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Book Review

Centering African Proverbs, Indigenous Folktales, and Cultural Stories in Curriculum

Dei, G. J. S., & McDermott, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Centering African proverbs, Indigenous folktales, and cultural stories in curriculum: Units and lesson plans for inclusive education*. Canadian Scholars. 431 pp. ISBN: 9781773380612

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North American schooling systems continue to perpetuate Eurocentric values, knowledge, and epistemologies upon students of colour, establishing a sense of estrangement from their ancestral identities. In multicultural landscapes like Canada, Eurocentric curricula fail to cultivate anti-racism and inclusive practices within the classroom, thus, adhering to epistemic harm (Teo, 2010). George J. Sefa Dei and Mairi McDermott create a comprehensive resource in collaboration with pre-service and in-service teachers who actively seek to challenge Eurocentric curricula.

The objective of the book is to undo the Eurocentric curriculum design through the use of Indigenous African philosophies that allow for notions of self and community to manifest within the curriculum. By employing African proverbs, fables, riddles, cultural stories, and songs in learning practices, it prompts for disengagement of Eurocentric values and attitudes. The editors of this book use Indigenous ways of knowing as a point of entry to reorient the curriculum that seeks to reinforce disparities. With the collective support of educators under the guidance of Dei and McDermott (2019), this book offers units, lesson plans, and notes, entailing materials, modifications/differentiated learning, and rubrics. The supplementary materials effectively align with inclusive pedagogies, where racialized students see themselves represented within the curriculum and the larger community.

The book is comprised of primary and secondary materials, teacher observation, literary analysis, and teacher accounts from contributors. It is divided into two parts: Part I of the book provides teachers with ways to undo Eurocentric views within the curriculum by using African proverbs, whereas Part II instructs on how teachers can decolonize their teaching practices using Kenyan and Ghanaian folktales.

Part I of the book, titled “Centering Proverbs in Curriculum,” outlines an anti-racist and decolonizing pedagogical framework informed by Afrocentric proverbs and folktales. The Ontario curriculum fails incorporating anti-racist research to effectuate pedagogical practices within the classroom. European epistemologies embedded in the current curriculum standardize Anglo-Western teaching dogma, and thereby, trivialize Indigenous ways of knowing. Eurocentric norms that are deeply rooted in colonial discourse position the colonized peoples’ epistemologies and ontologies as primitive and project a sense of “otherness” onto them. By engaging with Indigenous knowledge forms, educators can bring forth anti-racism pedagogies to deliberately challenge individual, instituted, and systemic racism in pluralistic contexts. Subsequently, this anti-racist approach empowers racialized students and teachers to illuminate their lived experiences and realities within the classroom environment.

Implementing anti-racism ideas in education allows for racialized students to have the agency to co-teach and produce knowledge while also prompting them for reflexivity. Likewise, anti-racism teaching frameworks allow historically suppressed voices to regain and reclaim spaces

within public spheres. In essence, anti-racism teachings and meaningful inclusions of racialized students nurture equity and renormalize particular values within the social domain.

Dei and McDermott (2019) emphasize that anti-racism education aims to rupture power relations within the parameters of schooling. The image of the teacher as the conventional knowledge expert shifts when parents, community Elders, and students become educator stakeholders. Elders offer reflexive pedagogies through a social justice lens that extends the sense of community to Elders and employ culturally embedded values to counter colonial thinking. This decolonizing pedagogy cultivates equity and inclusion, so that all stakeholders experience the merging of “home” and the “school” into a communal learning space.

Part II of the book, “Weaving Units Around Kenyan and Ghanaian Folktales,” illustrates how the use of African folktales elicits different world views, enabling for decolonization trajectories. Decolonizing pedagogies foster an organic unlearning process where students can begin to reconsider the history of ancestors and historical events that are omitted from the curriculum. By questioning the norm within Eurocentric schooling systems, students and teachers are undoing modes of colonization while understanding the implications of assimilating people of colour into Anglo-Western schooling. Unlearning allows non-dominant bodies to be recognized while prompting Anglo-Western students to unpack the White privilege they embody. This is done in the hopes that all stakeholders within the classroom reimagine truths through a decolonization journey. Using Kenyan and Ghanaian folktales as non-Western stories allows teachers and students to engage in metaphorical analogies represented by animals who embody diverse worldviews. These alternative views disrupt the colonial logic and reconsider how diaspora has brought predetermined cultural assumptions which are reflected within the current curriculum.

Overall, this book is a valuable resource for teacher candidates and teachers who take on the daunting task of reforming the Canadian curriculum and their teaching practice by using African proverbs and Indigenous folktales. The editors’ intention for creating this resource was to prevent further curricular violence (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2010) that has been occurring for centuries. Resources such as this elicit transformative and inclusive practice that aims to obstruct forces of systemic racism.

References

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