

# Currere and Critical Pedagogy: Thinking Critically about Self-Reflective Methods

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## Introduction

More than forty years ago, curriculum theory underwent what Thomas Kuhn might call a paradigm shift, with the scholarly focus shifting from an emphasis on development to one that took curriculum as something that needed to address a broader range of topics informed by multidisciplinary insights. Through this came the rise of autobiographical methods of self-reflective inquiry, an approach designed to attend to the methodological and phenomenological experiences of the individual learner. More specifically came the rise of the curricular method known as 'currere', a method designed to account for the self, encouraging the learner to reflect on the past, the future and the consequences for the present. However, autobiographical methods of curricular inquiry are not without its critiques. In this paper, I explore the rise and theory of currere, address some of its critiques, and in light of some of the problematic issues, offer a discussion textured by critical pedagogical literature. In so doing, I want to suggest that effective autobiographical work needs to attend to the critical social context for without it, such work risks becoming little else but a solipsistic and self-indulgent enterprise. Finally, I explore the idea of *bildung*, offering some suggestions about its ability to provide a theoretical lens through which the articulation of critical insights with autobiographical reflections might occur.

## The Genesis and Method of Currere

The growth of currere as a method of self-reflective autobiographical inquiry came about as part of the reconceptualization of curriculum. With Joseph Schwab suggesting that curriculum had reached the point of moribundity (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman, 1995, p. 187), the field experienced a shift from an emphasis on technical development to one driven by a concern for theorizing through various epistemological lenses. With this, the field of curriculum theory was to adopt 'meaning' and 'experience' as the primary epistemological lenses. As noted by Charles Silberman (Pinar et al., 1995), "in the early 1970s the crisis was one of meaning. Education was in need of a 'remaking,' and [...] the curriculum [w]as one area in need of drastic change" (p. 188). In something akin to Thomas Kuhn's notion of a paradigm shift, curriculum theorists responded to this crisis by changing the general epistemological focus and while such shift was not without controversy, the shift from asking 'how do we *develop* curriculum?' to 'how do we *understand* curriculum?'



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occurred nonetheless (Pinar et al., 1995). Out of this re-conceptualization arose currere, a method of autobiographical inquiry that helped reorient the focus on ‘meaning.’

In 1972, William Pinar began the process of conceptualizing a curriculum based around the self. He wrote a short article in which he reflects on an experience as a teacher wherein students used their personal experiences to discuss literature (Pinar, 1972). He suggests that he and his students rarely felt the need to refer to content beyond their own subjectivity and incisively concluded that, “we work from within” (ibid., p. 331). While not addressing autobiography as a method, he does begin to lay the groundwork for a curriculum of experience and subjectivity<sup>2</sup>. Following this, Pinar published various pieces outlining his autobiographical method of intellectual reflection: currere. At a meeting of the American Educational Research Association<sup>3</sup> in 1975, he continues his work to articulate how biography can be a means of elucidating one’s educational experience (Pinar, 1975a). In trying to outline what characterizes educational experiences, he maintains that the self and the “existential experiences” become the methodological data source (ibid., p. 2) for eliciting meaning. Through such a process, the self is the researcher (ibid.) and through researching herself, she attempts to access the “lebenswelt” or inner world (Pinar, 1975a, 1975b, 1975c, 1975d).

The next year, Pinar, along with Madeleine Grumet, published *The Poor Curriculum* (1976). This book functions as a seminal text, providing the philosophical foundations of currere while exploring its methodological value (ibid.). They argue for a “poor curriculum,” one stripped of everything but experience (ibid., p. vii) and in so doing, make explicit the notion that experience is central to inquiry. With this text, currere is presented as a comprehensive method of ‘self’ for curriculum theory, sufficient in realizing the goals of the ‘reconceptualization’. It achieves the goal of not only centring the individual in investigation but also centring personal subjectivity and epistemology as the primary foci of a reconceptualized curriculum theory.

The successful application of currere as a method is reflected in a piece two years after *The Poor Curriculum* wherein Pinar (1978) discusses his own experiences in relation to a reading of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Search for a Method*. Here, he clarifies the link between the reflective method of currere and education in stating that responses to texts makes clear the “fundamental aspects of the educational process” (ibid., p. 325). This privileging of experience is supported by Grumet (1978) who argues that currere provides students with the opportunity to develop responses to texts based on their experiences engaging with it (p. 291).

Having worked to supersede what MacDonald (1975) had previously noted as dissatisfaction with “technical” models of curriculum, Pinar and Grumet successfully developed a method that refocused curriculum such that the student and teacher were no longer simply objects to be molded epistemologically by a scientifically rational set of “positivistic” policies. Instead of looking at how to structure the lives of students, currere emphasizes how this structuring is done, shifting the focus away from the process itself and highlighting the consequences of said process(es). Consequently, currere as a method of self-reflective inquiry had drawn new lines around what constituted the realm of curricular inquiry, a set of demarcations that defined curriculum as an investigative enterprise that would occupy itself with the experience of education. By suggesting that the self and her relation with the educational world become the primary focal point of curricular work, the method of currere effectively reshaped the field, moving the focus from the document itself to those who live in relation to the planned curriculum. The field thus became more than

learning about regimentation and planned outcomes – it became a hermeneutic endeavour designed to relay the meanings and subjectivities of those who live between, within and outside of the technicalities of “document based” curricular work.

### **The Method and Its Faults**

In this method of not knowing and searching (Pinar & Grumet, 1976), there are four interrelated steps, which reconceptualize the field as a ‘complicated conversation’ (Pinar, 2012). The first is the regressive, a “re-experiencing” (Pinar, 2012, p.45); a “free associative remembrance of the past” (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. ix). Here, one engages in understanding the self in the current situation (Pinar, 2012, p. 46) and the ways in which they are a product of history. This is followed by the progressive stage, characterized by a reflection on the possibilities for the future in terms of how they manifest themselves in the present. As Pinar notes, this stage involves looking at how, “the future inhabits the present” (ibid.). Much like the existence of the past in the present moment, the future impresses itself on our current subjectivity (ibid.). Following this is the analytic, the self-reflective analysis of the past and the future. Here, one traces how the past inhabits the present and the relationship to the future (ibid.) thereby making clear how who we were, who we are and who we are to become shape each other. As Pinar (1975a) contends, the analytic stage asks us to answer the following question: “how is the future present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both?” (p. 12). Finally, there is the synthetic, which obliges the methodologist to reflect on the present so as to determine its meaning. Here, the researcher makes sense of the self in the present, explaining how she exists in the present moment. It is here in the final stage that the individual is able to articulate their understandings of educational experience (see also Doerr, 2004; Kanu & Glor, 2006; Pinar & Grumet, 1976; Pinar 1975a, 1975b; Pinar et al., 1995). Taken as a whole, currere is a reflective and engaging methodology of the self, demanding reflection on the individual’s experience so as to engender a more extensive understanding of how one’s personal history and aspirations for the future shape the individual in the current moment.

An example of currere is provided in Pinar’s (2012) book *What is Curriculum Theory*. Thinking regressively, Pinar discusses the Weimer Republic and the similarities that this has to the current and historical ‘state of emergency’ that has become a fixture of American political (and by extension educational) discourse. In the progressive stage, Pinar laments the increasing pervasiveness of technology despite researchers arguing against its value and Pinar’s concern that it fosters excessive individualism and a lack of engagement with alterity. Analytically, Pinar discusses the current state of anti-intellectualism that has come to suffuse the teaching profession courtesy of politicians who not only deprecate teachers and schools but also equate academic success with standardized testing. For the synthetic, Pinar contends that there needs to be a re-engagement with the idea of “complicated conversation”, characterized by a moral intransigence, to undo the deleterious effects of what he calls “school deform.”

Autobiography (in some form) has also been employed in various other contexts to gain understanding including in environmental education (Doerr, 2004), the fostering of critical skills in teachers (Kanu & Glor, 2006), feminist theory (Grumet, 1988; Miller, 1992, 1998) and in the questioning of belonging and national identity (Chambers, 2006). Each of these works demonstrates the ways in which autobiographical methods can help reorient curriculum such that it focuses on the individual (Pinar, 1981) while also providing a way to enhance and explain the learning environment/experience. In doing so, the works



illustrate the goal of currere and autobiography in general – to demystify and explicate educational experience (Grumet, 1978, 1981, 1999; Pinar, 1975b, 1975c, 1978).

While the notion of biography and the emphasis on the understanding of the self is not new to academic scholarship<sup>4</sup>, Pinar's work builds on various theoretical traditions to reorient (reconceptualize) the field of education. For instance, the concept of free association, borrowed from psychoanalysis (see Pinar et al., 1995, p. 521), plays a role in the regressive stage of currere (as noted earlier). For Pinar (1981), it plays a part in, "serious autobiographical work [wherein] one adopts a critical posture towards one's self-report, scrutinizing one's free-associative account looking for the *functions* of one's explanations of oneself" (p. 178, original emphasis). This free-association is the "method of data generation" (Pinar, 1975a, p. 2), the means through which one constructs themes for analysis. Here, the mind 'wanders' but does so with purpose wherein there is a noting of, "the path and all its markers" (Grumet, 1999, p. 26). The generative possibility of this free associative reflection is seen in Doerr's (2004) work wherein students were encouraged to think free associatively to generate pictures of the future (p. 25-26).

Such a method, despite its generative possibilities and support of reflexivity is not without opprobrium. Apple (1999), for instance, supports autobiography and the value it has for education but is critical of the potential individualism (p. 226). He goes as far as to suggest that such a method caters to, "the white, middle-class woman's or man's need for *self-display*" (ibid., p. 227, original emphasis). As a counter argument, Grumet (1978) maintains that denigration of autobiography is reflective of a subscription to the 'banking model' (p. 295). We can see here a tension between concerns over a racialized solipsism and the rejoinder that arguing against autobiography is akin to catering to the power relations that the critics are trying to avoid.

In addition to the aforementioned critique of autobiography as a sort of 'racialized indulgence', Doerr (2004), through her use of currere in an ecology class, discovered that the autobiographical responses were also noticeably 'gendered'<sup>5</sup>. She notes that there were, "many instances of macho behavior and language" (ibid., p. 149) coupled with articulations of masculinity designed to offset any possibility that the reflection was to be construed as feminine. This can be highly problematic if left unaddressed. One could even suggest that Pinar's (2009) criticism of critical scholarship's reduction of "reality to the social,"<sup>6</sup> wherein critical scholars situate themselves as ideologically free (p. 194), may apply here if the autobiographer uncritically reduces personal experience or values to the social and neglects a connection of their ideological self with the world. If autobiography is left uncritically examined, it risks becoming the self-indulgent endeavour alluded to by Apple.

In response to the critiques levied against autobiography as a method in curriculum theory, it is worth considering the epistemological refocusing (undertaken to address various concerns) in the field. The *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* notes a shift in the field, emphasizing the need to "brown" the curriculum as part of the work required to address the dearth of racialized non-white scholars (Springgay and Carpenter, 2011). A recent issue highlights the need to build coalitions amongst curriculum scholars (Howard, 2011), the power of television shows such as *South Park* to confront inequalities and assist in the development of antiracist beliefs (Meddaugh and Richards, 2011) and the potential of arts education to address counternarratives of race (Hanley, 2011). There is a call to attend to the issues of oppression, suggesting that autobiographical work will take up the cause of oppression as part of the shift in the field. Given this shift in epistemological focus in curriculum theory and the inextricable link between epistemology and methodology, one



must consider the value of epistemological orientations focused on oppression. One such framework is critical pedagogy, to which I now turn to highlight how it may augment currere's value as a method of inquiry and potentially address some of the issues raised here.

### **Critical Pedagogy: Can it Offer Something?**

As an epistemological orientation influenced by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Giroux, 2003; Kincheloe, 2007, 2008; McLaren, 2007), critical pedagogy focuses primarily on the relationship of capital and class status to the production of knowledge and the enactment of hegemony. As one would imagine, the influence of Marxism (in some form) bears heavily on the theoretical framework and recapitulations in the work of these scholars (see Apple, 1999, 2004; McLaren, 2000a, 2007). While there is recognition of other forms of oppression such as race and gender (Apple, 1993; Hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2007), it largely addresses education from an abstract perspective, focusing on constraint and regulation through economic relations<sup>7</sup>. While this is not a flaw in and of itself, it does frame many of the assumptions made in critical pedagogical thought and limits their epistemological assumptions to particular forms of oppression (as will be made clear).

For critical pedagogues, much like anti-racists (see Dei, 1996; Stanley, 2000), education is an inherently political act. The work of Michael Apple (1999, 2004) illustrates this for he commonly dwells on the rising influence of a variety of ideologies including conservatism and neoliberalism, each operating under the auspices of a "rightest agenda" (Apple, 1999, p. 114). The politics of schooling plays out through discourse to which the critical pedagogues respond by advocating for the employment of a critical literacy (discussed below). As Apple (1999) notes, "activities that we ask students to engage in every day, activities as 'simple' as reading, writing, and computing [...] can at one and the same time be forms of regulation and social control and potential modes of social criticism and transformation" (p. 98). Language, as Apple correctly suggests, provides the means through which one can regulate and transgress the boundaries of politically determined knowledge. For critical pedagogues, the focus is on this transgressive potential of critical literacy, which deserves some attention given its potential to provide students with the tools to obviate the damaging effects of hegemonic discourse.

Critical literacy advocates the converse of the "banking model" of education in which the student's mind is understood as something akin to a blank slate upon which knowledge is simply inscribed with little regard for the consequences or subjectivity of the learner (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994). As a means of countering the culturally denuding effects of such pedagogy, Freire (1970) advocates for a pedagogy that facilitates 'conscientização', the raising of individual consciousness. Key to this consciousness raising is a critical literacy, which, "becomes both a medium and a constitutive force for human agency and political action" (Giroux, 1983, p. 227). The heightening of a student's social and historical cognizance can be achieved through a critical literacy program aimed at elevating the oppressed from a status of subjugation to one in which they can name their own histories and knowledge while having them authenticated as legitimate forms of knowing. Such a pedagogical approach is not easy (Koh, 2002) nor will it 'feel good' (Hooks, 1994) which we might expect when we consider that the essence of oppression is to obstruct the, "pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person" (Freire, 1970, p. 40). To allow for this self-affirmation, to partake in a process of endorsing the views of the oppressed, requires a legitimization of the silences in texts. This is where critical literacy's





engagement with the taken-for-granted (Koh, 2002) and thorough questioning of articulated 'objective' knowledge provides a vehicle for the oppressed consciousness to ascend into the realm of legitimacy. It is through the, "ejection of the introjected subject positions of dominant groups" (McLaren, 2000a, p. 157) and the validation of individual subjectivity that critical literacy provides the means through which to disrupt the oppressed/oppressor dichotomy.

Critical pedagogy, as an epistemological framework focused on validating subjectivity, is not without fault. While critical pedagogy is subject to various critiques (see Ellsworth, 1989; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 2007; Pinar, 2009; Sandlin & Milam, 2008; Wardekker & Miedema, 1997), I want to focus on two that are pertinent and separate from the reoccurring critique that critical pedagogy and its associated concepts are largely abstract. The first concerns the inefficacy of critical pedagogy to affect the outcomes of the actions of teachers while the second concerns the largely gendered and racialized nature of those who comprise the base of canonical thinkers and their ideas. This is not to suggest that these are the only salient concerns. Indeed, the epistemological contentions of critical pedagogy, in being vehemently "anti-rightist" (given the trenchant Marxism that defines the field), are themselves open to sufficiently warranted critique for being over-zealously leftist and potentially unwavering. However, the two mentioned here outline two trends that appear to be threaded through discussions of critical pedagogical work and its critiques.

Given what could be interpreted as critical pedagogy's disinterest in concretizing the ideals of its epistemological contentions, it is perhaps not all that surprising that some educators have difficulty applying such a framework in the classroom. Take for instance the experiences of MacGillivray (1997), who found that despite her best efforts to effectuate a critical pedagogy in her classroom, she resorted to familiar techniques. Amidst a scholastic environment that promotes a model of the professor as, "calm, reserved, and somewhat emotionally distant" (ibid., p. 484), she found that she quickly resorted to a set of "rules" that conflicted with her understanding of what it meant to facilitate the creation of a learning environment driven by the ideals of critical pedagogy. Such frustration with the inapplicability of critical pedagogy is additionally reflected in Ellsworth's (1989) oft-cited critique of critical pedagogy in which she suggests that it is comprised of a set of, "repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination" (p. 298). Such problems appear to give the impression that critical pedagogy is quixotic and suitable for nothing more than the "armchair revolution" that Freire (1970, p. 52) was trying to avoid.

The other aspect that is of grave concern is the gendered and racialized constitution of both the texts and the authors. Hooks (1994), reflecting on her readings of Freire, states that she is continually reminded of, "the way he [...] constructs a phallogocentric paradigm of liberation—wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same" (p. 49). While Hooks (1994) does argue that this is the case, she also suggests that it should not, "overshadow anyone's (and feminists' in particular) capacity to learn from the insights" (p. 49), a point that McLaren (2000a) is quick to reference in his discussion of gender and race in Freire.

The frustrations of gender are accompanied by a discontent with the inability of critical theorists to embrace race as an equally valid oppression in analysis (Hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1997). Ladson-Billings (1997) suggests that race is "muted in analysis" (p. 127) which correlates with Hooks' (1994) concern that "nonwhite voices" do not appear to be gaining any substantial grounding in terms of voice (p. 9-10). Other thinkers have noted the neglect as well: Giroux (1983) notes the silence of gender and race in articulations of

resistance theory (p. 104) while Kincheloe (2007) notes the lack of voice on the part of some racialized minority groups. In fact, Kincheloe (2007) suggests that, “one of the greatest failures of critical pedagogy at this juncture of its history involves the inability to engage people of African, Asian, and indigenous backgrounds in our tradition” (p. 11). While this is addressed in some recent work (see for instance McLaren’s (2000b) piece on whiteness), the overarching emphasis on economic and macro-structural explanations serves as an exclusionary technique (however inadvertent), effectively eliding discussions of race and gender from critical paradigms.

### **Critical Pedagogy/Currere - Symbiosis**

It would seem as if the epistemological assertions of critical pedagogy and the methodological approach of currere are diametrically opposed. Currere emphasizes the individual lived experience as reflected in the epistemological influence of phenomenology (Doerr, 2004; Kanu & Glor, 2006; Pinar, 1975a, 1975b, 1975d; Pinar et al., 1995), existentialism (Pinar, 1975d, 1981; Pinar et al., 1995, p. 520-521) and psychoanalysis (Kanu & Glor, 2006; Pinar, 1975a, 1975b, 1975d; Pinar et al., 1995, p. 521-522). Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, concentrates on the role of structural, political and ideological forces as the object of study. Currere advocates a humanizing of education by focusing on the individual while critical pedagogy emphasizes macro level and abstract understanding as part of the humanizing effort. Yet, despite being apparently diametrically opposed, some of the values and ideas of critical pedagogy are present in currere. For instance, this artificial bifurcation belies currere’s psychosocial and political advocacy (Pinar, 1978) and its potential as a form of cultural criticism (Pinar, 2012, p. 45). As such, I would maintain that the relationship is not one of mutual exclusivity despite Pinar’s (2009) suggestion that critical work creates a subject/structure divide wherein the subject lacks any agentic capacity (p. 196).

First, the future plays a role in both currere and critical pedagogy. The meditation, “on what may come, on what you wish to become” (Doerr, 2004, p. 25) inherent in the process of progression is analogous to the emphasis on immanence in critical theory (Kincheloe, 2007). The devotion to change in both frameworks necessitates a reflection on the potentiality of differing futures. In the critical pedagogue’s call for a ‘transformative intellectual’ (Kanpol, 1996), there lies a call for a different future. This is echoed in Sandlin and Milam’s (2008) discussion of culture jammers in which individuals actively participate in cultural production so as, “to redefine possibilities for the future” (p. 331). Attempts to shift one’s perception of their own future corresponds with Pinar’s (1975a) suggestion that progression in currere should assist in helping the individual determine where their “intellectual interests are going” (p. 10). The two can operate in tandem to provide students with a criticality that shapes their own educational endeavours and desires for the future.

Both critical pedagogy and currere also emphasize the deleterious effects of the banking model (Freire, 1970). Grumet (1978) maintains that, “the instructional fallacy that denigrates students’ autobiographical writing subscribes to [...] the banking model of education” (p. 295). The paternalistic essence of the banking model abrogates a student’s right to use her own experiences in the knowledge construction process. To give students the opportunity to overcome the ideological limitations of the selective tradition (see Apple, 2004; Trofanenko, 2006) enacted through ‘banking pedagogies,’ critical pedagogues advocate for a critical literacy (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2000a, p. 187; Koh, 2002; Gurn, 2011). Given currere’s potential in providing critical reflection tools (Grumet, 1978, p.



296), it becomes apparent that combining currere with a critical literacy program can assist students and teachers in engaging with pedagogies that don't simply 'deposit' knowledge. Using a critical pedagogical approach in the classroom may even assist educators and students contextualize their experiences by illustrating the ways in which their understandings of the world are not solely the product of their own intellectual capacities. Doing this may insulate currere from critiques that it is unable to precipitate change if the understandings gleaned from it are not discussed as having been constructed within a particular political, ideological, social and economic context<sup>8</sup>.

As noted above though, there are two flaws in critical pedagogy that problematize it as an effective epistemological base for currere as a method. First, the difficulty in practical application (Ellsworth, 1989; MacGillivray, 1997) is incongruous with the ways currere is effective at eliciting meaningful reflection (see Doerr, 2004). MacGillivray (1997) reflects on her own familial and professional experiences to explicate the reasons why her biases prevented her from effectively engaging in critical pedagogy in the classroom. While this not an autobiographical reflection (at least not in the sense of currere), it does highlight the ways in which personal reflection can help to illustrate the problems of particular epistemological approaches as applied to pedagogy. The problems of application as reflected by Ellsworth (1989) are also made discernible through the articulation of her experiences teaching a class which provides the springboard for a trenchant critique of critical pedagogy as enacting an antithetical pedagogy in its reproduction of domination. The personal and pragmatic utility of currere is also unable to benefit from the largely abstract and impractical nature of critical pedagogy, which, "efface[s] subjectivity and the embodied individual, each pronounced, respectively, as only complicit with capitalism [...] or, simply, 'dead'" (Pinar, 2009, p. 192). While the aforementioned statement from Pinar is specific to notions of reproduction and resistance, I would suggest that it is equally salient with regards to descriptions of critical pedagogy's relation to currere.

In reference to the racialized/gendered critiques considered earlier, currere once again finds itself at odds with critical pedagogy. With regards to race, it is widely acknowledged by anti-racists that the inclusion of the narratives and subjectivities of racialized non-white individuals is an essential part in deconstructing both the we/us binary and the exclusion of racialized non-white individuals from the knowledge construction process. The importance of these racialized knowledges is acknowledged as consequential to curriculum studies. One such specific example is the notion of the literary canon (Pinar et al., 1995; Taubman, 1993) and the racialized politics behind its construction. While the ideas of critical pedagogy, particularly the recognition of the 'selective tradition' (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 251; Trofanenko, 2006) may be advantageous in augmenting the benefit of critical pedagogy to currere, the economic determinism inherent in this epistemological tradition may problematize any insights it may provide regarding racialized distinctions.

With respect to gender, not only is critical pedagogy largely silent on gender issues but seminal texts such as Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are noted as being androcentric (Hooks, 1994). Pinar (2009) even suggests that the existence of gendered statements is reflective of critical scholars employment of "a subject position somehow safely located outside ideological interpellation" (p. 193)<sup>9</sup>. Much like the concern enunciated previously with regards to race, the ways in which critical pedagogues approach critique is best suited to an abstract realm in which economics, and not gender or race, is the main determinant in oppression. Any frustration with critical pedagogy's lack of sensitivity to gender needs to be tempered though. Criticisms of Freire's work as



androcentric requires the juxtaposing of his work with Pinar and Grumet's early work with currere (see for instance Grumet, 1978; Pinar, 1975a, 1975b) wherein the male subject is uncritically privileged. Criticisms of the gendered nature of one from the other are unwarranted if we consider the historical context and the emphasis on rectifying this issue through each position as they are currently articulated. I would suggest then that both should work in concert to deconstruct the implicit androcentrism that saturates the theoretical bedrock of each tradition by centring gender and race in their epistemological and methodological work.

## Conclusion

Both currere and critical pedagogy have a similar goal in recognizing the subjectivity of the individual but articulate drastically different means of doing so. Critical pedagogy's arguably highfalutin nature is countered by currere's focus on centring the subject through her own words. Critical pedagogy though is by its very nature 'critical' which would benefit the method of currere which, despite the argument that it, "provide[s] students with the tools of critical reflection that they will need to transform their situations" (Grumet, 1978, p. 296), does little to lucidly articulate how this is the case. While critical pedagogy's abstraction (and perhaps its economic determinism) risks limiting its effectiveness to nothing more than what Freire called an "armchair revolution" (1970, p. 52), the 'conscientização' inherent as a base to critical pedagogy provides a way to expand and problematize currere to encompass critical reflection. Indeed, the centrality of hermeneutics in critical theory (Kincheloe, 2007) can support the analysis essential to autobiographical work. Beyond this, if educational experience, as the central focus of currere, is truly designed to focus on the, "experience associated with *educational institutions* as they are currently conceived" (Pinar, 1975c, emphasis added), one would be wise to avail oneself of the institutional focus in critical pedagogy to make sense of how the 'institution' shapes that experience. Critical pedagogy can therefore provide background knowledge for students to use in conjunction with understandings gleaned through the autobiographies to affect change. In fact, there appears to be a convergence in focus as seen in work being done to address issues of race (McLaren, 2000b; Pinar, 2000) and while this may not signify a partnership, it highlights the possibility for an engaged and critical currere informed by a critical pedagogy.

Beyond critical theory, other epistemological and theoretical frameworks exist as potential complements to currere. Anti-racism, gendered theories, and even alternative theories of social class (to name a few) can serve to augment the understandings gleaned and generated through autobiographical reflection. By educating students about the institutional and political context in which they exist, autobiographical reflections come to be textured by more nuanced understandings of the world. What is important is not so much the epistemological lens privileged as a complement (differing contexts demand different responses) but the application of critical insights to the personal experiences of our students and indeed ourselves. Consequently, although critical theory may not always serve as the most suitable complement to currere, the ways in which it and other critical paradigms unsettle and texture autobiographical work is not only worth considering but essential to future work.

How then might we reconcile the two paradigms (is such a process possible)? If we take seriously for a moment the idea that currere and autobiographical work more broadly would benefit from critical social thought and vice versa, there is an interesting space



opened for a different language around the position of the individual in the social context. No conceptual frame will ever be sufficient and neither of the aforementioned paradigms and its proponents, I venture, would disagree. That said, there is something of curricular value in the concept of *bildung* that can help create a convergent line(s) of thought that can bridge some of the concerns elucidated thus far. Curriculum literature (see Hamilton & Gudmundsdottir, 1994; Pinar, 2011; Vásquez-Levy, 2002) has engaged with this notion of *bildung*, a German word broadly pointing to the formation of the individual as a subjective being. As Vásquez-Levy argues (2002), *bildung* is at once inner and outer growth, social and individual and at once a process through which seemingly disconnected experiences of individual (maturation, coming-of-age) and social development (states of freedom) come together as a, “double process of inner-developing and outer-enveloping” (p. 118). She goes on to suggest that the consequence of such a process is the development of, “a critical consciousness and of character-formation, self-discovery, knowledge in the form of contemplation or insight, an engagement with questions of truth, value, and meaning” (p. 118-119). Pinar (2011) suggests something similar in presenting a definition of *bildung* through which, “subjective engagement with the social and the cultural for the sake of self-formation comprises one meaning” (p. xiv) of the term, a particular articulation that might possibly provide a theoretical avenue for the merging of the socio-political preoccupation of critical pedagogy with the ever inward looking nature of currere and autobiographical work more generally.

Ultimately, each of the aforementioned understandings of *bildung* corresponds to Gadamer’s (2004) assertion that the concept now, “designates primarily the properly human way of developing one’s natural talents and abilities” (p. 9), itself implicitly suggesting discovery or formation. The convergence of autobiographical work with critically rich and context aware understandings of the social space can make possible the inner/outer development, one in which “properly human” and supportive education can exist in relation to and inherently against on-going elisions of specific subjectivities or abilities from particular discourses or activities (eg. women from the upper levels of politics or business). Such a conceptualization appears congruent with notions of reflective praxis and at once central to conceptions of self-reflective thinking in which inner growth and nuanced understandings of the experiences of education can manifest themselves. Herein lies, therefore, a potential bridge for the seemingly disparate notions of the ever present dichotomy of self/structure, two circumscribed locales of reflective thought that define the currere/critical thought divide. By embodying *bildung* within the classroom space, educators and students alike can broaden the prescient and forward thinking dispositions that both autobiographical and critical pedagogical work call for and engender. Consequently, *bildung* provides a fertile theoretical ground from which critical pedagogical work can be sutured to the self-reflective curricular practices demanded by autobiographical methods such as currere. By working through this notion of articulating the social and cultural with the inner or “properly human” *bildung* may offer an approach to understanding curricular work that is at once self-reflective, progressive and critically cognizant. And while *bildung* may not, in and of itself, mend the flaws of each curricular epistemology, it offers a starting point from which to encounter, engage and reimagine the world as a place from which “I” and “we” live, love, play, imagine and create together.

## Notes



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<sup>2</sup> Although he does not explicitly couple (auto)biography with a method, he does state that in reply to the students affective responses to a piece of literature, he responds by using his biography (Pinar, 1981, p. 330). In Pinar et al. (1995) however, the authors suggest that this 1972 article was “the earliest expression of interest in autobiographical method” (p. 518).

<sup>3</sup> As noted by Pinar & Grumet (1976) in *The Poor Curriculum*, this paper formed the basis for a chapter in the book.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 2000) wherein it is suggested that the relationship between biography and history is essential to intellectual understanding.

<sup>5</sup> Something to note is that she taught at an all boys school. While this may be the case, this does not detract from the concerns over the displays of masculinity that pervade the autobiographical reflections.

<sup>6</sup> McLaren (2007) notes that, contrary to Pinar’s argument, “neither the individual nor society is given priority in analysis” (p. 194).

<sup>7</sup> What is of interest here is Kincheloe’s assertion that in critical theory, the theoretical base for critical pedagogy, there is a “rejection of economic determinism” (2007, p. 22).

<sup>8</sup> One might suppose that the emphasis on, “listening carefully to one’s own inner voice in the historical and natural world” (Pinar, 2012, p. 46-47) in the synthesis stage of currere is sufficient in providing students with the opportunity to question their present subjectivity and the ways it was shaped. The question that remains though is whether or not “listening to” one’s historical construction is sufficient if it is divorced from other dynamics. If it does not take into account other forms of oppression (racial, gendered, economic, political, etc.), I would suggest that it is in fact insufficient by itself.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting here Lather’s critique (cited in Pinar, 2009, p. 197) that critical pedagogy is a “boy thing,” reflected in the authority of the “masculinist voice” in critical theoretical discourse. This is evident when one considers that many of the “seminal” works are written from the male (white, middle/upper class) subject position.

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