

DISRUPTING THE DISCOURSE: A PATHWAY TOWARD DECOLONIZING AND DIVERSIFYING THE CANADIAN CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

What is the purpose of education? Are educators producing independent thinkers? This essay explores the significance of decolonization and diversification of curriculum in the Canadian context. Ethnocultural and religious diversity is more prevalent than ever before. Nevertheless, educational institutions continue to support and perpetuate social control and cultural capital by promoting the value sets of dominant groups. The author examines the benefits of inclusive educational spaces and methods to practice decolonization and inclusivity. Places of learning must respond to Canada's changing demographics and address its settler history. Policymakers, educators, and curriculum designers can transform social and educational contexts, supporting students to challenge systemic practices and norms.

MY STORY

Growing up in a small prairie city, I found that concepts of identity, culture, and knowledge²⁵ were brought to my attention and reiterated via confrontations with classmates both in and out of the classroom. Attending primary and secondary schools where the majority of students bore little resemblance to me awakened my sense of identity and lack of belonging. While my academic performance was not directly impacted by this lack of representation in the classroom, I felt pangs of isolation and confusion. My elementary experience excluded the stories of Indigenous leaders and communities and glorified settler histories and knowledge. The books I consumed did not reflect my lived experience as a first generation Canadian battling systemic discrimination and covert racism. It was only when I entered Senior 3 that I began to question colonialism, settler colonialism, and Canada's official policy of "multiculturalism."

DECOLONIZING, DISRUPTING, AND DIVERSIFYING THE CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Immigrants of South Asian descent have fought for recognition and equity since 1897 (South Asian Studies Institute, 2018). Beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, South Asian migrants arrived in western Canada and served as labourers

²⁵ Knowledge is an abstract concept without any reference to the tangible world. It is a very powerful concept, yet it has no clear definition so far. People have tried to define knowledge but the results are still very fuzzy (Bolisani & Bratianu, 2018).

(South Asian Studies Institute, 2018). Canadian history and social studies curricula have a tendency to promote content that is not reflective of the country's multicultural landscape. Multiculturalism was established by Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau in 1971 "to preserve the cultural freedom of all individuals and provide recognition of the cultural contributions of diverse ethnic groups to Canadian society" (Gagnon et al., 2019). It was a tool used to buy votes for the Liberal Party and appease opposition to official bilingualism in the West. Multiculturalism did not result in substantive federal policy changes. Rather, it was a largely symbolic representation of cultural diversity that benefitted the white majority (anglophones and francophones). I did not take time to reflect upon and critically examine the settler colonial framework²⁶ and question who benefitted most from the existing policy until my 17th year of existence.

Disrupting the discourse and re-examining ways of knowing has been a central aspect of my identity as well as my growth and development. My Senior 3 history teacher was the living embodiment of "disrupting the discourse" and taught me to question the system(s) in place. This was the first time I was exposed to curricula highlighting the contributions of First Nations communities and the impact of settler colonialism on First Nations livelihoods. I began to recognize the lapse in Manitoba's secondary school curriculum. The lack of representation with respect to Indigenous ways of knowing and immigrant contributions had been overlooked by curriculum developers. Indigenization and diversification of primary and secondary curricula began in British Columbia and Ontario, with these provinces taking leading roles in decolonizing pedagogies to better reflect the experiences of Indigenous students. Taking a cue from The Truth & Reconciliation Commission's 94 "calls to action" (released in December 2015), by underscoring the importance of language preservation and cultural competency training and developing secondary and post-secondary curriculum to advance the reconciliation process, British Columbia and Ontario classrooms are disrupting ways of teaching and knowing. Educators are diving into unknown territory. Creating a safe and open space for students to reflect and discuss Canada's settler colonial history encourages students to listen to one another, create a sense of belonging and community, counter stereotypes, and support students in exploring their own values (Kanu, 2011).

Decolonizing, disrupting, and diversifying places of learning is an arduous and iterative process, and "there is no simple or fail-safe formula that can be used to guide teachers" (McGregor, 2012). Decolonizing pedagogies requires educators to disrupt assumptions about where and how learning takes place and who facilitates the classroom. Disruption includes consulting with Elders and First Nations community members to revise mainstream education practices, utilizing learning resources that do not perpetuate colonial myths and stereotypes, and employing First Nations community

²⁶ Settler Colonialism is distinct form of colonialism that replaces Indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty (Barker & Lowman, 2019).

members to lead or co-facilitate workshops on governance, sustainability, and language (McGregor, 2012). Exposure to Indigenous perspectives ensures that students question narratives about Canada's settler history and Eurocentric social practices. Learning should not occur in a vacuum (Centre for Youth & Society, 2019). Place-based education empowers students, restores cultural knowledge and practices, and promotes critical reflection on Canadian history and settler colonialism.

Culturally responsive curricula that reflect the experiences of all students benefit everyone. Literature can play a significant role in identity and self-development. Books convey the human experience and illustrate commonalities that we often fail to acknowledge. Nevertheless, while books are used to share human experiences, the overwhelming majority are penned by white writers who dominate the literary world in Canada. My high school reading list featured works by William Shakespeare, George Orwell, Harper Lee, and Daniel Keyes. While I enjoyed some of these books, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the stories did not reflect my experiences. I sought books written by minority authors and found myself deeply immersed in the worlds of Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Anita Rau Badami. It is imperative that educators move beyond the single story²⁷—a term coined by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (TED, 2009)—and highlight novels written by racialized and Indigenous authors. Indigenous and visible minority students are more likely to engage in discussions and offer insights when they see themselves reflected in content.

Diversity in the Canadian classroom cannot be ignored. According to the 2016 Census, more than 20% of Canadians are foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2017). It is projected that the proportion of foreign-born Canadians could reach between 24.5%–30% by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Moreover, 40% of Canadian children²⁸ have an immigrant background (Statistics Canada, 2017). Finally, the language composition of immigrants has shifted dramatically over the past 100 years. Immigrants with English or French as a mother tongue decreased from 71.2% in 1921 to 27.5% in 2016. Diversifying classroom curricula allows newcomers and first/second generation students to find connection and develop a sense of belonging. An inclusive education fosters a culture of mutual respect and appreciation for individual differences. It allows students to become better equipped for life outside the classroom as children and adults (New Brunswick Association for Community Living, 2019). Inclusive education increases self-confidence and self-worth and creates more opportunity for camaraderie (British Columbia Teachers Federation, 2019). When students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, comprehension and retention of complex concepts is more likely. Educational institutions support and maintain social control and cultural capital via the values of dominant groups (Handelsman, 2011). Standardized or official knowledge is distinguished from and highly favoured over other forms of knowledge (Wotherspoon, 1998). Advocates of alternative ways of learning recognize the importance of disruption

²⁷ As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains in her 2009 TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story” (TED, 2009), the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

²⁸ Children are defined as anyone 15 and younger (Statistics Canada, 2017).

and inclusivity both in and out of the classroom. Fostering the future leadership of this nation will require all 10 provinces and three territories to continually evaluate and update pedagogies and curricula.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Moving forward, policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers should continually reflect on the goal of education (Centre for Youth and Society, 2019). Moving away from a Eurocentric approach to learning and adopting holistic ways of teaching will educate “the whole person” (Centre for Youth and Society, 2019). As a society, we need to examine the mandated education deeply rooted in settler colonial policy. Neocolonialism is perpetuated via curriculum, power relations, and institutional structures. Confronting existing institutional structures involves a myriad of stakeholders. Grassroots activists, Elders, educators, and students working collaboratively could transform social and educational contexts (Asher, 2009).

Canada has been espoused as a leader in peacekeeping and human rights; nevertheless, we have failed to acknowledge our own settler colonial history for centuries. A formal apology by Prime Minister Stephen Harper was a first step towards reconciliation but cannot undo the displacement and dismantling of Indigenous communities. Pierre Elliot Trudeau once stated that no uniform culture could define Canada and that the government accepted “the contention of other cultural communities that they, too, are essential elements in Canada” (Gagnon et al., 2019). Let us not forget the defining features of Canadian democracy. Disrupting and diversifying places of learning and knowing will reinforce this sentiment and reflect an inclusive Canadian experience.

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