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POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

Curriculum and colonisation: the conceptual and methodological challenges of scope

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Scope in decolonial curriculum research

In recent decades, decolonial scholars have theorised frameworks of coloniality and the history of colonisation through a timeframe spanning centuries and a geographic range crossing continents (Quijano, 2007). This ambitious scope has been valuable for identifying broader themes and fostering discourses between Indigenous peoples through common struggles, aspirations, and experiences (Wynter, 2003, p. 326). It is also useful for evaluating how educational curricula, practices, and institutions were disseminated throughout different empires via colonial expansion (Mignolo, 2011, p. 17). Educational materials such as curricula, textbooks, legislation, and regulations shed light on the ideological contours of colonial schooling (Kusabs, 2023a). Such sources are more readily available to contemporary researchers due to linguistic accessibility and the priorities of colonial archives (Smith, 2012, p. 225). For example, Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Minute on Education* in 1835 remains a popularly cited document in explaining the British Government's approach to colonial schooling, especially due to its influence over the Council of India's *English Education Act 1835* (Swartz, 2019, p. 19). Macaulay (1835) notoriously endorsed a pedagogical paradigm of imperial chauvinism when claiming that 'a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia… the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable'. Systemic examples such as this can shed light on how colonial curricula have contributed to economic inequities, cultural assimilation, and political disempowerment for Indigenous communities (Battiste, 2013).

Localised complexities

However, the frequently broad scope of decolonial scholarship also presents several challenges and important questions for curriculum research. It is much simpler to find information on how a curriculum has been constructed in a macro institutional sense rather than how it has been received by colonised peoples at the micro localised level (Tamale, 2020, p. 35). This is especially the case for historical examples where the passing of time poses limitations to methods such as surveys, interviews, and oral histories (Stevens, 2015, p. 58). However, historical evidence shows that Indigenous responses to colonial curricula were diverse, complex, and often subversive. To return to an Indian example in Kolkata, Topdar (2015, p. 420) argues that 'the colonial secondary school curriculum became a contested terrain, which, on the one hand, was implemented by the state for legitimizing colonial rule, and on the other, was interrogated and re-tooled by the nationalists to contest colonial ideologies… Much to the government's alarm, ironically, European authors including Thomas Macaulay, Edmund Burke, and John Milton wrote many of the "seditious" textbooks.' Bengali students quoted English political rhetoric from the colonial curriculum to highlight the British Empire's illiberal, hypocritical, and authoritarian governance over their lands. Such stories highlight how curricula are not simply absorbed passively by students but can be contested and reinterpreted differently at the local level (De Souza, 2016, p. 273). These types of Indigenous educational experiences call for diligent attention to contextual nuances in the past and present (Passada, 2019, p. 22).

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Indigenous subversions of curricula

Such understandings also highlight how Indigenous communities have frequently taken aspects of Western curricula and repurposed them into traditional modes of life (Rademaker, 2020, p. 196). In 1824 for example, London Missionary Society teacher Lancelot Threlkeld taught alphabetic literacy to Awabakal children in colonial New South Wales, hoping that his curriculum would 'Christianise and Civilization will then follow' (Barry, 2008, p. 72). However, Threlkeld (1974, p. 50) observed 'a dozen youths learning to read the Roman Alphabet which they frequently cut with their hatchets in the bark of trees'. Threlkeld's students synthesised alphabetic symbols into traditional Awabakal practices of dendroglyphs and tree scarring. This is an example of how Indigenous communities have dynamically repurposed curricula to uphold cultural integrity rather than passively assimilate to Western modes of life (Phillips, 2015, p. 99). In a similar manner, the delivery of curriculum has often varied at the localised level because of unique pedagogical approaches and teacher perspectives. In Aotearoa (New Zealand), Barrington (2008, p. 116) argues that some Native Schools subtly ignored assimilative directives from the Department for Education, allowing Māori cultural elements such as whakairo (carving), raranga (weaving), and whānau (family) participation. Such nuanced approaches to education are less visible if researchers automatically assume the assimilative efficacy of colonial curricula such as the Native School Codes of 1880, 1897, 1915, and 1931 (Simon & Smith, 2001, p. 10). These examples remind curriculum scholars to take caution when applying broader decolonial theories to specific localities. However, different levels of scope, branching from macro to micro, are still informative for a holistic understanding. Larger institutional structures reveal how curricula have been shaped by colonial ideologies but localised examples demonstrate how application varies at the grassroots level due to the complex plurality of Indigenous communities (Stewart, 2020, p. 97).

Relevance to contemporary education

These issues prompt the question of what relevance historical curriculum research can hold for contemporary decolonial projects and educational policies, practices, and pedagogies. Firstly, historical examples demonstrate how Indigenous engagement with colonial curricula holds a long trajectory, in which decolonial ideas are continuing to develop and apply (Hui, 2023). Secondly, each Indigenous community has a distinct culture, set of aspirations, and range of challenges (Kusabs, 2023b). This extends to the community's respective historical experiences with curricula which continue to affect immediate circumstances (Ahmed, 2021, p. 140). There have been a wide range of responses to colonisation and decolonial efforts must also reflect diversity, specificity, and relevance (Freire & Macedo, 2005, p. 127). Thirdly, such responses have often been characterised by flexible strategies of adoption, resistance, and synthesis (Van Toorn, 2006, p. 18). To dichotomously generalise Indigenous peoples to one side of a resistance/assimilation binary would be too reductive in explaining long-term processes of colonisation (Paterson, 2006, p. 12). Academia and educational research are spaces in which Indigenous thinkers continue to adapt, contest, and repurpose (Andreotti, 2021, p. 8). Historical examples can provide insights into how communities have been limited or effective in influencing educational curriculum to serve communal agency, cultural integrity, and self-determination (Hickey-Moody & Horn, 2022, p. 805). Such experiences can continue to inform contemporary educators in planning and enacting decolonial projects (Sabzalian, 2019, p. 333). In the application of curricula, teachers continue to navigate longstanding tensions between systems at the macro level and localised sites at the micro level (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p. 105). However, an open critical engagement with such complexities can be generative for decolonial inquiry and educational reform. Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 261) summarises that '[f]or decolonization, concepts need to be conceived as invitations to dialogue and not as impositions.'

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