



Applying decolonising practices to change curricular practices

Rebecca Cairns¹ · Deborah Price²

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A few years ago, a headline on the Skynews (2020) website warned: ‘Decolonisation of curriculum “coming to Australia.”’ According to a representative from the think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, this apparently presented a threat because ‘it’s politicising the present, it’s promoting the past as something that’s impinging on the present’ (d’Abera, cf Skynews, 2020, para. 7). As demonstrated by the last two reviews of the Australian Curriculum, conservatives and Coalition education ministers have amplified these sorts of fears to maintain tired ‘culture wars’ and ‘history wars’ tropes that preference celebratory versions of colonial narratives. Such views were also evident in ‘No’ vote campaigning around the referendum on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to parliament in 2023. The failure of the referendum to pass suggests many Australians are still not prepared to accept that the past does in fact do more than ‘impinge’ on the present and represented a collective rejection the *Uluru Statement from the Heart’s* call for ‘truth-telling about our history’ (First Nations National Constitutional Convention, 2017, para. 10). In the wake of the referendum, questions and issues concerning decolonising curriculum are even more urgent.

The authors of this edition of Point and Counterpoint may not necessarily agree on definitions of decolonisation, or agree on if and how to decolonise curriculum. However, there is general agreement that curricular practices play an

important role in both perpetuating and challenging racism and settler-colonial knowledge making traditions. This involves more than embedding First Nations perspectives, histories cultures, and knowledges into official curriculum. One’s own positioning and location is essential to this work: “What does it mean to decolonise?” cannot be an abstract universal. It has to be answered by looking at other W questions: Who is doing it, where, why, and how?’ (Mingnolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 18). This is powerfully illustrated by a special issue in this journal last year, in which researchers from various African nations explored perspectives on integrating indigenous knowledge systems in higher education through a decolonisation framework (see Woldegiorgis & Turner, 2023). Weuffen et al. (2023) suggest, ‘The term decolonising has been used increasingly to describe a process of speaking back to, and taking action against, deficit paternalistic and racist discourses permeating settler-colonial structures’ (p. 148). In Australia, they argue, these actions, or the doing of decolonising work, ‘is about taking an ethico-political standpoint for recognising and prioritising First Nations sovereignty and undertaking practical actions to interrupt settler-colonial racist discourses’ (Weuffen et al., 2023, p. 149). The following papers exemplify practical actions for speaking back to such structures and propose critical questions for curriculum inquiry.

In this Point and Counterpoint we begin, located in place, with spilly (David Spillman) & benny (Benjamin Wilson) who ‘yarn and write together’ on Country. Their paper, *Decolonising through ReCountrying in teacher education*, shares the ancient Googar Story ‘with permission provided by Damu Paul Gordon, in Karulkiyalu Country south of Brewarrina, NSW’. Through this story they offer a way forward that draws on diverse ways of knowing, being and doing by presenting a transformative process of decolonisation or ‘derepression’ that comes through deeper understanding of ‘self’ as a socialised and cultural being. They propose the significance of ‘ReCountrying’ founded

✉ Rebecca Cairns
r.cairns@deakin.edu.au

Deborah Price
Debbie.Price@unisa.edu.au

¹ School of Education, Deakin University, Geelong, VIC, Australia

² Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion (CRESI), University of South Australia: Education Futures, Adelaide, SA, Australia

on ‘engaging new or different relational ways of knowing, being and doing in-Country’. Such propositions are hopeful in proposing to disrupt the narrow ways of knowing, being and doing that have increasingly dominated contemporary curriculum.

The enactment of such transformation provoked by Spillman and Wilson is challenged in the second paper titled *Decolonising the curriculum through hospicing and collective re-imagining* by Melanie Baak and Denise Chapman. Creatively, their poetic expression of the contemporary educational context challenges the reader—particularly white, non-Indigenous curriculum researchers like ourselves—to critically reflect on how voices continue to be absent and silent with agency stifled. They explicitly implore the reader to examine the provocation ‘*Can we Decolonise a White curriculum?*’ and contest barriers and debates to curriculum design and enactment centred around whiteness, educational policy and structures, national identities, and curriculum responsibilities. For example, Baak and Chapman express:

‘Yet we are in a context in which teachers cannot speak and cannot teach about;

The referendum on the Voice to Parliament,

The current genocide in Palestine.

These are too political.
too divisive.
for classrooms.

Some massacres and genocides are speakable and teachable,
and others intentionally invisibilized.’

Their paper prompts an urgency and offers hope of decolonising curriculum through hospicing existing structures and reimagining as a collective.

The third paper titled, *A Failed Voice, failed curriculum* by Aleryk Fricker, a proud Dja Dja Wurrung academic, stirs in the reader a similar sense of discomfort and unsettledness elicited by Baak and Chapman. Fricker examines the failed 2023 voice referendum, which sought to modify the constitution in Australia to include a representative voice to advise the Federal Government on matters specifically pertaining to First Nations contexts. Both papers invoke a sense of disappointment with curriculum and education, provoking calls for action. Drawing parallels between the referendum campaign and the 2017 same sex marriage plebiscite, Fricker shares lived experiences of the referendum and underscores the importance of ethics education for drawing attention to

the collective moral responsibility of Australians in calling out the harm caused by so-called ‘free speech’. Fricker leaves us to contemplate how curriculum ought to focus on ‘truth-telling’, and the ‘rejection of populist and divisive conservative ideologies’; this requires, ‘acceptance that curriculum can never be without bias or political interpretation’ and a ‘courageous engagement with diversity and progressive values.’

Margaret Lovell’s paper *What’s racial literacy got to do with decolonising the curriculum? Non-Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures* further speaks to the challenges raised in the preceding papers through sharing the voices of teachers. Lovell contests that decolonising a highly colonised curriculum ‘relies on the practices of teachers in pedagogies and curriculum delivery’. Recognising her own positionality and identity, Lovell advocates deepened responsibility of non-Aboriginal teachers to decolonise the curriculum through sharing their unease and hopeful possibilities. Through these stories and voices ‘contextualised racial literacy’ emerges as key, embedding ‘truth listening’ through ‘the provision of ‘space’ for Aboriginal knowledges and voices to be heard at every level of education’.

This Point and Counterpoint concludes with Julian Rawiri Kusabs’ paper entitled *Curriculum and colonisation: The conceptual and methodological challenges of scope*. The paper provides a historical perspective that reinforces the deep rootedness of coloniality and a strong message about the sort of locatedness that the previous papers have demonstrated so well. Kusab’s work contributes comparisons between Māori and First Nations Peoples experiences of colonial curricula but highlights the distinctiveness of these experiences within and between Indigenous communities. Understanding these historical specificities, Kusab suggests, is important to curriculum research in contemporary contexts.

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