

I WAS RATHER A STORY

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I come from a family of 8 with 5 siblings and my parents. Growing up in Ghana, we all lived in a small compound house. We shared one bedroom and slept together in cramped spaces. Every day, my 5 siblings and I ate from one bowl and followed the directions of the eldest, as that was the norm in our household. In our family, individual voices often get lost. I never really had the opportunity to know myself, my potential, or my identity. My thoughts, desires, and aspirations were overshadowed by the collective rhythm of the family. My father's views were always right without room for debate or dissent. We were made to understand that fathers know best, and questioning their perspectives was not tolerated. This environment reinforced the adage that a child must be seen and not heard. Personal expression was rare; we moved as one, and decisions were often made for us by the older siblings or my parents. Our parents wake up every morning, and the first thing they do is to give instructions for house chores before we go to school, even before meals are served. Instructions weren't mere suggestions but a strict roadmap for the morning. Sweeping the compound, fetching water, cleaning the dishes, and organizing the living area were tasks expected to be completed with precision and urgency. Breakfast often felt like an afterthought, something you hurriedly grabbed on your way out if time was left. This daily routine became a defining rhythm of our mornings. In this household, my late father stood as the final authority.

When my parents were away, my two older siblings, Kwaku and Kwame, ruled the house like seasoned captains steering a ship. Their voices carried the weight of authority, and their instructions for house chores were commands, not suggestions. We followed without question, bound by an unspoken understanding that their word was law in our temporary kingdom. Their presence was like the sun and the moon, inescapable forces that dictated the rhythm of our days that brooked neither dissent nor negotiation. Tasks were divided among us based on age and ability, but fairness was not always guaranteed. I remember one morning when Kwaku, the oldest, assigned me the seemingly endless task of sweeping the compound while Kwame supervised the younger ones fetching water from the nearby waterpipe. In performing these tasks, we knew that disobedience was never an option, as it was quickly met with a stern lecture or a reminder of the family's code of ethics. There were moments when I envied friends in our neighborhood who seemed to have some freedom. They made their own choices anytime there was an opportunity for us to play together. But deep down, I understood that our way of life was shaped by our cultural identity and family background. My childhood days revolved around fulfilling roles and responsibilities assigned to me, with little room for my desires. The culture of authority that permeated our family left little space for voicing my perspective, much like the saying *speak when you are spoken to*. In many ways, I felt like I was living, but it was as though I never truly existed.

Although these moments taught me resilience and the importance of working with others, they also left me questioning the balance between individuality and community. I often wondered whether my voice and desires mattered, or if I was destined to always follow in the shadow of my older siblings' and parents' authority. In this environment, I never truly explored who I was or what I could become. It wasn't until later in life that I began discovering my identity, separated from the collective experience of my childhood. My background occasionally influenced my perspective

on the importance of listening to others and valuing their contributions, especially in contexts of shared goals. My early experiences going through these dynamics provide a personal lens through which I can critically engage with ideas about hierarchy, equity, and collaboration in leadership.

As I grew older, I started to realize how much I had lost in following the routines and expectations set by my family. I had no clear sense of who I was, what I wanted, or what I could achieve. The sense of individuality that many experienced growing up was foreign to me. My potential was hidden, even from myself, as I focused solely on blending into the structure of the family. I didn't question it then; it was simply the way things were. These feelings and environment align with the philosophies of Freire (1968/2020), who interpreted such experience as an example of the banking model of life, where individuals passively accept prescribed roles and expectations without questioning or critically engaging with their desires and potentials. Freire noted that this form of uncritical adherence can lead to a sense of dehumanization, as it suppresses one's capacity for self-determination and critical consciousness. Freire, however, asserted that these experiences should serve as the building blocks of reclaiming agency, an essential step in breaking free from oppressive structures, even those embedded within family or cultural norms. There was a time in school when I chose to take on a leadership role in a group project, believing it would challenge me and help me grow. However, I underestimated the nuances that come with working with a team that had conflicting interests and personalities. Any attempt to mediate and keep everyone on track backfired. I became frustrated and misunderstood. This moment of regret is in line with Aoki's (1993) notion of the lived curriculum, where he acknowledged the complexity and multiplicity of human experiences. Aoki asserted that, though these feelings could be challenging, they are also integral to personal growth. They push us to go through tensions, and we learn from them.

The first day I stepped onto college campus as a freshman I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. A weight I didn't even realize I had been carrying seemed to lift off my shoulders. For the first time, I was no longer bound by the rigid routines of my family life. I didn't have to wake up to a barrage of instructions or rush to complete tasks before starting my day. It was a strange, almost foreign feeling to wake up and decide for myself how my day would unfold. The silence of my new environment felt liberating, and the independence I was afforded became a revelation. It was as if I could finally breathe, unencumbered by the collective demands of my family. For the first time, I had the space and freedom to explore who I was, what I wanted, and what I could become. College became not just an academic pursuit but a personal journey of self-discovery and healing. It marked the beginning of a chapter where my voice, dreams, and identity could finally take center stage. The structured routines of my family life had been a safety net, even if they limited my individuality, and stepping beyond them left me vulnerable to the uncertainties of choice and self-direction. In my second year in college, schooling became like a double-edged sword. It was a space to explore my potential and expand my world, yet also one where I confronted fears of failure and the weight of responsibility for my decisions. I was like a bird taking flight against a strong wind or like a flower blooming beautifully but briefly. This is in congruence with Freire (1968/2020), who underscored that freedom is not simply the absence of oppression, but an active, often challenging process of conscientization. According to Freire, stepping into freedom requires critical awareness and the courage to challenge internalized constraints. It can be disorienting, but it is essential for genuine transformation. In this context, I believe that the dangers of freedom lie not only in external risks but in the internal struggle to redefine oneself without losing the grounding that provides a sense of belonging and identity. The steady shores of family life, though confining, sometimes feel like the only safe harbor in chaos. In this way, freedom became both a gift and a challenge. I was free, but I felt lost. Freedom felt

heavy, like a door open to endless paths but with no clear direction to follow. Freedom is exciting, yet freedom can be overwhelming. Freedom gives, but freedom also takes. In my final year, the structure I once relied on was gone, and every decision was mine. I gradually began to unearth pieces of myself. It was a long process of undoing the layers of silence and conformity that had shaped my childhood and learning. I knew I had a voice and dreams separate from the collective expectations I had grown up with.

After I graduated from college, I had the opportunity to teach in a community high school. In this environment, I was expected to apply the principles of universal design in my classroom. However, I often found myself doing the opposite. Meanwhile, I graduated from college as a trained special educator. I taught all students as though they were identical pieces in a puzzle, expected to fit into a singular educational framework. This was not something deliberate but rather the result of my childhood training and experiences, where no child ever had the opportunity to eat what we wanted—something I call a home-based one-size-fits-all practice. I had barely learned to weave the personal identities, experiences, and learning needs of my students into my teaching methods. I relied on traditional approaches, assuming that the self of one student could be mirrored in another, like passing the same key to unlock different doors. Interestingly, I treated the classroom as a single canvas. I painted broad strokes and hoped that the same color would suit everyone. But as I continued teaching, I began to realize that education is not about shaping identical molds but about recognizing that every student is a unique story with their pages to fill. This is consistent with the idea that classroom content is not just a structured program but a personal and dynamic journey (Pinar, 2004). I tried to pour each student into the same mold, expecting the same shape to emerge. However, little did I know that students are like gardens; you cannot water a rose the same way you would a cactus. What was I doing then? And who was I then? A teacher? Of course not! I think I was educated but uninformed. Those who saw me could probably describe me as a seasoned educator. But for me, I saw myself as someone who was waiting for the month to end to collect my salary; I was educated on paper but a layman at heart. The individuality of each student should have guided my teaching approaches, yet my lack of experience in this area meant I missed the opportunity to nurture each student's distinct potential. I think if the classroom could talk, it might gently point out some of the things I overlooked, particularly how I failed to truly see the self of each student in my teaching approach. It would remind me of the times when I treated students as though they were pages from the same book, rather than unique stories. The classroom might whisper that it noticed how I taught from a place of efficiency. I used methods designed to cover content but not necessarily to uncover the individual experiences, voices, and identities within its walls. It would likely say, "You've been a diligent teacher, but sometimes you missed the subtle cues—the questions unasked, the hands not raised, the quiet voices waiting to be heard." The classroom might point out how, in my rush to meet objectives, I often left behind the opportunity to connect with the deeper selves of my students.

In 2021, as my teaching career advanced, I was appointed a lecturer in the Department of Special Education at the University of Education, Winneba, in Ghana. It was within this new environment that my story took an entirely different turn. This appointment marked a significant evolution in my professional journey. In this environment, I decided not to treat students as if they were the same. Instead, I embraced their differences and crafted individual students as unique as themselves. Each student was in a world of their own. I gradually realized that every student required distinct teaching aids, assessment methods, and instructional strategies to help them grow and succeed. It was a stark contrast to my earlier teaching experiences, where a one-size-fits-all approach dominated the classroom. Here, I learned to see each student as an individual, with their

own pace, strengths, and needs, and to adjust my teaching to reflect that. For most professors in the college, standardized examinations were the norm and were widely regarded as essential for maintaining consistency and accountability. More often than not, these assessments imposed a rigid, one-size-fits-all structure and failed to account for the individuality of students or the complex, nuanced contexts in which learning occurs. As I strove to create inclusive, culturally responsive spaces for students thrive, I recognized the tension between my vision of individualized teaching and the penalties I could face for breaking the college policies that mandated standardized assessments. Just as we hold differing views on standardized exams, there has been considerable debate among scholars about their impact on students' achievement.

While Hirsch (1987) argued that standardized assessments provide a reliable measure of student performance and ensure accountability, Tienken (2016) contended that they often fail to capture the full spectrum of a student's abilities, creativity, and critical thinking. Hirsch posited that standardized assessment is a tool for promoting accountability and to ensure that all students acquire the foundational knowledge necessary for success. He argued that standardized exams provide a measurable framework to evaluate educational outcomes and ensure that schools are meeting essential learning objectives. Hirsch contended that, without standardized benchmarks, disparities in education might widen. He noted that it could leave some students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, without access to equitable learning opportunities. His perspective emphasized the role of standardized testing in fostering a shared, coherent curriculum. Tienken opined, however, that such assessments often fail to prepare students for the complexities of the modern world by focusing on rote memorization and narrow skill sets. Tienken further emphasized the need for curricula that prioritize creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability. The position of Tienken resonates with my approach to individualized teaching, where differentiated instruction and culturally responsive lessons are tools to empower students. These approaches allow students to see themselves and their histories reflected in their education. Despite the constraints of college policies, which sometimes do not allow for individualized assessment, I aim to challenge these systemic barriers, much like Love (2023) calls for educators to fight against oppressive educational systems. Love highlights the detrimental effects of policies that marginalize students, and urged educators to advocate for practices that affirm students' identities and aspirations. In my classroom, I envision fostering an environment where equity is prioritized, even within the bounds of standardized frameworks. In the second year of my PhD journey at Miami University, I was introduced to *curre* by Dr. Thomas Poetter, in the course, Curriculum Innovation. In this course, I questioned whether the individualized approach I practiced in college fully aligns with the principles of *curre*. *Curre*, as I understand it, calls for a deep reflection on the self, connecting the past, present, and future to one's learning and teaching practices (Pinar, 2004). It prompts me to consider whether the strategies I used in the college, while effective, allowed students to explore and express their narratives or if I was still imposing my structure onto their learning. In the college, we catered to each student's needs, but did we fully engage with their personal histories, dreams, and identities the way *curre* suggests?

SO, WHO AM I?

How can I use my current roles as a teacher, student, father, son, and spouse to tackle the challenges students face, especially for those with disabilities under unfavorable national and school policies? I will soon step into the classroom of Miami University as an instructor, planting

seeds of knowledge and advocacy. I go there with a determination to create an environment where every student can bloom. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, I sit at the desk as a student. I sharpen my tools of understanding and critique the systems that fail to support those who need it most. Later, when I go home, I assume the role of a father. As a father, I try to nurture my beloved baby (Naa Doodowaa) with love and empathy. I strive to teach her to stand tall against injustice. With my wife, I am a spouse. I weave dreams of equity into our shared lives by strategizing ways to push for change. And on the phone with my mother back in Ghana, I am a son. I honor the past and challenge my roots to embrace progress. In every role, I carry the fight for the most marginalized. I seek to dismantle policies that limit their potential, one step, one conversation, one lesson at a time. My various identities as a teacher, student, father, spouse, and son offer me unique perspectives in the fight against injustice and inequity, both in educational settings and in my personal life. Each role enables me to engage with these issues differently. Together, they allow me to disrupt oppressive systems and create spaces where justice and inclusivity flourish.

As a teacher, I hold the power to teach and to disrupt. Drawing from Love (2023) I see my role as a fighter within the system, where students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, are often punished for daring to dream beyond the confines of societal expectations. In my classroom, I imagine creating spaces where students don't just survive but thrive. Like planting seeds of liberation, I hope to weave culturally responsive lessons that reflect the rich histories and stories of those often silenced, pushing students to challenge oppressive systems and imagine new possibilities for themselves. As a teacher, I am on the frontlines of education and can directly impact how students experience learning. I design inclusive lessons, implement differentiated instruction, and advocate for individualized support that caters to the diverse needs of my students. Even in the face of restrictive school policies, I create a classroom environment that promotes equity, where students feel valued and included. I hope to use my position to make sure students are not punished by policies that deny them the right to dream and succeed.

As a student, I seek to approach my learning as a form of resistance, much like Love, anywhere Black and Brown students' ambitions are stifled by institutional barriers. I challenge the traditional curriculum built to maintain the status quo and instead embrace critical perspectives that question power and privilege. My journey as a minority student is a testament to how I can reclaim my education, turning every lecture, and every reading into a tool for deconstructing inequity. In the classroom, I seek to become a co-conspirator, who actively participates in reshaping the narratives of students so that dreams are no longer punished but celebrated. As a student, especially one researching inclusive education, I aspire to use my studies as a platform for critical engagement with the policies that negatively impact all students. As a father, I recognize that the home is the first battleground where dreams are nurtured and stifled. Inspired by Love's call for radical imagination, I envisage a space where my child will be free to dream boldly and love fiercely. I see my role as planting the seeds of social justice in her heart and teaching her to identify and resist the subtle forces of racism and inequity she will inevitably encounter. I hope she will see love as not just an emotion but an act of resistance against a world that often punishes those who dream beyond its narrow confines. I understand that advocating for students begins at home. Hence, I will ensure that my child is aware of the importance of inclusivity. I will also work to educate other parents about the challenges faced by marginalized students, build a community of support that can collectively push back against unfavorable school policies. Just as Love emphasizes the need for community-driven activism, I believe parents can be powerful advocates for policy changes that benefit all children. As a son, I hope to go through the delicate balance between honoring tradition and pushing for change. I know that some biases and inequities stem

from home and community, so I will initiate those difficult conversations with my elders, and act as a bridge between generations. I will honor my heritage while pushing it forward by ensuring that my family is part of the collective fight for a future where dreams are no longer restricted. As a spouse, I will treat our partnership as a foundation for building the world we want to see. I will ensure our relationship is a haven where equity and justice are practiced daily. I want our love to grow out of modeling the type of love and mutual respect that can dismantle oppressive structures. Together, we will be co-dreamers, and stand side by side in the fight against inequity, support each other's activism, and challenge the oppression we see in the world around us. Our love, like Love's vision, will be revolutionary, a force that nurtures dreams rather than punishes them. I am all of these; one person, many roles, each with a part to play in creating a more inclusive world.

Emotionally, I am more attuned to the need for vulnerability and self-reflection in my teaching and research. Drawing from the work of Poetter (2025) and the concept of *curre*, I now realize that my own personal history, struggles, and growth are central to how I approach both leadership and the work I hope to do in the future. I am committed to continuing to unravel my own story to understand the impact of my upbringing and how it shapes my teaching philosophy and leadership style. My role as a father, son, and spouse only deepens my commitment to advocating for change, as these roles constantly remind me of the importance of nurturing spaces where voices are heard, and dreams are not punished. Looking ahead, my academic and professional goals are taking shape around the idea of leadership that is not only inclusive but transformative. I hope to use my dissertation on social justice leadership to challenge the inequities in educational systems, particularly in the context of inclusive education in Ghana. Through this work, I want to contribute to the ongoing conversation on how educational systems can truly embrace all students, acknowledge their full humanity and potential, and dismantle the systems that restrict their growth.

My father came to wish that he had created a more open and nurturing space for us during our childhood. He realized how the rigid structure of our upbringing stifled my early self-discovery and how its effects lingered in my career and made it harder for me to find my footing. The lack of freedom to express myself or explore my individuality left scars that took years to heal. My siblings, too, have taken different paths. They have turned away from the traditions and values we were raised with. Anytime I visit them and see their children play freely in the living area, it reminds me of what we missed, like birds confined to a cage, never knowing the joy of spreading their wings in open skies. It's bittersweet to see how these lessons came too late for my father, who, before he passed on, wished he had allowed us the freedom to dream, question, and grow in a more supportive environment. His reflections are a reminder that childhood is not just about discipline and order but also about creating space for self-expression and the growth of unique identities. Despite it all, I have found a way to go through these challenges, but I can't help but wonder how different our lives might have been if home had been a place where dreams were nurtured instead of subdued. The journey is still unfolding.

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