

# Decolonising the classroom

with Dr Geraldine Balzer

## Talking points

- How might changing community demographics change the conversations about social justice?
- To what degree do you think that politics have a place in the classroom?
- What happens when teachers' ideas of social justice are radically different from those of the community they work in?
- Can inclusion be respectful of a broad spectrum of beliefs?
- Is it permissible for teachers to demonstrate their bias through the texts and topics they choose?
- Why is discomfort viewed as a necessary part of change? People usually shy away from discomfort; how can they be encouraged to embrace it?
- How can the 'right' level of discomfort be gauged, to prevent people feeling too uncomfortable and disengaging from the lesson or discussion?
- What are the intended long-term impacts of decolonising pedagogies?
- How do you think the roles of non-fictional memoirs and fictional novels are similar or different within postcolonial literature in the classroom?
- To what extent do you think decolonising pedagogies are also applicable for adults? How could they be adapted to suit an adult audience?
- Is it necessary for classes to reach a conclusion on what justice or equality looks like, or what a postcolonial future should look like? How should differing opinions be addressed?

## First steps

Changing teaching styles and materials can seem like a daunting prospect. Geraldine provides some advice for getting started. "Start small," she says. "Bring in a picture book or a short story and use it to open a discussion. Pick a local or global political event and learn together with the students, following it over a period of time to hear various perspectives. It's also important to look for allies and set up a network of teamwork and support."

## Reflection

Geraldine's background provides insights into the factors that shaped her own perspective on the world and her role as an educator:

*I grew up in a faith community that advocated for social justice issues through a long history of refugee sponsorship and crisis relief, locally and globally. These activities helped me recognise that people who needed assistance were not to blame for their circumstances.*

*I am a second generation Canadian whose grandparents arrived here as refugees following the Russian revolution. Through my own history and the work of my community, I came to understand that politics and power struggles lead to refugees, through no fault of their own. I was also challenged to question why the poorest people live in geological danger zones. I learnt at a young age that everything is political.*

*During my undergraduate degree, I had the opportunity to participate in a study tour to Haiti. I was shocked to discover that the slaves who overthrew the plantation systems were forced to pay reparations to their owners and the owners' descendants!*

*After graduating, I spent fourteen years as a teacher in Indigenous Inuit communities and came to understand the role of the school in the colonisation process. This latter experience led directly to my doctoral research and the work I have done since becoming an academic.*

Think about your own background, including formative experiences that have shaped your worldview and your chosen career path. Form a circle with colleagues to discuss your backgrounds and experiences. Think about:

- How do your own experiences shape your approach to teaching?
- What societal messages do you try to consciously bestow on your students? Do you think that you communicate any messages unconsciously too?
- How can your own background, and the backgrounds of others, help you approach decolonising pedagogies?
- To what extent do you think your experiences might limit your approach to teaching in some aspects?
- What new perspectives or experiences would help you embrace decolonising pedagogies?
- How do you feel about the 'pedagogy of discomfort'? Do you feel any inhibitions towards decolonising pedagogies that you would like support to overcome?

## Resources

- Geraldine recommends the Canadian Literature for Social Justice reading list ([canlitsocialjustice.wordpress.com](http://canlitsocialjustice.wordpress.com)), compiled by her research group, to help you choose postcolonial literature for the classroom. The website suggests novels, short stories, poems, plays, non-fiction works, and picture books to choose from.
- Many of Geraldine's group used talking circles – you can read more about this teaching technique and how to implement it on the First Nations Pedagogy website ([firstnationspedagogy.ca/circletalks.html](http://firstnationspedagogy.ca/circletalks.html)). Other teaching techniques include I-searches, where students choose to research what interests them, and Socratic circles, which involves two concentric circles of students and a question-led discussion.
- Geraldine points to the Human Library ([humanlibrary.org](http://humanlibrary.org)), where volunteers act as 'human books' to talk about their personal experiences, to help expose learners to a broad range of perspectives.
- The National Council of Teachers of English ([ncte.org](http://ncte.org)) has a wealth of resources for teachers – many of which are free and others require a subscription service. Resources include lesson plans, journal articles, and materials from BIPOC contributors.
- Little Justice Leaders ([littlejusticeleaders.com](http://littlejusticeleaders.com)) has resources such as social justice kits that are specifically designed to help children address social justice issues.