doctoral education is actively negotiated, disrupted, and reimagined.

In the synthetical stage of *currere*, these insights are realigned to consider what our collective placemaking makes markedly noteworthy about doctoral education at historically white institutions. By holding together past conditions, present practices, and imagined futures, this synthesis foregrounds how Four Black Scholars resisted institutional norms and created a collective that consistently remakes said norms through placemaking. What is made apparent is that our alternative space is not one that exists on the periphery, but it is a space that is designed for belonging, success, and survival during our doctoral journey.

Synthetical

In reflecting on our past, present, and future as the *Four Black Scholars*, the intentional cultivation of our counterspace within a historically white institution (HWI) has aided in the navigation and resistance against systemic inequities in our doctoral experiences. Pointedly, this counterspace has served as a site of community, accountability, and scholar identity to combat environments where our Blackness is seen as a deficit or not seen at all. Through collective dialogue and action, we have not only cultivated a space that has sustained us but one that calls-in institutional accountability. As Ross (2025) suggests, calling in invites constructive conflict. Moreover, we hold onto the possibility that institutions and environments are capable of change.

The field of educational leadership often presents principles of power-sharing, inclusive communities, and democratic ideals. Yet, these principles often fall short in practice to the very students they are serving. Principles cannot merely act as degree outputs but must be woven and stitched into the fabric of curriculum and teaching. We invite educational leaders and those alike to interrogate how their principles and actions affirm (or fail to provide) a sense of belonging for their students with particular attention to minoritized graduate students. How might an institution, college, and/or department provide space, both inside and outside of course instruction, for minoritized graduate students? How might the current social, cultural, and political climate affect how minoritized graduate students show up? These are the types of questions educational leaders must grapple with as they commit to an environment rooted in belonging and equity.

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LEARNING TO TALK ABOUT RACE
AN UNFINISHED CONVERSATION

By Franchesa M. Garza-Fraire
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A RETURN TO MY PAST

What are you?

I remember telling and retelling my cultural identity story to the white-haired ladies at Grandma's beauty shop, kids on the playground, strangers at the grocery store, men at the bars, patrons where I worked, my Vietnamese nail techs, and generally speaking any Asian person I encounter. As an Asian American, I cannot hide my *otherness*, and, yet, I do not have an Asian experience either.

My mother was adopted from a Japanese orphanage when she was two by my blue-eyed grandmother and her military husband, who, not soon enough, became an ex-husband. My mom's sister, who is Korean, was adopted and brought home when my mom was nine and my aunt was seven. Later married to the man who I knew as my grandfather, the family presented as Texans in a Southwest Bordertown.

My father was a first-generation Mexican American who grew up during a time when assimilation was a priority, and speaking Spanish in school was unacceptable and often punished. My family was middle class. We had a swimming pool and two cars, and we went on vacations. My parents worked all of the time to make this happen. For this reason, I grew up mostly at my grandmother's house and remember that I was only allowed to play with the children next door through the chain link fence that separated our properties. They were "Mexicans" according to my grandparents.

In school, children made fun of my slanted eyes, and I missed meanings in conversation when the language slipped in and out of Spanglish. My insides did not match my outsides. I saw the world through the blue and green eyes of my adoptive grandparents. Their lens was laced with bigotry; they didn't really know how to include or grow or edify my kind.

I grew up in a home where the "Mexicans and Orientals" were discussed as less than, but I was not. I was valued—a possession perhaps. Descriptors like "the illegals, the jigaboo, and the Chinaman" were used to describe our neighbors. Hearing how my grandparents discussed people of color and immigrants kept me longing and looking in mirrors trying to come up with a good enough answer for the recurring social question, "What are you?"

In 2019 and four and a half decades into my life, I was invited to learn about a concept called *currere* and write from my Un-Asian experience. The group of women who invited me into this project had similar experiences regarding their complicated Asian identities. There was something sacred and healing about safely exploring who I was with others who were doing similar work. *Currere* offered us a reflective opportunity to get to know ourselves without the pressure of pre-constructed ideas of what identity entails. Instead, we wrote from our own experiences in relation to the concept and focus of the project. That focus was our Un-Asian experience in America. We had common and uncommon experiences. We connected over the humorous and exhausting number of times we'd been asked, "Where are you from?" We shared tears over feeling

misunderstood and over our own misunderstandings. Most importantly, we concluded that we are more than our race, ethnicity, and origin. As a bonus, the ongoing cycle of *currere*-thinking also gave us permission to evolve and continue to consider this evolution and our origins with each future experience as more pieces of our identity formation.

A STEP TOWARDS MY FUTURE

As a counselor, counselor educator, and cultural responsiveness curriculum researcher, the intersectionality of my identity grows. *Currere* became a reflective practice, and I wanted to take it further. My best hopes are to create psychologically safe conversations where people can learn about themselves, one another, and recognize racism and bias without offense or shame, but rather as the systemic education we receive without our consent.

RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY

Counselor preparation programs have a responsibility to create safe learning spaces with empirically informed lessons that prepare clinicians who become increasingly self-aware and can think critically, act responsively, and practice active reflection when serving diverse client populations (Celinska & Swazo, 2016; Haskins & Singh, 2015; Ratts et al., 2016). This ethical responsibility is essential in counselor education. To improve future therapeutic relationships and outcomes, counseling students must learn to recognize and identify the social and cultural constructs that intersect with their identities and the identities of their clients. Counselors and counselor educators alike must also examine personal experiences of racism to build an awareness of existing and nuanced biases (Chan et al., 2018; Haskins & Singh, 2015; Matthews et al., 2018; Ratts et al., 2016). Such awareness can improve instruction, clinical assessment, and treatment (Sue et al., 2009). Yet, evidence-based pedagogy is still needed to create lessons that encourage critical reflection and conversation, while ensuring experienced safety for all learners and educators (Chan et al., 2018; Choate & Granello, 2006, Garza-Fraire & Stark, 2023).

To explore this research gap, for my doctoral dissertation, I proposed the use of *currere* as pedagogy for teaching courses that include topics on social and cultural diversity in counselor education. My research excluded, *currere* is not used as a counseling tool or known in any research regarding counseling. Yet, I found value in learning about *currere* and experiencing my own growth in self-awareness by engaging in the practice, and I wanted to bring the method with me into my work as a counselor and counselor educator. Afterall, it was the first invitation I had ever received to safely explore and further understand who I am from a lens of diversity and belonging.

In counselor education, we know that structure in reflective practice leads to quality outcomes (Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). *Currere* offers a loosely structured framework for ongoing reflection that is contextually relevant to learners and that can be revisited for ongoing reflection work throughout their careers (Pinar, 2014). *Currere* as a practice begins with personal and autobiographical reflections (Jung, 2016) and continues with collaborative conversations regarding practitioners' experiences. Although research regarding the efficacy of *currere* in counselor education is not available, the use of *currere* in the fields of education and social sciences exists and prompted the exploration and evaluation of its use in the graduate counseling classroom (D. Brown, 2018; Martin, 2018; Poetter, 2018).

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

For the qualitative study, 14 students engaged in a *currere* activity that included observations of reflective writing, discussion, and a final interview with me (the primary investigator) to better understand their experience of the activity. Participants were directed to (1) Describe a memory when they first became aware of their social and cultural identity, (2) Explain how this experience was racialized or normalized, (3) Speak to any power or privilege that influenced this experience, (4) Identify how this experience might impact their identity and work as a counselor, and (5) Finally, on a scale from 1 to 10, report how safe they felt completing this activity (10 = safest).

Findings from this study suggest that students experience *currere* as a psychologically safe and beneficial, albeit challenging, learning opportunity. *Currere* appears to support beginning development for students in multicultural and social awareness, responsiveness, and advocacy (MSARA). Benefits of the *currere* lesson, as reported by students, included awareness, learning, thinking, empathy, and meaningful connections within the classroom (Garza-Fraire, 2022).

Counselors must develop MSARA related skills essential to providing ethical mental health services to culturally and socially diverse communities (Haskins & Singh, 2015; Matthews et al., 2018; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2009). To meet these needs, effective teaching methods must exist. This *currere* study contributes to the scarce collection of pedagogical methods for instruction in MSARA skills for counselor education.

MY NOW, THEN, AND FUTURE

Once the dissertation was complete and I took my first faculty position, I experienced the struggles that instructors of color face when teaching on concepts of cultural humility and responsiveness or when trying to examine the importance of the decolonization of mental health for ethical practice with clients from diverse backgrounds (Yoon et al., 2014). The complexity of applying what I had learned through study, research, and small-scale application was more than I imagined. Additionally, and with no intent, I began experiencing the instructor reflexivity I had encouraged as a best practice based on the conclusions from my research (Garza-Fraire & Stark, 2023; Yoon & Kordesh, 2014).

Many students engaged in critical thinking and conversation using the *currere* method. These conversations were exciting and grew my personal awareness too. Conversely, over the course of three years, I also experienced resistance from a small but important group of students regarding specific course materials. Although this is expected and well documented in the literature, from a fragility standpoint, I observed a glimpse of something else. From them, I learned that, by inviting the self and its experiences into the learning process, a natural resistance and experience of psychological unsafety might also exist for students when their beliefs or experiences are challenged.

I wondered if feeling psychologically unsafe might be different from the fragility of ego or discomfort due to a narrative of passive or complicit behavior in the presence of racism. In the context of the newest political narratives, some students felt a need to protect their values and rights. One group of students challenged the use of the current textbook within a religious university setting due to a perceived agenda against white and or Christian experiences and beliefs. Though perhaps surprising, I found myself empathizing with their stance. I experienced a similar

dissonance when learning about my own cultural identity in relation to a system of racism I had experienced that was different than my textbooks described. I remember asking for more information about the school to prison pipeline in a graduate school course and feeling the eyes roll around me. I earnestly wanted to understand, while also having an unclear explanation of how I could be part of the problem or the solution as a 20-year public school educator and school counselor. The professor in that course encouraged me to *do more research* on the matter, and the conversation ceased. This experience brought up shame and doubt in my abilities as a professional and as a good enough human. I also learned that it was better not to ask questions about race in a classroom setting.

Some might name my experience a form of fragility, and I also know it was ignorance due to the context in which I was raised and the discrimination I experienced. I never asked for those experiences, and I can see both the privilege and oppression within that childhood today. However, it was only after *I did the research* that I better understood my racialized experiences in relation to the systemic conditions that exist. Prior to that, I experienced regret and shame for not knowing enough, feeling different, and misunderstood. As I look back, I am not sure all students leave the disenchantment within classroom learning environments with such tenacity and resolve; as an educator, I want to ensure classrooms become a place where a student's questions are carefully considered and discussed. If we want *all* students to examine their identity in relation to the diversity that exists within our population, they must first be afforded the opportunity to be honest about their resistance or confusion and have a safe place to explore their complex feelings.

As I look back on my own experience within *currere* and the reasons it was meaningful to me, I remember the feelings of safety—the encouragement to be completely honest, curious, even angry, in my writing and discourse with like- and other-minded people. I remember the content becoming increasingly more relevant to my personal and professional roles in the world for the first time in my academic lifetime. The opportunity to have hard feelings and complicated conversations about race, ethnicity, difference, and socially constructed systems, made a difference in how I saw myself and others with less judgement and more compassion. The ability to hear about people's experiences and have them listen to mine, created an opportunity for meaning making and an understanding that went beyond intellectualization.

I have experienced how safe classrooms must include (a) naming and acknowledging emotions, (b) sharing personal challenges and fears when appropriate, (c) actively participating in classroom conversations, and (d) helping create a classroom environment where honest and respectful conversations about race and a variety of beliefs can occur (Sue et al., 2009). *Currere* offers students and instructors opportunities to deeply reflect as individuals and openly listen to multiple experiences of race, ethnicity, and social norms; research supports such experiences (Chan et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2017).

My Meaning

I was not a fan of student anger, especially when it was towards me, other students, or documented on class evaluations, and I am learning from these experiences. That ongoing professional reflection that I posited as essential for educators in this field was and is occurring (Garza-Fraire & Stark, 2023). With each turn, I have had an opportunity to continue my *currere* reflections, toss in new social context, and produce new practices for the application of *currere* in and outside of the classroom. From my ongoing reflections and conversations, I recognize the

importance of not missing a learning opportunity due to the inability to have complex conversations but, rather. centering the learning opportunities around the ideas and conversations of those in the classroom.

Intentional reflective critical pedagogy, like *currere*, became essential when the post-electoral diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) language and narrative was silenced. Our work as diversity researchers and educators came under inspection, and many of our students are questioning course work that appears to be within the vein of DEI or aligns with antiracist language. Yet, our work is ongoing and must be framed in a way that still holds value and meaning for our learners and stakeholders. More importantly, our work as educators cannot get shut down for holding an agenda that may have begun to exist. Critical pedagogy resists the idea of agendas in education. The goal of education is not to tell students what to think but to help them become more aware, thoughtful, and engaged participants in a diverse and complex world (Freire, 1968/2000; Pinar, 2011, 2012; Pinar & Grumet, 2015; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2009).

As a result of my *currere* practice and reflection, I sought to make some changes in how we structured our *Counseling Diverse Populations* course. The graduate counseling department and leadership agreed to get rid of the existing textbook while keeping the guiding educational and professional and ethical standards for the course that serve and preserve the dignity of all students and their future clients.

Instead of having the content delivered by a textbook, students are (1) reflecting on personal socio-cultural and racialized experiences, (2) analyzing course content and professional competencies, (3) having conversations with one another, (4) and making meaning of the research and concepts surrounding cultural humility within the context of becoming counseling professionals to people from a multitude of backgrounds with unique experiences. It's important to note that the removal of the textbook was not to appease students but to responsively remove potential barriers to learning and create an opportunity for student collaboration and exploration. Brené Brown (2018), researcher and social work educator, identifies shame, perfectionism, and control as barriers to learning; meanwhile, curiosity, connection, and vulnerability lead to growth and grounded confidence. Experiential learning and qualitative research taught me that learning in a safe and challenging environment helps build self-awareness and cultural humility and has fostered curiosity for learning more.

As I reflect on the value of the ongoing process of *currere*, I am reminded that prioritizing the students' lived experiences within the curriculum improves learning (Pinar & Grumet, 2015). *Currere*, in Latin, means the running of the course, "wherein curriculum is experienced, enacted, and reconstructed" (Pinar & Grumet, 2015,p. 1). In other words, curriculum is to "the racetrack" as *currere* is to "the running of the race" (Pinar, 1975, 1994). Today, I better understand the progressive tense of curriculum building and the ongoing reflection that it requires for the educator committed to responsive learning spaces and ongoing conversations with students.

Until Next Time

It is too soon to know what the outcomes might be for the students, but I know that as a counselor educator and clinician this ongoing *currere* conversation is holding me accountable to the dynamic sociopolitical climate, the needs of students, and the needs of the people they will serve. This ongoing work includes reflexive observations of my experiences and contributions to

the ongoing narrative of diversity related education. Because of *currere* and this accountability, the conversations will continue.

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF MEMORY AND IMAGINATION
A *CURREREAN* INQUIRY INTO JUNG'S AFTERNOON OF LIFE

By Ivon Prefontaine
Independent Scholar

Overlaying almost four decades as an aspiring and active educator with seven decades of lived experiences offers volumes of complex, multi-layered memories. As I move through the late stages of my professional and personal journey, the philosophical inquiry into the utility of my lived experiences is paramount. "A question asked … perhaps most urgently by elders who wonder if all those years add up to anything worthwhile: Does my life have meaning" (Palmer, 2018, p. 11). This fundamental inquiry does not merely seek a retrospective validation but asks this question: How does this new meaning inform my future? These questions and the responses they yield call out to me to utilize the method of *currere* and its moments: regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2015, pp. 23–25). This autobiographical method offers rigorous opportunities to explore specific memories and examine how my intellectual interests intersect with the aspirations of student-teachers and the vision and mission of a contemporary university.

For the last four decades, teaching has been a vocation, a calling I respond to. In exploring "the afternoon of life [with] a significance [and purpose] of its own" (Jung, 1971, pp. 16–17), I find myself with a new vantage point to reflect on my life, imagine the future, and consider how these shape the present through a *currerean* lens. Being "on the brink of everything gives me new perspectives on my past, present, and future, and new insights into inner dynamics [shaping] and [driving] my life" (Palmer, 2018, p. 2). These insights include imagining a future as a field-instructor who guides student-teachers during their practicum experiences at a small, Christian university in Edmonton. The transition from the "morning" of my career—characterized by achievement and external validation—to the "afternoon" requires reconceptualizing the pedagogic self. The transition is more than chronological; it is ontological. It requires a shift from doing instruction to being a mentor, where wisdom of the past serves as the soil of the present and future.

Completing my PhD offered essential insights into possible intellectual interests and provided the conceptual language to begin describing how my educational experiences inform my present and future, beginning with my dissertation on vocation and teacher identity (Prefontaine, 2017). This scholarship has evolved to encompass teacher education, hope, nonviolence, and dialogue (see Fleener & Prefontaine, 2023; Prefontaine, 2023). When engaging with student-teachers, I feel somewhat reluctant to share these concepts, despite the university acknowledging hope and vocation on its website home page and the principle of nonviolence expressed in biblical passages, such as the Sermon on the Mount (*The Jerusalem Bible Reader's Edition*, 2000, Matt. 5–7), displayed around campus. I seek to avoid adding to the cacophony of "shoulds" student-teachers experience as they prepare to enter the profession and the early years of their careers. This reluctance is a point of *currerean* tension—a site where my personal history as a student and teacher and my professional identity as an instructor meet and can conflict with each other.

Currere offers opportunities to first explore these intellectual interests and how they relate to my own educational experiences. By returning to the genesis and forming of my own professional identity, I can begin to imagine ways to share dialogically with student-teachers to appreciate their understandings of these concepts, which are often inextricably linked to their

religious beliefs—with almost 70% identifying as Christian (The King's University, 2021). Engaging to listen closely and ask questions allows me to learn about a student-teacher's curriculum-as-lived-experience. They may not have yet explored the deeper meanings of their own lived experiences as a way of honoring their own individual "'*little' stories ... and the 'big' stories of [each of our] tradition*" (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 76, italics in original). At this stage of their careers and through intentional dialogue, we may each gently arrive at those new, deeper meanings.

REGRESSIVE MOMENT: RE-MEMBERING THE FOUNDATIONS

The regressive moment of *currere* calls for a return to the past to capture data of lived-experience. "I take myself and my existential experiences as a data source" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2015, p. 67). This is not merely a nostalgic exercise; it is a phenomenological excavation. By looking back, I aim to observe the pre-conceptual self—the person I was before my experiences were codified by professional titles and academic degrees.

It is February, 2013, and I attend my last Teacher's Convention before retiring to complete my doctoral studies. In Alberta, these conventions are significant professional events and, for me, transitional space. Amidst the crowd, I encounter Glen Roberts[1] who taught my older siblings. We weave through kiosks to a stall selling homemade jewelry. As we approach, a lady turns; Glen points to me and exclaims, "I found him!"

Despite the passing of decades, I recognize Mrs. Roberts, my Grade 4 teacher. As other teachers look on, we hug, she proclaims to onlookers, "smartest little boy I ever taught." In an instant, the weight of my PhD and decades of experience vanish; I revert to a reserved nine-year-old at a loss for words. This moment illustrates the temporal fluidity of the pedagogic self. I remain unfinished with the child I was, remaining an active participant in current educational encounters. We exchange life updates; she remembers my mother and shared afternoon visits over tea. Mrs. Roberts is beginning her retirement after over thirty years teaching. While she loved every moment, she is embracing jewelry making and other activities. As we part ways, this re-membering triggers a memory from my first year of teaching.

It is February, 1993, and I am a novice Grade 4 teacher. The principal notes that my experience coaching youth sports is a primary reason for hiring me, as students are enduring a succession of teachers and she hopes I can be the last teacher for them this year. They advise me that re-establishing order, stability, and continuity precedes academics. I use my physical education background, humor, and activities such as building snowmen, to build rapport. I strive to learn about each student's context to understand invisible challenges they each face. Who is in foster care? Who are latch key kids? Who is from an immigrant family? Each student has a unique name, a story to recount, and "their own private hopes and dreams" (Aoki, 1986/1991, p. 161). Despite well-meaning advice from colleagues to survive a "lost year," I teach and try to form trusting relationships, learning these are critical precursors to order and stability.

I teach Math long division—the "curriculum-as-plan … the works of curriculum planners" who are outside the classroom (Aoki, 1986/1991, pp. 160)—students struggle. Frustrated by rigid resource manuals, I seek advice from my spouse, who asks how I learned the concept. I reply, "with great difficulty and many tears." I return to my own fourth grade, failing to grasp long division in the "New Math." Usually a top student, I stare at my homework in despair. My mother

[1] I use pseudonyms to protect privacy.

brings me to the kitchen where, in rare collaboration, my largely absent father joins us. They look at the New Math example, shake their heads, and show me the old way. In minutes, the problems are solved. However, I cry again, fearing Mrs. Robert's reaction to doing long division the old way. My mother says, "Tell her to phone me."

The next day, Mrs. Roberts performs her ritual of checking homework. When she reaches my desk, she notes, "It is not done the right way." Without eye contact, I whisper my mother's message. I hear a sigh and the scrape of her pencil. I don't know if it is a check or an X, but I continue to do long division the old way. I return to 1993, and my spouse—who also learned the old way—suggests I teach the method I understand. The next morning, I introduce the "Mr. P way." I am "indwelling in a zone of [tensionality] between two curriculum worlds: the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experiences" (Aoki, 1986/1991, p. 159). When a student asks if the textbook way is also acceptable, I reply that we will find the best way for each student. As I circulate, I observe genuine progress. By June, most students have mastered long division. Reconciling the old way with the prescribed way becomes my first lesson in pedagogic nonviolence—a refusal to force a student's mind into a shape that does not fit with their lived understanding.

Due to their experience with the churn of teachers, students feel uncertain I will return each day. Despite their skepticism, I am consistent, even during personal crisis. When my father-in-law becomes terminally ill, I follow the principal's advice to be transparent with the students. I tell them I will return. When I do, I reconfirm my commitment, and the relief is palpable. On the final day of school, a student expresses a wish for school to continue, as they are learning. I feel humbled. It is autumn 1993, and I am a substitute teacher. One afternoon, my son hands me the phone; four students from the previous year searched the directory for every "Prefontaine" until they found me. They call to say they are doing well but miss me. They ask why I did not return. I offer a systemic explanation—how the system works—but feel it is a cop-out. I wanted to return, but the system did not allow for it.

Progressive Moment: Imagining the Future as a Field-Instructor

In the progressive moment, I enter the future, imagining it as a field instructor. This involves imagining "possible futures, including fears [and] fantasies of fulfillment" (Pinar, 2012, p. 46). In this moment, I project my current self into future scenarios to observe how my aspirations might manifest. Because each student-teacher navigates diverse contexts and histories, my role transitions from being a talking-head to an educator engaging them in dialogue. For those student-teachers who strongly identify as Christians and other faiths, doing God's work can align with the university's mission and can serve as a prime motivator. Also, it may inform how they conceptualize vocation, hope, and nonviolence. I imagine a future where the field-instructor is not a supervisor—consistent with the university's mission—who evaluates, but as a co-explorer who witnesses their emerging pedagogical practice.

Despite my absence from daily K-12 teaching, I envision a future where teaching remains a vocation—a calling for me. I meet with student-teachers in small groups before and during their practica. As my professional world narrows with my age, I introduce myself as sort of retired and choosing to be a field-instructor. My objective is to honor the reciprocity and tension between teaching and learning. During orientation, I ask each student-teacher to inquire into what vocation means to them and their emerging identity. I assume the role of learner, seeking to be informed by

each of their unique perspectives. A forward-looking stance can be a space for hopefulness to emerge throughout their careers.

I understand the progressive as hopeful, and I feel that my initial teaching experience demonstrates hope as indispensable to teaching and learning. I try to "discern where [my] intellectual interests are going, the relation between those evolving interests and [my] private life, between these two and evolving historical conditions" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2015, p. 76). What do I hope for as I engage each student-teacher? When student-teachers recount challenges—particularly related to classroom management—I recognize that their contexts differ from those I experienced. Rather than offering prescriptive fixes, I want to offer hope through dialogue as a gift to be accepted and acknowledge that challenges to one's calling to be a teacher arise. In this way, vocation is a two-sided coin related to passion. One side is a love of teaching; the other is suffering (part of the etymological root of passion) from challenges. In challenging moments, passion can evolve into compassion—a refined love in shared understanding. I imagine group conversations where, instead of troubleshooting a lesson plan, we sit with the suffering of a challenging day, acknowledging that pain is evidence of the love of a vocation called teaching.

I offer compassion to each student-teacher to sustain them as they encounter students facing their own significant challenges. Listening to each of their student's little stories allows them to gain some insight into their students' humanity. The progressive also demands resistance to increased standardization deforming education, such as the increased provincial mandate to quantify teaching and learning and reduce them and humans to statistical data. I imagine asking student-teachers how they might advocate on behalf of students without jeopardizing their careers, understanding that their backgrounds may differ significantly from their students. Open inquiry lives in dialogic spaces where, through listening, new possibilities can be sparked by lived-experience, a student's response, a mentor's comment, or a parent's insight. I envision a future where student-teachers advocate for the lived-curriculum over the standardized test, emboldened by our shared inquiry.

Analytical Moment: The Intersection of Self and Institution

In the analytical moment, I decompose the layers of my current reality, my current institutional life, and how the past and future inhabit it. I detach myself "from experience. Bracketing what is, what was, what can be, … potentially more free from it to freely choose the present, the future [and] how the present, however idiosyncratically, is … woven into the fabric of institutional life" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2015, p. 77). While drafting my dissertation, William Pinar (personal communication, 2016) asked me how schools feel today. This prompted a pivotal shift in my inquiry, raising a new question: "How do I want schools to feel?" As our grandchild approached school age, I also began to ask: "Who do I want teaching them?" and "How do I help inform these processes?" These questions are foundational to my intellectual interests and, for me, to becoming more. Juxtaposing my Grade 4 experience in my initial year teaching reveals a recurring tension between the curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived. This tension existed in the past and manifests itself in the present, forming creative spaces with new understandings about the future and what it means in becoming a field-instructor.

My position at the university is a product of good fortune rather than strategic planning and, as it is contract-based, it is tenuous. I taught the Philosophy of Education course in 2018 and became a field-instructor in 2019. The former role offers insights into the theoretical foundations

of the program, and the latter a practical context to apply and adapt one's pedagogic philosophy. I feel somewhat reluctant to share my intellectual interests with student-teachers even though these interests relate to the Philosophy of Education syllabus and readings, e.g., Palmer, Freire, Noddings, and Greene. This reluctance may stem from previous student feedback suggesting that my personal references to Catholicism are somehow at odds with the university's Christian ethos. This is a point of institutional analysis: How does the university define Christian, and how does my personal faith intersect with this definition.

The university's own survey revealed that students and faculty who identify as Christian feel more comfortable on campus and in classrooms than those who identify as following another faith or no faith (The King's University, 2021). How this intersects with my lived-curriculum-experience is crucial to how I interact with each student-teacher. I need to disclose my own understandings of key concepts with tact while learning about each student-teacher. By "'tact' [I] understand a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge of general principles does not suffice" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 14). Perhaps comfort is a barrier to growth. If a student-teacher and I feel too comfortable with our religious shorthand, we may fail to form hope to serve K-12 students from vastly different backgrounds. My role is to use the analytical moment to tactfully disrupt our comfort, replacing it with uncomfortable and necessary work of self-reflection.

Vocation and Wholeness

Being on the brink of everything has allowed my current perspective about vocation to transform. Using *currere* affords me new perspectives on how my educational experiences inform imagining a future braided into each present moment. The integrity of my vocation and identity holistically weave "intellect, and emotion and spirit and will [into] the [wholeness] in the [mystery of the] human self" (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 11). I understand that teaching is contextually and historically informed and, through dialogue and my own self-reflection, I can continue to learn the little stories of each student-teacher. This can manifest in conversations we engage in where educating is understood as an "ontological … vocation, a calling to humanization … of becoming more" (Freire, 2014, pp. 88–89). Some student-teachers understand vocation as pre-ordained God's work. There is a tension involved as, for me, it is a passion and animating of spirit that embraces highs and lows.

Passion—and, therefore, vocation—includes love of something and/or someone and suffering we experience in our love. When teaching

> is mine to do, it will make me glad over the long haul, despite the difficult days. Even the difficult days will ultimately gladden me, because they can pose the kinds of problems that can help me grow in a work that is truly mine. (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 31)

Dialogue and questions are essential in becoming a field-instructor. I ask eloquent questions to "open up possibilities and keep them open" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 298). As student-teachers describe challenging experiences, I remind them that patience, with themselves and others, is a virtue. In challenging moments, a teacher learns about themselves and

> the nature of [their] students and [their] subjects [to] enlarge … the exchange between [them and] to answer the heart's longing [in diverse ways] to be connected to the largeness of life—a longing [animating] love and work, especially the work called teaching. (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 5)

In this way, I can remain "in the process of becoming—an unfinished, uncompleted [being] in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire, 1968/1998, p. 65). Acknowledging and embracing my own unfinishedness offers hope rather than despair. I am no longer a master of a subject, but a fellow sojourner in the unfinishedness of humanization.

The Ontological Need for Hope

Hope, particularly in adult education, is a pillar of my intellectual interests, and how it relates to vocation and my calling to teach resonates in ways I am still learning to understand. It entered my scholarship after I became a field-instructor. I now understand that offering hope is vital to teaching and learning. "Educating is … a vocation rooted in hopefulness [and] resistance" (hooks, 2003, p. xiv). To remain hopeful, I resist habits such as dominating conversations. Being mindful of my tendencies allows me to avoid them in concrete ways and manifest hope as an "ontological [need anchored in] practice [and] not attained by dint of raw hoping" (Freire, 2014, p. 2). The University's mission points to ways the student-teachers and I can explore how hope manifests even during challenging times.

At the time of writing this essay, the university's website homepage declared, "Bright Hope for Tomorrow … Discover your passions … to follow God's call." When field-instructors gather, we often talk about how hope plays a role in becoming a teacher. We link it with biblical passages: "love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (*The Jerusalem Bible Reader's Edition*, 2000, 1 Cor. 13:7). Even during challenging moments, a love for teaching and learning can help overcome challenges and keep hope alive. In this way, I need to persevere and guide student-teachers differently.

Vocation and passion for what one does and who it is done with call for "calm endurance of suffering" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Good teaching is intentional acts in forming conditions for learning and adapting as needed. "Good teaching requires that we understand the inner sources of the intent and the act" (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 7). When a second-year student-teacher re-members a challenging experience from their first practicum, they invite me to share how I sometimes felt anxious and lacked support. We each are "in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality … a revolutionary futurity … and as such hopeful" (Freire, 1968/1998, p. 65). Through dialogue and reflection, an individual and the collective can imagine futures different than ones they currently experience. I ask them how they might imagine addressing a similar situation in the future. I try to move beyond wishful thinking to "radical [hope] committed to the bare idea … something good might emerge" (Lear, 2006, p. 94). To ignore my little story and my calling to teach in intentional ways endangers the learning of each student-teacher, the K-12 students they encounter, and myself.

Nonviolence and the Self

Reflecting on my decision to retire, I realize I had begun to do violence to my spirit and potentially to students. I grew "deaf to [my] inner guide [separating my] inner truth from outer actions [endangering my] sense of self" (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 33). Instead of feeling engladdened, I felt saddened. These were acts of violence masquerading as teaching, rather than responding as a teacher who loved teaching and students in their learning. I distorted "the life of" my calling (Freire, 2014, pp. 88–89). I forgot to ask myself, "Who is the self that teaches?" (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 4). This question is at the heart of nonviolent pedagogy. If I do violence to my own spirit—by staying in a role that no longer fits or by pretending to have answers that I do not have—I cannot help but do violence to the spirit of students.

Opening myself up to challenging questions and deeper reflection, I re-member my passion for what and who called me to teaching. I reunite my vocation and how it animates my spirit and self into a "whole [rather than] dismembering" them (Palmer, 1983, p. 103). Although it feels and looks different than teaching in K-12, I still teach. Who I teach now—adults—is different. Their needs appear more philosophical, more existential in nature. *Currere* helps me re-member what and who called me to teach and, by example, I can model and share it as a reflective process with each student-teacher. To teach non-violently is to form space where a student's identity is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be honored.

Critical Self-Reflection

Using myself as an object of research and my lived-experiences as data challenged me. Through *currere*, I am becoming more comfortable with me as a research object and my lived-experiences "as data … bracketing what is observed, the typically taken-for-granted and seeing it as it is" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2015, p. 23). In the past, my reflections were fixing things—lessons and scripts—and blaming others for my exit from the profession. As a form of prayer, the study of *currere* is continuing attention and ontological openness, offering "knowledge [to] exercise judgement … an ongoing act of openness to reality [a] spiritual, secular, even practical undertaking [acknowledging] the mystery saturating everyday life, thereby [redirecting] attention to reality in which [I] live" (Pinar & Grumet, p. 192). I now reflect to elevate the taken-for-granted—to surface it and inform how I am becoming a field-instructor.

I recognize I often dominate conversations. I am an expert with a PhD and decades in the profession. I overlook student-teachers' need to engage in their own critical self-reflection and to understand themselves as research objects and their lived-experiences as data. Through their own meaningful self-reflection, they engage in study "from [their] point of view [portraying] the self from the point of view of the self" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2015, pp. 22–23). I am still a teacher, but these are adults, some pursuing second and third careers, with lived-experiences to explore and inform their pedagogic practices. Gradually, by letting go and engaging in *currerean* reflection, I feel I can better "serve [student-teachers and those they teach] more faithfully (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 8). Its holistic nature benefits me.

If *currere* is good for my soul, it has also been good for my body. Even though there is not a definitive cause and effect relationship, I feel better physically since engaging with *currere* in a deeper manner, extending this to how I feel cognitively, affectively, and spiritually. "Life directed at an aim is generally better, richer, and healthier than an aimless one" (Jung, 1971, p. 20). Each

time I engage *currere*, I feel new meaning emerges for previously taken-for-granted phenomena and experiences, and I can better imagine my future as a field-instructor, reaffirming my vocation and calling as a teacher. The aim is not a target to hit but a direction in which to grow.

Synthetical Moment: My Afternoon of Life Re-imagined

The synthetical moment weaves the physical, cognitive, affective, and spiritual threads together. I had felt prepared for my afternoon of life. "Thoroughly unprepared [I stepped] into the afternoon of life; worse still, [I took] this step with the false assumption [my] truths and ideals [remained] according to … life's morning" (Jung, 1971, pp. 16–17). I understood being a teacher as being in a classroom. I now let go of this conformist notion to re-imagine my whole world as a classroom with a "potential to teach and learn … found everywhere" (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 190). Understanding and experiencing my teaching from new and different perspectives opens me up to listening to each student-teacher's story and how they can teach me. I realize that the long division, the teacher convention hug, the current role as field-instructor, and all my experiences and imaginings are woven into my curriculum-as-lived-experiences.

Stepping back to reflect on what happened, what is happening, and imagining a future informed by this emergent awareness is vital. During most of my career, I moved on the edges of critical self-reflection, doing a disservice to both it and my calling as a teacher. I often became lost in the weight of the present. *Currere* has allowed me to move beyond and keep my calling as a teacher alive. "Despite the riptide that is the present and the occasionally crushing weight of age, reactivating the past, [living in the present, and imagining the future] keeps the calling loud and clear" (Pinar, 2017, p. 5). *Currere* helps me listen more closely to reactivating my calling, a phenomenon I often missed.

Each student-teacher is on their own unique trajectory, guided by their curriculum-as-lived, their existing context, and how they imagine their future teaching. By inviting them into dialogue, they can each "discover, explore, and inhabit … the living of their life" (Palmer, 1997/2007, p. 190). Listening to their stories, they each offer invaluable insights as they re-member their lived-experiences and continuously re-imagine teaching as a vocation in emergent contexts. I need a more nuanced approach—one navigating difference in life stages, while remaining anchored in what calls me back to teaching in whatever form and with whomever each day. This inquiry into the architecture of my memory and imagination is an ongoing response to the question: Does my life have meaning? The response lives as the very act of inquiry, rather than being a destination—a *currere* continuing as long as I am willing and able to feel, observe, listen, and learn.

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The Curriculum of Gravity
How Teachers Can Harness Struggle

By J. Woods Hayes
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Today is June 23, 2025. It is my 47th birthday. Actually, to honor my family's precocious linguaphilia, I should say it is my 48th birthday, on which I am turning 47 years old. Or to be really pedantic, it is the 47th *anniversary* of my birth.

I start here for two equally important reasons. First, I am old enough now that I have lived through some things. I aim in this piece to suggest that it is in the moments in which we rise above that which attempts to drag us under we really find our mettle. I have had many of those moments. Second, it is crucial to understand, I think, that I was raised by men and women of great—but playful—intellect. And at the same time, I was raised to understand, perhaps, that such a trait was just the result of a tremendous stroke of luck—the throw of a dart into cosmic dartboard of many different (and equally notable) bullseyes.

This piece is really a letter to teachers, my comrades in one of the most important endeavors our species has ever undertaken. I am going to make a gutsy guess that, like me, you were probably good at school—at least some aspects of it. And it certainly makes sense to say that, in order to teach students to *be good students*, being good at doing school is not an irrelevant qualification. Yet, education is an underpinning of the human experience and far too large to define in simple reductions. Of course, Labaree (1997) knew that when he attempted to find workable purposes of education. Biesta (2009) surely understood that it is more than a set of justifications. Education is a set of working tools people use to carve themselves out of the rock of our imperfect origins—to make something true and beautiful out of our existence, however we define "true" or "beautiful" or "existence."

But as it is, if we really examine ourselves and our practices, is that what we are really prioritizing? How often do we teach our students *how* to carve themselves while holding a narrow vision of *what* they can carve? We regale ourselves with notions that we are "making a difference" and "creating a better world" while also keeping a death grip on traditions that are probably keeping those lovely ambitions well at bay. We hope to liberate our students while still paying homage to oppressive forms (see Darder, 2018; Freire, 1968/1996; Stovall, 2018). We are leaving so much potential behind as we march in such reverent step with our own experiences, ignoring those of our students. This is especially true if we are not from backgrounds that have experienced the oppressive weight of the system.

The incomparable bell hooks (1996) reminds us, powerfully, that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 126). To truly transform education, we must learn to harness the thousands of tiny victories our students make every day and empower them to see the immense and wonderful carving that lies inside of each of them. What follows is a plea. Recognize this: the *weight of the system* hits us all differently. The gravity exerted on us could be vastly incongruous to that which is exerted on our colleagues, our students, or our fellows in the human struggle. This is a curriculum for that challenge—the curriculum of gravity.

PART 1: HOW SHRIMPING TAUGHT ME THE IMPACT OF A TEACHER'S WORDS

I suppose I have to start pretty far back. There was always just an expectation in my household that I would be a good student. There was never a question that I would buckle down and do the work. But my parents also put forth a keen preclusion that we (my brother and I) would not be arrogant or boastful about our abilities or intellectual prowess—of which he had far more than I. My father especially seemed concerned with humbling us and teaching us that being smart kids didn't give us license to treat people with disrespect or, worse, to be prideful or think we were above our classmates and peers. Years later, in a conversation around my qualification as a National Merit Scholar, he said to me, "Being that smart can be very lonely if you let it be." At 16 or 17, I had no idea what he meant.

Some context is probably useful. My father is a very intelligent man in his own right. I can think of many tremendous ways he has influenced my thinking and challenged me. And often, he was insistent that I chose a humble path. He would remind me to use common language, for example, because anything else was just "being a peacock." He would say, "One should only use the word utilize when one can't use the word use." But he would also keep us above the groundlings by such reminders as "Nothing can be 'very very.' One 'very' will suffice." I wouldn't understand until much later on that the world would give me, a white boy, far more latitude and grace in how I wielded language. My vocabulary was a form of capital, and I could use it to fit into all manner of groups, from the most erudite to the most "common" (see Yosso, 2005).

To understand my dad, I think you have to back up even more. My grandfather was an eminent archaeologist in the Southwestern United States. If you read nearly any book on pre-Columbian culture in the four-corners region of the U.S., he's cited in there. He gave more lectures and published more surveys on Chaco Canyon than probably any contemporary during his time on Earth. To this day, his name is spoken with respect in places like Mesa Verde National Park and Bandolier National Monument. And yet, through all of that, he carried the self-ascribed moniker of "The Last of the Illiterate Archaeologists."

He would say this because, although he was greatly accomplished, successful, and well-respected, he built that career with only a bachelor's degree. I heard countless stories of how he battled the onslaught of people from "fancy colleges back east" who had PhDs but "couldn't conjugate a goddamn verb." This was the man who raised the man who raised me, and this really set the tone in my household. Learning was important, but true erudition was knowing that the common man was due far more respect than they were paid by "the learned."

And I share all of this for a simple reason. These lessons *did not take.* At all. By the time I had reached high school, I was arrogant and convinced that I was smarter than nearly everyone I came across in life. Sure, all teenagers think they know everything. Sure, they are often loud and wrong. But I was certain I *did* know everything.

Fast forward to 2014 or 2015. I had been teaching high school theatre for nearly a decade. I poured myself into my work, trying to help disadvantaged youth (whatever that means) create meaningful, powerful theatre. I wanted them to understand that they had power to really change the world by telling their stories and *making* people see them. I believed in them and wanted them to believe in themselves. Sounds great, right? But I was also quick to show my frustration. I was hard on them, and I taught them to be hard on themselves. I was not happy with the progress my actors were making, and I let them know every chance I could. After all, I had high expectations of myself, as teachers were taught to have (Lemon, 2021), and I was exceeding my own expectations. Why couldn't they exceed theirs?

But outside of school, I was engaged in a new obsession of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ). I am not overstating this. I was *terrible*. Each class, I would arrive early to get some extra stretching time and to possibly get some extra time with one of the coaches, who were usually there for that purpose. Class would start, and though we would often work on new techniques, we would also spend a considerable amount of time on my Achilles heel: Shrimping.

Shrimping is a technique in BJJ when you scoot along the floor, backwards, hinging around your hips while using your legs as propulsion. In grappling, this is theoretically a way of escaping an attacker who seeks to control you from the top position. The shape you form in the mid-point of this move is much like a shrimp, hence the name. Try as I might, I simply could not shrimp. Not even a little bit.

I would notice that my classmates picked things up with ease. It was as if they were secretly meeting for special class sessions without me to master techniques and to humiliate me. For the first time in my life, I was the worst student in the class, and not by a little bit. I was the worst *by far.*

While driving home from one particularly disastrous BJJ class, drenched in sweat, my mind went back to thinking of the things I was taught about humility. I thought about how, though not like BJJ, theatre is hard. Storytelling is hard. And digging down into our core to find the place where *good* storytelling comes from, that's practically impossible—especially for 15-17 year-old kids. As much as I wanted them to meet me where I was, my job was to do the exact opposite. My words were not received as encouragement. They rang to them the way shrimping did to me, as "You are not enough." But they were enough—and I learned that, to really teach them, I had to honor that they came to me with so much more than I had previously believed. They were due far more respect that I was paying them with my "learning." From that day forward, I never forgot that.

CURRICULUM OF GRAVITY AXIOM 1: THEIR GRAVITY, NOT OURS

In some ways, it's like I never grew past the arrogant youth who believed they knew everything. The effect of that was, quite simply, I was carrying a weight that was far too great for anyone—unrealistic expectations. I mean, sure, I *thought* I was meeting my own expectations. I thought I was exceeding them. But if I really think about it, my expectations of myself were to teach them to tell epic stories. And I certainly wasn't meeting that expectation, so long as it was framed in my definition of "epic."

I learned the distinction, though it sounds like such a "duh" moment, between *my gravity* and *theirs.* I had two theatre degrees and a lot more life experience. The task I was asking of them was a warmup to me. But to them, it was *The Odyssey.* My whole approach changed when I realized that. I started asking questions like, "What story do *you* want to tell?" I asked, "How do you want to tell it?" And I let them go.

I let them take risks and make it theirs. It wasn't always good. Sometimes, it wasn't even coherent. But I let them shrimp their way through the process. I let them struggle with the weight of their own experience—and the *additional* weight that it may not be received as they intend. And the *additional* weight that, if it wasn't, they would have to go back to the beginning, retool, and carve anew. And the *additional* weight still of the prospect that no amount of crafting and skill might *ever* make it palatable for some people. That is a lesson worth learning! That is a moment of opportunity for a teacher. I was listening to what Palmer (1998) calls our "inner teacher" (p.

33). I was letting that voice that guided me to this work *actually guide my work.* And in the process, I was teaching them that they could wrestle indefinitely with their own inner self—and that they could rise above that which seeks to pull us down—whether that's an unappreciative audience, an unfeeling teacher, or just a life of hardship. They were learning to overcome *their gravity*, and that is a beautiful thing—all thanks to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and how fantastically bad at it I was. I am forever grateful for that lesson.

Part 2: "Superman Chest" (Or, A Possible Future)

Garages can get really cold in the dead of winter, especially when they are detached from the main house. This typically isn't too big of a problem when you enter just to get in your car and go off on your daily routine. But there is no car in this garage. Not that, at times, I wouldn't like there to be. It's just that it's tough to fit a car in there with 62 boxes of Halloween decorations, 45 of Christmas decorations, and 80 boxes just marked "crafting."

Okay, so it's not just *her* stuff in there. Fair. One half of the garage holds a squat rack, 5 or 6 different barbells, kettlebells, dumbbells, and about 600 pounds of iron plates. This garage is a bona fide black-iron gym. And when it's winter—like, dark at 8:00am winter—it's cold. The barbells are always torture devices, but in this deep winter they will also take the skin right off your hands.

Still, I am here, because I need to get in my sets today. It's a Wednesday. A de-load day if you're fancy—a "light day" if you, like me, think that gives a bit more psychological oomph. On these days, I get to pull my squats back to what they were a week ago, and I only have 2 sets. It feels like cheating, but it keeps you moving forward. If we could add weight every session, we would all squat 5000 pounds. I am considerably far from that benchmark. It's good that it's a light day here. Because it's never a light day at my job.

I can still remember my first day in the principal's chair—so many eager pop-ins and handshakes, so many people sharing their excitement about my arrival. That felt good. But years on, it feels like my cold gym. Lonely, but necessary.

When I was working on my PhD, I read a lot by folx like Dr. Bettina Love and Dr. David Stovall who shared a stark, but somehow still beautiful, vision that, to really see an equitable, sustainable model of education, we would have to build it from the ground up. We would have to eschew all the discussion of reforms and call them out as the pipe dreams that they are. But I also recall the solemn reminder from one of my faculty who said that "we can't just burn down the buildings and expect it all to just work." But somehow I never let myself believe that our government would put public education on the executioner's slab—even if the signs were all there. And, that's exactly what they did just two years ago, when they outlawed public schools, except for State Training Academies, one of which I lead. The words of Assata Shakur (2020) ring in my head:

> No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free. (p. 455)

I hate how prophetic her words have become, though. I hate the way I must now ply my work in secret—whispers and side glances and so much fear now a part of educating our children, which should be the greatest endeavor of the human experience. They took away not only

education that could inspire their overthrow—they also took away the spirit to look beyond the Curriculum Directorate's official version of history. More than that, they took away any potential to see education as anything other than a sorting mechanism for the new American caste system. Abolition by the controlling interests of dominant narratives, and not at the hands of empowered communities, seeking to take back their human right to knowing.

Today, across the nation, we stand up. For months now, at my site, in secret and small moves, we've been doing the work Dr. Love taught us to do: Freedom Dreaming—collectively building a vision of what a just future looks like. We have been placing the humanity of our students at the center of what we do. We have included them in our decision-making and made small policy changes to center their diverse perspectives—without, of course, using any words from the Lexicon of Banned Words, such as "diversity" or "equity." We are focusing on creating nurturing environments and strong relationships where our students feel safe to explore their motivations and passions. We are seeking the knowledge and culture of our community and integrating them into every possible part of our curriculum and culture. We are supporting the wellness of our teachers—now villainized as enemies to the Directorate. We are choosing to see this moment as a gift and to take back our power as educators and as citizens. This, I believe, is what Dr. Love envisioned.

This is hard, though. Eyes are everywhere. Whispers are everywhere. Admonishments and proclamations criminalize any mention of identity or beliefs that are perceived as counter to the Directorate. New ways of sharing truths always lead to new edicts. The reality is, they are battling to contain the Zeitgeist, but they are losing. I will always work to see to that—just as so many of my fellows do too, here in our cold garages.

When we teach a new lifter to deadlift, we wish we could simply load up 500 pounds and have them stand it up. But of course, we cannot. Instead, we load up incremental amounts, small moves just like at work, and remind them to pull their chest up like Superman, set their back tight, and stand UP.

Curriculum of Gravity Axiom 2 – We Get Stronger, the Weight Doesn't Get Lighter

So, maybe this story is extreme. I like to think I am not alone in praying it never comes to this. And yet, if it does, as much as we'd like to blame one ideology over another, it will really be the result of a thousand cuts—a thousand little times we saw the weight that needed lifting and simply thought we could not. Or worse, that it wasn't ours to lift.

I've been a teacher for 20 years, even when my title said I was something else. In that time, I have been privileged to coach and mentor many new teachers into the craft. We can all remember those first years. So hard. So full of impossible battles. So much weight. But also, it's the time of our greatest growth. Those who lift weights for sport, or health, or mental acuity, or just sheer zaniness will tell you that you never seem to get as strong, as fast, as when you first start. An exercise physiologist could explain to you why this is and could use fancy terms like homeostasis to do so—but basically, it's because we don't really grow stronger from lifting the weight. We grow stronger from *recovering from lifting the weight.* In those first few years of teaching, we are lifting the weights of time management, self-care, behavior challenges, pedagogy, curriculum, committee assignments, difficult team members, unrealistic administrative expectations, parent phone calls, rushes to the IMC to make copies, ad infinitum. But we are also reflecting on all of

those things in an almost constant loop of recovery. "I made it through that day. What went well? What did not?" Rep after rep, we get stronger.

And then, somewhere along the way, we turn on autopilot. We know how to manage our time reasonably well. We know how to get done what needs to get done. We are busy. We are tired. We want to go home.

These are the days when new weights emerge—and my experience has shown me that getting teachers to lift them is very, very (sorry, Dad—it's appropriate here) hard to do. These are weights like redesigning curriculum, creating realistic assessment goals, advocating for teachers in opposition of dismissive school boards and principals, hunting resources, calling legislators, fighting disinformation, ad infinitum part two. And the recovery time for lifting those weights is astronomical. Our daily reflection becomes, "Why am I here? Why do I do this? Janice went to work for a credit card processor and makes twice my salary."

No one can blame teachers for leaving, not with any real merit to their argument. But take a step back and imagine yourself where you are right now. Think of the weights that are being presented to you. You couldn't even begin to think of lifting those weights when you started teaching. And now, you are in control. You are choosing to let that weight lie, not because you can't lift it but because you choose not to. And if that's your choice, *I respect that*! There is no shame. You are enough. But if you are willing to try, you can lift them, and we can all be there together to help and recover.

Part 3: How Sciatica Nearly Sunk Me (And Maybe, Gave Me My Life Back)

When I was young and loud and the full possibilities of life were still within my reach, I tended to lead my way through life with swagger of what I called non-conformity. That basically meant that I dressed and acted the same as everyone else in my crew, and we dressed and acted the same as people we emulated at punk rock shows in Phoenix. I think one could say that, quite literally, we were conforming. Aside from that, though, I loved a good irreverent joke. And one of my favorite was to pretend I was old (which I now know was a foolish quantifier) and exclaim "My sciatica!" I thought it sounded funny and that it sounded like something I had heard elderly people say. We would all laugh, the joke ostensibly being that we were not, in fact, old—and maybe that old people were worth laughing at.

Karma is, as they say, kind of mean.

You may recall, I learned a lot from my brief foray into the endeavor of becoming a jiujiteiro. It taught me a lot about how our students struggle—something I had been (almost arrogantly) ignorant of. But it left another unfortunate souvenir as well—a ruptured disc in the L4/L5 joint of my spine. And on an off for the last 10 years, that injury gave me my penance for my irreverence in youth in the form of, you guessed it, sciatica. Mild and intermittent though it was, I still spent many an afternoon on my back, nursing the pain. Somehow, that changed six months ago.

One of the really fun parts of aging, I find, is that almost inconsequential acts can cause significant bodily harm. I once, quite literally, hurt my back while making a sandwich. A few weeks before Christmas, I was preparing to travel back to Arizona, which I had done several times over a period of a few months, in order to help my dad, who was in skilled nursing care. I was excited. This would be my last trip for a while, because he would be coming back to live near me, in Oxford, Ohio. As I packed, probably overly distracted realizing I didn't have to fly again for a

while, I stooped to get something from the floor when I felt a pop in my back. Oops. Seering pain came roaring back into my life. I had erred, and I had erred greatly.

By the time I started the Spring 2025 semester (just 6 months ago as I write this), I was using a cane to walk. And "walk" is not really an apt descriptor of what I could do. I hobbled, and not very well at that. I couldn't stand either. Nor could I sit, lay, or any hybrid where I didn't feel intense pain unlike anything I had ever felt. Even sleep was impossible. It was a dark start to the semester, and not even teaching—something that has brought me immeasurable joy in my life—could alleviate that darkness.

Through this all, I was pouring myself into my academic work. Passing comps (comprehensive exams) felt like something I *could* control. Likewise, getting my dissertation proposal accepted was at least something to keep pushing for, even if I couldn't really live how I wanted to. And I am grateful that I put in that effort, because it might be what led me to my current salvation. It was something to keep striving for. It was a light at the end of a tunnel, and even if I didn't emerge from that tunnel walking, I *would* emerge with something to show for it. I would have a PhD. And though it never really seemed that important to me before, I most definitely would wear the honorific of doctor with pride.

That small change in mindset brings me to where I am right now. I found new resolve to fight and started training with barbells again. If I could work as hard as I have to keep my brain strong, I wanted to echo that in my body. As I write this, I live mostly pain free, and I feel recharged for the rest of my journey—an outcome that most certainly would not have come from collapsing into my pain and choosing to let it win.

Struggle, and our determination to take incremental steps to overcome it, are a core component of education. And yet, I am continually learning and re-learning the lesson that, when we, as educators, disconnect from our own struggles, we are not connected to the human reality of our students. Struggling to learn jiu jitsu showed me what it was like to not easily understand learning tasks—maybe for the first time in my life. Dealing with the seemingly impenetrable darkness of a disability, and the prospect that it may be forever, showed me that our obstacles will try very hard to define us. And, if we stop pushing against them, or seeing ways over them, through them, or by them, we accept that definition. Pushing through my academic tasks, and turning in work that I am proud of, showed me that we are capable of so much more than we believe we are.

Combined, aren't these powerful lessons that should guide how we teach our students? Should it not be our pedagogy to acknowledge that we grow through these struggles? Because, they won't go away, and they certainly won't empower us unless we dig deep to find the gems that lie within.

Curriculum of Gravity Axiom 3 – We Struggle, We Lift, We Recover, We Grow

If I haven't completely lost you, which is a distinct possibility, consider a simple scenario. A veteran teacher, Mrs. Ronnie, feels that her students' writing progress is waning (*weight*). Five years ago, she loved when district benchmark data would arrive—they were always a big ego boost. Today, she'd rather avoid it altogether. Still, she takes a deep breath, and though she really should finish planning next week's unit on assertive topic sentences, she opens the email with her results (*struggle*). These results are not good (*weight*). She does not shy away and keeps reading (*struggle*). She thinks deeply about what they mean (*struggle*). A clear picture emerges: They

aren't getting it. What she's been doing for so long now, it's not effective with these students (*weight*).

Well, maybe she hasn't really been focused (*weight*). Life has been hard lately (*weight*). She has a thought, and she immediately hates it (*struggle*). Then she hates that she hates it—why is she so stubborn (*weight*)? She needs help (*struggle*). She has to talk to Ms. Summers, the 26-year-old, ever-chipper, ever-jubilant 4th year teacher who loves talking about curriculum and pedagogy (*struggle*). Ms. Summers says she has the answer (*struggle*). "Differentiation and peer-review centers!" (*struggle*). Ms. Summers gives her a book. It has a cute title like "Power to the Writer!" (*weight*). But she cracks it open (*struggle*). She reads (*struggle*), reads some more (*struggle*), and reads until she realizes she actually likes the book and its ideas. She thinks, "this could work, but it means rearranging everything" (*weight*). But she puts her head down and gets to work (*struggle*).

Now we cut to Amaya. Amaya is 13 years old and hates Language Arts. She used to love writing and telling stories. People even told her she's good at it. Now, people rarely tell her she's good at things (*weight*). And, since she had to quit the volleyball team, the only thing she liked, to get home in time for mom to get to work (*weight*), she doesn't really want to even come to school. And it's so much worse this year with Mrs. Ronnie as her Language Arts teacher. All she does is tell Amaya she doesn't write "correctly" (*weight*).

But today she gets to class, and it looks different (*struggle, weight*). Something new (*struggle*). She doesn't like new (*struggle*). She casts a sharp-eyed gaze to Mrs. Ronnie, standing at the front of the class with a stupid smile on her face. Oh, no. Mrs. Ronnie is about to say something to her (*weight*). Teachers are so cringe. "Amaya, I am so glad to see you. You're such a good writer, and I think you're really going to like class from now on."

Together, over the next several weeks, Mrs. Ronnie and Amaya carry the weight of these changes. Mrs. Ronnie helps Amaya lift the weight of telling her story. Amaya helps Mrs. Ronnie lift the weight of letting go of some of the structures she has always been told are doctrine. Mrs. Ronnie also works with Ms. Summers to lift the weight of how to land this amidst the measurement-obsessed educational environment they work in. Mrs. Ronnie sees Amaya grow (*recovery*). Amaya feels herself loving to write again (*recovery*).

Is this idyllic? Absolutely. But I am asking you to consider the alternative? The weights were already there in Mrs. Ronnie's life. They were certainly there in Amaya's. Choosing not to struggle (or not knowing how to struggle) to lift those weights wasn't leading to anywhere good. But now, there is hope in Mrs. Ronnie's classroom again (*growth*). That, my comrades, is the power of gravity.

PART 4: THE WRONG TURNS, THE STUMBLES AND FALLS …

There is a line in a song called "The Luckiest," by Ben Folds. It goes, "I know all the wrong turns, the stumbles and falls brought me here." I think about this line a lot—more frequently, lately, as I wonder what exactly I've gotten myself into pursuing a PhD at almost 50. Every once in a while, I will say that I am just doing it to open some doors. I'm told it's still a pretty auspicious title, after all. But when I say this, I am reminded that I am not a credentialist.

At least, I am not a "credentialist" in this way: I don't believe a credential makes anyone better, or smarter, or more capable, or more right. And yet, I am probably a credentialist in one significant way. I believe that our life, as the collection of how we rise against challenges, as the

transcript of how we have treated others, as the artifact of what we have carved out of that rock of our imperfect origins, is worth hanging on the wall. It's worth stopping from time to time and saying, "You see that weight over there? I lifted that."

I am gob smacked, time and time again, by people who wish to downplay their own footprints—even though there are so many others who are willing to do that for us. As teachers, we face an ever-present tide of voices that wish to paint us in negative ways. They seek to tell us that we couldn't do, so we teach. They shout that we were "the dumbest students at the dumbest colleges." And yet, we persist against a gravity that most could not fathom—the of leading other human beings to light. Everything you are, and everything you have been through, has prepared you to lift that weight. You just have to believe you can.

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How *Currere* Helped Two Monks, a Wizard, and Me

Applying *Currere* to Character Creation Can Improve the TTRPG Experience and Enhance Autobiographical Reflection

By Paul Reiff
Independent Scholar

"We make in our measure and in our derivative mode."

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Faerie Stories*

I retired just over a year ago, and life in retirement has been terrific! It has been a time of relaxation as well as reinvention. My wife and I moved into a beautiful new home in a warm and welcoming neighborhood. I became a grandfather, and my grandson lives only minutes away. I keep busy with a variety of activities, some of which are perhaps predictable for a 60-year-old retiree—working on projects around the house, learning to play pickleball, and, best of all, babysitting my grandson.

I was looking forward to all of this as retirement approached, but one activity that I am thoroughly enjoying caught me by surprise. I rediscovered a game that I loved playing as a high schooler in the early '80s: Dungeons and Dragons (D&D).

D&D is a captivating game that has many unique elements. For instance, unlike most games, the goal is not simply to "win." Rather, the goal is for players to contribute to the creation of a story that evolves over time. They achieve this goal through working collaboratively and letting their imaginations run wild. Games, which can occur in-person or entirely online, can last a single session or they can involve countless sessions with players meeting weekly for years.

Of course, D&D, like any tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG), is not entirely free-form. The core rules, such as those in the *Player's Handbook* (PHB, 2024), provide a shared framework and delineate specific game mechanics, and the Dungeon Master (DM) is an essential player who acts as referee, performs as non-player characters (NPCs), describes settings, and much more.

However, the rules ultimately exist merely to facilitate player participation and creativity, and a good DM encourages imaginative contributions from players to determine the direction of the narrative, to make the details more vibrant, and to personalize the adventure. Arguably the most significant way these individualized imaginative contributions happen is through role play, and that begins with character creation. In other words, it happens the moment a player participant creates a player character (PC).

In my recent forays into the world of playing D&D, after determining the basic outline of my PCs following the options and templates explained in the rules, I moved beyond the suggestions in the PHB for creating a PC's backstory and opted to apply the method of *currere*. The results were characters that I could believe in and that felt authentic. In the sections that follow, I present three PCs—Azana, Harnish, and Carbon—that sprang to life from my imagination and that were reified using *currere*. Then, I turn the inquiry around and consider what these biographical choices reveal about my autobiography, my perceptions, and my identity.

AZANA AND DEVOTION

Azana is a pugilist in the style of Chuck Norris or Connor McGregor, relying on choke holds, body slams, and head butts. In D&D terms, he is classified as a human monk. Muscular and sinewy, Azana has been hardened by the rigors of life at sea, made obvious by the nautical tattoos that cover his body head to toe. In combat, these tattoos glow and radiate an iridescent sea-green, and they magically swirl and shift to imitate his various attacks. And of course, he sprinkles sailor jargon into his speech, using expressions such as "Shiver me timbers!" and "Hold fast, matey!"

As a youth, Azana lived in a small seaside community with his parents, eking out a modest living by fishing, growing grapes, and making wine. But his parents died before he was fifteen, and the call of the sea was irresistible, so Azana adopted the sea as his home, joining the crew of a vessel in port, and never looking back.

Azana reveled in the hardships and dangers of a sailor's life until one day his ship was wrecked. After weeks adrift, knowing he was on the brink of death, Azana prayed fervently to Poseidon for rescue. Poseidon heard his prayers, guided him to safety, and restored his health. In return, Azana devoted himself to his patron. And incredibly, he discovered that the more he gave of himself to Poseidon, the more Poseidon gave to him!

As he grows in prowess and skill, he knows the power flowing through him emanates from Poseidon. Feeling stronger and more confident than ever, Azana is eager to test the limits of his power and see just how strong he can become. He is ready to follow any rumor or venture to any destination in pursuit of action and adventure.

In writing Azana's backstory, I deliberately tried to answer the questions "Why is this person suddenly stepping out from their ordinary world and venturing into a new one *now*?" and "Why is this person suddenly growing so powerful *now*?" (As in many TTRPGs, PCs in D&D accumulate experience points, or XP, that allows them to "level up" and become stronger in the game by, for instance, gaining extra attacks per round or dealing more damage per attack.).

Moreover, I tried to envision his past (the regressive step), to look the other way and consider what his future may hold (the progressive step), to describe his biographic present (the analytical step), and to weave the various strands together to construct his identity (the synthetical step). I think the result is a compelling PC to play but also, given the world of fantasy and imagination he inhabits, a believable one.

When I took a step back and asked myself, "What events in my life may be represented in Azana's biography," I made some intriguing connections and saw some clear parallels. Although the differences are myriad (for instance, I have no experience with martial arts, no experience as a sailor, and just two small tattoos), we are alike in terms of surviving a traumatic experience and devoting ourselves to something as a result of working through the trauma.

The Covid pandemic certainly felt like a shipwreck moment. I felt unmoored and adrift as if lost at sea. And in the midst of the catastrophe, I found relief in exercise. Like many Americans, I bought a Peloton cycle and began a routine of regular physical fitness. This grew from cycling for 20 minutes two or three days a week to my current regimen of exercising for 60-90 minutes every day. I added a Peloton rowing machine to the equipment collection, took up yoga, Pilates, and strength training, joined the neighborhood track club, and started running in local 5K races.

Like Azana, I have discovered that the more I give to the god of exercise, the more he gives back to me. One could say that Azana found salvation in Poseidon, while I found salvation in Peloton. The depth of the importance of exercise to me, and the significance of it to my life right now, became evident as a result of creating the character of Azana and then reflecting on where

those choices came from and what they revealed. It was a surprising and rewarding moment of self-discovery.

HARNISH AND LIBERATION

Harnish Ewan MacMiller (AKA Arnie or Mac) has the mien of a soldier. In D&D terms, he is a human wizard. With close-cropped hair, upright posture, and neatly stowed gear, he stands as if ready for inspection. Harnish eschews the traditional garb of wizards. He doesn't carry a staff or use a wand, he doesn't have a beard, and he doesn't wear a pointy hat or flowing robe.

Harnish was born into a family of modest means. His father dabbled in myriad ventures, such as brewer, cobbler and tinker, but he excelled at none. Harnish, on the other hand, demonstrated early on a surprisingly profound proclivity for magic.

Although unsure how to pay for it, his father sent Harnish off to wizarding school. Harnish applied himself as much to his schooling as to working odd jobs in neighboring libraries and monasteries, earning a wage as well as studying ancient tomes and scrolls when possible. Despite his efforts, upon completion of his studies, he had debts to pay, so he put his pyromancy skills to use in the army as an artillerist and eventually paid back his student loans.

Now, having earned his education at wizarding school, served his time in the military, and settled his debts, he feels completely liberated. At last, he is free of the rigor of the academy and the routine of the army. He is free to make his own plans, free to pick his own missions, and free to choose his own adventures.

In writing Harnish's backstory using *currere*, I tried to create a past and future that had significance and relevance to his present situation and synthesize all three into a coherent identity. When I stepped back and asked myself in what ways the choices I made for his life story are a reflection of my own life story, I was stuck. I'm no wizard, haven't served in the army, and am not attracted to playing with fire. But then I realized that Harnish's sense of liberation and freedom mirrors my frame of mind in retirement.

After 35 grueling years as an English teacher, trying to crawl my way out from beneath mountains of essays to read and papers to grade, I certainly feel free at last. I am thoroughly enjoying spending time however I choose each day. This shared sense of liberation seems so obvious and apt to me now that I wonder how I initially missed it. However, on reflection, I am surprised to see the *depth* of my feelings. The process of reflection makes me realize just how very confined I felt then, how incredibly free I now feel now, and how excited I am to embrace the future.

CARBON AND BALANCE

Carbon is a 7' tall, 200-pound humanoid dragon. In D&D terms, he is a dragonborn monk with black dragon ancestry. He walks on two legs and has arms like a human, but he also has the scales, horns, and tail of a dragon.

From an early age, Carbon demonstrated an inner struggle to reconcile two conflicting impulses—civility and barbarity. As a child, due to his violent and unpredictable outbursts, Carbon was abandoned by his parents and entrusted to the care of a monastery. The orphan Carbon

gradually responded to the training and discipline of the halfling monks and learned to control his rage and savagery.

But the cultured personality remains only a thin veneer under which lurks the vicious and turbulent alter ego yearning to break free. Calm Carbon is pacific, reflective, and curious; wild Carbon fights like the xenomorph in the movie *Alien* (Scott, 1979), throwing quick punches, savage kicks, devastating head butts and bone crushing tail whips, with a single-minded focus on carnage.

Creating Carbon was a lot of fun. I thought that a character modeled after the archetype of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, or Bruce Banner and the Hulk, offered a lot of opportunities for intriguing role playing, but I also tried to better flesh out his identity by considering his past, future, and present.

Why has he left his ordinary world and taken up adventuring? Carbon's dual nature—one cultivating wisdom and self-control while the other craves destruction and violence—finds satisfaction in adventuring.

But why is he suddenly adventuring *now*? The monks who raised Carbon were halflings, the D&D equivalent of the diminutive hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* series (see Tolkien, 1954/2002). Like Buddy the elf in the movie *Elf* (Favreau, 2003), Carbon didn't realize the burden his relatively gargantuan size placed upon his adopted community. There simply came a time when the halflings, who were eager to see Carbon set out on his own, finally compelled him to venture forth.

How is his future interwoven with his past? Carbon hopes to acquire enough influence and wealth to found his own monastery some day and help others as he was helped. He hopes to pay it forward.

I also gave a lot of thought to his ideals. Carbon's worldview is heavily influenced by his belief in the importance of *balance*. Personally, he strives to reconcile his savage and civilized natures. Educationally, his monastic training reinforced the importance of balancing self-mastery of body and mind. Spiritually, he worships Yondalla, who manifests the aspects of both the fierce defender and the generous provider. Politically, he is aligned with the Harpers, a semi-secret organization that seeks to monitor and maintain the balance of power structures throughout the realms.

Carbon's membership in the Harpers came about as a result of game play. Due to the nature of TTRPGs, characters change and grow as the narrative unfolds. In this case, Carbon had to choose a faction to join. The DM presented various options that included, but was not limited to, the Emerald Enclave, concerned primarily with protecting the natural world and the environment; the Lord's Alliance, concerned primarily with the economic stability of financial markets and protecting the interests of merchants and rulers; the Zhentarim, a shadowy network of spies, smugglers, thieves, assassins, and others of that ilk; and the Harpers, concerned primarily with maintaining balance throughout the realm to ensure no person, group, or interest dominates the others.

I thought carefully about which group Carbon would naturally gravitate towards. Once I made the decision that he would join the Harpers, it seemed completely appropriate for him. And when I reflected on what the choice of the Harpers might reveal about me, it also seemed entirely appropriate.

I am certain that Carbon's concern with maintaining balance throughout the realm is an expression of my own anxiety about our current political climate in which democracy itself seems threatened. Under Donald Trump's presidency, our nation seems to be sliding toward autocracy

and authoritarianism, and norms of political tradition that usually maintain a system of checks and balances seem to be collapsing and eroding. A healthy dose of balance is exactly what we need to preserve what Abraham Lincon often referred to as the American experiment. I like this phrase because it captures a sense of the fragility and tentativeness of our political system. It needs constant attention and care. The Harpers represent hope that the center can hold and that balance can be sustained, so of course Carbon and I would be attracted to it. No other choice would have made sense for him or for me.

Conclusion

Hopefully, these three examples have demonstrated how *currere* provided a framework that brought these PCs to life, enhanced character creation, and improved role playing. As they continue to explore dungeons and fight dragons and have adventures, I am looking forward to seeing how they evolve—and I am looking forward to learning more about myself along the way.

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THE FOREST OF BECOMING
AN ALLEGORICAL JOURNEY THROUGH *CURRERE*

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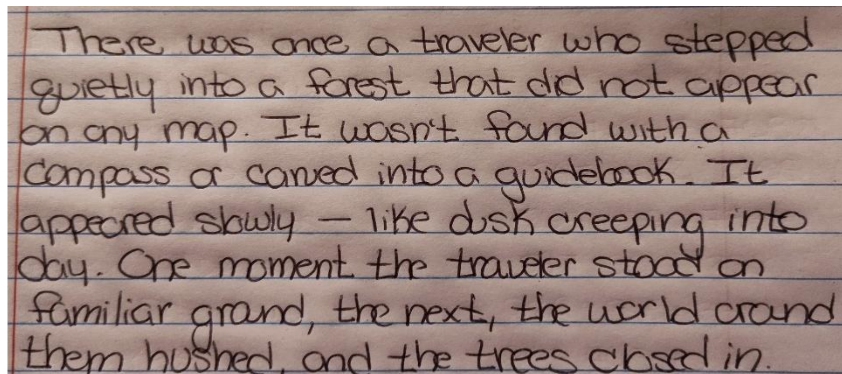
A student once scribbled a poem in the margin of their worksheet. It wasn't graded, cited, or turned into data. It was simply lived—a moment of expression blooming quietly inside the machinery of school. That poem was curriculum.

I know, because I was that student.

It wasn't exactly a poem. It was a story—written late one night during my 11th-grade English class at a small private Christian school. We were learning about allegory through Orwell's (1945) *Animal Farm*. "Use symbols," my teacher said. "Tell a deeper truth through fiction."

So, I wrote about a traveler moving through a dense, gray forest, branches curling like eyes, whispers riding the cold wind: *You're too much. You're not enough. No one would notice if you vanished.* What I felt deeply, though never said aloud, was that the forest was my loneliness —the bullying ignored in the halls, the principal who told me to "work it out," the spiritual harm delivered by a counselor's condemnation. The forest held everything I couldn't name.


There was once a traveler who stepped quietly into a forest that did not appear on any map. It wasn't found with a compass or carved into a guidebook. It appeared slowly — like dusk creeping into day. One moment the traveler stood on familiar ground, the next, the world around them hushed, and the trees closed in.

Excerpt from "The Forest," Work written by the author in 11th Grade English

When my teacher returned the story, she wrote in the margin: "Haunting. Evocative. What does the forest represent?" She didn't press for an answer. She simply saw it.

That moment taught me something I would only later find language for: curriculum lives beneath the surface—in stories, silence, and symbols. It can be both wound and balm, the forest and the traveler.

In today's standardized, factory-model education system, curriculum is often treated as a set of directives—content to be delivered efficiently, behaviors to be managed, and outcomes to be measured for accountability. But beneath those mechanized structures lies a quieter, more vital terrain: lived experience. It is the kind of curriculum that *currere* dares us to notice. As Pinar (1975) argues, curriculum is not merely a noun but a verb—a "complicated conversation" between the

self and the world. *Currere*, from the Latin "to run the course," invites us not to manage learning from a distance, but to reenter it, to reflect on our educational lives autobiographically, recursively, and imaginatively.

In *What Is Curriculum Theory?*, Pinar (2004) extends this vision through the language of allegory. Allegory, he writes, allows us to "reactivate the past in order to find the future," transforming autobiography into a generative site of interpretation and ethical reflection (p. 77). In this sense, allegory is not an escape, but engagement—an aesthetic and pedagogical form through which the private becomes legible and the personal becomes political.

As an online high school social studies teacher and a doctoral student in Curriculum and Learning, I live within two interconnected worlds—one shaped by practice, the other by inquiry. My days are spent navigating digital spaces where presence is uncertain and silence echoes louder than sound. My studies call me to question what education truly means, what it leaves behind, and what it might yet become. Across both spaces, one truth endures: curriculum is not merely delivered. It is lived.

This piece takes up *currere* not simply as method, but as narrative journey—an allegorical exploration of how curriculum echoes through memory, lives in the body, and unfolds in symbolic terrain. By grounding each phase of *currere*—regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical—in imagined landscapes like forests, streams, and horizons, I explore how educational experience shapes and is shaped by who we are, what we've survived, and who we hope to become.

This is not a conventional curriculum story. It is one rooted in silence and survival, in the shadows of adolescence and the glow of digital classrooms. It follows the looping rhythms of memory and imagination and asks what it means to teach when the self remains entangled with the curriculum we once lived. As Aoki (1993) reminds us, curriculum is not only what is planned and prescribed but what is experienced and interpreted—what occurs in the interstitial space between teacher, student, and subject.

In telling these stories, drawn from my own life as both student and educator, I turn to allegory as a way of excavating meaning. Each metaphor is a container for emotion, complexity, and contradiction. Each scene reveals curriculum not as static content but as evolving identity. In the tradition of *currere*, this is a search for self-understanding through education and education through self-understanding.

What follows is not a single story, but a spiral—of past and present, shadow and light, curriculum and care. The journey is personal. But the path, I hope, is shared.

Sanctuary Lost, Forest Found (Regressive)

Beneath the restless hum of a working-class city, a young traveler carved out a sanctuary—hidden deep within a shadowed basement where silence breathed between cold cement walls. Plush bears and rabbits sat in quiet rows, their stitched eyes fixed in patient vigil. The chalkboard stood like an ancient altar, dusted with chalk and longing. Worn scrolls of moss and brittle leaves—donated relics from forgotten seasons—held the weight of stories not yet told.

Within this refuge, the traveler rehearsed a sacred craft: the language of care. Here, lessons were not scripted but born from a tender yearning to be seen, to be understood, and to understand. This was no mere play; it was a quiet act of hope in a world where fitting in was a puzzle unsolved.

Each morning, as the basement's hush gave way to the day's first stirrings, a familiar melody drifted from the static glow of a small screen—soft and steady as a heartbeat. There, a man

in a red cardigan spoke with a kindness that didn't need to be earned. His words flowed like a slow, warm river, carrying truths too often lost in noise. With a quiet ritual, he unzipped a small suitcase—not to impress, but to share. Inside, he revealed a teddy bear's stitched heart and whispered that love is not worn on the outside but lives deep within. This was no mere toy, but a quiet message—that gentleness holds a hidden strength, and love does not need to shout to be deeply real.[1]

Surrounded by plush bears in the quiet sanctuary, the traveler felt the truth of that moment deeply. Though distant, the man in the red sweater became a silent guide—embodying listening, honoring feeling, and caring without condition—and his quiet guidance remained a steady presence, a gentle reminder of care amid a growing world.

But childhood was fleeting, and the basement belonged to a time long passed. In time, the sanctuary's walls shifted from shelter to boundary—a space that no longer held the traveler but instead called toward the unknown just beyond.

With a steadying breath and the basement door closing softly behind, the traveler stepped into a transformed world—a dense, tangled forest of becoming, fraught with shadows and complexity. This was no place for childhood's gentle play, but a realm where innocence faded and survival meant learning to navigate towering oaks draped in golden armor—players on battlefields where only the strongest trees thrived. The forest's law was strict: the tallest trees cast the longest shadows, while those who did not grow fast enough faded into the underbrush, invisible or marked by the thorns of exclusion. Its ancient limbs twisted like whispered fears and tangled doubts, shaping a landscape both daunting and full of quiet resilience.

The traveler, quiet and shy, wandered the edges of this world, a shadow moving like mist between gnarled trunks—present but unseen, slipping through narrow winding paths heavy with brittle scrolls of moss and the bittersweet tang of fallen pine needles. Hollow trunks groaned in the wind; branches snapped like distant thunder.

The traveler found kin among the wildflowers and brambles—those resilient blooms that leaned away from the sun's unyielding gaze. Marked by difference, they grew in quiet defiance, their petals soft, their presence unmistakably other. But belonging was brittle. Cruel whispers stirred the leaves like wind through dry brush, and silence thickened the air, pressing down like storm-heavy skies. Grief clung like damp moss to the traveler's frame—subtle at first, then suffocating. Beneath the surface, hunger wound itself into roots, coiling tight with unmet need. Shame, sharp and unseen, hid beneath practiced smiles—splinters beneath skin—growing inward, unspoken.

The Watcher of Halls, a great hawk cloaked in shadow, circled above—its piercing gaze cold and distant. Though it knew the names of the dominant oaks and champion trees, it turned blind eyes to the traveler's unraveling form.

The Keeper of Lists, a quiet spider weaving webs of cold records and rigid rules, catalogued pain as entries in its ledger, dismissing a trembling leaf's desperate flutter with a whispered, "You seek only attention." Those words sank deep into the dark soil, shadows stretching long and chill beneath the forest floor.

When the forest's refuge failed, the traveler sought the Guidance Glade—a dim, shadowed clearing where voices were supposed to be heard. There, the Keeper of Paths listened with folded hands, head tilted like a quiet prayer. But her words were sharp briars wrapped in scripture's cloak, proclaiming brokenness, exile, damnation. "Some are lost," she intoned, "their roots severed from grace."

Such judgment was a poison, seeping through roots and leaves. The traveler’s pain, once a silent scream, was stained with shame’s darkest ink.

Other sentinels of the woods—the teachers who shepherded the young saplings—turned their faces away. Their silence was a gathering storm, a silent pact with exclusion’s thorny vines. In a forest preaching compassion, they followed the loudest call, leaving the traveler to shrink beneath their gaze. Their inaction was wind that stilled breath and stoked the fire of loneliness.

The forest’s power was not shouted but whispered: surveillance in shadows, containment in the subtle twisting of paths. The traveler’s story was displaced—moved aside to the shadowed margins where becoming was denied. This was the curriculum not written in scrolls but etched deep into bark—the silent lessons of omission, exclusion, and erasure.

Each day added rings to the forest growing inside the traveler’s chest: a hollow place where hope struggled to take root. Attendance became avoidance; presence meant exposure to thorns. Depression settled like a quiet fog; disordered rituals became the traveler’s way to claim control amid chaos.

The Traveler Walking Through the Paths of the Forest as the Watcher of Halls Circles Above[2]

Yet within the darkness, a single shaft of light pierced the canopy.

Steady as a river stone shaped by patient waters, a Weaver of Words found the traveler. She saw the fragile poems folded like secret seeds within hidden leaves—confessions inked in shadows between the lines. She did not rush to mend broken branches but asked gently, “What story lives inside this poem? What do these words mean to you?”

Her notes returned like seedlings planted in fertile ground: *You are seen. Your voice matters.* She did not lead the traveler out of the forest but gave a compass—a quiet, steady hope to navigate dark paths.

THE HORIZON IMAGINED (PROGRESSIVE)

Years later, standing at the forest's worn edge, the traveler lifts his eyes to a horizon vast and uncharted—a sky painted in shifting shades of dawn, where every breath of wind whispers possibility. Behind him lie the tangled brambles and shadows of old pain. But before him, a new wildness stirs—raw, untamed, and alive with promise.

What if the forest could bloom anew—its dense thorns unraveling into vines of wildflowers, each blossom radiant, unruly, and essential? The traveler imagines this transformation: a landscape where silence softens into a hush, inviting deep listening. Here, no leaf is dismissed for curling differently, no root ignored for growing in its own direction. Each branch and blossom is honored for its becoming. No longer a labyrinth of exclusion, the forest becomes a vibrant ecosystem of belonging—where difference is not feared but cherished as the very soil from which growth emerges.

Within this renewed landscape, curriculum begins to breathe. No longer rigid bark etched with unyielding rules, it becomes a living weave of tendrils stretching through shared ground—flexible, relational, alive. Care is no longer a fleeting bloom, but a perennial covenant—a collective tending of both fragile shoots and ancient roots. Learning becomes interdependence, not imposition.

In the clearing, inclusion is no longer symbolic—it is embodied. Travelers need not reshape themselves to fit old molds; they are welcomed in their fullness—wild edges, broken branches, radiant hues, and all. Ambiguity and silence are held sacred, not problems to fix but spaces to feel. Those once unseen now find room to root and rise. Curriculum unfolds not as script but as shared story—shaped by struggle, relationship, and reflection. Relational empathy is not an afterthought but a foundation, asking not only, "What do you know?" but "How are you?" and "What do you need to thrive?"

Learning and teaching, once a solitary climb, now unfold as shared journey—lanterns lit together, guiding one another through dappled light and shifting shadow. Presence becomes not just footprints, but a steady heartbeat beneath the hush—a rhythm honoring every pause, every whispered doubt, every slow-blooming truth. Curriculum emerges not as an imposed path but as choreography of co-creation. Even in the misted glades where digital winds scatter connection, the forest holds faith in fragile threads. Patience is dawn's first light—compassion, the quiet rain that coaxes growth in the most unexpected places.

The traveler carries the shadowed forest behind them now—its bark smoothed by time and trial. They step toward the restless horizon, not chasing a distant dream but enacting a bold insurgency—reclaiming and remaking both story and self.

THE PIXELATED STREAM (ANALYTICAL)

Today, the traveler stands beside a pixelated stream—its waters flickering with fractured light, reflections broken into shards that shimmer just beyond touch. This stream threads through shadowed forests of code and glass, a place both connecting and separating, alive yet fragmented.

Each day, the traveler dips his hands into the shifting current—a grid of glowing names rippling faintly on the surface. Eyes dim like shadowed pools, voices muffle to whispers beneath the rush of invisible waves. Fellow wanderers drift like autumn leaves caught in the stream's

restless flow, their presence fractured into pixels and silence. Absences ripple beneath the surface—echoes louder than any spoken word.

At first, the traveler believes the stillness to be emptiness—disconnection carved in ice. The stream lies dark and silent, still as frozen glass, with no ripples stirring and no voices breaking the surface. He casts his words like stones into the void, hearing only hollow echoes that fade into the cold ash of dying embers. That silence—vast and unyielding—becomes more than absence. It is the riverbed itself, shaped by invisible distance. Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance becomes the traveler's lantern, illuminating the widening chasm between bank and shore, where tightly scripted lessons and one-way eddies deepen the divide. Dialogue flickers and fades, and without bridges built through presence and imagination, the stream grows colder still.

The traveler understands then: this is more than unfamiliar tools—it is profound isolation, a solitude born of fractured currents. Where is the human warmth beneath the cold glass? The preparation for managing the forest floors where footsteps once echoed does not teach the traveler how to tend a stream so wide, so fragmented.

And yet Moore's (1993) lantern glows on. Transactional distance, the traveler learns, is not a fixed canyon but a space to be bridged—a current that can be shaped with intention. It calls for care and creativity, presence that reaches without demanding, and dialogue woven like vine across water.

And slowly, beneath the fractured light, whispers stir—stories hidden beneath the ripple.

Moss is one such leaf adrift in the pixelated stream—a flicker unseen, assignments untouched, his name marked by absence and shadow. Yet when the traveler reaches beneath the water's surface, a tangled life emerges, woven with weighty currents—early morning care for younger siblings, night-shifts endured like storms, grief cloaked beneath the streambed—realities invisible to any digital gaze.

But this story is just one thread woven into a vast tapestry. The traveler carries with him a question whispered by a distant guide—"What does the forest represent?"—a quiet call to listen beyond words. He knows these moments do not flow alone. They are entwined with vast ecosystems beyond the screen. Learning is shaped by currents and undercurrents—social tides, emotional storms, technological eddies. What appears as silence is often the surface of unseen struggles: economic hardship, mental health tempests, caregiving storms, identity quests.

Yet, too often, empathy is lost amid systemic blindness, where structures that claim care overlook the hidden currents beneath. The traveler chooses to meet these silences not with quick fixes, but with grace, flexibility, and patient attention.

To understand these tangled currents, the traveler turns to guides who speak of ecosystems and webs—voices that illuminate what lies beneath the visible. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) vast ecosystem presses upon the unseen tides, shaping currents beyond the traveler's sight. Capra's (1996) living systems whisper that no leaf floats alone—each pulse linked in a vast web, vibrant and shifting. Eisner (1966) beckons the traveler to sense what slips beneath measure—the heartbeats between flickers, the breath beneath pixels.

With this awareness, the traveler shifts his gaze, learning to read the stream's hidden patterns—not as a static pane, but as a flowing, wild current—an ecosystem of presence and absence, connection and distance. With intention, bridges of asynchronous dialogue are built, and quiet pools emerge where slow blooms of voice begin to open. Presence becomes more than footprints pressed on soft earth—it is the steady heartbeat beneath fractured light, honoring every pause, every shadowed doubt, every slow-unfolding truth.

Yet the traveler knows this fragile emergence is delicate, like flickering shards of light scattered across the pixelated stream reminding him that tending these quiet currents calls for the care of a forest-tender, one who listens to rhythms beneath the soil, who waits for unseen roots to stretch, and who trusts that, even in silence, growth is stirring.

Just as a forest does not grow through force but through steady, patient nurturing, the traveler begins to shape this digital grove with quiet intention. He does not command growth but invites it—through gestures small yet sacred. Rather than rules and rigid bark, the traveler plants seeds of stories. Instead of lectures, presence takes root—inviting gentle leaves and quiet wanderers to share not just names, but playlists, images, and reflections—snapshots that reach beyond the pixelated surface. These moments echo the traveler's childhood sanctuary, where teddy bears once stood in quiet rows—stitched guardians of care and imagination, holding space for what was too tender to speak aloud. In that same spirit, the traveler now offers fragments of self: faded photographs, well-worn songs, memories of those who once tended to their young growth. Even the distant sound of a barking dog becomes a reminder that warmth and presence still thread through the digital expanse.

This is more than rapport-building—it is engrossment, the deep, attentive presence at the heart of what both Noddings (1984) and Gilligan (1982) call the ethic of care and relationships. This ethic moves beyond obligation or duty, inviting a relational responsiveness that nurtures trust and honors the emotional lives of others. It requires meeting others, not as tasks to manage but as whole beings to understand and support. The traveler embodies this by calling each by name, celebrating small victories, and following up not to monitor, but simply to ask, "Are you okay?"

In the pixelated stream, isolation gives way to connection, and the cold waters warm with genuine belonging. Here, education becomes an act of love and community—where vulnerability meets compassion, and learning becomes a shared journey, not a solitary climb. Social and emotional learning flows beneath these currents, guiding toward self-awareness and kinship. Weekly check-ins whisper gently, "How's your head? How's your heart?"—and in these tender moments, trust blossoms without judgment or grade. The traveler learns that care is not simply an action but a practice of holding space for others' full humanity—a healing presence that resists the isolation of fractured screens (hooks, 1994).

This ethic of care creates the fertile soil in which moments of choice and creativity take root—sacred groves in the stream where rigid structures loosen their grip. Within these openings, students transform into storytellers and meaning-makers, weaving poems inspired by Galileo's gaze or assembling collages that wrestle with justice and liberty. These expressions—imperfect yet deeply human—are not mere branches from the curriculum but vital pathways feeding a richer, more vibrant current of learning.

Curriculum is not just what is taught; it is the living web of relationships, the pulse beneath content. Each emoji, each delayed response, each whispered thanks is a feedback loop of trust and connection. In this pixelated stream, empathy is not just feeling; it is a practice, a continual reaching across currents, an unyielding hope for connection. In these moments, the traveler hears the resonant voice of Wheatley (2007) whispering through the digital leaves: "We are rediscovering our interconnectedness; there are no isolated individuals in the natural world. Life seeks to affiliate with other life" (para. 12). Even in fractured pixels and digital silence, life seeks affiliation. And so, the traveler listens, reaches, and waits for the currents to carry voice back—knowing that every ripple matters.

RETURNING TO THE PATH (SYNTHETICAL)

With roots deep and gaze forward, the traveler moves between worlds—through the forest of memory, along the shimmering stream of the present, and toward the horizon of gined becoming.

The traveler no longer fears the forest's hush. He knows that silence can cradle meaning, that wounds can root into wisdom, and that the unseen may still be deeply felt. Beneath the leaf litter of time, lessons once buried now bloom. The student he once was does not haunt him. He walks beside him—a companion, a guide—reminding him of who still waits to be seen.

The traveler returns often to the clearing—the sacred space where metaphor once met recognition. It is here he learned to listen for what could not be named, to hold space rather than solve. Now, he too listens like that—tenderly, curiously—knowing that care does not always speak aloud, but hums softly in shared presence.

In this return, the traveler sees his classroom not as a destination, but as a dwelling—a grove where human beings gather in all their contradictions and complexity. He does not arrive perfect; he arrives becoming. Each flickering name across the stream, each shadowed silence, is not a void to fill but a voice to invite. Here, education is not the offering of maps, but the walking of trails together—sometimes lost, sometimes found, always unfolding.

This is a pedagogy of presence—not performance, but witness. The traveler remembers Boyle's (2012) "enlightened witness"—the one who tends with presence, who helps others see their truest selves not through scrutiny but through sight. In the classroom-as-clearing, the traveler becomes that witness, not perched above but kneeling beside. He no longer asks, *What do you know?* but instead, *What do you carry? What do you need to bloom?*

Relational empathy becomes a compass—turning curriculum into conversation, assessment into reflection, and silence into sacred pause. This is not about reaching those "on the margins"—for the traveler knows now, we are all on the margins of something (Boyle, 2012). It is about building kinship in a world that too often forgets we are kin.

In this grove, the traveler cultivates a curriculum of care—rooted not in compliance, but in compassion. He's seen what grows when stories are invited to take root. He's watched hesitant voices break into flight, like birds lifted by the wind of being seen. He's witnessed identity blossom through cracks in the rigid stone—through memes, through poems, through questions whispered across the stream.

He still plants. He still reaches. And when the digital wind grows cold, he warms the space with his presence—a message sent, a name remembered, a heart checked on.

He traveler knows that the future is not some distant horizon. It grows right here, between breath and belonging, between data and dialogue. Each gesture of care is a seed—each story honored—a branch reaching toward light.

Currere is not a map, but a rhythm. It spirals, listens, opens.

The traveler walks with both memory and motion—with grief, with wonder, with purpose.

He does not teach toward perfection. He teaches toward possibility.

And so, the path continues—not straight, but sacred.

Not alone, but together.

Transformation in the Forest: Using the Past and Present to Explore the Possibilities of the Future

The poem in the margin did not vanish. It loops forward, carried on the recursive rhythm of *currere*—where the past is not left behind, but reemerges anew, shaped by present understanding (Pinar, 1975). Like metaphor and allegory themselves, it offers a language for the emotional contours of experience, where literal words fall silent (Eisner, 1998). The forests, streams, and horizons I traced throughout this journey are not simply symbols; they hold the contradictions, complexities, and care that define what education truly is.

What began as a personal allegory of my own learning and teaching, particularly within the shifting landscape of online education, has unfolded into a shared terrain. Here lies a vocabulary for what formal curriculum often overlooks: the emotional labor woven through teaching, the quiet disappearance of students in digital spaces, and the fragile hope that emerges through presence. In this way, it echoes what Schubert (1982) described as "theory within"—curriculum conceived not merely as external theory applied to practice but as understanding that lives inside the educator, shaped by story, memory, and meaning-in-motion (pp. 8–9).

One memory remains a beacon—a quiet clearing of recognition from my high school English teacher, amid the shadows of bullying and neglect. It was not just affirmation; it was a witness to a self I had no words for. In that small moment, I glimpsed education's heart—not instruction alone but care, not compliance but belonging. That lesson lives at the center of my teaching, guiding how I craft digital spaces grounded in empathy and vulnerability. I teach not only for the student I once was, but for every learner carrying unseen burdens and unspoken stories—each deserving to be fully seen.

Drawing on Noddings (1984), Gilligan (1982), hooks (1994), and others, I now understand care not as a soft addition but as the bedrock of meaningful learning and relationships. It is the soil in which connection, trust, and growth take root. In my virtual classroom, care blossoms through flexible pacing, creative design, and intentional human connection—memes that spark joy, playlists that build community, voice notes that close distance, and shared vulnerabilities that create belonging. These are not extras but essential acts of resistance against systems that prioritize efficiency over empathy. As hooks (1994) reminds us, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy"—a place where care becomes a catalyst for transformation

(p. 12). Through these practices, I build what I now call a *curriculum of care, a pedagogy of presence, and a vision for education rooted in empathy*.

Yet, this work transcends the walls of any classroom—virtual or physical—and sends ripples far into the fabric of our communities, cultures, and shared human experience. In a world that paradoxically grows more connected yet more fragmented, the simple act of truly seeing and honoring each individual becomes a powerful form of resistance. It disrupts systems that too often render people invisible or marginalized and plants seeds for a future where equity, empathy, and belonging are not exceptions but the norm. Teaching with care is not merely a method; it is a radical reimagining of what education can and must be—a force that nurtures whole human beings and fosters a more just, compassionate, and inclusive society. Through this lens, education becomes a living, breathing act of hope and transformation, shaping the present while daring to envision a better future.

Ultimately, teaching requires more than delivering content. It demands presence. It demands imagination. It demands that we meet students not only as learners but as whole, complex human beings—each navigating their own forests of memory, their own streams of challenge, and their own fragile clearings of hope.

This is the work.

This is the way forward.

And for me, it begins—again and again—with listening.

With presence.

With care.

And with the unshakable belief that every story deserves to be seen, and every student deserves to belong.

Notes

1. The man in the red cardigan was Fred Rogers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. One episode that stayed with me, "How People Make Stuffed Bears," shows Rogers unzipping a suitcase to reveal a teddy bear with a stitched heart. He reminds viewers that love isn't worn on the outside—it lives within. In that moment and so many others, he taught me that true recognition comes not through appearance, but through relational knowing—through listening with kindness beyond what we can see.
2. The visual imagery in this piece—excluding the excerpt from "The Forest"—was created using Adobe Express Image Generation, guided by original written descriptions crafted specifically for this work.

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