Tell Me I Matter: *Currere* as a Curricular Journey
By Jayna McQueen
Texas Christian University

School has been a haven for me. My life outside of the school building might be too complex and difficult to control or understand, but I knew the rules of *doing* school; I could follow directions and produce something. Performing well at school gave me a place to be accepted, to matter. Intentional reflection on the impact of school spaces in my life through Pinar's (1994, 2004) *currere* method helped me understand the complications of my lived experiences in order to assess the value of my work and for that assessment, alone, to matter—for *me* to matter on my own terms. In this paper, I explore my own *currere* journey through a critical geographic lens to consider the impact of educational spaces, power, resistance, and conformity more deeply. New understanding of my own privileges opened ideas of who might be left out of the conversation, moving me to visually depict this journey through digital storytelling[1]. Finally, I consider where my work might move forward in the world.

Currere: A Transformative Methodology

Pinar's (1994, 2004) *currere* methodology is an autobiographical journey of self-exploration with the intention of working toward a socially just educational community. Stemming from a cultural studies ideological understanding of the complexity of identity, I use critical geography to focus my *currere* journey through a spatial lens. The critical geographic framework studies the impact of physical space and place on the formation of personal identity, agency, and power, positing that spaces are not neutral, but perpetuate inequalities (Helfenbein, 2006; Sagan, 2007; Soja, 1989). The *currere* methodology within the critical geographic framework allows me to trouble my understanding of daily tensions that I blindly accept.

An Accounting: My Own Problemitizing

Not pretending to have an answer to the complex questions of education and its integral relation to social and cultural pressures, *currere* is merely a place to begin to understand my own lived experiences (Poetter & Googins, 2017). For the purpose of this paper, I try to separate the four stages of the *currere* process (regression, progression, analytic, and synthetical) knowing that the stages overlap and dynamically ebb and flow with and within each other (Pinar, 1994).

Regression Stage

I begin with the first time I consciously considered my internal stirrings as I interacted with educational spaces.

After a long day of teaching eighth graders, I walked to my graduate class at a local university. A markedly different feeling washed over me. My shoulders and face began to release tension. My brain wandered freely through possibilities. I fixated on these physical reactions as I walked down slightly curved paths under sweeping trees to a building that seemed to hold potential. Thoughtfully planned architectural structures must hold something and someone valuable. What about the public school that I walked into earlier that same day? What message did it convey about the value of the children and activities inside? The plain, square,

oatmeal-colored building seemed to hold a lifeless purpose of containment. Then, my thoughts turned to the second graders who I taught several years earlier. How much larger, more restricting, and imposing those same walls must seem when viewed through tiny eyes. What are we telling our children they are worth? What are we saying of the value that goes on inside their daily encampments? I have a long history with education. The spaces of schools have worked for me.

Desperate to move from the borders of the classroom culture, I fit myself into the mold of school at an early age, sitting down quietly at my place in the rows of desks filled with children who looked a great deal like me. In this institutional setting, adults and children accepted me; I performed well at school, and this conformity gave me some kind of value, albeit tenuously based on a shifting judgment. The physically conforming spaces of the school building became less a mark of impending doom and more a measure of success. These spaces contributed to my opportunities; I no longer minded the conformity of school. I was part of it. The straight rows and uniformity of school no longer othered me, but included me. I was now part of capital production.

What happened to those who did not conform so easily, who fought for their individual gifts and were pushed out to the borders? In this environment, "belonging is a privilege to be earned by docility, not a basic human right that is ensured for every child" (Shalaby, 2017, p. 162). If a child's gift is a fierce amount of energy, creativity, courage, or dramatic presence, they are punished and separated rather than celebrated. The choice is to ignore, contort, or deform their natural talents or face consequences that get increasingly more severe and more isolationist. The children are quite literally "rendered invisible" (Shalaby, 2017, p. 152). This isolation adds a heavy burden to children already feeling the disproportionate weight of racial, cultural, and economic inequities.

I had obstacles in the start of life. My sister and I were raised and supported solely by our young mother without much economic or emotional support. We were alone much of the time as our mom struggled to find her own way, to fight her own demons. We were not financially privileged, but I carved my own path, paid for my college education, and graduated with honors. I became pretty impressed with myself. I felt all children, regardless of economic status, should be able to accomplish their own dreams, using my accomplishments as an example.

Considering myself an advocate for children, that last sentence is difficult to write, filled with ignorant assumptions, false pride, and an attitude that reifies otherness by telling my story along this historical timeline. The first time I heard my own voice reading those words out loud to colleagues, I cried. But, with vulnerability comes strength and "an openness to being affected by others and also affecting others" in order to see a bit more clearly (Huckaby, 2013, p. 576).

I had obstacles as a young girl, but I fit into the standardized norms of whiteness. I was afforded access to spaces based on my gender, race, and physical appearance that privileged me. Although I was a child in poverty, I attended an affluent public school. I was accepted into the spaces of my more affluent peers, because I looked like them. I borrowed their spaces. My best friends' families let me sleep at their houses, eat at their restaurants, attend their churches. A bank president, business owner, and engineer wrote my reference letters for jobs and university admission forms. What if my neighborhood were different, my race were different, my religion were different, or my sexual orientation were different? The spaces borrowed would be different as well.

Progression Stage

I sit back and imagine: physical spaces for every child that promote agency and creative freedom regardless of zip code, race, or financial means, in communities where social and emotional health trump economic logic. Children need emotional support in relationships and spaces that value them, protect their rights, and recognize their gifts. When children do not find that support at home, they look for acceptance in other places; they look for someone or something to tell them they matter. Schools often fail.

The conforming spaces of the school environment told me I mattered, because I contorted my own body, emotions, and actions to meet the expectations of school. The spaces of schools should not shut out those unwilling to conform, but spaces and relationships in schools must value the knowing, as well as the knowledge, the becoming, as well as the being, of the individual child. I hesitate to describe one concrete vision of what these school spaces might look like in order to resist creating another binary that judges, so I hold any descriptions as fluid ideas rather than static lists.

The fluid ideas pour out as rows of desks pointing passive children toward some truth-bearer are replaced with spaces that allow all members of the community to interact and know each other in an entanglement of hearts, bodies, thoughts, and experiences. Children have spaces to interact as a community of learners with a specific order that "provides sufficient time, ample space, appropriate materials, and assurance that someone will help in case of need" (Noddings, 1992, p. 140). The spaces are fluid and adaptable but organized so that children learn to care for objects, as well as the other community members. Rather than the controlled movement of bodies in schools, children have wide spaces that encourage all to move freely. Varied types and heights of seating invite both young and old to live, talk, and work together, supporting social construction, analysis, and synthesis of ideas (Loi & Dillon, 2006). In these spaces, rather than performance as the measure of what matters, the child grows in her own gifts, understanding, and agency to develop a critical consciousness that enables the child to judge for herself where she matters in the world.

The right to privacy and uninterrupted time alone is respected not only for adults, but also for children. Beautiful, private places value the individual soul of the child (Te One, 2011). Every child has an individual space that is all her own to move in and out of as a representation of herself. She is worthy of beauty and care. She is trusted to choose private or social experiences as her needs alone dictate. This ownership provides an opportunity to care for the things she loves and a sacred space to which she may retreat when she needs to regain feelings of security, bringing "serenity to the soul" (Noddings, 2006, p. 140).

In this imagined world, all children have outdoor spaces with natural elements for climbing, hiding, playing, and imagining. Porches and gardens are "the lovely intermediate spaces that both shelter us and give us confidence to wander forth" (Noddings, 2007, p. 174). Natural spaces provide rich opportunities to invite and discover myriad living and nonliving things: humans, seeds, rocks, plants, and animals. Some children find interests or passions to explore more deeply with teachers, outside experts, and invited guests (both human and non-human). Outdoor spaces celebrate the wild and free.

If I am not restricted by economic constraints or the realities of social and cultural privilege, then all children have access to spaces that support them as creative problem-solvers, global thinkers, and economic transformers in order for

them to contribute to a healthy democratic society (Giroux, 2005). What would our communities look like if we valued children as the true foundation of our shared world, providing them with the spaces that they need in order to grow emotionally, physically, spiritually, and academically strong, regardless of the price tag? Looking at children as a means of production or economic value classifies children, creating a binary scale of a valued few and the rest. Providing equitable education for children is not a privilege, but a human right that cannot be assessed purely through economic measures (García & De Lissovoy, 2013).

ANALYTIC STAGE

I give myself permission to value my ideas and academic interests as they stand alone, without needing approval. My passions spiral back to work in communities creating more equitable spaces for children. The power, as well as the complexity, of this transformational journey is in this spiral, which continues to unfold even as I write these words.

In the unfolding, I know am a teacher. And, I am a student. The two identities tangle together in work as a graduate student, instructor, and researcher. Whether I take a detour on an academic or research path, my work and passion is teaching. Yet, while I taught in public schools, year after year I walked past and concretized hegemonic attitudes and spaces that focus on achieving standardization, defining children by their ability to conform, dehumanizing them into a single point on a chart. Othering students and their cultural values and experiences was the opposite of my intention, yet I did just that. So, I find the power of my reflection situated in valuing the present with that new understanding. Only then am I able to say, "Yes, I matter."

My work is situated at the intersection of my own rights, responsibilities, and gifts. Understanding my gifts as those both freely given and those intentionally earned, they include privileged knowledge and opportunities found in my current academic pursuits. I understand my responsibility is to work toward a more equitable, democratic community as I begin to see injustices. This work is messy and uncertain, but it matters. I have the right to choose to ignore these injustices or to pursue them. I choose to pursue them. I choose work that helps children tear down obstacles and build partnerships in communities. At this intersection, through research and community life, I work to connect with and to understand the needs of families in poverty, valuing and being vulnerable to the voices of children in poverty and their families who want the best for them.

SYNTHETICAL STAGE

I ask questions of myself and my work: How is my work important? Who am I affecting and how? With the hope of moving through the synthetical stage, I attended the 2016 *Currere* Exchange in Oxford, Ohio. Pieces fell apart, moved around, and came back together through dialogue with educational scholars, teachers, and activists. Beautiful things happened. Connections sparked new understandings, pushed for possibilities, and highlighted other viewpoints. I listened to the lived experiences of others within this supportive community and began to see my work and passions fitting into a bigger mosaic of life.

Children, regardless of their zip codes, races, or social statuses, should have safe places to grow, to learn, and to value their own selves, yet that idea seems unattainable in our current climate of reform, measurement, and accountability based on White norms. Situating my envisioned safe spaces for children within current political,

social, and cultural realities, I see possibilities. These challenges create opportunities for communities to regain their own agency, vision, and action. The healing will not be found in institutional settings. When communities come together in neighborhood-based organizations, they "recognize the role of care, healing, and justice in developing young people as well as fostering strong, vibrant community life" (Ginwright, 2010, p. 56). I posit that communities can create what children need: "a safe place of belonging for children, a safe place to find their own value, a safe place to see inequities and to imagine other possibilities" (Noddings, 1992, p. 116).

As I look for my place in this work, I come as one not knowing. I judge my own intentions and ideas, troubling my vision of some imagined answer, trying desperately to avoid the same pattern of expectation and compliance. Trying to unsettle binaries, I look to partner in communities that value the wild and free, as well as the compliant and quiet, as vibrant and gifted community members. Any move toward work that seeks a more socially just community will first need guidance from individuals who define their just world. With deep self-reflection, we begin to see the injustices that we have come to accept, and only then do we see our place in the call to action (Freire, 1993). With this in mind, it seems that the best I have to offer in this partnership is the *currere* method.

If, as a post-critical researcher, I truly value the fluid, individual, yet communal needs of families in poverty, then I must respect the offering of this most powerfully reflective tool. The transformative process of *currere* could help students, mothers, and teachers find where they matter in their own journeys and look deeply at the injustices they daily accept. It seems a gift too precious not to offer to community partners in research. I may not live with nor understand the needs of families in poverty, but I can extend a bridge from my own journey to individuals willing to walk with me.

Looking at charts and data cannot right the educational ship, but these current, violent acts of conformity on our children's physical, emotional, and spiritual selves open opportunities for community work. The *currere* method in community work can help families and children intentionally value their own creative thoughts, unique longings, and treasures of the heart. This personal value brings with it the agency to make sustainable changes in communities and schools. The cry of children might just move from, "Tell me I matter" to simply, "I matter."

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[1] Online readers may view the stories by clicking here. Print readers may view the stories by going to YouTube and searching for "McQueen spatial thinking."