

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE, FOUNDATIONS, AND DISSENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Contrary is what she called me. This spunky little lady named Libby, outside a small country church, said to me one summer day, “Lori, you are contrary.” Thinking it was a grand compliment for a teenager, I grinned and thought to myself, “That sounds like something worthwhile to be.” On the surface, being labeled a contrarian isn’t all that flattering, little did my teenage self recognize. Contrarians are often viewed as those with a negative disposition who seek to take alternative points of view just to trouble those with a majority viewpoint.

Years later, now a tenured education professor in a university, I often hear myself, the lone, dissenting voice of non-compliance; the smart and nice, but contrary and too idealistic, one; the one who just needs to “realize” how wonderful standardized EdTPA and measurable learning objectives can be. Having contrary opinions and philosophies is at the root of resistance even more these days in teacher education. It hasn’t always been a smooth path, and lately I’ve questioned how I will remain a good fit in any commodified, data-obsessed, school-as-a-business teacher education initiative.

As a young educator in a public school, I felt strongly about the sentiments, on intellect and inquiry, that Postman and Weingartner (1969) articulated in their classic book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Although I didn’t read this text until graduate school, it echoed much of what I felt ideologically about the purpose of education and schools. The question at the beginning of my career in higher education was how to be a transformational, intellectual, democratic teacher and scholar committed to the ideals of equality and social justice in education. This question remains unchanged but seems to be becoming increasingly more difficult to pursue and enact.

Pinar (2011) suggests that only by seeking meaning of self through the lived experience of curriculum can curriculum be truly experienced, enacted, and reconstructed. *Currere*, the Latin infinitive of “to run,” as method was originally outlined by Pinar in 1975 in his classic AERA paper, *The Method of Currere*, and further developed with Grumet in 1976 in *Toward a Poor Curriculum*. *Currere*, Pinar (2011) posits, “emphasizes the everyday experience of the individual and his or her capacity to learn from that experience; to reconstruct experience through thoughts and dialogue to enable understanding” (p. 2). In a shift to understand curriculum autobiographically, Pinar (2012) “provides a strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interests of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (p. 44).

Currere is, therefore, composed of four steps: the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetic, each providing a lens through which educational experience is remembered, envisioned in the future, analyzed for the present, and synthesized for understanding (Pinar, 2012). Utilizing the *currere* method has provided me space to reflect and autobiographically analyze the root of my educational experience, why and how my philosophy of education is created and exercised, and what I can do to continue on in these “paint by number” days (Taubman, 2009) in teacher education.

THINKING BACK ON MY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Being a preacher's kid can come with some perks: running around the eerily dark and quiet church sanctuary at midnight while your dad is finishing up his sermon, or the round the clock access to the church piano, flannel board, and Xerox machine, or the ultimate holiday moment when the ladies' groups shares Christmas cards stuffed with a single dollar bill for the cute little kids of the preacher.

It also has its questionable moments: being called down by your dad for talking (from the pulpit) in the middle of his sermon, living your life in a parsonage and a "goldfish bowl"—knowing the elders are watching your every move, the frequent moving, and the growing list of schools you attended with each new location. We moved fairly often, and as a result, I don't actually remember many of my teacher's names. I can recall the general energy of some schools and classrooms, but some moments are completely missing from my recollection.

Despite not really knowing what I aspired to be when I grew up (I think astronaut was the plan), I played a lot of imagined games of "school" in those church walls. Crafting lessons and instructional materials was an everyday event. As I got older, I led many children's activities and wanted to be a progressive educator before I even knew what it was. Despite the rural, conservative churches my dad served in, my parents were fairly "hippie" in their parenting approach. They both pursued education as first generation college students and continued into graduate education when my dad pursued masters and doctoral degrees in seminary.

Firstborn, I was a strong-willed, independent, and inquisitive kid born to small town, almost-but-not-really middle class, evangelical, hipster-like parents in Virginia (before being hipster was a thing). We were a bit unconventional, not affluent, and living in the church parsonage as we moved around was very common. Among the many messages they offered my two siblings and me was the value that thinking, curiosity, and intellect mattered. Knowing things about the world and the universe mattered. And asking questions and proposing alternative solutions was often the vehicle towards that knowledge.

At the center of being a preacher's kid, an evangelical Christian theology was mainstream in our home. It was fashionable not to celebrate Halloween (harvest parties being preferred instead), but yet we spent time theologically sparring with our scholar-pastor dad about textual criticism and inerrancy. While one opinion was explored on Sunday morning, my father encouraged us to challenge, question, and debate opposing points of view at home. Our experiences as a family were steeped in geeky popular culture with a mix of theology, science, and geography. We lived in several small rural towns in Appalachia and had the occasional taste of the city. Although we didn't travel much, we regularly watched *The Wonderful World of Disney* on our small color television along with *Star Trek*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *The Muppet Show*. I was an avid reader and distinctly recall being surrounded by a large number of Disney-produced "encyclopedias of knowledge," each volume abundant in text and images focusing on an aspect of the world: culture, technology, nature, geography, science, space exploration, geology, and art (just to name a few). I couldn't get enough of the world: literature, science, social studies, and the humanities. We made Chinese food at home, went spelunking, devoutly attended and sang in church youth groups and choirs, read science fiction, built models and rockets, and listened to 60s freedom rock, Jimi Hendrix, and the Beatles.

I would assume an outsider would call me an atypical female—an active outdoorsy kid who often avoided stereotypical gendered toys marketed towards girls. I was fascinated with NASA and maps that showcased far-off and exotic places, and if I was drawn to female characters, it was likely those who had esoteric sensibilities, contrary

heroinas like Mary Poppins and Alice in Wonderland. Disney absolutely influenced my lived, educational experience at home. I don't recall spending much time with any dolls, as Mickey Mouse ruled all. My well-worn Mickey Mouse stuffed animal sits in my china cabinet now as I write, a well loved artifact from those early years.

My first teaching jobs were at somewhat progressive schools: one a multi-age school with large learning centers in lieu of classrooms and the other a year-round public magnet school in a large city in Florida. Being different was what we did. We prided ourselves on having innovative pedagogies, not using textbooks, and having classrooms that looked like themed coffee shops. Make no mistake, we were still a typical public school with many unavoidable hallmarks of what life looks like in schools, but we attempted to merge some research with instructional decisions and carry the appearance that some against-the-grain qualities were being thought about. Of course, the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) remained an undeniable force in the interworking of teachers and parents.

As I made my way into higher education teaching, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, I sought to encourage deep reading of many types of text, texts that would often interrogate the power structures and systemic inequality in our schools. I recall one student remarking how she wasn't at all comfortable with what I was suggesting by saying, "This sounds like activism" and that it was not something she was willing to consider.

THE NEW COLONIZERS

Looking back, my childhood experiences with learning were more concerned with education rather than schooling. Education was what happened when you read a book or talked with someone new or tried out a new engine for a rocket. Schooling was often systematic and lacking in curiosity and philosophical purpose, while home was theological and full of eager questioning. I see that I bring many of these philosophical views of teaching and learning into my work as a teacher educator, as well as the idea that knowledge of the foundations of education are equally as important as pedagogical methodology. Further, much of my vision for education sits contrary to the current status of teacher education. This creates significant dissonance as I seek to prepare new teachers for the ways schools should be, versus the way that they currently are.

Postman and Weingartner (1969) assert that institutional powers prefer that schools do little to encourage children to question, doubt, or challenge the society in which they live. I often ask my elementary education students to consider the overall purposes of schooling, debate what and whose knowledge is most valuable, and examine privilege and power relationships in the American educational system. They have little understanding or awareness of the larger system at work, even as senior level students.

Concurrently, I am a strong advocate that elementary teachers should not only possess pedagogical principles and instructional methods, but must also be widely read in educational foundations and the history of schools and be able to cogently discuss curricular issues that often, then, inform pedagogical decisions, something that I have attempted to merge into my social studies methods courses. In these matters, I have been profoundly (perhaps naively) disillusioned.

Pinar (2004) warned us of the "the nightmare that is now our present," and I wonder if that sentiment could have been saved for 2017. As a teacher educator at a regional university, I've witnessed seismic change over the last five years in the work that we do. For teacher educators who strive to teach towards social justice, equality, democratic ideals, and the asking of hard questions of schooling over technical ones (Hyttén, 1999), the outlook is discouraging.

Most of our students have grown up with high-stakes testing and consider it a normal and uncontested variable. Students often see their time in the program as managing a checklist of things they need to do in order to earn their teaching credentials, with the philosophical study of educational issues a distraction from the “real things” that go on in schools. Opportunities for elementary education students to take courses in intellectually significant educational foundations—history of education, philosophy of education, socio-cultural influences on education, poverty, or social justice issues—are also reduced.

Meanwhile during the last five years, our university, like others, has been mandated to adopt new procedures, language, rhetoric, and perspectives. We’ve moved initiatives like the National Common Core Standards (career ready) to the forefront of our methods courses, reworked syllabi to reflect Career Ready/NCTQ/CAEP alignment and competency-based modules, found room to teach the new state evaluation value-added model, reshaped our programs towards a medical model of training (problem-based learning and student teaching now titled “residency”), and adopted the EdTPA, with each faculty member being calibrated to score them (prior to Pearson being selected as the primary scorer). What could have been a robustly academic, intellectual journey that valued the holistic study of education (its critical purposes, history, philosophy, foundations, content, and pedagogies) is reduced to the proper training, care, and feeding of technical workers for a factory-modeled vision of public schooling. And yet, there is little collective voice of dissent or outrage, mostly quiet compliance from students and faculty who are informed that these things are “not negotiable.” As one colleague shared with me, there is no academic freedom in teacher education, and it was time I stopped looking for it.

I synthesize and unpack these ideas within the theoretical framework of Olson’s (2008) *Schools as Colonizers*. Her work explores the deschoolers of the 1960s. Similar to the social and cultural reproduction frame she employs (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), perhaps teacher educators are being urged to culturally and socially reproduce and colonize the new ranks of elementary teachers who will be the primary technicians in the current audit culture (Taubman, 2009) of standardization, testing, and accountability. I’ve considered that teacher educators in higher education are similarly, as Olsen (2008) suggests of classroom teachers, blissfully unaware or, more likely, deliberately unconscious of their role and, as a result, support misguided mandates without question or hesitation. Students, therefore, are not challenged to examine the power and privilege structures in the schools in which they will work, explore histories of education and school reform, or “imagine otherwise” (Segall, 2002). Segall (2002) shares, “It is not the student teacher’s inability to imagine otherwise that restricts the possibility of educational change but teacher education’s inability to provide them ‘otherwise’ experiences that break with the traditional, the expected, the devious, and the taken-for-granted” (p. 167).

IMAGINING A SLOW FOUNDATIONS APPROACH TO TEACHER EDUCATION

There is hopeful anticipation when I am reminded, at curriculum studies conferences like the *Currere* Exchange Retreat, that the study of curriculum is indeed a complicated conversation that acknowledges lived, educational experience as transformative space. It is purposefully slow space. *Currere*, after all, is a thoughtful, slow, reflective process to analyze lived educational experience. A recent new text, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Berg & Seeber, 2016), illustrates a similar “slow” movement occurring in some spaces of the academy with faculty who resist the “culture of speed.”

In the corporate university, power is transferred from faculty to managers, economic justifications dominate, and the familiar “bottom line” eclipses pedagogical and intellectual concerns. Slow Professors advocate deliberation over acceleration. We need time to think, and so do our students. Time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury but is crucial to what we do. (p. x)

As curriculum today becomes more and more narrowly defined (even by well-intentioned colleagues in teacher education) as a school-based checklist of formal standards, the opportunities to resist banking concepts of education (Freire, 1993) and to deeply explore lived, educational experience are often diminished for both the teacher educator and the student.

As Parkinson (2013) rightly noted, “A growing and dominating focus on standardization, assessment, and accountability through accreditation consumes both attention and energy. Preparation of teacher candidates for a world of compliance overwhelms their preparation as agents of transformation” (pp. 121-122). For many of us who find our scholarship, research interests, and pedagogical identities situated in curriculum studies and elementary teacher education, the dissonance can be severe. Pinar (2012) illustrates this discord in his text, *What is Curriculum Theory?*:

Rather, curriculum theorists in the university regard our pedagogical work as the cultivation of independence of mind, self-reflexivity, and an interdisciplinary erudition. We hope to persuade teachers to appreciate the complex and shifting relations between their own self-formation and the school subjects they teach, understood both as subject matter and as human subjects. It is this indirect expression of subjectivity attuned to the historical moment that enables one to answer the ongoing curricular question *what knowledge is of most worth?* (p. 34)

Schubert (2013) echoes this idea,

While I agree that we need expertise in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, it is clear that we need much more. We need something to nourish STEM. What good are stems without roots and seeds? Educational foundations provide roots in the seedbed of philosophy, history, anthropology, economics, sociology, political science, geography, ecology, psychology, and more. (p. 92)

If teaching is to be public intellectual work, then intellectual work must comprise the majority of teacher preparation programs. Liberal arts education, with strong social justice components, must be included. Reclaiming foundations, educational philosophy, space for critical pedagogy, multicultural education, *currere*, and intellectual resilience are some avenues we might consider to shift the narrative back to one of educational transformation instead one of colonization. I’m quite glad to be contrary all day about that.

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