Sustaining the Hyphens: From Reproducing to Restructuring Teacher Education

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We live in a capitalistic "knowledge" society that has influenced our education and fostered an environment of survival to succeed, rather than develop a sense of compassion, community, and empathy in our students (Kanu & Glor, 2006). This focus on "knowledge" has left gaps in creating spaces within education for students to be able to undergo healthy identity formations, especially when various identity markers are involved. Today, newcomers, first- and second-generation individuals, use hyphenations as way to represent multiple ethno-cultural identity markers. The hyphen between an identification, such as Tamil-Canadian, is its own symbolic space between places acting as a hybrid connection "among nation, culture and subject, [that] both binds and divides" (Ng-A-Fook et al., 2012, p. 121). In this paper, I refer to students who have dual- or multi-ethnocultural identities as hyphenated to acknowledge and embrace the space that affords negotiation and flexibility in their identity.

Current schooling has left hyphenated students in a vulnerable position because the knowledge pushed on them had been socially constructed to serve and reflect the most dominant group of society, which, in Canada, are the colonial settlers. Additionally, there are racial systemic barriers that continue to exist and permeate educational institutions within Canada, manifesting in a variety of forms. One prevailing issue is getting Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) into educational leadership positions, as the current demographic within Ontario is not reflected within the overwhelming white teaching force. This is due to "gatekeeping mechanisms" within hiring practices that are maintained through racialized power structures, continually establishing whiteness as a social and cultural norm within the profession (Abawi, 2021, p. 80). The lack of representation "operate[s] to inform racist conceptions of whose bodies are suited to hold authoritative positions and whose bodies are marginalized from accessing such positions" (Abawi, 2021, p. 82). These conceptions trickle down to the students who also perceive the same outcomes for their marginalized identities.

With such an overrepresentation of whiteness within educational leadership positions, it is inevitable that the curriculum developed by these very same folks takes on a settler-colonial perspective. With the common practice of implementing such curriculum as planned, "Canadian schools are increasingly becoming sites of isolation and social injustices because they are poorly equipped to deal with the existing student diversity" (Raisinghani, 2016, p. 187). Such a curriculum "perpetuates whiteness as the norm" and is highly "ignorant of the lived experiences of students and their subjectivities," essentially silencing them (Raisinghani, 2016, p. 187). Through curriculum, minority students become obliged to assimilate into Eurocentric ideologies to not hold their educational success at stake. For newcomer students, compromising such success is out of the question with education being their way towards a better socio-economic future for themselves and their families.

At such a young age, students are pressured to pick and choose between identities, often neglecting the one that was fostered at home, as it does not have a place in their education. At the end of their schooling, students may walk away with a diploma, but the most critical question remains unanswered to them … "Who am I?"

Currere as the Amateur Intellectual

A way to oppose the threat of dominating ideologies is to move towards becoming "amateur intellectuals" who will question mainstream politics and social trends (Kanu & Glor, 2006, p. 101). Pinar's method of *currere* helps to transition educators into becoming amateur intellectuals by creating dialogue through our stories and examining possible changes we can make to address social inequities (Kanu & Glor, 2006). *Currere* is a form of academic life-writing that comprises revisiting the past, unfolding the present, and reimagining the future within education to contextualize the meaning of lived experiences in a temporal sense (Pinar, 1994). Although traditional academic work erases the author or scholar, our work, especially as educators, is shaped by who we are (Morris, 2019). *Currere* affords educators pedagogical opportunities to examine their own subjectivities around race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability and to then unlearn those social norms so that we can move towards social justice practices in our teaching. Therefore, *currere* is a powerful tool that can help with collective decolonization. By engaging in *currere*, we blend the boundaries of the past, present, and future, engaging with our inner experience to have a transformative new lens in the present (Capo Garcia, 2021). I engage in this vulnerable experience to acknowledge the oppression I have endured and privileges I have taken for granted, allowing me to make meaning of my journey through Canadian education and to enter a space of healing around my hyphenated identity.

Literature Review

Imagine walking into a space and being told "who you are right now, is not going to work here." Depending on which culture you engage with, your personality can be perceived as either a positive or negative asset to your socialization and integration into a community. This is especially cumbersome when the traits you developed were socially and culturally constructed as the appropriate norm at home but seen as inhibiting elsewhere. Jingyi Zeng (2022) speaks on this in her *currere* essay where she explained, "As a Chinese woman in China, I am expected to be docile and subservient" (p. 93), making the pursuit of higher education seem like a selfish endeavour. Similarly, Mahzad Mahjani (2018) expressed that her authoritative upbringing in Iran left her with no choice but to be "introverted," "shy," "obedient," and "submissive" and recognized the role it played in her education as she stated, "I was never brave enough to endure danger and criticism" (p. 54). As can be seen, the priority varies drastically based on the type of identity the individual is expected to uphold within a particular space. Understanding what is "right" and "wrong" can be confusing while navigating these spaces, but once children recognize the difference is in the space itself, they learn to adapt quickly by switching their behaviour and attitudes upon entry.

But carrying multiple identities can feel heavy, like physically carrying a closet full of different versions of yourself that you switch through when needed. This is why we are left to choose which version to wear more permanently, and that will be the one most accepted within the society we reside in; thus, assimilation presents itself. This assimilation manifests itself in a variety of forms as well. Rajwan Alshareefy (2017) discussed this difficulty in terms of language and communication, where he tried to hold back his Arabic dialect in his new American environment. He felt he had to "acquire (without negotiation) the academic conventions of [his] institution" (p. 21) to survive. Andrew Campbell (in Eizadirad & Campbell, 2021), an immigrant to Canada from Jamaica, also recalled having to hide his accent to feel "safe" and "accepted" for the

moment (p. 248). In other cases, one's physical appearance may also be called into question as well. Aaron Sardinha (2022) described flattening his curls to adhere to the professional look of the workplace, erasing a part of his Blackness. Sometimes, assimilation can be losing traditions as well, as Khan (2018) shared her memories of watching her first-generation Canadian children refuse the traditional Pakistani food they once loved after they began attending Canadian schools.

Sadly, these Eurocentric norms not only find their way into altering appearances, attitudes, and speeches, but within the educational content taught in schools. Welly Minyangadou Ngokobi (2022), who transitioned from attending various schools in the French education system across the African continent to the Canadian education system, felt an immense lack of representation in the content taught, specifically in English classes where she stated, "It made it seem to me like Shakespeare and other white authors wrote 'real' literature" (p. 62). Eboni Malloy (2022), who identifies as Black and attended school in North Carolina, shared a similar concern. She described a time in her social studies class when she was constantly in conflict with her teacher who was sharing misinformation regarding Black history, experience, and contributions (Malloy, 2022). She felt burdened with the pressure of ensuring her identity was accurately represented, something the teacher should already be taking into account.

These personal narratives share an evident pattern in the experiences of ethno-culturally hyphenated individuals within North America. Cultural markers such as mannerisms, physical features, and traditional staples were rejected, and the histories of vulnerable groups were erased. Everyone was forced to engage in a flight or fight response to their experience, choosing to either fight the system itself or fly away from the marginalized identity that was being targeted. This shows that it is no longer a debate of whether these acts of violence on identity are occurring, but how we can mitigate them. To do so, I will unpack my own experiences as a student and connect it to my current position as a future educator to assist in identifying the gaps in our teaching practices.

Context

In this paper, I examine my own experience, as a first-generation Tamil-Canadian within an Ontario K-12 education system and within a professionally accredited teacher education program. With parents who immigrated from Sri Lanka during the civil war period, the rich history and traditions within Tamil culture were not something my parents ever wished to compromise coming to Canada. This is not uncommon of Tamil people as this perseverance is what afforded us to have one of the oldest languages to exist on earth. The need to sustain was passed down generation to generation and, therefore, strongly informed the decisions my parent made while raising me in a predominately white town within eastern Ontario.

Revisiting the Past

Narrative Snapshot #1: Wiping away the Tamil

In my early elementary school days, my Amma (mom) would wake me up early to get ready for school. There was a lot to do in the morning, including taking part in my daily Hindu prayer, which set the tone for the day. The prayer consisted of lighting a small oil lamp, performing hymns and mantras, silently making my wishes and hopes for the day, and finishing it off by swiping *vibhudhi* (ash made of burnt dried wood) on

the forehead, and placing sandalwood paste and *kungumam* (red turmeric powder) at the points between the inner brows. This act was traditional within the Hindu praying ritual.

I remember the first time I walked up to my peers at school with the *vibhudhi*, sandalwood paste, and *kungumam* on my forehead. I honestly had not given it a thought as I was used to my parents having it on at home. But a classmate pointed it out to me and said, "Hey, you got some dirt on your forehead." I was instantly embarrassed and wiped it right off. Being raised under the Tamil ideology that a "good girl" was obedient and never talked back to anyone; I made no attempt to explain myself. Additionally, my classmate's approach did not help the situation. I had developed highly introverted tendencies due to the nature of my upbringing. Perhaps, if my classmate had been curious, I would have felt more comfortable explaining the *vibhudhi* to them; but having it pointed out as something "wrong" shut me off.

That day when I went home, my mom asked what happened to the *vibhudhi* on my forehead. I told her I took it off because someone in my class thought it was dirt. My mom got upset, not with the classmate, but with me. I was scolded for being so easily influenced by my white peers. Her approach was quite aggressive considering I did not have any understanding of how social conditioning worked, but I can now understand that it was a response to the fear of seeing her child abandon her Tamil identity with such ease over a trivial matter. Unfortunately, it still contributed to my early confusion of trying to navigate between how much "Tamil" I could bring into my classroom, and how much "Canadian" I could bring home.

From that point forward, I would go through my normal morning routine including my Hindu prayers, but on the walk to school, I would wipe off the Hindu markings on my forehead. When I got home, I would lie to my mom that it got wiped away during gym class, while wearing my hat, or when playing during recess. I became good at lying—lying to my mom, lying to my classmates, but ultimately, lying to myself about who I was.

NARRATIVE SNAPSHOT #2: MAKING ENEMIES WITH MY MELANIN

By the time I hit high school, I was so good at hiding being Tamil that my friends would joke that, if they could not see me, they would assume I was white. I changed myself to be as western and Canadian as possible. This included replacing my A. R. Rahman or S. P. Balasubrahmanyam music tracks in my iPod with One Direction or Katy Perry, bringing chicken nuggets to school over chicken biryani, and begging my parents to buy me American clothing brands like Hollister, Aeropostale, and Abercrombie & Fitch. These changes seemed to worked because I was making more friends and easily integrating into our settler Canadian school system and its cultural expectations. The teachers would gush over how easy it was to teach me, and my friends felt like I understood them so well. But it was not enough for me, or should I say, for society. The colour of my skin still made me stand out.

Colourism is deeply rooted within South Asians, especially with the history of the caste system. We are constantly told that fair skin equates to beauty, and you see it in every form of influential media. Even my own family would point out and ridicule me for being dark skinned. My Tamil aunties encouraged me to use products like "fair and lovely," which contained harmful ingredients like bleach. I became obsessed with using these bleaching products, checking in every night with the skin lightening scale provided in the packaging to see if I was turning any fairer.

A compounding factor to my developed insecurity about the melanin of my skin also came from the people I was constantly surrounded by in high school. All my teachers, guidance counsellor, principal, as well as the administrative staff, were white. Every lesson taught where "so and so" made a great discovery was about someone who was white. Our school was unconsciously and consciously reproducing an institutional culture and respective narratives that only white people could be successful in the academic world. Being an academically driven student, I began to look at my skin as the enemy, acting as a barrier to my success, not realizing that it was a settler colonial system that valued cultures of whiteness that was working against me.

Narrative Snapshot #3: Seeing Clearly with a New Lens

Leaving my small eastern Ontario hometown for the big city of Montreal during my undergraduate studies was an eye-opening experience. I was right in the mix of one of the most diverse populations I had been a part of so far. I was quick to connect with international students who did not quite fit into the Canadian settler colonial systems and its reproduction of a culture of whiteness. Watching how proudly my peers displayed what I once perceived as their "otherness" made me want to embrace the non-Canadian aspects of my identity. However, when finally finding the courage to reach out to the Tamil community at my university, I was painfully rejected for "not being Tamil enough" and being "whitewashed" in their eyes. At that point, the effects of my deep submersion within settler colonial culture had done its damage, leaving me in an isolating "in between" land, where those who do not fully belong in either/or are left to defend for themselves.

And so, when I entered the University of Ottawa's Teacher Education Program, I came with a mentality that it was me, myself, and I. I had absolutely no intention of even trying to find a community, feeling I would rather be alone than put on a mask again or be vulnerable enough to get rejected. However, this very same feeling now fuels my commitment as a future public-school teacher. Although I felt it was too late for me, I wanted to be able to intervene in time for my students. This influenced my decision to select the Urban Communities Cohort as my specialized focus due to it providing the opportunity to work in high diversity classrooms within urban priority schools for my practicums.

A tool that was introduced to us within this cohort was an equity lens, as a metaphorical means for analyzing the complex intersectionality of class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability that composes one's positionality in relation to others (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). We were often asked to reflect on our lived experiences through this lens to synthesize our professional teaching philosophy. This introspective opportunity allowed me to see how spaces are socially constructed to benefit dominant groups and how at times I had fallen victim to it, but at other times, I had greatly benefitted from it too. Recognizing those systemic barriers that are in place and that permeate educational institutions finally provided me with meaning and understanding around my experiences.

Unfolding the Present

Currently, in the University of Ottawa's Teacher Education program, I find myself having to get involved in extracurricular activities beyond the course work and practicum expectations placed on teacher candidates in order to fulfill all my needs as a person of color entering the field of education. One such activity is leading the Teacher Candidates of Colour Collective as a co-organizer. As part of this collective, I help

to organize workshops and seminars such as "Decolonizing the Teacher" or "Writing within the margins." The purpose is to offer alternative professional learning (PL) that specifically targets the needs of BIPOC and other visible minority teacher candidates, which typically is not provided by the Faculty of Education itself. A majority of the professional learning opportunities provided by faculty focuses on teaching strategies, interview tips, applying to Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), getting to know your union, and managing conflicts, all general information teacher candidates require. But in terms of PL opportunities that reflect Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), the faculty shares very few workshops, with the same repeated "Anti-racism," "Black History Month," and "Indigenous Perspectives" PLs based entirely on pedagogy rather than assisting BIPOC teacher candidates in navigating teaching. Such PLs feel tokenistic in nature, as if to check that a quota was met rather than create meaningful and new opportunities for learning targeted to sustain the identity of BIPOC teacher candidates.

In addition to this, the collective also provides a physical space were BIPOC teacher candidates can engage in dialogue and have open conversations about their experiences in the program or within practicum. This space is crucial as the program is made up of a majority of white teacher candidates and taught mostly by white professors, causing those BIPOC teacher candidates to get lost in the mix and losing their voices in the process. Of the eighteen courses I have taken in this program, four have been led by BIPOC professors. Unsurprisingly, these four courses also incorporated alternative perspectives that my other courses did not typically offer. For example, the course taught by white professors always referred to utilizing the curriculum expectations in our lessons, where the courses taught by BIPOC professors encouraged us to question the narratives in those curriculum expectations. Like the program, my practicum schools had very little diversity in their teaching staff as well. Both of my Associate Teachers (AT) were white. They did a great job of mentoring me in lesson planning, assessments, and classroom management. However, they offered little insight in how I could make the most of my BIPOC identity for my students. I was fortunate enough to meet a senior biology teacher who identified as South Asian. They took me under their wing and afforded me opportunities to observe their teaching while offering their words of wisdom. I learned quite a bit from them from small tips such as not shying away from using my full Tamil name with my students to their teaching philosophy, which was informed by traditional South Asian ideologies adapted to meet the needs of their students. This encounter demonstrated how crucial representation in the field of education is for visible minority students to be able to see themselves in the same space.

Reimagining the Future

When I envision myself in future educational spaces, I do not see myself at the front of the classroom, changing the slides to a PowerPoint, in need of quenching my thirst because I've talked myself dry. I see myself circulating my classroom, checking in with my students who excitedly explain their self-inquiry projects, amazed with their findings and constantly learning something new alongside them. I do not see myself spending my prep or afterschool time reviewing the same lessons I used a couple years in a row, memorizing scripts, and cramming last-minute facts in my head. Instead, I see myself finding an online simulation I could share with my students to supplement their learning, gathering materials for an experimental idea a student proposed earlier in the week, or bookmarking a community program I recall a student showing interest in.

I see myself in my lunch hours and break times, swarmed by students, not to ask help on question 2b of the homework, but to tell me about their lives, finding comfort in my marginalized identity and asking advice about how to navigate the world as a person of color. I will remind those students to find power in their lived experiences, to use them as assets to their learning, and to bring voice to them inside and out of the school. And because I recognize that I cannot represent all marginalized and vulnerable students, I bring community to them. I invite guests relevant to the topic and relevant to the students, mindful of the impact representation can bring.

I will be listening, hearing, and noting down all the experiences, ideas, and shared knowledge my students put forth in class. I walk into each day excited to see where my class will take me because no one class will be the same. Every space I curate will be unique because no one space has the exact same students. Within these spaces, my students will be agents of their own learning, not passive knowledge consumers, and will know my role is to facilitate their learning, not dictate it. I will offer them global perspectives rather than settling on one dominating view that will silence their voices. Through these efforts, the environment I create will validate and sustain their identities and encourage them to do the same for others.

Returning to Now

To be able to manifest such a future requires that I begin healing the trauma that has been placed on my hyphenation during the years of tug-of-war battles between my identities. I ask then: How can Teacher Education programs cultivate a healthy space for teacher candidates to heal and embrace those hyphenations, so that they can support their students down the road? In the University of Ottawa's *Final Report: Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence* (Ebanda de B'beri, 2022), many recommendations are put forth that Teacher Education programs can take on to help establish those ideal environments for hyphenated students. One such recommendation is to accelerate the hiring of BIPOC professors by applying accountability policies to reduce the gap between white and BIPOC professors, to not solely rely on additional positions, to fast track BIPOC recruitments, and to retain current BIPOC professors through hiring packages that include mentorship and support (Ebanda de B'beri, 2022). Having representation in the educational leadership positions within Teacher Education programs can serve as a support for hyphenated teacher candidates who are looking for a mentor to help guide them through the field. I know that the few BIPOC professors I have had during the program have been my first point of contact whenever I needed advice simply because my perspective felt validated through them.

Additionally, another priority highlighted in the report is to "create a safe space, physical and virtual, for BIPOC students, staff, and professors" (Ebanda de B'beri, 2022, p.17), with the purpose extending beyond networking, mentoring, and sponsoring, but to establish a climate of trust so BIPOC communities can express themselves and be vulnerable to growth (Ebanda de B'beri, 2022). Currently, student-run groups such as the Teacher Candidates of Colour Collective do offer such benefits; however, the responsibility to plan and implement programming to fulfill such needs should not be on the candidates alone, but in collaboration with the faculty where there is a forum for marginalized voices to speak, share their concerns, offer ideas, and for faculty to actively listen and support their needs whether that be through offering resources, connections, or funding. Thus, it is crucial to pair teacher candidate agency with faculty support.

Teacher Education programs should act as macro scale versions of the classrooms in which we are set to teach as educators ourselves. But due to its post-secondary nature, programs tend to be structured more like training camps, at times neglecting to take into consideration that the teacher candidates themselves still need their identities validated and sustained. These programs model how we teach our students, and so the pedagogical tools and instructional strategies they encourage teacher candidates to implement, such as UDL, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and reflexive practices, should just as equally be implemented by the program in addition to the recommendations listed above. Providing teacher candidates with the opportunity to deconstruct their lived experiences to acknowledge their biases and assumptions, to seek out mentorship through professors who identify with them, offer meaningful content that resonates with them, and to form a community to sustain such an identity will only help to pass on the same opportunities for their future students to undergo healthy identity formation as well.

Conclusion

If we are not fostering learning environments that embrace the identities of students, what does that say? What are we telling students when we reject a part of their identity, or worse, do not even acknowledge it as worthy enough to include in their education? What effect will this have on them physically, psychologically, and spiritually? Are these effects short-term or long term? Will they be contained within the individual's lifetime or passed down generationally? The harm that has been inflicted on us during our identity formation is ongoing, so some of these questions are yet to be answered completely but must continue to be investigated. In the meantime, I think its important to re-evaluate what the purpose of public education is in Canada. We boast in pride about our diverse population but demonstrate the opposite in our institutions and curriculum. As of now, we are indoctrinating a nation of youthful minds to be citizens that serve the colonizers. This is not to put the sole blame on educators, as the teaching programs that prepare these educators reproduce the same dominant ideologies as well. Thus, teacher education programs must be restructured in a way that encourages facilitating educators in unpacking the biases and assumptions that inform their worldviews and create an understanding of how positionality plays a role in the classroom, all while simultaneously sustaining their identities. Only then can we look next towards the idealized education that develops students as global agents of change, advocating for each others' rights, and working collaboratively towards a sustainable future. By having the opportunity to decolonize themselves through a supportive system, educators will inevitably provide the space for students to undergo healthy identity formations that will sustain those hyphens and reap the benefits of plurality that will pave a way towards a community of change. This is how we prepare our hyphenated students to answer that question of "who am I."

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