

STARTING THE CONVERSATION: USING THE *CURRERE* PROCESS TO MAKE THE TEACHING INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE MORE POSITIVE AND ENCOURAGE COLLABORATIVE REFLECTION IN INTERNSHIP SITE SCHOOLS

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It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear.... It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to.
Marilyn Ferguson (in Lewis, 2013)

INTRODUCTION: THE IN-BETWEEN SPACE

As Director of Student Teaching for the St. Mary's College of Maryland's (SMCM) intensive, year-long Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program, I am interested in exploring ways to help teaching interns navigate, and even embrace, the demanding MAT curriculum for maximum intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and professional growth as they transition from student to teacher.

Casey (1993) expresses the universality of *in-between* space: "A beginning-place and an end-place may stand out as the most conspicuous parts of a journey...but the in-between places are just as interesting, and sometimes more so" (p. 275). The internship experience component of any teacher preparation curriculum places teaching interns into challenging (and often quite uncomfortable) in-between spaces, and the SMCM MAT program is no different. First, the program requires that interns act as professionals while they are still graduate students. From day one, interns become well-aware that, as teachers working with children, they are held to different standards of behavior and must live in between the public and private expressions of themselves, including their language, relationships, and social media presences.

Each intern must also establish his or her authority with students, but within the context of the mentor/mentee power differential and with the implicit understanding that sharing an established teacher's classroom equally is virtually impossible. Further, interns must present themselves to their students as leaders in the very classroom space designated to help them learn to do so. Interns arrive as students but are expected to perform as teachers from day one.

This in-between space of identity formation is uncomfortable at best and can be agonizing at worst. Many interns experience high levels of stress and anxiety. I believe that challenging situations have great power to shape individuals, but I have also seen that too much stress can result in a counterproductive internship. I am concerned that an overly difficult internship experience may have an impact on a teacher's entire career by reinforcing behavioral patterns of stress and negativity before the teacher is even hired as a professional educator. Exploring and analyzing these in-between spaces is an important key to improving teacher preparation programs.

In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger (1969) argues that identity is constructed based on language. Gadamer (1975) expands this idea, stating, "...experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. We seek the right word—i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing—so that in it the thing comes into language" (p. 417). The MAT

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program invites interns to walk willingly into a space lived in between the roles of graduate student and teaching professional without the language of an established identity to frame and support their efforts. Ironically, it is this very experience that helps develop each intern's construction of his or her professional self. How can we communicate this challenge in a way that leads to positive identity formation?

THE *CURRERE* PROCESS: ACTIVELY CONSTRUCTING CURRICULUM

It is through the language of Pinar's (2004) *currere* process that I ask my graduate MAT students to explore the *in-between* spaces of their former experiences with school and schooling, their current status as interns, and their ideas about their future selves as they prepare to become educators.

Currere is the Latin verb meaning "to run" in the way a current runs or flows. Curriculum is a noun that springs from this root and means: a running, course, career. More specifically, *currere* is an autobiographical method designed by Pinar to provide a broader and deeper understanding of one's lived experience of curriculum through a process of remembering the past, imagining the future, then analyzing and synthesizing emergent themes. The term curriculum as Pinar uses it goes beyond defining the document that dictates instructional standards—it represents how groups (teachers and students) act and interact as educational experiences are created (Grundy, 1987). Doerr (2004) describes the *currere* process as Pinar's desire to shift the focus of curriculum theory from guidance to understanding.

Using the *currere* process to explore these in-between spaces, interns simultaneously deepen their understanding of the SMCM MAT curriculum and also broaden their understanding of curriculum in its many facets. The *currere* process allows teachers to see themselves as active participants in shaping the lived curriculum along with their students. Each teacher's understanding of curriculum in terms of lived experience is an essential aspect of a powerful and positive professional identity.

Grundy (1987) characterizes curriculum as a "cultural construction" that is a "way of organizing a set of human educational practices" (p. 5). My synthesis of all I currently understand about curriculum is that, once it is set in motion, it *creates itself*. By this, I mean that human beings inhabiting a classroom space together generate experiences that provide the frame for interpretation of meaning; therefore, no single curriculum can possibly exist. Curriculum is always an individual creation, and the results for each teacher and student will always be unique.

The concept of *Curriculum in Abundance* (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006) is, in my view, one of the most inspiring expressions of curriculum in all of its possibility. Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford (2006) assert that, "...in a classroom where curriculum is understood and practiced in abundance, even 'ordinary' is better than it was, because at least all the students get to live in the presence of work being done that is beyond the scarce pale of schooling" (p. xxv). After interns actively explore and discuss curriculum in all these aspects through the *currere* process, curriculum comes to life. Interns begin to see themselves as creative, purposeful educators, rather than instructional delivery people.

METHODOLOGY: THE CONVERSATION BEGINS AND EXPANDS

The SMCM MAT begins during Summer Semester. I teach a summer practicum course during which I ask interns to explore, and perhaps reframe, their understanding of students' behavior. We examine interns' preexisting ideas about teaching and take a candid look at personal bias. This is the springboard from which I introduce the *currere* assignment. I completed my own *currere* project in 2011 and found it had a profound

impact on my awareness of who I am as an educator. I have been using it with my graduate students ever since. Here are the directions I give interns for completing the four-step *currere* process as I adapted it for the MAT program:

Stage 1 – Regression

Think back as far as you can and record your memories in a stream-of-consciousness manner. Consider teachers, experiences with education, impressions, and media—anything at all that is vivid to you as you grew up with the concepts of education and teaching.

Stage 2 – Progression

Next, project yourself into your future and record “memories” of things that are likely to happen based on this foundation of memories and ideas about teaching. (It is common to find this challenging.)

Stage 3 – Analysis

Look at the connections between your past memories and your ideas about the future. Make an objective identification of the common themes and connections between the first two stages.

Stage 4 – Synthesis

Finally, pull the whole thing together—(where you’ve been, where you’re going, and the common themes)—and write about how you will use this new self-knowledge to make conscious, informed decisions about your practice as an educator.

Each year, I explain to the interns that the process will help them anchor their MAT experience by making them aware of the influences that brought them to teaching and that the process can provide a compass to help each of them more intentionally craft their future lives as educators. I assign only an hour as the time expectation for completing the project, but I welcome the interns to spend more time if they choose to do so. The majority of interns respond that they become “hooked” on what they are discovering as they write and that they spend well beyond an hour working through the process steps.

Currere offers an opportunity to go back to the beginning, project into the future, and then purposefully and intentionally examine the in-between space. The assignment is the foundation for learning practical and applicable strategies for making the classroom a positive and productive space. *Currere* gives interns the insight and grounding in their own self-reflection to see themselves as more than managers of students—they become the architects of a classroom culture of learning and a curriculum of abundance. One intern characterizes her newly developed insight regarding curriculum in this way:

With this knowledge of wanting to establish empathy in my students, allowing them to be a part of the curriculum seems to be a great way to ensure that. By contributing actively to the course content, struggling students may work harder than they would have in a classroom where they are passive spectators.

After interns complete the project, we discuss the experience as a group. Interns make further connections between what they learn about themselves through the *currere* process and the curriculum they choose to live in their classrooms as a result of this rich conversation. I receive positive feedback each year from my interns after they have completed the assignment in terms of its impact on their classroom practice: specifically,

their deepened understanding of professional identity and their improved ability to more consciously and intentionally shape their classroom experience. The following are representative examples of project feedback:

Intern from 2011: This was a really powerful and generally awesome project! It is such a good way to start the MAT and really put our roles as student teachers and eventually the real thing into perspective.

Intern from 2013: You were right about the *currere* project—once I started writing, I couldn't stop! It was a very cathartic experience, and it motivated me to email a former teacher to tell her how much she positively influenced my outlook on education.

My view is that the assignment is so personalized and individualized that it actually brings abundant energy to those who work through the process in a serious and reflective way. Seeing the interns' growth as a result of the *currere* process has also inspired and energized me as an educator. I have been spreading the word ever since.

I enthusiastically described the assignment to an assistant principal at one of our culturally diverse and professionally demanding internship partner schools. He adapted the *currere* process for use as a change initiative with a small group of four experienced middle school teachers. These teachers independently explored, in writing, their foundational and most memorable autobiographical experiences with school and schooling without filtering for positive or negative effect. Next, they were given a compilation of my interns' responses about their memories of teachers and teaching. The teachers and the assistant principal met to compare their written experiences, share their reactions to the intern responses, and identify common themes. I participated in an additional conversation with the same group and introduced the idea of examining the space in between what these experienced teachers had felt about the profession when they had started and the current state of their practice. The conversation centered on rejuvenation of the desire to inspire students and making a renewed commitment to the profession.

These four teachers, two teaching interns from my preparation program, the assistant principal, and I shared our experiences with *currere* at the Maryland State Professional Development Schools (PDS) 2013 Conference and then conducted a more interactive experience with participants at the June 2013 Maryland PDS Network meeting. This is an excerpt from the reflection of one of the middle school teachers:

Through this experience, and after the conference, I went back to my classroom feeling refreshed. I remembered that, as teachers, our words, thoughts, and actions can have an impact, a lasting impact, on the students that enter our classroom. Even when I am most stressed or upset, I have to remember that what I do today could be remembered twenty years from now. This experience made me realize that I want those memories to be positive. I want to be the motivator, the enthusiast, the positivity in my classroom that will not let those kids become another body in my classroom, but another life that can be transformed. As a school, we need to create a culture that will take our own experiences in school, teaching, and life and build them into our daily work to create students who will see education as an opportunity, not a listless daily routine.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS: MAKING THE TENSION OF IN-BETWEEN MORE INTENTIONAL

Each teacher and intern participant reported that completing the *currere* process led to insights into their current teaching practices. Both novice and experienced teachers identified the *currere* educational autobiography process as a powerful strategy that helped them become more reflective and intentional about crafting their professional identities. The resulting rich conversations after completing the *currere* process were focused on enhanced teacher effectiveness, improved school culture, and a rededication to positive relationships with students.

In *The Tact of Teaching*, Van Manen (1991) states that educators must continually reflect on the lived experiences of interactions with children. Van Manen argues that educators who examine inevitable mistakes can strengthen their pedagogical intent to help children realize their potential for being and becoming. This is true for teachers, too. Through conversation centered on the *currere* process, anxiety and emotional dissonance (whether as part of the teacher preparation process for novice teachers or from the day-to-day stresses on experienced teachers in a challenging career) can be reimagined as a pathway to emancipation from negative patterns of thinking and behaving, rather than a downward spiral into burnout and, ultimately, departure from the teaching profession.

Teacher resilience is an important area I identify for future study regarding applications of *currere* to improve teacher quality and professional retention rates. Henderson and Milstein (2003) describe the research on adult resiliency as emergent but use their observations and reviews of extant research to conclude that the process of developing resiliency is similar for children and adults. Perry (2002) makes the following suggestions for developing resiliency in children:

- Offer activities that gently push children out of their comfort zone, helping them build their capacity to deal with future stressors.
- Help give each child a sense of his unique and special gifts. When you take a child aside and make him feel special with your attention and praise, you are shaping resilience. Your comments are powerful. Even brief, positive comments can be used by these children for a lifetime.
- Encourage children to think of things they are no longer afraid of. Point out their ability to thrive once they have faced a challenge.
- Give children many opportunities for speaking in front of the group. These experiences early in life build confidence and resilience. (p. 24)

If one rereads the items above, but replaces “child” and “children” with “teacher” and “teachers,” it is easy to see how the *currere* process and the associated conversation addresses the above suggestions and can support the development of resilience in teachers.

As an added benefit, by developing resilience in teachers, this same skill will also be enhanced in students as teachers model resilient behaviors. I offer evidence in the following quote from an intern’s *currere* project synthesis:

The value of analyzing the past perceptions that have led to my current construction of what it is to be an educator is that I now see what is important to me personally, and I think about how I can be a positive influence in the lives of my students. By comparing my past experiences with my future goals, I realize not only that my experiences have given me insight to the kind of teacher I hope to be, but also that

good teaching is about more than being a traditionally “good” teacher. It is about a readiness to adapt for students and to do whatever is necessary to provide the tools that students need to be successful.

The first step is simply becoming aware of the true nature of the in-between and reframing the perceived negatives (as well as the discomfort of feeling like a “fish out of water”) as opportunities for growing wiser and more resilient. The *currere* process helps develop awareness of the nature and potential of in-between spaces, as well as the concomitant intentional examination and crafting of the experience based on this awareness. The process offers a unique opportunity for developing greater professional capacity and stronger professional identities in both new and experienced teachers.

CONCLUSION: BUILDING ON THE IN-BETWEEN USING THE CURRERE PROCESS

I have learned to embrace that tense in-between space between beginning and becoming. The education of children, who have unique needs and often exhibit unpredictable behavior, can be an uncomfortable undertaking. Instead of trying to control the discomfort in education, we must engage with it and explore what there is to learn about ourselves, as well as what it means to educate others. Although often uncomfortable, the in-between space is a dynamic construct that is, in essence, pure possibility.

Based on my varied experiences with *currere*, I am more curious than ever about learning from examining the lived experience of teachers (both beginning and experienced) in terms of navigating the in-between spaces of education and exploring what it means to be a teacher. A thoughtful examination of (and conversation about) the in-between space of the teaching internship through the *currere* process can mitigate stress, reduce discomfort, and support positive identity development for teachers-in-training. Most experienced educators live in professional spaces in-between their ideals and their perceived realities, and the *currere* process can generate conversations about how to maintain idealism and motivation in the face of difficulty and disillusionment.

If educators are not to remain trapped in unnecessarily uncomfortable in-between spaces throughout their careers, without ever experiencing the opportunity to grow, purposefully and courageously delving into these spaces is vitally important. *Currere* is an effective way to structure that exploration and can be the common ground for authentic conversation that can shape positive experiences for teachers and students.

The *currere* process is an elegantly simple way to bridge educational curriculum theory and daily teaching practice. That synergy is necessary to develop and motivate high quality professional educators. I propose using the *currere* process with educators as a surprisingly powerful way to improve teacher preparation programs, encourage more positive school culture, and develop more purposeful, resilient teachers. The *currere* process can lead to authentic reflection and deeper commitment to creating richer learning environments for children and teachers. Once the exchange of ideas begins, I am certain that new ways of using the process will arise. I am eager to adapt and improve the process through collaboration with other teacher preparation programs and schools. I look forward to being part of a vibrant and exciting conversation.

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