

In Pursuit of Whimsical Wisdom for Education Changemaker Mental Health and Burnout Prevention

Where there is a whimsy, there is a way

David Charles Metler

“What is your greatest weakness coming into Teach For America” (TFA Interviewer)

“I will never feel like I did enough for these students” - David Metler (2010)

At the time, my response was non-triggering to myself and the interviewer. I was accepted into Teach for America (TFA) and began serving in Detroit when I was twenty-two years old. I would last four months in my twelfth grade English position at Detroit Midtown Academy, even after training from TFA and graduating from the University of Michigan School of Education. If my current self were the interviewer, I would have said to my younger self in the kindest Midwestern way possible, “David, that sounds like a savior mindset and also have you heard of self-care?!”

I hadn’t.

There I was on the first day of TFA, with my tie-dye tie, teaching 12th graders who were just a few years younger than me. Parker Palmer once shared that *“we teach who we are” but what if we can’t be ourselves in our roles in education?* I had never thought that the face of authority would be my own. My face, the face that used to be covered by freckles and watermelon seeds, transformed as I walked into the classroom for the first time as a real classroom teacher.

My principal pressured me to yell at the students to ‘control the classroom’ and forced me to change my desks from a circle to traditional banking education rows leaving Freire, bell hooks, and Dewey shaking their heads. I did everything I could to support twelfth graders who were reading and writing at a 2nd grade level. This included before and after school tutoring and making regular home calls to the majority of my students, many of whom were failing because attendance was so infrequent and there was no attendance policy. When my Principal demanded that I give all the students A’s at the end of the first report card marking so that the school could maintain its funding, I decided to leave on ethical grounds.

It took me some time to peel myself off my parent’s family room floor as I struggled with anxiety and depression. With my mom’s loving support and support from my mentor Teresa Graham Brett, I was able to begin processing what had happened and started getting back on my feet. Teresa’s book ‘Parenting for Social Change’ illuminated for me the larger control culture of adultism that is systemic to schooling that I struggled with in my authority role as a teacher (Brett, 2011) and helped me put language to the moral injury I had experienced (Levinson, 2015). I also found it therapeutic to talk with those who had similar experiences in TFA Detroit and led some events in the region to

support the well-being of my fellow educators. While supporting other educators, I discovered my purpose - to support educator well-being.

From TFA Dropout to Swing Set Institute Founder

My healing and authentic empowerment path (Allo, 2023) began with realizing my burnout was not completely due to my own lack of tools for self-care, but also to the lack of system support for educators and the failure to prepare for the vicissitudes of the teaching profession. Now, with over 20 years of experience working to transform educator well-being and empower youth across PK-16 education, including working in juvenile prisons, children's hospitals, and foster care, I have broadened my perspective of why the education system is the way it is and what it may take to change it.

More than four in ten K–12 workers in the U.S. (44%) say they feel burned out, outpacing all other industries nationally (Gallup, 2022). Even with increased funding for more school counselors, educators are uniquely on the frontlines (Collins, 2023) with teaching being considered as stressful as working in an ER (Jennings, 2018). In addition, there's a need to understand how students are impacted by 'stress-contagion' from burnt out educators (Oberle, 2016) and how a culture that supports thriving educators could positively impact student outcomes.

Wisdom in the field of education brings our attention to the power of the inner landscape of a teacher's life to transform education - 'our hidden wholeness and the courage to teach' (Palmer, 1998) and creating systems that support educators and youth thriving.

A full commitment to educator well-being hasn't yet been tried at a system level.

I founded the Swing Set Institute to co-create a whimsical wisdom community for education changemakers. The vision is to inspire a world where children and adults are thriving because adult 'childhood changemakers' are whimsically healing from their own childhood and schooling experiences to be more empowered to face the inner work in a collective care community to become allies with youth and as adults truly heal unleashing their capacity for integrating the wisdom of childhood into their education changemaker path liberating both adults and children.

Healing with the Wisdom of Childhood

The Swing Set Institute approach is rooted in the foundational qualities of education -realness and ridiculousness- supporting educators to therapeutically reconnect with the wise qualities of childhood that are the qualities of great educators – playfulness, creativity, humor, imagination, curiosity, risk-taking, resilience, and teamwork. This

supports educators to creatively prevent burnout, and collectively heal playfully processing what happened in their own childhood and school experiences.

Education changemakers will grow in awareness of the relationship between their own childhood and schooling experiences with the triggers they have in daily interactions with students and in educational settings that connect to their past wounds and disempowering experiences. With whimsical therapeutic support, transform how they mirror the injustice of the world in how they teach students (Brett, 2011). Educators can be challenged to question their authority and power over students so that they don't perpetuate injustice and oppression in everyday moments in education. We can finally get to the source of the system level power-over dynamics of discrimination and oppression whose roots begin at the beginning – in childhood.

What it looks like to be In-SpireD - Reimagining Educator Mental Health with Realness and Ridiculousness

The Swing Set Institute In-Spire program came out of the 2025 4.0 Tiny Fellowship design dreaming process and was shaped by over 100 education changemakers across the country. The first 4-week pilot was offered in the summer 2025 and was expanded into its current 6-week curriculum course in the summer 2026 with the guidance of the alumni from the In-Spire 2025 cohort.

In-Spire is intentionally offered on Sunday nights in summer to replace the Sunday Scarries with a relaxing space for slowing down and cultivating inspiration before the start of a week. With education changemakers from across the country, and Canada, and across the education ecosystem from teachers to principals, to executive directors and education consultants, In-Spire is an intentionally diverse collective care community of education changemakers that now has 10 alumni (a cohort of 6 alumni from its 2025 program and a cohort of 4 alumni from its 2026 program.)

“I was inspired by the freedom to be both real and ridiculous. We need to seek out and protect our joy and sense of silliness and how lightness, humor, whimsy, has to have a space—an intentional one—in our classrooms and schools”

-In-Spire Participant

The expanded 6-week In-Spire curriculum includes bite-sized practical Whimsical Mental Health Tools for education changemakers including:

Whimsical Well-Being - exploring the intersection of realness and ridiculousness in mental health in education and cultivating the discernment and tools for balancing gravity with levity along the education path.

Anti-Resume Party - *practice* bringing light and reflection to the setbacks, failures, and challenges for education changemakers we would typically hide, feel the common humanity of growing through experiences like these, and becoming more whole integrating these significant experiences with whimsical wisdom

Presence in Processing - Slowing down to learn between the lines, writing up a critical moment from our education experiences, and sitting with it with full presence fully bringing it to the group for higher level processing and insight

Poetry of Purpose - Sharing poems that move education changemakers to feel as candles flicker bringing forth a bubble bath for the mind and heart, and reflecting on the way poetry speaks realness and whimsicalness into the heart to reconnect to inner wisdom from childhood

Whimsical Wisdom Council - Collectively sharing our most frustrating challenges and dilemmas in education experiencing the common humanity of not having it all figured out and the collective wisdom of the group and each education changemaker's intuition.

Larger Connection - *Feeling in-spired with connections to education changemakers that are 'walking the talk' and bringing innovative embodied changemaking strategies to mental health in education. Being a part of something larger - a whimsical wisdom community of education changemakers - feeling that larger connection to your whimsy besties who are all on similar journeys in education.*

Where There is a Whimsy There is a Way - Deeper Learning for Education Changemakers

I had a full circle moment representing the Swing Set Institute at the Inaugural 2026 Teach For America Statewide Summit in Rochester NY learning how to best support new TFA corps members and TFA alumni with whimsical wisdom for sustaining the emotional journey of education. There I was a TFA Detroit 2010 dropout, now 16 years later 'bringing the whimsy back' to transform mental health and prevent burnout for education changemakers through the Swing Set Institute. I find TFA to be a community of kindred spirits deeply passionate educators committed to equity and transformation in education which calls for a deeper commitment to the mental health and wellbeing of TFA corps members. As a TFA drop-out, I feel compassion and deep resonance with the new TFA 2026 corps members, and am hopeful that programs like In-Spire could potentially become the norm for creating a collective care community for pre-service teachers and sustaining this community throughout the education professional journey to better protect and harness educator mental health, self-care, and wellbeing.

I also was in-spired recently to be a part of the 2026 Harvard Graduate School of Education Deeper Learning Institute Education Camp in Colorado, where I formally became part of the alliance of education leaders cultivating deeper learning across the country. To be able to lead and facilitate this deeper learning with authenticity and integrity with students, education leaders are working to embody this 'symmetrical' deeper learning from the inside-out. I was inspired by the Deeper Learning Institute Ed Camp intentional offering of a magical learning environment that infused a 'spirit of playfulness' of summer camp into the growth and learning of education changemakers (Mehta, 2026).

The vulnerability of adults feeling safe to be more playful, especially leaders in education to take the work seriously but take themselves a little less seriously, will take careful construction of spaces like the Educator Camp and the In-Spire Program that create the conditions for adults to play with new ideas and take the pressure off to be certain, to stay curious, and lead with your own vulnerability and realness where silliness is a shared sacred language in education. The capacity for adults to tap back into their playful spirit will take seriously the need for adults to heal from their own childhood and schooling experiences and remind ourselves of the wisdom of childhood that we have forgotten and remember that there truly aren't any grown ups.

"I'm going to tell you something important. Grown-ups don't look like grown-ups on the inside either. Outside, they're big and thoughtless and they always know what they're doing. Inside, they look just like they always have. Like they did when they were your age. The truth is, there aren't any grown-ups. Not one, in the whole wide world.'

We sat there, side by side, on the old wooden bench, not saying anything. I thought about adults. I wondered if that was true: if they were all really children wrapped in adult bodies, like children's books hidden in the middle of dull, long books. The kind with no pictures or conversations."

-Neil Gaiman, 'The Ocean at the End of the Lane'

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