

## BECOMING AND TEACHING: *CURRERE* IN CONTEXT

By Della R. Leavitt

*Dorothy Stang Popular Education Adult High School, Chicago, Illinois*

Growing up as a white, middle-class, suburban female in the 1950s and 1960s, I battled Baszile's (2015) pervasive double-bind. I found the "need to say something about who [I am] and what [I] mean" (Baszile, 2015, p. 122), while challenging societal attempts to limit who I was. This regressive piece examines my critical educational influences to engage in the first phase of Pinar's (1994) *currere* method, using Baszile's (2015) refinement of *currere* from a critical race/feminist standpoint. To do so requires not only "(re)membering the childhood that has made [me] who [I am], but also (re)membering the collective past hats [I have] been taught, warned, and seduced to forget" (Baszile, 2015, p. 124).

Returning to my early school experiences reminds me of the limiting social context for young women in the 1950s and 1960s. From my earliest days, my father's encouragement jarred with society's mixed messages about professional options for women. Changing times and the Cold War pushed mathematics and science to the forefront of our nation's future, but the often unspoken subtext was that those were not fields for females. It was my non-college-educated father's belief in my abilities, juxtaposed with my middle school math teacher's embrace of the innovative mid-1960s "New Math" curriculum, that boosted my confidence to lead me to a non-traditional, female career in the technology field. This same confidence propelled a sharp detour from that twenty-year career to become a Chicago high school math teacher. That detour changed my life.

Amid the palpable fear of nuclear annihilation after the adult generation lived through the reality of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, schoolchildren experienced bomb scare drills in fallout shelters that became the abnormal norm. While sit-ins and marches advanced the Civil Rights Movement, aiming to end explicitly racist social practices, the Vietnam War escalated. Each night, television newsmen reported the body count of U.S. casualties. With my pre-teen eyes and sensibilities, from the Cuban missile crisis to the violence at the Selma march, the future of humanity felt tenuous.

Pinar's (1994) foundational query, "What has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?" (p. 20) relates to my question: How have my life's experiences shaped coming to teaching?

### MY DAD, MY TEACHER

My dad was my teacher, although that was not how he earned his living. The eldest of six children born to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents on Chicago's West Side, he remained a curious life-long learner about many topics. His observations displayed an analytical eye toward human nature honed by the experiences of his large, extended family clan and the surrounding life in Chicago's immigrant Maxwell Street market.

My dad was eager to share his stories with me—family stories, Army stories, stories of people he knew on Maxwell Street—I loved to hear these again and again. Although my dad was a conventional man, he treated me with no less promise than he

would have accorded a first-born son. Before I learned to read, he taught me numbers with card games. I delighted when he praised my cleverness. He encouraged my reading, too. Every Thursday, his day off, he took me to the Belmont branch of the Chicago Public Library. I remember how I discovered wondrous storybooks to take home to our third-floor, walk-up apartment. At age four, after proving I could write my name, I earned my own library card. Reading opened my world before I entered school.

My parents met and married one year after my dad returned from his European tour of duty in World War II. My father insisted my mother leave the war-time secretarial job she held in his uncle's office to stay at-home. By age seven, I had four younger siblings. As a child, I noticed how my mom embraced her role as homemaker. I saw how she assumed a daunting regiment of cooking, cleaning, laundry, and infant-feeding. Sometimes, it was too much. Mom's occasional explosions displayed the frustrations of keeping a pristine house with five young children. Early on, this did not look like the life I aspired to.

### PLAYING TEACHER FOR MY SISTERS AND BROTHERS

When we moved into our new, suburban development, tri-level house, my dad would drive off in our only car six long days out of the week. With added commuting time, his twelve hours away from home stretched out longer than before. In his absence, I took up teaching my four younger siblings, reading aloud to them and listening when they read to me. I taught them card and board games and praised their developmentally-appropriate accomplishments, even when I knew I could do better. My accepting phrase, "that's good for your age" boosted their learning.

One day our dad brought home a small chalkboard with six boxes of colored chalk and an eraser. He hung the blackboard in the sub-basement for us to "play school." I was always the teacher. We knew our mom and dad were both smart, but neither had gone to college. All we knew about college was what we learned from Dobie Gillis and Maynard G. Krebs on the popular television sitcom. I wrote on the chalkboard what we imagined to be a college student's gargantuan homework assignments. College work must be impossible.

"Read pages 1-400. Do 150 math problems."

Unlike many girls, math was my favorite school subject. When I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I understood fractions so well I wished I could take over from our teacher to explain addition-with-unlike-denominators when I saw my classmates' puzzled faces. I thought up ways I would explain it differently from our teacher to guide my friends' understanding. *Maybe I will become a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher when I grow up.* By 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I reveled in the patterns I saw converting between decimals and percentages. Again, I imagined the myriad of explanations to ease my friends' confusion when they cried, "I don't get it!" I didn't want to be a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher anymore. I wanted to teach 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Teaching was one of the few careers where I saw professional women.

### NASA FANDOM IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

After Soviets' surprise 1957 Sputnik rocket launch, our country was consumed with outer space, and so was I. My fascination with the NASA program began as soon as I could recite all the names of the first Mercury Seven astronauts. Each was a modern day Argonaut in the space race. In 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, our whole student body jammed into the school library to watch the first two United States manned space flights on television. We ooh-ed and aah-ed for all fifteen minutes of Alan Shepard's

and Gus Grissom's flights. I remember those to be among our best school days.

As a 5<sup>th</sup> grader, I opposed a popular anti-Communist slogan, "I'd rather be dead than Red," by sporting a button a friend's mom gave me that read, "I'd rather be..." I was a sensitive peacenik, but my parents took little notice. They were mainstream Americans who voted twice for Eisenhower instead of Illinois' native son, the progressive senator Adlai Stevenson, who lost both presidential runs in the 1950s. My draftee father remained loyal to his World War II commanding general who warned of the advancing "United States military-industrial complex" in the 1961 farewell speech he gave at the end of his presidency (Eisenhower, 1961).

### FACING RACISM AND "NO GIRLS ALLOWED!"

In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, we had our first male teacher, Mr. Bryant<sup>1</sup>, for science and math. We flirty, pre-teen girls thought Mr. Bryant was handsome enough to be serenaded with our own lyrics to "Let's Get Together," (Sherman & Sherman, 1961) from the popular film, *The Parent Trap* (1961). Mr. Bryant ran our class with military-style discipline, standing tall and foreboding at the front of the class. He had the habit of keeping his hand in his front pocket, noisily jangling his keys and a fistful of coins. He eyed us like a warden might survey the classroom with his jailer's narrow brown eyes, looking to catch us if we dared to step outside his petty rules. Mr. Bryant punished us with ridicule for our minor misdeeds and seemed to enjoy himself. "You! That's enough! Stop your talking! Come up to this front corner and put your nose against the wall!" I was only up there once, but some boys in our class were chastised every day. I found Mr. B's punishments overly harsh.

Mr. Bryant hailed from Downstate Illinois. He spoke with a pronounced Southern drawl and made racist comments in our classroom of all-white students. His ugly words offended me. They reminded me of Alabama Governor George Wallace's segregationist diatribes that we heard on television. Mr. Bryant instructed us, "Use only one color in the title of your science posters. A different color for every letter reminds me of the junked cars parked all over the South Side ghetto." What? His words grated like fingernails on a chalkboard. My father worked six days a week at his Maxwell Street restaurant and liquor store. Many of the customers and the people who worked there were Black. Was that the ghetto Mr. Bryant talked about?

Together with our pre-teen sexual awakenings, the Civil Rights movement was disturbing the old order. In the Chicago suburb of Cicero, protestors threw rocks at Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Open Housing marches. With my growing awareness of the injustice of the restrictive covenants that kept Jews and Blacks confined to limited neighborhoods in my own suburb, I connected to King's housing fights. I was beginning to form my own political stance. Mr. Bryant's pronouncements clashed with my emerging values.

I finally abandoned my group of best girlfriends who continued to sing Mr. Bryant's praises after he offered an opportunity to bring in a "50-cent diode" for after school science lessons to build a crystal radio. "Boys only," he told us.

"I want to learn how radios work! It's not fair that we can't do this!" I protested. Mr. Bryant dismissed me. "This isn't for girls," he said. "Forget it."

### THE NEW MATH

I stepped across a great divide, leaving Mr. Bryant's myopic views to join the other 7<sup>th</sup> graders in our suburb to enter one centralized school. Since the Sputnik launch, the U.S. government determined that our schools were inferior because the

United States had missed the boat, or more accurately, the spaceship. Caught off-guard, the National Science Foundation invested in an academic think-tank to revise the country's mathematics curricula. The first one launched around the nation was dubbed the *New Math*. It was developed by the *School Math Study Group* (Wooten, 1965). As a *New Math* guinea pig, it was my patriotic duty to leap ahead of our Cold War enemies.

An exceptional woman led us into this new world. She was our visionary 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher, Mrs. Hammer. As a 60-ish, grey-haired widow, she looked like a traditional school marm, but she was not. I remember how she began our first class with a quotation from a famous mathematician, who I learned later was Carl Friedrich Gauss. In her large, looping script, she wrote these words across the whole wall of the chalkboard: "Mathematics is the queen of all sciences." Those words enthralled me.

Mrs. Hammer opened my eyes to a fresh look at my favorite subject. She surprised us with paperback textbooks to herald this new curriculum. These bright-yellow books replaced our "old school" hard-covered texts—our first clue that school would never be the same again. And, it wasn't just the covers. Inside, there were more words than numbers. The pages bore closer resemblance to storybooks than to the traditional math books that were filled with rows of problems. Could our old, "numbers-only," pages have been among the reasons my elementary school classmates had been scared away from math?

My dad had intuitively understood the concept of math phobia. "Some people are afraid of numbers," he taught me. "They see numbers and run away. Just relax. Let numbers be your friends. You'll know what to do." When I shared my dad's watchwords with my girlfriends, they laughed. "Friends? Numbers can't be friends!" But, I understood what my dad meant.

Our *New Math* curriculum approached mathematics learning in a holistic way. We learned new ways to count with foreign number systems beyond our age-old, Base 10 decimals. If we count in the Binary system or Base 2, there are only zeroes and one's, instead of ten numerals, 0 through 9.

In the binary number system, count: "0, 1, 10, 11, 100, 101, 110, 111"

In our everyday Base 10 counting system, we count: "0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7"

When I translated hexadecimal (Base 16) machine language in my later programming career with mainframe computers, I was reminded of what I had first learned in my 7<sup>th</sup> grade *New Math* classes. Hexadecimal is not like Base 10. Counting on your fingers won't work, unless you have 16 fingers!

In those years, satirical folksinger and Harvard mathematician, Tom Lehrer, encapsulated the criticisms of our befuddled elders with a song about the *New Math* (Lehrer, 1965). He sang out how its simplicity was clear only to children. None of our generation's parents, college-educated or not, had seen this type of mathematics before. Bob Dylan poetically articulated the era's wide-sweeping social transformations singing, "The times, they are a'changin'" (Dylan, 1964). Mrs. Hammer was our female *Tambourine Man* (Dylan, 1965), taking us into this brave new world. I was eager to follow her in those jingle-jangle classroom mornings. Joining the *New Math* generation, I felt I understood something that my parents never would.

Mrs. Hammer gave us insights into how research mathematicians explore new directions. She praised a student who offered an innovative solution that was different than any we had seen before. With great fanfare, she would call out with glee, "There's more than one way to get to Marshall Field's! You can take the bus downtown, the train, or the highway, just so you get there!" Hearing her exultation was her ultimate compliment. We lived to hear her rejoice in our innovative solutions.

### BECOMING A TEACHER AT MID-LIFE

Having a child is life-changing, no matter what the circumstances. Time raced on as I chased my successful tech career. I was thirty-nine when I gave birth to my son. Before the Family Leave Act, my company, IBM, offered a rare and generous policy of a one-year unpaid leave with my new baby. IBM continued our family's health insurance, now three of us, with the promise that I could return to my high-paying position after my leave. My spouse's seven long days per week schedule at the law firm would not wane; if anything, he was planning to increase his hours. I wanted time with my child.

Within a few months I realized that, although I loved to be with my baby, I felt isolated. I had worked full-time since I was twenty-one. All my friends were working. I met a group of interesting women in my neighborhood who also had infants. We formed a moms' and babies' group, but that wasn't enough stimulation for me. I searched the newspaper want-ads for a suitable part-time job. I found a listing from a community college hiring day-time remedial mathematics teachers. I applied and was hired on the spot to teach two courses slated to begin the following week.

My son was six months old. A friend recommended a baby-sitter for Tuesdays. My mother sat (no-charge) on Thursdays. My babysitting expenses consumed my whole salary as an adjunct instructor at the community college. After those courses, I realized teaching was my calling, but I needed a certificate. I applied to my local university, but after I returned to work, I found the courses only met during the day. I was stuck. It seemed there was nothing I could do. My demanding job would never permit me to be away two mornings per week to pursue my teaching certificate. I wouldn't even think of asking. My family depended on my solid income and health insurance benefits. I felt dejected but decided this was not the right time. Timing is everything. I knew that. My dream was deferred, but not canceled.

I kept my ears open for alternate routes to teaching. Around the country, these programs were becoming fashionable, but Illinois was among the last in the nation to offer these pathways to teaching. I applied to the first program I heard about and advanced through multiple series of interviews over several months. I met with teachers and union and district representatives as I moved closer to the final selection. Finally, I was accepted into the upcoming cohort, but I would have to leave my long-term position at IBM one week later and leave co-workers and accounts without adequate notice. I was too conscientious to do that. My son was four years old. I declined the offer. Would I ever be a teacher? Was I dreaming an impossible dream?

Three years later, I heard a radio announcement about a private foundation seeking state approvals to establish an alternate teacher-credentialing program. I called the director.

"When our program is approved," he said, "I'll contact you to apply."

One year later he invited me to apply to be a member of the first cohort. By that time, I had changed jobs to work at the best position of my technical career. It was both challenging and lucrative. I was an account executive with Motorola's nationwide, wireless data network. I had a lot of responsibility, an excellent salary, and, despite weekly travel to nationwide customers, I was home to read to my son at bedtime almost every night. It was not the right time for me to leave. But, I was intrigued by this new alternative certification program, paired with a well-respected university. It stayed on my radar.

One year later, although my job was still going well, against my husband's wishes, I decided to apply to join the second cohort. I had lost a close friend to a

virulent cancer. My encouraging father had passed away the year before. My son was nine years old, traversing his Chicago Public Schools route from kindergarten through high school graduation. I was inspired by his dedicated teachers and wanted to join their ranks and do my part. It was now or never. Time to stop talking the talk. I was ready to walk the walk.

Becoming a mom later in life than most added to my courage to leave the tech field and incited my ambition to teach. My son's Chicago Public School teachers influenced my decision to leave my corporate position to cast my lot with theirs. To teach. I searched my soul and found my mission was to increase opportunities for students who might otherwise be denied access. I wanted to pass on the advantages and options of a technology career.

My son's African American first grade teacher approved of my decision to become a teacher. She confided in me, "I taught high school, too, only my first year. It was tough. It was not the proper place for me. I will never regret my choice to teach 1<sup>st</sup> grade." She had taught 1<sup>st</sup> grade for 33 years. Now, I wonder, *was she warning me?* I heard the words, but I did not waver in pursuit of my goal to teach.

Almost one decade after the *New Math* opened my mind to deeper understandings of math concepts, I boldly launched my twenty-year career in the fledgling technology industries. Again, my *New Math* foundation undergirded the audacity I had to leave the technology world behind to believe I could become a Chicago high school mathematics teacher.

### MY DREAM DENIED

The *New Math* emphasized understanding. When I became a high school teacher, this emphasis came flooding back to me. It appeared in new reform curricula we learned about in our fast-track alternative certification program. But, in the Chicago school where I taught, not unlike many throughout the system, old-school math was the norm alongside many old-school attitudes about who can and can't do math.

It is rare to fully predict the effects of a catalyst until the reaction is put in motion. Would anyone assume the daunting task of raising a child if we knew all possible outcomes in advance? I found teaching high school to be more difficult than I had expected. Having the desire to teach is not sufficient, nor is it enough to have mastery of the content knowledge. There is no way to escape unique school cultures. American society's rooted inequities based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity are reproduced in many schools.

During my three years at the same high school, I witnessed injustices against students when teachers proclaimed, "We don't want kids from the projects here!" or blocked a field trip saying, "I wouldn't take *Those Kids* anywhere," and justified punishing grading decisions with "*That's what F's are for!*" These attitudes worked against my purpose and my students' ability to graduate and go on to higher education. Federal and district policies placed an emphasis on standardized tests that worked against students and me, as I struggled to learn how to become an effective teacher.

### STILL I RISE

I was broken and pushed out of the school, like many students who left without a diploma. But, I regained my footing, and as Maya Angelou (1978) captures in her poem, "*Still I rise!*" How I found my way is another story. At age 59, I earned a doctorate in curriculum and instruction in order to take my place in partnership alongside teachers and continue with my life's work. Life goes on.

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<sup>1</sup>All teachers' names are pseudonyms.