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Editorial Staff

Stuck

By Sarrah J. Grubb
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Stuck

in the Present Moment

I have lost sight of future hopes

~~Instead~~
Mired in
The routine of
Letting things
Go

Soul pieces
Slip
Through
my
f i n
g e
r
s

Exchanging
For
Checklists?
Rubrics?

Just get through
- ~~this day~~
- ~~this week~~
- ~~last month~~
- next year

Committee-d into silence
Anesthetized by agenda items

“the devil is in the details”

Grubb, S. J. (2020). Stuck. *Currere Exchange Journal, 4*(1), 1.

Discovering the Treasures of Ongoing Self-Reflection: *Currere* as a Recursive Practice

By Leslie L. Palmer
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The *currere* process (Pinar, 2004) is a way to more intentionally mine the wisdom gained from experience and create a more purposeful present and future. It is a way to unearth connections and relationships that are part of the personal historical record of the creation of a life. *Currere* offers a way to slow down, take a moment, and reflect on what is discovered in the same way that one uncovers bits and flecks of gold that wink and shimmer as sand flows through a sieve. *Currere* is all these things as a single process completed at a moment in time. But *currere* becomes so much more when used as a recursive practice.

Finding *Currere*

I began teaching in the mid-1990's after several years in advertising. I started as a grade five elementary teacher and transitioned to middle school as a Language Arts teacher, where I stayed for four more years as a learning specialist. I moved to the high school level to teach AP English and then accepted a position in a college MAT program as an administrator and instructor. Two years later, I began working on my Ph.D. in Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership from the University of Maryland, where I first discovered and used the *currere* educational autobiography process. Moving through the four steps of the process (regression, progression, analysis, and synthesis) opened a world of insights and new connections for me.

The c*urrere* process made such a profound impact on me that it became the basis for my dissertation research with five intern teachers to discover answers to the phenomenological question: *What is the lived experience of intern teachers using currere to understand curriculum?* My exploration of this question was centered on broadening the interns' understanding of curriculum's reach and potential so they might experience curriculum in its fullness as teacher and students together.

The conversations with my five intern teacher participants, along with many months of writing about our discussions, revealed themes that helped me learn and grow. The insights I captured also allowed me to contribute my discoveries through publication. But that isn't the end of the story. What I learned took me to another metacognitive level and raised many more questions about my professional path: After so many years away from first-hand experience in my own classroom, did I still have an authentic voice as a teacher educator? Could I do what these interns did day after day with the same courage, compassion, and commitment? Did I have what it would take to become a beginner all over again as a classroom teacher? I had flirted with the idea of returning to public school teaching years before but had not made the final leap. I was inspired but admittedly fearful of such a major change.

Whether by divine intervention or as pure coincidence, budget cuts had come to the college, and many of us with the "administration" designation lost the opportunity to teach. Just days after that announcement in late August, I received a call from our public-school internship partner county asking if I knew anyone looking for an English position

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for a last-minute opening at the high school level. I heard myself say, "How about me?" and I knew that the time had come and that my life was about to change.

A Seismic Shift

After writing a phenomenological dissertation that had the *currere* process as its essence and heart, I returned to the classroom to reengage with a place that was at once familiar yet also totally alien. I found myself gasping for air in a whirlwind of change, anxiety, and junk food consumption. I was a first-year teacher all over again—with the added pressure of being a former teacher of teachers. How could I ask for support when I had been the one sought out by others who needed help? How could I manage anxiety when I felt that showing it might destroy my credibility or, worse, reveal me as the imposter I feared I might actually be? I felt anything but courageous, and the volume, pitch, and frequency of the voice of self-doubt grew stronger. I spent the first quarter of the school year feeling overwhelmed, overworked, and overqualified. That last feeling was the most disturbing, and I realized that, to be a successful teacher and take care of my responsibilities for my students, I had to find a way to get over it or, rather, get over the barriers I had created for myself.

Nuggets of Truth and Gems of Wisdom

One early evening, I was poring over LinkedIn job listings with an open bag of Cheetos, and I had an epiphany: I needed to return to *currere*. Truth be told, I felt a bit foolish. I had immersed myself in the *currere* process, used it as the foundation for teaching a graduate course, made it the fundamental element of my doctoral research, and expounded on the benefits of its use as well as its implications for improving teaching practice. And then I had simply abandoned all I knew to be true to stress, self-pity, and complaining. I opened the book and reread the passage in which I described my discovery of c*urrere* and its value to me:

> I remember knowing right away as I began my own journey as a teacher that some intangible connection existed between my students and me. The feeling was so real, but I could not find the professional language to describe it properly. What I experienced included classroom management, group culture, and relationships; but it also existed in a realm between and beyond those things. [Through the *currere* process], I described the feeling using words such as *connection*, *rhythm*, *sparks*, and *flow*. Those early experiences with what I now name as *lived curriculum* remain vivid to me to this day. After my enlightening and influential first experience with the *currere* method, I found myself wishing that I had accessed all of the information and insights from the process much sooner in my teaching career. It became very clear to me that I was coming to a true understanding of the breadth of curriculum as a river of practice leading to an ocean of possible outcomes. (Palmer, 2019, p. 7)

To find a solution to my current, almost debilitating, anxiety, I realized that I needed to look at my situation in a way that offered structure and distance in order to break through the negativity and move from knee-jerk reacting and into responding in healthy ways. I needed to renew my relationship with the c*urrere* process.

As I leafed through the pages of my research with intern teachers using *currere*, I couldn't help thinking about new teachers who did not have prior experience to fall back on as a map or a process like *currere* to serve as a guide. Were they being "wired" for

anxiety from the very beginning of their careers? Several of my intern teacher research participants had shared with me their experiences of *currere* in terms of its role in mitigating anxiety. My eye fell on the page on which Jane summed up how the *currere* process helped her navigate and manage daily stressors. In that moment, this former student became my teacher as her words took on new meaning in the context of my new role:

> I almost find it therapeutic. Teaching does tend to pull on the heartstrings almost every day. And I almost intentionally try to remove myself from some of the situations because I know I am vulnerable to anxiety and I have some health-related issues related to anxiety-inducing situations. So, in the movement...in the moment of experiencing things in the classroom and feeling removed, but then going back and reflecting, it...drew that line of balance for me to where I don't feel the anxiety, because it's already happened but now I can think about it and learn and grow from it in a therapeutic sense. Now I'm trying to let things go that I can't do anything about now, but still hold onto them to use them as a learning experience. (Palmer, 2019, p. 186-187)

Newly inspired, I turned once again to my own written *currere* processes done in previous years. I opened my Word files, and I reread every section. I realized that some entries in the Progression sections had become reality and that, while some Analysis connections and Synthesis observations were still intact, some had shifted. This act of reengaging with my older *currere* process entries, along with what I found in those documents, serves as the foundation for this, my latest *currere* project focused on my new professional beginning:

Regression – Experiences that have Brought Me to this Moment

- I continue to revisit the memory from my childhood of feeling frozen in my seat, barely breathing, as I watched my first-grade teacher grimly and roughly tie Robbie to his chair with a jump rope from the playground equipment box. His crime? He could not stay in his seat.

- A former *currere* Progression entry I envisioned in which I had earned my Ph.D. has come true. Having my 91-year-old father, my son, and my daughter-in-law, whose voice is part of my dissertation, in attendance at my defense is now a priceless memory.

- My first classroom was a corrugated metal temporary trailer that had no running water but let in the rain, so the carpet became soggy and mildewed. I thought that environment was inappropriate for my students and me, but I was humbled to find that the classroom that made me initially feel "less-than" was actually a place where my students and I thrived together.

- I felt like an imposter when I transferred to the high school to teach both AP Literature and the English "Bridge" course designed to help struggling students achieve a high school diploma. I was often stressed about staying ahead of the literature in some classes, and I fretted over the progress of students in others.

Progression – Visions that Create a Map of Possibilities

- I am comfortable in, and happy with, my position as a high school English teacher. I have decided to call it my triumphant return even though some of my former colleagues were once so bold as to say, "Why would you ever go back?" and "What were you thinking? You were *out*!"

- I am standing on a stage about to give a TED Talk about pedagogy and lived curriculum as the heart of the classroom and the real force behind learning.

- I continue to write about *currere* and teacher education from a position of first-hand, current classroom experience. I have found that what I once perceived as a professional limitation to being part of the education curriculum and policy conversation is now a source of strength and credibility.

Analysis – Themes that Emerge from Examining the Past and Envisioning the Future

- I am aware, more than ever now, of the profound influence of teachers on students, each other, families, communities, and society as a whole.

- My mission is to help broaden the definition and classroom manifestation of curriculum to include Curriculum-as-lived with a focus on the critical importance of pedagogy.

Synthesis – Bringing it All Back to Make Meaning of "Now"

I am aware that, to some, returning to serve as a classroom teacher is a step back in terms of a professional resume, but I intend to ignore those unproductive views and focus on what I am learning all over again about what it means to be a teacher.

Using *currere*, I realize that a large part of my life's purpose is to contribute to developing a public education system that unapologetically claims pedagogical practice as its foundation. It is important that I share my vision of schools where pedagogy is the focus and learning is the natural outcome *and* that I find like-minded people with whom to build on that vision.

What the *Currere* Process Is – and Is Not

Currere is more than a process. It is an opportunity to write, reflect, converse, reflect, write, and converse again. Our lives are lived as *currere*—we remember and learn from the past to make plans and then act to create a desired future. We seek patterns to organize and understand our lives in context, and we work to make sense of it all in a way that further develops the relevance of, and purpose for, our lives. Acknowledging and experiencing *currere* as a recursive process and practice can be a way to a richer lived experience.

The *currere* process is not magical, and it is not a sole solution to teachers' experiences with anxiety and stress. There are many daily demands, practices, and policies that pull teachers' focus from serving students to checking boxes and finishing tasks that are ultimately irrelevant. Education professionals must re-view, re-vision, and re-sift through teaching practices to allow the most sane, salient, and sparkling practices to surface while the cheap and useless sand falls and blows away.

Living *Currere*

My lived experience using *currere* and recently rediscovering it as a recursive practice has shown me the value beyond measure of *currere* as a self-selected part of a teacher's practice. After moving through the *currere* process once again, I now have a calmer mind, a more self-directed sense of professional purpose, and a stronger voice as an educator. I wish the same for my colleagues everywhere.

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Was I Making Black Art?

By Dorothy Heard
Montclair State University

Pinar's (1975) *currere* method offered me a means for forming knowledge from experience but not explicit channels or directions for how new knowing would unfold nor precisely how new knowing might move me to a different position from which to understand my own educational history and my work now as a teacher educator. Over the course of several months, I reflected on, wrote about, reviewed, and considered educational experiences that had impacted me and my work to prepare teachers to teach in P-12 schools, particularly in art classrooms. Using free-association, I sometimes found myself wondering—what is school for, what is teaching for, what are students supposed to learn and why, and what is art for? My thoughts and concerns wandered widely as I searched for a sustainable beginning that would most closely resemble one of the many points of urgency around art, education, and race in America. With more reflection and more writing came more questions. Gradually, and without explicit intent, one of my past educational experiences took shape and began to persistently re-surface and come into focus. With each reflective session, details were sharpened until the pedagogical event, the circumstances, individuals, place, time, light, colors, some of the spoken words, and even the timber of voices and ambient sounds were captured.

The learning experience I'd recalled from my first year in college didn't seem at first to be informative in anyway, just slightly annoying. As a first-year student, and without fully understanding the totality of it, I was among one of the largest groups of black students in American history to attend a predominantly white college. I was aware of the historical nature and reality of the moment but not its historical, social, cultural, political, and economic significance. I had been told, and I had believed, that colleges and universities were places without the meanness of racism—that colleges and universities were places of intellect and creativity and fairness. They were places of freedom and equality. I was excited about the opportunity to be free and think and act freely with others who were also free.

My desire to escape into that place of freedom was so strong that I was wholly unaware and grossly unprepared to enter a new and vastly different kind of pedagogically racially discriminatory arena than the one in which I had grown up. At first glance, there was not a single roughly chiseled-out chunk of overt bias to be seen. But I soon realized that college was a place where racism, class discrimination, and gender bias were, for the most part, indelibly and deeply incised into not just the substrate, but also embossed onto the smooth veneer of every thought and act of teaching and learning. But what had happened then and what was happening now that made me think of this? What would I recall about that time that relates to now? What was the problem then and what was the problem now? Would reflecting on both the past and what was happening in the present change the way I understood, considered, thought about, and responded to my own past educational troubles, current pedagogical problems, and pedagogical goals for future? Could revisiting the past shed light on present troubles and open a way to future, small, but important, triumphs over inhumanity?

College was new to me. White teachers were the only people I'd known who'd gone to white colleges. Big city living was new to me as well. I spent hours at a time walking around the city, walking to and from school and work. I began making photographs of

Heard, D. (2020). Was I making black art? *Currere Exchange Journal, 4*(1), 7-16.

some of the people and things I saw. I made a lot of pictures of African Americans on streets, in restaurants, markets, and laundromats, on trolley cars, street cars, and buses, buying fruit at outdoor markets, playing in parks, and playing cards on foldable tables on sidewalks. Toward the end of my first academic year, I decided that I would make a couple of very large paintings of African Americans doing ordinary things. As a 19-year-old with scant knowledge of art history and no knowledge of African American art, or so I thought, I was excited about my idea. I also had a sense that I wanted to show African Americans as good, solid, ordinary people. I wonder now how I had so easily, so unconsciously, so readily assumed the position of having to explain, of trying to demonstrate that blacks are people too. I wanted to valorize, to raise the plain-ness, the decency, the relaxed-ness, the safeness, the all-right-ness, the everyday-ness of African Americans. I didn't know it at the time, but my urgent need for counter-narratives was the driving force behind what I was thinking and attempting to do. I had, like many, internalized racism, internalized the oppressive narrative that African Americans are dangerous, incapable of creating and managing their own lives, and, therefore, must be controlled. With that as a frame, could my paintings be images of humanity? Or would they be just another visual attribution to the power of racial oppression? That worrying made me realize how and why some black people go crazy. A couple of years later, in graduate school, I would begin reading Gregory Bateson (1972) and instantly recognize the double-bind that is the space and structure of racism constructed over centuries for the continuing legacy of African American internment.

The black and white photographs I made of the simple honest acts in which I saw African Americans engaged were beautiful to me. I chose a few of them for inspiration and began making sketches for my first painting. It would be 6 feet by 10 feet. I had over-heard one of my instructors urge his students to "make big mistakes." We should commit ourselves to what we were doing in the moment, then review, critique, modify, correct. Then, once we'd arrived at a place at which we could, for the moment, go no further, we should, in that place, locate what new understandings we could. I listened to Nina Simone as she sang: "There're so many new mistakes to make. Why repeat the old ones?" Studio work practices reflected and resonated life ways. Creative risk making and risk taking are critical parts of every genuine artistic experience. Living life as a free self means expanding the way one lives, doing things differently, considering varied perspectives. Trying something new sets your "self" up for a strong, solid dialogue with your life, your ideas, your canvas.

I borrowed parts of images from a few different photographs, and I used them to make several sketches of what would be the central focus of my paintings—three black men sitting on the steps of a once glorious, still impressive, brownstone mansion. The man on the right had half a sandwich. He leaned across the man in the middle to offer his sandwich to the man on the left. I'm not sure why, but this designed scene had, still has, a powerful effect on me. Many years later, I wonder whether it's simply because the sketches in some ways echo the spirit of fellowship, teaching, and the communion of sharing a meal before Christ made his prediction and started the world anew—tensions between fellowship, community, hope, trust, need, and betrayal. If I could hear the words and dwell in the thoughts of these three men, would they speak of the betrayal that is endemic to being black in America? Would they offer up hope for humanity? At the time, in spite of and because of the double-bind I had brought to the surface as part of my aesthetic process, I was enthralled with the picture I was creating.

I took my partially finished painting to school. I stood in front of my painting professor and explained how I had arrived at what he was looking at. He praised me

for the size of my canvas, for having gotten the materials needed, for having done an excellent job of building the stretcher, for stretching and gesso-ing the canvas. He issued praise for underpainting, getting tones and values of Payne's grey, yellow ochre, and burnt sienna right, for blocking areas of mass, for composition. Then, with the abruptness of a prosecutor intending to entrap and dismantle a presumed-guilty defendant who he'd skillfully lulled into relaxation and expectant fairness, he told me that there was no such thing as "black art." I was caught off-guard as only an African American woman who wishes not to live in a state of racism can be. Had I lost my racial socialization skills (Boykin & Toms, 1985)? My thoughts raced. I hadn't mentioned "black art." I hadn't claimed that what I'd done was "black art." I protested silently to myself—"I don't even know what 'black art' is!" I denied my own knowing. I wondered, was my art black because I'm black? My painting professor went on to tell me that simply putting African Americans into traditional genre scenes doesn't make "black art," doesn't make "a new art form." He lectured me extensively on the genre paintings of well-known artists of the 19th and 20th centuries—Winslow Homer, Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper. He pointed to famous artists who'd made classical and much lauded paintings that included black people. To illustrate, he cited Manet's "Olympia," a picture that includes a black woman in attendance to a white female courtesan or prostitute. He was emphatic in his assertion that—putting blacks in paintings was nothing new, it had been done and done well, and most critically, pointedly, no more was needed.

While he spoke, I wondered to myself—had the double-consciousness of racism entered an external space that my professor and I could share and examine? Was he aware of the double-consciousness of racism? Could he help me break free? To conclude his critique, he challenged me to create a truly new art; a new voice. He wanted me to create a voice that didn't include making paintings of African Americans, because that had already been done and was "well behind us now." Was he thinking of Henry Ossawa Tanner? He couldn't have heard of W.E.B. DuBois (1926/1994) who had said:

> I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful…as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red; but the point today is that until the art of black folk compells [sic] recognition they will not be rated as human. (p. 104)

Did he know that Langston Hughes (1926) had urged black artists to embrace their black identity? He was countering Langston Hughes.

His teaching-critique lasted about 45 minutes. I took my painting home. I cried. Yes, it was six or seven weeks before the end of the spring semester, and I needed to produce something for my final. But that's not why I cried. I cried because I felt hurt. My chest physically hurt. But I couldn't figure-out why. I couldn't put into words why I felt hurt. There seemed to be too many points of hurt and too many levels and sub-levels of each hurt to find the words to encompass them all—the complexity of the double-bindedness of racism. I knew I had been chastised, accused of attempting to make "black art." I knew that I'd been told that there was no such thing as "black art." And I knew that somehow that had made me feel bad and ashamed.

I had failed, but how had I failed? I had made a mistake, but what was the mistake? How and where had the error, my error, occurred? Most important, what was I to learn from this? Pierce (1995) says that, "the most baffling task for victims of racism and sexism is to defend against microaggressions. Knowing how and when to defend requires time and energy that oppressors cannot appreciate" (p. 282). At the time it occurred,

my failure to gain any insight from that particular educational experience magnified my pain. My conclusion at the end of freshman year was that, at the very least, the experience had left me with the dread that other such moments lay ahead. I wanted to avoid being racialized—being seen as just a black girl, not wanting to be seen as only black, as limited to a white man's idea and creation of me. I didn't want to be racialized. In happy times, in sad times, I listen to Muddy Waters and Thelonious Monk. I re-read *Black Boy*, Genet's *The Blacks*, *The Fire Next Time*.

There is power in shame. Williams (1993) says that, "by giving through the emotions a sense of who one is and of what one hopes to be, [shame] mediates between act, character, and consequence, and also between ethical demands and the rest of life" (p. 102). Over the summer months, I realized that I had long been exposed to—had long been a consumer of—black art works. But I hadn't known it. I hadn't had conversations with myself about it. And because I hadn't shared this knowledge of myself with myself, I didn't know how to speak to my painting professor. But now I knew. I knew that there was something called black art—art works made by human beings, works that expressed, that questioned, that honored the experiences of African Americans, their possibilities for self and community, their humanity, their ideas. By fall, I had also come to realize that my professor had known that there was something called black art and that he had denied it and rejected it, as had Hilton Kramer (1970) and other white art world authorities and institutions. I had broken the spell. For months I had thought that I had innocently stumbled down the wrong path. I had been stripped bare, shamed, and set on fire. I had run away as quickly as I could. I was left with the ashes and seeds of something, but I didn't know what. But why should that long-ago learning experience be a thing of concern to me now or to anyone else for that matter? What is the danger of incurring systemic institutionalized racist pedagogical pain and maintaining silence, even silence within oneself? Dr. Chester Pierce (1988) says that "blacks must have a firm theoretical grasp of racism in order to dilute its crippling effects" (p. 33).

Creating Our Lives Creating Our Stories

Bringing past educational experience to my present work (Pinar, 1975, p. 9) as a teacher of teachers was unexpectedly natural. I began that phase of my *currere* by writing responses to one of my experiences with a former painting professor. I soon found myself returning to and writing about the following, more recent classroom experience I'd had with a fourth-grade student and my pre-clinical teachers. But to say "returning to" isn't entirely correct. I hadn't come full-circle. Yes, it had been the spark that had started my journey, my reflection. It was that recent interaction that had sent me spiraling outward into my past. But my return was moving toward an inflection point. The path and the view were now different. Here's how my *currere* began.

Their body language told me that things weren't progressing in the way my pre-clinical teacher would like, nor in a way her fourth grade student wanted it to either. As I approached their table, they gave me the briefest of glances and continued talking to each other. Fourth grade student and pre-clinical teacher each exchanging, repeating, and reaffirming their goals, intentions, and perspectives. They seemed to agree on the general literacy goal, and neither seemed to question the means for reaching their goal. But they were completely at odds about the aesthetics, content, tone, nature, and validity of what Elijah,[1] the 4th grade student, wanted to write about. I thought to provide some assistance, to reduce what appeared to be their escalating levels of tension, to model best teaching practices, to support them both, guide them both toward teaching-learning

success. I sat down. At first, I listened and observed. Then I asked Elijah to tell me the story he wanted to create/write. With the watercolor picture he'd made in front of him, Elijah began to verbally write his story aloud. He sighed and repeated: "A problem that people have is that some people steal." As I heard him say this, I silently wondered, "Why is my pre-clinical teacher rejecting what Elijah wants to write about?" As I verbally dictated Elijah's story back to him so that he could write it down, I began to consider how poverty, as perhaps the most virulent mechanism for perpetuating structural, institutional, and cultural racism, intrudes into and negatively shapes every aspect of learning for poor black students. My engagement with Elijah and my pre-clinical teacher pushed my thoughts into spaces that were both immediately present and past. Pinar (1975) said that "the biographic past exists presently, complexly contributive to the biographic present" (p. 7). What had they said? How had their words vibrated along multiple lines of challenges to student learning in the present now and, at the same time, awakened a memory of a pedagogical episode in my own personal education experiences? What was it that had happened to me with my painting professor, and could it offer insight(s) into my work with Elijah, with my pre-clinical teacher, and my work as a teacher of teachers?

Stealing, consequences, alternatives, and rationales, in the story he was attempting to write, Elijah had wanted to argue the positives; but he could see the negatives of stealing too. The negatives loomed large, but he was willing to risk them for the gain. When I had asked how he'd feel if someone stole from him, he became animated saying that had already happened and that no one except he and his family had suffered. He wondered out loud why he should care if others were hurt; no one had cared when things had been/were taken from him. Elijah was bitterly wrestling with knowing something is wrong and feeling that it could also be right because others did it, and they got away with it. My pre-clinical teacher glossed over Elijah's emerging nuanced views on stealing and persisted with her own position that stealing is wrong, no matter what. I thought about how much would, educationally, continue to be taken, stolen, from students like Elijah—students who understand that there is no way to regain what they've lost and that, even if they could steal something, get something, it would not be the same as having never had something taken in the first place. They would never regain what had been taken.

Elijah had seemed pained by the idea of stealing but suggested it was the right thing to do even if there was no chance of complete recovery, even if that meant one risked losing even more. But what had been stolen; what had been lost? Did my pre-clinical teacher understand that something priceless had been lost—had been taken away? That Elijah had lost his expectation of the world as a safe, fair, equitable place? That he had lost a certainty, lost trust, lost some critical aspect of community, and that there's no way to steal those back? While defensively, blusteringly, boldly stating what had to be done to set-things-right, Elijah also seemed resigned to hew, to conform to convention, as if acknowledging being caught in a realm of unending effort and defeat. As I sat with Elijah and my pre-clinical teacher, there were brief moments when Elijah made comments to himself as though my pre-clinical teacher and I weren't there. He code switched a couple of times, each time after making a statement intended for himself or someone else not present with whom he could share his conversation and then rephrasing his self-comments and statements when he returned to directly addressing my pre-clinical teacher and me. Racism requires having many such conversations with oneself in unsafe places; it is part of the everydayness of racism (Bell, 1992). Had my pre-clinical teacher noticed Elijah's functional double-consciousness (Du Bois, 1903)?

When I think back on that learning episode with Elijah and my pre-clinical teacher, I find myself wondering whether I/we have time to be more than just generalist-anti-racists. That is, do I/we have, and do we take, the time to offer students more than just pejorative instructions in ways of not being racist. Are we teachers who offer exemplars to students of what anti-racist, democratic, inclusive, and respectful talking, thinking, and behaving looks like and sounds like and who explain why certain ideas, speech, actions, practices, laws are racist? Do we have the time to do that in situ? Can we take the time to collaterally deconstruct implicit racism when we are part of that racism—intricately intertwined with it? When we are teaching and we do not attend to racism, however subtle and implicit, is it because we are calculating whether it's worth our limited resources—limited time with students, pressures of a neoliberal curriculum, uncertainties about capabilities of students in our classroom, uncertainty about our own capacity to chart a course that could lead to greater student understanding, teacher understanding? Pinar (1975) suggested that reflecting on, writing down, a problem allows one to move to a different view of the problem and that the problem itself becomes different (p. 5).

In response to Elijah and my pre-clinical teacher, I acted in the moment. My actions were not planned. Was I prepared? No. But as I listened, I soon began to speak. And as I did so, in my mind, I shifted from seeing the three of us as 4th grade student, pre-clinical teacher, and professor to wanting us to engage as collaborators who were bringing our own ideas and experiences to our responses to what Elijah was saying, to what my pre-clinical teacher was saying, and all three of us engaging in voicing and examining our ideas, our words, the histories and implications behind our words, our hopes and expectations for the ourselves and each other. In my listening and speaking, I had attempted to create a shift in the usual, habitual, taken for granted, expected, typical ways of teaching and learning. Had they felt it? Did Elijah and my pre-clinical teacher notice that we had stepped out of time? That I was trying to ontologically coach us into another locale? Out of the world of expected limited ideas, responses, and roles? Had we stepped out or had we simply stepped more deeply into our own sense of being as a black 9-year-old boy, 20-something pre-clinical teacher, and African American professor? I had let go of the expected, the predictable. In my effort to bring them with me, I had made subtle physical gestures and movements, changed my voice and facial expression. Had they come? My pre-clinical teacher resisted with a quick widening of her eyes, a "hmph," and a nervous chuckle. Elijah became more emphatic and more candid. I tried to follow them both. I tried to bend their trajectories, and my own, toward an open space where we all could hear and see behind what we were saying and hear each other and return, not to where we had started, but to a new place—a place where learning and teaching produced new perspectives, new views of what it means to learn in and through the lenses of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and the visual arts.

"Don't Bring Your Self to School"

Mirroring society, schools have strong taboos against talking about topics like stealing. Before I sat with him and his pre-clinical teacher, Elijah's thinking and talking behaviors had already been called-out as inappropriate, and he had been repeatedly asked to stop what he was saying and asking. He was asked to think of something more appropriate to write about. Not only could Elijah have been removed from the lesson and asked to sit quietly at another table, he could have also been sent to another classroom, to the principal's office, or to the school social worker's office. He could have been removed to any number of other locales to begin a process of behavior correction. That hadn't

happened because Elijah seemed to sense what might happen next if he'd continued to speculate about narratives and subplots for his story about stealing. He had slumped down in his chair, dropped his chin to his chest, lowered his eyes, and crossed his arms. His regular classroom teacher had noticed and told him to, "Sit up." To maintain some level of safety, but at a cost, Elijah acquiesced.

After teaching their 4th grade students, my pre-clinical teachers take time to make written reflections on their teaching experiences and their students' learning. Pre-clinical teacher group-talk follows writing. During these sessions pre-clinical teachers ask and attempt to answer questions and try to link their teaching and thinking to research and to their prior teaching experiences. The pre-clinical teacher, Becca, who'd worked with Elijah was eager to share her experience of a critical incident and get feedback from other pre-clinical teachers. She began by saying how shocked and dismayed she'd been by Elijah's insistence on writing a short story about stealing. She wondered aloud whether he'd been caught stealing, been punished, and was simply being defiant. Another pre-clinical teacher who'd overheard much of what Elijah had said offered her impression that "he's probably stolen something in the past, but I'm not sure. I don't know that for sure." Then she added that "he's learning this at home." "By the way he talked" she said, she could tell "it wasn't the first time." Some of my other pre-clinical teachers agreed, and a couple of them jokingly asked, "where's my bag," "my purse?" My pre-clinical teachers were adamant that stealing was wrong and that students needed to know that. They said that Elijah's comments were inappropriate for the classroom. And further, that he "shouldn't be allowed to think that way, period." Becca said she was glad his regular classroom teacher had "made him behave." A couple of my pre-clinical teachers said that they thought Elijah was a "troublemaker." And they agreed with each other that proof of their claim lay in the fact that Elijah had "talked about stealing out-loud." One of my pre-clinical teachers said she thought that "he acted like that just to get other students' attention…to get Becca's attention and to make it more difficult for Becca to get anything done at her table." My pre-clinical teachers said that Elijah's behavior was wrong in several ways. They concluded that Elijah had stolen things, was attempting to diminish their positions as teachers, had interfered with other students' learning, and was purposefully being resistant to being taught, thwarting his own opportunity to learn. In their view, Elijah was asking inappropriate questions and making outrageous statements about stealing in order to forestall having to "actually do his work." They saw his behaviors as challenges to their authority as teachers.

My pre-clinical teachers had learned, and were calling upon, institutionalized academic racism in propositional defense of, in support of, their belief that Elijah was well on his way to becoming a petty thief, a criminal—one of them said she thought he'd probably "go from school to prison." My pre-clinical teachers said they'd read an article about the school to prison pipeline in one of their education courses. Among themselves, they differed on the exact statistics but agreed that, based on what they knew about Elijah, they were witnessing the beginnings of it. Institutionalized racism can be subtle, automatic, unconscious, defensive. Poverty begets criminality. I asked them what we ought to do? What research and best teaching practices recommended? Their responses were that they'd of course be nice to Elijah, be patient with him, treat him fairly, like they treated all the others. But beyond that, there was little to be done. Home, community, and his past and continuing inappropriate behaviors had already determined what would happen to him. My pre-clinical teachers were perpetuating academic racism (Pinar, 1991). They had internalized racism. They are victims of the history of racism in America but probably could not, would not, identify themselves as such. I asked

my pre-clinical teachers whether they could empathize with the perspectives Elijah had presented with his speculations, his what ifs and maybes? I asked them to lovingly, pedagogically, lean-into teaching him. I also asked my pre-clinical teachers why they thought I might ask them to consider Elijah's emerging thoughts, speculations, views about stealing.

Prometheus Stole Fire from the Gods

Acts like stealing cause harm. Elijah had attempted to explore that harm and, in doing so, had opened a way for teachers to think with him about ways students are negatively affected by the institutionally constructed and supported realities of poverty, racism, and neoliberal schooling; ways in which students respond; and to consider how such harmful damage might be contested. Had my pre-clinical teachers any personal experiences, stories, theories, proverbs, parables related to stealing that they could have shared with Elijah?

Elijah and his classmates had read how Rainbow Crow had sacrificed, had lost his beautiful singing voice and his beautiful multicolored feathers to bring fire to suffering animals on earth (Van Laan, 1991). Elijah and his classmates had also been introduced to Prometheus and had talked about Prometheus' reasons and his punishment for stealing fire and giving it to human beings. My pre-clinical teachers had guided and supported students' examination of art works and discussions of the Rainbow Crown and Prometheus stories. Why hadn't my pre-clinical teachers suggested that learning as a possible anchor, for themselves and for Elijah? Why hadn't my pre-clinical teachers engaged in an extended discussion of what Prometheus had done, the consequences and benefits, and whether it was worth it? Why had they instead sought to criminalize Elijah's artistic creative expression?

Zero tolerance for perceived inappropriate behavior had won. It had won over and above aesthetic query. It overwhelmed creative thinking and art making. We had short-circuited Elijah's epistemological curiosity—contradictions he was finding within himself and in society. But crucially, and I would say cruelly, it had cripplingly interrupted Elijah's moral formation (Buckmaster, 2016) and our opportunity as teachers to fully support his "self-formation…as an ethical subject" (Foucault, 1985, p. 26). Producing a self occurs through relationships with others (Foucault, 1997). All persons, perhaps especially young students, become; they change, grow, make themselves through interactions with others and ideas in context. For young African American students, bringing life to their spaces in school (Rose, 2010) is making learning a contested space. Pinar (2008) said that: "In studying the politics of identity, we find that who we are is invariably related to who others are, as well as who we have been and want to become" (p. 30).

What do we as teachers have to do to help students like Elijah, if not reclaim, then create a path forward to security, well-being, a path out of the overwhelming burdens of poverty and racism inside and outside of the classroom? How can teachers help students like Elijah further articulate the double-bind he presented to himself and attempted to make plain to us? During debriefing, I had attempted to guide my pre-clinical teachers toward a space in which we could consider, that might allow for, that could possibly grant permission to students for, creative examination and critical pedagogy. My pre-clinical teachers had circled the boundaries of imaginative extrapolation and extension. I wondered whether and how often they themselves had been led to or found their own ways to or otherwise entered-into creative exploratory spaces on behalf of their own

troubling or even dangerous thoughts or experiences. I wondered what else I could do to further their *currere* and my own. I wondered how I could help my pre-clinical teachers shift from their indictments of Elijah as a criminal in the making to critically reflectively examining their own beliefs and assumptions brought to the fore by their past and current pedagogical experiences. Why would we criminalize Elijah's artistic creative expression? Reflection, interpretations, and classroom applications of research, theory, and best practices ought to help pre-clinical teachers begin to uncover their attitudes and behaviors toward and their expectations of and for students of color (Romano, 2006). Recognizing racial bias in education, however painful and disrupting that may be, isn't enough. Guiding pre-clinical teachers' examinations of their counter-factual thinking (McGarr & McCormack, 2016) on racism so that they become accustomed to creating positive learning outcomes for African American students takes time. Racism in education must be challenged every day until we, and all those gripped by it, are released. Until we are all transformed into the full realization of free selves.

What Now?

The future is always just a moment away. My reflections and analyses have led me on-ward toward wondering how I might do a better job of preparing myself and my pre-clinical teachers to teach black students not just how to defend themselves against the twin assaults of poverty and racism, but, more powerfully, to create themselves as free persons. Recognizing, anticipating, being on guard against, being ready to respond to, and to defend against subtle messaging about who they are and who they can become is, for some poor black students, the space in which they enter every encounter, in school and out of school. In the ordinary course of teaching poor black students, I've heard myself intuitively utter phrases like: "It's all right baby, I'm not trying to hurt you." What has caused me and some other teachers to have to comfort poor black students in this way? To ask for their trust? To have to attempt to get students to relax, let down their self-protective guards? To be vulnerable in learning? To step back from their warding stances?

Some black students are a bit more fortunate than others. They have one, and if they're very lucky a few, teachers who recognize the siege-state in which far too many poor black students approach and move through every interaction in the classroom, in school, every day. Why should they have to do this in school? Poor black students know that schools are physically, emotionally, culturally, and socially unsafe places for learning. What must I do to move a step closer to being able to say to poor black students, "It's okay baby, *we're* not trying to hurt you"? What steps do I need to take to be able to honestly say, "It's okay baby, *no one here* is trying to hurt you," and to be able to say, "We're here to help you create you"? Racism and poverty are insidious institutionalized roadblocks to learning. When these are removed from the life experiences of black students and their teachers, what will I say, what will I sound like? That seems like a far-off distant place.

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Endnotes

[1] Elijah and Becca are pseudonyms used to protect students' identities and do not refer to any past or current students called Elijah and Becca.

Finding My Voice and Future: The *Currere* Process of a Young Special Education Teacher

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I began a graduate course over curriculum design with the idea that curriculum is a set of pages guiding what teachers instruct and for how long. In my undergraduate program, I never looked at school curricula. In preparation for my current job, I was never trained on how to use the curriculum, only given a link for how to access it. It was not until this graduate course that I realized there is much more to curriculum than subject matter; teachers also must recognize the hidden and null curricula they may be teaching without even knowing.

Since I had a misguided idea of curriculum itself, I definitely did not understand the power of *currere*. Kanu and Glor (2006) stated that teachers must "move out of the conception of teaching only as rules, processes, and procedures" (p. 110). With this new idea of different curricula, I now understand how *currere* can help a person analyze her current practices. This is shown in my *currere* process as I dive into reflection, examining how my past affects my present as I plan for a better future.

A Glimpse into My Past

Some people say they grew up knowing they wanted to be a teacher. I, however, cannot say that. I can recall various career plans I had throughout my life—part-time ballerina part-time police officer, pediatric nurse. I remember in Kindergarten my teacher asked us what we wanted to be when we grew up. I answered confidently, "A BEEPER AT K-MART!" Well wouldn't five-year-old me be disappointed to be living in Missouri without K-Marts now?

Despite my many thoughts of what I wanted to be, I have found a place where I belong. For this, I have some amazing teachers to thank. I began pre-school at age three, attending a private, Catholic grade school, where I remained through eighth grade. The school community was small and tight-knit, totaling no more than 50 students per grade level. I did enjoy my time at this school. I was able to grow in my faith and receive a great education, all the while forming some friendships that I still maintain.

There were many quality teachers at my first school. One who still influences me is Mr. Tramont. He was the greatest jokester of all time. I have an older brother and sister, both of whom he taught before me. Every day, he would greet me with a "Well hellooooo Ms. Niece-wander," knowing that the correct pronunciation is "Nice-wander." Then, he would flash one of his contagious smiles and crack a joke to the next person he saw. Mr. Tramont was my ELA teacher for seventh and eighth grade. As funny as he was when he joked, it was no-nonsense during work time. He was able to turn the funny on and off based on when it was appropriate. He held high standards for every single student. By the end of eighth grade, I was a wiz at MLA format. Imagine my disappointment when I learned all education papers were to be written in APA format instead.

One of Mr. Tramont's greatest passions besides The Three Stooges was *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He spent nearly an entire semester reading and discussing the book. Every year, he taught students the racism of the 1960s. He dove deeply into issues like lynching and important people like Emmett Till. Most things we learned are not mentioned in textbooks and would rather be forgotten by many people. However, he

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pushed past the uncomfortableness to teach students the reality of the world. He did so with reverence. It was truly inspiring to see a teacher identify realities that need to be discussed in the world and take that on himself.

I was split from many of my friends when I attended a nearby public high school. I enjoyed my time there, meeting some great people and teachers. While there, I participated in a program called A+ Buddies where general education students were paired up with students in the special education classroom and went on monthly field trips to help them apply the life skills they learned in class. This was my first experience working with individuals with special needs. The joy that I felt with those students was something that I had not felt before. Watching the pureness in everything they did and seeing them get opportunities to go to the movies or buy candy at Target was truly moving. Even thinking about it now sometimes brings me to tears because so many of the students just want to be like everyone else, so when they finally had the opportunity to do so, they thrived. It was such a rewarding program and learning experience.

Being a part of the A+ Buddies program inspired me to try teaching. It seemed reasonable. I like kids, and they make me happy, so I could be a teacher, right? With that mindset, I began my undergraduate work at Lindenwood University. I started taking Elementary and Special Education courses, diving into practicums in both the general and special education settings, during which I learned that I was meant to be a teacher. I earned my substitute certificate and took jobs as a substitute teacher and paraprofessional in various districts. Eventually I happened to land a substitute job as a paraprofessional in a self-contained Autism room. Those boys won me over in three short hours. I began subbing three days a week in that room for over a year. I quickly became part of that classroom and school community. It was never easy. I dealt with screaming, hitting, and running almost every day. But something about those students and the love they gave changed me. I knew without a doubt that I needed to be a special education teacher. It was tiring but so rewarding.

The following year, that classroom became fully staffed. However, the principal asked me to begin working with a new student who had just been adopted from China. He faced a terribly traumatic past, growing up in an orphanage in China. I thought my previous assignment was challenging, but I faced a whole new level of difficulty with this student. He fought me on work every day. He would self-harm if he was angry enough. He would yell and cry, making me want to do the same. I had to pick battles and find ways to engage him in learning, which at times seemed impossible. I stuck to my guns, though, and maintained high expectations for him. We could take breaks, but we would finish work. It was tough learning how to teach in a trauma-aware way, but he and I both pushed, and we made tremendous growth. He was eventually able to speak more clearly, read basic books, and accept losses more easily. I was eventually able to stay calm while he was heightened, redirect him when I anticipated a break down, and maintain high expectations even when he was upset.

When it was time for student teaching, I was placed in the Autism room I had worked in previously and in a first grade classroom. I loved teaching in both classrooms. It was reassuring to know I could do well in both the general and special education settings. My time in the first grade classroom was somewhat challenging. This was my first time seeing a general education teacher struggle with inclusive practices. She seemed to give up on some students who she did not anticipate being successful. A student with ADHD was often on the bottom of her behavior chart and deemed "uncontrollable." A student who was a low learner but did not meet IDEA qualifications

was deemed "helpless until she can qualify in third grade." It was challenging as a soon-to-be-teacher to see so much negativity. As I started to take over the classroom, I tried new tactics to help these struggling students. I created a new behavior incentive program for the student with ADHD. I did more frequent check-ins with the struggling learner, providing accommodations like drawing lines on her paper to help with letter sizing and organization. It was powerful to see the accommodations I thought of on my own making a difference for these students.

Upon graduating, I was offered my first job as a Special Education Resource teacher in a neighboring district. My first year of teaching was a whirlwind. I went in with a plan to just try my best to be a good teacher for my students. I am blessed with supportive administrators and teammates in my Special Education department. The students were well-behaved besides some excessive talking. While I love my teammates and fellow staff, there are some strong personalities. As a people pleaser, I was definitely overwhelmed by that and let it affect my confidence. I had to learn how to address other teachers, even if they have twenty years of experience to my six months. Issues occurred that had the potential of affecting my ability to be in compliance with the IEPs. With guidance and reassurance from my administration and mentor teacher, I eventually summoned the courage to address the situation. Though it was not a smooth process, I stood my ground because changes needed to be made to best serve the students. I learned to just do as much as I can in my time with the students and control what I can control.

Each of these educational experiences have influenced who I am as a teacher today. They formed my philosophy of keeping high expectations. I learned to form strong relationships with students. Each year, new experiences will mold who I am and who I want to become as a teacher and individual.

What Do I Want?

As a Type A person, I enjoy having a specific plan that I can follow. Since I thrive off a structured plan, thinking about the future is sometimes intimidating. Thinking about the future is not always as easy as making a list of steps and following it. The teaching world is constantly changing. The best I can do in this Progressive Moment is focus purely on this moment of my life, noting what I want to accomplish with no limitations.

Being that I am intimidated by the future, it is expected that my first thought is a fear. The school district I work for is one of the fastest growing districts in Missouri. My current school and another elementary school just opened two years ago, and both are already overcrowded. There will be a new elementary school opening next school year and a new high school the following year.

My biggest fear when thinking about the future is that I will be involuntarily moved to the new elementary school next year. I am a creature of habit, and I do not want to leave the people and environment of my current setting. My team is so supportive, offering to share resources without even being asked. The teachers throughout the building share a common goal: push students and ourselves to be better. The administration at my school is supportive and meaningful in the advice they give. Their philosophy of supporting and loving students while still maintaining high expectations for academics and behavior aligns perfectly with my own. Sharing these strong beliefs makes it scary to consider moving schools. There is no way to know right now if I will be moved, but I must get past the question, as I cannot dwell on the unknown.

I see my career as a graduate student continuing after I complete my initial Master's program. I have appreciated the new mindset that being a student while also a teacher

instills. I appreciate being able to reflect on what I would want in a teacher and give that to my students. Continuing towards another certification upon graduation will ensure that I continue growing and evolving with the ever-changing world of education.

In my work so far, I have become quite familiar with the assessment side of Special Education. I enjoy looking at assessments and discussing what the results show. What I appreciate most about these assessments is that the results are seen in a black and white manner. Based on student scores, there is a definitive answer whether or not a student qualifies for special education. While you do not always agree with the qualification, the results can still be used to devise a plan to close any gaps and accommodate students.

This fascination with assessments and creating plans has led me to the possible career path of a School Psychological Examiner. While I am happy being a Special Education teacher now, I want to have an alternative option should the dreaded teacher burn-out occur. Being a School Psychological Examiner would allow me to still work in Special Education and with students. I would still be a part of the school community, which I would miss if I ever left teaching. One aspect of being a School Psychological Examiner that intrigues me is the opportunity to learn more about qualifying students for Special Education. One of the biggest frustrations as a teacher is seeing a student who is struggling and would benefit from Special Education, but they are not "low enough" because the discrepancies are not large enough. However, what the assessments require students to do and what school curricula require students to do are two completely different levels. Based on the knowledge I gain as a School Psychological Examiner and the research I do, I would like to take part in some sort of activism to change the tests used to qualify students for Special Education. The discrepancies between student ability and grade level expectations are not always accurately yielded from current assessments. Updated assessments would give more accurate information on what the students can do compared to their same age peers. Hopefully administering updated assessments will lead to more students who need Special Education qualifying earlier, giving the opportunity for earlier intervention.

Before I take on the world of assessments and activism, I have more immediate goals for myself as a teacher. One thing that affects my everyday life, as a teacher and an individual, is a lack of confidence. I often find myself comparing what I do to what others are doing, even if we are working with very different kids. I constantly question if I am doing a good job as a teacher and providing my students with the high-quality education they need and deserve. It is unfair to put myself down when I compare myself to a twenty-year veteran. Of course a veteran teacher will have more ideas on how to accommodate and teach students than a second year teacher like myself will. Even if I cannot immediately name off a variety of IEP goals to work on with a student, that does not mean I am a worse teacher. I have strengths, and I have weaknesses. We all do. Moving forward, I want to maintain a more positive outlook on my skills as a teacher. I want to use that positive outlook to advocate for myself and my students. I want to be able to confidently defend my decisions without worrying if I am doing something wrong by being different or if I will upset someone. I need to do what is right for myself and my students, even if my plan is not what a veteran teacher next door would do.

There are so many unexpected twists and turns in life that you cannot anticipate. Something could happen a couple minutes from now that would change your future completely. It was an interesting, yet challenging, task to think about a wide open future without any doubts or limitations. Being able to anticipate the possibilities and prepare myself will help with the unknown changes in the future.

The Current Me

I have always claimed that time-management is one of my strengths. When pursuing my Baccalaureate degree, I was working three jobs and taking 18 credit hours each semester. I thought I had the whole time-management thing down. Boy, was I surprised when I started graduate school! In this current stage of my life, I am tackling my second year of teaching and first year as a graduate student simultaneously. I have found myself facing new challenges and reacting differently than I would have before.

I grew up trying to be the "model student." I followed the rules. I listened to my teachers. I earned mostly As. I did everything by the book. That is what I was taught by my parents. One thing I am finding about myself that has changed is my ability to accept failures. I can recognize when I made a mistake and accept whatever may come from that. I still remember in eighth grade when I lost 10 points on a math test because I forgot to put parentheses around coordinates. I had the numbers all right, but I just forgot the parentheses. I was not able to accept that as a failure, clearly as I still remember that to this day. Flashforward to my past semester. Some professors are very strict with due dates, and twice I posted an assignment late because I was either confused on deadlines or something in my actual career as a Special Education teacher had to take precedence. This is not due to lack of responsibility or care on my part. I am still very passionate about doing well in school. Instead, I see it as a reminder that my neat schedule for the week will not always go as planned. When that happens, I have to adjust and set priorities. When receiving the grades for my graduate courses, I easily accepted the point deductions because I missed the original deadline. I am not caught up on missing a couple points because I know I did the best I could in that week's situation. I can learn from my mistakes and move forward without wallowing in losing a couple points.

Who I am as a graduate student sometimes causes difficulties for me as a teacher. As a student, I try my best on everything to the point of overthinking. When I see students in my classroom give little effort, it frustrates me. It is ironic that I expect so much out of my students, yet I am in the Special Education field. You would think if I wanted mastery I would be in general or gifted education. The way I rationalize it is the drive I have for myself as a student motivates me to keep high expectations for even struggling learners.

As a teacher, I am trying to maintain confidence in myself and my abilities. I have good and bad days. I try to focus on the high points, keeping those celebrations close to my heart to propel me forward during the bad days. A couple weeks ago, I had two IEPs, parent teacher conferences, and end of the quarter progress notes due. It was a stressful week filled with anxiety and tears. When analyzing the students' progress towards their goals, it was difficult to swallow that some students are making tremendous progress and some are not. After my two IEP meetings, though, one of the general education teachers emailed me and shared how impressed she was with me in the meeting, explaining that everything was professional and smoothly transitioned and that it was clear that I know my students well. In addition, a Speech Language Pathologist and Assistant Principal told my Special Education Department Chair that I led strong meetings. Hearing feedback like that assures me that, even at my lowest moments, I am still doing well.

After looking at students' progress for first quarter, it would be easy to say, this student can't do this and that student can't do that. I am reminded of my philosophy of education, though: maintain high expectations for all students no matter their ability level, while fostering strong, encouraging relationships along the way. I first started forming this philosophy while subbing and student teaching in the non-verbal Autism room. So many people, including teachers in the school, would doubt the students'

abilities. The boys in that room had so many bystanders fooled. One particular boy used a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) book as a communication tool. Even with the PECS book, he would usually just use it to request snacks or his tablet. He would be happy to just lay around all day, eating and watching YouTube. He will do that too if he is allowed. In the classroom, though, we would not let this happen. We pushed him hard every day and made sure he did his work. Whether it was done willingly or hand-over-hand, it was completed. One day when I was taking data on him, he came willingly to his desk, did every task I asked of him, and even sang the entire alphabet unprompted. Every adult in that room stood amazed, showering him with praise.

All students, especially those with special needs, are capable of incredible things. Often times, people let labels limit their beliefs in these individuals. This was the case when I was working with the student from China. He had the maturity and social skills of about a four-year-old, despite being nine. People just saw him as a cute little boy they could joke around with. By doing this, he learned that school was a place for play. When I made him focus on work, I was often faced with backlash. His anger would be directed towards me and himself when he struggled. It was heartbreaking. It was infuriating having him scream "NO!" at me when I asked him to do a task. We persevered by working through his frustration. I reminded him it is okay to be frustrated and take a break, but the work still had to be done. Some days he loved me, and some days he did not. At times I wondered if it was worth it. Was what I was doing even making an impact? Was my philosophy of education completely off-base? One day during my student teaching, he was walking out to recess. He saw me, stopped, shouted my name, and ran up to hug me. It was then that I knew I was on the right track. Yes, we would push each other's buttons. We both made each other work hard. But he made tremendous progress. His reaction to seeing me in the hallway proved that, despite the high expectations I held for him, he still felt my love and encouragement, forming a strong teacher-student relationship. I knew then that my philosophy of education was strong and successful.

To this day, I maintain this philosophy. I identify what the students need and push students to make progress. I teach a group of fifth grade math students who currently perform at about a second-grade level. We were working on addition and subtraction when I discovered that the students did not know how to identify, let alone count, coins. We switched gears to coins immediately. I am passionate about teaching money, because it is a life skill every person needs. We began working on identification before moving to counting coins. Interestingly, one day I was discussing the progress of students with a co-worker. In response, she told me to stop trying and just give the students a calculator. I was completely caught off-guard by this repeated comment. I was finally able to say, "Stop. I don't tell you how to teach in your room, so don't tell me how to teach in my room." As someone who struggles with confidence, I was impressed with my own ability to stand up for myself and my teaching practice.

Fast-forward to the end of the quarter. We have continued working on counting coins every day. We even started adding in dollar bills. The students show a great passion for this skill. At parent teacher conferences, one of my students completed a first quarter reflection. He stated that his favorite subject was math "because I can use it." Hearing a student say that his favorite subject is the one I teach because he can use it in real life was incredible. It felt like what I am doing makes an actual difference in students' lives.

What is even better is having another example of how my philosophy of education is succeeding. Seeing this be a successful action plan for all of my students is what motivates me to continue using it in the future. The future is full of unknowns. Will I

have to move to another school? Will I stay in special education my entire career? Will I even be in the same district in five years? One thing I can take with me into whatever setting, school, or district I am in is this philosophy. No matter where I am or what my students' ability levels are, I can hold high expectations while maintaining strong relationships with my students.

Above all, learning that I can say no and stick up for myself is something I am very proud of. I am a people pleaser who finds it hard to say no to others, often leading me to feeling overwhelmed and doing things I do not actually want to do. I am learning to say no and stand up for what I think, rather than just following what is suggested or pushed on me. I have proven that I can tell a veteran teacher no because her suggestions did not follow my beliefs. I did what I thought was right. Not only is what I am doing with students working and the students are making progress, but the students are enjoying it. They are passionate about what I am teaching because they can use it in their daily lives. I have to use this pride to push me forward, continuing to fight battles for my students and for what I think is right. I must continue holding high expectations not only for students, but also myself.

The Future Me

Throughout this *currere* process, I have analyzed who I am, why I am that way, and who I want to be. It has been an eye-opening experience to analyze how my past has affected my present teaching and beliefs. Who would have thought being traumatized by losing 10 points on a Math test in eighth grade would impact who I am as a teacher and student now? Based on these connections and my hopes for the future, I have a better idea of where I want to go moving forward.

To start, I have to swallow my concerns for next year and live for the present. I cannot live my days wondering if I will be at the same school next year. I will put aside the wonder and put all of my focus on the needs I am seeing today. In doing so, I will ensure I am following my own philosophy of education. Keeping high expectations for every student will continue to prove successful for each student who enters my room. We can joke, and they can call me silly, but when it is time to work, we get the job done. The phrases "I can't" and "I don't know" are not allowed in my room. Students are expected to try their best before admitting defeat.

High expectations will not only be given to students in my room, but also myself as a student. I want to benefit from my graduate education as much as possible. I have to take the skills and ideas I learn and apply them to my current classroom whenever possible. I have to identify everything that I teach in my room, explicitly or inexplicitly. Realizing what behaviors and patterns I use in my classroom and analyzing what it teaches my students allows me to make sure I am maintaining a healthy school environment for my students.

Moving forward in my graduate education, I plan to continue on to get my certificate to become a School Psychological Examiner. I want to see reform in Special Education requirements. Becoming a Psychological Examiner will allow me to gain experience in the testing side of Special Education, allowing me to better visualize what is faulty in the system. Using the information I find, I will have a better understanding of what reforms to push for.

Finally, the biggest thing I have to address moving forward is my confidence. Being a second year teacher, I am short on different ideas for students who are struggling. I will continue seeking the help of others. I can use the help of fellow teachers, my team, and

the district Literacy and Math Coaches. In addition to using the help of others, I will try to fully believe in my own self. I cannot rely on the reassurance from others. I have to understand that I have the knowledge in my head, ability to find new information, and, most importantly, the drive in my heart to be a successful teacher. Knowing that will motivate me to continue fighting battles for myself and my students. This will propel me forward to continue working on myself as a person and teacher, allowing me to be the best I can be for my students.

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Indelible Moments: Creating a Culture of Empathy

By Jody Googins
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I had come to school that day with a new outfit on. My mom had purchased both my sister and I matching skirts and tops, one in hot pink and the other in a royal blue. I had selected the hot pink combination and wore it proudly. At my school, we wore uniforms most days. The only days we were excused were for special occasions and for "First Fridays." First Fridays were always the first Friday of the month, and we attended all-school mass. Being out of uniform gave us a sense of freedom, of creativity, a chance to wear something new, something every fourth-grade girl I knew loved to do. It wasn't a *fashion show* type of day; it was more of a *be yourself* type of day. And I always loved it.

My memories of fourth grade include distinct memories of my teacher, Mr. Thompson. To be honest, the best way to describe Mr. Thompson was *scary*. He. Was. Scary. He was large, a type of large that might come across as obese, but we knew he was exceptionally strong. He would, about once a year, tear an entire Yellow Pages book in half, a harrowing feat for any of us to imagine. He had a mostly bald head with a three-quarter rim of dark hair that started a few inches from the top of his head and stretched from ear to ear along the back. He had a goatee and mustache—dark and trimmed—that covered the lower part of his face in a circle shape. It was always groomed and well-maintained. I am certain he shaved daily, meticulously outlining the shape of his facial hair, never a whisker out of line. He dressed impeccably, always the same—dress pants, a short-sleeved collared shirt, and a tie. It never changed, even on spirit days. He was a constant professional, never shedding his "teacher" appearance. He epitomized strength, authority, and control, something that makes me shudder in retrospect.

There's something else about Mr. Thompson that anyone who had ever been in his classroom would remember. He kept animals and reptiles in glass terrariums. We had gerbils, hamsters, a guinea pig, and, most notably, a boa constrictor. Once every few weeks, he would feed the boa constrictor and let us watch. He would bring a mouse or rat into the room in a white, cardboard box. We would all gather around the large terrarium, the thick glass offering us protection. He would open the top of the enclosure, tilt the white box over a bit, and drop the poor, unsuspecting mouse into the death trap. The mouse would run around the space, sniffing the environment, seemingly trying to decipher where exactly it had landed. The boa constrictor would move ever so slightly, sliding its long body around the enclosed space. We watched intently, 9- and 10-year olds with so little knowledge of this world of prey and predator. After minutes of anticipation, the mouse running frantically and the snake slowly slithering and sliding its body around, the scene would come to a climax in an alarming way—the boa constrictor would suddenly and quickly launch at the mouse, so rapidly that if I blinked, I missed it. Its jaws would encapsulate the entire mouse, swallowing it whole. Inevitably, some would recoil in terror or scream at the sight. Some would laugh; others hid their eyes. I am sure many of us did not know how to feel. Even now, as I remember it, I cannot imagine how I must have felt watching the mouse meet its demise, time after time. We would watch as a lump would literally move down the snake's body slowly, as he digested his feast.

Yes, Mr. Thompson was scary. As the years have passed, I have thought of Mr. Thompson, of the indelible moments in his classroom that will never leave me. One

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of those moments happened on the day that I wore the new outfit—the hot pink skirt and matching top. As a prepubescent 9-year-old female, I had never considered what I wore to be an expression of my sexuality, of beauty, something that could cause shame, a choice that meant more than just an outfit that included my favorite color. I played sports, was a bit of a tomboy, wore costume jewelry, probably carried a purse because my mom did. I was nine. There was no social media. MTV had launched only three years prior. We had just gotten cable television probably that year.

I remember sitting at my desk listening to Mr. Thompson. Our desks were in clusters, four to a cluster spaced sporadically around the classroom. Mr. Thompson was talking about something; I have no memory of the subject matter, but I remember he was walking around the classroom while he talked. My elbows were propping my head up when he walked close to me. Without warning, he leaned down and grabbed the end of my skirt as it stretched an inch or two above my knees, shortened because I was sitting. He shouted at the entire class whilst holding on to my skirt, pronouncing something about the inappropriateness of the short skirt I was wearing. He was shaking my skirt, condemning the immorality of such an outfit. As I remember this moment, most of it is fuzzy; I could not tell you who was sitting near me. I could not tell you what happened immediately before or after this moment. I could not tell you exactly what he said. What I know is that I felt ashamed, embarrassed, humiliated, shaken, and fearful, all at once. I do not remember if I told my parents or anyone else. I do not remember if any of my friends said anything about it afterwards. I simply do not remember any other part of the story. But I remember feeling, for the first time in my life, shame and powerlessness.

This memory haunts me. It is an indelible moment of my life. Romano (2019) says, “Indelible moments held in our memories are there for a reason. We might not understand their meaning until we explore them, until we write about them with such detail that we experience them anew. And [then] we know” (p. 33). In the fall of 2019, I began teaching a class to pre-service teachers that focused on “classroom management.” In previous years, the class had focused on very practical and technical elements of teaching and managing a classroom. It included topics like classroom rules, classroom setup, discipline, parent communication, and other procedures that generally related to compliance. A colleague and I decided to approach the class with a curriculum lens, asking students to consider their classroom environments, their positionality, their own and their students’ cultural identities and experiences, and the larger issues of social justice that are at hand when classrooms are “managed.” We included some of the practical elements that pre-service teachers craved—strategies for communicating with parents and how to set up their classroom, for example—but tried to focus more on what we considered to be essential when teaching: adolescents, the environment, and the curriculum. We wanted our students to learn about creating the kind of classroom that fosters a focus on individual learners and their individual needs—one that had a welcoming, inviting, and warm environment and one that employed a rigorous, engaging, relevant curriculum. We began with the premise that in order to create this kind of classroom, to truly *know* others well, a teacher must first know herself.

To this end, my colleague and I began the class asking students to create a podcast about an indelible moment of their schooling, a moment that played a pivotal role

in their development. We wanted them to recall their own experiences in school, to remember something that may have shaped them or changed them. We wanted them to remember how it *felt* to be in school and experiencing that phenomenon. I began by first writing down my own indelible moment, my memory of Mr. Thompson and my skirt, this memory I have never been able to shake but that I had never examined before. Echoing Romano (2019), I didn't understand its meaning until I wrote it down and then spoke it. Mr. Thompson held power over me that day. He wielded it like a weapon, making me feel small and shameful. I can feel the residual effects of that moment still, in what I wear and in my perceptions. It is the first lesson in feminism that I learned, an unintended consequence of Mr. Thompson' actions, I am certain.

In sharing my moment, I became concerned that it would be a catalyst for my students to tell adverse stories about their teachers. The last thing I wanted was to have my students produce what Gregory Michie (2009) says are often the narratives of teachers: "horror stories, fueled by media reports that portray schools in chaos" (p. xxxi). I was troubled by the notion that my most memorable elementary school moment was so negative. I certainly have happy memories of elementary school and had incredible teachers who I remember just as clearly as Mr. Thompson. But no other moment has stuck with me the way this has. So, I shared my feelings with my students. I told them about Mr. Thompson and how he made me feel—little, insignificant, embarrassed. I told them that teachers have incredible power to make students feel a certain way, and it is essential to check one's power and privilege in the classroom. It sounded cliché as I said it, but I wanted them to consider their future classrooms in the light of their own experiences and the experiences of others like me. And then I sent my students off to author their indelible school moments, hopeful that their memories would serve them well and that their stories would be foundational in this "classroom management" class.

Memories are a funny thing. Especially as I have gotten older, I realize that memories are precious and easily lost. My own memory is invariably cloudy; my siblings remind me of events or holidays or habits we used to practice. I might have a vague memory of the event, perhaps a picture in my head of the attendees or of a central happening, but it is difficult for me to pull the entire memory together. I often consider how, if we don't share the memory, it might die when we do. I realize this is a grim thought, the idea of memories dying, but it is a reality if we do not give voice to them. The memories we keep have meaning for ourselves and for others. In the case of my class, memories can inform future practice, the environments teachers create for their students.

I did not know what to expect from my students, but when I began to listen to their indelible moments, my breath was often taken away. They told stories of resilience, of tragedy, of hope, of joy, of simple and of complicated events. The stories varied greatly, as the students were from many different places and had a variety of backgrounds and identities. What stood out to me, though, is that the majority of students shared stories about a teacher, specifically how a particular teacher made them *feel*. They didn't share horror stories or hyperbolic tales of inappropriate teachers. They shared authentic, important, indelible moments that have stuck with them, that have had a hand in their development as future teachers and/or as humans. It is from these indelible moments that my colleague and I began to build the foundation of our class.

To ask them to only reflect on their own experiences, though, was inadequate. It was essential for them to be able to take what they learned and use it to connect to students in their future classes. Their experiences are exactly that—*their* experiences. To make an assumption that others will have similar experiences is silly; we are all so different, and our students are all different as well. My experience with Mr. Thompson made me feel small and insignificant. I cannot assume that any of my students had an experience with a teacher that mirrored mine. What I can believe is that my students may have felt small and insignificant at some point in their lives. And I know how that feels, so I can use my experience to connect to my students. In the words of William Ayers (2001), teachers must be "bridge builders" (p. 64).

> The teacher must be the architect and the contractor who begins to build the bridge. She must know the child in order to know where to put that first plank. She must also know the world, have a broad sense of where the bridge is headed, and have confidence that she and the students together can get there. (Ayers, 2001, p. 75)

This bridge building, this pedagogy that encourages teachers to know themselves well in order to know their students well, is the essence of teaching, the art of teaching. Through reflecting on their own stories, my students began to reflect upon their own cultures, and this, in turn, opened a door to learning about others. We can learn about others through reading, certainly, but that is not enough. Delpit (2006) asserted that educators must do more than simply read about other cultures; they must be open and welcoming of what these cultures bring into their classrooms by shedding years of stereotypes and preconceptions and by truly studying and appreciating how these cultures can enrich their classroom environments:

> [Educators] must also learn about the brilliance the students bring with them "in their blood." Until they appreciate the wonders of the cultures represented before them—and they cannot do that without extensive study most appropriately begun in college-level courses—they cannot appreciate the potential of those who sit before them, nor can they begin to link their students' histories and worlds to the subject matter they present in the classroom…. We must work to remove the blinders built of stereotypes, monocultural instructional methodologies, ignorance, social distance, biased research, and racism. (p. 182)

It was in the spirit of Ayers (2001), Delpit (2006), and other scholars that we reflected on indelible moments in our classroom management class. Yes, we talked about classroom rules, parent-teacher conferences, and the first days of school. But our emphasis began with and remained with the idea of a teacher's position and power in the classroom and that incredible ability to affect how someone *feels.* Racism, indifference, deficit thinking, forced assimilation, and more drain the life out of students. And students remember. They remember how they *felt*. Mr. Thompson is a part of an indelible moment in my life, but the moment is really not about him, and as I examine it now, he is less important. What I draw from the moment is the incredible influence we can have on those around us in the way that we speak, in the way that we interact, and in the way that we show care. Yes, "teaching is instructing, advising, counseling, organizing, assessing, guiding, goading, showing, managing, modeling, coaching, disciplining, prodding, preaching, persuading, proselytizing, listening, interacting, nursing, and

inspiring" (Ayers, 2001, p. 4). But it is also, at its core, an act of love. When we finished the semester, I found myself reminding my students that they could be a part of one of their student's indelible moments. What kind of moment will it be?

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Who Am I?
Or
Condemned by Speaking and Damned by Silence:
A Decades Long *Currere* Journey

By Kevin M. Talbert
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I first constructed this manuscript for a conference presentation more than 10 years ago while a graduate student. Over the ensuing years, I have periodically looked back on this essay and, especially, its guiding metaphor exploring the dialectic of speech and silence as way to think through—beyond?—my own Whiteness. In a sense, then, what follows is a sort of layered "meta"*currere*, a narrative originally written in an earlier moment of my life history rewoven in this current moment. In many places, especially the flashbacks, my original draft remains intact; in others, I have revised in this new moment of synthesis and in light of (re)new(ed) imaginings for the future. I hope the reader will see it as neither the final word nor the end of the story. Indeed, I believe it is a story joined already and always in progress.

My rendering here confounds easy division of past/present/future; it seeks to blur the linear expression of time and its easy reduction to a formula of inevitable progress: past → a present that breaks with the past in a moment of "insight" and progress → a transformational, transcendent future state of being. I cling to the promise that "I am what I am not yet," as Maxine Greene (2001, n.p.) said, but in many respects, I am still who I have always been, and not necessarily better. Many of the same issues and questions that originally prompted this reflection persist.

Flashbacks

One

Recently [a break in a semester during graduate school], I spent some time with my parents and my younger brother and sister-in-law. They all live in the same complex of low to medium-rent apartments. Cramped in my parents' small kitchen, two of us at the small table pushed into the corner and two more hovering over the counter by the sink, we were sharing a meal. Outside, the complex was abuzz. Police had come to the complex to investigate what apparently was a domestic disturbance that had carried over outside, and my family seemingly could not resist commenting. My dad uttered that he "wasn't surprised; it's turning into ni**erville over there." I did not speak. While I tried to allow my silence in that moment to speak and while I "tried" to make it evident that I absorbed the comment with silence and through disquieted body language, the reality is that, as uncomfortable as the comment and the situation made me, I said nothing.

Two

Cafeteria duty is one of the less glamorous tasks I was expected to perform as a high school teacher. Generally, two teachers were assigned to each of our two cafeterias to monitor students. Most of the time, nothing out of the ordinary happened; students generally caused few problems. Fairly regularly, the assistant principal would circulate

Talbert, K. M. (2020). Who am I? or Condemned by speaking and damned by silence: A decades long *currere* journey. *Currere Exchange Journal, 4*(1), 30-37.

through while we were on duty in the lunchrooms. On more than one occasion, she would amble over to where I was and would gesture toward the same particular table of students and remind me to "keep an extra close eye on them; they tend to be trouble." She was referring to the one table composed of primarily black students in this school composed primarily of white students. I replied, "Look, they aren't bothering anyone. If you think they're being a problem, you talk to them."

Three

Alice (a pseudonym) is a biracial student in one of my sophomore classes who came from the city school district because she moved to live with her grandmother. Alice struggled academically and had encountered disciplinary problems at her previous school. Very quickly, Alice faced the same problems at her new school. Yet Alice was always pleasant in my class. I would greet her every day when she entered my room; she'd usually return my greeting, "hey, what's up, pimp," which I took as a way build a positive relationship. This was our little ritual. I soon evaluated Alice as needing special attention, help understanding the directions for homework assignments, etc., and I tried always to take time to slow down and explain to her. I also thought she might have difficulties in reading comprehension, so I initiated the process through the guidance office to get her tested. Alice was never a behavior problem in my class, and I like to credit my proactive approach to building a positive connection with her. Only days after beginning the process to get her academic assistance, Alice was in a fight at lunch, her first major school infraction, and was suspended for ten days and sent away to the local alternative school.

Part of my motivation to leave high school teaching and attend graduate school was to engage in an intentional project to explore the question: "Who am I?" As a teacher of teachers and scholar of education, this fundamental question stirs me still. Joe Kincheloe (2006) illuminated the teacher who embodies a *critical ontology* as one who "understand[s] how and why their political opinions, religious beliefs, gender role, racial positions, and sexual orientation have been shaped by dominant cultural perspectives" (p. 182). I find it essential to my own "wide-awakeness" (Greene, 1977) that my intellectual journey root itself in a critical ontology, a search to understand my own life in relation to the commonsense of the dominant culture.

As a teacher-scholar engaged on my own *currere* journey, I am compelled to investigate my identity and how it influences my teaching and research. In particular, for the act of *currere* to be socio-politically useful and not merely an interesting but vain exercise, I must investigate how my identity intersects with dynamics of power and how these intersections impact my ability (even my desire) to work toward peace and justice. In large part, such a personal excavation necessarily exposes both unintentional and deliberate silences and mis-steps.

As a white, heterosexual, cisgender male reared in the tenuous middle class of middle-America, I have struggled often to articulate my own cultural identity, especially my racial identity, my Whiteness, and its relationship to my work. Willinsky (1998) noted that hegemonic racial consciousness assumes white as "a color that need not name itself" (p. 8). As a Master's student, I felt culture-less; I could only understand being

white as "not being black." I remember a visceral feeling of affinity for people of color who can distinguish their culture with specific practices, language, and so forth. As absurd as that might be, at that time I, like many white people (Kendall, 2006; Matias & Mackey, 2016), was unable to narrate my lack of cultural understanding as a product of hegemonic privilege. My own racial subjectivity was only really apparent when I felt it was being directly confronted, typically by the legitimate challenge of a racialized other (Gallagher, 1997).

I also felt this phenomenon similarly as a high school social studies teacher. Part of the challenge of teaching American history is to shape a story that does not reify the marginalization of dominated peoples. This is particularly difficult given the narratives presented in most texts, as well as in popular culture. I often tripped over my identity; here I was, a white, middle-class heterosexual male teacher, trying to accurately (whatever that means in a post-modern world) and justly represent the story of people who were often oppressed and/or victimized by people with an identity similar to mine. I was also consciously intent on not reducing American history to a victimization narrative, which was equally challenging for me. My students too were primarily white and middle class. Trying to suggest to them that they should care about history's sins and omissions was a struggle. I could not fully understand, much less articulate, how my socio-cultural position shaped my reading and telling of history.

In my current privileged faculty position as a teacher of teachers, most of whom are also white, I continue to ponder the implications of my social position and cultural formation on my teaching, the experiences my students and I share in the classroom, and the impact that our interactions will have on their future classrooms. "The hegemony of whiteness has so naturalized itself within the field of U.S. education that it goes undetected, despite the major implications it imposes on the educational equity of students of color" (Matias & Mackey, 2016, p. 34). This *currere* narrative is, thus, a reflection on my own coming to racialized consciousness over the last decade. It is an ongoing project to understand my own Whiteness and undermine its effects, to dismantle white supremacy in/through my teaching.

(How) Can I model critical consciousness for my students? (How) Can I help them learn to uncover their own subject positions and how they influence who and how they are in the world and how that will manifest in and through their teaching? How can I model authentic and ongoing self-critique, acknowledging that my own racial subjectivity is always in the making and, thus, always in need of interrogating? I have found the heuristic I unpack below to be a helpful way for me to think through my own racialized subjectivity, including my inability and unwillingness to speak against racism in the preceding flashbacks. It is also especially useful in helping me consider how to model anti-racist teaching for/with my students-who-will-be-teachers.

If I speak, I am condemned.
If I stay silent, I am damned…
-From "Who Am I?" in the musical, *Les Misérables*[1]

In a central scene of the musical *Les Misérables*, the protagonist, Jean Valjean, is conflicted as he discovers that a man bearing his likeness is on trial for crimes alleged against Valjean himself. Having fled his life as a convict and after gaining social

prominence, Valjean recognizes the opportunity to have freedom from his past if this man is convicted in his place. The song "Who Am I?" reveals Valjean's crisis of identity as he questions whether he should speak on the man's behalf and set the record straight about his own past or whether he should stay silent and allow the man to be sentenced for Valjean's crimes. If he speaks the truth about his past and his identity, he will be condemned as the escaped convict he is. If he stays silent, he will be damned to live the remainder of his life knowing his freedom is not really freedom at all if it is contingent upon the betrayal of an innocent man and at the cost of his own true identity.

One might read Valjean's conflict as a *currere* moment, a coming to terms with his own story, a movement of praxis, or self-understanding propelling him toward transformation (Eisner, 2002; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995). He asks, "Can I conceal myself for evermore? Pretend I'm not the man I was before?" The consequences of Valjean's self-deceit are real. If he denies his past, he condemns an innocent man to prison. He realizes that, despite his self-deception, he cannot escape the legacies of his past. He learns in the present that, rather than running from his past troubles, he can acknowledge them and seek to make amends. He confesses his identity as prisoner 24601. For the rest of his life, Valjean acts to (re)create himself not as something *other* than prisoner 24601, but *more than* 24601.

In what follows, I use the condemned by speaking and damned by silence metaphor as a heuristic to guide the analytic phase of *currere*. There is an instructive paradox to Valjean's situation. While at first, he feels as though his confession will lead to his own imprisonment and potential death, it ultimately yields his personal restoration and redemption. Had he not confessed, however, his soul would have been damned even though he might have "saved face." He would have foregone the possibility of redemption through owning up to his past. There is a sense, then, in which Valjean is trapped whether he speaks or not; he can choose the social death that comes with his confession but that could yield existential freedom, or he can choose the social safety that will ultimately damn his soul and foreclose his chance at redemption. In his *currere* moment, Valjean learns that a freedom that is contingent on denying others' freedom is no freedom at all.[2]

If I Speak, I am Condemned

I have neither the luxury nor the right to deny my Whiteness; I must speak it as true and acknowledge my complicity in the white supremacist project. I cannot credibly claim to be "social justice oriented" or "antiracist" or "woke" otherwise. And, I cannot be an effective teacher, especially for my white students. Yet, like Jean Valjean, speaking an acknowledgement of my "true" identity risks my being "found out" for my hegemonic complicities and their legacies. If I speak, I am also condemned to confront my resistances, my own racial fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), and the fear that if I let go of who I am (or who I think I am) I will become something else, something unrecognizable to myself and my (white) community, something less. Like Valjean, by speaking I risk my social standing in my communities—family, work, church. These are the consequences of my Whiteness; I cannot escape as Valjean did to avoid his criminal sentence.

I am not suggesting that risk and discomfort are valid reasons for me to continue to promote injustice, merely that they at least partly explain resistances and silences and

are a pedagogical challenge to overcome. As Kumashiro (2002) noted, "The desire to learn only what is comforting goes hand in hand with a resistance to learning what is discomforting, and this resistance often proves to be a formidable barrier to movements toward social justice" (p. 4). Acceptance of my own discomfort is necessary to my ability to speak against injustice. Speaking for justice requires me to investigate how my identity has been socially constructed within patriarchal, racialized, heteronormative, and classist discourses. It means that I am willing to bear the consequences of my own past rather than reject them. Valjean's moment of self-discovery and self-revelation to his potential captor, his moment of praxis, impelled him to confess his criminal past. Likewise, acknowledging and working to undo my own racism catalyzes my own praxis, opening the possibility of my pedagogical effectiveness, especially with my white students (who, often unbeknownst to them before our encounter, are my racial co-conspirators). White supremacy is not all that defines my Whiteness unless I deny its existence and its impact on me.

If I Stay Silent, I am Damned

Silence has long been an effective tool of hegemony, erasing identities and disciplining bodies and minds. In many ways, the first rule of Whiteness is that one must not discuss it.[3] Only when someone speaks and "plays the race card" does racism exist, and then it exists only as a cudgel with which to punish white people. This discursive move has the direct intent of silencing opposition to racial supremacy.

My own silences damn me. If through speaking I can transform the negative effects of my Whiteness and its hegemonic legacies and complicities, then in silence I am damned to continue to be defined by and perpetuate those legacies, forever bearing the scars of my past even as I attempt to hide them. "If, as Ignatiev and Garvey (1996) argue, 'treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity' (p. 10), then loyalty to whiteness pulls one's soul away from humanity" (Matias & Mackey, 2016, p. 34). My own liberation, indeed my own humanity, is stolen when I am silently complicit in the face of racial (or any other) injustice. Just as Valjean felt his very soul was at stake if he did not acknowledge his past, so my own soul, that which defines me as human—my "ontological vocation" (Freire, 2000)—will wither if I remain silent. Valjean's moment of consciousness, and rehumanization, began when he confessed his past and started the journey to make amends.

As I return to analyze the flashbacks that begin this narrative, I consider the implications of accepting condemnation for speaking or being damned by silence. In the first flashback, where I am gathered with my family at the kitchen table, my silence continues to reverberate. At the time, I did not speak because it was family and because I did not wish to upset whatever tenuous familial harmony may have been present. I also may not have spoken because I was unwilling to risk my own position/identity/capital within the family (as someone "educated," "loved," etc.). I recognize the operation of patriarchy that would prompt me to chastise mom but never think to do so to dad. Racist and classist ideologies shape how my family narrated the perceived economic deterioration of their neighborhood and the scapegoating of their black neighbors as the reason for the deterioration, a common hegemonic exercise. I had the opportunity to use my own Whiteness as a form of power to counter the racist Whiteness of my father, yet I chose silence. Had I spoken, I may have been condemned as an outsider, as "trouble," but I also may have interrupted the racial hegemony within my family. In the moment, I was content to embrace my familial racism as my own and was unwilling to accept the consequences that would have resulted from speaking.

In the second flashback, my speaking back to the school administrator was couched not in the language of racial and class justice, but in the language of technical management of space and bodies and hierarchy of authority. I did not overtly challenge her on the fact that I perceived that she was profiling the students for their Blackness. Rather, my appeal was to the technical management of the space and whose institutional authority was primary in that moment. Ironically, in reality, I actually reinforced the assistant principal's racial authority and left uninterrogated and uninterrupted the discourses that circulate in education generally and in my school particularly that repeatedly cause some students to be labeled as "problems" because of the bodies they inhabit. I muted my own racial speech, thereby, acting as a racial co-conspirator (the assistant principal was of Asian descent), even while I reified my own patriarchal authority over her. While I was willing to assert my gendered privilege to undermine her authority, I did not deploy my own Whiteness to undermine her (perceived) racism.

The third flashback exemplifies the power with which circulating racist and classist discourses impacted the school's treatment of Alice as a "problem waiting to happen." I recognize the racial paradox of Alice's situation. I felt as though she really did need academic assistance; I refused to read situations where she was a distraction in class solely as evidence of her lack of appropriate cultural capital to function "correctly" in a classroom. While I did not then have the scholarly language to identify this "deficit ideology" permeating the school's treatment of her, I did keenly sense the ideology's impact and tried to confound its effects by getting her assistance. Unfortunately, the reality that Alice might have needed real academic assistance may have only strengthened the hegemony of the deficit discourse, in a sense confirming the stereotype that students like her were not suited to our school community.

I carry these stories and others as reminders of my own past experiences with racism. They continue to resonate, humbling me when I puff up on my own wokeness. And, they temper my frustrations as a teacher of white students-who-will-be-teachers. They impel me to publicly confess the problematic aspects of my Whiteness in front of my students; I pay my penance by imagining with them how we, as white teachers, can reject racism and work positively toward racial justice.

The Future Present

Since I first began this *currere* journey more than 10 years ago, I have since transitioned from high school teacher, to graduate student, and, now, to professor, a teacher of teachers. Though my formal schooling is in the past, my education continues. As bell hooks (1994) noted, "the professor is something I become as opposed to a kind of identity that's already structured and that I carry with me into the classroom" (pp. 132-133). My growth into "professor," especially one committed to social justice, is dependent on my willingness to be transparent with my students about my own trajectory toward critical consciousness. I wish to embody integrity in my teaching. I am mindful that "the *way* we speak about our teaching influences and determines what we *do* when we teach" (Harris, 1987, p. 41, emphasis original).

In her magnum opus *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) noted that "there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches" (p. 43). I recognize a measure of pain in my decades long journey of grappling with the implications of my own sociocultural identity, especially my Whiteness. I look back on my own old ways of thinking, knowing, and acting with painful regret, but I am also conscious that I am not that far removed from my old ways. Indeed, when I am not careful and critically reflective, those old ways—still

ingrained deep in American culture and manifesting in my actions in the world—will remain current ways. Yet, the pain is instructive as I teach and write. My students and I struggle together to imagine a socially just future and, especially, our contributions to that future. I work with students to help them to uncover and come to terms with their own Whiteness and its implications for their teaching.

As I note at the outset of this narrative, I cling to the promise that "I am what I am not yet" (Greene, 2001, n.p.), but I reject as false any notion of my racial progress as inevitable, complete, or certain. I participate in the construction and maintenance of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1994, p. 26) on a daily basis, even if unwittingly. There will undoubtedly be instances where I fail to speak, and act, against injustice, choosing instead the comfortable silence of my racial privilege. Yet, I remain committed to promoting justice and alleviating suffering (Talbert, 2017) through my teaching and scholarship.

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Endnotes

[1] *Les Misérables.* Produced by Cameron Mackintosh. Music by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg. Lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer. Adapted from the novel by Victor Hugo.

[2] I acknowledge the limits of adhering too concretely to this metaphor. Like any metaphor, this one can only extend so far. Valjean flees after his confession and goes into hiding rather than being sent to prison.

[3] In the movie *Fight Club*, "the first rule of fight club is that no one talks about fight club." In the context of Whiteness, one might say that "the first rule of white club is that nobody talks about white club."

Rethinking Narrative's Place in the School and the Classroom: Developing a Narrative Mindset

By Kevin D. Cordi
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A Place for Story in Education

How does narrative affect our work as teachers? Are we exploring the full potential of learning and teaching using story? How can the storytelling and story making process inform our practice?

Since I began teaching over 25 years ago, both in secondary schools (14 years) and at the academy level with four different universities (over 12 years), I have invested in knowing more about storytelling. I have served as "the first full-time high school storytelling teacher in the country," acted as the Executive Director of the National Youth Storytelling Olympics (now Showcase), and taught an eclectic range of courses from Advanced and Applied Storytelling to Uncovering Folktales, Fairy Tales, and Other Ghost Stories. However, after studying the work of *currere* and writing my own autoethnography entitled *You Don't Know Jack: A Storyteller Goes to School* (Cordi, 2019), I realized I have been distancing my use and application of story. In other words, when I thought I was incorporating story-based knowing into my teaching, I was not. Until I engaged in reflective work studying narrative, I could not understand how true narrative-based teaching worked. I know story as a way to learn concepts, as a method to build literacy, as a means of entertaining others, and as a meaning making process. However, I now question, what if narrative becomes what drives our thinking in education? What if it becomes a pedagogy of practice to review school, classes, students, and my own teaching? How will this inform or change my perception? What if I act from this mindset?

I have developed new ways of narrative thinking, including exercises that I used in my classes. I have also invited two practicing teachers to explore developing a narrative mindset (Cordi, 2018) along with some of my undergraduate students who explore their field placements within a narrative lens. Because of this and their work, I better understand what it means to be a story-based educator.

Story is Part of Being Who We Are

We live storied lives. Try to spend one day without telling a story. One would be hard pressed to find a time where narrative is absent. As Gottschall (2013) stated, we are "storytelling animals." We can't escape story, and I would argue we don't want to. We should embrace the influence of narratives in our lives. In an interview by Daniel Pink (2012), Gottschall stated,

> I'd like readers to take a moment to marvel with me about the role of story in human life—from dreams to reality shows, to urban legends, to religion, to pop songs, to the life stories that define our personal identities. For humans, story is like gravity—it's this powerful and all-encompassing force that we hardly even notice because we are so used to it. But gravity is influencing us all the time, and the story is too. Most of us think that our time in the provinces of storyland doesn't shape or change us. But research shows that story shapes humanity at the historical, cultural,

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> and personal levels. Story isn't a frill in human life—something we do just for kicks. Story is a vastly powerful tool. By educating ourselves about story, we can learn that power in our own lives. (n.p.)

Story and Teachers

As educators, we need to think deeply how story impacts our teaching. We also strongly need to consider how story affects learning. Story allows us to recount and recreate. When addressing an event with a colleague, we tell the story just enough that we believe it is worth telling and, in doing so, recreate the experience, teaching both ourselves and our listeners what we've learned. Our choice of words, intonation, and delivery are part of our story DNA. We want story to move our chosen listener. And we'll tell it again and again to others. Stories change people. Consciously or unconsciously, we know that.

Story is a Meaning Making Process of Learning

Story is also the way all people bring meaning to their lives, but especially teachers who think back on the events that happen in their educational environments. If one provides space for teachers to tell stories that happen in their classrooms, they will tell these stories. We use stories when we question an event or idea. How often have you heard someone say, "It is like when," "imagine if," and "have you considered"—these are guiding words that direct our students (or colleagues) toward story. Narrative connects us to memory as a way to recall and retell. "Stories are easier to remember—because in many ways, stories are HOW we remember" (Pink, 2005, p. 101).

We are Wired for Stories

Stories are the way we recall everything or as Cron (2012) stated, it is in our wiring. The power of storytelling is supported by neuroscience, theory, psychology, and best practice. According to Mar (2004), an integral part of our neuropsychology is interpreting the world around us through characters and interactions. Humans instinctively respond to story. "We're wired to turn to story to teach us the ways of the world" (Cron, 2012, p. 2). Because it is a co-creative oral experience, storytelling aligns with aspects of both social constructivist theory and dialogism (Hibbin, 2016). As Shuman (1986) noted, "Storytelling offers one of its greatest promises, the possibility of empathy, of understanding others" (p. 180). As we study our work as educators, should we pay more attention to test score data rather than narrative pedagogies that ask us to comprehend what makes us human?

As Newkirk (2014) stated:

> When we employ narrative—and approach experience as caused and comprehensible—we gain a measure of control.... If we accept this conception of narrative as a foundational mode of understanding—we need to rethink the way we position it in our curriculum. (p. 34)

In other words, if one is wired to naturally respond and use stories, why as educators are we using them less and less? Why are we resistant to use stories to teach and to study storytelling as a teaching pedagogy? Recent developments are occurring that recognize the value of story and storytelling as educational practices (Cordi, 2019; Collins & Cooper, 2005; Haven 2014; Ochs & Caps, 2001). We need to accelerate the process. We

need to revisit narrative's role in educational environments. After all, educators lose out if they fail to explore and use storytelling in the classroom.

Teaching with Story

Tveten's (2019) book, *Imperative Narratives*, argued that teaching with story is powerful. He stated,

> Teaching with story is the most powerful tool that we can use as teachers. Changing the stories we tell about ourselves, our schools, our students can literally change lives. Nowhere are stories more important than education. (p. 5)

Still, there are others who dismiss storytelling and the power it holds to connect students. In discussing storytelling and education at a national conference, another presenter said, "storytelling is the thing for this year, next year it will be something new." Such thinking is dangerous because as Parkinson (2011) stated, "storytelling is more than a fad; it's always current news, because it is a central part of human and humanly intelligence" (p. 1). If educators engage in story thinking and use story responses as a more conscious act, they will know better the story of being a teacher, a contributor to the school, and most importantly, the value of students' stories. Bruner (1990) supports this claim. He sees the power of story both to inform and to tell. "A narrative, after all, is not just a plot, a f*abula*, but a way of telling" (Bruner, 1990, p. 123).

Language allows us to create ideas. Narrative is also a language that allows us to see what is not there. Narrative is a method to explore the possible, the place where "what if" starts. Bruner (2010) speaks to narrative and the way it operates.

> Narrative is rather an all-purpose vehicle. It not only shapes our ways of communication with each other and our ways of experiencing the world, but it also gives form to what we imagine, to our sense of what is *possible.* (Bruner, 2010, p. 45)

If as Vygotsky (1978) stated, language is a "tool of tools," why are we as educators not using this tool more in the classroom? Why are we neglecting that power and instead relying on standardized testing, non-interactive lectures, and mindless worksheets? Where is the narration in these methods? Pinar (2012) believes this type of skill and drill work can be mind-numbing, causing "historical amnesia, political passivity, and cultural standardization" (p. 17). Instead, educators need to seek pedagogy that invites narratives.

Imagine a classroom where students are not allowed to talk about anything, but the content and the teacher insist that everyone is quiet. Regardless of whether or not the students have something to add, the teacher speaks, and they listen. Such a classroom discourages students from asking questions or adding to the conversation. The story told is the teacher's story. This transmission model of learning has persisted for decades and been far too common in classrooms. Consider what narratives go unheard, unexamined, or remain forever untold.

Restricting Teacher Voice

Such an environment shows us why we choose detached instruments like standardized testing in the classroom. In their own classroom, teachers are restricted,

even silenced from their own narratives. Teachers' stories of the real experiences of learning rarely get told. State and national mandates purposefully choose to isolate teachers' voices. I have witnessed "scripted curriculum" where teachers are only allowed to say what is on the printed lesson. Any deviation is counted against the teacher when it comes time for evaluations. Schools should be places where others know that stories are welcome. Far too often this is not the case. Students and teachers both suffer from disconnection in a classroom when the school curriculum is the only story. A story-filled classroom recognizes the value that living people are in the classroom. In fact, the curriculum is built from inviting people to share ideas, and stories. The classroom becomes an ensemble of narratives (Cordi, 2019) on which the teacher can base the lessons. An ensemble of narratives is when the many voices in the classroom actively contribute to the curriculum. The story voice must be present for the participants to truly connect.

Heinemeyer and Durham (2017) stated:

> Our research demonstrates the kinds of learning that are endangered when the storytelling voice is sidelined in education and when storyknowing is not recognized as knowledge. Opportunities for pupils to learn from teachers' and each other's experience, to build shared and contextualized understandings of complex themes, to claim and develop their own narrative voice and to enter emphatically into the worlds of different times and places, become scarce. (p. 50)

Reflection and Narrative

Narrative also enables us to reflect upon our teaching practices. Reflection is a critical part of the *currere* method. This is a research practice that includes both narrative and reflection from the stories of the past, present, and future. Pinar (2012) intended that *currere* be used as a "method of self-understanding through academic study" (p. 6). Reflection at its most basic level means "to bend back" (Valli, 1997, p. 67) so we can move forward. Imagine a classroom where a scripted curriculum is taught or the only voice is the teacher's. How often can the teacher reflect on work when the narrative spaces of the students are not heard or the teacher's voice is not valued? If he or she or they are not receiving feedback, in the form of questions or students sharing narrative connections, the teacher can only reflect marginally at best.

When educators use narrative, they are drawing on their pasts to act on the future. Valli (1997) further suggested, "a reflective person is someone who thinks back on what is seen and heard, who contemplates, who is a deliberative thinker" (p. 68). Most of all, the reflection can bring about action. When one can think about ideas, they can activate change.

We need to continually review our teaching practices. Narrative is an instrument that can be used to help us rethink and react to how we teach.

What is a Narrative Mindset?

The work of psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) seriously re-examined the mindset that we use in teaching. For over 40 years, she has studied mindset and its meaning; however, her idea of fixed and growth mindset is not set in stone. She emphasizes that the way we think can change the way we react. Dweck (2006) wrote in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, "You have a choice. Mindsets are just beliefs. They're powerful beliefs, but they are something in your mind, and you can change your mind" (p. 16).

The same is true with story. "The way we think about story is vital to teaching, as it is to many other sides of life and the way we live it" (Parkinson, 2011, p. 3).

As educators, we need to see our work as our story, and that story is essential living data. Living data includes how story affects our teaching and the reflections around our thinking using story. Story is often a predictor more so than data, because after all, story is data. As Newkirk stated, "We simply cannot translate bare numbers into recognizable human reality; our eyes glaze over…. Put another way, we may piously claim that all human life is sacred, but we rarely act that way" (pp. 109-110). According to Wilson (2011, as cited by Newkirk, 2014), "stories are more powerful than data because they allow individuals to identify emotionally with people they might otherwise see as outsiders" (p. 110).

However, one needs to put this in practice. I have found it is useful to seek out the narratives not only in my classroom, but with my graduate and undergraduate students.

Space for Narratives

In order to adapt a narrative mindset, one must create space in the schools and in the classroom for telling, listening, and making stories. In the *Dialogic Curriculum*, Patricia Stock (1995) discussed the issue of making space in the classroom to ask questions, especially from what students read.

> Some educators insist that teachers should not allow students to explore their personal concerns in the talk or writing they do in classrooms, even when students' concerns match those in the readings they are assigned…. I hold a position on this issue that I have not reached easily or lightly; Teachers of schoolchildren are never far from the concerns their students bring with them to their studies. If they are, they do not teach students. They may teach subject matter, but they do not teach students. (p. 76)

If we don't provide narrative spaces for our students to talk or if administrators silence **(**Fine, 1983**)** teachers' narratives so they can teach to an agenda, how can we feel part of the story of the school or the community?

A small change in the way we think can make a big difference. First, we must create a space to do this. As McGonigal (2015) stated, "small shifts in mindset can trigger a cascade of changes so profound that they test the limits of what seems possible" (p. 27). It must be meaningful and have a narrative purpose, a purpose that deliberately and intentionally creates a story that proposes change (e.g., Olivola & Shaffir, 2013; also see Duffy & Dik, 2009; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008; Steger & Park, 2012). Instead of ignoring the narratives that surround us and are within us, we use them to create purposeful change.

Narrative Exercises: Putting Narrative Mindset into Practice

Working as an Assistant Professor of Education at Ohio University Lancaster, I have intentionally created mindset exercises for my students. Doctoral candidates and practicing teachers and three pre-service educators reflect on using the exercises. Here are some of the results.

I asked two practicing educators and doctoral candidates to find the story of their school and respective classrooms by simply videoing throughout the school, including the hallways, reflecting on what they intentionally and unintentionally communicated

when viewed or experienced as story. In other words, when you walk into the building, intentionally seek the narratives that are obvious, hidden, or missing. Then, I asked them to reflect on changes that could be made regarding what they found as they completed this narrative exercise.

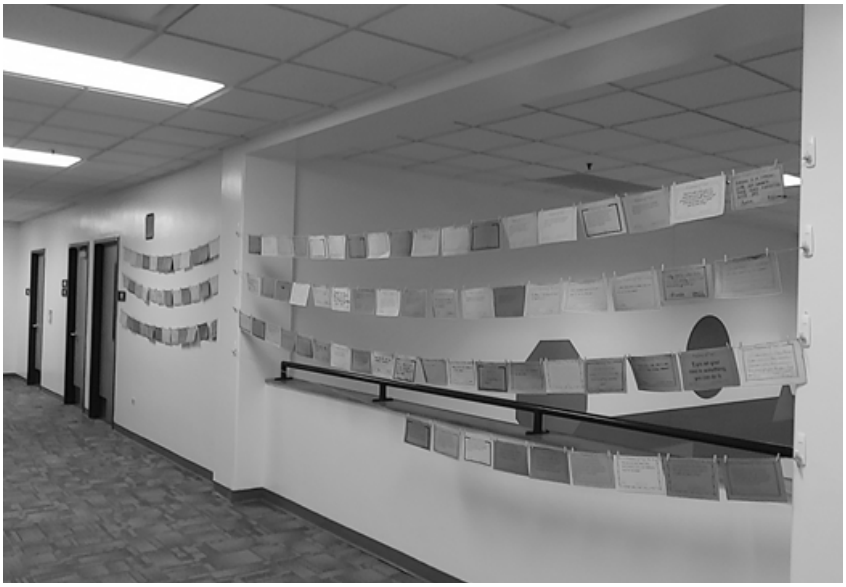
Entering the School—Telling the Story: Graduate Students Speak About Using a Narrative Mindset

Concrete narratives tell us who we are. This would include visual stories. Working with educator Kristin Cibulka at Central Road School in Illinois, we discussed the atmosphere and her school. Here is her account.

> While the entryways and shared spaces of our school were decorated, the story was teacher driven. The front entryway focused on positive behaviors and school fundraisers. There were motivating sayings and bright colors, yet no story about the true community of the school was conveyed. The halls were generic and lacked student voice, ownership, and narrative. What story of the school community did we want to tell? Taking a narrative viewpoint, we saw clearly what was missing in our halls: the students. Working as a team, the teachers developed two opportunities to showcase our students' stories and voices.
>
> We began by transforming the front entry to be a place of warmth, ownership, and community. The students participated in reading *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold and found ways to capture the message of the book. All students and teachers created name decorations to display on our bulletin board, and families sent in photos to fill a community wall. Subsequently, when students entered the building, they stopped to enter their own story portrayed for all to see. Searching for their names and pictures, the smiles on their faces told us that they felt important and welcomed in our school. It changed the narrative.

We made a second change which has been transformative for the students and the teachers. We introduced the idea of using Cordel literature in the form of a text museum from The Learning Alliance. This idea sparked a collaborative project for the fourth through sixth grades. Using the concept of "golden lines of text," students learned to identify quotes, song lyrics, catchy phrases, poems, and even images to support the words that spoke powerfully to them. Everyone displayed their "golden lines" in our text museum for all to see. Currently, the museum spans the entire upstairs hallway and is growing at a tremendous rate as parents, teachers, students, and volunteers add to the museum. It is a collective story.

Through the golden lines of text, students are surrounded by book titles, literary themes, challenging ideas, conversation starters, but most importantly their own and other students' voices. While this project has led to many wonderful literacy activities and lessons for the teachers, it opened a window into our students' lives. As the students turn in the words that speak to them, we learn more about their dreams, fears, families, goals, and needs. Their personal narratives are on display, saying "your story matters." Narrative mindset changed the philosophy of our school to one of empowering our students and strengthening our school community.



Another educator, Jennifer Katrein**,** is also working with developing a narrative mindset, here is what she discovered.

Even before working with Kevin Cordi on narrative mindset, I knew the walls of our school had the potential to showcase student work and perhaps feature the pride students felt in a completed a piece of writing and their own announcements. It wasn't until looking through the lens of story and applying a narrative mindset that we made the conscious decision that the bulletin boards, windows, and walls were

able to tell the story of who we are as a school community. I walked the halls of our building, videotaping the walls leading from our front entrance to our gymnasium and then back to my office. Our 'Building Leadership Team' worked for several years with the mission of empowering our students' voices, ensuring that everyone who walks through our doors is represented in these spaces. From exploring the video, we decided to re-design to make more of a narrative impact. Now on one wall were student speech bubbles, with each student sharing words of wisdom or meaningful quotes that resonated with them.

Another change is the board outside my office showcased one-word hashtags generated by the staff after reading a picture book and sharing personal stories around the word *agency.* Our staff vision statements read more like a narrative story wall in our staff workroom, and our entry window is now graced by a page from Peter Reynolds' (2019) book, *Say Something*. The window is surrounded by white stars on which students have shared their stories of what makes them grateful. The page urges children to say something to the universe about being grateful to be alive. We didn't know how this message would affect our community at the school when illness reared at our door. Our principal was diagnosed with stage-four cancer at the beginning of the school year. It was to have been his retirement year. Prior to his diagnosis, he would talk of what he hoped his legacy would be in the building—it centered on student voices and student action. One of the final gifts I was able to give to him (we lost our leader just before Thanksgiving) was the narrative that silent video told of our building, our values, and our stories. What it really was saying was that the legacy he had hoped to leave was alive and well and living on and within our walls. I don't think that I can ever again enter a space without also beginning to tell myself the story those walls are sharing—before any spoken story.

Access to Stories: Pre-service Educators Speak to Using Narrative Mindset Exercises in the Field

I asked my pre-service educators to search to see if stories are apparent or blocked in the classroom. I asked them to explain their answers. They each kept a narrative journal to reflect on what they saw and experienced during these times at their schools.

One pre-service educator, Sydney Rauch, visited an urban school setting for four full days during the semester. She shared:

> In my classroom, stories are generally blocked from occurring. This teacher does not allow students to talk about anything other than math in the classroom. This completely blocks the art of storytelling because students are not free to share their own stories, and the teacher isn't able to share her story either. Her language does not include students telling stories. She constantly yells and raises her voice at students for talking, even if it is math related.

Sydney speaks to the silencing of students. This creates a classroom where students are not heard. I recently listened to Cornelius Minor (2019), author of *We Got This*, our required textbook, speak at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference in Baltimore, MD. He said that teachers are inauthentic when they say they will listen to a student's problems but then don't make time for anything beyond the subject matter when a problem is shared. I agree. Restricting voice represents a disparity of power. How often can students feel comfortable when their stories are silenced? There is an

imbalance to an access of stories. Sometimes the class can be more of a monologue than a dialogue. Sydney continues, "The teacher says she can't work unless the room is completely silent and to ensure this, she provides headphones to listen to music if they can't work in silence." Is this the same as having the right to your story? Music may be an accommodation, but it also silences the students who need to talk to learn.

Recording for Stories

Another exercise for my pre-service students was to notice and record in writing what was said and what students saw when they, as pre-service educators, first entered the classroom. I suggested they adopt a narrative mindset (Cordi, 2018) and look for the obvious stories and those that are not.

Pre-service educator Morgan Rupp (personal communication, 2019) stated,

> As I walked into the building, I heard a loud female voice yelling at the kids in the hallway. She spoke firmly, telling the kids to pull their pants up and get to class. I remember feeling overwhelmed due to the fact that every kid was taller than me and that I felt that I personally was being yelled at. Many students wrote about how the teacher invested in their story and their place in the classroom.

However, Morgan felt unheard. She questioned, "It was uncomfortable, and I asked myself how the students felt. Were they used to the raised voices of their teachers? Did it bother them, or mean anything to them? Were they scared?" Morgan recognizes the need for access to stories and the effects when students are not comfortable sharing them.

Posters and Doors

Later, still adapting a narrative mindset and drawing from the work of Alfie Kohn (2010), I asked my students to turn to the walls and the posters on the wall.

> You can tell quite a lot about what goes on in a classroom or a school even if you visit after everyone has gone home. Just by looking at the walls—or, more precisely, what's on the walls—it's possible to get a feel for the educational priorities, the attitudes about children, even the assumptions about human nature of the people in charge. (n.p.)

As Kohn stated, posters that say, "no whining here" or "Everyone can be president" perhaps don't tell the story one wants in the classroom. First, everyone feels bad some of the time, and a poster that communicates the story of "no whining" declares clearly that no one can tell about their bad day. Next, not everyone can be president; immigrant students not born in America are excluded from that particular story. How can your classroom tell a story of inclusivity if the posters on the wall don't address it?

Posters can address it. Morgan remarks on a reassuring poster. It stated, "I don't understand yet and I can redo the work." That was strikingly different than what she saw her first day. It would be curious to record the contradiction narratives that occur. Sydney Rauch made the observation, "There are signs outside of every teacher's room with colors and pictures that speak to the personality of the teacher. Those tell the story of the teacher before he or she engages with students at all." How often does the story on the door display the bell schedule, the menu for the week, or no real story at all? Imagine walking in as Sydney did and being confronted by the color pink. "Ms. B's door has

a cartoon drawing of herself with pink everywhere, and it said that she was the 'math princess.'" As Sydney notes, "it seems like these doors would be an invitation to get to know the teachers." Yet how often does the plain door close down the invitation? The story when a student walks in the class should be the greater story that one is telling as an educator.

Rules and Contradictions in the Classroom

Another exercise I offered to pre-service educators was to examine the rules of the classroom and what story those rules communicate. Student Leah Phillips stated, "We don't want rules that create barriers for our students, but we do want them to understand when it is appropriate to speak out in class." She noted, "in the classrooms I have been in, discussion is rare. Students are supposed to work on their own and stay at a level zero, for zero talking." However, considering the contradictory narratives, she also states, "the classroom…now has a couch, bean bag chairs, and other fun seating options, but those are hardly ever used." What does it say to have added these relaxed friendly conversational seating arrangements and the story the physical objects communicate, only to be silenced from using them?

My Reflection

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) defined working with narrative as a process of asking questions. This process is called narrative inquiry. Narrative carries with it "a sense of a search, a 're-search,' a searching again, a sense of continual reformulation" (p. 124). They view what they call narrative inquiry as a reflective practice for all teachers. Clandinin and Rosieck (2007) stated that this is "not only on individual's experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individual experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (p. 42-43).

When we realize the value of narrative in the classroom, we need to begin to re-see and re-energize our classroom by starting over with story-filled eyes and narrative purpose. After all, teachers are always starting over. "Teachers live in a world of start over. From new standards to new students, every school year begins with change. We love the opportunities for reinvention and reinvigoration, new classroom setups, new colleagues, and new possibilities" (Mraz & Hertz, 2015, p. 15). Why not start over with a narrative mindset to guide classroom choices and decisions?

Entering my own classroom, I put on story-filled eyes to examine how I visually and vocally welcome students. Worse yet, I look for evidence that I am unconsciously silencing them. I create spaces that invite narrative and build empathy beyond my curriculum. I work to highlight the community story first and build it along with our curriculum needs.

I don't restrict my stories of promises, failure, and uncertainty. I work to tell the real world of the teacher, not the false narratives perpetuated by media or superhero motifs. I want my story to be real and my students to feel invited to be real themselves. I begin by changing to a narrative mindset, and I don't mind that the change is helping me reevaluate what teaching means. I want my classroom to contain powerful stories, and we will tell those in ways they will be heard, experienced, shared, all the while evolving. In order to keep learning in a fluid manner, I often respond in story. I work to avoid simply saying yes or no. Even my questions often include the invitation, "Tell me more…" Such a story prompt moves my students to respond in story as well. I view narrative as rich data that constantly informs my practice.

When meeting people, I listen for their stories. I don't rush. I take the time to provide equity in the classroom by allowing all voices to be heard. This makes me a better listener, teacher, and, consequently, a better storyteller.

Adapting a narrative mindset does not occur overnight, but it is an invaluable practice. I am deliberate about what posters are hanging in my office, the hallway, and in the classroom, working not to contradict what is posted and what is said. Reflecting with and for my students, I see storytelling, story-making, and the story-thinking as a process that demands active listening and co-creating.

Narrative thinking takes time and it needs to be valued. As Newkirk (2014) stated,

> It is conventional to view narrative as a mode...often an easy one. When we rely on stories, we are accused of being "anecdotal," not intellectually serious. We are told that on the job and in college, we do the hard stuff, the rigorous stuff; we analyze and make logical arguments. We don't tell stories. But we do. (p. 145)

Yes we do. As educators we have important stories from years of learning and living. So do our students. We respond with narrative because we begin to see that story works to help students make meaning. Alex Haley, author of *Roots*: *The Saga of an American Family*, once said that "without storytelling there would be no roots" (as quoted by Sirah, 2014, n.p.). We need to nurture our minds and those of our students as we would nurture a growing plant. We respond and teach with narrative so our stories in our classrooms continue to grow. For anything to grow, it must be attended to, and a good story demands our attention. We must continue to recognize the meaning of the stories before us.

Once, when listening to a student share a story with me, I stopped her. I remember the conversation. I said, "Michelle, can I take a break just to refresh? It has been a long day, and I am starting to drift. I need to re-focus so I can hear your story. Your story is that important to me. Do you mind?"

She paused. I remember her response. "Mr. Cordi, no one has ever told me my story was important. Thank you." This conversation reminds me that adapting a narrative mindset will allow more students to be heard.

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Poetry as Inquiry: Using Poetry to Explore the *Currere* of Prison Experience

By Ann Bracken

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In 2015, my editor at *Little Patuxent Review* gave me an assignment I wanted to refuse; she asked me to interview a professor who ran a writing group—in a prison—and then to visit the prison and interview the men. The woman who ran the group—Professor M., a sociology professor at a major research institution who'd volunteered in the prison for seven years—spoke very positively about the men who participated in her group. Near the end of our interview, she shared a program with me for a literary day of the arts where the men had performed their original poems, stories, and songs. Their faces looked young and happy, which was a complete surprise to me. Professor M. assured me that I'd like the men, and her parting words were especially compelling: "There's no one else that I'd rather spend a few hours with in a discussion."

I was intrigued, but frightened to go into a prison. My mind buzzed with all of the common middle-class stereotypes about "those people" behind bars and how they might act. "Those people": school drop outs, drug dealers, hustlers, maybe even murderers. At that time, I had driven by the prison only once and never had the slightest desire to volunteer there. Several of my writer colleagues worked in prisons, and while I admired them, I had kept my distance, partly out of fear and partly because my protective shell had begun to crack as I learned about the prison industrial complex and the school-to-prison pipeline. Many of my former high school students had brushes with the juvenile justice system, but none of them were especially "bad" kids. Instead, they were kids who had tough home lives or who had made really poor, impulsive decisions or who'd been unfairly targeted by a biased system that landed them in the lap of the law. Deep down, my spirit realized that, if I were to go into a prison and meet the men, I'd probably form a bond with them. Up to that moment, I'd walled myself off from that possibility, but my interview with Professor M. had piqued my curiosity.

Once my security clearance came through, I accompanied Professor M. to meet her writing group. Along with a lone pad of paper and a single pen, I'd brought a copy of my first poetry book, *The Altar of Innocence*, for the men to read and share. I thought they could relate to my story about drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and divorce.

Ninety minutes were allotted to interview five men, so I'd prepared questions about something that I wanted to know and understand better: *Who were you when you came here?* and *Who are you now?* I wasn't allowed to have a recording device and couldn't take any pictures, so I wrote notes on everything I experienced in order to capture the look and feel of the prison. My hastily scribbled sentences contained every detail that I could observe—the yellow X on the elevator floor designating the spot where no one could stand for fear of stalling the elevator, the insulation peeling off of the pipes in the hallway, the black metal peeking through chipped paint on the bars, the smell of bleach in the hallway outside the school, the song-like Baltimore and foreign dialects of the guards—and most of all, the men in the writing group. Each one of them greeted me with a smile and shook my hand to welcome me to the group.

Professor M. had told them why I was coming and then gave them a bit of my background—college lecturer, writer, and former high school teacher. One of the group

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leaders wasn't there that day, either due to some infraction or other responsibilities he had. After about 15 minutes of introductions and chatting, we got started with the business of the interviews. The men sat around a large, rectangular table, each with a black and white composition book that held his writing. I didn't think we'd have time for sharing, but it was good to see that they'd come prepared. I made notes about the physical condition of the room and copied down the quote written in neat cursive on wide yellow bulletin board paper that served as the backdrop on the stage. "Education is a passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it."

I was impressed by the men's good manners and calm demeanors. They laughed and joked with one another and shared stories with Professor M. and me. I felt much more relaxed than I'd imagined, and I was totally enthralled with all that the men had to share about their lives. Here is a sample of what they told me. All of the men's names throughout the manuscript have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

> I was misguided. I had no sense of self-worth. I grew up without any guidance. I'd say I was a lost individual. I was only reading at about the 7th grade level. I did some dumb things. I've been here since I was 15, and now I'm 28. Who I am now is a happy individual. I'm striving to be a better person—educated, moral, all that. I'm working on my character. I meditate, pray, work on my attitude. I want to contribute in a positive way. Part of what helps me is reading. When I read words, and I didn't know what they meant, I went and got a dictionary. The idea that I could learn on my own was a spark.
> ~ Ryan, from East Baltimore

> When you're lost, any road will take you there. I'm a people person, but listening to my peer group back then, that was the blind leading the blind. One thing that I've always had is I like to read. But I couldn't connect what I was reading with what I was experiencing out in the world. I wish I had had a mentor, someone who could have helped me make sense of the world. The first time I was in prison, there were no programs and no education classes. But now, I take every program they offer here. I know how to make sense of my life. That took maturation. What I want to do now is put a new vibe into the system—something that will be beneficial for myself and others. ~ Matt, from East Baltimore

> When I came here, I had just turned 15. I grew up in the childcare system, so I lived in lots of places. Coming to prison was like crossing the Rubicon for me. Since I've been here, I've developed my values and formed better habits. I love reading. One of my favorite authors is Proust…I'd describe myself as a lover of language, and I live in my imagination. I've developed a value set and for me, the most important value is compassion. I see myself as part of the human family. I know that spirituality is omnipresent, and it connects all of us through one language—the language of love.
> ~Vincent, grew up in various MD and DC foster care homes and institutions

> I'm a Hispanic male, so there are a lot of expectations from my culture. To be a man means you are aggressive. You have to protect your self-esteem. Now, thanks to Ms. M, I'm a feminist. I understand the position of women in America. I've been in prison for 12 years, and I know the best way to spend my time is to educate

> myself. I participate in every program they have. I believe that knowledge is power, and I've dedicated myself to education. I'm still trying to level the playing field. I grew up in poverty, but now I'm trying to do it the right way. I'm working on my character by being honest with myself. I ask for help now. I'm committed to learning and striving to get where I want to be. I want a respectable position when I get out of here, so I can help people. I want to give back. I've been able to develop my ideas through arts and writing.
> ~ Williams, from Hyattsville

As the men spoke, I worked hard to hold back the tears that formed in my eyes. Because it was the first time I'd ever met any of them, I never expected to hear what they were telling me, and I was amazed at how open and trusting they were of someone who was a complete stranger. Professor M. and I said a hasty farewell when the guards came in to tell the men they had to return to the tiers—the cells where they lived. Each man shook my hand and asked me to return. Matt's last words to us before the group broke up touched me deeply and remained with me to inspire my return visit: "When people are in a state of disconnection, it's much easier to harm the environment, to harm each other. The arts build a connection. That's why they're so important." I felt the same way about the arts and knew I had something to contribute to these men who were all so eager to learn and make new lives for themselves.

After a couple of sessions accompanying Professor M once a month, I applied for full volunteer status and began assisting her during bi-monthly writing sessions with the men. One of the ways I coped with the juxtaposition of sadness and despair of both the prison environment and the men's stories along with the amazing writing they shared was to take copious notes about what I saw and heard. I was following a dictum from another poet, David Whyte (1992), who'd observed, "The poet never misses the details." It was as if the men were speaking in poetry at times, their observations were so keen and nuanced. And writing poetry about my experiences was the best way for me to process my sadness and frequent rage at the injustices I saw first-hand. Poet Jane Hirschfield (1997) expanded on poetry's ability to capture intense feelings when she observed that, "Through poetry's concentration, great sweeps of thought, emotion, and perception are compressed to forms the mind is able to hold—into images, sentences, and stories that serve as entrance tokens to large and often slippery realms of being" (p. 6-7).

Poetry offers the perfect tool for capturing the essence of an experience. And because I was usually torn between giving the men my full attention and taking notes about what they were saying, poetry suited the way that I collected impressions in snippets of conversation and brief phrases of description. I remember feeling flooded with urgency and emotion whenever I sat with the men in the writing group. With our time limited to 90 minutes and a rigidly enforced schedule, an air of urgency pervaded our meetings. We needed time for a check-in to hear how the men were doing, and we reserved time for each member of the group to read something he had written either as a draft or in a more polished form.

But because we were in a prison, we also felt a responsibility to respond to any unexpected events that might come up—a lockdown that had gone on for days, a friend being placed in solitary for several weeks, the loss of recreation time. When the men talked about their daily lives and difficulties, I felt an intense need to record some of the details of their discussion. Now an event like spending time in solitary for circulating a petition for better food became more than a news item on the radio, and I wanted to

capture the details so that I could share the truth of the men's experiences. Poetry offers an avenue for the voices of incarcerated people to be heard. Poetry is a tool to disrupt the dominant, racist discourse that so often re-entrenches stereotypes and perpetuates abusive policies. There is a reason that repressive regimes lock up poets. Poetry uses language to challenge the powerful.

Recent studies have found that the United States incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world. According to a 2019 report from The Prison Policy Initiative called "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie," authors Wagner and Sawyer (2019) detail the numbers of America's incarcerated people in numerous types of confinement.

> The American Criminal Justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1,852 juvenile facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in U.S. territories. (Wagner & Sawyer, 2019, n.p.)

Yet despite the massive scope of the U.S. prison population, very few white, middle-class people have ever been inside a prison, and fewer still have talked with incarcerated people to find out who they are underneath the label of felon.

Before I volunteered in a prison, I was one of those people, and I had no idea who the prisoners were, as men and women with lives and families, until I ventured inside. What I found was so compelling that I wanted to share the experience and the lives of the individuals inside with an audience. And while statistics and data do tell a large part of the story, I knew that poetry could capture voices and experiences and be able to "address topics in a visceral way to reconstruct and confirm the lived experience of others" (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxvii) that might move people to want to learn more and to work for change.

Along with Leggo (2005), I wondered what might happen if I "emphasize[d] the use of language to question…and ruminate on notions of truth," and I hoped that "language as performance [might] invite…conversation" (p. 178). And similar to Laura Apol (2017), who uses poetry to explore trauma in "Writing Poetry in Rwanda," "It [poetry] increased my ability to listen deeply, to understand myself and others, to process what I was learning, and to respond to the trauma of survivors" (p. 71).

Many American poets have explored the lives of marginalized people so that we may all be able to listen more deeply. One of the most notable voices is that of Philip Levine, who was United States Poet Laureate in 2011. Levine wrote numerous poems about the workers in Detroit's auto plants where he went to work on the assembly line at age 14 and then returned as an adult in 1950, determined to use his writing to bring "voice to the voiceless" (Poetry Foundation, 2020). Levine (2016) offers readers a visceral description of factory workers in the poem "More Than You Gave,"

> Call it a long day if you want and a hard one, too,
> but remember…we got underpaid work…
> no one cares that our voices
> are harsh from cigarettes and our ears worthless,
> our timing off, and we've got the wrong words
> in the wrong places. Let's just give it what we have. (p. 20)

Natasha Trethewey, United States Poet Laureate from 2012 to 2014, talks about the language of poetry that "allows us to see ourselves in the intimate experience of others… and to hear the rhythms of our own heartbeats" in someone else's "voice speaking across the distance" (Simon, 2018, n.p.). Trethewey's (2015) book *Thrall* explored the pain of growing up as the bi-racial child of a white father and a black mother and linked her experiences to those of other such children throughout America's history. In a poem that is at once playful and pained, Trethewey recounts a visit to Monticello with her father in the poem "Enlightenment" and uses their experience to work with the questions of identity and power. When the tour guide invites them to "imagine stepping back into the past," Trethewey (2015) jokes that she whispered "to my father: This is where / we split up. I'll head around to the back" (p. 71). Her father laughs, and she continues, "I know he's grateful / I've made a joke of it, this history / that links us—white father, black daughter" (p. 71). Readers can feel the dueling emotions of love and tension that fill their visit, one that surely brought their own relationship into sharp relief for readers, "reminding us not what makes us different but what makes us alike" (Simon, 2018, n.p.).

Levine and Trethewey both offer readers the chance to explore unfamiliar areas of American life by using the vehicle of poetry. Prendergast (2009) cites a broad range of areas of study that are suitable for poetic inquiry including sociology, counseling, and anthropology, noting that poetry "will carry within it the power to move its audience affectively as well as intellectually" (p. xxii). The reader is free to form an opinion based on what the poet presents as the truth of a situation. It is in this commentary-free form that poetry seems most like more standard forms of research. The poems that follow are meant to illustrate several of the benefits to using poetry as a tool for inquiry.

Poetry Renders Experiences in Their Purest Form

For the past several years, I've been hearing more and more in the media about the conditions in prisons, both the physical conditions of day-to-day living and the conditions related to education and visitation in particular. One of my friends gave me a copy of a memo that the Maryland Commissioner of Corrections issued regarding how many books each prisoner was allowed to have. Along with spelling out the maximum number of books, the memo specified the approved sellers. I'd heard about this kind of limitation on book purchases in various news stories, and now it was happening in my state to people I knew. I used the information in the memo to write a found poem—using many of the words exactly as they appeared in the memo—and I also interspersed questions that I had as well as a comment from one of the men. Poetry allowed me to concentrate the most essential elements of the situation.

I chose the form of a found poem for "Information Bulletin: Book Orders" (below) because, as Hirschfield (1997) reminds us, a memo transformed "into poetry's lines is recast: the new form signals us in reading it, to listen for concentration's transforming arc" (p. 12). Using the words from the memo as my data source allowed me to preserve the institutional form of the language and to offer an example of the type of petty restrictions that incarcerated people routinely endure. In the end, the ACLU sued the State of Maryland over this policy, and the Commissioner rescinded it, but the memo stands as an example of the restrictions that many state institutions are attempting to impose.

"Information Bulletin: Book Orders"

"Inmates shall be allowed quarterly
book order from 3 companies.
No third-party orders are allowed."

The first approved seller is Penguin Books.
I place a mock-order for several books. The "buy" button drops down a list of sellers
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Books-a-Million, Target and Walmart.
Millions of books sold on Amazon come from 3rd party sellers

Books & Things from Utah is the second approved seller
& I notice the top seller on the home page
The Book of Mormon Made Easier
How many Mormons are in Maryland prisons?

The last approved company—Edward R. Hamilton Books
with 16 books under the heading
African American, including
The Boleyn Women.
No one ever told me the Boleyns were Black, and I thought they were British.
Prices range from $4.95 to $19.95 per book. All shipping is $4.00 per order.

"Inmates shall submit their orders to the property officer for review.
Inmates are allowed a maximum capacity of 1.5 cu ft of books
12" X 12" X 18"
To meet these requirements
inmates may need to mail out books
or donate books to the prison library
upon receipt of new books."

The men tell me
there are no limits on TVs or Game Boys in the cells.

Poetry Can Mimic the Rhythm of Speech

Poetry can mimic the rhythm of speech and can emphasize ideas and observations with its its use of white space and line breaks. In my poem "Richard Sturn's Rules for Participation," I use some of the words that I heard Richard say to reveal his character and show his intensity and defensiveness. I use the line breaks and white space to slow the reader down and to call attention to the person in the poem as well as to simulate his speech and movements because "line breaks cause the reader to linger an extra beat: the space between stanzas brings the reader to a hard stop" (Cohen, 2009, p. 109).

> Taking in the many different visual layouts of poems on the page offers researchers new ways to represent interview data that respect the tone and movement of the original conversation in ways that may not yet have been imagined in education research before. (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009, p. 18)

The layout and line breaks in this poem are as important to the message, and to the research, as the words of the character Richard Sturn. I had worked with Richard for

over a year and was familiar with his speech patterns and mannerisms. During the writing sessions when the men shared their work, I wrote down snippets of what they said and described their clothes and posture. Those notes were my raw data that I would "sift through" and "sort out words, phrases, and sentences to synthesize meaning" in order to create poetry that was "deeply rooted in the sense of voice" (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxiii). I used those notes to create narrative poems to share my experiences.

"Richard Sturn's Rules for Participation"

Richard's tan pants hang straight from his waist
full and loose, stop inches above his ankles.
White socks turned down top off brown boots.
His hair is cropped close, black framed glasses

shield his dark eyes.
His coarse, black beard runs
from ear to ear, like thick fringe
starched and dry.

He comes to every session, never shares.
I start with *How are you? What have you been reading?*
Richard says, "I don't have time to read.
Too busy working on stuff for my release."

When the other men ask *What have you got today?*
I seen you writing all the time in that book.
Richard tells the writing group
"I got some writing. But I ain't sharing it.
I don't share with nobody."

He defends the one teacher
everyone else fears—and finds aloof.
"She helped me. She's just trying to do her job.
Tighten things up around here."

The men look down at the table.
We sense the invisible wall
he builds with each phrase.
Richard folds his arms across his chest—the other men read.

Then tells us, "I'm leaving soon—
going to a half-way house."
Will you have a job? I ask and pull back in my chair.
An offer of space.

"I'm going to do haz mat.
Been doing that here in the prison."
Then Richard leaves the group, clutching his *Quaran*
to pray in an empty room.

Poetry Offers the Reader an Experience of a Person

Poetry offers the reader an experience of a person or a group without commentary and judgment. The use of images connects an unfamiliar experience to a familiar one to form a bridge between the speaker in the poem and the reader or listener. After one of the men I worked with in the writing group was eventually paroled, we worked together in a mentoring capacity so that I could help him with editing and polishing his writing. Sadly, Tony (not his real name) was rearrested less than three years after his release and incarcerated for four months only to later be found innocent due to the State's lack of evidence. During the time that he was incarcerated, I wrote to him weekly. The letters that I sent were my way of helping him to feel connected to a friend, and his letters back to me revealed his daily struggles to hold on. As I read Tony's first letter, I heard the poetry in his words and decided to pull out several of the lines and rearrange them in stanzas to give a better idea of who he was and the awful conditions of his imprisonment.

"Poems are presences. They ventriloquize voices" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 146). My friend's voice allows readers to experience his daily existence in a Baltimore jail as he awaits trial. His use of the phrase "enemy walls" is a powerful image that allows "outer and subjective worlds [to] illumine one another, break bread together, converse" (Hirschfield, 1997, p. 17). His words need no commentary, for to shout injustice would not add anything to the poem's impact. The reader is free to determine if his conditions seem appropriate, especially when you consider he was being held on a pre-trial basis, similar to thousands of other accused persons across the United States.

"Letter from a Baltimore Jail"
-a found poem

I face these four enemy walls—this cell
robbing me of my desire to live.
The courts have no care
for my real story—to let them tell it
no Black man with a prior criminal history
would drive
away from gunshots.

I've been writing a lot lately—the most important part of me.
My true freedom within these pages.
I've written to my girlfriend every day, 20 new poems, and the start of a new book called
My Second Chance.

I'm in the cell 23 hours a day
since January 29th.
Today is Valentine's, and I finally get a shower.
I've maintained my hygiene with a bird-bath at the sink.

At first I had no pen, no paper—
There's no library here.
I read the Bible every day and take beautiful lessons from it.
There's so much riding on my case.

I want to *prove* that men can change
or else
others will fall victim
to this wicked system.

When I get more paper
I'll copy my poems for you.
I'm down to 10 pieces—using every one strategically.
I send you all of my love.

In another kind of poem, the persona poem, derived from the Greek word *persona*, meaning mask, the poet puts on the mask of another in order to better communicate an experience or a person in a direct way, "to be touched by someone whose pain or truth was entirely different from mine" (Cohen, 2009, p. 81). I wrote "Vocabulary Lesson with Rodrigo" as a persona poem because I found the information that Rodrigo (not his real name) shared with me to be profoundly disturbing, yet I could not condemn or judge him because he showed both his dark past and a keen awareness of joy and innocence, especially when he talked about his youth and his desire to be a writer. Choosing the form of a persona poem allowed me "to mask my own point of view and look at the world through someone else's eyes" (Cohen, 2009, p. 193) and to "get access to that truth, through another voice, another angle of vision" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 127).

"Vocabulary Lesson with Rodrigo"

I've turned my cell into a classroom—You know, it's either Yale or jail. I write all day in my cell. That TV, it calls to me, those games just waiting, but I got books in me. I'm doing 30 years. My baby, she gave me $400 and told me *Get a TV, a Gameboy, some barbering tools to keep yourself looking good. That's your survival kit.* Then she disappeared. I looked at that money and thought Do I really want a TV? And I decided to buy a word processor for $300 and get the barbering tools too. Later, somebody else gave me a TV. I got my GED, yes, in prison. School never meant nothing to me. Math? Math never taught me about H—U—N—G—E—R. I knew that first-hand when I went home. I did read a book once, but that's about all I ever got outta school. I mean, I love the lights, I must be a bug or something, cause I'm always going after the lights. I remember the first time I stood on top of a hill and looked out over Baltimore. I said that's where I want to be. I have books in me. In the courtroom I heard the judge talking about an armed, career-criminal, and I looked around to see who else was there. Me? I'm a good guy. Now I got time. I know I did the crime. If I ever get outta here, I know I won't write. I don't have the strength to deny myself outside. But I don't want to go back to what I did before, I'm not saying that. I know it was wrong. My novel's call *666 Pimpin*. Here's the synopsis. My characters are great. The ones you think are bad in the beginning turn out to be good and the ones you love turn out to be evil. It's 459 pages, and it's a good read. Maybe your daughter would want to read it—find out how not to be a prostitute. Nobody wants to talk about human trafficking, but it's everywhere. Let me explain. I keep my drug friends separate from my gorilla pimp friends. A regular pimp, the ladies be like, "Honey, I love you. You take care of me, and I'll give you all my money." Regular pimps got rules. A gorilla pimp be like he see a girl on the

street, he tell her "Woman, now you work for me." Take her? No, I don't take her. I just borrow her.

Definition according to *The Urban Dictionary*:
"Someone that pimps hoes through brute force. Uses excessive head twisting and arm breaking. As opposed to proper pimping through finesse, not force."
Example: *"That nigga a gorilla pimp, that's why his bitches look rough and beat up."*
https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Gorilla%20Pimp

It is my hope that "poeticizing" my experiences with the men and women I met during the three years I served as a volunteer in prison will provide a bridge to connect readers with the humanity of the faceless and forgotten people we call "prisoners." Poetry serves an important function in bringing the lived experiences of one group of people to "speak" to another group, helping us to "see most in an altered light, some shadowed corner of experience newly illumined and made perceptible by words" (Hirschfield, 1997, p. 45). "The activity of poetry is to tell us we must change our lives," according to Hirschfield (1997), who seems to be echoing German poet Rainer Maria Rilke from his poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo": "for there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life" (p. 223). Researchers hope that there is power in their work, power to speak to a wide audience and to effect change. But poet Edward Hirsch (1999) reminds us of an even greater power inherent in the lyric of a poem: "Poetry puts us on the hook—it makes us responsible for what we might otherwise evade in ourselves and in others" (p. 157).

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The Language of Lost Cranes

By Morna McDermott McNulty
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I look inside myself and see my heart is black
I see my red door I must have it painted black
Maybe then I'll fade away and not have to face the facts
It's not easy facin' up, when your whole world is black
(Richards & Jagger, 1966)

Question: *What is a lost language versus the language of being lost?*

Maybe it all started with the song "Paint it Black" (1966). At least (according to my biological father, Tom) that was when "I" started. Or, to put it another way, I was conceived in a dorm room at Stephenson Technical College in NJ in the year of 1967 to the song "Paint it Black." This may or may not have significance. How many of us *really* know how much our conditions for creation (our origin stories, so to speak), or the characteristics of those who made us, really determine who we will become. But I was wondering about the song "Paint it Black" in particular the evening that the dark Matter burst forth from inside of me, breaking my upper left rib in my rib cage. Like a fire ball. Or an explosion. It left its mark. From birth? Or death? I never liked the song very much. Never thought much of it. But then I finally met Tom, when he was 71 and I was 50. But I was conceived when he was 18 years old, and Alison (my biological mother) was only 16. On the night that they spent in that dorm room listening to the Rolling Stones, they were certainly not anticipating that nine months later I would be in the hands of the Westchester Adoption Agency. But when Tom later told me of my origin story, I wondered about the meaning of that song, so I looked it up.

We are all "fractals" of our parents (or families at large). I am a kaleidoscope—not of one or two parents, but of four. I did not have the knowledge of my "birth parents" (Alison and Tom) or the "Paint It Black" origin story until I was in my early 50s. I knew from an early age that I was adopted. Yet, I had no background knowledge of the people from whom I had been created. For more than 50 years of my life, I was the child of Polly and Jack McDermott. That was all I knew. And it was good enough. I could always easily identify what aspects of personality reflected Polly or Jack, the parents who perhaps did not "make" me but raised me and, to that extent, did "make" me who I am. I have my mother Polly's "sailor's mouth" and her brash sense of humor. I have my father Jack's love of writing and books.

But the *dark Matter*… I credit Tom and Alison for that. I know for sure it belongs to my grief. Or, rather, the dark Matter showed itself at that moment, as if it had been lying in wait since that night in 1966 at Stevenson College. "Paint it Black" is like an incantation calling it, or me, into being. It was still burrowed deep within me, dormant, my conscious self unsuspecting of its presence. It revealed itself on that day in February, 2019, when I drove seven hours from Singer Island, Florida, to Hilton Head, South Carolina. Both Tom and my mother Polly died that week.

I knew Tom was ill. I had booked a flight to Singer Island to visit him while he was still alive. My mother Polly had been in poor health for a while, and my sister Megan (who was also adopted at birth) and I knew her time was limited. We had plans to visit her the week after I returned from visiting Tom. But Tom passed away just the day before

McNulty, M. M. (2020). The language of lost cranes. *Currere Exchange Journal, 4*(1), 62-68.

I was supposed to arrive. I flew down anyway to help my half-brother, Tom Jr., and his mother (Tom Sr.'s wife) with funeral arrangements. Just as I was wrapping up the funeral arrangements (odd, picking out a coffin for a man I had just come to know but who had been with me my whole life), I received a call from Megan. "Mom is dying. We have to get to Hilton Head. Now."

We had known she was not doing well. The news was not surprising. At 87 years of age, she had been in a rapid decline for several months. But I had only arrived in Florida the day before and had to get back in my rental car and race seven hours up Highway 95 to South Carolina to see my mother and say goodbye before she passed. Would I be too late—again?

In the seven-hour drive, I had nothing but time to think about it all: death, loss of parents, being adopted, identity, love, family. *Who was I? Who am I, anyway? And what would I become once they were all gone?* My father, Jack, had died 24 years prior. My biological mother, Alison, died 15 years ago. I never got to meet her. As posited by Morris (2019), "Death brings into question educational, autobiographical, psychoanalytical, theological, philosophical, sociological questions—with such intensity" (p. 10).

Lost Cranes

This paper focuses on using *currere* as a method for exploring the interior grief process of loss and death juxtaposed with the exterior embodied experience of identity by relationality. I will focus on the regressive phase of *currere,* described as a, "re-entry to the past and its conscious reincorporation into the present," because as Pinar (1992) reminded us, "the past is not a language lost to the present, not a language sealed off in the unconscious, forever buried" (p. 265). I knew that I would someday write a paper with the title *The Language of Lost Cranes*. The idea for that started back in 1999 with an intimate conversation with lover/academic partner and an email. He was referencing a work of Pinar's—one with which I was just becoming familiar— entitled *The Lost Language of Cranes*. In a comical unconscious slip of the tongue while typing something academic in an email correspondence, I "flipped" the wording of Pinar's title, referring instead to "the language of *lost cranes*." While it was unconscious and accidental (and humorous), it resonated with me enough so to remain something I'd like to explore, almost 20 years later. Because now is the time I had been waiting for. In his 1992 paper, Pinar said that in "Chinese culture the crane symbolizes long life" (p. 254), so it makes sense in my reversal of his title that a "language of lost cranes" signifies the loss of life, which is partially what this paper is about.

In its original form, *The Lost Language of Cranes* was also about notions of family, as is this paper. I knew that a "play" on the title, not of lost language of cranes… but of *lost cranes* seeking language, reminded me of being "lost" in my/self, seeking words to describe a lifetime of in-betweenness, or not-yetness, of being both/and. The lost language—a language of lost children? Of lost love? I am thinking of how "the regressive phase of *currere* is not about wandering around in one's own house of mirrors, Narcissus-like" (Pinar, 1992, p. 265). Rather, it is a, "remembering that the language we speak now derives from what and whom we saw through our windows as infants and children and young adults" (Pinar, 1992, p. 265).

That's what I thought of as I was driving up Highway 95. I have been a lost crane in search of a language. And the loss of language, absence of the articulate, the stifling silence, feeds the dark Matter. It crouches and waits for the right moment. *Did they (meaning Tom and Alison) pass it on to me?* For all I have learned about Tom and

Alison, I'll never know the answer to that. Was it the moment that Alison, pregnant and alone in the pregnancy-center, surrounded by nuns, waiting to give birth, while Tom was forbidden to see her, that she too felt utterly alone? Or, was it the day after I was born when they took me from her and placed me in the care of strangers for six weeks before being delivered to my (adoptive) mother and father? What inarticulate rage grew in me those six weeks? Trying to erase the fear—the fear that I will not make it to my mother's bedside in time (*geez, I'm going 90 mph*) I try to explore other questions: *What do we carry? What do we pass down? What do we learn from our environment? And what do we have the power to change? I am, or any of us, fate, or fortuity?*

Dark Matter

The song "Paint it Black" plays over the closing credits in Stanley Kubrick's (1987) Vietnam movie *Full Metal Jacket*. Tom was in his first hospitalization (the beginning of the illness that eventually killed him) in 2017. It was at that exact same time that I, now having discovered his name/identity and location, took a chance and wrote a letter to him, telling who I was. I had no idea, as I mailed it, if he would ever open it or, if he did, what his response might be. When we spoke for the first time, he told me that while he was in that hospital bed he was watching the PBS Ken Burns's Vietnam TV series. This program ends each episode with that same song. Tom told me how strange it was, because he says he was thinking of "me" (the idea of me at least, the child he assumed he would never know) for the first time in many, many years, because of the song at the end of each episode. It was the song that was playing in the dorm room at Stevenson Technical College the night I was conceived. Then upon his arrival home from that hospital stay, he opened the letter I had written him.

That song, like my life at the moment of the seven-hour drive between death and dying, has everything to do with me, then and now. According to one song-related website:

> Coping with death was a part of daily life during the Vietnam War, and death and grief show up clearly in the first verse of "Paint it Black" in the form of a funeral. For most people, funerals are not an everyday occurrence, but in "Paint it Black," death seems to be just as much a part of day-to-day life as a "newborn baby." (Shabi, 2016, n.p.)

We are each of us made in part of dark Matter. There is no language for it. The cells are "lost" in a black hole of sorts. My birth, and the deaths of Tom and Polly, and the dark Matter growing, silently in the lost language of it all. As Pinar (1992) said in *The Lost Language of Cranes*, "The past is not a language lost to the present, not a language sealed off in the unconscious, forever buried" (p. 268). This growing darkness, like the song, "may be symbolically carrying away his (my) heart, or ability to love and feel altogether" (Pinar, 1992, p. 268).

The narrator in the song, like myself, is struggling with the growing emptiness inside. The loss of my mother, Polly, creates an existential terror—the universe becomes a terrifying place of danger and emptiness without her there to protect me. It was a place where she alone was the being who kept it all at bay. The desire to "paint it black" was bursting wide open, summoning the dark Matter to fight back. And then one night, two months after Polly's funeral, she (my dark Matter is

a "she") sprang forth with such a primordial scream and wrenching of the body that she left me with marks on my back and a broken rib. The dark Matter had perhaps been there all along, in my being since birth, but now needed to be let loose in the form of its own material being beyond the confines of my body. I embrace a Deleuzian (1993) sense of Matter here, in which dark Matter, the likes of which can shatter one's own rib cage, "is what fills space and time" (Emerling, 2017, p. 442). It is, "'unformed, unorganized, nonstratified' and with all its flows" (Emerling, 2017, p. 442). I concur with Emerling, citing Deleuze, that such Matter-as-chaos, "comprises singularities and relations, that is, relational capacities (to affect and to be affected). There is always…a continuous variation of matter" (Emerling, 2017, p. 442).

The "lines of flight" of this dark Matter from my body leave me now with nothing but unspeakable memories in my DNA that whisper memories that do not belong to me—*What am I supposed to do with them? How do I speak to memories that speak only the language of lost cranes?*

In the original essay, based on a David Leavitt (1988) novel by that same title, Pinar (1992) examined the journey of both himself and a narrative (fictive) character, both searching for a "lost" language (of cranes) by which they might communicate both the familiar and strange, to connect with those around them. Here, it is I (the crane) who is lost, searching for a language in my wanderings, during which I have re-arranged my "self," or the "eye," of the I (McDermott, 2011), in new relations to others, facets of my *currere*, or becomings. Fitting, that cranes symbolize long life—since my essay is about birth and death. I recall an earlier work in which I co-wrote about the nature of such experiences:

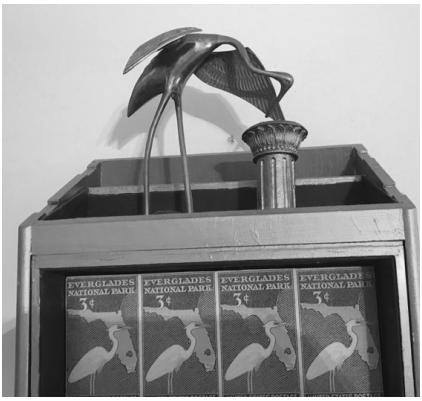
> We map our experiences, moving landscapes traced with aesthetic and sensory hues, ruptures of memory and overlays of the imagination. Such experiences in turn in part determine the forms such representative maps will take. The body of work (representation) and the constructor of that work intertwine each other in mutually shaping processes where properties from each are infused into each other. The "original" form and content of the representation cannot remain static but flows outward, and implodes inward unto itself at each intersection in which it is performed. The data, possible interpretations and representational form themselves are transformed by multiple emergent contexts into unpredicted and un-thought of possibilities. (Daspit & McDermott, 1999, n.p.)

Spiraling Cranes

The first time I saw Tom's artwork, I knew I didn't need the DNA test to confirm our connection with one another. Each painting or shadow box was like a matching finger print. Now, it felt like my artwork was not merely a form of self-expression—it was a thread pulling me back to something and someone with whom I was connected, but had not yet known. I believe that in our shared unconscious *currere*, Tom and I were looking for a lost language for the pre-formed and inarticulate connections across time and space. The near-identical style and subjects of our work (unknown to one another until 2017) was a correspondence of sorts. In my art I was creating a way of communicating with my origin story—a language between myself and Tom. In the absence of words, the language of *currere* worked through our images, weaving together past, present, and future. Baross (2017) suggested,

> It is across this interval that two disparate images enter into communication, each reciprocally imposing itself as the other's memory, a memory that has been haunting it since the beginning of time, outside historical time, which may arrive from (our historical) future or past. (p. 60)

The narrative form shares the same central thread with the process of *currere*. Both spiral in form connecting everything to everything else. Considering the "persistence of memory" (Kuberski, 1992, p. 31), I know, "it is within the spiral we must turn, and turn and turn…for a spiral is a compromise between the progressive element of the line and the recursive, conservative disposition of the circle" (Kuberski, 1992, p. 31). I am creating a spiraled memory. I recall the email to my lover/academic partner in 1999 about cranes being lost and lost languages of cranes, then, in 2019, realizing how apt this metaphor would be for this paper, and then I return again to Florida in July, 2019, to attend the memorial art show for Tom. There in his apartment, which served as his personal art gallery, he had several works of art involving images of cranes. Cranes are a major theme of his work. The narrative is what we create, just as *it* is creating *us*.



(artwork by Tom C. S., date unknown)

(artwork by Tom C. S., date unknown)

Dark Matter of Lost Cranes

How do we express those things for which we have no language, yet? If we don't know where we're going, how do we get there? Pinar (1992) suggested that,

> The regressive phase of *currere* asks us to speak again in the lost language of cranes, to see again what was outside our windows, and to become married. That is, in unison—with ourselves and with those around us, by renewing our vows to those who are past, exchanging vows with those who are present. (p. 267)

I am looking out my car window now, at the signs along Route 95. Measuring mile by mile, the time it will take me to travel from one lost place to another. As Grumet (1999, as quoted by Smith 2013) recounted, "Here, the mind 'wanders' but does so with purpose wherein there is a noting of, 'the path and all its markers'" (p. 6).

The work of William Doll and his discussion of complexity theory does much in considering the intangible ways we ought to reconsider defining curriculum, inquiry, and learning. I have a visceral appreciation for the notions of chaos and complexity now—not merely an intellectual one. I am living Doll's (1993) description of *currere*, which involves "looking both backward and forward, to the past and to the future" (p. 277). My dark Matter is Doll's (1993) idea of "indeterminacy" (p. 277). He continued:

> Bohr…*(Tom owned a cat named Nils Bohr, coincidentally)*…spent long hours arguing with Einstein over the nature and role of indeterminacy in the universe—Einstein always holding that "God does not throw dice." Indeed, probability theory was developed to help tame the randomness Heisenberg and others found in nature. (p. 277)

The dark Matter that formulated inside my cellular being, and transformed becoming from known toward an unknown, offered both terror and possibility. In their death, and in my *currere* of becoming. Doll (1993) suggested, "Characterizing curriculum in terms of 'dark' systems may be an unfamiliar concept; but as more interconnections are made, the points where they meet become darker, richer, more ambiguous" (p. 279). Like Jodorowsky (2007), "I want to be continually being born, like the universe" (p. 47). He continued:

> My thoughts and feelings must be alive as my corporal matter. If my body cells are dying each moment and being born each moment, why should my thoughts last longer than my body cells?… I don't have one theory; I have a continual death and rebirth of theories. (p. 47)

I am creating a theory for the language of cranes, who are lost and wandering, in search of the birth and death of possible meanings for existence. Kuberski (1992) reminded us that, "We ignore the fact that all organisms are, given their finite life spans, their origin and their progeny, representations, narratives, and tropes themselves" (p. 91). This story is about memory work. More, it is about loss (or lack) of memory, where language is merely a ghost of utterances from which no meaning can be discerned. At the death of Tom and my mother, Polly, my dark chaos was excavated from inside of me: dark Matter. I wonder, "How can something that is forgotten be represented?" (D'Errico, 2017, p. 345). Like D'Errico (2017), I ask, "does representation not imply remembrance, a code, a grid, on which longitudes are appointed in advance in order for us to remember things forever as they are?" (p. 345). Is it here that the lost cranes can find their language? Because, "Memory is but prefigured knowledge: the safe pathways of resemblance, traced in advance, demanding to be followed" (D'Errico, 2017, p. 345). *Currere*, as a

"persistence of memory" (Kuberski, 1992) is a search for "correspondences" (Baudelaire, 1857) that become, "like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance…. With power to expand into infinity" (n.p.). The spiral of nature reveals how we turn—and (re)turn—unto our past, present, and future forms. Our past, present, and future forms collide and correspond, creating new emergent forms that are far from the stable familiarity of the "known."

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Bridging the Distance Between Us: Reconciling with Trauma

By Kristan Barczak
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If you're lost and you're lonely
Go and figure out why
Take a trip to your dark side
Go on, and have a good cry
'Cause we're all lonely
Yeah, we're all lonely
Together
-"Heavy" by Birdtalker

I can remember the day—no, the moment—that signified the "end."

"Do you have any questions for me?"

I, of course, had questions. I had a cornucopia of questions, ranging in size, shape, and color. Some of them, for example, were simple, logistical in nature, and rather innocent; others were complex, demanding, and contained seeds of bitterness. All questions were born out of the same source—years of painfully endured waiting and wondering, marked by fear, abandonment, and sadness. However, I could sense from the expressions in the room that I was not supposed to ask any questions. Instead, I should accept the "end" as it came to me and be grateful for it.

I understood this and can still see the tensed foreheads and downward cast eyes to this day, but as I have said, *years* were endured. So, these expressions were not enough to contain the overflowing question cornucopia, and I took my opportunity to seize the metaphorical apple—and toss it.

"Where do you go?"

No one took a breath. No one looked at me, except for one person—the person who mattered in that moment to me.

A prolonged pause and then—

"The truth will set you free."

Trauma: A Conceptual Present, A Conceptual Hell

At the time, I indeed felt "set free" by the truth that filled the room, and recognizing this feeling as an "ending" to the hardship contained in the prior years, I lamented, "I'm just glad it's over." Nearly 12 years later at this writing, I understand that moment as both a beginning and an end, with the years following that conversation tainted by a personal, individual battle with trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Robert Fournier (2002) provided an apt description of this phenomenon, stating, "the period after the traumatic event may be more realistically identified as a beginning rather than an ending, an often prolonged time and space of suffering, pain, and hardship—a hell on earth" (p. 113). While I did not discover Fournier's (2002) words until recently, the use of the word "hell" resonates with me, especially as I reflect on the following personal journal entry, wherein I attempted to personify the idea of trauma and my relationship with it at the beginning of the "end."

Barczak, K. (2020). Bridging the distance between us: Reconciling with trauma. *Currere Exchange Journal, 4*(1), 69-74.

> *Personified, Trauma used to look like the worst version of a demon. Dark, deep holes where eyeballs should be, spikey teeth, a snarling bloody smile. Hooded like a dementor and quite possibly there to suck out my soul … Trauma used to follow me around and instill me with agony. He'd crush my temples with long, bony fingers, filling my brain with horrid flashbacks and my body with physical pain. I would scream, cry, hyperventilate. Break things, lash out…*

While trauma represents something of a demon to me, it's important to understand that, technically, psychological trauma is defined as "an emotional response to a terrible event," (American Psychological Association, 2019). Thus, trauma is not the event *itself*, which is what turns the moment I described into a beginning, rather than an end. Again, I will cite Fournier (2002), because his definition provides more clarity around what trauma is by expanding the definition of trauma to be "a natural human response to the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual manifestations of stress in a person's life" (p. 116). I have felt and endured my response to each of the four categories of manifested stress Fournier describes, and these responses have constituted my personal hell. Reflecting on this now I can't help but wonder the following: did the truth free me? Or was I damned?

I have spent years praying for freedom from this hell and pleading with the forces that be to remove all traces of trauma from my soul and, thus, my behavior and ways of being. However, despite this elongated effort to deny and push away the trauma I carry, I have spent an odd amount of time over the past several months intentionally immersing myself into this hell. In the midst of a rather unexpected mental shift, I have brought the traumatized portion of myself purposefully into the light, illuminating details I have previously kept secret. Instead of avoiding the darkest parts of myself, I am taking time to willfully explore and investigate the nooks and crannies within my hell—pulling out drawers, opening closets, and exchanging pleasantries with the Trauma Demon.

Ultimately, I am trying to more deeply explore William Pinar's (1994) concept of the "conceptualized present." In the words of Pinar (1994), "In which present is one absorbed? Is it the concrete, literal present?… Or is the present where one dwells what we can call an abstract, conceptual present?" (p. 21). Throughout the years, trauma has hijacked my conceptual present and, thus, has often placed a veil over my concrete present. For example, instead of noting the stiffness of my desk chair (the concrete present) and meandering through the thoughts and writings of, say, Philip Jackson, while vaguely considering what I will eat after I read (the conceptual present), there have been times when my conceptual present has been bombarded with overwhelmingly painful, vivid memories; the flashbacks are all that exist to me as the concrete present slips away. Again, I find this reflected in my journal entry.

> *Sometimes, we have a chat. I ask him why things have happened this way, and he says he does not know. I know he's right. Trauma didn't cause the events I question him about; he is simply one with the ability to defy our human concept of time, destroying its linear nature, and marrying the past with the present… Trauma's ability to bend time allows me to see the present through a multitude of lenses. Instead of just seeing what's happening now, I see what's happening now as it is touched by the past…*

So then, what is my conceptual present, at any given time? Is it damaged? What is your conceptual present? What is my partner's conceptual present? My friend's? My

family's? What is the conceptual present of the stranger in the coffee shop? At the gym? If you and I are sitting next to each other, but my conceptual present is all smoke and carnage from some past event, are we really near each other at all? Or am I alone? These questions have recently plagued me, sending me marching straight into my conceptual, personal hell. In the following pages, I attempt to share what I've found in my exploration, somewhat selfishly hoping to better understand what might lead to my ultimate exoneration. In doing this, I explore three fundamental overlying themes: isolation, synthesis, and how we might defy isolation for the sake of synthesis, thus, creating possibilities for a better world.

As I've stated, Trauma's interaction with my conceptual present has rarely been controlled. However, in order for this personal experiment (of sorts) to work, I needed a controlled area to carefully and intentionally enter my conceptual hell. So, as I write this piece, I sit at my dining room table. There are four long windows that provide a beautiful view of the backyard. There are birds flying through the trees and fluttering around on the ground, and I note that I've always loved the whimsical nature of birds. Suddenly, my neighbors' dog sprints the length of their yard, tongue flying in the wind. These images make me want to stay here in the concrete present. But alas, I close my eyes and gently enter the memory that has been keeping me up at night. The birds fade away.

The Isolation Paradox

I'm receiving a bubble blower. It's large, and it has an electric fan, so it blows even larger bubbles. I am slightly too old for a bubble blower, by maybe a year or two, but I say, "thank you," and play with it. As a 10 year old, I watch the bubbles, and I am filled with an inexplicable sadness. As an adult, I understand this moment as the first time I knew something was horribly, irrevocably wrong. The harshness of that realization juxtaposed against the innocence of the bubbles is almost too much to bear. Indeed, in the words of Bessel van Der Kolk (2014), "Trauma, by definition…is unbearable and intolerable" (p. 1).

It's an odd thing to be emotionally triggered by bubbles. I expect if I stood next to a friend, watching bubbles float through the air, they might feel whimsical and childlike, while I hold back strange and inappropriate tears. In this way, my friend and I would be physically close together but mentally apart by an immeasurable distance. Furthermore, it is, of course, not only the rare bubble encounter that places an undesired conceptual distance between myself and those around me; I experience this mental exit from the shared, linear spacetime continuum rather frequently and often without warning or clear cause. As such, during these times, I feel very much alone.

It is this isolation that I seek to explore, because although I may feel alone, I now know that at least 64% of people experienced at least one traumatic event as a child (Cavanaugh, 2016). van der Kolk (2014) found that approximately one in five Americans were sexually molested as a child, and one in four were beaten; similarly, a quarter of Americans grew up with an alcoholic relative. Further, van der Kolk (2014) confirmed that trauma has a lasting impact on our minds and bodies, saying, "But traumatic experiences do leave traces, whether on a large scale…or close to home…. They also leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems" (p. 1). As it turns out, a great many of us are in lasting pain, and yet, we often feel we're enduring it alone.

As I reflect on this cruel paradox—the thing that isolates us also being the thing that many of us have in common—I am drawn to understanding how we may, both in an education setting and within society at large, play a role in alleviating some of this pain.

If we work to bridge the distance between us, could we loosen the grip trauma has on our lives? As I reflect on the pervasiveness of trauma in society and the frequency with which we experience traumatic events as children, I realize how trauma is passed down through generations (van der Kolk, 2014). Painful experiences breed harmful coping mechanisms, and learned behaviors become difficult to defy. If we spoke of this pain more openly, could we break the cycle?

Admittedly, at least some of my motivation behind this interest is selfish. When I reflect on Pinar's (1975) *currere* method—regressive, progressive, analytical, synthetical—I am struck by my ability to work through the first three steps, but not the final step. I cannot synthesize myself into something whole. When I look at myself, I always see two of me—the "me" who hangs out with the Trauma Demon and the "me" who can see the birds in my backyard. I cannot make them one. As I write this, I realize this is likely because I want to protect the "me" who can see the birds.

The Synthesis of Ourselves

I want to see your sadness
I want to share your sin
I want to bleed your blood and,
I want to be let in
Don't you just-
Don't we all just-
Want to be together?
-"Heavy" by Birdtalker

I have not disclosed the "truth" that was shared in the moment that marked the beginning/end, and I will not share it now. It is not the event I wish to focus on, but the response to that event—the trauma—my reaction to the "truth." In the beginning of this paper, I posed the following questions: Did the truth free me? Or was I damned? Even despite a longing to protect the portion of me that does not feel the trauma (i.e., the "me" who can see the birds), I understand that this separation within myself is what has been damning. I have prayed for freedom, but I cannot have it until I am willing and able to make myself whole.

Growing up and in school, I was never taught how I may go about synthesizing myself. Traumatic experiences were not discussed, and in fact, a certain layer of privilege allowed me to live my life pretending as if nothing were happening. I was a little odd and often distracted, but no one knew about what I faced at the end of the day—not even my best friends. I did not know anything about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or Depression or Anxiety, and as such, when I began making choices born out of harmful coping mechanisms and chasing toxic relationships that modeled the familiar, I did not understand there could be a different way to live.

Now, the writing of Maxine Greene (2014) breathes life into me, with her writing about "social imagination." She argued for arts education in writing, "children can look beyond what is to what might be, to what should be, to alternative possibilities" (p. 123-124). Likewise, I am drawn to Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade's (2009) work on "critical hope," which he calls the "enemy of hopelessness," as it is operationalized against false hope (p. 185). I believe we can use the works of scholars like Greene and Duncan-Andrade as guiding beacons to discuss traumatic experiences and pain with one another—and our students—in ways that instill a sense of agency within us and

them. We must ensure that our upcoming generations know there can be a better way to live, and this must begin with ensuring that they are able to synthesize themselves, reconciling the trauma in their past with the way they envision their future, and making themselves—and this world—a bit more whole.

This goal is, of course, not easily accomplished. Currently, literature regarding trauma-informed education is littered with deficit thinking (even if the same literature vehemently claims it does not engage in deficit thinking). For example, one tendency is to claim that it is critical to ensure traumatic experiences are not viewed as a part of a student's identity, thus, ensuring the avoidance of deficit thinking (Goodman, 2018). Unfortunately, this sends the message that having trauma in one's life is so inherently terrible that it must be cast as far away from one's identity as possible. This line of thinking inevitably leads to the damnation I and others like me experience as we attempt to live as halved persons.

When I think of why I am afraid to let the "me" who spends time with the Trauma Demon interact with the "me" who can see the birds, I ultimately feel a gushing wave of shame. I am ashamed of the "terrible events" in my life. I am even more ashamed of my reaction to them. I am ashamed of every tear, scream, therapist appointment, broken plate, nightmare, and flashback. As long as I feel this shame, I cannot be free.

Imagining New Possibilities

And so, now, I ask the following questions: How can I, and others like me, be free? How might I rid myself of shame? How might I and others like me reconcile our pain with the parts of us that can "see the birds," thus, becoming whole? I must confess that I do not fully know, and I believe that claiming to know the answer to these questions would be an injustice to both you, the reader, and to myself. However, I can reveal to you a secret that I learned in the midst of creating this paper that I hope may offer a hint at something healing and helpful. Then, perhaps, over time and through work like this, we may chip away at some form of an answer—a dynamic, evolving, fluid, and everchanging answer.

When I first recorded the bubble blower memory several months ago, I admit that I could not even begin to envision an ending to this paper. At the time, I felt incredibly frustrated by this; however, I now know that these closing paragraphs were not available because the "experiment" was not complete. Since that first recording, I have read the bubble blower memory to myself more times than I can count; additionally, I have read it aloud to my partner and given it to others, allowing friends, acquaintances, and perhaps strangers to read it for themselves. Recently, as I read the memory again before attempting to write these paragraphs, I was struck by the incredible, nearly unbelievable notion that is this: the memory of the bubble blower no longer keeps me up at night.

Indeed, the memory that just a few short months ago was so painstakingly present it could bring me to unbridled tears in an instant and pry my eyes open in the middle of the night, interrupting dreams and deflecting joy away from me, now hardly crosses my mind. Of course, there are other memories now that creep up when I'm alone or trying to sleep, but the realization that this particular memory has dissipated painlessly and, frankly, unremarkably could honestly motivate me to sing and dance in joy—right now! So, how is that? How is it something that haunted me so mercilessly could simply… disappear?

I am not entirely sure, but I believe it is because you, and others who have witnessed it through this piece, now carry parts of this memory for me. Instead of it existing like

a hardened callous, rudely protruding on top of my soul, it has been filed down by this process—some of it seeping back to where it came from and other parts of it now "out there" in the open for *you* to deal with. It could be argued that it is selfish of me to ask you to take on parts of my gross, calloused memory—but I think I would do the same for you. Because without the burden of our hardened, calloused memories, we have more room to engage in critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), to create agency, and to imagine new possibilities (Greene, 2014). We have more capacity to see the birds.

As stated, my claim is not the "final answer." It is simply a guess. More work will need to be done to determine the answer, but for now, we must claim the parts of our identity that we are told must not see the light of day, and we must encourage our youth to do the same. Then, we can collectively begin imagining new possibilities with the ultimate goal of breaking the cycle and creating a better world.

Are you feeling fearful, brother?
Are you feeling fearful, sister?
The only way to lose that fearful feeling
Replace it with love that's healing
-"Heavy" by Birdtalker

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