

## **A RESPONSE TO DR LOUISE TAYLOR'S 'SEEKING EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR BLACK STUDENTS: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT'**

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It was a privilege to be asked to respond to Dr Louise Taylor's *'Seeking Equality of Educational Outcomes for Black Students: A Personal Account'* for this edition of *'Open Dialogue'*. In doing so, I shall attempt to provide – and I think consonantly enough – a personal account of my own or, at least, an account of my developing understandings of some of the topics raised by Dr Taylor. In doing so, I will hopefully signpost the reader towards thinkers who are considerably more illuminating than I am. On reading Dr Taylor's contribution, I found myself in agreement with her far more often than I was in disagreement. But having said this, despite the messages that we might pick up from our toxic system of political 'representation', or the tendency shared by many social media users to argue about the things that matter to us with the people who do not, I think it's also important that I say that I feel that the idea that dialogue is necessarily adversarial is nonsense. In my view, dialogue should be about achieving improved understandings, and here at the outset of my response, I would like to thank Dr Taylor for improving some of mine.

To say something about myself, I was raised in northern England, and I am of English, Scottish, and Irish Traveller descent. I lived most of my adult life (twenty-four years) in Ireland, where I worked for the most part in pre-service teacher education. I moved back to England just under two years ago, and important amongst my various identities is that I am the father of two terrific kids. I have been involved as a researcher, practitioner, advocate and some-time campaigner in the prevention of bullying and violence in schools and communities for the past twenty years. About a decade ago, I met two people (separately) who were very important in terms of drawing my focus towards looking at schools not only as locations where violence could and did take place between children, but also as institutions in which powerful agents in society – including governments – could and did implement practices and policies of violence against children, and the populations of which those children formed a part. These were my former Ph.D. student, Dr Jerry Lynch, whose work on survivors of Ireland's industrial schools has prompted my research activity in the area of institutional abuse; and Dr Hadi Strømme Lile (University College of Østfold in Norway), a renowned Sámi legal scholar, who prompted my interest and involvement in Sámi matters. This in turn has led, through various twists and turns, to my collaborative involvement with Indigenous scholars and scholarship over the past few years, which has been massively influential on my thinking.

Last year, I was asked to lead a newly-formed sub-committee on 'Decolonisation of the Curriculum' within my university faculty's 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' section. I found the idea of decolonisation efforts starting up in a university situated in the very city from which the *'Mayflower'* had sailed exactly four centuries previously interesting for a variety of reasons (and this included the laugh that this gave some of my Indigenous friends and colleagues in North America). I have found that whilst many people with deeply-held commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion (which is often manifested in years of genuine social action) find the idea of decolonisation attractive, what has dominated our discussions at these early stages is what is (and can be) meant by the term. Bhabra, Gebrial & Nişancioğlu (2018) noted that decolonisation involves '...a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies', but has 'two key referents':

*'First, it is a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study; it re-situates these phenomena as key shaping forces of the*

*contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view. Second, it purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis' (p. 2).*

In my view, it is possible to see some decolonisation efforts as a response to a challenge advanced by the feminist author and activist bell hooks a quarter of a century ago:

*'There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures' (bell hooks, 1996, p. 118).*

My view is that if we are to use the term 'decolonisation' meaningfully, we must recognise that its use moves us beyond looking at, say, increasing the levels of representation, at all and higher levels, of peoples of colour and (to use the UK legislative terminology) other persons belonging to 'protected characteristics' groups. In other words, whilst laudable, necessary and certainly long overdue, making improvements in racial / gender / social class equality in educational systems do not, in and of themselves, constitute decolonisation in its entirety. To properly engage in decolonisation in educational settings, we will also need to acknowledge and adjust the types of knowledge that we privilege, and to make fundamental changes to power relationships, especially (for those of us involved in university settings) those that are evidenced in the research that we undertake, supervise and refer to in our processes of teaching and learning. There are obviously challenges to this. In the first place, with respect to the 'alternative ways of thinking' aspect of Bhambra, Gebrial & Nişancioğlu's (2018) definition, and the 'paradigm[atic]' and 'transform[ing] consciousness' aspects of bell hooks' (1996) challenge, the traditional and continued privileging of Eurocentric systems of knowledge in educational systems, whilst entirely disavowed in the TINA ('there is no alternative')-style 'thinking' of neoliberalism, is abundantly evident. Indeed, neoliberal TINA-ism is only the latest incarnation of the age-old aggressive positioning of Eurocentrism in education. If we consider the situation of the some of the worlds' Indigenous peoples, a recently-published book that I edited (Minton, 2020) documented the evidence that:

*'In a number of countries around the world, a system of residential schools in which Indigenous children were compulsorily enrolled was operational by the late nineteenth century, and continued to be so for at least a further century. These schools were, in many cases, run by Christian religious orders on behalf of, but with relative independence from, the governments of post-colonial nations, with the usually expressed intention of 'solving' the 'problem' of Indigenous peoples. This 'solution' was often implemented in the deliberate and forceful removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities, and them being 'educated' away from their 'savage' backgrounds, into the 'civilised' ways of the colonising societies' (p. 1).*

We described the processes above (in the book's sub-title) as '*genocide via education*'.

Furthermore, the Māori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has ably communicated how the development of universities continued the epistemocidal efforts made against the native populations by European settlers in Aotearoa / New Zealand. In other words, from the perspective of the colonised, the very term 'research' (which, prior to her advocacy of the now realised (see Pihama, Tiakiwai & Southey, 2015; Smith, 2003) *Kaupapa Māori* – ways of knowing and researching consistent with, and drawing from, Māori world-views and knowledge bases - Smith described as being 'probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary', as it '....conjures up bad memories [and] raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful' (1999, p. 1)) is conflated with European colonialism. Small wonder, then, that from many Indigenous scholars' viewpoints, universities serve as *re-colonising* (rather than *de-colonising*) spaces (see Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004).

Coherent critical and constructive perspectives on the transformation that is so desperately needed within universities in North America, in order that they can become places where non-Western ways of knowing, being and finding out are fully valued, rather than being marginalised, or responded to in tokenistic ways that obviate change and obfuscate the post-colonial status quo, have long since been available to those who care to consult them. These include the widely influential publications of my colleagues Margaret Kovach (2010) and Shawn Wilson (2008), both of whom are Indigenous scholars who have reflected on their personal experiences of encountering real opposition within the academy. On a related point, the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2017, 2018) has noted that whilst in some ways universities should ideally be placed to serve as sites for decolonisation work, the reality is that they are simultaneously hampered by the university sector's embracing of neoliberal values and practices (for a prime example here, those who work in British universities may wish to reflect on the increasing commodification of university education over the past thirty years).

The practice of psychology, the parent discipline of most of this journal's readers, has been understood by Ian Parker (at least, in terms of how mainstream psychology is practiced and taught) as always and inevitably linking itself to power, grounded as it is in capitalist philosophy and economies (2007). The individualised, socially-alienated, economically-productive person is assumed to be 'normal', and psychology has served to regulate and replicate that norm. Instead of helping people to cope, current psychological practice has become part of the problem, rather than the solution. Such views are challenging to many (and indeed, they are deliberately positioned as such), because mainstream psychologists generally assume themselves to be utilising the 'correct', 'scientific' and 'objective' procedures (and should they teach undergraduate psychology, they will require that their students adopt similar positions), and remain unconscious, or disavow the fact that they have adopted distinct epistemological and ontological assumptions, and made distinct axiological and methodological choices. TINA-ism again seems to be the order of the day; yet as Shawn Wilson (2015, p. 33) reminds us, 'Any research represents the paradigm used by the researcher, whether the researcher is conscious of their choice of paradigm or not'.

If we *are* to do things differently – to make a genuine start along the paths of the 'alternative forms of political praxis' of Bhabra, Gebrial & Nişancioğlu's (2018) definition, and the 'practical model for social change' and 'transform[ing] structures' of bell hooks' (1996) challenge – then we in psychology and education must fight TINA-ism in our own back yards. We must first acknowledge the choices we have made, and we continue to make, and what we continue to privilege; and then make meaningful changes. It is to be acknowledged that the legacies of half a millennia of colonialism will not be overturned in the blink of an eye. As Wolfe (2006) argued, colonisation was not a single historical event; the structures of colonialism evolved over time, and have remained with us to the present day. But in our disciplines, there *are* indeed alternatives, and Dr Louise Taylor's marvellously insightful article gives us pause for thought on the inequalities, inequities and injustices that make it incumbent on we psychologists and educators us to play our part in seeking out, generating and realising these.

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