

ON DECOLONIZING THE CURRICULUM: THOUGHTS OF A BLACK PRE-SERVICE TEACHER

By Welly Minyangadou Ngokobi

McGill University

Having attended French schools across the African continent, I argue that Eurocentric curricula have been constructed to perpetuate a harmful single story: in my experience as a learner, history classes always maintained African countries' etiquette of post slavery nations bound by poverty; French classes indoctrinated us that French literature can only be white and European, and rarely—if ever—shed light on acclaimed French and Francophone authors of color who have greatly contributed to the French patrimony; Field trips were all organized to view colonial sites or slavery museums. While these sites have their place in general culture and are part of history, they certainly do not tell the “whole story.” Furthermore, one cannot ignore the emotional and psychological impact their consistent and persistent visits have on minoritized students.

Given that education has been an effective weapon of domination during slavery and colonial times and is today the foundation of beliefs and value systems that individuals learn from a young age and carry through life, I intend to explore, through self-study and supportive materials, how my experience was a product of the maintenance of elitism in Eurocentric education on the African continent and to reflect on how these findings have informed my current philosophy of education and the teaching practices I intend on taking on as a future teacher. In short, I will attempt to answer this question: “How can experiences of Imperialist education inform a novice teacher’s philosophy of education and teaching practices?”

My inquiry will be led by the notion that educators should consistently reflect on the hand we play in the perpetuation of systemic oppression and will follow these points of consideration:

- How can we use our personal experience as students to inform our philosophy of education?
- Does our approach to education and our lesson materials align with our community’s interest?
- How are we promoting student empowerment and inclusion of all students within an education system?
- How can we offer students of diverse backgrounds a safe learning environment?
- How can we adapt our course materials in order that they reflect our community of learners?

To address these points of inquiry, my work will first provide an introduction and explanation of my choosing of the *currere* method. Then, and as per this research method, the meat of my work will be divided in four main “moments,” which will discuss my research question in forms of reflection. I then conclude my work with a summary of my findings.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY: *CURRERE*

It is well known that the methodology of *currere* is particularly fit for students of curriculum who have repressed the frustrations they carried throughout their personal and academic development. The introduction of this inquiry has made my stance quite

clear. Through this methodology, I explore my frustrations that stemmed from feeling invisible as a student, which now informs my advocacy for inclusive curriculums and pedagogies. This research project was initially conducted in the context of my Master's degree at McGill University and was initially written as a Capstone, which I worked on throughout my degree. It was then converted to fit the requirements for this scholarly journal.

My methods for this inquiry include data from personal reflections, field notes, notes from my reflexive journals, and informal conversations with peers and family members. As mentioned earlier, the methods of this inquiry will be discussed through four different moments: the regressive stage, in which will be discussed my past experiences in a Eurocentric curriculum, the progressive stage, in which will be presented the now informed pedagogical approaches I intend to take on as a teacher, the analytical stage, in which will detail the connections made between my past, present, and future experiences with Eurocentric curriculums, and the synthetical stage, where my conclusions will be drawn. This inquiry will close with a summary of my findings.

FINDINGS THROUGH CURRERE

REGRESSION MOMENT: OVERVIEW OF MY PAST EXPERIENCES

As a student, my experience in the French system in expatriate schools around the African continent deeply tarnished my understanding of what it means to “learn.” My in-class participation and my grades were the sole metric of my intelligence and my assimilation to French academic and behavioral standards and requirements. Absent was an acknowledgement of my cognitive abilities and my overall growth as a learner and future global citizen. This was a restrictive experience of what learning is or is meant to be. My journal entries from my time as a young learner in French schools established on African soil suggested that people of color had no place in curricula.

I felt, as a person of color, that we were tokenized during momentary celebrations of French diversity. Moreover, we seemed to have been negatively depicted as either victims or perpetrators of human rights violations. This included child labor, slavery, civil wars, and genocides. The moments when we got to the “slavery chapter” in history classes will forever be engraved in me. The “here we go again”s. A journal entry from 2007 simply reads: “I just pretend to look in my bag when we talk about this now, because why can't they at least stop staring?” I was 13 years old.

This teacher-centered pedagogy relegated students' critical thinking abilities to the margins, which marginalized working-class students, especially if they were non-White. I recall having a conversation with my mother, who reminded me of the efforts of a group of West African mothers, of whom she was a part, to help the schools we attended at the time develop a plan to create, at the very least, spaces for student cultural identities within the school and develop activities to represent us all in a healthy, harmless manner. In this conversation, my mother took me through the process of approaching the school and negotiating at length for the implementation of various projects that could or should be implemented. The school eventually welcomed the ideas, made space for the mothers' committee, and accommodated the activities. These included a much more vibrant, more inclusive Francophonie (of which the venue they had relocated to any Kenyan school that would be able to receive us for the day), fund raisings for struggling communities outside of school, and trips to various locations to offer community service.

NARROWING DOWN THE PROBLEM AREAS

I recall several instances throughout High School in which I thought “we're in a French school, so it makes sense that we're learning French things ... I'm French too,

so why don't I see myself in what we're learning? Well, I *am* Black after all. Maybe it's different." In this sense, I had started sensing that "things were not adding up." I recognized the logic of learning about French culture and history—seeing as I was in the French school system—but I felt deep in my gut that the curricula skipped a large portion of Frenchness that not only exists, but is a huge contributor to what France is today; French people of color and their cultures. One of my English teachers, Mrs Chigiti, did her best to have us read Black authors of color, but none of them were recognized as worthy of being studied for high stakes exams in the French school system. In turn, it made it seem to me like Shakespeare and other White authors wrote "real" literature. I thought, "If we're studying it for high stakes exam, then it must be what's legitimate."

It was only when I attended an African Literature class at the university level in Montreal that I found out that writers of color can and do have pieces that are world renowned. Imagine my surprise and my disbelief, reading about places in Africa I had lived in, cities I have gone to school in, and streets I had walked on in texts qualified to be studied at the university level! Until that time, I had not even known about Aimé Césaire, Maryse Condé, Marie Ndiaye, and so on, despite them being part of the "patrimoine Français." I will note here that this African Literature course and its content were niche, in the sense that the content was specific to this course. As such, there have been rare occasions—if any—in which I have studied material from a Black author or an author of color outside of the context of a class explicitly labeled as containing material created by Black authors or authors of color. For instance, I have taken a class on early 20th century Literature, or even American Literature, and encountered no Black author/content there.

MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH PERSONAL EXPERIENCES LEARNING IN CANADA

My experience with learning in Canada has been similar to that in French High schools. As mentioned in the last portion of the previous paragraph, I have consistently noted that Black History Month and any other event under "diversity and awareness" is typically tokenized as *the* occasion to showcase diversity in the student body/the curriculum, social and racial struggles, or even to bring forth content that is usually tucked away in a niche. ("Here we go again.") For instance, I have sat through a lesson in which we were to watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's famous TED Talk, "The Dangers of a Single Story," as part of our unit on diversity. Adichie was the only Black author/creator whose content we were explicitly made to engage with in class throughout the entire program I was in. Another instance I recall was when we were given texts to read about the history of the mis- and underrepresentation of Black people in search engines such as Google. I do not recall sitting through a lesson in which Black content was used for any other reason than diversity week or for digging deep in the symbolic or explicit and quantifiable violence we deal with. We were given some readings pertaining to diversity and inclusion, but those were optional, easily skippable. As such, there has been a clear overall maintenance of the etiquette of the Black students and students of color overall; the lesson materials only seemed to have space for this community of learners when discussing topics of injustice, crime, racism, genocide, prejudice, human rights violations, and so on. This is almost as if the only space our voices hold any legitimacy in is when topics related to harm are brought forth. There needs to be visibility of all communities forming the body of learners at all times and across the spectrum. Not necessarily because it is the topic at hand, but because it is who is consistently addressed in a classroom.

PROGRESSIVE MOMENT – WHO DO I ENVISION MYSELF TO BE AS A FUTURE TEACHER?

My idealized approaches to teaching are reflective of my experience as a learner throughout my educational experience. It is imperative that, as a future teacher, I consistently revisit my idea of the ideal classroom in order to avoid partaking in a vicious cycle of rebranding a system that is lacking in inclusivity and authenticity. As such, my own pedagogy will mostly be student-centered, where students are made agents of their own learning and around which the teaching will occur.

I envision my classroom as a shared space for students' voices. The learning environment that I want to offer my students is clear: the diversity within my community of learners is recognized and appreciated. Visually, and at surface level, I want my classroom to be decorated with student work and art. Additionally, student responsibilities will be established in terms of taking care of the classroom—cleaning, tidying, and computer assistance. At a deeper, cognitive level, I envision that my students will learn within the spheres of radical and culturally responsive pedagogies. As such, my students will have space for authentic critical thinking, where they can engage with materials at a personal level, while involving their positionalities and understandings (Giroux, 1992).

My lessons and materials will be curated according to observations that I gathered from learner profiles I will create at the start of the year. I will also ensure that all content discussed and shared in class resonates with my learners and is representative of them (Cunningham, 2001). I plan to make space for students' indigenous traditions and cultures in my classroom curriculum. This approach to curriculum building is specific to Funds of Knowledge and Identity, in which students' personal and cultural knowledges are made part of the learning process to achieve given learning goals (Moll, 2019; Subero et al., 2017). I successfully put this teaching approach to practice during my first practicum. My field notes, my supervisor's and Co-Operating teacher's evaluations, and most importantly, the feedback from my students attest to its effectiveness.

Lastly, I hope to develop reflexive teaching practices by consistently reflecting on and tracking my teaching practices, the outcomes of lessons and interventions, and my subsequent adjustments (Grant & Zeichner, 1984). Reflexive teaching will have its place in my overall transformative approach to teaching, one that deeply questions the pedagogical structures and practices set in place for a diverse community of learners (Shields, 2009).

ANALYTICAL MOMENT: CONNECTING MY PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE EXPERIENCES AS A PRE-SERVICE TEACHER

The main element that connects my past, present and future experiences with European (and/or Western) curriculums as a pre-service teacher is reflexive thinking and learning. Reflexive thinking, as defined by Grant and Zeichner (1984), is an aspect of teaching and learning that was emphasized extensively in my pre-service teaching program. During my Master of Arts in Teaching and Learning at McGill University, I was encouraged to give myself the space to reflect on my envisioned (and/or current) teaching practices and to redefine my philosophy of education. The entries in the journal I started in our first professional seminar indicate that this process felt strange and time-consuming to me at first but, with time, has uncovered a few sets of arbitrary rules that I have unconsciously been subscribing to.

For my part, I knew that my philosophy of education had to take the form of a response, in its own ways, to my experiences as a young learner. My frustration with the European education system fostered at first a sense of rebellion and frustration,

which translated to my somewhat a personal vendetta against a system of authority that I believed robbed me of a well-rounded, intentional, and inclusive education program that reflected its actual community of learners. Indeed, with French schools exclusively geared towards the transfer of Eurocentric knowledge at the time, there was no space for authentic learning in the curricula. Attending the graduate program at McGill and being able to reflect on this past has shown me that teachers have the power to navigate curricula in ways that make up for the system's shortcomings. As such, with time, my philosophy of education settled into more of a comprehensive statement of the vision I have for myself as a teacher, and for my community of learners. It was after dissecting each fiber of frustration and grudge that I was finally able to construct a philosophy of education that is valid in its quest to eradicate the remanences of colonial education in Eurocentric curriculums, all the while respecting the boundaries of emotional projection. Indeed, my philosophy of education dictates that learning must be critical, authentic, progressive, and inclusive. As such, its main tenets are: all members of the classroom are learners—students and teachers alike, teachers and learners are self-reflective, positively culturally aware, and responsive. As well, learners are consistently encouraged to find and use their voices through learning materials and content that are relevant to them. Finally, learners must feel safe in the classroom. Thus was born the vision I have today for myself and my learners and the ideal classroom in which we will all be learning with, from, and for the sake of each other.

With this philosophy, I hope to “fight back against” the French education system that shadow-banned the aspects of Frenchness that would have made learning meaningful to us Black students and students of color. Indeed, I have now understood that the French curricula have been positioned in non-European settings (that is, in French schools established in African soil, for instance) as being the only legitimate curricula to guarantee academic success and worldwide respectability. This was historically emphasized in French schools, which emulates elitism and exclusivity (DeSoto, 1971; Sabatier, 1978). To develop a form of inclusivity, however, the French system has been abiding by the theory of universalism, the main tenets of which ascertain that all students are held to French values, regardless of their social, ethnic, and racial backgrounds (Achille et al., 2020). As attractive as equality in the eyes of administration may be, this idea still casts a shadow on and mutes the multicultural student body. In this sense, there is no space intentionally made for Black, Indigenous, and students of Color in the curriculum. As such, as great as universalism may be to forge a community of learners bonded by values that are greater than all, it actively separates the student from the being, the school attendee from the child with intricacies that do deserve to be recognized and for which space should be made, especially when the school is built on their own native land (Cunningham, 2001).

Putting these thoughts and theories into consideration in my first year as a teacher, I was able to see my students' responses to my approach. I started small, by creating habits of allowing my students to speak their minds, during and outside of lessons, as well as by intentionally curating my lessons to the students in front of me, diversifying the sources of my learning materials in a way that would be most meaningful to them. It's important to note that my students were predominantly Black, though I was their only Black teacher. My experience of this was powerful, because I know how much my past self would have loved being seen and heard. I cannot speak for my students, but I will quote one of my high school students, who said, randomly, in the middle of class: “Miss Welly, I'm so happy you're Black. You just get it. I don't know. It's nice.”

Another example, drawn from a field entry I wrote during my first year as a teacher, was a solid marker in my becoming as a socially-just pedagogue. February was approaching, so I casually brought up the topic of Black History Month and asked students how they felt about it in general, and if they wanted us to celebrate it.

They rolled their eyes and were clearly uncomfortable. I asked them what was wrong. They said, “Here we go again with this. We don’t want Black History Month, Miss Welly. Last year they made us watch documentaries on slavery and colonialism, and we saw slaves being whipped and getting their hands cut off on camera, and we don’t want to see this again. Let’s just move on” [my students would have been 12 years old at the time of this event]. I told them that Black History Month is meant to be a celebration, that “there are so many other things to talk about that reflect Blackness.” They answered, “Bah, like what?”

Together, we explored the concept that Blackness is not a momentary or trendy event. We took this opportunity to discuss topics that we didn’t get to spend enough time on during the rest of the year. For example, we did vocabulary lessons under the theme of diasporic foods—which my students consume on a daily basis. We went through their history, my students’ personal experiences with them, and I had them create their own diasporic dishes. I noted that “February was so fun, it felt like we weren’t even in class.” More than this, February was my opportunity to go through another “here we go again” moment from a completely different position. This time, as a teacher who was seeking to show students that they, with their sociocultural backgrounds and communities, are seen and that their knowledge base, as generally marginalized and racialized individuals, belongs in academia. Unfortunately, a conclusive observation I made was that

regardless of how much I grew as a person and an advocate for inclusive pedagogy, the field of education, especially in Eurocentric school systems, has not. So, here we are again, same problem, different scale. Because now it’s about me, a Black teacher, trying to work with teachers from the dominating culture to get students never to feel those “here we are again” moments, while still facing that gaze in doing so.

By “facing that gaze,” I meant literally being looked at for tips, tricks, and answers when Black History Month is mentioned in board meetings (I was once told, “Ah! Black History Month is going to be so great now that you’re here!” Here we go again.).

SYNTHETICAL MOMENT: MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

My past experiences as a learner have been the hammer and the chisel of my becoming a teacher. By looking back at my journey as a learner in a Eurocentric, traditional education system, I now understand that a student’s learning environment will dictate their relationship with learning in general and impact their sense of identity and belonging in a community of learners or the classroom culture. In this sense, my learning environment was the root of my feeling of inadequacy in all spheres related to learning. Not seeing myself represented in lessons in any capacity has led me to believe that learning and growing are two separate processes, when in fact they inform each other. Drawing on Apple (2008) and Kelly and Brandes (2001), schools must represent the cultures of the student body, As such, students who are under-represented

and do not relate to the school context will not have the same opportunities to grow and personally develop as other, better represented student populations. This is too often the case in many Eurocentric education systems, which were established for the purpose of colonization and epistemicide (Mesaka, 2017). Rooted in the principle of Eurocentric Diffusionism and the Inferiority paradigm, Eurocentric education systems have been geared towards self-gratifying agendas of societal forging and indoctrination (Blaut, 1999; Faith, 2013; Tate, 1997).

It took me years to understand that literature can be written by authors of color. While this seems insignificant—an unfortunate moment in my growth as an individual—it deeply affected my perception of self. I had no understanding that narratives could include anything other than a white, Eurocentric perspective. Indeed, I believed that all narratives that were generated from European (and Western) peoples were universally dominant in terms of legitimacy and that African and Black narratives were exclusively relegated to elective courses, fun facts, and diasporic conversations. I now recognize that Mrs. Chigiti, my High School English teacher, put in much thought to her teaching. She proved to us that a teacher could include literature authored by people of color, even when the texts did not generate conversations about race and culture.

The elitism forged in Eurocentric education systems tends to be masked in universalism and egalitarianism, where all students' social differences are merged into a single identity, one administered by the representative state to which the school belongs (Achille et al., 2020). Inevitably, these proceedings halt individual growth and transformation. They have harmed generations of students, especially those of color, who are left with the heavy work of re-discovering self and repositioning oneself in the world. When students of color understand the racial and cultural power dynamics that limited their becoming as active members of society, then they can finally move past the repressive institutional discourse that limited their participation in our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Tate, 1997).

Progressive education systems must correlate with the ways in which our world functions today (social relationships and overall dynamics) (DeSoto, 1971). What I suggest is that teachers, especially those of color in European or Western curricula, who are new to the teaching should allow their inner student to have presence in their process of building their philosophy of education throughout their career. This will encourage an honoring of self, avoiding disruptive cycles of misrepresentation, and racial and cultural disparity. What I propose is different from projecting onto students what a teacher wished they had learned when they were students. Learning experiences are personal, but our approaches to teaching and learning do not need to be. This look within is a critical reflection that takes knowledge from past experiences to inform how to craft future teaching practices. It is essential to consider exterior elements that are independent of self. Who is the community of learners? How can you create content that all students can relate to and connect with authentically? How can you reach students to positively impact their growth as members of society? How can you show students that learning requires them to be present in the classroom as “students” but also as their full selves?

CONCLUSION

It is our duty as educators to ensure that curricula in ethnically and culturally diverse spaces that reflect, include, and make space for the community of learners and the mosaic of people who hold the flag of its representative state. It is understandable that we must transfer knowledge that resides within the boundaries of the educational

agenda of the representative state—to abide by the general guidelines brought forth by Ministries of Education. However, abiding by the curricular policies should not restrict us from creating curricula that represent and serve only the dominant culture. Instead, we should gather the funds of knowledge and identities of our community of learners and transfer knowledge that is recognized by both the governing state and its peoples. The way we transfer this knowledge must also be culturally responsive, radical, and reflexive. Indeed, and to put it in simple terms, what we teach must be meaningful to our community of learners.

Allowing ourselves, as pre-service teachers, to take on archaic teaching practices and curricula serves no one. With education systems slowly changing, new curricula are developed that better reflect our world dynamic and what is deemed important for young learners to know as they become active members of society. Pre-service teachers can take the lead and teach youth in a progressive, inclusive, and meaningful manner. Failure to do so harms our students as they realize that the educational institutions are attempting to indoctrinate them with obsolete colonial ideals. This can then cause a disconnect with their identities as individuals and learners, especially peoples of color attending Eurocentric schools in or outside their native lands.

Thus, as educators entering the field, it is our duty to reflect on our experiences as learners and allow the meaning stemming from these reflections to inform our teaching philosophy and practices in a relevant manner. More than projecting our learning experience, it is about seeing students who would have been invisible in education systems and helping them see that they and their societies can move beyond the colonial era.

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