

SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE: UNVEILING RURAL STUDENT CHALLENGES IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO THROUGH *CURRERE*

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Intense, meaningful reflection provides an avenue for educators to examine their actions. The *currere* process facilitates reflective practices as it encourages educators to contemplate experiences that may have consciously or unconsciously impacted their beliefs and practices. Through the *currere* process, practitioners impartially reflect on guiding influences that embody who they are and whom they hope to become. Pinar (1994)—a foundational contributor—emphasized the importance of conceptualizing the relationships between past, present, and future. Pinar suggested achieving such understanding by deeply analyzing “what has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience” (p. 20). Through regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical processes, educators can unveil crucial underlying principles that guide their professional ideologies.

I employed the *currere* process in my educational practice to unleash assumptions and influences that have covertly and overtly influenced my academic and professional career. Through a rigorous synthesis of my past, present, and future, I examine the ways my academic experiences influenced my understanding of life, which has guided my professional pathways. In this paper, I begin with an overview of pertinent elements of Trinidad and Tobago’s education system. This overview is followed by a regressive approach (Pinar, 1994) that entwines rural philosophies (De Lisle et al., 2012; Rajack-Talley, 2016; Schafft, 2016) with my narrative account of my experiences as a rural student attending one of Trinidad and Tobago’s prestigious secondary schools located in an urban area. I next employ progressive and analytical approaches to explore my current experiences and whom I hope to become as an educator. Finally, employing a synthetical approach, I assess my profound purpose by considering who I am. By relying on Pinar’s four approaches—regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical—I ask, “How does rurality appear as a theme in my academic and professional life?”

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO’S SECONDARY SCHOOL SYSTEM & RURAL CHALLENGES

Trinidad and Tobago remain dependent on an archaic colonialist system of high-stakes examination and student segregation that was first established in 1879 (De Lisle et al., 2012). The country’s public secondary school system consists of 32% denominational schools run by religious bodies and 68% government schools (MOE, 2020). Denominational schools traditionally have been labeled prestigious. They achieve high academic learning standards and attract wealthy and high-achieving students (De Lisle et al., 2010). At the end of compulsory primary education, all students must take the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA), which assesses competence in mathematics, language arts, and composition. The marks attained are used for sorting students into secondary schools. Parents provide a list of four secondary school choices. Schools at the top of the lists are usually prestigious, in high demand, and located in urban areas. Providing this list does not guarantee a child’s placement into their chosen schools. Students who are not placed in schools of their choice are usually placed in an institution within their geographic catchment area.

The Concordat of 1960—a legislative agreement between denominational boards and the government—gives religious school boards the choice of 20% of the students enrolled in their secondary schools. Each religious board chooses these students based on the individual board's criteria. This process implies that factors such as wealth, social status, and religious beliefs can influence which students attend prestigious schools. Furthermore, many rural students with average or low performances on the SEA examination are placed in schools within or close to their communities, resulting in rural schools lacking high academically performing students, while rural communities' high academically performing students are placed in urban schools.

Globally, rurality is often associated with tranquility and low crime (Perreault, 2019; Pylarz & Bowden, 2019). This situation is the same in Trinidad and Tobago, where serious crime occurrences are substantially more frequent in urban areas than rural (OSAC, 2019). The levels of safety and security within rural communities often persuade rural community members to sacrifice potential opportunities in urban centers to remain in their communities. Rural students encounter similar challenges as they grapple with a desire to remain within their community's safety against the desire to venture to urban centers for better academic and career opportunities. As Trinidad and Tobago's high performing schools are mostly located in urban hubs (UNICEF, 2017), rural students desiring academic advancement must endure the long daily commute to urban areas or abandon the safety and comfort of their homes and relocate to urban regions.

Trinidad and Tobago's decision-makers often overlook the country's rural communities' developmental needs. Over the years, numerous cries from the country's rural residents have emphasized varying deprivation levels that rural communities endure (Paul, 2018; *Trinidad & Tobago Guardian*, 2012; *Trinidad Express* Editorial Staff, 2018). Poor roads, inadequate essential services, such as safe and available water and electricity, and lack of public social services are among the significant challenges rural community members consistently undergo. There is, thus, a national disregard for rural development that places many communities at a deficit (De Lisle et al., 2012; Rajack-Talley, 2016; UNICEF, 2017). Poverty is another factor that often places rural residents at educational disadvantage. Trinidad and Tobago's poverty rates are significantly higher in rural areas than urban ones (De Lisle et al., 2012; UNICEF, 2017). There exists a link between poverty and low academic performance, whereby, parents experiencing poverty cannot adequately provide the necessary finances for school supplies, meals, and travel (De Lisle, 2019). Poverty, and its effects, may provide one explanation for the drastically lower educational attainment among students in Trinidad and Tobago's rural areas (Central Statistical Office, 2020; De Lisle, 2019; UNICEF 2017).

MY CURRERE JOURNEY'S INCEPTION

The memory that stimulated my quest to embark on a *currere* journey began on an unforgettable day in June 2018. On that day, I stood proudly before colleagues and students at my school, graciously accepting a commemorative token that signified the community's immense appreciation for my dedication as a teacher at their only primary school. Community members and organizations touted me as one of their school's best teachers based on my continual success in guiding the community's children toward attaining high scores on the SEA examination. That particular year, five of my class's twelve students gained scores high enough to secure placement into four of the few prestigious secondary schools in the city, some 42 kilometers away. Although not rare for

urban primary schools, this was a remarkable feat for my small rural school. Throughout the school's history, students have rarely attained scores that enabled them to attend any of the city schools that attract highly academic and affluent children. The community perceived the five students' performances as validation of my success as an educator and a representation of their school's and community's growth and development.

Adding to my already boosted ego was the knowledge that, for the first time, I had assisted students in qualifying for entry into one of the country's most prestigious schools—my alma mater. Suddenly the realization struck me, "They will be attending my alma mater." Two vivid, conflicting memories overpowered my thoughts. My first memory brought back pride and joy—similar to that felt by my students. At 11 years old, I stood in front of my school's assembly as my principal shouted with exuberance the name of a school in which I had been placed. The school was unknown to my friends and me, but the word *college* was enough to evoke a chorus of cheers and praises. Such school-placement seemed unachievable to any student at my school. I was the first student in my school's and community's history to gain entry into a prestigious school.

Two years later, in a starkly juxtaposed memory, I again was in front of my school's assembly. This time, instead of approximately 80 pairs of eyes, over 500 pairs of eyes stared at me. My principal stood with three girls to her right and me to her left. Unlike me, the girls to my principal's right were all beaming with pride. I vividly recall feeling willing to sacrifice anything in the world to be one of them as anxiety and disgrace replaced the pride that had illuminated my eyes two years earlier. I attended a school that had a standard of excellent academic performance to uphold. Underperforming was unacceptable and signified inherent laziness, negligence, and apathy and was, thus, deserving punishment and humiliation. Unlike my schoolmates to the principal's right, who achieved over 90%, I achieved under 30% and was subjected to the consequent humiliation of standing to my principal's left. I grappled with internal conflicts such as relief that my parents, friends, and community members would not learn of this event, as no other schoolmate resided in my community and telephones were not present in my community's households. I felt disconcerted that the school I was once elated to attend had morphed into an institution I hated. Above all, I blamed myself for my inability to rise above the numerous circumstances that led to my underperformance.

As my consciousness returned to 2018, I acknowledged that many of the challenges I faced when I was a rural student attending a secondary school in the city still existed. This epiphany led to deep reflection on my role as an educator and my effectiveness in improving students' opportunities and preparing them for circumstances that may challenge their academic success. Furthermore, I pondered my role as an educator and those of my own past educators. How similar and dissimilar were our practices? What advice can I offer educators whose emphasis on high stakes examinations and high accountability may mar their ability to recognize the challenges students within their classroom face daily? Thus, I began my *currere* process through in-depth, honest, constant introspection of my biographical journey.

REGRESSIVE: AN EXAMINATION OF MY PAST EXPERIENCES

Performing exceptionally well in primary school and being placed in a prestigious school in the city meant leaving the safety of my mother's home and my community to live with a father I hardly knew but who lived within walking distance of my new school. The alternative was a costly commute along over 30 kilometers of winding, partially dangerous cliff terrain to and from school. The move to my father's home in the city was

guided by an ambitious hope of attaining a more conducive learning environment than my rural environment could offer. The urban environment of drugs, crime, and abuse, albeit strange to me, seemed almost normal to my new city family and friends. My new lifestyle required safety precautions, such as remembering to lock the front door behind me whenever I entered the house, not venturing too far away from home, and always being conscious of my surroundings. My chaotic unfamiliar lifestyle did little to improve my academic performance. Steadily, the girl whose academic performance once placed her at the top of the class began to decline. For the first time in my life, I found myself at the bottom of my class's academic ladder. Then unexpectedly, nearing the end of my first year at my school, to everyone's surprise, including my teacher's, I gained full scores in an activity, surpassing everyone in the class and revealing my hidden potential. Maybe it was an effort to dispel the notion of me cheating or maybe it was intuition that directed my teacher to summon me to her office to chat about my home and experience at school. Not understanding its significance, I innocently repeated a word I often heard friends and neighbors use to describe a member of my household. I impassively told my teacher, "He is a *pipper*" (a local term meaning drug addicts with a high dependence on illegal drugs, such as cocaine and methamphetamine). My teacher's smile diminished, I was allowed to return to my class, and that weekend my mum informed me that I would be moving back to her home.

I dispelled any teacher's expectation that returning to my community would improve my performance as my grades continued to decline. Relocation meant enduring the foreseeable challenges that my mother hoped to elude by sending me to my father's residence. Nonetheless, my teachers perceived my continued low grades as a threat to my school's sterling reputation and a ratification of my indolence.

Though happy to return to my community, I was not prepared for the many challenges of attending an urban school while living in a rural community. I woke at 5:00 am each day to catch a public bus that would take me to school, and that same bus would bring me back by 7:00 pm. Poor community roads meant placing a piece of cloth in the back of the bus shed, among other pieces belonging to other residents, to remove the mud off my shoes, thus, concealing the reality of my less than satisfactory community conditions from my urban counterparts. During my second year at school, inclement weather caused a massive landslide that marooned our community from the rest of the country. For two months, I would wake at 4:00 am to walk, alongside other residents, six kilometers to the landslide point. On reaching the landslide, I would remove my shoes, tread cautiously across the dangerous pile of mud and stone, rinse my feet in a nearby spring, replace my shoes, and enter the public bus that would be waiting to take commuters to their city destinations for work, school, or to access necessary services that are only available in the city. I would then repeat the process for my return journey home. My sheer exhaustion at the end of the day, along with my candlelit study area, frequently limited me to merely completing, or many times partially completing, homework with no opportunity for pursuing additional studies.

My lifestyle was vastly different from many of my classmates. Our matching uniforms were unsuccessful in concealing the disparities among students' social statuses. The affluent popular students understandably bonded in friendship and overshadowed their few impoverished classmates. Students' high-end means of transportation, popular expensive bookbags and stationery, and their ability daily to purchase lunch and snacks from the school's cafeteria were jarring and unwelcome reminders that I was a square peg desperately trying to fit into a round hole. My mother's meager earnings as our

community's seamstress could barely sustain the yearly school expenses, but this was a sacrifice she was willing to make to ensure I attended my elite school. The exhaustive list of necessary school supplies that came at the end of the school year, and lengthened with every new term, was presented to parents with the unequivocal expectation of prompt purchasing. My mother's inability to attend to the endless demands for additional school supplies often fueled my contempt toward my school and my family's economic situation. I despised the constant class projects that required purchasing items. In many cases, the decision to settle for a failing grade for non-submission seemed like a reasonable alternative to the humiliation of presenting unappealing work created from scrap resources while my classmates produced beautiful projects written on expensive stationery or built with newly purchased resources.

My mother's tasty bake (a flat-bread, roasted in an iron pot or tawa), though happily displayed and relished in the company of my rural community friends, was something I was reluctant to display among my classmates who were accustomed to oven-baked bread. I ate out of my bookbag, concealing my frugal meal packed into my baby brother's formula tin. The covert yet continuously building annoyance toward my mother for her inability to provide me with lunch money overshadowed any real understanding of her financial hardships. A progressive longing to attend a less prestigious city school, similar to those attended by other students from my community, fueled hatred and regret that my academic ability led me to my institution. Other students in my community attended schools comprising students from less affluent families and whose SEA grades were not sufficient to access the more sought-after schools. At these institutions, teachers were aware of the various social challenges their students faced, and as such, realistically gauged their expectations regarding students' performances in tandem with students' lifestyles, aspirations, and needs. Unlike me, my friends who attended these schools seemed happy. Regrettably, my educators did not consider my rurality, my route to school, or my background as obstacles which, like the landslip that prevented commuters from reaching their desired destinations, prevented a smooth transition along my academic journey. Instead, educators perceived my failing grades as representing a need for direct intervention in the form of punishment and ultimately a spot to my principal's left.

PROGRESSIVE: THAT WHICH I INTEND TO BECOME

As I look beyond today into a future five years from the present, I envision little change to the system that places some secondary schools above others. Times have changed since my days as a secondary student. Now, essential services such as water and electricity are more frequently accessible to rural communities, although not equitably distributed. Rural citizens' quality of life has improved, but the poverty levels remain higher in rural areas than urban.

Five years from today, I will have attained a PhD and be, yet again, the first in my community to achieve such level of academic performance. I envision myself as an educator enacting change and as a representation of rural advocacy. I will reach out to rural parents and students, preparing them for the challenges ahead as I use my resilience as an example that, to the optimistic eye, obstacles can be steppingstones. I will encourage other rural educators to do the same by stimulating self-esteem among students and molding them to believe in themselves and their abilities to overcome inevitable rural challenges. Most importantly, I will promote collaborative activism among educators and communities to identify systemic practices that disadvantage rural education and, by so doing, advocate for positive transformation of such practices.

Freire (2002) emphasized the importance of disadvantaged people educating persons in dominant positions about unjust practices and revealing inequitable systems that disadvantage and marginalize. Freire also stressed the importance of persons in dominant positions understanding and accepting accountability for their actions and the ways their practices marginalize others. I envision myself returning to my alma mater and similar prestigious schools to share my student-experiences with teachers and use these experiences as a means of revealing concealed realistic challenges that their students encounter daily. Thus, I will be speaking from a student's perspective about issues that still exist in the education system today. I will highlight systems that stimulate practices that isolate and suppress students' performances, thereby, promoting the need for the country's education systems to address social challenges, which will, in turn, improve all schools' performances. Through my advocacy, I will promote equitable opportunities for rural students by working to ensure that rural secondary schools will be adequately equipped with the necessary infrastructure and human capital to promote meaningful place-based education for all students, thus, making rural schools attractive to students of all academic levels and social statuses.

I will continue to embark on research that addresses rural deprivation and educational disadvantage through my university academic position. The *currere* process will be one of the main approaches guiding my various research, thus, inviting rural and urban educators to embark on *currere* journeys to stimulate deep emotional reflection and meaningful change to praxis, ideologies, and professional growth. As such, I will continue to be an advocate for rural development. Through my scholarly practices, I will raise awareness and clamor for improved educational opportunities for rural areas so that the long journey to urban hubs for education will become a thing of the past. Then, rural communities will be exposed to high-quality education synonymous with their urban schools, thus, allowing rural schools to become beacons of rural development.

ANALYTICAL: THE PRESENT ME

I write this paper some 4,017 kilometers from my homeland. A quest for academic success has once again pushed me to unfamiliar territory. As I pursue my doctoral studies in New Brunswick, Canada, I find myself, yet again, a square peg trying to fit into a round hole—Black woman and outsider who is caught in an unfamiliar place but opting to undergo any formidable challenges as a necessary sacrifice for professional development. Today, I draw from the intrinsic strength that has propelled me throughout my life and has gotten me through five years of secondary school and 11+ years of post-secondary education. The obstacles that I long ago instinctively turned into steppingstones now serve as building blocks of my resilience as the community that supported me all my life continues to regard me as a representation of community success.

Today, I continue my doctoral studies exploring rural education in Trinidad and Tobago guided by an inclination to challenge policies and practices that disadvantage rural students. I guide my research toward exploring the perceptions of educators, students, and community members. Exploring perceptions was a purposeful well-thought-out decision as, like Freire (2002), I believe stories must be told from the vantage points of those affected by them. Throughout this and future research, I intend to unveil practices that overtly and covertly marginalize and disadvantage some groups of people while providing others with privilege.

Though no longer in a primary school classroom setting, I continue to educate via various mediums. My role as a budding university educator allows me the opportunity

to influence and mold university students' lives. Freire (2002) and hooks (1994) encouraged educators to become learners, to be willing to switch roles with students and learn from their students as much as they would like their students to learn from them. Each student is unique with their own distinct narrative. I am an educator of current and future educators. My crucial job is to invigorate my student-teachers' understanding of the complexities and diversities that exist within classrooms and the need for educational opportunities that cater to each difference so that students can thrive in an inclusive environment and be cognizant of their lived experiences.

Finally, I have moved from a rural community in Trinidad and Tobago to New Brunswick, one of Canada's most rural provinces. I remain in a different but similar rurality. In this province, I continuously learn of synonymous challenges to those my rural home community experiences. Consequently, my advocacy goes beyond my homeland but also includes my new home. I sit at a unique vantage point to identify rural challenges and, thus, tailor my suggestions and intervention strategies to meet the needs of rural communities located in Canada and Trinidad and Tobago.

SYNTHETICAL: WHO AM I?

Trinidad and Tobago has a long way to go before its governing bodies are willing to acknowledge their practices that often marginalize and disadvantage citizens in various levels throughout the country's systems, let alone take proactive action toward alleviating such practices. High stakes examination and segregation will continue to dominate the country's education system in the foreseeable future and will remain a driving force that pressures educators to sacrifice attention to crucial student differences for the sake of achieving high test scores. My seemingly dystopic premonitions are not intended to stimulate fear or a sense of hopelessness, but to provide realistic depictions of life as I see and comprehend it. Accepting reality as it manifests is my first step to self-awareness. By explicitly recognizing the injustices in our system, I am countering oppressors' desire to maintain the status quo. I believe that life's circumstances are not definite, and the challenges that rural community members encounter are not products of their destinies. Instead, transformation can actualize through collective action whereby rural voices work together to rebuke the status quo and demand better situations for themselves. I am willing to stand against the norm instilled by inequitable systems.

I am a rural community member who has experienced firsthand the barrage of challenges that rural students and community members undergo. Nonetheless, I am an example that people can overcome challenges and that rural students can achieve academic accomplishments that may seem unattainable. At the same time, I am also a living casualty of a system that has dominated and marginalized rural students, thus, etching lasting scars in what should have been a great educational experience.

CONCLUSION

I began my *currere* process by reliving a 2018 experience of receiving an award for my ability to guide rural students toward attaining high scores in a high-stakes examination, thus, enabling them to attend urban schools. I wonder which was of more importance to students, parents, and community: students attaining high examination scores or students attending schools in the city. I often hear community members and fellow educators compare neighboring schools' performances by counting the percentage of students placed into city schools—ignoring the fact that some non-prestigious schools are also located in the city—rather than the percentage of students attaining over a determined score. I grapple with internal conflicts as pride in assisting my students in

attaining high performance struggles against despair that I actively set my students along a difficult path that may potentially result in varying forms of distress. Over the years, I mastered the art of guiding students to understand exactly what is needed to do well in an exam. However, I did not adequately consider preparing them for the realities that they may face as they enter a new lifestyle completely different from what they are exposed to in their current classroom. I wonder if my former students are enduring similar challenges as those I had.

There is now a secondary school located in my home community, yet the institution remains less desirable as city schools continue to attract high performing students. Consequently, the community school is left with medium and low academically performing students. Occasionally, students previously placed in urban schools may transfer to their community school after a couple years, citing inadequate transportation, high expenses, and late and early hours as some of the justifications for relocating. However, transferred students often come from lower performing city schools, while students attending prestigious schools prefer to endure the hardships over sacrificing their opportunities for better education and subsequent employment.

Employing *currere* processes allowed me to synthesize my past schooling experiences in Trinidad and Tobago to understand my current experiences of rurality in New Brunswick, Canada—an emotionally fulfilling undertaking. Through the in-depth examination of my inner thoughts, I uncovered emotions that have been hidden for numerous years and identified connections between my past experiences and present practices. The *currere* process has brought me to a place of self-realization, where my actions and ideologies are no longer perceived as happenstance but are understood as innately grounded in my experiences. Furthermore, through the *currere* process, I can chart my future by understanding who I am and clearly envisioning whom I intend to become, thus, creating a pathway from which to follow. As the years go by, I intend to maintain reflective practices through *currere* and will, therefore, continually reexamine my evolving past and present while charting new futures.

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