EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM 2017.pdf

Marva S McClean, Dr.

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/marva_mcclean/9/
EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM:

WRITING TRUTH INTO THE CURRICULUM ACROSS THE GLOBE

Marva McClean & Marcus Waters


SEEKING SOCIAL JUSTICE WITHIN THE NEO-COLONIAL LANDSCAPE

bell hooks (1994) asserts that to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching so that anyone can learn. Peter McLaren declares, “we desperately need cadres of teachers to speak out and to create spaces where their students can assume roles as razor-tongued public instigators for social good (McLaren, 2015, p.4).” We contend that the Western educational system must take into account these words in examining the wounds caused over time by colonization from which have spawned oppression, racism and alienation resulting in the achievement gap between White children, descendants of the settler class and children of color (including Black,
Aboriginal, and other ethnically diverse children), descendants of the enslaved people. Globally, colonization has created and facilitated the elements that led to educational disparity as is evident in the fact that within the West there is not one country born from colonization where the Indigenous or people of color share in any way the quality of life of the descendants of this settler class. Even with pressing reforms, the past century of education has failed to close this gap because the focus on equality instead of equity has continued to feed this problem in a society that prioritizes efficiency in resource management over social justice in education (Espinoza, 2007).

This study interrogates how historically, the destruction of culture erodes cultural heritage and with it, social mobility. This negates human rights and dignity leading to the perpetuation of the so-called failure of ethnically diverse children in school. As a result of the complex, multilayered and problematic environment in which they work, two scholars collaborating between the continents of Australia and North America, complicate the data from standardized testing in their communities to “argue for the implementation of critical literacy as a step towards achieving social justice and equity in classrooms across the United States and indeed the world” (McClean, 2014). They push for innovative, nontraditional and experimental methods of teaching that focus on the oral tradition of people of color including rites of passage, storytelling and performance (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In order to attain equity within school systems across the globe, deliberate action must be taken to bring the dignity of all children into the curriculum and include the history and culture of formerly colonized people resting on the foundation of the funds of knowledge that children of color bring to the classroom with them (Bhabha, 1994; Gonzalez & Amanti, 2005). In pushing for an interrogation of the colonial origins of their background, the African Diaspora and the Aboriginals of Australia, both scholars argue for an
engagement with the past and an understanding of how the historical continuities of racial
tolerance maintain a system of educational injustice in 21st century classrooms (Solorzano &
Yasso, 2001).

**Investigating the Historical Continuity of Inequity**

The chapter explores the residual effects of Imperialism on the formerly colonized and
investigates postcolonial themes such as the Indigenous self, gender constructs, cultural and
communal identity, problems of location and (dis) location, and the interplay between history
and memory. Scrutiny is directed at the global educational system, which has led to White
students, their history and culture positioned as more legitimate and powerful, as students of
color remain deficit, weak and different (Mander et al., 2011). Such positioning is being
emboldened by the Trump era in proposing massive cuts to public schools in a clear statement to
“starve the public school system and privatize education” (Johnson et al., 2017) in order to make
America great again.

The Trump administration seeks to create a new federal program that will channel taxpayer
dollars directly to elitist private schools which are not held to the same system of accountability,
as public schools. The concern here is that taxpayers’ dollars, which are needed to improve the
glaring inequities within public schools will be funneled away, causing the divide to be extended
and the dream of transformation even more elusive. Johnson, et al. (2017) argue that this
capitalist investment strategy ignores civil rights laws and supports a school system which
accommodates discrimination in admissions and discipline and is not subject to basic monitoring
and oversight. As such, there is an increased capacity for these schools to continue with the
White supremacy platform that actively divides people on race, color, gender and socioeconomic
status (Johnson et al., 2017).
In addition, with the mounting social and political repression and derogatory representation of immigrants we are witnessing the re-emergence of fear-mongering about the other while the needs of those most vulnerable are ignored within a system that evades any direct and honest scrutiny of the segregation that endures. The use of racially coded language such as seeking “good schools” and “good neighborhoods” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 62) continues to uphold the standardization of the curriculum resulting in the labeling of some children as failures, with little or no attention to the gifts and talents they bring to the classroom. This deficit framing of the other within education and accompanying discourse is significant as institutions of learning have historically embodied spaces thought to symbolize truth, knowledge, merit, achievement, trustworthiness, objectivity and normality (Fine et al., 2004). These representations bolster the power of the privileged member while at the same time work to exclude, deprive and even silence the marginalized.

In examining themes of historical empowerment of groups that have been historically marginalized in the literature, the chapter looks through the lenses of Critical Race Theory (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002), Funds of Knowledge Theory (Gonzalez & Amanti, 2005), Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995) and Postcolonial theories (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Ngugi wa Tiongo, 1989; 1993) to shed light on the colonization and the [mis] education of children of color, the relationship between the particular and the universal, and the residual effects that the violence of hegemony and imperialism has wreaked on the society, family, and community. The chapter calls for a revision of texts to include the socio-political and historical knowledge of Black and Indigenous people. It seeks to disrupt the openly racist discourse fueled by a roster of White supremacist speakers (Thrasher, 2017) giving breath to an era of neo-colonial thinking which seeks to position White superiority
over people of color, denying “tension between equality and equity with little room for cultural diversity and difference or for engagement” (Altmen, 2013, p. 12). As educators, we find ourselves in an environment of open hostility requiring agentive action that opens up space for scholars to work as interpreters of culture and curriculum (Kanu, 2006; Moya, 2001). Because our interpretation of the world is inseparable from our transformation of that world, (McLaren, 2015, p. 11) we have collaborated to write truth into the curriculum across the globe seeking to create classrooms that are more equitable and accepting of diverse perspectives; a place where the child’s voice is elevated and celebrated.

**The Global Thrust for Agency**

This study has revealed just how critical it is to global research to have the benefit of scholars engaged in a discourse on the globalization of education. In keeping with McLaren’s perspective that we need a pedagogy of commitment and obligation (2015, p. 10), we have found that utilizing Third Space methodology opens up the redemptive possibilities of social justice education that builds historical consciousness and validates the contribution of Black and Indigenous people to the global landscape. We investigate our role as agents of change and argue for conscientization (Freire, 1970/1993) in re-examining the history of discovery and colonization in the educational discourse across the globe (Hall & Fenelon, 2009; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). We share the findings from our collaborative inquiry which highlight that emancipatory pedagogy as we put forth will empower students and position them as “razor sharp public instigators for social good” (McLaren, 2015, p.4.).
HOW DO WE CORRECT HISTORY?

We adhere to hooks’ philosophy that teaching is a sacred act that goes beyond passing on information (hooks, 1994). It is an intentional act of sharing in the building of the child’s intellectual and spiritual growth. Since meeting at a conference on Indigeneity in 2014, the two researchers have been engaged in a concerted effort to break down fabricated barriers and support and empower each other as Indigenous scholars of social justice and equity. At the time, we were brought together based on our common history of colonization and the residual effects of oppression affecting Indigenous people worldwide. In recalling the central role of intergenerational teaching practices in the making of our childhood subjectivities, we interrogated the turbulence of the geo-political landscape of the 21st century and questioned our work as social justice educators. We concluded that we had not taken strong enough action in contributing to the changes we sought for children in our respective schools.

In Australia Aboriginal children are often alienated from school where students aged 15 years and over are half as likely as White Australians to have completed high school (23 % compared to 49 %). They are also twice as likely to have left school at year 9 or below (34% compared with 16 %). In 2006, around 10,400 young Indigenous adults aged 18-24 years (22%) had left school at year 9, three years prior to even beginning what should have been their final graduation year of high school (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003).

In the United States a four-year gap extends the difference in performance between Black children and White. On a national average, 67% of Blacks and 57 % Hispanics graduated from high school annually in comparison to 81% of White students (National Council of Education Statistics, 2015).
In examining these statistics, we reminded ourselves of the need to forge a relationship such as ours, as “it is important for [I]ndigenous people to have informed allies outside of their local communities” (Semali and Kincheloe, 2002, p. 19). This study asserts that such relationships are necessary (Semali & Kincheloe, 2002) to widen the discourse globally leading to the broadening and deepening of our curriculum work beyond the K-20 classroom through deliberate action to counteract the hegemonic construction of the academic achievement of Indigenous children.

**Disrupting the Normalization of School Communities**

This study seeks to create a collegiate model of intellectual exchange and partnership between student and teacher in such a way the educator actively promotes self-confidence and belief in each student, their culture, and life experience. Teaching then allows marginalized groups a voice... a voice that not only acknowledges, but celebrates, diversity within the classroom and reflects upon life experience as essential in the way we teach and see the world. Education as it is established currently seeks to lock participants into established binary patterns. This demonstrates the complexities of the struggle in striving for equity, where the aim is to continually recognize and challenge the binaries that privilege some and marginalize others. By sharing our assumptions, beliefs and practices with students we engage them in an exchange that is reciprocal, guiding them to realize and experience the support we offer in their endeavors.

As adults and students work collaboratively, they both come to recognize the continued importance of shared learning that disrupts any imposed curriculum. Authentic learning experiences pulled from Indigenous Knowledge Production (Waters, 2012) are referenced in the chapter as tools to create the space for children to speak back to the classroom pedagogy and bring their knowledge and experiences to bear on the school’s literacy practices. Such an approach speaks to the cultural capital of Indigenous people and asserts the efficacy and sense of
belonging of children of color. It also reaffirms the classroom as a safe-space to negotiate identity. We believe that this approach will provide counter narratives which the Common Core Standards (USA) currently marginalizes with its increased focus on informational texts that continue to elevate Eurocentric material. This emphasis means cutting back on imaginative material, including storytelling, which we consider to be most vital in providing space for children to assert their academic identity. As Indigenous scholars of color, we have no choice but to embed our own notions of culture and identity into our teaching practice.

**Forging a Pedagogy of Courage**

We draw upon our custodial obligation as First Nation Australian and as Black Jamaican to craft our cultural capital within the curriculum programs we design. However, conscious of our location within an exclusionary education system, we collaborate to embolden each other from a position that Cowlishaw (2004) describes as no longer purely Indigenous or non-Indigenous but instead some “strange in-between space.” Yes, we are teachers, but we are also Aboriginal and we are Black. Therefore, we talk openly about our life experiences as people of color, in sharing with our students who are there to learn about the world they live in, our circumstance and life experience and negotiate a journey of lifelong learning. Our cultural heritage affirms that lifelong learning enables students to identify critical moments as heightened understanding towards strategic signposts that map a person’s progression through adolescence to adulthood (Henderson, 2012, pp. 20-23). It is the researchers’ experience that agency and growth evolve from an individual’s ability to recognize critical moments throughout their life journey, whether that be in reflection much later in life or as they are happening at the time. It is this understanding of lifelong learning as a journey of knowledge production before and after one enters the classroom that appears to be missing within current Western education.
In Kamilaroi Aboriginal Australian pedagogy there is a term called *gamil-bidiwii* which in English translation reads as a strategic foundation in establishing life-long learning. There is an acknowledgement that we don’t fully appreciate the immediate world around us without reflecting on past events and future goals as we shape our aspirations. Analyzing Indigenous Epistemology as past and present narrative upon reflection, is pivotal to Indigenous First Nation knowledge production as stated in Pope (2005):

Through the singing we keep everything alive; through the songs the spirits keep us alive. This is speech that acts and is acted upon: created, it creates in return. Such a view of creation as ceaseless recreation and of life itself being crucially dependent upon a mutually informing exchange of spirit and song, can seem strange and even unsettling to Western readers brought up in ‘the Whiteman’s way. (Pope, 2005, p. 144)

To understand Kamilaroi First Nation Australian pedagogy one must acknowledge a sublime connection that moves back and forth throughout human history, oblivious to time, place, culture and race. This is an epistemology ingrained within and through dialogue embedded within our need to express our identity from generation to generation. Life begins before you are born and continues after you die as you regenerate one common timeless narrative understood through ceremony. Practically speaking, there is no “creation from nothing.” There is always something “before the beginning,” just as there is always something “after the end” (Pope, 2005, p. 37).

**RESEARCHING ACROSS BORDERS**

We utilize qualitative tools including digital technology to settle the research lenses on ourselves (Boylorn & Orb, 2014; Milner, 2007), compelled by our obligation and commitment to disrupt
the standardization of global pedagogy. We apply an autobiographical stance to interrogate the subjectivities of the student identified as at risk and assert the need for educators to engage in critical collaborative inquiry across the globe in addressing the vexing problem of educational injustice that has persisted from colonization into the 21st century. Self-conscious of our location within the research (Ellis, 2009), we argue that self-awareness by itself is not sufficient to bring about change or empowerment. It must be manifested in agentive action. We locate our scholarship within the context of geography and history (Mohanty, 1997; Semali & Kincheloe, 2002) and confirm the efficacy of finding critical friends for support and empowerment which may lead to effectiveness, vitality, and self-renewal of the K-20 teaching profession (Hawkins, 2017).

While our collaborative inquiry focuses on the investigation of global Indigenous epistemology as valid curriculum text, we pulled from the Aboriginal Kamilaroi heritage for this unit of study. This, we argued, would be a useful tool to assert the validity of Indigenous epistemology, open up students to the global landscape and provide them with the space to speak back to the text in such a manner that would elevate their position in the class as cultural beings and critical inquirers. From this cultural space, the voices of children speak out on topics of contemporary discourse connecting them to topics of historical significance in the centuries old Kamilaroi Aboriginal culture. This study is complicated as it is filtered through the subjective processes of our inquiry into Indigenous Knowledge Production as alternative pedagogy. We collected and triangulated data including observational notes and written reflections from both students and ourselves. We critiqued our interactions with the students and formulated the hypothesis that when students are able to engage as collaborators in the enactment of classroom pedagogy, their academic performance improves.
McLaren’s assertion informed the theoretical framework of this study which investigates the question: **How can educators engage students as collaborators within a third space that elevates their voices as successful students?** In this inquiry process, the researchers theorize the significance of educators interrogating the complexities of their lives (Ellis, 2009) and the work they do in schools as agents of change seeking to write truth into the curriculum. The study utilizes the collegiate model of intellectual exchange rooted in theories of the conscientization of schooling (Freire, 1970) and Indigenous Knowledge Production.

Twenty-two 8th grade students of diverse backgrounds in Marva’s classroom participated in this study during the 2016-2017 school year. Marcus served as presenter via Skype in an intercultural examination of the Kamilaroi Aboriginal knowledge and pedagogy utilizing self-authored texts. This material was utilized over a three-week time period and students participated in critical analysis and discussion in an interactive discourse with the two researchers.

The focus of this chapter’s analysis narrows in on the live hour and a half Skype session with Marcus where students engaged in inter-generational teaching methodology bringing previous learning into the immediate experience to interrogate and speak back to the pedagogy formulated by the two researchers. Detailed observational evidence, whole participant observation and reviews of narrative reflections written by the students, before, during and after live interactions with Marcus were collected and analyzed by both researchers. We assembled the data and engaged in interpretations and findings. Utilizing qualitative tools, we triangulated the data collected and found that there was evidence of conceptual growth, development and increased historical consciousness demonstrated by the majority of students. The students performed
pedagogy which demonstrated their sense of being empowered as equal in a partnership of learning with us, the researchers.

**BUILDING RACIAL & CULTURAL LITERACY**

This study embodies the researchers’ mutual concern about the exclusion of Indigenous heritage from the curriculum in the schools children of color attend and seeks to find ways to correct the existing history and write truth into the curriculum. We questioned the low expectations the administration and faculty had of the students as they were labeled as at risk of failing the school year and organized into a group for remediation and placed in Marva’s class for instruction in reading comprehension and critical thinking. In keeping with the objectives set out in our program of collaborative inquiry, Marva began the 2016-2017 school year with students, focused on a multicultural calendar that was intentional in utilizing resources, locally, nationally and internationally to fill in the missing gaps in the texts that were assigned and bring the dignity of the children into the curriculum, including the history and culture of formerly colonized people.

We agreed that this approach would serve multiple purposes including opening up the students to imagine new perspectives that may build their learning into a transformative experience.

We aspired to create instruction that would encourage students to examine the social culture of other countries and engage as collaborators with an international scholar using digital technology to expand the scope of the curriculum. Within this cultural space, students would also investigate and share their expertise as evolving scholars.

*Gamil-bidiwii - Intergenerational Teaching and Learning within the Global Classroom*

Material from our integrated self-study was selected to analyze the efficacy of our approach. We decided to utilize Marcus’ text on Aboriginal rites of passage as it focuses on storytelling with an
emphasis on values, individual responsibility, and concern for the welfare of the communal environment. The text emphasizes several aspects of children’s learning styles and multiple intelligences including kinesthetic, visual and auditory. In addition, it offers an experiential rites of passage story to the adolescent getting ready to make the journey from middle school to high school. The story is particularly empowering as it presents the unique experience of adolescent boys engaging in a rite of passage ritual connecting them to their sacred heritage and thousands of years of history. This story reinforces how rituals are cultural tools and the significance of these to Aboriginal cultures; to their understanding of identity and community.

WHOSE VOICE COUNTS? DECONSTRUCTION & APPLICATION OF MEANING

Experiential Pedagogy

Dr. Marcus Waters

Inter-generational Pedagogy of the Kamilaroi First Nation People

Kamilaroi Aboriginal people have scarred trees, which carry their pedagogy from generation to generation. A scarred tree is a tree that has been carved into telling/documenting stories from the past. Some of the scarred trees within Kamilaroi have been dated over 20 thousand years old. At an early age (10 – 12yrs) and after having completed a first stage of initiation ceremony young boys are chosen, no more than three at a time, to attend sessions with older cousins, brothers, uncles and fathers to learn not only how to carve into the tree, but also sacred symbols that tell story and retain history. They begin by learning how to strip bark of branches to make both spears and shields. The boys are observed to see how well they listen and also their discipline ensuring these are the right boys chosen. The flint blades used are very sharp but the exercise itself is relatively simple as long as the boys observe and listen. They are then left to their own
devices as the elder Kamilaroi discuss the stories to be carved and begin looking for suitable trees. The trees are not random and make up a larger circle that surround traditional ceremonial grounds, both as an indication identifying the site to locals and as a warning to others not to enter this sacred site.

When the elders return they will look at the spears and shields for quality and workmanship. At this point a boy may be replaced by someone they feel is more deserving if the quality of the work is poor. The boys chosen are then told the significance of the site for ceremonial purposes and why the trees have been chosen to carve. The trees will generally make either a triangle, square or circle enclosing sacred land where non-initiated are not allowed to enter. The boys have their bodies painted with ochre (clay) from the land on which they are standing and have to recite stories that both offer protection and put the boys in a trance, which opens genetic memory and collective consciousness. Smaller logged trees are placed on the ground and the elder men (50 – 60yrs or older) create stencils with charcoal that the younger men (20 – 40yrs) are to carve. As this is done the younger teenage boys draw stencils on the logged trees as practice in observing the older men.

The young boys together with the teenage boys will carve under strict supervision. When the younger men are close to finishing the carving some will stop and join the younger boys supervising and helping them as they finish. Others will break off and start mixing ochre, which will be applied as paint and varnish for finishing the trees. As they work the boys will learn privileged songs that bless the carvings and ask that the ancestors be pleased with their efforts. This action also introduces the young men as the first of their generation to be chosen as carvers. This is a great honour not only to the boys but their parents, immediate and extended families. The songs that are chanted in repetition are also pivotal in re-introducing the children to their
Kamilaroi language. This will be essential in understanding more complex rituals, ceremony and carving as the boys get older.

Unknown to the Kamilaroi is that many developmental psychologists including Sigeman and Shaffer, cite the work of Jean Piaget in understanding this age period to be inclusive with further periods of adolescent development as the “formal cognitive operations stage” where logical thought and abstract skills are developed (see Sigeman & Shaffer, 1995, p. 199). As the older boys are required to plan in advance and systematically test ideas related to their uncle’s story, first told to them via another elder cousin years earlier, they learn to adopt a systematic and scientific method of problem-solving (Sigeman & Shaffer, 1995, p. 199). As they communicate what has been taught to them to their younger siblings, they understand the language they use to be referenced to an area of long-shared meaning (this is how collective consciousness, or genetic memory, has built up) involving not only their uncle, but also the group and their younger brothers, in relation to the world around them.

The stories carved into the trees record historical accounts and also explain the creation of Aboriginal people as a DNA that connects them directly to the land and country through kinship systems that originate from the time of Ancestral Beings that first created the land. The pedagogy recorded is inherent as epistemology that is clear and never questioned. The stories charted through ancient symbols of tens of thousands of years depict the Kamilaroi people’s Yanguru (Moiety as genetic memory) which is ancient and their Yarudhagaa (Totem as genealogy). Together the stories, symbols, carvings, song and dance remain connected through Kubbaanjhaan (ceremony connected to land) that allows the Kamilaroi to move back and forth between the Burruguu-ngayi-li (Dreaming) the oldest living ritual belief system in the world. This is repetitive learning; intergenerational teaching that keeps us rooted in our ancestral
heritage. (At this time women are teaching the girls weaving-creating mats—that stitch our
genealogy into visual text.)

**The Classroom Narrative**

**Dr. Marva McClean**

Throughout the school year, I have bonded and worked intentionally with the students to expand
their notion of what it means to be a successful student. This move has been challenged by their
awareness of the fact of their standardized test scores, prior experiences in school and the
knowledge that they were labeled as at risk of failing the school year. It has been my objective to
strengthen their literacy skills and engage them in the construction of classroom pedagogy in
such a manner that builds their competence and confidence as scholars not just to meet the
curriculum standards of the school and district but also to extend beyond that as critical thinkers
with the capacity to critique diverse forms of texts and share their perspective through written
and oral forms of presentations. This stance has been grounded in the Teaching Tolerance Anti-
Bias Framework including the following social justice standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2017).

- Students will develop language ad historical and cultural knowledge that affirm and
  accurately describe their membership in multiple identity groups.

- Students will use language and knowledge to respectfully describe how people (including
  themselves) are both similar and different each other in their identity groups.

I observed students interacting with Marcus as they engaged in reflection and questioning as
strategies to convey their interpretation of the rites of passage story they had read and critiqued
prior to the session. The objective was for students to take leadership of the session and explore
and assert their academic identity. And so, I looked for signs of their ability to present summary
statements of the meaning they had derived from the texts, their probing of the author to bolster their mean-making, their application of the text to real life and their overall sense of efficacy in participating as leaders within the learning experience.

After reading and critically interrogating this text, including writing marginal notes and answering questions I posed to them during previous classroom instruction, the students then prepared to speak back to the author to seek clarification, share their perspectives and make direct connection to their life in school, in their community and within their cultural world. The focus of the inquiry that follows speaks to the Skype session which took place on the afternoon of May 8, 2017 and lasted for approximately one hour and a half in my classroom. Present were the 22 students of the class, the school principal and Marcus via Skype. I facilitated the learning engagement largely as observer with the students leading. [Students’ first names are used based on their request and the permission of their parents.]

**Reflections by Marva**

Marcus (student) organizes the physical set up of the computer and connection to Skype and waits for Marcus (Dr. Waters/research) to call in and he accepts the call. Hailey then welcomes Marcus, introduces herself and the class and initiates the conversation. Peter volunteers and summarizes his understanding of the text they had read prior to the session and another kicks off with the first question.

The students had prepared questions to ask Marcus and under the acknowledgment of Hailey, they stand to ask these questions which I list as they speak. While these are the lead questions, other questions also emerge during the dialogue and are addressed during the inquiry.

1. What is the role of women in your Kamilaroi culture? [Adriel]
2. Was there a time you felt like giving up? [Christina]

3. Why do you paint yourself in ochre? [Peter]

4. Does your tribe work with other ethnic or cultural groups? [Marcus]

5. I am Amarhi, and my middle name is Itoro and it means praises to the Lord. What is the meaning of your name? [Amarhi]

6. Has there been disagreements among your people? How do you handle these disagreements? [Thomas]

7. What did you want to be when you grew up? [Peter]

8. Who is your leader? [Thomas]

9. What is the toughest time the Kamilaroi experienced? [Sophia]

10. Is age important in your culture? [Preston]

11. Why are some children sent outside? [Samedha]

The sense of efficacy in taking the leadership of the class with me in the background, demonstrates the students’ awareness of the goal of the session and their responsibility as collaborators in the mean-making of this live authentic text. During the interaction I frame my observation around five elements of interactive storytelling: Speaking, listening, movement, questioning, and reflecting/making holistic connections. The interaction between students and Marcus reveals a concern with their adolescent identity and reflects the immediacy of their application of the story to their lived experiences.

Students seem to be connecting their place in the world to that of the Aboriginal children portrayed in the text and convey their curiosity about the organization of the ceremony, children’s involvement and experience and the overall meaning of the ceremony.
“Why are some children sent outside?” Samedha asks during a discussion of the organization of the ceremony. They seem interested in the comment that the children are not forced to stay. If their attention wanes, they may go outside, engage in another activity while the others stay and share the information with them later when they might be more receptive, Marcus tells them.

In their probing questions of Marcus, they reveal an interest in his experience as a child and now as an adult reflecting on that experience and one he was now engaged in as a cultural custodian. Interestingly, their questions often loop into extensive discussions that facilitate a recursivity, weaving in and out into various themes; an intense discussion between themselves and the speaker.

Marcus tells the students that stories are a way of passing down heritage from one generation to another and is an effective way to educate about their cultures, identities and history. As they interact with him, they remain attentive and are deeply engaged in the interactive storytelling process. Marcus responds to the questions, often connecting to the value of passing down vital knowledge to younger generations through this experiential text of tribal gathering of his Kamilaroi people. In this traditional narrative of the Kamilaroi people, he taps into his family’s accumulated lifetime knowledge and experience and conveys morals about respecting the environment and the central role of women as both leaders and cultural custodians. Students are interested to learn about this central role of women in the Kamilaroi culture and expand their view on gender constructs in the society. Marcus emphasizes to them, “Each of us belongs to an ancestral being. We are connected through land, kinship and language. Each is sacred to us. Do not underestimate your potential.”

Peter then interjects with the question, “Why do you paint yourself with ochre?”
They are enthralled as he discusses the value and role of color in the human experience and expressions of identity. I can see that they are making the connection.

Marcus encourages them to explore their culture and identity. He tells them, *Look around the room. Look at the diversity in your room. Do you realize how many people have suffered to make this diversity possible? That is sacred.*

As they stand and sometimes move forward in raising their questions or probing for further clarification, I notice they are listening to the speaker and each other and resisting the privileging of one perspective over the other. They seem to be expanding their perspective on how a society may allow space for empowering certain groups—giving people agency. They seem to establishing lasting connections in their interaction with Marcus.

The interactions are contributing to the strengthening of the intellectual community in the classroom as the students are manifesting the space they occupy as a community of practice through their obvious display of passion, integrity and knowledge. And I am pleased with their sense of empowerment.

As they share their knowledge and ask follow-up questions, I can see that they are imagining new possibilities and connecting holistic reflections to the lived experience and knowledge of their communities. I feel that indeed, we have realized the objectives not only for this learning experience but also the long-term curricular goal of empowering these students as social justice agents of change. I am emboldened to think that they are well on their way to “plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world and will evaluate what strategies are most effective” (Teaching Tolerance, 2016, p. 2).
Reflections by Marcus

In negotiating the wounds over time caused by colonization, as a Black teacher of Aboriginal heritage I feel the resulting achievement gap between White children and my own children within the very education system that allows me to feed, house and look after my family as a senior lecturer in one of the world’s most prestigious yet innovative universities. There is undeniable juxtaposition between my own social mobility and capital gained from a ‘white man’s education’ against the labeling and scarcity of my own people rarely visible within the institution I work. In negotiating the situation, I find myself returning to a place before the beginning to find an answer. My people, the Kamilaroi people, call this circular non-linear world view gamil-bidiwii; a pedagogy of teaching that allows multi-generational dialogue as a form of lifelong learning that through language, ceremony, art and dance is interdisciplinary in its approach, and more importantly, never ending.

I never dreamed as a child of public housing that one day I would have this exchange of views, sharing and knowledge production take place in a south Florida classroom. This is a form of teaching through dialogue and storytelling with the space to interconnect ways of knowing, ways of understanding and ways of seeing the world with diverse students of varying ethnic backgrounds curious and engaged, despite being labeled and classified the exact opposite. I observe that as each student stands to attention, they would first state their name and then politely say hello before asking their question. I find this to be empowering. I have often given guest lectures at a variety of schools and you become used to answering. But to have this pause, a beat before each question in giving me their name, reaffirms our positioning as people of color. This is an acknowledgment, often just a nod of the head or even escaping with another and breaking into broken English, Kriol or what my colleague Marva, refers to as Patwah, in
connecting culturally before resuming a meeting with non-Indigenous colleagues. This small beat, and there are many displayed in public, often missed by non-Indigenous people, helps to bolster my responses and reaffirm for me my role as a cultural custodian, learning from and sharing with these children from across the other side of the world.

I am really impressed with the students, where both their age (mid-teens) and classification as ‘at risk’ or ‘learning difficulties’ defies their interaction, revealing deeper concerns with issues of coming of age, morality, history, identity and community one doesn’t usually see in an age of entitlement, social media and popular culture. Their curiosity is palpable and I can tell they are wrestling with big ideas and questions about life and cultural meaning. Marcus’ question, How do the children get in a trance? What is this experience like? reveals that they are striving to make meaning, connecting their place in the world against that of the Aboriginal children portrayed in the text, particularly in regards to the organization of the ceremony, the involvement of Aboriginal children either younger or of similar age, and how these children were selected to participate.

What was of particular interest was the idea of having achieved a sense of reward for the Aboriginal children involved together with the overall meaning of the ceremony as a rite of passage. This went beyond a romantic curiosity and spoke deeply of these students in the US, who from an outsider’s perspective would be seen to be living in the ‘greatest country in the world’ and all the sophistication and opportunities up against remote Aboriginal children living in third world Australia. Yet, as my old people warn me constantly, knowing I now live and work in one of the big cities that ‘there is a great price you pay for such sophistication’ and here it was as an exemplar as these US children appeared to want for some similar connection beyond their own experiences. I was not surprised; these are children who are not considered for what
they bring into the classroom. I have seen it all too often previously in Australia when dealing with my own Aboriginal experience as a child growing up. You never study people who look like you in the textbooks of Western classrooms, just those who represent the settler communities and their descendants who exclude you to special needs and specified classrooms. What did surprise me was the probing questions and how this experience connected me to my Aboriginality, my culture, my custom, and my Aboriginal communities back home in Australia.

Peering out into the classroom from behind a computer screen via Skype, the visual display of the children indicates that they are from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and yet it saddened me that they had to be prompted to explain their many cultural backgrounds. Peter notes he is of Haitian heritage; Samedha, Pakistani; Marcus, Jamaica/Hispanic and Amarhi, African by way of Nigeria. Though saddened, I understand it. Back home in Australia we are constantly reminding our children that they are not only Aboriginal, they are Kamilaroi, Wiradjuri, Kooma or any other of the five hundred or so First Nations that populate Australia. No matter how much ceremony, initiation or cultural repatriation there is, the hurt and loss of generations create a culture of wanting to become accepted, even if this is in direct denial of your cultural roots.

Inherent in this process is the requirement that the marginalized member adopts the privileged member’s assumptions, ideologies, values and indeed, their very culture as a way of becoming legitimate. Without such common narrative, those who stand out, be it culturally or because of their color, hold competing values which excludes or at the very least, makes some feel uncomfortable. Both individual and collective identities are then shaped by multiple and competing discourses encountered over long periods of time and it takes some time, and my having to constantly refer to myself as ‘Black’ before these students begin to open up about their
own cultural background and identities. As they question me, probing into the Kamilaroi epistemology, we then work collaboratively to keep the dialogue active and I recognize that we are building partnerships of learning between both teacher and student on the spot. This is an epiphany for me. This is intergenerational storytelling that I have been investigating all my life. From across the seas and via modern technology privileged through education, I am carrying the archives of my people’s 80,000-year-old history and heritage and sharing it with diverse children in a classroom in cosmopolitan south Florida.

This is how I justify my privilege and together with Marva we have spent the last three years investigating our role as social justice educators holding ourselves accountable as agents of change contributing to the international discourse against standardized testing, the achievement gap and instead, focusing our attention towards achieving educational equity.

I acknowledge the presence of the principal in the room and invite him as well into the conversation, hoping that his active participation may result in bolstering Marva’s social justice work with the students and an expansion of cultural work at the school. I feel confident that in this mutual exchange we are acknowledging past events as critical moments that create new insights for understanding the future. And it is my hope that this exchange of ideas will allow the students a calmer transition from middle school into high school, after all, should that not be our role as educators?
REFLEXIVITY: RESEARCHERS’ FINDINGS

1. This intergenerational teaching methodology worked effectively in the utilization of modern technology through Skype-to facilitate an exchange of ideas and meaning. In facilitating reciprocity, it simultaneously invited the multiple voices of the students.

I think that Dr. Water’s presentation was very helpful and interesting. He explained how his people tell stories by carving trees and what the women’s role is. He stated that if anyone ever broke a rule, they would have spears thrown at them and only block them with a tiny shield. He talked about how when he was younger, the children that wanted to learn would learn and become more knowledgeable and teach the kids who didn’t pay attention. Kaitlin

The experience I encountered from the Skype call was spiritual and very inspirational. It was an encounter that I would have never thought I would experience in school. After this experience, I now would like to visit Australia and see the culture and the Aboriginal clan or mob. I would also like to learn more and tell my brother about this experience and if he would be interested since he is Aboriginal. Marcus

2. This form of pedagogy attends to social-emotional development and validates the placement of the student’s perspective within the classroom instruction:

I thought that it was interesting. This was because I learned about the Kamilaroi people, and their way of living and principles. For example, they are ruled by women. I really like how Dr. Waters answered our questions in bulk so that we could understand the answer. I can relate because when I asked if he felt isolated when he was focused on important things, he said that he
did and I can relate because I know that sometimes I try to focus on important things but I really get isolated and focus on irrelevant things because I get lonely. **Amahri**

The presentation with Dr. Waters via Skype was very inspiring and intellectual. The way he spoke about his heritage showed that he has a lot of pride and respect for his family. Dr. Waters explained how he had to work hard for himself when he was younger and to show all his classmates that he was just as smart and just as much as a hard worker like they were. I took in all the inspiration and lessons he gave us and I applied to my life to better myself. Overall, the presentation was very helpful for me and my other students not to take anything for granted and be grateful for my education. **Christina S.**

3. **As the child’s voice is established this helps to build academic/intellectual competence:**

*He answered the questions in depth and did a good job explaining his culture. For example, he explained that the trance makes you feel like you’re in your grandparents’ shoes and living there. He also explained that the women in his culture are the leaders and caretakers.** **Ethan**

*His presentation was well prepared and he knew what he was talking about. He answered every question with strong details and a relaxed manner. He explained to us about the leadership, the struggle and the history of the Kamilaroi people. He gave an amazing speech at the end which was very motivational and strong. I could tell that he was talking through experience and from his soul.** **Preston**
I was very impressed at the fact that he remembered everyone’s name that spoke. I also really appreciated that he took time out to speak to our class when it was 2 A.M. in his country. I liked the way he expressed his feelings to us and how he went into depth of my classmates’ questions. I was really shocked that he was proud to say he was black because nowadays people are embarrassed to say their race or even that they are black. I also enjoyed when he was talking about his tribe and the name of his language. **Christian**

I found the call with Dr. Waters very exciting and interesting. I loved the way he went into depth about every question that we asked. The conversation we had with him was very deep. It was amazing. I also liked how he remembered other questions we asked and referred back to us when he was speaking about a related similar topic. I got really happy when I got to ask him a question. He went into detail and he was very specific about every little thing. Dr. Waters is amazing. **Sophia**

I was excited when he spoke to the whole class and how he shared his life experiences with us. I was impressed on how he remembered my classmates and their names and how he went in depth in details with others who asked him questions. I liked the way he expressed his feelings to our class. I was amazed how he was proud to say he was black because some people nowadays don’t like to say their race proudly. **Isabella**

4. The students, their teacher and the principal came together with Marcus in a collegiate model of intergenerational teaching practice that reflects the scope of this approach to effect transformation at schools. The principal’s note to Marcus presented below underscores the implications of such a radical pedagogical stance:
Dear Dr. Waters,

It was a delight participating in your recent presentation via Skype with Dr. McClean’s 8th grade students at XXX Middle School. Your presentation on Aboriginal rites of passage with its focus on personal responsibility, community engagement and preparing for the future fitted well within the instructional priorities of our school mission.

I wanted to take a moment to thank you for a robust and engaging session which certainly supports our instructional mission to build the historical consciousness of our students and lay the foundation for a purpose driven future.

I noticed that the session not only engaged the students but also allowed them to take leadership roles in sharing their commentary, asking you questions and reflecting on your responses. These are all instructional approaches that are central to our mission in building future leaders. Further, such an approach supports our commitment to building an inclusive community which fosters our students’ global competence.

I invite you to consider this invitation to collaborate with Dr. McClean in developing this activity further into a program that may be extended to our wider school community. I am looking forward to further developments of this initiative.

Once again thank you.

In making the strategic move to invite the principal to the session, we sought to instigate change not only within the classroom but also at the schoolwide level. The principal’s notes to each researcher document the effect of the session on his instructional leadership with strong implications of further development.

Deal and Peterson (1999) note that the school leader must listen for the deeper dreams and hopes that the school community may hold for the future. The principal’s participation and subsequent follow-up indicate that engagement with this classroom community had ignited a spark that may indeed develop into a flame, leading to future change.
We discovered as students shared the experience, they were able to persist against obstacles of shyness, negative association with certain class and racial groups and alienation. Sophia, whose response is detailed above, not only spoke publicly for the first time in the class that year, but she found the experience enjoyable and engaging citing she was really “happy to ask him a question” and she felt “respected...” That Sophia, Preston and Christian as well as many others noted the importance, and surprise at the same time that Marcus not only remembered students’ names, but also their questions and that he was able to cross-reference the information, reflect the reflexive stance they have taken in exploring their subjectivities and questioning the world around them. Their historical and socio-political consciousness is heightened in the reflection of the idea of race and color being a point of conjecture where one might be embarrassed rather than proud to publicly acknowledge their racial identity. This finding also gives a significant outcome to the study.

Through empowering the students, the research allows their imagination to move beyond the obstacles of class, race, gender and other forms of discrimination, in an effort to suggest greater connection, both rational and intuitive. Having established this partnership with students, the next step was in re-framing Indigenous scholarship away from academic critique and towards a provisional space which can document a parallel validity and authenticity for both Black and White, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. In doing so we are able to then demonstrate the capacity to engage the discourses of learning, comprehension and critique in order to make education more inclusive in disrupting the most powerful characteristics of our field: inequity, and further complicating the curriculum (Wissler, 1997, p. 88). So rather than inhibit a “strange in-between space we are in a newly formed inclusive third space “… between the generative act that brings a
work into existence and the receptive act that is a proper appreciation of that work” (Davies, 2004, p. 26).

**COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY for CHANGE: RECOMMENDATIONS**

We believe that incorporating lessons in storytelling including the significance of cultural objects will assist in minimizing stereotyping as it highlights the beauty and value of diverse cultures to be shared and examined in an inclusive space. We push for young adults’ development through the process of building historical consciousness to engage citizens within the context of critical race theory, funds of knowledge and reflexivity, writing and performance theories. This collaborative process is ongoing as both researchers continue in the investigation of the possibilities that Indigenous Epistemology hold for global classrooms. Based on the students’ probing and direct request for follow up activities we have now taken a further step to design and implement a mentoring program embedded within rites of passage theory for students from this class and others from the rest of the school community. The design of this work is in progress with thirteen students who have met in three sessions of exploratory discussions with Marva.

**As a result of this study, we offer the following recommendations.**

- Create the opportunity for both teacher and students to reflect on themselves as cultural beings and the sacred place story occupies in their lives.
- Recognize that cultural differences do not represent deficiencies; instead are central to the global diversity that typifies our pluralistic world.
• Provide the opportunity for students to expand and enrich their repertoire of knowledge, skills, and behaviors, and extend their cultural competence in developing a positive attitude towards their culture as well as others.

• Provide space for students to participate in experiential pedagogy and take the lead as knowledge experts in such a manner that showcases their talents and abilities beyond routinized curriculum.

• Utilize innovative strategies to acknowledge and documents students’ evolving academic growth and achievement.

**WRITING TRUTH INTO THE CURRICULUM**

This chapter makes a significant contribution to the scholarship with strategies to create a borderless educational community that will uplift the profession and improve student performance. It reveals the emancipatory role of children as critical inquirers who explore the historical context of diverse cultures and connect that to the family history of others who they might have thought to be different or far removed from the reality of their community.

We have troubled notions of the role or definition of an educator by bringing the self with its vulnerabilities and subjectivities into the research journey in spite of the [un]comfortableness it evokes (Ellis, 2009). Our collaboration reveals the possibilities of deepening cross-cultural understanding of self, identity and the power of community. It sheds insights on the role of digital technology in facilitating global collaboration towards building new communities of practice. We have unearthed strategies to energize ourselves through a model of collaborative inquiry that is innovative and empowering in spite of hegemonic constructs and policies and assert an expanded definition and new approach to literacy in global classrooms.
From this discourse we have broadened our perspective about cultural heritage the world over and learned about the unique cultural expressions of each other’s culture. The students’ probing questions, their reflections and revelation of their capacity to lead within their classrooms repudiated the notion of their status as failures. They enlightened us of the value of intergenerational teaching and reaffirmed to us that we can pursue creative measures in filling in the gaps within the textbook and write truth into the curriculum.

**KEY WORDS**

Social justice education

Neo-colonial Studies

Indigenous Epistemology

Aboriginal First Nation People

Disrupting routinized curriculum

Rites of Passage Theory

Cultural Space

Student as Change Agent

Collaborative Inquiry
REFERENCES


Marva McClean is a public-school educator and Teacher-Researcher whose research agenda focuses on Social Justice & Equity in Education; the Sociology of Middle School; Transnationalism & Post-Colonial Studies; Indigenous/Aboriginal/Maroon cultures. She engages in collaborative inquiry with international scholars to explore Indigeneity across the globe and create strategies to build the historical consciousness of youth in schools. Dr. McClean is the author of *From the Middle Passage to Black Lives Matter: Ancestral Writing as a Pedagogy of Hope*, Peter Lang, 2019.

Marcus Woolombi Waters is a Kamilaroi First Nation Aboriginal ceremonial keeper who speaks and writes in his Kamilaroi Aboriginal language. His research agenda focuses on surviving Kamilaroi epistemologies essential to cultural maintenance and trans-generational pedagogy. A published playwright, screenwriter, journalist and academic, he is Program Director of Creative & Professional Writing & Convener of Screenwriting at Griffith University, Australia. He is also a recipient of the Griffith University Excellence in Teaching Award. Dr. Waters is the author of *Indigenous Knowledge Production: Navigating Humanity Within a Western World*, Routledge 2018.

Please watch for the authors’ forthcoming book: