A Letter to a First Year K-8 Classroom Teacher

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AS A UYGHUR TRANSNATIONAL TEACHER FROM NORTHWEST CHINA, I came to an important realization during my PhD studies. I discovered that my understanding of "curriculum" had been shaped by a Eurocentric and colonized perspective. This insight didn't come to me until after I had already stopped classroom teaching and begun my doctoral journey. Looking back, I wish I had recognized this sooner—particularly during my first year of teaching. Had I understood this earlier, it would have helped me navigate the complexities of teaching with a deeper awareness of the relational and cultural dimensions of education.

After completing my PhD in Education, I decided to write this letter to my past self, reflecting on how my views on curriculum have changed over time. My hope is that by sharing my journey, I can offer some helpful insights to other first-year teachers, especially those like me who are navigating the complexities of teaching in the U.S. while carrying a transnational identity shaped by different cultural and educational experiences. In this letter, I return to my early, basic understanding of curriculum—the one I held as a brand-new U.S. K–8 classroom teacher trying to do everything "right." I then bring in ideas from American scholar Madeleine R. Grumet, whose expansive and poetic view of curriculum helped me see teaching as something more relational and alive. Along the way, I also began to notice how non-Western ways of knowing offered wisdom that wasn't named in my formal training but felt deeply familiar. As I reflect on whether broadening my view of curriculum has made teaching clearer or more complicated, I want to tell my past self—and others like her—that there is always another way forward. Even in moments of exhaustion or disillusionment, there's a path that leads back to meaning, to connection, and to the heart of why we teach. In this paper, I adopt the format of a letter rather than a conventional academic essay. This choice is not merely stylistic but is methodologically and philosophically aligned with my argument: curriculum is not a fixed body of knowledge but an evolving, relational, and interpretive experience. Traditional academic structures often impose rigid, impersonal modes of communication that risk alienating the very human and dialogical nature of curriculum. Instead, the letter format performs the idea that curriculum, like conversation, is an invitation, an engagement, and a space for reflection rather than a transmission of predetermined knowledge.

Drawing from hermeneutic traditions (Gadamer, 1989; Pinar, 1994), I position the letter as an aesthetic text—one that is open to interpretation, responsive to context, and shaped by personal

meaning-making. Just as Pinar (1994) describes curriculum as a subjective, autobiographical process (currere), the letter format enables a personal yet scholarly exploration of curriculum as lived experience rather than as a static object of study. This approach challenges the notion of curriculum as something external and standardized, instead embracing it as a text to be read, written, and rewritten within the relational spaces of education.

In choosing the letter format, I also recognize its disruptive potential within the academic landscape. As a form that has historically been used in philosophy, education, and critical theory (e.g., Rilke, 1929; Freire, 1994), the letter resists the authoritative, impersonal voice of conventional scholarship in favor of a relational, situated, and reflexive mode of inquiry. It acknowledges the reader as a co-participant rather than a passive recipient, enacting the very principles of participatory and dialogic pedagogy that I argue should inform curriculum itself. For example, as Nieto and López (2019) demonstrate in their mother-daughter dialogue, meaningful engagement with teaching and curriculum emerges from relationships, stories, and intergenerational reflection. Also, Paulo Freire's writing (1994) serves as another methodological inspiration. His use of a letter-like tone and structure embodies his philosophy of dialogic education, where knowledge is co-constructed through relational exchange rather than imposed through hierarchical authority. Similarly, Lynn Fendler (2012) presents "Edwin & Phyllis," a dialogue that delves into the motivations behind choosing a career in teaching. This exchange provides valuable perspectives on the multifaceted nature of the teaching profession. Aligning my inquiry process with the spirit of works by Freire (1994), Fendler (2012), and Nieto and López (2019)—educators who use dialogic engagement as a methodological choice in educational inquiry—I have chosen to write in the format of a letter. This decision allows me to move away from conventional academic writing structures and instead embrace a more relational, dialogic approach to curriculum inquiry. Below is my letter/inquiry:

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Dear Rey,

You're about to begin your journey as a K-8 Classroom Teacher in a U.S. urban school, and I know how excited you are to step into the classroom. I remember that feeling well—the anticipation, the hope, and maybe even a little nervousness. I'm writing this letter to gently invite you to pause for a moment and reflect on what curriculum truly means before you start your first year of independent teaching in your own classroom. I know you bring valuable insights and experiences to your teaching journey, and I also recognize that academic discussions about curriculum can sometimes feel distant from the realities of the classroom. That's why I am writing this letter in a conversational tone—to create a space where we can think together, exchange ideas, and explore curriculum in a way that feels meaningful and relevant. As the philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991/1987) suggests in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, equality is not merely an end goal—it is the foundation from which we begin. I hope that the conversational tone of this letter reflects that spirit, inviting both writer and reader into a shared process of inquiry.

Rancière (1991/1987) reminds us that "reasonable communication is based on the equality between self-esteem and the esteem of others. It works toward the continuous verification of that equality" (p. 79). In this same spirit, I want to affirm that as you step into your classroom, you are not only teaching toward equality—you are teaching from a place of equality. In the very process

of teaching and learning, your students bring knowledge, perspectives, and experiences that position them as co-learners alongside you and each other.

In the sections that follow, I first explore foundational understandings of curriculum—its Latin root, common public perceptions, and contemporary scholarly definitions. I then introduce the work of American scholar Madeleine R. Grumet and her expansive view of curriculum. From there, I consider whether broadening our understanding of curriculum clarifies or complicates the work of teaching, particularly in terms of logic and practicality. Finally, I take a step back to offer alternative perspectives, highlighting why embracing an expansive view of curriculum can be both a challenge and a gift for teachers.

Curriculum as a Journey: Where Do We Begin?

Curriculum is a Latin word carried over into English. The Latin root of *curriculum* means a running race (Egan, 2003). It is a noun. In other words, based on its Latin root, the least expansive notion of curriculum is this: if a group of people are in a race, the course is the same for everyone. As a noun, *curriculum* refers to this fixed and structured running course.

Historically, this structured and standardized view of curriculum shaped much of early curriculum theory in the Western academic discourse. Franklin Bobbitt (1918), one of the first American curriculum theorists, saw curriculum as a scientific process—one that should efficiently shape students into productive members of society. His work laid the foundation for Ralph Tyler (1949), who developed what became known as the "Tyler Rationale," a model that continues to influence curriculum design today. Tyler's approach emphasized clear objectives, measurable outcomes, and a structured sequence of learning experiences. While this systematic approach helped establish curriculum as a formal field of study, it also reinforced a view of curriculum as something planned, delivered, and assessed—a predefined course much like the original Latin meaning of the word.

However, not all scholars agreed with this structured and efficiency-driven approach. In *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, Herbert Kliebard (1995) argued that curriculum has always been a contested space, shaped by competing ideologies. He highlighted how different groups—administrators, humanists, social reformers—have fought to define what knowledge should be taught and why.

William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet challenged the idea of curriculum as something static and prescribed. Pinar (1975) introduced the concept of *currere*, shifting curriculum from a noun to a verb—something lived and experienced rather than simply followed. Grumet (1988) expanded on this idea, emphasizing personal narrative, subjectivity, and the lived experiences of teachers and students as central to understanding curriculum. Their work invited educators to think beyond fixed courses and standardized objectives, instead considering curriculum as an ongoing, deeply personal, and even poetic journey.

Outside academia, many people still tend to think of curriculum as textbooks or prescribed guidelines for teachers. But scholars in this field remind us that curriculum is ultimately about fundamental questions that shape human decisions, both individually and collectively. As William Schubert (1986) writes, "What knowledge is most worthwhile? Why is it worthwhile? How is it acquired or created?" (p. 1

This letter is an invitation to think about curriculum not just as a structured plan, but as something more expansive—something that evolves, that is shaped by the lives and experiences of those who engage with it.

Curriculum as "*Currere*": Running the Course of Lived Experience

There are many different expansive notions of curriculum. In this letter, I want to introduce you to one scholar who has proposed an expansive notion of curriculum: Madeleine R. Grumet (e.g., Pinar & Grumet, 1976; Grumet, 1980). Grumet is an American Curricular theorist. Grumet taught high school English in the New York area for 12 years before she started her academic career in the field of education.

Instead of using the noun version of curriculum, Madeleine Grumet intentionally uses the verb version of the term, *currere*. For Grumet's expansive notion of curriculum, we are not looking at curriculum as the course that people are on, but their experiences on the course. So *currere* is different for everyone on the course. By using the verb form of *curriculum*, she emphasized the action, the experience, and the individuality of each runner. Based on Grumet's works and other educational literature in the field of curriculum, I have conceptualized Grumet's use of the term based on three key elements in curriculum: individuality (Kolb, 2015; Schwab,1969), autobiography (Grumet, 1990; Grumet, 1999; Kridel, 2013), and emancipation (Grumet, 1987; He, 2003; Freire, 1970). *Currere* allows Grumet to see these three elements and allow her to relate them to a larger curriculum reform. Each of which will be discussed below.

One of the first things that stood out to me in Grumet's (1980) work is how *currere* brings attention to the individuality of each learner. She draws from Pinar's definition, which describes *currere* as "my existential experience of external structures" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. vii). That phrase—*existential experience*—really shifts the way we think about curriculum. If we stick to the noun form, *curriculum* sounds like something set in stone, a fixed course that everyone follows in the same way. But when we think of it as a verb—as *currere*—it suddenly has movement. It becomes the act of running the race, where each person's pace, path, and experience are uniquely their own.

This perspective has made me reflect on my own teaching. When I ask myself whether I'm honoring the individuality of my students, I'm really asking: To what extent does my teaching recognize each student's uniqueness, even within the constraints of standardized schooling? And beyond that—how am I honoring my own individuality as a teacher?

This is where Pinar's (1994) work on *currere* as a method of self-examination becomes intriguing . He describes it as a process of looking inward—retracing our educational past, making sense of our present, and imagining what's possible in the future. In *Autobiography, Politics, and Sexuality (1972–1992)*, he explores how personal and social histories intersect within curriculum, showing that teaching isn't just about delivering content; it's about navigating our own identities and relationships to knowledge. Thinking of *currere* as a roadmap, not in a rigid "follow these steps" way, but as a tool for reflection, has helped me make sense of my own journey as a teacher.

This brings me to the second key element: autobiography. Schubert (1986) traced the experientialist view of curriculum back to Pinar and Grumet's *Toward a Poor Curriculum* (1976) and Grumet's (1980) article *Autobiography and Reconceptualization*. Their work emphasizes the idea that curriculum isn't just something external—it's something we live, something we make sense of through our own stories. Grumet's view of curriculum "emphasizes the individual's own

capacity to reconceptualize his or her autobiography" (Schubert, 1986, p. 33). In other words, reflecting on our past experiences isn't just about looking back; it's about actively reinterpreting what those experiences mean and how they shape our understanding of teaching and learning.

Going back to the race metaphor—if we see curriculum only as a noun, it suggests a standardized path that's the same for everyone. But if we embrace it as a verb, we acknowledge the movement, the flow of past, present, and future, that shapes each person's journey. This way of thinking aligns with the idea that students aren't empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge; they are already knowledge holders (Greene, 2000; Levine & McCloskey, 2012; Shalaby, 2017; Freire, 1970). *Currere* reminds me that curriculum isn't just about what's taught—it's about the lives and experiences of the people in the room.

The third element I consider when thinking about *currere* through Grumet's work is emancipation. This idea of movement—the verb form of *curriculum*—naturally connects to the concept of liberation. For Grumet, curriculum isn't just about absorbing knowledge; it's about actively shaping one's own path. She writes, *"I choose . . . who it is I aspire to be, how I wish my life history to be read. I determine my social commitments; I devise my strategies: whom to work with, for what, how"* (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. ix). There's so much power in that statement. It's about personal agency—the ability to decide who we become, how we engage with the world, and what kind of change we want to make.

Grumet (1987) has written about the liberating function of curriculum, but she's not alone in this thinking. Paulo Freire's work, especially *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), is a cornerstone in conversations about education as a tool for emancipation. Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, saw education not as a means of depositing knowledge into passive learners but as a practice of freedom—one where students and teachers engage in dialogue to critically understand and transform their world. Since its first English translation in 1970, Freire's book has inspired generations of scholars to think about education in terms of grassroots intellectual emancipation and the critical literacy of marginalized communities (Barros, 2020; Freire, 1970). His ideas, much like Grumet's, challenge the notion of education as a static, top-down process and instead frame it as something living—something shaped by the people engaged in it.

However, Freire's vision of emancipation is not without critique. Bowers (2015), in *Rethinking Freire*, raises important questions about the unintended consequences of framing education purely through the lens of liberation. He argues that Freire's emphasis on critical consciousness and individual emancipation often overlooks the deep ecological and cultural traditions that shape knowledge. In other words, the push for liberation can sometimes come at the expense of local, intergenerational wisdom—replacing one dominant narrative with another rather than truly decolonizing education. This critique makes me pause. While I believe in the power of education as a tool for personal and social transformation, I also wonder: In my own teaching, do I leave enough room for students to see value in the knowledge that already exists within their family history? Does my approach to curriculum recognize not only the need for change but also the importance of sustaining students' most familiar ways of knowing within their families and communities?

Thinking about *currere* in this way—as an ongoing process of shaping and reshaping not just knowledge, but also identity and social engagement—reminds me that education, at its core, is about movement. But perhaps this movement isn't always about breaking free; sometimes, it's about returning, re-rooting, and holding onto what grounds us.

How Expanding Curriculum Clarifies the Work of Teaching

An expansive view of curriculum, while it may seem overwhelming at first glance, ultimately clarifies the work of teaching. By focusing on curriculum as a verb—an ongoing, dynamic process of engagement with students—this perspective helps teachers see beyond a fixed, standardized approach and understand teaching as an active, relational experience. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing each student as a whole person with unique backgrounds, needs, and experiences, which allows teachers to more clearly identify how to support and guide them.

Rather than merely following a rigid set of guidelines or predetermined content, an expansive view of curriculum enables teachers to focus on the lived experiences of their students, providing a roadmap for personalizing instruction. It frees teachers from the constraints of simply transmitting knowledge and instead highlights the art of teaching—fostering deeper connections with students, and making the process of teaching feel more meaningful and authentic.

In this way, an expansive curriculum view doesn't complicate teaching, but rather simplifies and clarifies it by encouraging teachers to focus on the human elements of education, where each student's journey is valued, and their stories become central to the teaching process.

Logic: Thinking Deeply About Teaching

Recognizing expansive notions of curriculum before stepping into your first year of teaching will be a real asset to you. The hidden and implied curricula are always at play in schools, whether we acknowledge them or not. With an expanded understanding of curriculum, you'll be able to see these dynamics for what they are—rather than letting them go unnoticed. By conceptualizing them, you gain the ability to reflect on their impact and how they shape the classroom environment. In the following sections, I'll explore how an expansive notion of curriculum can provide clarity in your role as a teacher and in understanding your students, making the complexities of the classroom more manageable and meaningful.

Teachers as Intellectuals: Beyond Just Delivering Content

As you begin to step into the role of a teacher, it's important to consider what it truly means to be an educator. In the context of American schools, a series of historical and systemic factors have often placed teachers in a role that feels like that of a worker within a larger social engineering project (Labaree, 1997). Policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have brought about significant efforts to standardize education, which has, in turn, increased the accountability placed on teachers (Lasky, 2005; Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). This accountability often takes the form of scripted lesson plans, which are encouraged through professional development workshops, school cultures, and textbook publishing companies (Apple, 2013; Crowley, 2017). Teachers are frequently expected to follow strict rules and schedules, and while these structures are intended to ensure consistency, they sometimes have the unintended effect of diminishing the professional autonomy and morale of educators (Hoyle & Megarry, 2005; Santoro, 2011). In such a setting, teachers might feel they have fewer opportunities to embrace their roles as intellectuals and creative thinkers. This more rigid, standardized approach to curriculum can make teaching feel more like overseeing a set of procedures, rather than engaging with the deeper, individualized learning experiences that make teaching truly transformative.

However, imposing various top-down standards and putting teachers in a surveillance role negatively impact the quality of the teaching in a classroom (Biesta et al., 2015; Vaughn, 2013). One of the key ways to improve teaching quality is to restore power and agency to teachers (Robinson, 2012; Sannino, 2010; Sexton, 2008). As Mahony and Hextall (2000) eloquently put it:

> I think if your ultimate model is a profession which is of very high status, and achieving very high standards by any kind of international comparisons, then the only appropriate model for that is a very high degree of self-government and self-regulation. But you know, that also requires a very high level of political trust and I don't see any politician around at the moment who is willing yet to hand that over. (Mahony & Hextall, 2000, p.139)

The heart of Mahony and Hextall's (2000) argument is that improving the quality of a profession begins with trust. The solution lies not in imposing external standards or rigid accountability measures, but in entrusting teachers with the autonomy, respect, and responsibility to shape their practice. When we embrace the expansive notion of curriculum, we move beyond viewing teachers as mere technicians who transmit knowledge. Instead, we recognize teachers as intellectuals who engage with students as whole individuals—each with their own stories and knowledge. In this expanded view, teachers become artists working alongside creative individuals in pursuit of emancipation. Such a framework honors the body and voice of the teacher (Freedman & Holmes, 2012; Grumet, 2010) and activates their human agency (Bandura, 2006). Expansive notions of curriculum, therefore, not only challenge traditional views of teaching but also offer a pathway to improving the quality of education itself.

Students as Human Beings: Learning as a Lived Experience

Just as it is essential to recognize teachers as intellectuals with agency, it is equally important to see students not just as vessels for knowledge, but as human beings with rich, lived experiences. In this section, we will explore how the expansive notion of curriculum honors students as individuals and emphasizes learning as a deeply personal, transformative journey. In the simplified and less expansive notion of curriculum, students become vessels of knowledge. In the United States, the goal of schooling has been *to secure gainful employment.* Hence, teachers have to teach for job markets. (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Labaree, 1997) When teachers enter a school to teach, they are entering an institution whose main purpose is not intellectual expansion but job markets. Therefore, vertical and horizontally aligned pedagogies value the universal curriculum over the individual experience (Schwab 1969; Schwab,1973) Inside this framework, teachers are forced to ask, how can I improve students' scores and let them behave well? When such question guides the work of teaching, it is very easy to ignore the wholeness of students as human beings and students may be less willing to participate in a dehumanized experience (Shalaby, 2017).

On the contrary, expansive notions of curriculum invites teachers to treat each student as a whole human being. In this way, teachers will not merely see students as a person who is detached from their context. When we see a student, we see a person coming from a particular family, culture, and community. We see their friends, hobbies, emotions, hopes, and fears. We know that this is a person with stories, agency, and future. Through the expansive framework, as teachers, we might ask ourselves: what kind of human being do I cultivate through my work of teaching? What is worthwhile to know for these creative human beings in my classroom? Such humanity-oriented questions will guide a teacher to treat each individual student as a whole person.

Freire (1970) challenges the banking model of pedagogy and refuses to treat students as the vessels of knowledge. He calls for a pedagogy that starts from students' own passions and concerns, which works toward liberation of students as well as their communities. Similar ideas have been represented by many grassroots community activists. For example, Mike Rose (1996) quotes Frances Lucerna, co-founder of El Puente school, who says

> Look what's happened to reading, writing, and arithmetic … these "basics". We don't see them any longer as life skills. They're subjects to be taken, subjects outside our experience. They're not seen as essential to our knowledge of the world, but that if young people know that if they can read, if they can write, if they can understand algebraic codes-if they see that they can use those skills, use them to bring about change in their own lives or in the lives of their families, or in their communities-well, then, there's no stopping them. (p. 211)

El Puente is a school in Williamsburg, New York City. This school focuses on the development of the whole human being as well as students' community. Frances Lucerna challenges the separation between subject learning and the purpose of education. She believes in the power of a whole human being mindset, as well as the emancipatory potential of education.

Utility: Making Curriculum Work in the Classroom

In this section, I want to reflect on how the expansive notion of curriculum can come to life in the classroom, moving beyond the constraints often placed on teachers. Drawing from my own experience teaching in an urban school in Phoenix, Arizona, I'll share how an expansive view of curriculum isn't just a theoretical concept, but a practical tool that can transform teaching and learning. By embracing a broader understanding of curriculum, we open the door to a more inclusive, responsive, and meaningful educational experience for both students and teachers.

This section will explore two essential aspects of this approach: culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and genuine parent involvement. These are interconnected strategies that allow us to see and honor every student as an individual and build lasting, supportive relationships between schools and families. Through these practices, the expansive notion of curriculum becomes a living, breathing part of the classroom, making teaching clearer, more compassionate, and more connected to the communities we serve.

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Seeing and Honoring Every Student

When we acknowledge students as whole human beings, situated in their families and communities, we recognize that the knowledge and resources tied to their cultural backgrounds should be deeply valued. Levine and McCloskey (2012) affirm, "Cognitive development, academic development, and language development are all related to the extent to which individual students and their cultures feel valued by the school community" (p. 41). In essence, they argue that academic success is closely tied to how well a student's culture is embraced within the school environment. If students' family and community cultures feel excluded, their educational progress becomes more challenging.

Ladson-Billings (1995) further strengthens this argument by stating that curriculum must move beyond content-focused efficiency models and actively affirm, sustain, and build upon students' cultural identities. Unlike the traditional, limited version of curriculum—which often positions curriculum as a neutral, technical process—Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) sees

curriculum as a culturally embedded, relational, and dynamic process. CRP, in contrast to more rigid, technical models, acknowledges that curriculum plays an essential role in shaping students' learning experiences and identities. It emphasizes that a truly responsive curriculum is one that not only respects but actively incorporates students' cultures into the learning process.

During my time teaching in an urban school in Arizona, where nearly all my students were from immigrant families and many did not speak English at home, I made it a priority to foster a welcoming environment. At the start of each school year, I created a bulletin board outside my classroom door with the phrase "All Are Welcome In This Classroom," written in the various languages spoken by my students. Many of them expressed their excitement upon seeing this display, a small but meaningful gesture that acknowledged the diverse backgrounds they brought into the space.

However, while the visual representation of languages and cultures was an important first step, I soon realized that inclusion must go beyond decorations and phrases on the wall. In their book *Teaching English Language and Content in Mainstream Classes*, Levine and McCloskey (2012) cite a table from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) outlining principles for effective classroom organization. One of these, Principle Five: Contextualization, emphasizes that "in contextualized classrooms, activities derive from the experiences of the learners" (p. 45). This aligns with Grumet's (1980) perspective on curriculum, where she describes autobiography and lived experience as the seeds of pedagogical practice.

In my classroom, I strived to create an environment where students' cultural practices and native languages were not only recognized but also celebrated. I encouraged students to brainstorm their writing responses by blending their first language with English, drawing on a translanguaging approach (García & Wei, 2013). According to García and Wei, translanguaging is "the act of using one's full linguistic repertoire" to make meaning, learn, and communicate (p. 39). To honor and build on this linguistic richness, I invited students to teach me phrases in their native languages (Seltzer, 2019; Riley, 2015), positioning them as language experts. I also brought cultural artifacts into the classroom to decorate our space, making it feel like *their* classroom, too (Catapano & Thompson, 2013).

When we treat students as "knowers," it empowers them to see themselves as such. A powerful example of this mindset comes from the video *The Multilingual Classroom* (Teaching Channel, 2011), where one student proudly says, "I speak English as another language, and I'm very lucky that I can speak two languages." This simple statement captures the essence of how our mindset as educators shapes students' self-perception. I often witnessed how this asset-based approach resonated with my students. When I mentioned something related to their culture or spoke a simple phrase in their native language, their faces would light up with pride. It was in these moments that I was reminded how deeply intertwined knowledge and identity are; students bring their own wisdom and experiences into the classroom, and as educators, it is our privilege to honor and celebrate these assets.

Genuine Parent Involvement: Building Bridges, Not Walls

In practice, teachers should become a bridge between parents and schools because parents' role in the curriculum is vital. I have talked about culturally responsive instruction in the section above, but this cannot become our excuse for generalization and essentialization of culture and language (Jaffe, 2008; Jonasson & Lauring, 2012; Nozaki, 2000). Sometimes it is easy to make

assumptions about students' family culture based on the countries they are from or the native language they speak, but as Paratore et al. (2010) remind us, "the particular ways parents interact with children is not a function of language or culture, so we cannot make assumptions about home practices or routines on the basis of the dominant language or culture" (2010, p. 308). Seeing students as a whole is not only about valuing the larger community they are from; it is also about a genuine friendship with their parents toward the common mission of education.

In a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Los Angeles, California in April, 1981, Madeleine Grumet has suggested that some parents feel that they have little control of school curriculum because they are usually given a last-minute chance to get involved in school policy by superficial opportunities (Grumet,1981). Similarly, Apple and Beane (2007) describe Bob Peterson, a fifth-grade teacher who helped create a two-way bilingual school with a group of critical educators and parents in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They explain that, within a progressive educational approach, parents' roles involve fully engaging in curriculum design and being actively present in the classroom. Apple and Beane argue that parental involvement should go beyond traditional activities like organizing pizza picnics or field trips, aiming instead for meaningful collaboration in the educational process.

As Apple and Beane (2007) summarize Peterson's view on parents' essential role in curriculum, "The central issues are power, presence, and resources" (p. 52). They suggest that parents hold the power to design and influence the curriculum and to be actively present during students' learning processes. Additionally, parents can contribute valuable and cost-free resources from the community to enrich students' learning. This involvement is not only theoretically justified but also financially practical. When parents' knowledge and wisdom are welcomed and valued, they can provide meaningful contributions that enhance the curriculum.

One lesson I have learned in my classroom teaching experience is that how one communicates matters. At the beginning, I was shy and chose to reach out to families with email or written letters instead of phone calls, but I noticed that there was little engagement from parents. Then, to improve parents' genuine involvement in the conversation, I started to use a personal phone call, which was more successful than one-way communication mode. Another important lesson I learned about communicating with parents is that phone calls should share success stories. (Levine & McCloskey, 2012). At the start of my independent teaching, most of my communication with parents was reactive, focusing on behavior problems, concerns about grades, or notifying them of a student's illness. Over time, I realized that this approach might have felt more like watching and judging their children to parents rather than truly connecting with their families. I noticed a lack of sincerity in these interactions, something John Dewey (2005) describes as essential for genuine connection in *Art as Experience*. I often felt uneasy and stressed before making these calls, and I could sense similar anxiety from parents. In such exchanges, parents were not seen as equal partners but rather as passive recipients in the curriculum process. Reflecting on this, I knew I needed to change how I communicated—shifting toward more sincere, collaborative, and empowering conversations with families. . Then, in my phone calls, I tried to make sure that I included detailed compliments and success stories of the student. Also, I would ask parents' opinions, suggestions, and insights on student development. Gradually, I started to feel a positive atmosphere in my classroom that parents wanted to participate in. It is a slow process to learn about the communication styles of students' parents. However, in order to build a bridge connecting students' lives at home and participation at school, the time and energy are necessary and worthwhile (Levine & McCloskey, 2012).

In short, in the current section named "Utility," I have given some pedagogical suggestions in terms of 1) culturally responsive instruction, and 2) genuine parents' involvement. These are only two detailed examples of how to apply an expansive notion of curriculum to practice. Looking at curriculum as *currere* and recognizing students' whole experience also relates to many other pedagogical strategies. For example, another pedagogy strategy can be *frontloading.* When we use an expansive notion of curriculum and recognize students' individuality, we need to consider students' prior knowledge. For example, in a reading class, we can start a reading activity by a warm-up exercise activating students' prior knowledge. This pedagogical approach of building background knowledge before reading a complex text is called "frontloading" because a teacher is intentionally loading key knowledge that students will need to understand a text.(e.g. Neuman et al., 2014) Overall, even though the practical examples I have shared in this section seem small, please do not ignore the impact of these seemingly small steps can have, not just on one individual student's academic development, but on the empowerment of their family and larger community as well.

Beyond *Currere*

Non-Western and Critical Perspectives

I want to take a moment to acknowledge something important. The way I've been talking about curriculum—starting with its Latin roots and drawing on ideas from a White scholar—comes from a Eurocentric knowledge system. This isn't accidental; when I began my graduate studies in the U.S., I was immersed in Western academic traditions, where dominant voices shaped my understanding of curriculum. Even as a Uyghur, I had to start with these Western theories as my entry point into the field, navigating their frameworks before I could begin to find my own perspective. But I also want you to remember that curriculum is not just a Western concept. It exists in other knowledge traditions, too—within Black communities, Indigenous cultures, and the lived experiences of immigrant families.

So, I invite you to ask yourself: What does curriculum look like in these communities? What knowledge is considered meaningful and worth passing down? These are questions that deserve space not only in our teaching but in the way we move through the world. I hope you carry them with you, both inside and outside the classroom. As a transitional teacher from the Uyghur ethnic community in a U.S. classroom, I hope you'll remember that your voice—your experiences—are part of the broader curriculum you are engaging, too.

Know that for scholars, teachers, parents, and students from non-Western cultures, it can often feel like the concept of curriculum doesn't quite reflect their own ways of knowing (e.g., Johnson et al., 2017; Shahjahan, 2005). When I first entered this field, I felt that, too. But I also want to reassure you that academia is shifting—slowly, but meaningfully. More scholars of color and grassroots communities are entering these conversations, expanding what we mean when we talk about curriculum.

Even back in 1986, the White scholar William Schubert acknowledged this gap, writing, "It would be desirable to have more perspectives drawn from the Eastern, African, Latin American, Icelandic, and other non-Western educational histories, but this goal awaits further historical research in education" (p. 55). Decades later, this work has begun to unfold as scholars from

diverse backgrounds bring their lived experiences into curriculum theory, making space for different perspectives..

For example, Mingfang He (2003), a Chinese American curriculum theorist, offers a beautifully personal take on curriculum. Having lived through China's Cultural Revolution, she doesn't see curriculum as something confined to national histories or abstract theories. Instead, she understands it as something deeply personal—woven from real stories, real experiences. In *A River Forever Flowing*, she uses the metaphor of a river to describe curriculum, showing how it moves, bends, and reshapes itself over time, just like the lives of the three Chinese female teachers she writes about. This reminds me that curriculum isn't fixed. It isn't owned by a single tradition or way of thinking. It flows, carrying with it the voices, histories, and lived experiences of those who step into its current.

Another powerful example of a critical perspective on curriculum comes from the book *Reclaiming the Multicultural Roots of U.S. Curriculum* (Au et al., 2016). In this work, three scholars from different ethnic and racial backgrounds come together to challenge the dominant, Eurocentric history of curriculum. They argue that curriculum has always existed within communities of color; it doesn't need to be validated through a Western academic lens. Instead, they highlight how knowledge is embedded in oral histories, folk songs, and the everyday interactions of Indigenous and Black communities. Curriculum isn't just what's written in textbooks; it lives in the traditions, stories, and cultural practices that have been passed down for generations.

A similar perspective emerges in Sandra Gonzales' (2015) *Abuelita Epistemologies: Counteracting Subtractive Schools in American Education*. Through an autoethnographic inquiry, Gonzales reflects on her childhood and the deep well of knowledge carried by her grandmother. She argues that Indigenous women are not just knowledge holders—they are the keepers of curriculum itself, passing down ways of knowing that are just as systematic and intentional as any formal education. Her work reminds us that curriculum is not always something designed in institutions; it is something lived, embodied, and shared within families and communities.

These perspectives expand the conversation, reminding us that curriculum isn't only what is sanctioned by the academy. It exists wherever knowledge is nurtured, wherever stories are told, and wherever learning happens in ways that are meaningful to the people who carry it forward.

How Seriously Should You Take an Expansive View?

You might be wondering—how seriously should you take this idea of an expansive notion of curriculum? My answer is simple: nothing is more serious when it comes to being a teacher. After all, what could be more important than recognizing students as human beings who have the capacity to shape their own lives? What is more essential than seeing them as knowers rather than passive recipients of information? And what could be more urgent than approaching the future of our society with a humane and thoughtful lens? To be a teacher is to be at the forefront of this responsibility—to see each student not as a machine to be programmed, but as a person navigating their ever-evolving journey.

That said, embracing an expansive notion of curriculum doesn't mean imagining an idealized, utopian version of schooling. Rather, it means recognizing the real constraints that exist in classroom teaching while still finding ways to move forward with agency and purpose (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Biesta et al., 2015; Moje et al., 2004). Some might argue that focusing on a social

justice mindset is the key to being a teacher for change. While I deeply value the importance of social justice in education, I still believe that an expansive notion of curriculum is essential for sustaining teachers in the profession.

The reality is that even teachers who are trained in leadership, advocacy, and systemic reform often find themselves feeling powerless within the structure of schools. As Fendler (2012) points out, schools have historically functioned as institutions that reinforce social stratification, despite the best efforts of reformers. Teachers may enter the profession with a strong sense of purpose, but they are still working within a system that isn't designed to give them the power to create large-scale change. As Fendler (2012) puts it, "there's no evidence to suggest that teachers can have that kind of system-wide impact" (p. 465).

So where does that leave us? If schools are built in a way that often limits teachers' influence, then what can sustain us in this work? This is where an expansive notion of curriculum becomes more than just a framework; it becomes a form of faith. It is not just a roadmap for respecting students; it is also a vital source of strength, one that allows teachers to hold onto their own humanity and dignity, no matter how difficult the system may be. This is especially true for early-career teachers, who are often the most vulnerable to burnout and disillusionment (e.g., Burgess, 2012; Malmberg & Hagger, 2009; Paris & Lung, 2008).

In the end, teaching is about more than just delivering content or mastering pedagogy. It is about holding onto the bigger picture—about knowing that even within a flawed system, we can still find ways to honor our students and ourselves.

A Closing Reflection

Dear Rey, thanks for giving me space to talk about my growth, my reflections, and my opinions. If curriculum is to be inclusive, lived, and evolving, then our very mode of writing about curriculum should reflect these principles. A letter is, by nature, unfinished and open-ended. Unlike conventional academic writing that seeks to arrive at conclusions, a letter extends an invitation to further conversation. Ultimately, the choice to embrace expansive notions of curriculum is yours. To accompany these words, I have also included a photograph (figure 1)—a self-portrait that I displayed during my doctoral graduation art exhibition. In this image, I stand in the here-and-now, gazing at the railroad that connects me to the past, the far away, and to home. At my PhD graduation, this image stood as a reminder of the journeys we take—not just those mapped out for us, but those we create through every challenge and discovery.

Figure 1: Self-portrait

As a Uyghur child who left my homeland to attend a boarding school on the far side of the nation, the railroad in this image carries with it layers of meaning far beyond its physical form. It symbolizes exile—the uncertainty of departure and the weight of the unknown. It echoes the quiet surrender that often accompanies change, yet it also represents the search for something more: belonging, understanding, and a way back to a place that feels increasingly distant. In many ways, the railroad mirrors the course of my lived experiences, tracing a path where identity, history, and memory collide. The rails, though stretching toward an uncertain future, are also a bridge to the past—a past rooted in the homeland I left behind. This image is more than just a reflection of the journey I've taken; it's a reminder that the roads we walk, whether chosen or thrust upon us, shape us. Each crossing, each turn, brings us closer to understanding who we are and where we come from.

Yours in learning,

Reyila (راهىله)
03/25/2025
East Lansing, Michigan

I acknowledge that I write this letter from the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Anishinaabeg—Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. This land was ceded in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw, and I recognize the ongoing presence, sovereignty, and resilience of Indigenous communities.

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