

What is Education? A Scholarly Inquiry of *Currere* and Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract

This scholarly inquiry employs *currere* and collaborative autoethnography to examine an emerging response to the question “What is education?” Three co-researchers, given a short time limit to respond, found a method to research, discuss, analyze, and synthesize, reflecting on various philosophies of education. Collaborative autoethnography allowed the co-researchers to dialogue and discover, based on their own perspective while finding new understanding through the others. *Currere* offered a framework of ongoing reflection on each co-researcher’s life experience in relation to the inquiry question. The result is an intertwined collaboration of reflection on educational experiences, looking towards the future, analyzing the present moment in inquiry, and creating an intriguing synthesis of new understanding.

Keywords: *education, collaborative autoethnography, currere, Dewey, Noddings, Rousseau, Green, Cavell, Buber, Du Bois, Freire*

Introduction

As three co-researchers, we met in a doctoral class discussing ideas of what education is to each of us. We arrived at the idea that we could collaboratively have a shared dialogue about our ideas, jotting down notes each day and questions that arise, while responding to our own inquisitive questions and from this, come together to learn from each other in the collaborative inquiry. Furthering this idea, we also included elements of surprise, new knowledge, and future collaboration ideas along with new research methodologies to discover. For this scholarly inquiry, the approaches of *carrere* and collaborative autoethnography are used as a way to dialogue. These methodologies were visited early on as we investigated what our goals for the inquiry were and how to write collaboratively together.

Carrere and Collaborative Autoethnography

With the purpose of responding to our inquiry using purposeful and meaningful dialogue, Pinar's (1975) method of *carrere* allows us to reflect on the relationship of our academic experiences, our life and identity, and how our these have shaped and allowed for the emergence of a social reconstruction. "The method of *carrere* seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one's understanding of one's life (and vice versa), and how both are imbricated in society, politics, and culture" (Pinar, 2012, p. 45). In seeking to understand how our educational experiences inform our understanding using *carrere*, as researchers we must explore "living simultaneously in the past, present, and future" (p. 5). In a collaborative inquiry, we look to collaborative autoethnography as an additional methodology to form the interconnectedness of our understandings.

Integrating collaborative autoethnography, Bochner and Ellis (2016) describe this methodology as a way for researchers to write together while writing their own stories with a "common desire to achieve understanding of a topic from multiple perspectives through dialogue" (p. 177). The three of us come from quite different backgrounds and lived and educational experiences; collaborative autoethnography is used as a research conversation with written text "as a place for negotiating these different worlds of meaning on many different levels" (p. 606). According to Pinar (1975), the guiding question in *carrere* is, "What has been or what is now the nature of my educational experience?" (p. 2). From this guiding question, we shape the dialogue into a collaborative autoethnography to respond to the inquiry in the style of a talking circle where each co-researcher is given uninterrupted space to share.

Traditionally, talking circles have been used to pass on knowledge, values, culture, and experiences while creating a space where each co-researcher is valued and listened to. First Nations Pedagogy (2009) describes talking circles as a way of encouraging "dialogue, respect, the co-creation of learning content, and social discourse." Using a talking circle as a way to write our scholarly inquiry, we are able to share our ideas without interjection, and without the need to agree or disagree. We are not required to respond cohesively with our ideas, and we do not reject the ideas of the others. The idea is to allow each co-researcher their time to share or pass while collaboratively contributing to an interconnectedness. Using this method for a collaborative inquiry, it did not take long before some intertwining ideas melded into our *carrere* and collaborative autoethnography paper.

Situating Ourselves in Contemplation

Situating ourselves in our collaboration, we each started from the point we were at in our dialogic circle, looking around us, noticing what education can be, yet contemplating what education is.

LL: As I sit down about to embark upon the daunting task of writing about what education is, my eyes shift to the floor beside me. My four-year-old daughter is engaged in play with her toys and stuffed animals. I pause to take it in. She lines up her stuffed animals along the wall in a row and proudly stands in front of them. She then drags over an easel and princess wand (as a pointer) and begins. To teach. I gasp a bit at the realization that my little girl is playing school. The gasp is mostly due to the fact that it is not the kind of school I'd expect her to play. This looks more like the school I experienced as a child, but certainly not the way I teach. In fact, my daughter has not yet begun school. Under what circumstances did this little girl develop her understanding of schooling in this way? It occurs to me that she has formed this framework of education from what she has seen in the books we've read, shows we've watched, pictures she has seen. She has constructed an idea of school and hidden curriculum and she has yet to step foot in a classroom. She's using play (as she should) to make sense of her world and to understand and prepare herself for that which she will become a part of, in less than two years. As educators and change agents, I think to myself, we have work to do.

RW: To consider the question "what is education?" it is my belief that one must centre themselves in their own educational journey and reflect on the experiences that are a part of such journey. Dewey says that "education is not preparation for life; education is life itself" (cited in McHale, 2015, p. 1). I think about what has led my life thus far. What have I learned? Who have I learned from? What has shaped my identity, and how do I perceive myself and my place in this world? Perhaps it is my belief system, spiritual and moral, that encourages me to reflect upon what it means to have life, to live. Quite possibly, it is my family and community orientation, culture, and Africentric worldview that raise my appreciation for those who have supported me in my learning journey both formally and communally. I find myself not only deconstructing what education is defined as from a philosophical standpoint but also challenging my own ideas about what it means to me.

EW: What is education? What is education? Growing up, my life was rich in language, and my passion for culture was evident. In secondary school, when all other students were planning what they would do for postsecondary, I was unplanning how I would manage (or not manage) to make it to school the next day. I was fortunate to enrol in an outdoor program and receive credit for learning on the land, the traditional territory of the Ktunaxa. Math, Science, Outdoor Studies, and Social Studies High School credits were received on guided learning adventures with my outdoor education cohort. Looking back, I wish there had been more choice in education streams or programs. Although an at-risk student, I graduated and continued on to postsecondary education, which was never once presented to me as an option during my adolescence. Thus, the perseverance, the realization that I can create my own future, despite my challenging upbringing and ancestral background, is often the basis for my own decisions in teaching and learning.

RW: I grew up on “The Island,” one of the forty-eight historical African Nova Scotian Communities and one of three distinct African Nova Scotian communities, on the outskirts of the town of Truro. My immediate and extended family of neighbours, peers, and community elders, provided me a solid foundation for self-discovery, learning, and communal activism. This fostered the opportunity to learn about myself as an African Nova Scotian individual in a collective of others who shared this racial and cultural identity. In my master’s thesis (Boudreau, 2015), I researched about the impact of participating in culturally specific community-driven programs sharing my own experiences as a researcher participant. One of my fondest memories of feeling proud to be who I was, proud to be Black, was participating in a community-driven Africentric Saturday School program. “Afrocentricity centralized and normalizes the narratives of people of African descent within the context of community, taking into account historically rooted ways of being and knowing” (Lynn, 2005, p. 134). Although I had a beautiful upbringing in my home with my parents fostering my sense of self, love, and safety, this community-driven program is the first memory of really feeling that sense of belonging in a learning environment.

LL: What is education? As an “educator,” surely I would know the definition of education! I’ve been teaching for 15 years, so that should be simple. As it turns out, there are no easy answers to the education question. In fact, likely only more questions. When I reflect upon the word “education,” I think of the associated words, such as “school” and “teacher.” It’s interesting, yet not surprising, that one’s mind goes there first. The teacher “educating,” bestowing knowledge upon his or her loyal subjects as they soak in what they can. This concept of education is likely what Paulo Freire was referring to with his analogy of bankers (Duarte, 2018). The teacher deposits the knowledge. The students receive it. A deposit into an account. Students sit in rows facing the master and wait for the “education” to come their way. Students look to the teacher for approval and acceptance, and aim to please. However, in reality, this makes education less about each individual and their journey, and more about a road already paved, heading in a predetermined direction.

Connecting to Dewey and Other Theorists

In our previous studies, Dewey has been presented as a place to start when looking at a definition or meaning of education in regards to theorists. From Dewey, we look at other theorists who influence and shape our experiences in our collaborative dialogue.

LL: For me, I connect much more with John Dewey’s definition of education. Dewey (1916) describes education as a “process of living and not a preparation for future living.” Dewey’s outlook on education and educational inquiry resonates well with me. He was action-oriented, believed in change, and felt power in the classroom (Saito, 2018). The phenomenologist in me gravitates to the value of the lived experience for learning. I reflect upon how as a classroom teacher I have been immensely more focused on the process rather than the products of learning. The realization that learning is happening continuously in every life, lived in every lived moment, is uplifting. Education is everywhere and in everything. And through our interactions with one another and the world in all aspects of our lives, we are all educators, and we are all students. What we are learning, and from whom or what, is a different question. But I believe that education isn’t something given, but something experienced. I believe that schools,

the “institutions for learning,” should consider learning as living as more of a philosophy for learning.

EW: Saito (2018) recognizes Dewey’s philosophy of “democracy as a personal way of living” (p. 137). In my own life, this has been something created and nourished in the past five years since leaving the public school domain. I often relate this to work-life balance. Sitting in a BC Teacher Federation workshop in 2008 where I was learning how to recognize signs of misaligned work-life balance, I recognized my own imbalance. Tenured teaching in the district means that while you have a job, you are at the whim of the hierarchy as to whether you teach the same grade twice, stay at the same school or even in the same geographical classroom within the school. Teaching was a career change for me. I came from a sector that had work-life balance and thought education would offer this as well. I discovered that work-life balance can be encouraged or compromised depending on your employer in education. Either way, that tenured job was creating challenges for my work-life balance and was a working environment unreflective of my educational philosophy.

RW: Growing up in a predominantly white town, with the majority of my teachers, peers, sports coaches, and town leaders being white, was challenging at times. I think about the fact that I had lots of friends, but what I remember more strongly are the feelings of being “othered,” which presented more subtly than overtly in most cases. I was often the only African Nova Scotian student in a class of approximately twenty to thirty predominantly white students. These experiences were uncomfortable most times, perhaps not recognizing it as this at the time, as an innocent and naive child until more exposure to elements of my culture. Du Bois in 1897 raised the notion of double consciousness, “a twoness of being an American Negro” (cited in Bruce, 1992, p. 299), used to characterize issues of race and the contention between identities and belonging for people of African descent in a Eurocentric society.

LL: John Dewey spoke of experiential learning and the importance of life experiences (Saito, 2018). Without students participating in and reflecting upon their own learning, how are children really supposed to grow? Children are born explorers. Of this I am certain. They are scientists, artists, musicians, craving a world to dig into and understand. They need to play and think and wonder—and my job is to facilitate that as best I can. I appreciate how Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that children construct their learning from their own point of view, so it only makes sense that we are able then to co-construct our curriculum, even our assessment, in ways that make sense to and interest them. He didn’t see children as little adults, but capable of thinking and exploring in their own way (Jergus, 2018). Summarizing my thoughts on what education is, defining myself as an educator, and connecting to the school system I work in as well has me clearly thinking about many concepts and a variety of views. It’s not as simple as “what is education?” or “what sort of educator are you?” I suspect both these questions will never fully be answered, only explored.

RW: Considering the power that is entangled with education, and considering education as a practice of freedom (Duarte, 2018) it is no wonder that reading and literacy skills were prohibited for many marginalized groups of people as it could do just that, “free” them. As a person who has faced racial and systemic barriers, I have also benefited from many culturally responsive supports including culturally specific community-driven programs which often have

filled the learning gap that has existed within a Westernized educational environment. This support along with my own resiliency has enabled me to progress thus far in my educational journey. However, I must ask the question, What about those who have not been so privileged in this way? What are the most important unanswered questions concerning the state of education for African Nova Scotian learners over the course of the learning journey? It has been over twenty-five years since the BLAC Report on Education (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994) was conducted regarding the state of the African Nova Scotian learner and ten years since the Reality Check Review (Enidlee Consultants, 2009).

LL: I recognize how it's important to know our philosophies around education and learning, as it shapes us into the teachers and humans we are. Our belief systems influence us in every aspect as we walk through this world. As a school teacher, I take my beliefs into the classroom every day. I believe that children learn best when their needs are met, which is likely why I connected well to the view of Nel Noddings, in centering education around caring (Verducci, 2018). I believe that in order for my students to build their understandings and learn effectively, they first must feel safe, healthy, and happy.

EW: From Martin Buber, we learn that our own educational experiences, while a continued point of reference in our teaching, are not meant to guide students to follow that path we have taken (Cuéllar, 2018). Yet, "educators often underestimate the importance of their actions and beliefs on the life of their children and how their identity is shaped by them" (Smeyers, 2018, p.5). Furthermore, Cuéllar (2018) mentions that Buber has a metaphor of "point the way." I think of this in relation to the statement, "Experience cannot be repeated, and nonetheless, the conditions for developing those bonds could be fostered" (p. 51). Belief in possibility is also a wonderful connection to the idea of teachable moments, but are we including the experiences of all our learners in teachable moments? As a *métis* educator, I wonder about the inclusivity of diverse cultures and how colonization affects these theories in Canadian education now in the 21st century, where we are reconciling education through decolonization.

RW: It is clear that as in Carter G. Woodson's discussion of African Americans (cited in Asante, 1991, p. 170), African Nova Scotian students "have been educated away from their own culture and traditions and attached to the fringes of European culture; thus dislocated from themselves ... [they] often valorize European culture to the detriment of their own heritage." Asante (1991) discusses the importance of representation from an African-centred worldview, asserting that African American students should be invited to see themselves not merely as seekers of knowing but as integral participants in it. Westernized institutions of education are not authentically and empathically aware of the implications of racism, post-traumatic slave syndrome (Crawford et al., 2003), and cultural trauma (Sharpe, 2015) that students and families endure. For example, Black people in Halifax are six times more likely to be stopped by police for a street check than whites (Wortley, 2019) and further, more likely to be charged, with 30% of Halifax's Black male population charged with a crime as opposed to 6.8% of the white male population (Short, 2019). This being factual, is there not a call for students to be taught how to know and assert their rights given this reality? If we consider a just and inclusive learning environment, then should we not consider the practical implications that being uninformed can have for certain populations?

EW: One of the tasks in teacher preparation programs is to figure out your philosophy of education and write a statement. Repeating this exercise has helped to decipher and understand schools of thought, debates, and theorists in a new way. Reflecting on what type of schooling one had and whether they liked it or not can present a basis or bias for looking towards one philosophy, yet away from another. Previously, as a second language teacher and home economics specialist, my philosophy of education statement relied on the idea that every child can learn language and that learning often required hands-on activities. While John Dewey was not presented for his theory of education in my studies, heavy focus was placed on Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Perhaps it was the radicalness of my fantastic French professor in Foundations of Education '06 that influenced the path of the course. Rousseau's publication, *Émile, ou de l'Éducation*, furthered his criticism of theories well believed in the education field during the late 1700s (Jergus, 2018). In my own baccalauréat en éducation, perhaps my naivety led me to believe the material presented to me, and my philosophy of education was shaped by the narrowness of material. Recently reviewing the old statement, I wonder who that teacher may have been. I had to look beyond the *Rousseau* chapter presented in class; I was wondering how my earlier ideas that every child can learn language and that learning requires hands-on activities matched the statement of philosophy.

LL: When a teacher such as myself values this living and experiential or inquiry-based style of learning, we are faced with barriers to overcome. We must persevere, because the system is still designed in traditional values and structures of education. We have learning divided by subject and specific time blocks allotted. We have buildings with closed spaces and an approach that centres around a particular hierarchy. It then presents a challenge for those wanting to stray from the norm. These challenges were discussed in Garth Boomer's (1992) article called "Negotiating the Curriculum." Judgement from other teachers and the system itself makes change hard for individual teachers, which in turn makes for slow widespread change (Boomer, 1992).

EW: I have been fortunate to embrace education that is not the norm, learner-led and following interests, for the past 5 years as an unschooling homeschool mom. I never thought that I would end up homeschooling my son, let alone letting him direct his own learning. We are fortunate not to have to divide learning by subjects and time blocks, but we are able to live life while learning and following passions. I learn more from my son's learning needs than I have ever learned as a teacher, which has encouraged me to set goals each year for my own learning needs. While I don't find connection to all of Rousseau's ideas, revisiting his philosophies has allowed me to reconnect with some ideas that match many of the fundamental values of the education system my son is immersed in. Where I found connections to Rousseau's ideas of education is in Collins' (1976) explanation of how the goals of education must be formulated in the present, we must look at a learner's stage of development, and the goal to live well. All of these are aspects of the education's philosophy; however, his education also promotes a philosophy of democratic education.

LL: Noddings believes that schools should become full-service institutions, to meet inferred, expressed, and basic needs so learners can learn (Verducci, 2018). Working once in an elementary school with some of these types of services, I was able to see some of the direct benefits. Our school housed a dental clinic, psychological services, social worker, nursing staff,

and a guidance counselor. The church across the street provided a breakfast program and our school provided additional snacks when necessary. Not only were the students able to seek services such as dental care with minimal interruption to their school day, their parents were able to send them to school to access multiple services and know many of their needs were being met at this hub of the community. Unfortunately, however, schools such as this are not common at present. Noddings also believes teachers need to genuinely care for their students and work in their best interests, always (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2018). In fact, with the teacher as the “one-caring” for the student, all decisions would be made keeping in mind the student’s holistic needs. As a teacher, I do make an effort every day for my students to feel loved, cared for, and accepted. I wonder how society would change if we were to invest substantial amounts of money into education as also healthcare, and wait long enough to see the results. It would take bravery to embark upon such an endeavor where results would likely not be recognized in the immediate future.

RW: Fulford’s (2018) summary of the work of Cavell naming and supporting education outside of school and its validity in the educational and learning journey resonates with me, as much of my learning about self has come from outside of the Westernized education classroom. Thinking about knowledge as a contested terrain, I struggle with the Western ideas of success, minimizing the “non-formal” type of education or rather, what I would consider, communal learning, in my experience. Let’s also consider language and categorizing formal vs. non-formal—who gets to say that learning to acquire culturally framed wisdom and life skills that are passed down from generation to generation is any less formal than that of what we learn in the Western construction of school?

EW: “It is often forgotten but true nevertheless, that there are many roads to Rome, and not everyone [wants] to go to Rome anyway” (Smeyers, 2018, p. 3). From this, I reflect that there are many ways for a learner to get where they are going, but it is a good idea to ask learners where they want to go. Ask often. Currently, I ask my K-12 learners at the beginning of the year and seasonally, but they are welcome to come up with new ideas and add them to their learning plans throughout the 34-week school year. On this notion, the idea of democratic education merges into my idea of “what is education?” as learners become partners in making educational decisions and actually help the consultant or teachers with planning to meet their needs.

RW: To think of ourselves as education to one another (Cavell, 1990, cited in Fulford, 2018), I consider both Westernized educational institutions as well as traditional communal education settings. Dewey’s concept of “Beautiful Knowledge” (cited in Saito, 2018) and self-transformation is a recurring theme for me at this point in my life. Perhaps it is my lived experience which has embedded in me this critical analysis, or maybe it is my background education in social work. Acquiring such a critical analysis of the world in which many groups are surviving acknowledging the violence of oppressive attitudes and structures, I often question my role in conforming to the Western worldview through a Eurocentric education system. The question arises, Why is it that in order to study and research in this way, one must go through this Eurocentric process? Who says that this is the way, the right and only way, and why? These are the questions that I struggle with and in fact, answers that I had to “get over” to seriously consider embarking on this journey.

LL: I do think often of the kind of educator I strive to be. In my classroom, I seek to find a balance of what the students “need to know” versus what they “want to know.” After all, who is it that determines what they “need to know,” and why? There are questions we need to be asking ourselves and potentially questioning if we are all striving to improve our public schools. I recognize there are curriculum expectations in the areas of reading, writing, and more, and I am accountable for those. Facilitating learning however, can take many forms, and I assert my autonomy as an educator wherever I possibly can.

Concluding Thoughts on Education

EW: My own experiences as a learner, the experiences of my son, and those of the learners that I work with in K-12 and in postsecondary shape my definition of what is education. It has not been a static definition in this career, and I believe it will continue to evolve and change with knowledge. It also changes amidst our own lived experience.

RW: I am here, and what is most important to me is the why. I am here not only for myself, but also for my family, community, and my people.

LL: Each child needs to have a voice, and the voice heard the least should be mine. Children as young as five have capabilities to become not only moral citizens but agents of change in their school and communities (Kohli, 2016). They also begin school with thoughts and feelings and experiences and life already lived. This is why they all need to have a voice.

What is education? In summation, what we have discovered is that collectively, there can be no defined definition of education. What each learner experiences will be individual and their own. How one learner experiences a single class in a school or university may not at all be the same as what the learner sitting next to them is experiencing. What we have learned from our inquiry is that our own experiences and those of our children or family, as well as the experiences that you create as a teacher and experience as a learner, shape your definition of education. The definition can evolve as your experiences change. The definition will look different if your experiences of education are online, face-to-face, in community, land-based, or even self-directed as a learner who is following their own dreams and passions. The people who surround us influence our definitions of education and can be a reason why we choose to be learners and further our own knowledge; we learn to better ourselves and our family and community. And finally, how we teach has an effect on what our expectations are as a learner. For those who create classrooms and listen to the voices of each learner, there becomes an expectation in adult learning that this would be present when the role of teacher becomes the role of learner. In a world of diversity, whether we look at K-12, early childhood, or even adult learning, it is important that education be reflective and inclusive of each learner no matter what definition of education is being used.

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