

Decolonization and Art Education

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Introduction

There are few who can deny that, in present times, humanity faces great uncertainty. With most powerful governments of the world failing to take adequate action to address climate change or acknowledge the ongoing oppression of marginalized minorities, it is not surprising that more than one journalist has not been able to describe the last decade without highlighting its tumult. As the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to develop and aggravate equity issues for people from all over the world, many struggle to picture a propitious future. More than ever, humanity needs to reorganize their communities and value systems in a way that will unify its members so that they can confront these global issues and manifest a peaceful and thriving existence. Decolonization embodies one such a protocol.

Eyers (2017) defines the term decolonization as “when a nation seeks to become free of the oppressor/oppressed regime imposed on them by a colonial power, and to physically and legally undo the colonial state, or Empire, that has dominated their society” (para.1), and when a colonizer “[withdraws] and [leaves] the lands of the oppressed they have taken by stealth or force” (para. 2). Describing the term within the context of colonization of the Americas, Eyers elaborates that while it is generally recognized that it is not within the capacity of most settlers to leave Turtle Island as many do not possess a substantial link to a homeland elsewhere and have resided on the land for over 12 generations (para. 3), they are requested nonetheless to pursue the instruction of decolonization through other significant tangible and symbolic ways. These include actively supporting efforts of re-indigenization (para. 14), resisting destructive values of the colonial authorities through neurodecolonization (para. 7), and asking oneself what their country may resemble if they were able to reduce existing Eurocentric dominance and authority (para. 3). Eyers (2017) presents some examples

of said destructive values to include white supremacy, disconnect from nature, hetero-patriarchy, and intense economic and individual competition (para.7).

This literature review discusses the potential of art education to teach and pursue practices that align with the goals of Decolonization. Specifically, I propose that art education aligns with three of Eyer's (2017) main components of decolonization: resistance, neurodecolonization, and re-indigenization. The literature analyzed includes empirical studies of various educational protocols that attempt to pursue these practices, and articles that critically examine existing notions regarding oppressive values of the settler state. I have chosen to focus on art education in particular as my experience studying and pursuing visual arts has enhanced my capacity for empathy with cultures and ideas different from ones that I have been socialized to appreciate and normalize in my society. It is similarly stated in the official Ontario grade 1-8 curriculum handbook for The Arts that the experience of art education is one where "students deepen their awareness and appreciation of diverse perspectives." (Ontario, 2009). In essence, I feel there is potential for art education to serve as a useful conduit for decolonization among students of the 21st century as they face an ever-changing world.

Resistance

Resistance involves actively challenging the Settler State with the intention of undoing its systems of oppression. These systems include: Eurocentric dominance, white supremacy, racism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, slavery, land theft, imposed treaties, broken promises, relocation, forced assimilation, government manipulation, corporate control, psychic violence and all other associated operations of oppressions that impact Indigenous people and people of colour (Eyers, 2017). The first step to designing a protocol of resistance

through art education thus involves identification of these problematic institutions. Desai (2010) asserts that the contemporary colourblind approach to race in American society and within visual culture ignores societal equity issues like socio-economic inequality among racial minorities as it is founded on the assumption that minorities have equal opportunities to succeed, and that racial discrimination exists only among individual people, not systemically. Desai (2010) further elaborates that, by extension, the practice rejects opportunities to have discussions on issues of race, and perpetuates the normalization of silence on racial issues. This operation is described to exist in visual culture among mainstream movies and artwork that portray individuals of colour in a limited way that fails to acknowledge racism as a systemic issue. Kraehe et. al (2017) further support this argument by describing a lack of critical consciousness involved in North American museum curation and media representation of non-Western cultures. In lieu of presenting diverse cultural practices in a manner that is accurate to contemporary times, they explain that the material presented through these platforms is often an essentialized representation of select practices that were studied decades ago. Students who study these materials in the classroom are described to internalize notions of the presented cultures in a reductive manner that satisfies the ongoing Eurocentric status quo. In a slightly older article, Krahe et.al (2013) discusses how this inequity in art education, alongside socio-economic barriers, plays a role in discouraging students from minority groups from engaging with the arts in school and pursuing postsecondary study in the subject. The articles all concede that when Whiteness and other forms of normalized privilege are not questioned or examined in the process of planning art education, regardless of attempts at including material related to those of non-Western cultures, students are not taught in an equitable manner, and decolonization has not taken place.

Next, as an act of resistance, it is important that oppressive settler institutions are brought to the attention of teachers in art education courses so that they may identify such operations, proceed to consciously pursue allyship with marginalized groups in their class populations, and then teach these same practices to art teachers-in-training. Lee (2013) performed a research study investigating the influence that participating in a social justice art education studio course had on the explicit and implicit racial biases of its graduate and undergraduate participants. Throughout the course, in between course assignments, students were asked to provide written reflections, artist statements, and interviews that examined their relationship with race and racial issues. Discussions about race and social inequities also took place during artwork presentation sessions. While also examining the cultural and economic backgrounds of the participants, Lee determined where students had gaps in their knowledge regarding existing forms of systemic racism, and then proceeded to facilitate discussions that supported remedying this lack of awareness, such as conversations regarding positionality. Based on their final reflections and exhibited behaviours, these initiatives appeared to support productive changes in the belief systems of these students. Acuff (2016) similarly performs a study on art teacher candidates by asking them to share, through dialogue and in the form of art projects, their life narratives to explore how circumstances, identity, and systemic racist operations have constructed their knowledge of race and racism. The introductions to the various course topics were also prefaced with anecdotes that emphasized a need for vulnerability and critical thinking during these processes. The conclusion determined that teaching students to approach art education with an intersectional mindset required an understanding that each student must approach the task of becoming a critical multicultural pedagogue in a distinct way that addresses and acknowledges their unique positionality in relation to the current settler systems. Presenting a more specific

framework for art education research, Kraehe and Acuff (2013) assert the necessity of four theoretical perspectives, critical race theory, intersectionality critical multiculturalism, and social justice education, to determine questions that teacher candidates should ask themselves when designing art education pedagogies. No research study is performed within the article, but several case studies that focus on the structural interplay of race, class, sexuality and nationality in the process of determining effective art education pedagogy are cited and analyzed. Kraehe and Acuff (2013) end the article by emphasizing the need to ask the following questions when seeking to address inequities in art education: “What explains the low participation of students of color and low-income students in college-bound tracks of advanced art courses?” (p. 298), and “Whose knowledge, culture, and educational experiences have been subjugated in art education?”(p. 298). The articles all highlight the necessity that art educators analyze their knowledge of the dominant systems of oppression to become educators that teach materials that align with the goals of decolonization.

Finally, social justice initiatives are important to promote awareness of settler systems in society and challenge the established authorities. Kraehe and Acuff (2013) present a definition of social justice education as a goal that “ [works] against forces that structure and legitimate inequality” (p. 302), and that “is found within multicultural education theory ...CRT, feminism, (dis)ability studies...postcolonial theory, and queer theory” (p. 302). Presented in comparison to art education, which is described as more discipline-based, Social Justice Education is further described as a form of education that focuses on equity for all students by not avoiding critical class discussions on such subject matter, even when a student creates artwork that is described to be about a social justice issue. In lieu of solely providing a definition, Lee (2010) advocates for students of an art education course to “create a public artwork...based on an analysis of four to five interviews...conducted with preservice

or practicing art teachers regarding their views on race, racism, and art education” (p. 7) for the purpose of creating work that asks the viewer to consider issues of race and racism from the perspective of critical race theory. The works manifested pursued critiques of mainstream colourblind ideology juxtaposed with celebrations of diversity (p. 7). Conrad et. al also facilitated a social justice-based art assignment among art educators in training. However, in lieu of a direct analysis of issues in society, art education students created artwork that critically analyzed the relationships they possessed to the land they resided on. The works presented ranged from commentary of issues regarding environmental destruction, the problematic eurocentric interpretation of Canadian history, and resistance of systems that attempt to silence Indigenous voices and knowledge. Each work was also accompanied by a detailed and personal artist statement describing their positionality based on their relationship to their location. In essence, based on these three works of literature, there is an overall consensus that social justice initiatives in the art classroom in the form of art projects are effective when they are approached in a way that critically considers one’s positionality, the existing oppressive systems, and involves open dialogue on issues of intersectionality and equity in society.

Neurodecolonization

Neurodecolonization involves becoming aware of the toxic value systems and memes of the settler state that have been conditioned into one’s consciousness, and subsequently working towards replacing them with values of decolonization. According to Eyers (2015), some significant values of the settler state include, but are not limited to: placing humancentric desires over those of earth, disconnect from nature, implicit and explicit judgement of individuals who do not conform to the white ableist heteropatriarchy, and a

measure of human value based on wealth or class. Identification of these systems present in one's community is one of the first steps to performing neurodecolonization. Bode (2013) describes the implicit biases revealed among a group of American art teachers when engaging with non-western artwork. It is described that they state that the artwork of Senegalese artist Samba Ly greatly resembles that of Picasso, without awareness of the fact that Picasso's work was heavily derived from the aesthetic of West African art. Bode asserts that the assumption that the artist's work is derived from a famous Western artist reveals the bias among American teachers and the school system about where art is produced, and which art from which cultures are considered true art. Describing a similar situation, Acuff (2014) states that, despite their recent attempts to discuss issues of inequity and oppression among minorities and racialized individuals in an art education course, they have still had students ask "Why do we need to discuss diversity in art?". The observation is described to reveal a necessity for students to think about their positionality and implicit biases when training to become art teachers. Similarly, Bequette (2007) describes prior teaching experiences to argue for the need for multicultural art education that is inquiry-based. To explain, they highlight the common misconception that has been commonly held among many non-Indigenous students that Indigenous groups are all part of a singular community. This was described to be the circumstance despite said students having had several opportunities to create art projects supposedly related to Indigenous traditional art in the past. Bequette (2007) asserts this to be the result of the failure of the art teachers that taught these students to make the effort to learn the truth of the matter themselves as a result of their own implicit biases. To sum, for students to learn decolonization, teachers and art education instructors must not neglect first critically analyzing the commonly held colonized beliefs systems of the settler state present

within their own consciousness' and the minds of their students when selecting modules to teach.

In addition to identifying the common colonized values present commonly within larger communities, neurodecolonization also requires examination of one's positionality and belief systems specifically in relation to issues of colonization and race to determine what aspects of themselves they need to work towards modifying. Lee (2013) designs an art education curriculum with an overall focus on addressing positionality to inform one's beliefs about race and racism. Reflections on this subject were manifested through prompt-based writing activities, artists statements, interviews, and art projects. In Acuff's (2014) research study, student-teachers created art projects that communicated implicit and explicit assumptions they believed k-12 students might have about them. The process helped the student-teachers consider the implications their pedagogies in the classroom could have in relation to their identity, and the ways they might need to sometimes address them in the classroom. Adding to this protocol, Bode (2013) argues for the importance of art teachers actively making an effort to practice viewing the world from the perspective of individuals from marginalized cultures, in particular the artists that the teacher is selecting to study within the classroom. Bode emphasizes that this practice of empathy helps teachers consider work from a lens detached to their own positionality so that they are able to ask themselves how the artist might want people to view the work being studied, and think about ways that the voices of that artist's community can be heard. According to the analyzed works, it is essential that both students and teachers practice looking at their positionality to determine the ways in which they may be colonized mentally, and practice looking through the perspectives of marginalized groups in order to begin to become a true ally who can teach decolonized art education.

Lastly, there needs to be protocols to help students and teachers adopt values of decolonization into their mind. Among them include empathy, mindfulness, and vulnerability (Eyes, 2017). Bertling (2015) discusses the results of a mixed methods research study involving middle school students engaging in a place-based art education plan. The curriculum involved caring for nature, performing drawing exercises to communicate their feelings about their interactions, and interviews through which they explained their artwork orally. The data revealed that students experienced increased levels of empathy with the natural world, and increased pro-environment viewpoints as a result of their participation with the curriculum. Similarly, Barrett et. al (2007) facilitated a study where student-teachers shared and practiced mindfulness by assigning projects that made students think about concerns and circumstances relevant to their local and global community. Students developed an awareness of the interconnectedness between human beings and the world that surrounds them, and, as a result, became more prepared to identify and challenge the sociocultural issues of their world. Lee (2013) describes vulnerability as a natural effect that manifests when a teacher consciously pursues the goal of creating a space where diverse viewpoints can be discussed without judgement, something they emphasized their students to allow for when facilitating discussions regarding critical multiculturalism. Their article uniquely describes the process of decolonization beginning with the process of pursuing decolonizing discussions. Overall, the literature asserts that conscious creation of art assignments that also involve discussions regarding intersectional issues and positionality can instill the decolonizing mindsets of empathy, mindfulness, and vulnerability into students and educators.

Re-Indigenization

Re-indigenization involves returning to practices and knowledge systems that existed before modern civilization, including those associated with one's ancestral heritages (Eyers, 2017, para. 14). One significant way that education can pursue re-indigenization is through land-based learning. This style of education assumes an environmental approach to learning that involves practicing mindful awareness of one's sense of place and learning from the natural world. Bequette (2007), reflecting on personal and case study teaching experiences, argues for the benefits of land-based teaching that emphasizes the traditional cultural knowledge of the local Indigenous communities through experiential learning protocols with said members. Bequette argues that this helps prevent stereotyped and essentialized notions of Indigenous cultures, build environmental stewardship among non-Indigenous students, and creates opportunities for interdisciplinary learning with the science curriculum. In contrast, Conrad et. al (2019) present the argument for the benefits of land-based learning in a way that is more focused on the social emotional development of students. In their presented study, students of an art education graduate course create projects that reflect their relationships to the natural world that immediately surrounds them. In the accompanied artist statements, they express complex feelings about the physical aspects of the land degrading from climate change and its history of colonialism. The desire to prioritize the environment manifests by extension of the experience, similar to the most recently aforementioned study, but with a greater emphasis on the mourning the wrongdoings of the settler state. Bertling (2015) describes a similar process that specifically observes the capacity for middle school students to develop empathy with the environment through land-based learning. Focusing slightly less on the spread of Indigenous knowledge than the former two studies, Bertling (2015) considers how empathy manifested from land-based learning can inspire students to envision improved

futures for the world around them. In essence, land-based learning in art education can manifest in varied forms, including prompt-based art assignments and assignments led by members of the Indigenous community, to facilitate social emotional learning that encourages environmental stewardship, raised awareness of one's sense of place, and interdisciplinary learning experiences. While empathy for the natural world appears to remain a common result of the experiences, manifestations of other emotions appear to support these same learning outcomes.

Next, in a re-indigenized society, groups that have been marginalized must be provided with voice and agency. In the Australian study facilitated by Mills et. al(2019), Indigenous elementary students of the Yuggera, Jagera, and Ugarapul language regions of South East Queensland were taught by local Indigenous community leaders to engage with visual arts in a way that aligned with the ways of learning of said communities. The students created individual tempera paintings of the land, applying Indigenous visual art techniques and colour palettes. The style of painting demonstrated was similar to that of the images that Indigenous Aunties would illustrate in the sand while sharing stories. Through the creation of the paintings, the students were able to connect with their heritage and express themselves using Indigenous visual language and symbols, and learn about the creation stories associated with the heritage of their local community. Students were given the opportunity to freely express their cultural viewpoints without needing to conform to Eurocentric artistic notions of art and visual expression. In contrast, in the Canadian study facilitated by Bergoray and Brown (2018), Indigenous learners were given the opportunity to express their voices through a medium that is considered more universally common in the contemporary West: sequential narratives. In this study, through the creation of graphic novel illustrations, adolescent Indigenous students investigated the processes that cause communities to engage in

behaviours that negatively impact their health and wellbeing, such as substance abuse and alcoholism. In the study, it is acknowledged that these risky behaviours disproportionately manifest among Indigenous teenagers in large part due to a significantly lower quality of life caused by ongoing systemic oppression, and the consequences of the legacy of colonialism and residential schools. However, as part of an interdisciplinary effort to use the project to also teach digital literacy, students were also asked to consider the role of media glamorization in manifesting these behaviours among their population. While students did use the projects to share their narratives of personal traumas and struggles while also expressing their opinions of the presence of problematic institutions like Western media, the role of discussing systemic oppression in diminishing the quality of life for Indigenous teenagers was not as greatly emphasised in the assignment brief. It is possible this lack of clear instruction may have presented as a barrier for some students who may have felt hesitant to openly express their traumas or hidden feelings in the art. Next, in contrast to both of these studies, Acuff (2016) encouraged art education students to investigate their own positionality to design their own art assignments. In their artist statements, the students were instructed to describe both their critical analysis of their positionality in addition to their personal sentiments to it. Without it being a requirement of the project, the personal narratives of students manifested within the intentions of the artworks, further emphasising that providing a certain degree of agency over an art assignment will naturally manifest students' personal voice in them. To sum, in the classroom, there are multiple ways art education assignments can be used to empower students from marginalized groups to express their voice with agency when not limited to art projects that all follow a single style, intent, or medium. However, these projects should nonetheless emphasize these permissions in assignment briefs.

Lastly, a re-indigenized society involves recovery and sharing of Indigenous knowledge without cultural appropriation, or “othering”. Gayed and Angus (2018) propose methodologies for teaching photography history in a manner that integrates non-Western and Indigenous knowledge. The methods presented include assignments that require engagement with the history of more than one geographic sphere and from multiple time periods. The presented case study also demonstrated that teaching art history from more than a single time period helped students avoid essentializing an entire culture as a series of stereotyped images. While the study specifically presenting pedagogical methods for an undergraduate survey course, similar protocols can be applied to K-12 grades. In the curriculum facilitated by Mills et. al (2019), indigenous knowledge is brought to the focus of pedagogy as indigenous painting methods and philosophy are taught within a middle school. The practice empowers students to share their cultural perspectives. Unlike the context of the former study however, it is taught within the context of an Indigenous majority school, and more study may be required to investigate how a similar project may manifest among more diverse demographics. Among one such a demographic, Moore and Baker (2019) describe how modifications made to an art education module in an Australian Bachelor of Education degree demonstrated notable improvements in teacher candidate awareness of Indigenous knowledge. The modifications were informed by an Indigenous educator, and “demonstra[ted] broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages,” (p. 13). The participants engaged with old and contemporary Indigenous songs and artworks that reflected sentiments and narratives of Indigenous culture. They also wrote periodical reflections describing their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, which yielded productive results. To conclude, recovery of indigenous knowledge in the art classroom involves engagement with the arts and

histories of indigenous culture in ways that explore nuanced aspects of their culture, honour their histories, and is informed based on the input of indigenous community members.

Conclusion:

For this literature review I sought to answer the following inquiry question: based on the available literature, what is the potential of art education to teach and pursue practices and ideas that align with the goals of Decolonization? The articles that were reviewed demonstrated examples of tangible ways to present materials and discussions that facilitate decolonization. In terms of decolonial resistance, critical multiculturalism and social justice education were two theoretical frameworks that repeatedly manifested within literature exploring this topic, and the literature repeatedly supported the necessity for teachers to pursue these mindsets when designing art lessons. In Neurodecolonization, awareness of how one's personality influenced their implicit and explicit belief systems was key to performing inner work necessary to pursue decolonization of the mind. This was demonstrated to be an activity that was supported by both ongoing self-reflection over the course of semesters and discussions with others. The literature revealed that re-Indigenization similarly involved thinking about positionality when selecting pedagogical materials and designing curriculums informed by input from members of local Indigenous communities. Lastly, all three aspects of Decolonization that were investigated in this essay emphasize the importance of ongoing discussions regarding oppressive systems in safe spaces to help students and teachers decolonize their mindsets, and their educational system.

Overall, there tended to be general consensuses for most of literature regarding all the explored subtopics. Even studies that used different methods than most others to explore decolonized protocols in art education or that took place outside of North America did not

yield results that contradicted one another. It is notable that the oldest work of literature analyzed, *Traditional Arts Knowledge, Traditional Ecological Lore: The Intersection of Art Education and Environmental Education* (2007), focused the least on the introduction of specific frameworks, and primarily emphasised the benefits of land-based education for interdisciplinary study and educating students on Indigenous knowledge. This reveals a general shift in attitudes regarding decolonization in the last decade during which the other articles were published. Lastly, it is significant that less than half of the authors that performed the empirical studies are individuals who identify as indigenous. This demonstrates a lack of representation of indigenous voices in this practice, something that contradicts the goal of decolonization in itself.

For the next steps in research related to this topic, it worth exploring what a decolonized art education curriculum may resemble in 2021. This may mean considering how digital platforms can be used to enhance the decolonized art education experience, and how decolonized education practices that heavily rely on experiential learning processes like land-based education might translate into online learning. It will also be necessary for future researchers to actively seek out authors that explicitly identify as Indigenous, and are near the specific community they are studying.

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