

FROM PERSIA TO CANADA: EXPLORING TEACHER IDENTITY THROUGH *CURRERE*

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This article explores teacher identity through the experience of one Persian-Canadian teacher candidate in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. This exploration uses Harste's (2003) questions as a framework. He said that the heart of every curriculum should address the questions: "What kind of lives do we want to live, and what kind of people do we want to be?" (p. 11). Currere focuses curriculum theorising not on "a course to be run [but as] the personal experience of the running. [...] experiences that are shaped by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other markers of difference" (Kanu, 2011, p. 204). This distinction allows us to highlight the "nature of the individual experience of the public: of artifacts, actors, operations, of the educational journey" (Pinar, 1975, p. 400). The descriptions of individual experience below, which are attributed to the poet Rumi, perfectly exemplify this distinction.

The treasures that can be found outside of you can't even compare with the treasures that can be found inside of you. Why are you so enchanted by this world, when a mine of gold lies within you?

"Who am I?" This is the most difficult question to answer, especially since I grew up under a despotic regime in Iran. How could I know myself, when I was not even allowed to use pronoun "I" at school as a child. I still remember my teacher's reaction in Grade 3 when I said: "I think..." to answer her question. She suddenly shouted at me and reminded me that my point of view, as a child, was secondary and of less importance in front of an adult. She encouraged me to use the pronoun "we" until I grew up enough to be accepted as an adult by the society. Ironically, Islamic rules and the norms of the society suppressed me even more as I became an adult woman. Although I worked a lot on my self-awareness and I stood up for my rights many times throughout my life, I feel like I still have a tendency to hide myself in a group, which gives me a sense of security and safety.

I need to provide you with more context, on my family. My father, who had a military background, enforced an authoritarian parenting style. He had strict rules with no explanation and his focus was on absolute obedience. He never let me go to my friends' homes, participate in their parties, or even take a taxi or commute to further distances by myself. I was accompanied everywhere by my parents until I was 18 years old. Neither as a child nor as an adolescent had I the courage to speak up and stand up for myself. Unlike my two brothers, who were brave enough to protest against his unjust rules and gained their personal freedom and control, I was obedient. Not that I had chosen to be submissive, but I had no other choice. To be honest, now that I reflect more, I think it is just an excuse to exculpate myself, because sometimes I think that it was my own fault and that I should have tried to be rebellious, like my brothers.

My mother, being a teacher, had nobody to look after me at home during the day. From the time I was three years old, I had to get up early every day and go to school with her. When I was two years old, the Islamic revolution occurred in Iran, and when

I was four, the war between Iran and Iraq began. In those days, there was complete chaos in the country. In my kindergarten, we didn't have any toys. Teachers taught us in an empty room with neither decorations nor colors. All we had were some books, paper, and pencils. We listened to stories, drew pictures, or slept. In spite of the gloomy atmosphere in schools, I loved studying, and I was enthusiastic to learn. I attended Grade 1 classes when I was five.

I still remember that my most enjoyable play activity was teaching my dolls, my precious toys! In fact, after the war began, most of the stores were empty, given that many factories didn't have enough raw materials to produce what the people needed. At home, I had only a few dolls that my mother had made, a blackboard, chalk, and books. Many children's books were black and white, and most of them were about religion, war, blood, death, and orphans.

Although music was banned everywhere in the country, I tried to turn the poems from my textbooks into songs and secretly sang them to my peers to create a happier ambiance at school. By nature, I was a happy girl, sociable, passionate, and I loved dancing and singing. Sadly, I got punished for singing. We always had spies in our classroom, among our peers, even at elementary school. School principals, designated by the government, trained some children to report on those who were talking against the regime or behaving against the Islamic rules, in order to find the families whose ideologies did not fit into their beliefs. It is true that, to this day, I still carry fear as part of my identity, as if it is ingrained in my unconscious memory.

I remember that whenever I expressed my true opinion about the government, even in a circle of friends, I couldn't sleep at night. I was thinking that somebody would knock at the door to take me to prison and torture me to death. I don't know why I always expected the worst; those dark thoughts gave me butterflies in my stomach. Words don't have the power to describe these feelings. This kind of fear disappears not at once but little by little, as slowly as snow melting in a very cold winter.

In the darkness of my childhood and adolescence, I did not have any hobbies other than studying hard at school. I was very motivated and always earned the highest marks at school. For this reason, I was called "Miss Doctor" by my family, friends, and teachers. In fact, in Iran, receiving a medical or a law degree amounts to the highest achievement in life. I had high hopes that my future was going to be brilliant: a prestigious job in the medical field, financial stability, and so forth. So, I tried hard to achieve "my" goal.

In June of each year, high school graduates in Iran had to take a tough, nationwide university entrance exam. The competition was difficult, and the seats at the best public universities were limited. Unlike other parents, who would let their children apply to universities in other cities to continue their education, my father was quite hard on me. He would not allow me to live alone in another city because I was a girl. Therefore, I had no other choice but to be accepted at a university in Tehran, which was not easy. Because of this pressure, during the last two years in high school, I "imprisoned" myself in my bedroom and studied day and night. I was scared. The future didn't seem brilliant to me anymore; it was uncertain, vague, nightmarish. The label "Miss Doctor," along with all its connotations, was like an exhausting burden on my soul. I could not imagine my future without that white coat and a stethoscope draped around my neck.

On the day when the examination results were released, I was terrified. With shaking hands, I grabbed the newspaper with lists of names and numbers. I saw it

all white, and I felt like my heart was jumping out of my chest. Impossible... errors happen... let's read another time... but my reasoning was useless. I didn't make it! It was tough to face the harsh reality. I had to accept it. My feet were numb! I did not want to return home. I knew that I was going to be bombarded by inquisitive telephone calls. I was disappointed and disconsolate. I tried again the following year, but in vain. My brother tried to convince me that the medical field was not my best option. Finally, I decided to study French translation. Although at the beginning I was fearful of this change, little by little, I fell in love with this melodic language, and I became virtually fluent in French after four academic years, and I established a translation company with my brother. I also decided to continue my education. I pursued a master's degree in French language and literature and started to teach French at universities and French schools in Iran.

Today, when I reflect on those stressful moments, I do not regret not becoming a doctor any longer, and I feel happy on the path of my current journey, because I love teaching more than any other job. It is interesting that, sometimes, a bad thing results in a positive turn in one's life. I believe that I would not have been a successful doctor because it was not "my" own goal. It was the goal of my parents and my teachers.

It is true that I belong to a generation called the "burnt generation," and I still carry baggage full of suppression, fear, and confusion. However, I am grateful for my academic achievements in which my mother played a significant role. Furthermore, the disciplinarian context in which I grew up equipped me with skills such as a strong listening ability, high attention to detail, a perfect sense of organization, and punctuality.

I would like to elaborate here on why my generation, especially women, are considered the "burnt generation." We are the generation who experienced Islamic revolution, war, harsh and inhumane rules, and discrimination. When we were born, black was our colour, the colour of femininity. They forced us to wear everything in black to make us invisible. I lost count of how many times I was punished just because I loved beautiful colours. They wrapped the natural beauty of our feminine bodies in black veils because we were called the "source of sin." We were not allowed to wear makeup or perfume. We were not even allowed to travel alone, because it was against the law to book a room in a hotel as a single woman. We were born to be chaste and naive. Our wish was to have the freedom of a man or simply the natural freedom of a human being. Our hopes and dreams were so simple: we wished to be able to ride a bicycle, to run, to laugh, to sing, to dance, to show our natural emotions. We did not have the right to love the opposite sex. We were even banned from attracting attention in public through laughing loudly or showing our natural emotions, such as joy and enthusiasm, given that these kinds of actions were deemed "vulgar behaviour."

It was in this way that the societal norms made me introverted and shy as I grew up. As I reflect more, I feel like there is something important missing in my life. In fact, I became an adult without having the chance to live fully each period of my life, given that I had to behave like an adult throughout my whole childhood and adolescence. I never crossed the red line, because I was not brave enough to endure danger or criticism. On the other hand, many of my friends at high school were rebellious. They tried to live a normal life. They had their hobbies and chose their boyfriends clandestinely, at the risk of being arrested and whipped. I wanted to be safe. I shut down my heart and killed my needs. I cannot tell if it was a conscious or deliberate choice. I was not even aware of my metamorphosis: from a passionate, sociable, happy little girl to a robot programmed to study hard without paying attention to other aspects of life. My parents and teachers were proud of me, and my friends'

parents showered me with compliments to make me a model to follow in order to protect their children.

Among all the subjects at school, I loved literature and specifically poetry. However, writing a short paragraph was a real torture to me. At university, for the first time in my life, I fell in love... with my literature professor who was seven years older than me! As a shy girl, especially with the thick red line between men and women in society, it was impossible to reveal my “true” and “deep” love to him. I didn’t know who he was outside university. I didn’t have any clue about his personality or interests. I was just infatuated with the way he was writing and reading poems. For the first time, I was outside of my comfort zone, and I was feeling sinful. I was thinking that I tarnished my reputation, my family’s reputation, by falling in love. Carrying this reputation was an unbearable burden on my shoulders. I was suffering, but I didn’t have the courage to open my heart. Love was forbidden and considered an unforgivable sin for us, the “burnt generation.” The poem below from Ahmad Shamlu, one of the most famous contemporary poets in Iran, portrays exactly the shadow of fear that followed us in every personal aspect of our lives:

In This Dead-End
 They smell your mouth
 lest you should have said: I love you
 They smell your heart.
 What a strange world, my dear!

And they whip love
 near the lampposts.
 We must hide love in the closet.

In this zig-zag dead-end of coldness
 they keep the fire alive
 with song and poetry
 Do not be afraid of thinking.
 Whoever knocks at the door at night
 has come to kill the light.
 We must hide light in the closet.

Now the butchers are
 on each cross-road
 with a tree trunk and a bloody cleaver.
 What a strange world, my dear!
 And they operate to put a smile on our lips
 and a song in our mouths.
 We must hide our pleasures in the closet.
 They barbecue canaries on fire
 made of lilies and lilacs.
 What a strange world, my dear!

It is the triumphant drunkard Devil
 who is celebrating our sorrow.
 We must hide God in the closet. (Shamlu, 2003)

I took refuge in my dreams, and I started to write about my emotions. At first, it was frightening, but little by little, I discovered the healing power of the words to the point that writing became joyful and liberating to me. In other words, writing allowed me to externalize my emotions and discover their deeper meaning. My professor left Iran the following year, and I found out that I was not really in love with him, but with literature. This painful experience and self-discovery provided me with the opportunity to know my strengths and believe in my abilities in writing. I decided to participate in a writing competition organised by the French embassy in Iran, and I won the first prize among Francophile participants from the whole country. The prize was a trip to France. I was both happy and sad at the same time. I was happy because I overcame my challenges in writing and sad because I knew that my father would not let me leave by myself. For the first time, with my brother's support, I stood up and made it clear to him that I would not let him ruin my future anymore. Deep inside, I was terrorized. How could I manage to travel to another country all by myself? I was not even able to take a taxi in my own country! On the day of my departure, at the airport, I was paralyzed, and I could hardly breathe. I told myself that this trip would be a turning point in my life. And, it was. After my trip to France, I decided to apply for immigration to Canada, and in 2008, I left Iran.

I continued to run the translation company along with my brother. But, without teaching, I felt like there was something important missing in my life. As I was busy working for the company, I also started to teach French on a part-time basis at a college and in different ministries in Toronto. Translation was my main job, in other words my bread and butter, but teaching was the source of my happiness. It was my vocation, my *raison d'être*. Life was smiling at me: financially, I was stable, and teaching French was very fulfilling. However, life has its own ups and downs and can be so unpredictable at times. Two years ago, because of an unforeseeable incident, the company was dissolved. I felt lost and financially insecure. Although I was a successful teacher, I didn't have any formal academic training to be able to apply for a full-time job in this field. It took me one year to reflect back on my whole life and overcome my fears. In the end, I decided to apply for a Master of Teaching degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at University of Toronto in order to broaden my knowledge in the field of teaching.

It was at OISE that one of my professors, Rupert Collister, introduced me to *currerian* conversation and helped me to reflect on my past and explore my identity. Reflecting on my past and trying to make connections between past, present, and future provided me with a great opportunity to delve into my unconscious and gain a new awareness of my "self." It was the key to identifying and unpacking my biases.

In my first practicum, I was teaching Grades 1 and 2. There was a cute, little, white, Canadian boy who was struggling with reading. Although he was the youngest in the class, he was the only child who never cried, even if he had little injuries. He always protected his friends and told to other children that he was the strongest. I was attached to him, not only because he was very funny, but also because I spent more time with him to improve his literacy skills. One day, my assistant teacher and another male teacher were talking during the recess, when this adorable kid interrupted their conversation and with a witty smile told to her: "You women, you are not smart. I wish I had him as my teacher. He is smarter than you." Although he did not directly address me, it was heartbreaking to know his beliefs at this age. I was so disappointed, especially since I was enthusiastic to help him to become a good reader. But, how would he learn from a person who was not as smart as he wished?

This little boy's comment about women was eye-opening to me. It was interesting to see how a child who was born in Canada and grew up in a white family could have the same biases as a child who lives in a patriarchal society such as Iran. When I was a student, I was also thinking that boys were smarter than girls because they were better in mathematics and science. Given that one of the consequences of Islamization of the educational system in Iran was the segregation of boys and girls, the male teachers were not allowed to teach to female students at school. Sometimes, I was thinking that, if I had had the chance to be taught by a male teacher, I could have understood mathematics better. Although I had very good marks at school, deep inside me, I did not have confidence in my abilities as a girl. According to Hembrow-Beach (2011), there is a gender gap in education in fields such as math and sciences, where girls are underrepresented. Moreover, both male and female students, even in Grade 2, have this negative perception that math is for boys (Tomasetto, Alparone, & Cadinu, 2011). As I was reviewing research conducted on gender issues in education, one of my disturbing biases became visible to me. Gray and Leith (2004) showed in their study that teachers are likely to privilege boys more than girls by paying more attention to them because they think boys are more capable than their female students.

At the first glance, I could not even imagine myself among these teachers, given that I had suffered as a woman in a country with rules aimed to make me a submissive woman. How could I privilege my male students when I myself deeply had experienced this gender discrimination in many aspects of my life? Much to my surprise, I spotted sexism in my own language while telling the anecdote of this little boy to my friends, saying, "He acts like a real man; he never shows his weaknesses to others and tries to protect his friends."

Unfortunately, as I observed attentively, I became aware of more sexist vocabulary and expressions that I use unconsciously in my everyday language. Research has shown that sexist language has detrimental effects, especially on women (Schau & Scott, 1984), because it can convey the message that only the masculine is the norm (Hamilton, 1991).

Although this discovery was disturbing, I realized that what we think we believe does not necessarily direct our actions and manifest in our language. Sometimes, our actions and the language we use are in alignment with beliefs that we strongly consider unacceptable and wrong. In fact, the context in which we live has a deep impact on our personal and social life without us being aware of it consciously. Although mentally I was rebellious against the discriminating dominant rules in Iran, in practice I had to be obedient in order to function according to the societal norms and survive. I am optimistic that this self awareness helps me to begin to work on myself so that I can better foster a gender-equitable environment in my classroom and advocate for equality.

I believe that, if I know myself better, I can better help my students to know themselves. Sometimes, I think the effort of my Grade 3 teacher, to encourage me to use the pronoun "we" instead of "I" had a significant impact on my confidence, to the point that I had forgotten my "self," my goals, my interests, and my passion.

Although I didn't have many toys when I was a child, my blackboard, my colourful chalks, and my dolls were more than enough for my enjoyment. They were enough to nurture my imagination. The conversations in my imaginary classroom were rich and thoughtful. I could teach to my dolls for hours without getting bored. My dolls were always my students, never my patients. Becoming a doctor was not my own goal and my real vocation. I was forced by my family and my teachers to step in a labyrinth

of frustration and confusion that ended up in disappointment. Now, I am happy that I was not accepted into the medical field where I would have been condemned to do what I didn't really like for the rest of my life. But back then, this failure was like the end of the world to me.

When I was younger, I had less experience, and my world was limited to my own life and the people around me. My teachers at school had never modeled failure to me. They never talked about their weaknesses and fears. Making a mistake was associated with shame and lack of talent and intelligence. Although I loved literature, I was frightened of writing. My teachers asked me to write compositions without showing their own challenges in writing and without providing me with necessary tools. I, myself, overcame my fear of writing by writing. I did not have any other tools than my diary to reveal my suffering in the Dead-End of a country where love was whipped and light was hidden in the closet.

Writing helped me to analyse my "self" and gave me a deeper access to my interior world, where I had kept my fears buried. I had fallen in love with my professor because my weakness in writing was his strength. I could not even imagine that one day I could be able to write like him in English. His position as a professor seemed unachievable to me. So, it was easier to love his position and abilities. After a short dialogue that I had with him, I saw the hard work behind his mastery of speaking and writing skills.

I believe that, as a teacher, my role is to help my students visualize the challenges behind each success. They need to see clearly that there are lots of challenges, injuries, and disappointments and lots of hard work behind each successful performance and achievement. This is critical, especially in our era where students are surrounded by all kinds of distractions and can easily be disoriented and lost. My aim is to make my classroom a safe place for mistakes and to encourage my students to embrace their weaknesses and find their own goals and interests. My role is to show them that failure is an integral part of their growth and that without failure no achievement would take place. My vocation is to help them understand that, with each failure, they become stronger and more experienced throughout the journey of their lives.

The following words of illumination are attributed to Rumi, one of the famous poets in Iran:

The wound is the place where the Light enters you.
 What hurts you, blesses you. Darkness is your candle.
 Where there is ruin, there is hope for a treasure.

I am thankful that immigration provided me with the opportunity to meet people from different cultures and backgrounds, and my education in Canada broadened my horizon. If I had not immigrated to Canada, I would always have had the feeling that only women from Iran, and other developing countries that medias always focus on, are the victims of gender discrimination. It was hard to believe that, "By the time they reach adulthood, most women agree with most men that males are superior" (Matlin, 1987, p. 269). It was also shocking to both my Canadian peers and I, at OISE, to find sexism in the residential schools in Canada. Moreover, after talking to different people from different religions, I did not find any difference between the extremist versions of Islam, Judaism, or Christianity. In fact, discrimination neither exclusively belongs to developing societies nor to any specific religion.

I believe that my vocation as a teacher is to equip my students from different backgrounds and cultures with the necessary tools of critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and collaboration and give them the confidence to believe in themselves, confront their weaknesses, and without being afraid of failure, pursue their own goals and make their dreams happen.

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