

Dr Geraldine Balzer

Teacher
CPD

At the **University of Saskatchewan** in Canada, **Dr Geraldine Balzer** researches social justice teaching. She is collaborating with teachers to develop alternative teaching methods that can be used to decolonise classrooms and make teaching more open, collaborative and inclusive.

Break the podcast down:

Joe: Geraldine, your research involves looking at strategies teachers can use to begin decolonising their classrooms. Could you start by explaining what decolonisation is in terms of education, and why there's need for it?

Geraldine: I think that in a context specifically like Canada, which is a settler colony, and in all settler colonies that exist around the globe, there's this incredible diversity in classrooms. We've had a school structure that was really designed on the Eurocentric system to meet very specific goals. Current research really starts pulling in to start thinking about a capitalistic economy that's worked because of the colonial system. But as our world has become more fluid, our classrooms have become more diverse, and we end up with a system structured on a world that doesn't exist anymore.

So, we find that many of the students in our classrooms are not represented in the literature chosen. Their backgrounds are often diminished. We have an assumption about what is important in knowledge and what isn't and don't recognise the vast amount of knowledge that students bring with them. It's also very much a fact that they need to recognise themselves in the classroom, in the literature that's chosen, and the perspective that's looked at in the history that is taught.

Joe: In your Futurum article, you mention a few methods teachers can use to begin decolonising their classrooms, from different ways of analysing literature to rearranging classrooms and trying new forms of discussion. What methods have you found to be particularly useful?

Geraldine: One method is decentralising the power – the teacher becomes one of the learners. I have seen teachers who have moved the idea of a teacher's desk out of the classroom. They occupy a table space just like any of the students, they rearrange the classrooms, the desks or tables are in circles or people are working in clusters. They take the hierarchal structure of the classroom out of the space. Then, there's a vulnerability for the teachers because they're also learners and have to admit what they don't know.

I think we've often created these structures where teachers are supposed to know everything and feel as if they are failing if they admit their vulnerabilities. I remember a story that one of my research assistants told of observing in a classroom with one of the teachers participating in a study. The teacher came in and sat in a circle with the students, put her feet up on the table, slammed the book down and said, "I was so angry when I read this story. I just didn't know that I wanted to go on. Did anybody else feel that way?" The research assistant thought, "Oh my God, I've never seen a teacher do that before," like, admit that this book annoyed them, that relaxed pose in the classroom. She said the kind of energy, conversation and discussion that happened in the room because the teacher was expressing her frustration with a novel that the students then felt free to offer their critiques and their frustrations. I think there's that sense of the teacher showing their vulnerability so that the students can also be vulnerable.

Joe: A lot of the time teachers are in the position of being a role model so the way that they act is likely to influence their students. Having a more open and expressive response to a novel might encourage that from their students. Is your research focused mainly on literature and the books taught in schools?

Geraldine: I've been an English language arts teacher so literature is a really important part of what I do. I really started thinking about this when I was teaching in Indigenous communities. We'd been looking at the literature that was being offered and students would say, "But where's my story? Where are our stories?" because the stories all are predominantly British and American authors that were generally white men. The idea of the literature curriculum came about because it was used in India to train people who were going to be working for the British Government and the Tea Company, etc. in how to be proper British gentlemen. The literature chosen had a very specific goal. It was successful and brought back to the factory towns of England and Scotland. →



We haven't really thought about why we choose the literature we choose. One of the things that I like to suggest to teachers is that there should be literature in their classroom that represents the diversity of their classroom. Every child should be able to see themselves in a book, and that shouldn't just be a book that tells the traumatic story of a people. If it's going to look at African Americans, it can't just be a slave's tale with a trauma. There needs to be stories of success and joy. One of the things people talk about now is books that celebrate Black joy or Indigenous joy or any marginalised group that answer the positive stories there as well. One of the African American academics, Rudine Simms Bishop, talks about literature being windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors. She said that one of the things that often happens is that for minority children, the book is always a window into the life of somebody else. And for mainstream children, the book is always a mirror of their own life, and what we need is to have books that are sliding glass doors that enable readers to move between worlds. I think that's a really important thing in terms of choosing literature.

Joe: Is it as easy as a teacher deciding that they want to introduce new books? In the article, you talk about a few barriers: the school curriculum, time pressure, resource pressure and a lack of confidence on the teacher's part and validation from the schools. What can teachers do to start implementing these changes?

Geraldine: Sometimes, the teacher is the biggest barrier themselves, having the confidence to do that. I think currently within the Canadian structure, we're really being encouraged to include Indigenous voices, Indigenous ways of knowing. Teachers don't want to move into a world of cultural appropriation, but they don't feel competent to answer many of these questions. So, that's a space where teachers really need to admit their shortcomings and that they are also learners, and sometimes rely on resources available to them in the community and to take those risks and take small steps.

Another barrier is access to resources because, often, schools don't see the need to replace literature texts, and that is really a space where teachers need to advocate and sell the reason that they want to use a text to the people who have the power to purchase it. That's also one of the pushbacks from parents. They're not used to their children coming back from school and asking these sorts of questions or having ideas that are very different from the family structure. And then thinking about how to explain to parents why you've chosen a specific book. That's one of the key things when I'm working with teacher candidates – you always need to explain why you've chosen a book and how it meets curricular goals, so that administrators and parents understand that you have a plan for using this.

Joe: It's about having the confidence to be able to explain to parents that you're not just doing this as some sort of tick box exercise, ticking the diversity box, but that there are real benefits to all of your students in a wider variety of texts. What motivates you and what inspired you to do this work?

Geraldine: Social justice issues have always been a key part of who I was. It comes from growing up during an era of civil rights movements. Those are the things that were on the news and we were being made aware of. Then, living in a community that looks to making the world a better place by ensuring that people had resources and access to education. And also being the granddaughter of refugees. So many strands that continued to weave together, so I ended up where I am now, and the liberty I've had to shape my teaching to those ends, as a shifting curriculum that has the space for teachers to push boundaries as well.

Joe: I get the sense that your driving force is compassion for other people and trying to help other people get the education that they need.

Geraldine: Yeah. I'd say that's a really big part of it, that access to education, and an education that validates who they are and doesn't just reshape everybody into what some people may have seen as being the ideal citizen. That we now embrace the diversity as opposed to trying to make everyone fit into the same mold...

Read Geraldine's Futurum brochure:

www.futurumcareers.com/decolonising-the-classroom

Download her activity sheet:

www.futurumcareers.com/Geraldine-Balzer-Activity-Sheet.pdf

