

The method of currere in M. R. Carey's *The Girl With All the Gifts*

Patrick Chi Kai Lam 

¹ University of Alberta, Faculty of Education, 116 Street and 85 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2R3, Canada

Abstract

The Girl With All the Gifts depicts the struggle of a group of humans who embark on a journey of survival with a gifted girl named Melanie. Although the narrative is not set in the context of education, the military and scientists in the story set up a carceral classroom to investigate the infected children's abilities, including Melanie. In the classroom, the learning initiates Melanie's self-realization as the *next* person during the outbreak of the hungries plague, demonstrating Pinar's method of currere. This paper examines how Melanie's self-realization embodies the four steps in the method of currere and discusses the educational experience within two confrontational views on education presented in this narrative.

Article History

Received 11.04.2024

Accepted 20.06.2024

Keywords

Currere; narrative;
carceral classroom;
educational experience

Introduction

The Girl With All the Gifts begins in the Hotel Echo, a military base operated to prevent the incursion by hungries (this story's version of zombies) and to develop a cure against the epidemic during the outbreak of the hungry plague, which caused a majority of humanity to become mindless hungries. The military and scientists in the base immured and examined a group of sentient hungry children in order to find a cure for the hungry plague, which the children did not realize they were hungries at the beginning of the story. Dr. Caroline Caldwell, the principal scientist in the Hotel Echo, recruits several teachers to teach the hungry children in a carceral classroom to investigate their mental and psychological abilities. However, despite possessing human sentiency, the hungry children are treated inhumanely. Each of them is cloistered in a single lightless cell daily and strapped on a wheelchair during the lesson. More miserably, "they never learn about ... themselves" (Carey, 2014, p. 21). Every Monday to Friday in the Hotel Echo, they are transited to the classroom with a standardized procedure and tested in the lesson. They do not question themselves, such as who they are, until Miss Justineau, their teacher, tells them stories.

One of the hungry children, Melanie, the titular girl with all the gifts, recalls the past lived experience in Miss Justineau's lessons, imagines the future, analyzes the past and the present, and realizes she is one of the *next* people who will establish the future world. Melanie's self-realization epitomizes the method of currere proposed by Pinar (1975a), which provides a strategy for one to self-understand. In this paper, I examine how Melanie's self-realization in M. R. Carey's *The Girl With All the Gifts* embodies the four steps in the method of currere and

Corresponding Author Patrick Chi Kai Lam  chikai@ualberta.ca  University of Alberta, Faculty of Education, 116 Street and 85 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2R3, Canada

discuss the educational experience within two confrontational views on education presented in this narrative.

Currere

Stirred by his early teaching experience and his analysis of traditional schooling, Pinar expressed his interest in autobiographical methods in the 1970s. In his essay *Working from Within* (1972), Pinar expressed his initial attention to discovering the self's subjectivity and wrote: "My student and I have come to feel that we rarely need to refer to subject matter outside ourselves. ... We work from within" (p. 331). Along with his analysis of how schools make children mad (1975b), Pinar searched for an autobiographical method that allows one's inner observations and proposed the method of *currere* in his article *Currere: Toward reconceptualization* (1975a). *Currere*, the Latin infinitive form of curriculum, means to run the course "through conversation, ongoing dialogical encounter among students and teachers in classrooms but also within oneself in solitude" (Pinar, 2020, p. 51). The method is a complicated conversation in which interlocutors are speaking not only among themselves but also with those not present, like unnamed peoples and places they may be studying, politicians and parents alive and dead, and the selves they have been, they are becoming, and they will become (Pinar, 2012). Although he offered various purpose statements throughout his article about *currere* (e.g., Pinar, 2008, 2012; Pinar et al., 2004), Pinar (2020) lately concluded that the purpose of *currere* is "intensified engagement with classroom life, supported by the cultivation of a consciousness that remembers the past with an eye on the future while focused on the present" (p. 52).

Pinar formulated the method of *currere* in four steps or moments. These are (a) regressive, (b) progressive, (c) analytical, and (d) syncretical. These represent the temporal and reflective movements for the autobiographical study and seek to understand the contribution academic studies make to one's understanding of one's life (Pinar et al., 2004). In the regressive step, "one return[s] to the past" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 55) and tries to re-experience past lived or existential experiences. In the context of educational experience, for example, one focuses on past life in schools, past life with schoolteachers, past life with books, and other school-related artifacts (Pinar, 1975/1994). Extracurricular interests or even summer jobs are also some illustrations related to education. However, the emphasis of this step is the past, not yet its reconstruction in the present, since the reconstruction interrupts observers' re-experience of the past.

In the second or progressive step, one imagines the future and looks toward what is not yet the case, what is not yet present. Pinar (2012) noted that the future, like the past, inhabits the present. One first relaxes by taking a few slow deep breaths and thinks of the future, perhaps three days hence, three months hence, or three years hence. The observers pay attention to education experiences, such as learning, the relationship with teachers, or the relationship with all school-related artifacts. As important in the regressive moment, one free associates to avoid using rational or logical aspects (Pinar, 1975/1994). Thus, the future can be a fantasy, dream world, or illusion.

Unlike the first two steps, the analytical moment is not self-scrutiny but self-examination. One examines the past lived experience to understand what before might have been obscured, rejected, or neglected by one's submersion in the present (Pinar, 2020). Other than the

relationship between the past and the present, one can discern how the past inheres to one's fantasies of the future. To stress the temporal complexity in this stage, one asks, "How is the future present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both?" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 60).

In the synthetical step, one re-enters the lived present, listens carefully to one's own inner voice, and asks, "Who is that?" and "What is the meaning of the present?" (Pinar, 1975/1994, p. 26). The subjective synthesis of one's past, present, and future "provides a different passage to a different past" (Pinar, 2020, p. 50), consequently reconstructing one's subjectivity in the service of self-understanding.

The Method of Currere in The Girl With All the Gifts

Similar to the story in the keyword response by Ogden (2020), Melanie lives a life without subjectivity. Physically, Melanie is always strapped on a wheelchair to be transited to the classroom on weekdays and the shower room on weekends and listens to teachers in the class while being restrained to the chairs. Those hungry children in the base are not allowed to have free time. Their names are randomly chosen from the top of the name list. Besides learning in the classroom and bathing in the shower room, they are immured in their small and square cells. On the other hand, intellectually, "they never learn about ... themselves" (Carey, 2014, p. 21). The learning process in the Hotel Echo is fundamentally the rote learning of information, in which children only memorize facts, dates, tables, and equations. Lefebvre (2014) explains that rote learning of information marginalizes students' thoughts and occurs outside of lived experience. Further, this carceral classroom functions as a cram school described by Pinar (2015), where skills replace academic knowledge, and decontextualized tasks prepare students for standardized tests. In this classroom, "students become ciphers," and "human subjects become numbers, e.g., test scores" (Pinar, 2015, p. 115). Without lived experience, the data source of the method of currere (Pinar et al., 2004), Melanie finds it impossible to embody her educational experience, understand herself in the context of learning, or ponder who she is. Melanie's later self-understanding is attributed to Miss Justineau's lessons. Miss Justineau, Melanie's favorite teacher, dissents from the rote learning approach and promotes creative and critical engagement with literature and storytelling in her lessons (Hamilton, 2021). With the lived experience in Miss Justineau's lessons, Melanie can then regress to the past, indulge in fantasy, analyze the past and the present, and finally ask: what am I?

The Regressive

At the beginning of the story, Melanie returns to her past as a means of re-experiencing Miss Justineau's amazing lessons: "She just sits there wide-eyed, drinking in everything that Miss Justineau says, and memorizing it so that she can play it back to herself later, in her cell" (Carey, 2014, p. 11). Melanie not only recalls the joyful past life in Miss Justineau's lessons but anything that happened in her lessons. After the class Sergeant comes into Miss Justineau's classroom and intends to irritate Kenny, the classmate who sits two rows ahead of Melanie, she keeps re-experiencing, even enlarging, this past situation in her cell: "Melanie barely sleeps at all that night. She keeps thinking about what Sergeant said, that the children aren't real children, and about how Miss Justineau looked at him when he was being so nasty to Kenny" (Carey, 2014, p. 14). Besides school life, Melanie sometimes recalls other school-related artifacts, like the music sung in Miss Justineau's lessons. "Melanie thinks of a song the children

learned and sang one time: You're my bread when I'm hungry. ...And Miss Justineau will be her bread" (Carey, 2014, p. 64). In the middle section of the story, after Melanie escapes the turbulent military base overrun by hungries together with Miss Justineau, Dr. Caldwell and two sergeants, she encounters several serene moments that lead her to return to her past. Gathered in Miss Justineau's arms in a garage, Melanie cannot stop thinking about the thrilling moment when she almost bit Miss Justineau's throat while escaping the military base. "The nightmare lays its stifling folds across her thoughts, and she knows there was ... some hidden payload that she'll sooner or later have to face" (Carey, 2014, p. 161). Following a series of escapes beyond the fence of the military base, Melanie leaves the group for a while because she realizes she has the intention to eat Miss Justineau. During her wandering around the community, she sees a group of children from a balcony which marks the first time she has encountered people outside the military base. That night, she sits on the roof of a house for several hours in a steady downpour. "She's trying to make sense of something she saw late in the afternoon. ... She's been running it through in her mind ever since in endless, silent replay" (Carey, 2014, p. 296). By re-experiencing those past lived experiences in Miss Justineau's lessons and during her escape, and hovering them over the present, Melanie generates the data to be used in the later stages for self-understanding.

The Progressive

In imagining the future, Melanie imagines what she can do for Miss Justineau: "Melanie wishes she was a god or a Titan or a Trojan warrior, so she could fight for Miss Justineau and save her from Heffalumps and Woolzes" (Carey, 2014, p. 15). She also writes a story that depicts her saving Miss Justineau from a monster, and "they lived together, forever after, in great peace and prosperity" (Carey, 2014, p. 17). Besides imaging protecting Miss Justineau, Melanie sometimes imagines her in a happy family, where they love each other, much like the stories she read in Miss Justineau's lessons:

What she thinks is: *this could have been me*. Why not? A real girl, in a real house, with a mother and a father and a brother and a sister and an aunt and an uncle and a nephew and a niece and a cousin and all those other words for the map of people who love each other and stay together. The map is called *family*. (Carey, 2014, p. 242)

No matter how the future she imagines is impossible, Melanie's progressive moment thoroughly illustrates what Pinar stressed: "to free associate to avoid the use of rational or logical aspects" (Pinar, 1975/1994, p. 25).

The Analytical

Melanie analyzes both her past life with school-related artifacts and the present to understand what before has been obscured: Melanie asks another one of her teachers, Dr. Selkirk, why the children in the stories they read sometimes eat other foods, such as cakes and chocolate, but they only eat grubs, and only once a week. Melanie further examines the stories and her present:

In most stories she knows, children have a mother and a father, like Iphigenia had Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, and Helen had Leda and Zeus. Sometimes, they have teachers, too, but not always, and they never seem to have sergeants. So this is a question that

gets to the very roots of the world, and Melanie asks it with some trepidation. (Carey, 2014, p. 19)

Other than the above self-examination of the relationship between the past and the present, Melanie also discerns how the past inheres to her fantasies of the future and the present in the past. When Melanie entertains the hope of staying with Miss Justineau as she grows up, she understands that her desire will not come true because she knows that, “extrapolating from the stories she’s read or heard, ... children don’t stay in school for ever. They don’t set up home with their teachers and live there and be there with them when school is finished” (Carey, 2014, p. 21). Moreover, when Melanie sees all the broken windows, fallen roofs, and hanging doors after escaping from the military base, she realizes that she has immersed herself in her fantasies of the future without thinking of the past and present. She realizes that she has been told “the population of Birmingham is zero” (Carey, 2014, p. 7). “She just ignored it, ignored the self-evident logic of her world, and believed — out of the many conflicting stories she was given — only the parts she wanted to believe” (Carey, 2014, p. 147). By recalling the past and imagining the future, one is freer from the present (Pinar, 1975/1994). Without submerging in the present, Melanie examines the relationship of her past, present, and future and understands that she is distinct from the children in the stories and lives in a world unlike the one she had hoped for.

The Synthetical

Putting the past, the present, and the future together, Melanie re-enters the lived present and asks the questions that burn a hole through her heart: “Whose children are we?” (Carey, 2014, p. 19), “What am I?” (Carey, 2014, p. 126), and “why am I different?” (Carey, 2014, p. 376). Although Melanie cannot answer these questions by herself due to inadequate past lived experience, she at least notices the difference — “I’m different because I don’t want to eat anyone” (Carey, 2014, p. 229) or “they can’t think or talk. I can” (Carey, 2014, p. 376) — and strives to understand her present and, of course, herself. Near the end of the narrative, Dr. Caldwell explains to her that she is a second-generation hungry who can consciously think, learn, and feel like humanity. Despite the taxonomy of her species, second-generation hungries, created by human survivals, Melanie self-realizes her species as “the next people” (Carey, 2014, p. 399) who will reform everything and establish the future world. By conceptualizing the present situation, Melanie understands who she is and the meaning of the present.

Insights for Education and Closing Remarks

Throughout the process of Melanie’s self-realization as the next person, it is obvious that Miss Justineau plays a pivotal role in each step of the method of currere. Without Miss Justineau, Melanie would not know what normal children eat, do, and have from the stories heard in Miss Justineau’s lessons, which subsequently become the data source of the analytical moment. Without Miss Justineau, Melanie would not indulge in her fantasies of the future and understand these fantasies are unrealistic. Without Miss Justineau, Melanie would not question the difference between herself, the children in the stories, and the mindless hungries and ask, what am I? What Miss Justineau provides to Melanie is an educational experience that enables subjective and social reconstruction and is central to the concept of currere (Pinar, 2015). The educational experience is “where academic knowledge gets rearticulated through students’ and teachers’ lived experience” (Pinar, 2012, p. 223). In the method of currere, one

reconstructs the educational experience through thought and dialogue to enable understanding, which can then assist in reconstructing one's own subjective and social life (Pinar, 2015). Educational experience is necessarily critical for the method of *currere* to carry out one's self-understanding.

On the other hand, other teachers in the narrative do not favor animating students' educational experiences but only focus on preparing them for memorization, standardized exams, and test scores. In the classroom where Melanie studies, "every day has sums ...[,] spelling, and ... retention tests" (Carey, 2014, p. 6). Teachers "test the children with short-answer and multiple-choice questions for most of the day" (Carey, 2014, p. 80). Miss Mailer, one of Melanie's teachers, "is only interested in their vocabulary ... and doesn't care much at all what their stories are about" (Carey, 2014, p. 16). Even though Miss Justineau wants to read the children a story, a sergeant challenges Miss Justineau's teaching approach and aptly points out the purpose of the educational program in Hotel Echo: "I thought the idea was to put them through their paces, not give them a cabaret" (Carey, 2014, p. 12). This kind of education for alienation (see Gereluk, 1974) can be considered as "social engineering" (Pinar, 2015, p. 12), where education is an automobile engine that transports students to the promised land of high test scores. Standardized tests undermine the lived links between knowledge and self, thereby silencing subjectivity. Apparently, this kind of education does not trigger educational experience because the academic knowledge is not grounded in lived and subjective experience. Pinar (2012) emphasized that "curriculum is characterized by educational experience, not test scores" (p. viii). Education without the agency of subjectivity will dissipate and give way to conformity driven by scripted curricula and standardized examinations (Pinar, 2012).

All in all, this narrative, though not set in the context of education, demonstrates how Melanie's re-experience of the past, the imagination of the future, analysis of the lived experience, and synthesis of the moments epitomize the four steps in the method of *currere*. By analyzing her self-realization as the next person, the significance of Miss Justineau's role in the *currere* process is revealed. Unlike other teachers, Miss Justineau does not focus on imparting facts and promoting rote learning. Instead, she provides opportunities for students to encounter themselves and the world they inhabit and thread the study through their own lived experiences. These opportunities eventually lead to the educational experience where Melanie engages in solitary inner conversation and understands her species as the next person.

Declarations

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

Authors' contributions: The first author is the only contributor to this article.

Competing interests: The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethical approval was not required for this work.

Publisher's note: *Currere* and *Praxis* remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Orcid ID

Patrick Chi Kai Lam  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9534-8813>

References

- Carey, M. R. (2014). *The girl with all the gifts*. Orbit.
- Gereluk, W. (1974). Alienation in education: A Marxian re-definition. *McGill Journal of Education*, 9(1), 34-50.
- Hamilton, S. E. (2021). The girl with all the gifts: Eco-zombiism, the anthropocalypse, and critical lucidity. *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 32(4), 285-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2021.1977567>
- Lefebvre, H. (2014). *Critique of everyday life: The one-volume edition*. Verso.
- Ogden, H. (2020). Doubt. In J. Wearing, M. Ingersoll, C. Deluca, B. Bolden, H. Ogden, & T. M. Christou (Eds.), *Key concepts in curriculum studies* (pp. 53-54). Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F. (1972). Working from within. *Educational Leadership*, 29(4), 329-331.
- Pinar, W. F. (1975a). Currere: Toward reconceptualization. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *Curriculum theorizing: The reconceptualists* (pp. 396-414). McCutchan.
- Pinar, W. F. (1975b). Sanity, madness, and the school. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *Curriculum theorizing: The reconceptualists* (pp. 359-383). McCutchan.
- Pinar, W. F. (1994). The method of currere. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *Autobiography, politics, and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory 1972-1992* (pp. 19-27). Peter Lang. (Reprinted from *the method of "currere"*, 1975, April, Annual Meeting of the American Research Association, Washington, D.C., United States)
- Pinar, W. F. (2008). Curriculum theory since 1950: Crisis, reconceptualization, internationalization. In F. M. Connelly, M. F. He, & J. Phillion (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of curriculum and instruction*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412976572>
- Pinar, W. F. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203836033>
- Pinar, W. F. (2015). *Educational experience as lived: Knowledge, history, alterity*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315752594>
- Pinar, W. F. (2020). Currere. In J. Wearing, M. Ingersoll, C. Deluca, B. Bolden, H. Ogden, & T. M. Christou (Eds.), *Key concepts in curriculum studies* (pp. 50-52). Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F., & Grumet, M. R. (1976). *Toward a poor curriculum*. Kendall/Hunt.
- Pinar, W. F., Reynolds, W. M., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. M. (2004). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. Peter Lang.