Reckoning with Self: Curriculum Inquiry as Self-Understanding

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Curriculum inquiry is the art of telling, retelling, and sharing stories through the lens of curriculum by probing experiences that shape, thought, action, and disposition (Schubert, 2008; Sharma & Phillion, 2021; Short, 1991). It seeks to unravel what experiences bring purpose to life (Varbelow & Gee, 2017). Curriculum inquiry, therefore, examines all forms of curriculum but with emphasis placed on the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum refers to the implicit and often unintended lessons that are taught and learnt through various forms of interaction (Alsubaie, 2015). Such interactions are usually shaped by teachers, students, family, awareness, knowledge, and the society (Cornbleth, 1984). From this interaction, individuals develop their own interpretations and meanings, whether implicitly or explicitly conveyed. Examining and understanding the hidden curriculum will, therefore, require teachers to understand how it manifests in their own lives so that they can then understand how it manifests in the lives of their students (Aoki, 1993; Jerald, 2006; Pinar, 1994). This requires critical self-examination and reflection as one shares and re-shares stories from the past and present while using the results to inform present and future actions. To this process, Pinar (2004) offers the concept of *currere* to aid persons who are committed to undertaking curriculum as self-inquiry.

Curriculum inquiry aided by *currere* provides an opportunity for educators to combine scholarly reflection on self and practice to educate learners to be thoughtful, active, participatory citizens (Giroux, 2011). It serves as a useful foundation for moving from the individual to the communal and, therefore, provides a base for evolution towards collective action (Garcia, 2021; McDermott, 2022). For instance, such interrogation may reveal oppressive structures in our educational journey that inform our subjectivities and can serve as reminders that our thoughts, assumptions, and actions are rooted in the coloniality of our being (Garcia, 2021). Therefore, as I engage in this inquiry of self as a teacher, teacher educator, and curriculum scholar in Jamaica, I engage in intellectual scholarship through an active process of reflection and action to derive new theoretical and practical possibilities for teaching and learning that are beyond content knowledge (McDermott, 2022). Consequently, such intellectual scholarship offers a reckoning with the past, present, and future and offers opportunities in the classroom for re-storying and disrupting colonial notions of understanding of self (Garcia, 2021; Giroux 2011).

Within the context of this paper, curriculum inquiry involves interrogating my experiences as a student in a Jamaican primary and secondary school, experiences as a teacher in a Jamaican secondary school, the personal experiences linked to my social context, and experiences I have garnered as a teacher educator and curriculum scholar working in a higher education context in Jamaica. It offers an inquiry to understand the meanings attached to such experiences (individual reckoning) and to offer them as a representation of curriculum inquiry that embodies a broadened view of curriculum (Aoki, 1993; McDermott, 2022; Pinar, 2004), consequently, offering insights on how educators may engage in critical reflection and, thereby, improve professional practice.

To reckon with myself, I use retrospective accounts through journaling to recollect memories to answer the question: In what ways have my personal and educative

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experiences propelled me in becoming the teacher educator and curriculum scholar I am today? The re-construction of my story was, therefore, from memory, and as a result, I recognize that this may be partial as I try to bring coherence to my present and past (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Nonetheless, in this reflection served as a tool for critical self-dialogue and for improving my understanding of myself in relation to others, practice, and social events (Baszile, 2015; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Sawyer, 2022). Using a recursive approach, I began with recording memories of my experiences as a student about to exit primary school, as a secondary school student, as a teacher in an inner-city secondary school, and as a teacher educator and curriculum scholar. Through this recollection, I highlight critical events from childhood to adulthood that are connected to teaching and learning through various forms of schooling.

Deciphering my Identity

As argued by Baszille (2015), a journey towards self-understanding requires that the question "who am I" be engaged with through deep and ongoing contemplation. Moreover, identity development is a crucial aspect of the life of a teacher educator, given the roles teacher educators play in pre-service and in-service teacher development. Therefore, my aim in this paper was to utilize a fluid autobiographical process as I describe, interpret, illuminate, and create new insights by reflecting on who am I.

> As I sit to ponder the question of who I am, a series of questions emerge. Why did I decide to do this task? What aspects of my story do I really want to share? There are so many pieces. I never like talking about myself, yet I am always willing to encourage others to talk about themselves. Am I an imposter here or a hypocrite? Hmm … let me give this a try.
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> My journey as an academic a scholar, as I dare say, started as an unplanned one, and perhaps unplanned is not the right word, or can I say unplanned but focused. Let me explain what I mean by unplanned. So as a student attending primary and secondary school in Jamaica—what I consider to be the years that have shaped me—I didn't know what I wanted to become. I didn't know what career path I wanted to take, not because I wasn't ambitious but because everything seemed so farfetched and so out of my reach.
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> In my mind, the first stage of doing well was to be successful at the standardized examination at grade six of primary school. At the time, this was named the Common Entrance Examination (CEE). Oh boy CEE! Did I do well at that, no I didn't. So having failed common entrance, the view of everyone around was that I had not done well. Those in my community who did well were seen as the stars; they were lauded as they were the ones to attend the traditional ("bright") secondary schools while I and others would attend less than ideal secondary schools (non-traditional secondary schools); the schools for the not so "bright." We became the outcasts, as our names were not published in the national newspaper, nor did we receive congratulations from the community personnel, nor were our parents given accolades—simply because we were unsuccessful at CEE. In the minds of everyone around, being successful at the CEE meant you were destined to be something great in life.
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> With determination, I attended the not so bright school. Attending this school was another struggle, but I was determined I would ignore all the negative views about the school, and I always felt I could do well anywhere. Knowing and believing that I can do well anywhere is also an experience that influenced my guidance with

my daughter in later years. At the announcement of her primary exit standardized examination results, she cried because she did not like the school at which she was placed. In my mind, it was a good school, but I think in hers and the minds of other family members it was an "okayish" school. So many persons encouraged me to have her transferred to another school that in their eyes was better. This resulted in another internal dialogue about what lessons I want to teach her as she embarks on her journey, so I kept her at the school in which she was placed.

As a student at my non-traditional secondary school, my friends from primary school who were now attending the "bright" schools would separate themselves from us at the taxi stand and even in our communities. However, that did not deter me. I also recall not having lunch money on many occasions, but no one knew. When I had lunch money, I acted no different from when I did not. This I think has given me my sense of humility and downplaying my own accomplishments at times in my adult life. As I put words to paper, these moments seem so vivid, but until I started writing, these memories were not at the forefront of my mind or so I thought.

Could these experiences be the reason I give so much of myself to my students? Could this be the reason I continue to work so hard and put pressure on myself to do well? Could the hardships and lack associated with these periods of schooling be why I am so empathetic towards my students? This piece is revealing as I am writing. I am being confronted with my past self, but then is this really my past self? Is this self not very present, and is this the self that is propelling me sub-consciously?

Fast forward to the end of high school where I needed to sit the standardized examination. At that time, all who went to the not so bright secondary schools did the free examination called Secondary School Certificate (SSC). From this group, there was also a selection of those who were considered bright by teachers to do the Caribbean Secondary Examination Council Examination (CSEC), which required payment in order to sit the examinations. I was one of those who was selected to pursue some of these subjects. Oh boy, looking back now, I see how the decisions teachers make can affect the lives of students forever, and so I take my role as a teacher/teacher educator seriously, as I recall how helpful and supportive these teachers were to us. They became surrogate parents by helping us to make life changing decisions. As I recall the memories of these teachers, I turn the spotlight on myself as a teacher teaching at an inner-city secondary school during 1995-2006. I was stern with both parents and students. I gave them my heart in listening and supported those who lacked funds at times for lunch. No matter how undisciplined a student was, I was able to talk with that student, but he/she knew that when it comes to respecting authority and doing their schoolwork, that's a must. I am emotional just thinking about these students in the inner-city secondary school where I taught. They just needed love and to be shown another way. I meet them all the time in these later years, and it is always so lovely to see them.

But back to my secondary school years as a student. I was determined I would do well, whatever that looked like. Upon completing the Grade 11 year my Home Economics teacher discovered that I did not have enough subjects or enough money to pursue studies after high school. So, thank God for teachers. She suggested that, since I didn't have money to attend technical school like many others who were graduating with me, maybe I could repeat Grade 11 and pursue additional subjects, and of course that I did. During that year, she told me about teachers' college and

indicated that, because I was doing Home Economics, it would be best to attend a particular college. So, as I thought about attending a teachers' college, I was confronted with the fact that I didn't attend teachers' college because I wanted to be a teacher. I attended because it was a good and cheap option financially. As I am doing this piece, I recall that this was the best decision I made, and I made it because I had teachers who supported me and showed me the way. My parents knew nothing when it came to academics; they didn't understand the system they didn't have to come to school for any disciplinary issues; all they did was allowed me to attend school, and the rest was up to me. When I told my parents that I applied to college and got through, their concern was where would they find the money while my concern was if I can just get in. My application was successful, and there, my pre-service teacher training to become a teacher started. I lived on campus, and to date these are some of my best memories, and for me this began my journey of starting to do well and becoming an academic. I became a teacher and then furthered my studies and met some wonderful teacher educators who inspired and propelled me to always take the next leg of the journey. So, who am I? I am a successful teacher educator, researcher, and curriculum scholar, a successful parent, a mentor to many, and, overall, an academic who loves her students and works hard to help them and myself succeed. I note though that it's difficult to separate these different selves, as they are all interrelated, and one does not exist without the other.

Synthesizing for Self-Understanding

Undertaking this critical analysis through *currere* has allowed me to reveal hidden facets of my life history (Garcia, 2021) and showcase the intersections between self and the structures of schooling and society that are steeped in the effects of colonialism in a country that was once colonized. As noted in my narratives, there is discomfort that comes from talking about myself. This discomfort results from the cognitive and emotional difficulties faced when recalling memories (Richert, 1990), especially for individuals living in countries that were once colonized. Nonetheless exposing the "masked self" (Kelly, 2020) is crucial in unearthing the beauty and power that reside in our stories and create opportunities for decolonizing our minds. Unmasking also allows us to see the various versions of ourselves that we intentionally or unintentionally allow others to see (Guo & Moon 2022; Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2014). From my story, it is evident that my essence is shaped by my family, social context, school life, and the dispositions of teachers who supported particular desires at different points in my journey. Consequently, this demonstrates the concept of curriculum as cultural construction, as together all of these experiences frame my interpretations (Grundy, 1987).

Curriculum as argued by Pinar (2004) is the collective stories we tell others about our past, present, and our future. These stories are derived from our situatedness and the roles that embody our lives. As educators, these experiences converge in classrooms with those of our students and influence how we teach and the level of attention given to what we teach. As a teacher educator and curriculum scholar, I have often felt that other teachers could benefit from a storying of my experiences but at the same time felt such storying may not be considered academic enough within my context. This for me represents my ongoing struggle with the disconnect between what curriculum truly is and the understanding of curriculum that dominates the country context of my professional practice.

Within Jamaica, a model of schooling that emphasizes examination results and curriculum as product adopted from the British colony continues to dominate the

structures of schooling. This represents a narrowed view of curriculum and often reduces students' autonomy, constrains teachers' autonomy, creativity, and innovation, and limits the outcomes of schooling to narrowed measurable outcomes (Winter, 2017). This examination-oriented structure perpetuates a dual education system that has become entrenched in the social fabric of Jamaica and has functioned as the most powerful gatekeeper of the status quo (Patterson 2021; Task Force on Educational Reform, Jamaica, 2004). This dual education system manifests itself in diverse types of schools, especially at the secondary level, that perpetuate a classist and elitist structure (Espeut, 2016; Patterson, 2021). This examination-directed structure facilitates a system of placement and preference based on examination scores and gives rise to tensions such as who attends which type of school, what subjects are offered, and what resources are available (Jennings & Cook, 2019). These structures also influence the pedagogies utilised and the sociological issues with which teachers must contend.

Through reflecting on my history, I have come to realise that pragmatic experiences such as decisions that are made about who is taught what and what students get selected for what tasks or examinations in our classrooms may serve to influence or determine what individuals come to hold as truths about themselves (Varbelow & Gee, 2017). For example, the process of selection for types of school to be attended and types of examinations to sit will influence how students view their place in the society (Sacks, 2001). These decisions have lasting effects beyond the present pragmatic decision and lead to a classist society and a society that is hinged on an inferiority-superiority complex. Additionally, decisions about who does what without attending to issues of fairness leads to low self-esteem of students and students lacking confidence and not wanting to speak in class. While some of these effects may be explicit, oftentimes these are manifested in the hidden curriculum (Alsubaie, 2015). They also lead to entrenched intentional and unintentional oppressive acts that may render one group of students being confident and valued for what they bring to the classroom and another lacking confidence and feeling undervalued because of their circumstances. However, a teacher who is critically conscious of self, the societal structures, and the school culture that perpetuate such actions will create opportunities through teaching that help students derive confidence and own the truths about their circumstances as legitimate and valued knowledge.

Reflecting on my experiences has helped me to understand why I always create opportunities in my teaching learning sessions for each student to share no matter how disconnected a student may seem. This aligns with the views of several scholars who argue that teachers' understanding of the hidden curriculum provides an important means for teachers to improve their practice (Aoki, 1993; Jerald, 2006; Pinar, 1994). Given the colonial structures that continue to dominate schooling and perpetuate an inferior-superior culture in Jamaica, students need to be taught how to have internal dialogue in combatting external pressures that render them less valuable (Cook, 2012). This internal dialogue for me served as a tool for ongoing reflection, self-regulation, and monitoring as I became more aware of my thoughts and actions (Freire, 1968/1992). Dialectical engagements are crucial for decolonizing the curriculum and for identifying, labelling, and combatting oppressive and social injustice actions perpetuated by schooling. These are crucial for moving curriculum from a focus on content to understanding curriculum as being connected with life as lived (Aoki, 1993; Grundy 1987).

Another important lesson in my story is that teachers help to determine students' life chances especially in the context of schools that are under-served, where for many students the teacher serves as a surrogate parent. It was the actions and decisions

of teachers that determined that I could sit examinations, and it was the actions and decisions of teachers that determined I could attend a teacher's college. Such influences demonstrate the power that resides in the nature of teachers' work. These decisions and the results I have served to influence the sensitivities I hold regarding my students and in helping them to be successful. A teacher's conception of curriculum affects the decisions he/she makes about what should be done, who should do it, and why it should be done (Dejene, 2020). Such conceptions evolve from teachers' own experiences, their interactions with theory and the reflections that emanate from the combination of theory and experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). As such those who prepare teachers must emphasise for teachers their responsibility to engage critically with self, theory, and research to build their intellectual roles and awaken their critical consciousness (Freire 1963; Giroux 2011).

While years of teaching experience are valuable, experiences alone will not result in the sort of transformative actions required of teachers. Teachers need ongoing professional development through a variety of media including engagement with theory, research, and their own personal search for knowledge, newness, and awakening. Consequently, giving rise to curriculum as the embodiment of the what, the how, the personal, the professional, and the milieu that results from this (Cornbleth, 1984; Grumet, 1981; Pinar, 1995).

Furthermore, issues about better schools continue to dominate the landscape of education in Jamaica, especially as it pertains to secondary education (Jennings & Cook, 2019). Perhaps the time has come for teacher educators to exercise agency and lead the charge for examining the long-term effects of these issues and how they result in a segregated society. My critical consciousness has been awakened about how decisions of my teachers influenced my life and how those decisions are now influencing my professional practice in terms of the issues with which I engage in my teaching, the pedagogies I employ, and my advocacy in helping in-service teachers see curriculum as more than just the subjects they teach. One of the crucial elements of education is to help learners dream and to aid them in becoming thoughtful, active, participatory citizens (Freire, 1968/1992; Giroux, 2011) regardless of their circumstances. Teachers at all levels of the education system (nursery to university) shape consciousness and life chances negatively or positively. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to critique their experiences and self-understanding to minimise negative influences on their students. To this end, I offer the process of *currere* as a starting point.

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