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**BECOMING AN ADVOCATE
FOR ALL STUDENTS**

Sheldon L. Eakins, Ph.D.

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Leading Equity

**Becoming an Advocate for All
Students**

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FIRST EDITION

CHAPTER

5

Promote a Decolonial Atmosphere

Our educational system today has established norms that have been in place since the Industrial Revolution. The original educational system wasn't created for folks like me. It wasn't created for women either. These norms were created by white men for white men, and we still hold onto a system that was designed to keep the elite in power and everyone else at the bottom. There's a lot of ideology from Western mindsets that has continued to perpetuate within our educational system. This chapter discusses ways we can decolonize our classrooms.

Coloniality in Education Today

When we say we're going to *decolonize* education, we're planning to disrupt the status quo. One of the things I noticed when I spoke to many of my indigenous students was that they tended to have their heads down. They wouldn't look me in the eye, and that made me curious. I spoke to one of the indigenous staff on campus and told them my situation. I said, "I noticed that many of the students keep their heads down when I'm speaking to them; you wouldn't happen to notice the same thing when you speak to them?" The staff member responded with "In our culture, we view adults/elders as wise, so we show our respect by bowing our head. That's our way of showing respect; now if a student is looking at you in the eye, you may want to see why that is the case."

We live in a time when popular culture and "it's always been that way" dominate what society deems acceptable and normal. However, the challenge is that those who determine what is

traditional, normal, popular, or acceptable do not reflect a diverse representation of identities. Many countries in Asia and Africa revere their elders, and younger people utilize culture-specific titles when speaking to their elders. Some countries in Asia bow to each other, and some European countries (France, Italy, Spain) air kiss on the cheek. These are signs of respect in these cultures.

I'll give you another example. Growing up in school, I remember taking music class. I love music and enjoyed learning about various composers and the different eras of music. When we got to classical music, I learned about Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, etc. These men are considered some of the greatest classical music composers of all time. But to whom? I would argue that classical music for me should include Negro Spirituals. Also, were there not any women composers during this era? I never learned about Fanny J. Crosby, a blind hymn writer and poetess during the 1800s. Fanny wrote many songs that are sung in churches today such as "Blessed Assurance" and "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Saviour." I guess folks like me don't have a say in who gets included in conversations about the greatest classical musicians.

In the United States, we tend to expect everyone to learn how to speak English and assimilate to the traditional approaches of behavior norms that the dominant culture dictates. If you go against these norms, you are considered weird, different, and sometimes disrespectful. We see examples of these attitudes in school when students are taught how to walk, talk, and interact with each other according to how the adults in the building would like them to behave. However, are those expectations created with their students' identities and talents in mind? "Oh, but we've always done things this way" can't be the reason behind it. Just because you've always done something doesn't make it right. It's time to promote a decolonized atmosphere.

Decoloniality

Let's look at the word *decoloniality*. According to Future Learn, decoloniality is "A movement that identifies the ways in which Western modes of thought and systems of knowledge have been universalized. Decoloniality seeks to move away from this Eurocentrism by focusing on recovering 'alternative' or non-Eurocentric ways of knowing." As a former history teacher, I can attest to my disagreement with some of the ways I was expected to teach certain historical events. I never agreed with the rationale for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. We celebrate the expansion of what we call the United States and share one side of the story. We glorify names such as Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and admire their ability to study the terrain, plants, and animal life. We are taught to admire how they facilitated the establishment of trade opportunities with the local native tribes they encountered. However, we don't mention the impact of their "expedition" on the native communities and the generational effects many of our indigenous communities have faced because of this blatant reconnaissance mission, but we celebrate historical events like this as important milestones.

The Legacy of Colonial Education

We can go all the way back to 1779 when Thomas Jefferson proposed an educational system with two tracks. In his words, he described the tracks as being destined for "the laboring and the learned." What I find interesting is that even in 1779, coded language was utilized. Think about what Jefferson said. He called them "the laboring and the learned." What do you think that means? Who's in the laboring group, and who's in the learned department? Who did these categorizations represent in 1779?

Today, what terminology do we use to express ideas like this? We'll say stuff like "Title I schools," "inner city schools," or "inner city students." We still utilize coded language. This is not new. Another thing that Thomas Jefferson added meant that scholarship would allow a very few of the laboring class to advance by "raking a few geniuses from the rubbish."

We're going to set up these two tracks with the laboring and the learned, and on top of that, we'll just rake in a few geniuses. Within that laboring pot, Jefferson felt that there were a few geniuses. He didn't want them to miss out on any opportunities. Again, he was using coded language. It sounds familiar to me. Let me step on a soapbox for just a moment. It sounds a little familiar when we think about our gifted and talented programs. How does that look? Well, when we think about the representation in our gifted and talented programs, who's there? Are the laboring and the learned there? When we think about how students get recommended into programs such as gifted and talented, we must consider that as teachers and counselors, we're gatekeepers. We control the representation that is in those programs. Black and Brown students and students of color in general are not represented in our gifted and talented programs.

Let's fast-forward to the 1830s. By this time, most Southern states had laws forbidding individuals to teach people in slavery to read. Even so, around 5 percent become literate at great personal risk to themselves. In 1864, Congress made it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native languages. Native children as young as four years old were taken from their parents and sent to the Bureau of Indian Affairs off-reservation boarding schools whose goal, as one BIA official put it, was "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man." Indigenous folks had their hair shaved. They weren't allowed to speak their native tongues as if whatever language they spoke was a foreign language. Keep in mind that English is a foreign language. Only in America would we think

that it's more important for us to make sure that we preserve the English language. If you're not from England, then you're not speaking English.

Industrial Revolution 1865–1900

The Industrial Revolution was from 1865 to 1900. Surely, things have changed since 150 years ago. Tell me if any of this sounds familiar: Education was managed from the top down. Education was outcome-oriented with aged-based classrooms. Schools predominately had a liberal arts curriculum, and they focused on producing results. That surely doesn't sound like what education looks like today. It's different now, right?

How Can I Begin to Decolonize My Classroom?

My goal is to create a sense of urgency about the need to decolonize our classrooms, and I hope I've persuaded you. Colonialism persists in the lingering ideologies and patterns of power within the American educational system. To facilitate culturally sustaining classrooms and meet the needs of our students, we must centralize multicultural education. Here are some steps to begin decolonizing your classroom that you can implement in any content area and at any grade level:

- Analyze texts and experiences from multiple perspectives and lenses.
- Require students to think about how knowledge is constructed.
- Shift marginalized voices to the center of your curriculum.
- Invite students to think critically and acknowledge biases.

- Promote research and learning via exploration and discussion.
- Allow students to create relevant, authentic learning products.
- Adopt cultural storytelling and include narratives from diverse authors.
- Use inclusive vocabulary and challenge noninclusive or offensive terms.
- Empower students to make decisions about social and political issues.
- Challenge students to use their learning to take action and solve problems.
- Implement transdisciplinary approaches, such as project-based learning.
- Invite students to share how they experience their world and their communities.
- Honor culturally rich modes of expression and ways of working.
- Know and love your students for who they are, not who they might be.

Five Additional Essentials to Decolonizing the Classroom

Dr. Michael Dominguez was a guest on the Leading Equity Podcast entitled “How to Decolonize Your Classroom: Five Essentials Every Teacher Must Know” (<https://www.leadingequitycenter.com/86>). Here are the five essentials he discussed:

- **Essential 1**—Find literature written by a decolonialized scholar. When we think, “Okay, I want to be better as a culturally responsive educator. I want to show I can support my students better,” but I use books that aren’t written by folks

with lived experiences. We undermine our goals. The first step to decolonize our schools is to find literature written by a decolonial scholar. (We will discuss this more in Chapter 7.)

- **Essential 2**—Spend time with students outside of school settings. Recognize the importance of spending time with families outside school settings. Now, I know for two years we've been in a pandemic. It's tough. It's rough. Shoot, I'm at home. I'm ready to go travel. Spending time with families outside of school settings is not ideal. It's not feasible these times, but if there are ways that you can attend a quinceanera, a bar mitzvah, or a powwow, I recommend doing that. I am not limiting you to attend only cultural events as mentioned in Chapter 3. There are extracurricular activities, such as sports, debate teams, chess teams, cheerleading teams, and so on.
- **Essential 3**—Build curriculum around authentic transdisciplinary problems. How relevant is the content that you're presenting to your students? Can your students identify within their own community the content that's happening to them?
- **Essential 4**—Check your language practices. Are we allowing our students to be themselves? Are we allowing them to speak the language that they prefer to speak? I believe in the value of academic language such as Standard English. I believe that there's a time and a place when we want to be able to express ourselves in a formal way. However, we also don't want to diminish our students' identities, and I'll even expand that to our families and our staff. We don't want to diminish their opportunities to be themselves through their use of a variety of nonstandard English that makes them comfortable. (Refer to Chapter 4 for more information about checking your language practices.)

- **Essential 5**—Know and love your students for who they are. How important is this? I mean, we often hear, “Oh, it’s very important to develop relationships with our families if we want them to be engaged.” When we think about the experiences of our family members, we might have parents or guardians who have gone to the school. They may be alumni of the school, and maybe they didn’t have the best experience. We wonder why they don’t want to come. How are we providing a welcoming experience for our students and their families when we say that we’re going to empower them for anti-racist practices? This is not a time to set up a session or a parent night to tell our parents how to be culturally responsive at home. That doesn’t make any sense to me. How are you going to tell a family how to be culturally responsive?

Making the Shift Away from Banking

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, author Paulo Freire (1968) mentions the concept of the banking system. The banking concept views learning as a process in which students simply store the information given to them by their teachers. The following is a list of mindsets and instructional strategies that you can adopt to combat the banking paradigm and facilitate a learning experience that is dynamic and engaging for all students.

Mindsets	Instructional Strategies
My students’ views of the world matter in my classroom.	I can position myself as the facilitator of the learning experience, rather than as the keeper of all knowledge. I can invite my students to build on their prior knowledge to enhance their new learning.

Mindsets	Instructional Strategies
Learning in my classroom is an active process, not a passive one.	<div>I can activate students’ critical thinking skills by empowering them to generate their own questions, rather than simply answering mine.</div> <div>I can leverage the processes and tools that professionals use to allow my students to apply their knowledge to authentic tasks.</div>
Effective teaching and learning in my classroom require two-way communication.	<div>I can ask for my students’ feedback on my lesson plans and my lesson implementation.</div> <div>I can provide my students with opportunities to make meaningful choices about their learning.</div>
My classroom procedures and norms should support students assuming the roles of active, authentic learners.	<div>I can use discussion protocols that honor each student’s voice and contribution.</div> <div>I can co-construct classroom norms and ways of working with my students.</div>
I teach most effectively when I am willing to learn from my students and capitalize on their strengths.	<div>I can use a reciprocal teaching model to empower my students to support each other’s learning.</div> <div>I can allow my students to personalize their learning experience by incorporating their backgrounds, interests, and identities.</div>

Transitioning from Oppression to Elevation

In what ways do we intentionally and unintentionally oppress or discriminate against our students? This resource will empower you to take a deep look into the way our schools and classrooms operate to identify oppressive or discriminatory policies that may be impacting students daily. Use the following tips to begin making the shift from unintentional oppression to intentional elevation.

Tip #1: Acknowledge That Oppression Exists

Acknowledge that the American education system was not set up to support the success of students of color. As a result, opportunity gaps continue to impact Hispanic, Native American, and Black students. Take a critical look at your school's policies and procedures. Do any of them impact certain groups more than others? For instance, does the dress code penalize girls more harshly than boys? Do disciplinary policies lead to a disproportionate number of referrals for students of color? Consider gathering student and family feedback about the student handbook and school policies. Acknowledge that there may be systems in place within your school that are inequitable. Keep in mind that silence and complacency send a clear message to students that their needs are unimportant.

Tip #2: Listen to Your Students

Students' voices are essential in developing a culture of elevation. Students should feel as though they have choices and their concerns are heard. Involve your students in the implementation of school policies and procedures. If your school does not have a student council or a similar representative body, consider starting one! Students should have representation in the planning and development processes of the decisions that impact them. Excluding or overlooking student voices may perpetuate oppressive experiences for them.

Tip # 3: Inspire Students to Learn

Focus on processes of learning that are affirming, rather than forcing students to be compliant and prioritizing quantitative end results. To what extent are students able to exercise agency in how their classes or schools are run? Consider allowing your students to help you co-create engaging learning experiences that welcome their ideas and interests as they relate to the course content.

Conclusion

Reflect on who your students are and how they engage with the world. Allow them to bring those talents and skills to address issues and problems that relate to them. Teach from a social justice perspective by embedding content that resonates with students' experiences and issues that are important to them. Go beyond discussing the historical trauma that people of color have experienced such as slavery, genocide, conquistador exploration, and other areas of oppression. Presenting groups exclusively in the context of historical oppression only perpetuates a dominant/non-dominant dynamic between majorities and minorities. This essentially rubs salt in a wound. It sends a message to students of color that in the eyes of society, their identities rest on vulnerability to authority. Instead, bring in aspects of their cultural identities that address the daily experiences of students of color. Students also need to see the triumphs and successes of their people and understand how those people gained power.

Avoid the exploitation of cultures and deficit perspectives that maintain colonial patterns of power. Instead, help students learn in culturally congruent ways. Help students learn about science, literature, and history from individuals who look like them as the focal point rather than use traditional methods of content that are dominated by whiteness.

Answer the Following Questions:

1. Are my students' behaviors in line with my views of how students are supposed to behave and interact with one another?

2. Am I operating on a "you got to learn this for the test" mindset, or am I bringing in culturally relevant content to engage my students and develop their critical thinking skills?

3. In what ways have I ventured beyond my textbook, and is the content in the book indicative of my classroom demographics?

4. What indicator in each of my lesson plans illustrates my attention to culturally relevant teaching?

Equity-minded educators actively work to ensure their students can see themselves within the course content. If you truly value diversity and student voice, it can't happen through the occasional culturally based holiday or activity (e.g., Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, Native American History Month). Instead, culturally relevant teaching must be a daily practice woven into the fabric of the coursework in which students

regularly experience lessons that reflect their language and cultural identity. Go beyond observable and concrete measures such as food, music, dress, posters, and books. Those are important and exciting to students, but do not stop there. You can do better, and you can dig more deeply.

A significant attribute of equity is the ability to recognize culture and learn how students' culture impacts their beliefs and behaviors. Consider the unconscious associations of students in their behavior and demeanor. For example, ponder the ways in which students interact with each other outside the classroom such as during recess and lunch (settings such as these allow you to learn from students without the expectations of traditional classroom behavior). What are the norms of their social interactions? What are their communication styles? Consider their behaviors and compare them to what you and the school culture consider acceptable and normal.