

BOOK REVIEW **OPEN ACCESS**

Book review: Teaching Social Justice Using Postcolonial Texts: Encountering Pedagogies of Discomfort in Practice

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Teaching Social Justice Using Postcolonial Texts: Encountering Pedagogies of Discomfort in Practice

Edited by Geraldine Balzer, Teresa Strong-Wilson, and Anne Burke

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The anthology edited by Canadian scholars Geraldine Balzer, Teresa Strong-Wilson, and Anne Burke is an invitation to come to terms with postcolonial critical literacy in literature didactics with children and young people. The editors seek to "disrupt the school canon and problematize the stereotypical Canadian identity by introducing new stories and encouraging their students to have new conversations and consider their communities in new ways" (2023, p. 2). The book includes 10 chapters written by 26 contributors, all from Canada, divided into three parts – 'Using post-colonial literature to address legacies of colonialism', 'Pedagogies of discomfort', and 'Negotiating difficult conversations in the classroom'. The book thus explores the pedagogical uses of literary fiction to tackle postcolonial legacies in the classroom.

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The collection of texts, many of which are based on observation of classroom interaction and professional reflection among teachers, aims to develop a ‘pedagogy of social justice’ – a concept that is by no means novel. A diversity of theoretical and practical processes ranging from minority movements to state-driven truth and reconciliation processes have problematized the narrowness of the school curriculum and increased awareness of how certain hegemonies are reinforced and normalized. Central to all chapters in the book is the recognition of the significance of a ‘pedagogy of compassion’ (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). It shares similarities with Freire’s (2005 [1970]) pedagogy of the oppressed, the postmodern and/or feminist ‘border pedagogies’ that encourage learners to question the prevailing representations and hegemonic structures (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991), the destabilisation pedagogies of cultural literacy (Ochoa et al., 2016), pedagogies of negotiating hybrid identities (Bhabha, 2004 [1994]). and other pedagogies of de-Westernizing. In all these pedagogies that are derived from the critical pedagogy, the idea of recognition of dominant power relations and the structuration of the world surrounding the learner play a pivotal role.

In the pedagogy of compassion, the underlying idea is how to step into the ‘discomfort zone’, to put aside the familiar, or to break away from the colonial mindset. According to Boler (1999, p. 176), the pedagogy of discomfort begins “by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others”. By creating such a culture of inquiry, learners and educators can “recognize how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see” (*ibid.*). Postcolonial critical literacy largely leans on the politics of feeling, which needs to be identified as a central element of both public discourse and the development of and education in literacies.

The chapters dive into the processes of reflection and dialogue around conscious literary readership, reporting teacher and learner stories and classroom interactions, and focus surprisingly little on literature and texts as such. Still, one could argue that even the selection of texts plays a crucial role for successful pedagogy. As examples of postcolonial literature, the authors of the anthology refer to texts that illuminate historical issues of slavery, colonization, racism, and genocide. They also mention books that are focused on issues of discrimination, segregation, questions of identity, language loss, and disruptions in the mediation of heritage because of structural power relations. Examples from the Canadian literacy sphere include the indigenous picture books *The Rabbits* (Marsden, 2003) and *Shi-shi-etko* (Campbell, 2005), and the novels *Indian Horse* (Wagamese, 2012), *Homegoing* (Gyasi, 2016) and *The Danish Girl* (Ebershoff, 2015), as well as the graphic novels *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) and *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1980). In each nation-state, there is native literature that draws on the local conditions, written by local authors. For example, in Sweden, books by Sámi authors and immigrants with different cultural backgrounds are frequently addressed in schools and in teacher education. Some of them, such as *Stolen* (2023, originally *Stöld*, 2021), by Ann-Helén Laestadius, were also included in the public reading list that was published in 2014 by the Swedish Arts Council (Kulturrådet, 2025) as recommended readings for pre-schools, primary schools, and upper secondary schools.

However, postcolonialism is not defined solely by themes and topics in literature. The broader sociology of literary production, which is almost entirely overlooked by the contributors to this volume, also reveals important structures that should be discussed. When selecting literature, it is not only the subject matter that is important, but also the authors' backgrounds, their positioning, and their intended audiences – whether they write for minority audiences, majority audiences, or both, as well as who publishes and mediates their work. The way authors construct their imagined audiences is a particularly interesting issue, closely tied to the challenges and competence requirements of critical literacy. A minority author may frame questions differently when addressing a minority audience compared to a majority audience, while a majority author may encounter difficulties in engaging with topics that minority communities seek to claim as their own. Understanding how colonial structures continue to shape the contemporary literary landscape is crucial and should not be dismissed.

Moreover, postcolonial critical literacy can be, of course, taught and developed through other materials than literary fiction, such as non-fiction, films and television series, games, other interactive works and simulations. In fact, during the past years, there has been quite an emphasis on the potential of virtual and augmented realities to evoke compassion and emotional investment in learning about the horrors of war, the Holocaust, human trafficking, or other forms of oppression. In this respect, returning to the reading of literature is a welcome contribution to postcolonial classroom didactics. By developing practices of enchanted reading (to borrow the concept by Felski, 2008) education can contribute to subjectification as a process where the reader can unveil power relations and responsibility, solidarity, and togetherness in terms of his or her own positioning in the world. Nevertheless, a great challenge for today's educators, which the book does not address at all, seems to be how to get children and young people committed to reading. Rather surprisingly, the anthology leaves the selection of teaching and learning materials beyond its scope, as well as related questions such as those of authorship and freedom of speech, as well as reading practices that are connected to uncomfortable feelings.

Nevertheless, the focus may be justified by the fact that, rather than the selection of teaching and learning materials, *who* the teacher is may play a more central role. In creating 'disruptive' approaches to literature and cultures, teachers are lead thinkers, moderators, cultural translators, gatekeepers, and facilitators of critical thinking. As noted by Susan Tilley and Nicole Redmond in their fieldwork, teachers' intentions and experiences are often connected to their own life histories and educational journeys (2023, p. 118). Therefore, the extent to which teachers acknowledge and critically reflect on their own privileges or subordinate positions significantly influences their pedagogical approach and interactions with students – how they read and reflect upon their multiply-authored and positioned selves. In their chapter, Angela Ward, Allison Balabuch, Lauren Frodsham, Katherine O'Connor, and Carol Nahachewsky pinpoint that postcolonial pedagogies require a personal commitment to difficult and "discomforting work" (2023, p. 18). Discomfort does not necessarily result in positive shifts in understanding or subsequent action. It is, in other words, not always an

effective tool for fostering empathy and awareness; rather, it can reinforce or intensify feelings of distress without leading to meaningful engagement or change. As pointed out by Ward and colleagues, the true foundation of discomfiting labour requires non-judgmental listening and dialogue, sharing and feeling together. The authors in many chapters conclude that this process, in fact, does not have an end and no ultimate answers. The ambiguous character of the process might pose challenges for teachers to put the ideas described in the anthology into practice. If seeking models, frameworks and best practices, teachers are likely not to find them in pedagogies that are highly situated, learner-centred, and learner-dependent, as well as in many ways contingent. Equally, many teachers in the empirical studies conducted by the authors of the book experienced the concept of “postcolonialism” to be theoretically too complex and elusive and therefore preferred the term “social justice”.

In practice, negotiating perspectives can involve situations like the one described in the fieldnotes by Magdalena Vergara, Teresa M. Dobson, and Alexis Birner in their chapter (2023, p. 81). A boy of Iranian background remarked that Indigenous people in Canada should be grateful to Europeans for bringing modernity to the Americas. However, a book he read introduced a different perspective, highlighting the negative consequences of cultural erasure and its long-lasting impact. This led him to reconsider the idea of colonization as a necessary civilizing force. In the classroom discussion, he was encouraged to critically examine the conditions of colonization in Iran, which he had initially perceived as an entirely different case – arguing that Iranians had been “civilized from the beginning” rather than “barbarians”, as was the case with “Indians”. These reflections sparked several moments of discomfort that the entire classroom had to navigate together.

The chapters offer relatively few concrete tools for navigating discomfort in educational settings. However, what becomes evident is that the concept of discomfort prioritizes the emotional experience of the individual, whether as a learner or an educator, placing them at the centre of the process. However, this raises the question: to what extent should I, as a descendant of “white settlers”, feel personal guilt or responsibility for the actions of my ancestors, who lived in a time with vastly different societal structures and cultural norms? Acknowledging privilege can easily turn into a search for those to blame, potentially reinforcing trauma at the expense of hope and beauty, or balanced intercultural dialogue. If a lecture concludes with the question “now that you know, what will you do?”, as proposed by Kevin McBean and Robert Piazza in their chapter (2023, p. 97), the well-intended effort to “remove the claim of ignorance” (*ibid.*) may instead lead to self-reproach and despair. It could be suggested that while feelings and actions are inherently personal, the focus should ultimately be on societal structures and power asymmetries, shaped by dominant ways of thinking and valuation, rather than by placing responsibility on individuals.

Unfortunately, addressing uncomfortable issues in educational settings still often remains a superficial exercise – merely a means of “dedicating attention” to the miseries of history to fulfil curricular or other strategic obligations. With shrinking classroom time and growing demands, it is not particularly attractive for teachers to become engaged in discussions

that create and need dissonance. However, in a world where postcolonial approaches are banned by autocratizing regimes that were once liberal democracies, fostering cultural and intercultural understanding is becoming more important than ever. In this respect, the Canadian scholars, through their rich observations from classroom interactions, not only inspire educators but can also potentially support public authorities, parents, caregivers, politicians, and civil society actors in using literary texts and other materials to envision the importance of recognizing difference and building bridges. These approaches, when taken seriously and made systematic, do have the potential to foster deeper and more meaningful engagement beyond the surface level of informing and dedicating attention.

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