

Complicated Conversations: Decolonising Psychology of Education

The psychology of education has long been shaped by ethnocentrism, its theories and practices developed from a narrow, male, Western perspective, leaving gaps in how psychology accounts for the diverse experiences of people worldwide. This article considers the impact of colonialism on higher education and describes a project at Trinity College Dublin to address and undo these systemic biases by decolonising the Psychology of Education programme's reading lists and curricula.

Introduction

This article considers the impact of colonialism on higher education and examines perspectives on decolonisation of curricula. The field of psychology has long been shaped by ethnocentrism, with most theories developed from a Western perspective. Theories and practices have often reflected the privileged viewpoints of middle-aged, Western, Caucasian males, leaving significant gaps in how psychology accounts for the diverse experiences of people worldwide.

In a co-construction approach with lecturers and students, the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) has taken steps to address these biases by decolonising the Psychology of Education programme's reading lists and curricula. It has used reflexivity and incorporated diverse perspectives, particularly from marginalised groups, to create a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of psychology of education through a universal design for learning (UDL) lens.



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Why was this project needed?

The purpose of our research was to explore the need to decolonise the Psychology of Education curricula in an Irish setting. This context differs from much of the literature, as Ireland has a relatively recent and unique history of British colonialism, and a lack of decolonising of psychology from an initial teacher education perspective. While Ireland has experienced some of the same cultural impacts as other formerly colonised people (e.g., language loss, identity development), the ethnicity of Irish people is less easily distinguished at first glance.

Lopes Cardozo (2012) discusses the importance in Bolivia of both intraculturalism (development of skills relating to other cultures) and interculturalism (reflection and growth with respect to one's own identity). The need for both seems appropriate in the Irish context.

The project was timely due to the structure of academic knowledge in psychology, which has historically been produced by a narrow demographic, primarily middle-aged white males, leading to biased understanding of human behaviour (MacDonald, 2006). Over-reliance on WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic) populations in research compounds this (Henrich et al., 2010) and prevails in higher education curricula today.

This bias exacerbates a gap in how psychology accounts for cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity, which limits the field's relevance and applicability in global contexts. The predominance of Western male scholars implicitly reinforces a hierarchy that prioritises certain voices and experiences and marginalises or ignores others. This not only limits students' understanding but impacts their sense of belonging in academic spaces.

The aim of decolonising education is to reverse the harmful effects of colonisation on marginalised groups, create a more inclusive, equitable learning environment (Phiri et al., 2023), and encourage students to replicate this social-justice perspective beyond the lecture halls. Reading lists and curricula are a critical starting point for this work. Examining how colonialism has shaped education in politics, O'Neill (2024, p.1) argued for a need to 'interrogate, and transform, the coloniality and whiteness of UK Higher Education'. Including the voices and experiences of students from racial minorities, she suggests, is critical to decolonising the field and challenging existing ideas.

Here, however, the pitfalls of white saviourism come into focus. Common in humanitarian work, this is a dynamic where white people cast themselves as heroes, 'saving' non-white people. It perpetuates a power imbalance by stripping agency from those who become passive recipients of so-called benevolence; after all, achieving personal agency is a hallmark of psychology.

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The problem with white saviourism lies in its superficial engagement with social problems (Cole, 2012). Rather than seeking to dismantle the structural causes of inequality, it offers an emotional experience for the white saviour, validating their privileges.

These isolated acts of charity do little to address systemic issues, ultimately reinforcing the disparities they purport to alleviate (Aronson, 2017). White saviourism may derive partly from assuming one knows what's best without recognising one's biases. An important initial step is to unlearn previously held ideas. The research team acknowledge the ironic nature of their composition, noting their personal and professional privilege in this project and continuing their own journeys of positionality and reflexivity.

Unlearning

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Scholars emphasise the need for 'unlearning' as part of decolonising higher education. Le Grange (2023) discusses three main steps in teacher training: currere, complicated conversations, and land education. Currere, developed by Pinar (1975, 2011), is an autobiographical approach with four parts:

1. *Analytical*: Consider one's educational past, present, and future
2. *Synthetic*: Look at fragments of experience, politics, and culture
3. *Regression*: Return to autobiographical and educational past
4. *Progressive*: Turn to an imagined future.

Currere can be undertaken by everyone, including teachers in training, to unlearn Westernised biases (Le Grange, 2023). Complicated conversations can occur 'when scholars of curriculum/teacher education engage with peers (particularly those with different histories, beliefs, and ideas, such as Indigenous scholars), in national and international spaces, and listen respectfully so as to interrogate their own understandings of self and the field' (ibid., p.16). Such conversations may be facilitated with talking circles, based on equality and shared power, where participants can speak without interruption.

The way forward?

This initiative is grounded in UDL, which aims to make education more inclusive (Quirke et al., 2022, 2023). It is well placed for decolonising the Psychology of Education curriculum, as it prioritises inclusivity and reflexivity, essential for dismantling biases. The reflexive approach to UDL and inclusion supports educators in critically examining their practices, helping to identify and remove colonial influences, thus fostering a more inclusive, accessible, and culturally responsive curriculum.

Guided by Quirke et al. (2023), the first challenge is the difficult process of self-reflection to identify our own prejudicial thinking, which may result in inadvertent discriminatory behaviour. Next, decolonise the lecture material and co-create reading-list material with students, incorporating non-Western voices, to ensure diverse perspectives on psychology and education.

Adopting interdisciplinary approaches would encourage intra- and inter-cultural engagement, allowing students to reflect on their cultural identities while developing an understanding of others' (Lopes Cardozo, 2012). As educators, we should actively interrogate our positionality and privilege to avoid a white-saviour narrative. Finally, fostering spaces for dialogue through methods like talking circles or communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) would enable meaningful, equitable conversations among students and faculty from different backgrounds. This collective reflection and unlearning of biases can support a more integrated, inclusive learning environment where all students feel represented and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The project resulted in increased awareness and meaningful understanding of the complexity of equality, diversity, and inclusion in Psychology of Education. It emphasised continual understanding of our positionality through critical reflexivity, with the goal of amplifying the voices that need to be heard. This is not an all-encompassing solution to the complex issues of decolonisation, but rather a critical and practical first step towards personal, professional, curricular, and institutional responsibility in addressing these matters and initiating actions that can produce immediate results.

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