

NAVIGATING THE LATEST CULTURE WAR

INSIGHTS FROM THE *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE ON

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM DESIGN

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Being a teacher in the United States in the 2020s means experiencing moments of being celebrated during the shift to online schooling and the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic only to quickly face intense scrutiny following the George Floyd protests (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). Teachers find themselves at the center of a culture war, with shifting targets ranging from debates over pronoun policies and perceived religious infringements to concerns about critical race theory (CRT), book bans, and making white students feel guilty (Berkshire & Schneider, 2024). Despite the swirling debates, teachers are rarely asked about their experiences: “What is teaching like right now? How can we support you beyond the extra jeans pass? Can you care for your family? How is your mental health?” Being a teacher blends awe, pain, hope, tears, stress, burdens, and excitement. This paper shares the experiences of six Midwest educators, the Currere Collective, navigating culturally responsive curriculum amid the current culture war. The discussion is organized as follows: defining culturally responsive curriculum in the current sociopolitical context, exploring the origins of the Currere Collective, examining insights from our sharing, and discussing communal *currere* efforts as support for teachers today.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULAR WORK IN 2025 AND BEYOND

A culturally responsive curriculum centers students’ lived experiences as vital resources for learning (Milner, 2010; Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005) while affirming and sustaining their cultural heritages and evolving identities (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). It is co-created dynamically by educators and students, challenging hidden norms and inequities by intentionally including marginalized perspectives and diverse ways of knowing (Bishop, 1990; Eisner, 2002; Gay, 2018). This approach fosters critical consciousness, empowering students to identify and address systemic inequities (Freire, 1970; Milner, 2010) and encourages teacher reflexivity to disrupt biases and inequitable practices (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). By leveraging students’ community cultural wealth and recognizing culture as dynamic, it creates inclusive, engaging, and socially just learning experiences (Gay, 2018; Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005).

However, implementing culturally responsive curricula faces significant challenges in today’s polarized educational landscape. The perennial question, “What knowledge is of most worth?” (Spencer, 1860) sparked debates long before public schooling in the U.S. However, some argue that current ideological battles impact teachers on a previously unseen scale (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). Equity-oriented educators urge teachers to teach in culturally responsive ways to support all students’ success, yet federal, state, and local efforts to eliminate culturally responsive pedagogy have been pervasive since the first Trump administration (Fuchs, 2020; Dutton, 2021; Ranschaert, 2023). For example, in 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a



law limiting race-based discussions in schools (Farrington, 2022). By January 2025, 861 anti-CRT efforts were introduced at various government levels (CRT Forward Tracking Project, n.d.). This tension, compounded by pressures to raise test scores and emphasize academic excellence, often portrays social justice discussions as incompatible with educational success—despite evidence to the contrary (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

The cultural climate of the past five years has been incredibly hostile toward teachers. In 2020, protests against mask mandates and online schooling erupted at local school board meetings (Khazan, 2021), with media highlighting unrest and violence (Cottle, 2021). In Missouri, where the five authors of this paper teach, the Attorney General filed lawsuits against districts enforcing mask mandates (Schmidt, 2021). Soon after, anti-CRT protests became dominant at school board meetings (Dorman, 2021) and continued for months in districts where three of the authors teach (Riley, 2021a), with some advocating for classroom cameras to monitor teachers (Riley, 2021b).

Teachers also faced book bans (Hixenbaugh, 2021), firings for addressing racism (Pendharkar, 2021), and investigations for showing movies with gay characters (Hernandez, 2023). Over 160 teachers lost their jobs due to political controversies (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). In Southwest Missouri, near where four of the authors teach, a teacher resigned in 2021 after parents objected to a pride flag in his classroom. A neighboring district declined to renew a teacher's contract after she taught, *Dear Martin* (Riley, 2022), a novel by Nic Stone depicting a teen's attempts to process experiences with racism.

As a result, teachers fear community backlash and job loss (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024; Ranschaert, 2023), leading them to self-censor and interpret policies cautiously (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). They are uncertain how to navigate teaching “divisive concepts” (Pollock et al., 2022, p. 17), which now include topics like race, gender, sexuality, identity, and equity, often because they are believed to provoke discomfort, guilt, or other emotions for some students (Stitzlein, 2024, p. 2).

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT: THE NEED FOR A *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE

This challenging landscape highlights the need to equip educators with the tools, knowledge, and support for engaging in culturally responsive curriculum work—a focus of ELE 711: Contemporary Issues in Elementary Curriculum, taught by Chloe each spring. The course's guiding question asks, *How can elementary curriculum promote a more equitable, compassionate, and just society?* Students explore curriculum definitions, the effects of standardization, and balancing equitable teaching with high-stakes testing. Topics include defining success in schools, using literature to reflect diverse experiences, and addressing hidden and null curricula in social studies. Students investigate bias in curriculum, its impact on students in poverty, and equity-centered, trauma-informed education strategies, with a focus on LGBTQ-inclusive and anti-racist curricula.

Students engage in weekly interactive discussions via Padlet or Google Slides to synthesize media and learn from peers. Throughout the semester, they conduct an equity audit of a curricular unit using Jess Lifshitz's (n.d.) *Crawling out of the Classroom* and NYU Steinhardt's Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecards (Metro Center, n.d.).

In Spring 2024, Chloe hosted optional Zoom sessions for students to discuss course topics, alternating between structured formats and open forums. During these sessions and in assignments, students raised concerns such as, “How do I do this work and not get fired?” and “What is my



district's policy on LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum?" These questions inspired Chloe to propose the *Currere* Collective to explore these challenges. Goals included the following: 1) addressing questions about equitable curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation, 2) reflecting on aligning practices with values and course-correcting when needed, 3) building confidence to create change within our roles, and 4) supporting one another.

THE *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

I, Chloe, invited five ELE 711 students to co-author a *currere* paper addressing questions raised during the course. All five graduate students agreed. The *Currere* Collective includes five teachers (Milana Hainline, Rebekah Mann, Madison Mielke, McKenzie Pon, and John Dove) and me. Rebekah Mann, McKenzie Pon, and I hold tenure spanning Missouri and Arkansas. Our diverse backgrounds, cultures, identities, and teaching experiences shape our daily teaching practices. Below, each author introduces themselves.

MILANA HAINLINE, SECOND-YEAR TEACHER, 2ND GRADE; BENTONVILLE, AR

As a second-year teacher, this is my third classroom. After the 2024-2025 school year had started, I was moved to another grade level. I was then almost moved to a different school at the end of the year due to numbers but was able to stay at the last minute. My future position for next school year is not guaranteed, since I am still the last hired. Although this can add some incredible stress, I am passionate about teaching. I enjoy finding ways to support and teach equity in my classroom. With the *Currere* Collective, I hoped to find ways to appropriately use my voice to address curricular issues within the realm of equity and inclusivity, as well as find ways to confidently incorporate my ideas in my lessons without fear of being told to stop talking because I am young.

REBEKAH MANN, 11TH-YEAR TEACHER, 1ST/2ND GRADES GIFTED EDUCATION; SPRINGFIELD, MO

I am in my 11th year of teaching. Throughout that time, I have worked in five locations and positions, spanning kindergarten through 12th grade, using various delivery methods, including in-person, virtual, and summer camps in English and/or French. The past three years have been spent in gifted education.

My overall goal with the *Currere* Collective was to regain my confidence as an educator to teach outside the box. During my first five years of teaching, I was in a school with a staff of highly religious and conservative individuals. This time coincided with my husband's years in graduate school and massive student loan debt repayment. I was the sole financial support for our family and felt I couldn't rock the boat for fear of my family's stability. Unfortunately, that fear has stuck with me, and I hoped this would be a healing experience in order to be a stronger advocate for my students, colleagues, and myself.



MADISON MIELKE, *FOURTH-YEAR TEACHER, 5TH GRADE SCIENCE; WRIGHT CITY, MO*

I am in my fourth year teaching in a semi-rural school district outside of St. Louis. I have taught third grade and all subjects of fifth grade, but this is my second year teaching fifth grade science. I knew I wanted to be a teacher since I was in first grade, and my goal is to become the best teacher for all of my students. My passion is to help students become interested in what they are learning to create lifelong learners. My school district does not purchase any kind of curriculum for teachers to follow, so it is up to each grade level or teacher to create the curriculum that they will be teaching as long as the content follows the state standards. Because of this, I have the freedom not many teachers have to create a science curriculum that includes different voices, stories, and experiences from cultures, locations, and identities. The *Currere* Collective is important to me because I know that, to become the best teacher I can be, I first have to understand myself and the world around me to create an inspiring, inclusive, and socially just curriculum that grabs the attention of every single student in my classroom.

MCKENZIE PON, *SIXTH-YEAR TEACHER, 2ND GRADE; SPRINGFIELD, MO*

In my first years as a teacher, I spent much of my time witnessing the inequities in education and quickly realizing how much of an uphill battle it would be to address them. I learned early on that advocating for students and speaking out against systemic injustices often came with personal consequences and even retaliation. These challenges remained as I progressed in my career and became tenured, but my commitment to fostering equity and inclusivity deepened. The intersection of being an Asian American educator in an interracial relationship continues to shape my journey, reminding me of the importance of advocating for justice despite the fear and resistance. Teaching demands resilience and adaptability, and while the challenges of this work remain significant, I believe that advocating for justice and change is essential for creating a better future for our students.

JOHN DOVE, *FIRST-YEAR TEACHER, 6TH GRADE SCIENCE; SPRINGFIELD, MO*

As a first-year teacher, I find things challenging, to say the least. There are plenty of obstacles to navigate, but I remain passionate about teaching all students. There have been times when I have felt the system was trying to kill my passion for teaching, especially as a queer educator (Howard & Dove, 2023). With that being said, the intersection of being queer and an educator has greatly impacted my life. Teaching takes your entire being, and when part of me is being told to stay silent, it affects my ability to do my job well. This is something I share with my students in some ways, as I live in a place where many queer students fear for their safety. Despite the stigma these students already face, I am told directly by superiors not to use students' preferred pronouns, have conversations around LGBTQ+ topics, or even have a safe space sticker visible in my classroom. The systemic inequities present against queer youth may be rampant, but I do what I can to build resilience in my students and show them that I see them for who they are. I am still learning to navigate resilience as an educator, but I believe that The *Currere* Collective is a step towards change.



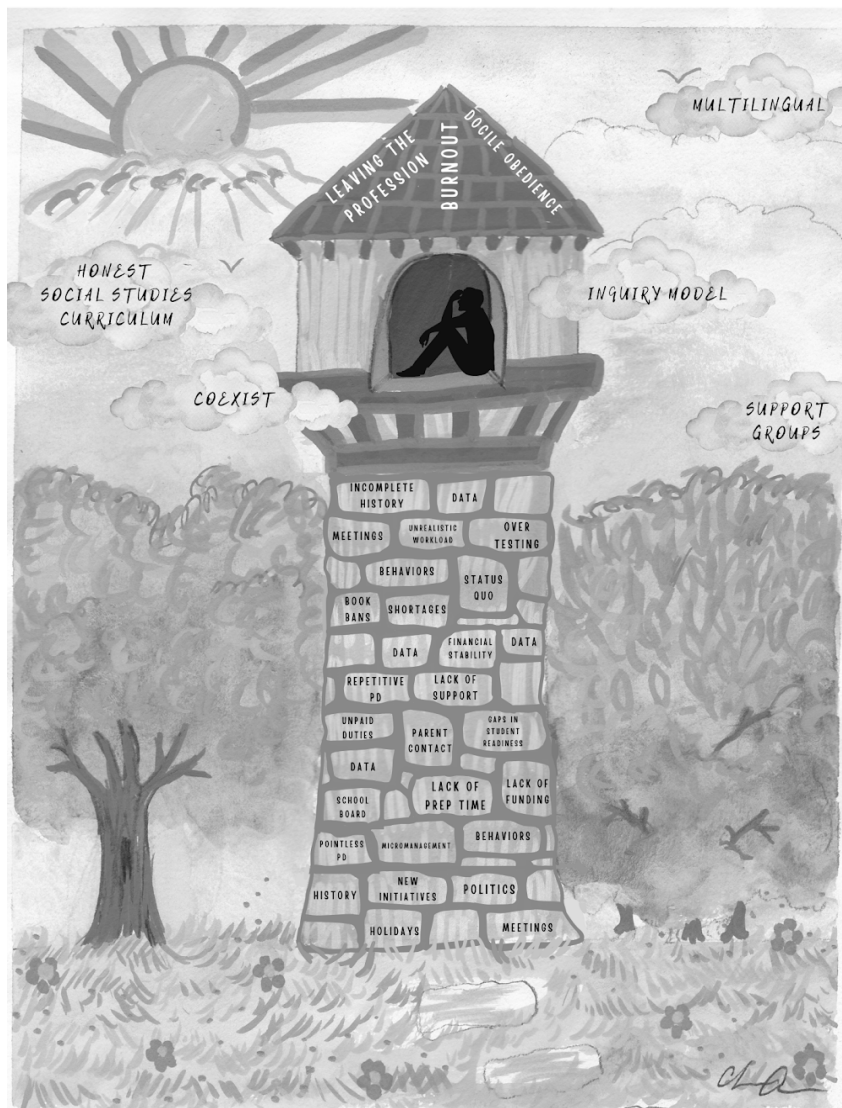
THE *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE TIMELINE, AGENDA, & RESULTING THEMES

The *Currere* Collective met synchronously on Zoom 2024 according to the timeline below. Discussions were guided by the question: How do elementary educators in the Midwest design and implement culturally responsive curricula during the current culture war?

Dates	Meeting Outline
July 10	● Create norms for collaborative work ● Identify strengths and roles of each author ● Debrief feedback from the <i>Currere</i> Exchange Conference ● Create interview questions for the Regressive Moment interview ● Establish discussion protocol for 90-minute interviews: ○ Each individual speaks for 10 uninterrupted minutes ○ Open discussion with the remaining time
July 29	● Regressive moment interview addressing the following question: ○ What has socially just curriculum looked like for you as a P-16 student and into your role in education now?
August 15	● Review the regressive moment transcript for errors. ● Progressive moment interview addressing the following questions: ○ Imagine a year, five years, and 10 years from now—where anything is possible—what does your teaching look like regarding a socially just curriculum? ○ As you consider the future, what fears come up for you? ● Discuss emerging themes.
August 29	● Review the progressive moment transcript for errors. ● Analytical moment interview addressing the following questions: ○ What does your work regarding socially just curriculum look like now? ○ How is the present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both regarding socially just curriculum in your work? ● Discuss emerging themes.
September 13	● Review the analytical moment transcript for errors. ● Synthetical moment interview addressing the following questions: ○ Given your reflection over the last three interviews, where are you now in understanding of what it means to do socially just curriculum work? ○ How does this understanding align with the kind of teacher you aspire to be? ○ What are your general reflections on the <i>currere</i> process as a whole? ● Discuss emerging themes.
October – December	● Solidify themes ● Brainstorm ideas for allegorically capturing our narratives ● Write up findings

Our meeting transcripts revealed four key themes: 1) navigating tension between teacher aspirations and educational constraints, 2) envisioning inclusive futures and aspiring to be the teachers we needed and our students deserve, 3) confronting the absence of support and unseen struggles in education, and 4) embracing courage by rejecting the status quo. Below, we use allegory, poetry, and images to represent and interpret these themes while protecting the anonymity of the authors who are current classroom teachers. To honor the sensitive nature of the school-based narratives and the vulnerabilities they shared, direct quotes are included sparingly.

NAVIGATING THE TENSION BETWEEN TEACHER ASPIRATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL CONSTRAINTS: THE TOWER



Note: Original image created by Tina Collado and Rebekah Mann. Used with permission. Poem written by Rebekah Mann (2024).

*Confined to a tower
With a narrow view,
Curious and wondering
What more they can do?*

*How could this place,
That they dreamed of being
Be so dark and rigid,
With a lack of seeing?*

*Each new year,
Comes with more expectations
But nothing comes off
Their plate of dedication.*

*What can be done,
For this teacher dreamer?
How can they be
A student teacher?*

*Use the students to
Guide the profession
So, question the curriculum
Until there is progression.*

*The students deserve
To discover the world
Hands-on, immersive,
And unfurled.*

*Keep chipping away at
The bricks of the tower
Eventually, you'll discover
How you possess power.*

ENVISIONING INCLUSIVE FUTURES AND ASPIRING TO BE THE TEACHERS STUDENTS DESERVE: UNDERWATER TEACHER DREAMER



Note: Original image created by Madison Mielke. Used with permission.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel longs for the world above, believing it holds something better than her underwater life. She is willing to sacrifice everything to belong to it, much like many teachers are drawn to education, feeling a calling to guide and inspire young minds. Ariel's desire to escape her father's control reflects the restrictions many teachers faced in school, where decisions often ignored cultural diversity and student interests. For many members of the *Currere* Collective, these experiences became the motivation to enter the profession, striving to bring inclusivity, depth, and critical thought into the classroom.

Ariel's siblings are content with their lives under the sea, while King Triton dismisses her dream as reckless and cannot understand her needs. Similarly, many in the *Currere* Collective recall their unmet needs in school, whether due to learning differences, mental health struggles, or challenges at home. These experiences fuel the drive to become educators who provide the support they once lacked, ensuring students feel seen, heard, and valued while advocating for equitable access to resources.

As Ariel collects artifacts to prepare for her new life, teachers also dedicate years to gathering knowledge and resources to create inclusive classrooms that honor diverse cultures. Just as Ariel hoards knowledge, educators collect books and materials that reflect students'

backgrounds, aiming to be the teachers they once needed and empowering students to embrace their unique identities.

Finally, Ariel sacrifices her voice to gain legs, symbolizing her desire for a new identity and belonging.¹ Similarly, teachers embark on their journey with a vision for their classrooms, sacrificing time, comfort, and identity to create spaces that inspire and nurture growth. Ariel and teachers undergo transformative journeys that require courage, sacrifice, and determination, striving to break free from traditional constraints, champion inclusivity, and foster emotional well-being. Ariel says, “I just don’t see how a world that makes such wonderful things could be bad.” Similarly, how could the world of education, which teachers work so hard to be a part of, be anything but good?

CONFRONTING THE ABSENCE OF SUPPORT AND UNSEEN STRUGGLES IN EDUCATION: I NEED ASSISTANCE



Note: Original image created by Fiona Badley. Used with permission.

strongest support beams if I could have felt anything. So I sat there, crumbling on the ground, echoing my last feeble words into the abyss. “Help...help...help...”

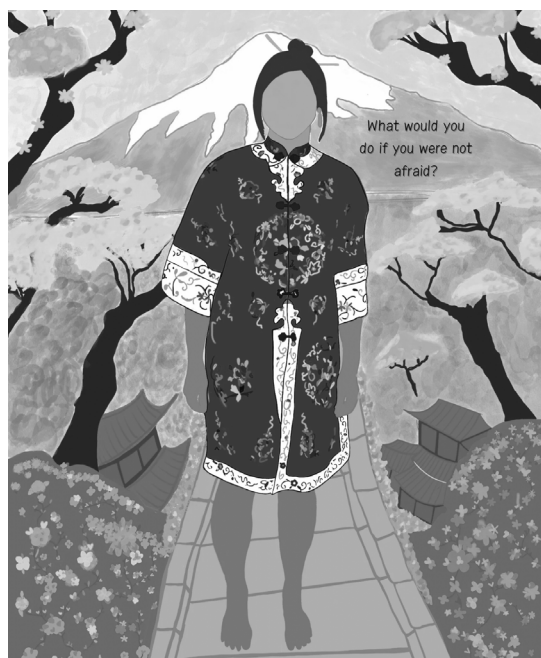
I couldn’t find my way out. I had been wandering for what felt like years along this path of pins and needles. The chains around my bloodied ankles groaned and ached with each step, but what else was there to do? Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something in the shadows ... a surveillance camera? Do I dare give in to this glimmer of hope to be saved from here? Foolish as it may be, I got up and ran toward the camera, injuring my feet further on the rough ground. As I collapsed beneath the monitoring camera, I gasped out, “Please! Help me! Please!” The lens focused on me, and I waited with bated breath. But nothing happened, so I again pleaded, “Please help me! I need assistance!” The camera focused once more, then shut off. The despair I felt would have crushed the

The grim imagery above reflects the lack of support many authors expressed during our *Currere* Collective meetings, a theme central to our discussions. Support can make or break a teacher’s success, and one of the most crucial forms of support is from school and district leadership. Administrators have a significant impact on teacher well-being and productivity. During our *Currere* Collective meetings, many authors shared similar experiences in teacher preparation programs focused on equitable teaching practices. However, they encountered resistance or outright refusal from school leadership when attempting to implement these practices.

The frustration of facing barriers can make the job feel hopeless, leading to the question: Why do teachers who become administrators abandon the mission of supporting ALL students?

Society expects teachers to carry the world's weight, as seen in slogans like "teaching is my superpower." Teachers are cast in various roles—heroes, villains, martyrs—yet the one thing often overlooked is that teachers are human. Despite this, we are expected to thrive on less every year. Some families and policymakers abandon us, and the road we walk is arduous, but the people supposed to support us—our school administration—often turn away. The teacher shortage is no mystery when you speak to teachers about their struggles without adequate support. Instead of support, teachers face scrutiny, as seen in comments like, "If kids are on a device above 40 minutes a day...we'll get in trouble." Teachers are met with judging gazes, obstacles, and a lack of trust. The question remains: Is there a way forward from this cycle of struggle?

EMBRACING COURAGE BY REJECTING THE STATUS QUO: WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE NOT AFRAID?



Note: Original image created by McKenzie Pon. Used with permission.

The teacher grazes her hands over the title. "Mulan" is etched in brilliant gold, and the pages are still crisp. As the students sit eagerly awaiting the tale their fearless leader has just brought forth, the educator cannot help but take a deep breath. This tale is what is needed right now. It is as if each time it is read aloud to a new group of students, she is reminded of what she desires to do—break the educational barrier. The teacher begins to read:

Once upon a time, a girl understood the Chinese practices of being a woman. She knew how to greet others, how to sit, and the proper conversations to discuss during an evening meal. It was as if her job was to please everyone but herself.²

The teacher pauses. It hits too close to home. She continues,

After many years, it seemed that poor Mulan felt the pressure to please. She could not fit that mold completely. She would respectfully bow her head and repeat the motions that society told her to—though, in her eyes, some things just did not seem necessary. Other young girls around her seemed to get it. They knew what honor meant and how important their families were to them. This black-and-white notion of what it meant to bring honor seemed to make sense to everyone but herself. However, as time passed, Mulan could no longer bear to remain confined within the structures of her society.

She took a risk. In the mirror, she cut her hair and changed into her father's clothes. Behind closed doors, she practiced her fighting skills. She understood what was more important to



her than following the rigidity of her village. Something lay ahead that affected more than just herself, and it was that very thing that she would fight for.

The teacher paused again and began to look around the room at students' eager faces, waiting to hear more. What had this teacher allowed the education system to turn her into? Breaking the chains of the norm to do what was best for students—something bigger than herself. The parallels were too similar. How silly yet beautiful to begin seeing hope within the children's books in her classroom. The teacher could not help but skip ahead. She needed more hope. She needed a sign. Something that reminded her to keep going.

When word had finally spread that Mulan had left in place of her father, the village became a sea of whispers. How could a girl leave for something so scary? Couldn't she be killed? What if the emperor found out about this? The questions came from every direction. However, while adults ran their minds silly, little girls began to have very different conversations. They began to believe they could fight, too. Little girls realized they could not only be women who bring honor to their families but could do so in unheard-of ways. Mulan had not even returned, yet young girls acted like they already had. The norm was changing because Mulan was doing something bigger than herself.

With that, the teacher paused again and breathed in and out. This classroom was as much a place for change as any other. Perhaps she could break that educational barrier and impact something bigger than herself.

Just as Mulan defied societal expectations to honor her family, many educators today challenge the status quo to foster classroom equity. Drawing from personal experiences, they encourage hard conversations about identity and empower students to express themselves. As Madison noted, "What we were taught when we were young is not the whole story," emphasizing the need to expand the narratives shared with students.

Like Mulan's impact on the girls in her village, teachers inspire students to embrace their identities and dreams. McKenzie described "being a voice for my students, having authentic conversations, and promoting them as global thinkers who take action in the world." These dialogues foster empathy and challenge traditional narratives.

While Mulan's story serves as a powerful allegory for educators challenging the status quo, we also recognize the complexity of invoking her narrative—particularly given its retelling by Disney. The symbolism resonated deeply with our discussions, yet McKenzie, an Asian American educator, felt it was important to critically engage with the cultural implications of using Mulan as a representative figure. The following reflection contextualizes her personal connection to the story while also addressing its limitations and layered meanings within this collective project:

As an Asian American educator, I have complex feelings about Mulan. I recognize the valid critiques that Western retellings of her story, especially in commercial forms, often simplify Chinese culture or present it through a lens that isn't fully authentic. Yali and Kaiju (2021) discuss Anjirbag's (2018) argument that, although Disney aimed to present *Mulan* (1998) as a multicultural and diverse story, the film still carries colonial perspectives in its portrayal. They point out that the animation style contributes to framing the culture as "other," subtly reinforcing cultural separation and difference. These concerns matter deeply, particularly as I work to ensure that students experience culturally accurate and empowering representations.



At the same time, Mulan holds personal significance for me. She was the first strong Asian character I ever saw—brave, clever, and determined. She wasn’t a sidekick or background figure. That visibility meant something in a world where I rarely saw myself reflected. As an adult and educator, I now see how, even in her rebellion, Mulan was constrained by the systems around her. She had to take on the identity of a man to be heard, to act, to make a difference.

I see this mirrored in education, especially for women and educators of color. We are often asked to suppress parts of ourselves to be accepted or seen as “professional.” But like Mulan, many of us reach a point when staying quiet is no longer an option. We take the risk not just for ourselves, but for equity, justice, and the students watching us, wondering what they might dare to do if they weren’t afraid.

The question, “*What would you do if you were not afraid?*” drives educators to confront systemic barriers and initiate critical conversations. As Rebekah said, “Questioning creates change ... if we don’t do it, we’re not going to make anything better.” However, a lack of institutional support often complicates their efforts. McKenzie highlighted this, sharing, “People just aren’t aware of what’s actually going on in classrooms. My hope is to keep advocating for these issues.”

Educators cultivate dialogue and reflection to create equitable spaces where students and families feel seen. Milana underscored this: “Reflection can’t happen just once a year. It needs to be constant to ensure all students feel valued.”

Mulan’s story reminds us that challenging societal norms can inspire transformative change. Similarly, educators can help future generations engage in meaningful, necessary conversations that foster understanding and action.

LESSONS TO CARRY FORWARD FROM THE *CURRERE* COLLECTIVE

Through our *Currere* Collective conversations, we asked how elementary educators in the Midwest navigate designing and implementing culturally responsive curricula amid the current culture war. After four meetings focusing on the four moments of *currere* (regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical), we identified four themes: 1) navigating the tension between teacher aspirations and educational constraints, 2) envisioning inclusive futures and aspiring to be the teachers we needed, 3) confronting the absence of support and unseen struggles, and 4) embracing courage by rejecting the status quo.

These themes reflect the complex landscape of teaching for social justice in 2025, as discussed in the literature (e.g., Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024; Ranschaert, 2023). The first three graphics depicted a lone teacher navigating dangerous environments—a tower, underwater cave, and bed of needles—symbolizing barriers like politics, data overload, unpaid duties, over-testing, book bans, whitewashed curricula, lack of funding, restrictive demands, and insufficient support.

In contrast, the fourth image, inspired by Mulan, showed a teacher facing a towering mountain with the caption, “What would you do if you were not afraid?” This question challenges educators to overcome their fears and embrace the difficult work of creating culturally responsive curricula. The ideals in these visuals—multilingualism, inquiry-based learning, honest social studies curricula, support groups, diversity, inclusion, and validation—serve as a guiding vision for teachers striving for meaningful change.

While asking teachers to be more courageous may seem simple for those not in PK-12 settings, it is not easy when one’s job is at risk (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). The advice to “Shut your door and teach what you know is right” overlooks teachers’ grim realities (Ranschaert, 2023).



Teachers need strategies to work within current challenges to uphold their ethical commitments. One such strategy is finding a support network with like-minded colleagues (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024). Groups like the *Currere* Collective can be crucial in supporting educational justice work. Our final *currere* meeting reflected on how the collective process impacted us individually and as a community, highlighting the potential of communal *currere* as a powerful tool for supporting teachers engaged in social justice work:

Milana: The *Currere* Collective has shaped the way that I view education and has shaped the things that I allow in my room, whether an administrator tells me to do them or not to do them. I think this process has allowed me to go, “Okay. What from my past self and past education was good? What did I want to change? And how can I apply that now?”

Rebekah: After college graduation, I remember that feeling of excitement for teaching. My plans of a grandiose vision of incorporating world languages into my lessons for enrichment quickly got swallowed up by the never-ending list of expectations... . The feeling of overwhelm was inevitable. You begin to think, “I have no time for a passion project. I have no time to do anything except for everything they’re asking me to do, and there’s not even enough for that.” The *Currere* Collective has been a safe place where there can be intellectual conversation that I haven’t been getting in other areas, and it’s very necessary for me. It has fed my soul as an educator to have these conversations and is reviving the preliminary aspirations.

Madison: Administration and the school board like to tell me to “remember your why,” but every teacher needs to go through the *currere* process. Remembering why we do this is one thing but remembering what kind of teacher we *want* to be and what we are doing in our classrooms that do *not* align with that wish is another I haven’t thought about the teacher I want to be since college, when I was daydreaming about the classroom I didn’t have yet Now, I am in the thick of it, and it has taken four years for someone to stop me and make me remember my teacher daydreams.

McKenzie: Through this reflection, I have realized that I am not alone in facing many of the challenges I have encountered. Listening to others’ experiences has highlighted common struggles and introduced me to new perspectives and issues I hadn’t previously considered. This collaborative process has inspired me to think about ways to improve my practice within my classroom and school. It has also reinforced my commitment to continuous growth, not only for myself but also for the benefit of my students and the broader community.

John: And so, when I’m here, meeting with the *Currere* Collective, it’s like I get to remove myself a little bit and just think about ... the broader scope of socially just curriculum work ... about how meaningful it feels to collaborate with other educators—such as the *Currere* Collective members, who I respect greatly—and it feels like something is being done.

Teachers described the *Currere* Collective as an opportunity to gain a “balcony view” (Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024, p. 11) that allowed them to go above the “dance floor” of teaching’s endless demands and critically evaluate their current practices concerning their teaching



philosophies. They characterized the meetings as a “safe space” that fostered “intellectual intimacy” and provided a sense of shared struggle, starkly contrasting the isolation they often experience.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we detailed the impact of the latest culture war on teachers’ efforts to implement culturally responsive curriculum practices. Specifically, we shared our experiences as six Midwest educators comprising the *Currere* Collective. Together, we navigated the tension between our teaching aspirations and systemic constraints, envisioned more inclusive futures, confronted the lack of institutional support, and embraced the courage to engage in hard but necessary conversations for educational justice. The *Currere* Collective emerged as a supportive community of like-minded educators, fostering intellectual intimacy, mutual encouragement, and a reinvigoration of our ethical commitments to social justice in education. We united through our shared dedication to equity and genuine desire to advocate for meaningful change. As Venet (2024) recommended, “If you feel stuck or lost about how to make change, start by connecting to others” (p. 253).

NOTES

1. Although *The Little Mermaid* is being used as a recognized narrative, we are not endorsing the cultural portrayals of the position and view of women, whiteness, and the exotic “other” (Lacroix, 2004).
2. All text, including the retelling of the *Mulan* story, was written by Milana Hainline.

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