Storying the world: Decolonizing classrooms

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6 June 2024

Geraldine Balzer, Associate Professor from the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan, discusses the importance of decolonizing classrooms by telling stories about the world

Colonialism held great promise for the European world – access to land, resources, and wealth; for colonized peoples, it resulted in lost land, lost resources, enslavement, and poverty. The impacts of colonialism have shaped the 21st century through ongoing political conflicts, immigration and migration, and global climate change, forcing the Global North to face the resulting inequities and disrupt colonial structures perpetuating these inequities. One such societal structure, often seen as benign, is schooling. Kanu (2009) describes curriculum as a cultural practice that reinforces the hegemony of the existing political power structures, acting as an agent of the state as schools continue to:

- Inculcate the knowledge and culture of the dominant group as the official knowledge and culture.
- Maintain social control without resorting to other methods of domination.
- Exercise power and control through the body of knowledge distributed through the curriculum, rules, and regulations.
- Confer cultural legitimacy on the knowledge of specific groups.
- Conform to a single set of imaginaries about culture and national citizenship.

Decolonizing classrooms research

A recent Canadian research study focused on introducing students to postcolonial literature as one way of interrupting the hegemony of the classic school canon. This contrasts with Ingrid Johnston's (2009) observation of English teachers who "often find themselves perpetuating the teaching of texts that have gained the status of school canonicity" and tend to reinforce "the entrenched nature of school reading practices" (p. 117).

By disrupting these entrenched practices, teachers who participated in this study also disrupted their students' worldviews and challenged them to be "enlightened witnesses… which means we can be critically vigilant about both what is being told to us and how we respond to what is being told" (hooks, 1997).

Through the reading of postcolonial texts, teachers and students were able to consider the power tensions that are a result of colonialism – the "vexed cultural-political questions of national and ethnic identity, 'otherness', race, imperialism, and language" and "the

complex relations between imperial ‘centre’ and colonial ‘periphery’” (Oxford Reference). The dominance of stories from one cultural group erases the presence of other groups, minimizes their stories and experiences, and denies them a meaningful place in society.

The literature historically chosen for classrooms and endorsed by the curriculum is complicit in this erasure of experiences and histories. While contemporary curricula encourage a diversity of stories, the limitations of school resources and teacher experiences result in the status quo carrying forward, reinforcing an unacknowledged racist history and a perpetuation of colonial-era stereotypes.

How teachers re-examined their emotional investments

Acknowledging that teachers can act as gatekeepers by controlling ideas, knowledges, and texts, this study, framed within a “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), considered how teachers re-examined their emotional investments in enacting dominant settler values through changing their text selection and teaching practices.

This research project offered teachers the possibility of forming solidarity with and empathy for their students, the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge, the opportunity to improvise and develop new pedagogical approaches, and to enact their passion for social justice (Nieto, 2006) through engagement with postcolonial literature in the form of inquiry groups focused on changing classroom practices.

Participating teachers were committed to developing pedagogies of social justice teaching in their classrooms by introducing literature that told the stories of underrepresented members of society. These counter-stories included postcolonial literature and other literary genres that spark discomfort, like those including Indigenous and LGBTQ2S+ voices, bringing attention to normalized forms of injustice to push boundaries collectively and individually (Yesno, 2021).

Engaging student voices alongside teacher voices

Participating teachers invited students to consider oppressive structures of racism and discrimination, encouraging them to consider assumed societal truths from a critical perspective as they began their decolonizing journey. Students and teachers engaged in moments of discomfort as they considered the trauma of residential schools, issues of cultural appropriation, and how identities have been externally constructed. Through their engagement with these works of literature, students could problematize taken-for-granted assumptions, see images, and hear language in new ways.

One of the goals of the pan-Canadian research project was to engage student voices alongside teacher voices, considering the potential as well as challenges of classroom conversations for ‘ruptur[ing] the ordinary’ (Fielding, 2004, p. 296) as well as moving students towards ethical co-witnessing. We looked at difficult, uncomfortable moments – turning points – as teachers, as well as students, negotiated these spaces in the context of “complicated conversations” in the classroom
(Pinar, 2012).

Through a pedagogy of discomfort and the counterstories told in postcolonial literature, students and teachers were exposed to new ways of seeing the world. They began to break open the strictures of colonialism, revealing that stories matter and the people who tell those stories matter. Through the breaking open of these stories, understandings shifted, and absolutes were challenged, inviting each of us “willingly to inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self” (Boler, 1999, p. 176) and enter a decolonial space.

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