

Decolonizing the Classroom and Resisting Curriculum: Centering a Pedagogy of Love.

A Thesis in the Field of Early Childhood and Childhood
for the Degree of Master of Science in Education

Art of Teaching Program

Sarah Lawrence College

Paola Brasca

May 2025

Abstract

This thesis is a celebration of critical, decolonial practices in the classroom. Through the lens of critical pedagogy, as written by Freire and several others, it becomes clear that we are in need of loving, caring, compassionate teaching, especially in the historical and political context that we now live in. Historically, education has been turned into a tool for controlling young minds, and most traditional education settings still perceive it as just that. I argue that we must form a type of pedagogy that does not replicate these violent power dynamics, keeping the child at the center. This can be done through classroom practices of resisting curricula, multilingualism, centering non-Western perspectives, promoting intercultural dialogue as well as critical thinking and agency through play, building community, and valuing diversity. I then focus on the idea of pedagogy of love as an act of resistance.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the children I have worked with. You have taught me so much.

My wonderful host teachers in New York – thank you for welcoming me into your magical classrooms. Cassandra, Jia, Rob, Michelle, and Beth, spending time with you and the kids was the most incredible part of all of this.

Miss Camilla, thank you for encouraging me to apply for this program and for showing me for the first time what a joyous classroom looks like.

Thank you to my dad for supporting me in another crazy move across the world.

And thank you to everyone else who was part of this journey, in big and small ways.

Outline

1. Introduction

Recollection: my journey in education.

- Times when being a learner felt completely right, and times it felt wrong.
- Resisting and pushing back against dominant ideas of what schooling and education should look like.

2. Standardizing imperialism: some background

- Colonial powers have shaped educational systems to control colonized peoples. Colonial histories around the world are interconnected.

Dei, G. J. S., & Kempf, A. (2006). *Anti-colonialism and education: The politics of resistance* (Vol. 7). Brill.

- Educational systems that were founded during colonialism still perpetuate injustices today.

Ginsburg, M., & Clayton, T. (2002). Imperialism and education. *Education and Sociology: An Encyclopedia*, 387-92.

- Linguistic imperialism is when the colonizer's language is imposed on indigenous people, allowing for indigenous languages to go extinct.

Phillipson, R. (1992, 2012). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Colonialism and education are tools through which Western powers seek to dominate and subjugate peoples around the globe.

Nwanosike, O., Onyije, F., & Eboh, L. (2011). Colonialism and Education. *Mediterranean Center of Social and Educational Research*, 2, 41.

- “Settler histories are reinforced by a colonial education system. The U.S. public education system continues to center Western concepts and ideals.”

Huff, L. (2022, February 28). *Through a White Colonial Lens: A Look into the US Education System*. School of Marine and Environmental Affairs.

- The United States’ colonial history has deep ties to its education system, prioritizing white-centered, nationalist curricula.

Sleeter, C. *Standardizing Imperialism*. Rethinking Schools.

- “English language teaching has become part of the process whereby one part of the world has become politically, economically, and culturally dominated by another, and the English language teacher has become an agent in the maintenance of international patterns of dominance and subordination.”

Naysmith, J. (1986). English as Imperialism?.

3. Critical decolonial pedagogy framework

- Critical pedagogists oppose the banking method of education and interrogate power dynamics within the classroom.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic.

- Child-centered pedagogies and experiential learning are fundamental aspects of critical decolonial pedagogy.

Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- It is important that our focus be on placing children at the center of our pedagogy.

Carini, P. Kanevsky & B. Wice (Eds.), *Prospect's descriptive processes: the child, the art of teaching and the classroom and school*. (pp. 77-83). North Bennington, Vt: The Prospect Center.

- The theoretical framework behind critical pedagogy implies an act of challenging structures of authority.

Dei, G. J. S., & Kempf, A. (2006). *Anti-colonialism and education: The politics of resistance* (Vol. 7). Brill.

- Western-centered perspectives that have been the norm in traditional education for decades must be challenged in favor of indigenous ideas. “[...] denaturalize assumptions embedded in Western epistemology that position Indigenous knowledge as [...] illegitimate.”

Ginsburg, M., & Clayton, T. (2002). Imperialism and education. *Education and Sociology: An Encyclopedia*, 387-92.

- Dialogue with and between students holds a place of centrality in critical pedagogy.

Paulo Freire: On Language and Power.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTwY2nGONs8>

- It is important for teachers to model an inquisitive mindset.
 “The key is curiosity, and it is curiosity, not answers, that we model.”
 (p.127)

Paley, V. G. (1986). On Listening to What the Children Say. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(2), 122–132.

4. Decolonizing the classroom

4.1. Resisting curriculum and challenging colonial ideas in education

4.1.1. My experience at the Institute for Descriptive Inquiry Fall Conference: what do you think about when you hear the word ‘resistance’?

4.1.2. How we can teach and learn about injustice and humanizing practices through children’s literature.

- Ginsburg, M., & Clayton, T. (2002). Imperialism and education. *Education and Sociology: An Encyclopedia*, 387-92.

Education = resistance.

- What does resistance as intertwined with education mean to you in your practice?

4.2. Multilingualism

4.2.1. Koharu: modifying teaching practices to better include the child’s perspective and home languages.

4.2.2. Daisy: children learning and teaching one another, and the joy of language learning.

4.2.3. Children translating: multilingual practices in a Pre-K classroom.

- How children use language to mediate understanding, co-construct meaning, construct meaning within oneself, and show knowledge.

García, O., & Wei, L. (2015). Translanguaging, Bilingualism, and Bilingual Education. *The Handbook of Bilingual and Multilingual Education*, 223–240.

4.3. Questioning assumptions and centering non-Western perspectives

4.3.1. Discussing elections and the Declaration of Independence in 4th and 5th grade: “this doesn’t happen now!”

4.3.2. Ubuntu discussion: creating community in late stage capitalism.

4.4. Promoting intercultural dialogue

Penpal project: emergent curriculum and multiculturalism in the classroom.

- It is important that we base our curriculum in our students’ interests.

Adair, Jennifer Keys, and Colegrove Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki. *Segregation by Experience: Agency, Racism, and Learning in the Early Grades*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.

- Multiculturalism as a way to expand boundaries of knowledge.

Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (pp. 39–58). Routledge.

4.5. Promoting critical thinking and agency through play

Play and project-based learning in classrooms intertwine with critical pedagogy and give children agency and empowerment to challenge educational norms.

- Cieczczyk, A. *Emergent curriculum as a point of resistance*. *The International Journal of Early Childhood Learning*. 2021;28(1):61-72.

5. Conclusion: pedagogy of love

- Teachers and children are in a process of self-actualization and taking care of one another.

hooks, b. (2014). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.

- Teachers learn from children as much as children learn from teachers.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic.

- Teachers model love as a way to empower.

Shalaby, C. (2017). *Troublemakers: Lessons in freedom from young children at school*. The New Press.

Process Paper

I never consciously decided to become a teacher: getting to where I am now was a process which included multiple amazing children, wonderful teachers, a global pandemic, moving across the world three times, extra long work hours, and all the love I have experienced for and from all the people who supported me in various ways along the way. When I first started this program, I did not think of myself as a teacher: I needed to learn more about myself (as a teacher and as a person), and about what being a teacher actually means. What does it mean to me? What does it mean in the historical and political context in which I hope to become one? Before I began thinking about my Masters oral project, I thought about these questions. I figured my thesis should reflect what I have learned about being a teacher in the past two years. Teaching is something I no longer see as just a job – it is a collection of experiences and practices that dictate a big part of my identity. It is a way to look at children as the wonderful, precious, multifaceted, loving individuals they are. Families and other teachers become collaborators, and together we create a community. I could not help but think that these ideas totally go against the preconceived notions that make up traditional education, which is how I started narrowing down to what my topic for this project should be.

Having worked in two international schools in Italy and Japan before I came to Sarah Lawrence, I was particularly interested in topics of globalizing education and colonialist influence on the way we teach. Initially, I wanted my thesis topic to be specifically focused on language and language teaching practices as intertwined with these issues. During my two years at Sarah Lawrence, in my teaching placements, I had observed

classroom practices that pushed back against imperialist ideas of language through critical decolonial pedagogy. I started researching this topic last year, and grew more and more interested in the existing research. As I began writing about it for my Masters Oral presentation, though, I was struggling to find a point of view and concrete classroom practices to illustrate this research. I then decided to zoom out of the specific issue of language, while keeping the same critical pedagogy framework, and to broaden my topic to include multiple practices — not just multilingualism. I had so many stories of children I wanted to talk about and I had to make my topic broader to do it. I also wanted to broaden my research so that I could include some of the theory that has particularly interested me over the course of these two years: Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and John Dewey, among many others.

The main thing that guided me throughout this process, though, were the children: they have taught me so much about childhood and teaching throughout the years, and I wanted to honor that. Of course, it would not have been possible without the theory and research I have conducted these past two years. The reason I chose to apply to Sarah Lawrence was exactly this union of theory and practice, which I wanted to reflect in my thesis presentation. Theory can give us a foundation, a framework to analyze our experiences, but it would not be enough to have theory without practice — my classroom experiences were valorized by the theory I was learning, and vice versa. After I decided to broaden my topic, I started making a list of stories of children and classrooms I wanted to talk about in my presentation, which became the base for my outline and subsequent research. As I was writing down these stories, I thought about what my point with all this would be, and once again, thinking about my time in

classrooms I knew exactly what I wanted to convey: I believe in the idea of a pedagogy of love that is political, founded in aspects of critical pedagogy, compassionate, and empathetic. This is what I hope to model in my teaching and the mindset I hope my students will leave my future classrooms with: placing value in love and empathy through action. This action includes the classroom practices I have listed in my presentation and many more.

It is with this idea of there being many more classroom applications that I look at my future classrooms. I believe that, as teachers and as human beings, we never stop learning. Therefore, this work is not supposed to be taken as final, as all there is. As I discuss in my presentation, it is important that our pedagogy remains flexible, so that we are able to better accommodate the needs of our diverse students. This flexibility in the name of equitable practices is what I wish to bring into all those future classrooms. I will never stop learning, and I will never forget all the ideas that I have communicated in this project – writing about them was a way to crystallize them in a way that encompasses my teaching values, while still allowing for variation.

To conclude, this project was an interesting and important one for me to write. I enjoyed the process of starting from the children and their stories to then build up my research around them. Children are and have been the center of my practice, and I hope I have portrayed this throughout my presentation. As well as this, it is important to note that this work is not over: we must keep learning, observing, loving, and taking care of one another.

Bibliography

- Adair, Jennifer Keys, and Colegrove Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki. *Segregation by Experience: Agency, Racism, and Learning in the Early Grades*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.
- Al Hosni, J. K. (2015). Globalization and the linguistic imperialism of the English language. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 6(1), 298-308.
- Carini, P. Kanevsky & B. Wice (Eds.), *Prospect's descriptive processes: the child, the art of teaching and the classroom and school*. (pp. 77-83). North Bennington, Vt: The Prospect Center.
- Chen, R. (2009). *Early childhood identity: Construction, culture, & the self* (Vol. 35). Peter Lang.
- Cieczczyk, A. *Emergent curriculum as a point of resistance*. The International Journal of Early Childhood Learning. 2021;28(1):61-72.
- Crain, W. (2010). *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications* (6th Ed). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson.
- Dei, G. J. S., & Kempf, A. (2006). *Anti-colonialism and education: The politics of resistance* (Vol. 7). Brill.
- Delpit, L. E., & Kilgour, J. (2008). *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of freedom : ethics, democracy and civic courage*. Rowman & Littlefield, , Cop. (Original work published 1998)

García, O., & Wei, L. (2015). Translanguaging, Bilingualism, and Bilingual Education. *The Handbook of Bilingual and Multilingual Education*, 223–240.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118533406.ch13>

Ginsburg, M., & Clayton, T. (2002). Imperialism and education. *Education and Sociology: An Encyclopedia*, 387-92.

Hagopian, J. (2024, March 22). *Israel's War on Gaza Is Also a War on History, Education, and Children*. Rethinking Schools.

<https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/israels-war-on-gaza-is-also-a-war-on-history-education-and-children/>

Hebron, M. (2002). Observing, Documenting, Presenting. In M. Himley, L. Strieb, P. Carini, R. Kanevsky & B. Wice (Eds.), *Prospect's descriptive processes: the child, the art of teaching and the classroom and school*. (pp. 77-83). North Bennington, Vt: The Prospect Center.

Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (pp. 39–58). Routledge.

Huff, L. (2022). *Through a White Colonial Lens: A Look into the US Education System*. School of Marine and Environmental Affairs.

<https://smea.uw.edu/currents/through-a-white-colonial-lens-a-look-into-the-us-education-system/>

Naysmith, J. (1986). English as Imperialism?.

Nwanosike, O., Onyije, F., & Eboh, L. (2011). Colonialism and Education. *Mediterranean Center of Social and Educational Research*, 2, 41.

Osberg, D. and Biesta, G. (2008). The emergent curriculum: navigating a complex course between unguided learning and planned enculturation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40(3), pp.313–328.

Paley, V. G. (1986). On Listening to What the Children Say. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(2), 122–132. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.56.2.p775487x30tk69m8>

Paulo Freire: On Language and Power. www.youtube.com.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTwY2nGONs8>

Pennycook, A. (1998). *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*. London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 4-5.

Phillipson, R. (1992, 2012). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shalaby, C. (2017). *Troublemakers: Lessons in freedom from young children at school*. The New Press.

Sleeter, C. (n.d.). *Standardizing Imperialism*. Rethinking Schools.

<https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/standardizing-imperialism/>

Sokolower, J. (2022, November 17). *Teaching Palestine*. Rethinking Schools.

<https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/teaching-palestine-an-interview-with-palestinian-educator-ziad-abbas/>

Tan, A. (1990). *Mother Tongue*.

<https://www.umsl.edu/~alexanderjm/Mother%20Tongue%20by%20Tan.pdf>

Children's Literature Cited

Aya Ghanameh. (2023). *These Olive Trees*. Penguin.

Ho, R. (2021). *The Lost Package*. Roaring Brook Press.

James Lincoln Collier, & Collier, C. (2012). *War Comes to Willy Freeman*. AudioGO.

Kassis, R. (2023). *We Are Palestinian*. Crocodile Books.

Lamothe, M. (2023). *This Is How We Do It*. Chronicle Books.

Mattar, M. (2024). *Sitti's Bird*. Crocodile Books.

Moushabeck, H. (2023). *Homeland: My Father Dreams of Palestine*. Chronicle Books.

Ready, D. (1998). *Mail Carriers*. Capstone.

Refiloe Moahloli, & Mcdonald, Z. (2022). *I Am You: a Book About Ubuntu*. Amazon

Crossing Kids.