
Special issue: *Decolonising the School Curriculum*

Research article

Considering the role of social media: #BlackLivesMatter as a pedagogical intervention to decolonise curriculum

Thashika Pillay,^{1,*}  Claire Ahn,¹  Kenneth Gyamerah,¹  Shuyuan Liu¹ 

¹ Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

* Correspondence: tp61@queensu.ca

Submission date: 5 July 2021; Acceptance date: 27 April 2022; Publication date: 8 June 2022

How to cite

Pillay, T., Ahn, C., Gyamerah, K. and Liu, S. (2022) 'Considering the role of social media: #BlackLivesMatter as a pedagogical intervention to decolonise curriculum'. *London Review of Education*, 20 (1), 14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.14>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright

2022, Thashika Pillay, Claire Ahn, Kenneth Gyamerah and Shuyuan Liu. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.14> .

Open access

London Review of Education is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a drastic transformation to schooling for students throughout the world. During this period, a number of issues arose in our local, national and global communities, including the death of George Floyd and subsequent protests and rallies organised by #BlackLivesMatter. Living through and witnessing many social issues, coupled with the new and enduring pandemic, furthered our understandings of how young people were engaging with these topics without the structures of schools to support them. This article presents the results of a case study where youth aged 15–17 years shared their experiences and understandings about many social justice issues they were observing. The most significant learning around these issues for youth occurred informally through social media as opposed to in the classroom, reinforcing that schools are not ethical spaces from which to challenge institutional, structural and systemic barriers to justice. As such, this article discusses the potential for formal education to be transformed into an ethical and decolonising space to learn about and challenge injustice.

Keywords social justice; high school; youth; informal learning; formal learning; #BlackLivesMatter; decolonising curriculum; decolonising pedagogy; social media

Introduction

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, all schools in the province of Ontario, Canada, closed as a result of a ministerial order issued by the Ontario government. In the period since, a number of issues became more visible in our local, national and global communities, including instances of police violence, most notably the death of George Floyd in the US and the subsequent protests and rallies organised by the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In Canada, there were incidents of violence perpetrated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and other police forces, the Wet'suwet'en protests, and the decision-making processes around the reopening of schools in September 2020. We came to this study with the assumption that during pre-pandemic times, youth were provided with opportunities to engage in conversations around these issues with peers and teachers, in person and in the moment. However, affirming Battiste (2013), this research confirmed that mainstream schools are not an ethical space for decolonisation, and in actuality COVID-19, the subsequent lockdown (from March 2020 to August 2020), and ongoing changes to the overall schooling structure in Ontario enabled youth to engage with these topics, among others, in more substantive ways than they had previously, although not without contradictions. The purpose of this article is to present data from a case study that employed narrative enquiry to investigate how high-school youth (aged 15–17) in Ontario, Canada, were understanding and engaging with difficult social justice topics outside formal education spaces, and to specifically consider how youth are engaging with informal spaces as sites of significant learning, including more non-traditional spaces, such as social media platforms. We argue that there needs to be more attention focused on what decolonial and anticolonial spaces of ethical engagement of learning would look like – spaces where there would be invaluable opportunities for both teachers and students to work collaboratively to question and oppose traditional, oppressive systemic barriers.

Literature review

Key discourses on schooling often highlight the benefits of formal education in light of societal and public good (see UNESCO, 2020). The role of schooling in supporting learners to adopt social skills and values that enhance the quality of life has been widely documented (see OECD, 2014). There is burgeoning research on formal education, and in particular on the role of schools in transforming society and creating capabilities (see Tikly and Barrett, 2011). The fulcrum of these debates, however, has been limited to education access and/or the positive outcomes of traditional schooling (Harber, 2004).

Despite this transformative potential, it remains the case that formal schooling serves as a site that reinforces cognitive injustice, cultural violence, white supremacy, racism and oppression of minoritised and racialised students (see Giroux, 2001; Harber, 2004). The structure of formal education often generates very constricting learning environments where teachers and students are unable to effectively engage in critical and meaningful conversations in the classroom about justice and equity (Howell et al., 2019), and underscores a problematic outlook for conventional schooling, as it reinforces rather than ameliorates social inequities (Harber, 2004; hooks, 1994). That is, schools tend to reproduce inequities and, consequently, actively enact them. More recently, formal schooling has been critiqued for failing to address critical issues resulting from the stark inequities and learning gaps exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Allen et al., 2020). Subsequently, this has resulted in youth seeking other spaces or creating their own spaces (for example, social media platforms and speaking to family or peers) to significantly explore and educate themselves about justice and equity. Although some informal learning spaces, such as social media platforms, have received criticism for spreading misinformation, propaganda and hate speech (Carney, 2016), it is significant that these spaces collectively act as a transformative pedagogical space providing young people with opportunities to engage in wider social and political issues, thus increasing engagement with justice issues and bridging the power imbalances that exist within formal education structures (Chun, 2018; Greenhow and Lewin, 2016). The growing interest in social justice and

equity topics among youth through non-conventional learning platforms calls for a critical enquiry into how formal education curriculum is designed, understood and implemented by teachers.

A significant number of studies have examined the benefits of integrating social justice in the classroom (Dover, 2015; Guthrie, 2018; Howell et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995), as well as teacher capacity in this regard (Agarwal et al., 2010; de los Ríos et al., 2015; Kumi-Yeboah and Smith, 2016; Kelly and Brandes, 2010), or student engagement in informal learning contexts (Carney, 2016; Chun, 2018; Greenhow and Lewin, 2016; Kahne and Bowyer, 2018, 2019). Others have explored governance and policy limitations (Burke and Collier, 2017; Harber, 2004; Williamson, 2017), and the role of curriculum and policy in addressing wider social justice and equity issues (Kinloch et al., 2020; Liou and Cutler, 2021; McMahan and Portelli, 2012; Skinner and Bromley, 2019).

Yet, despite the benefits of engaging students in social justice topics in the classroom, teachers often resist doing so because of perceived barriers, such as limited pedagogical and subject matter knowledge (Burke and Collier, 2017); inability to apply justice topics meaningfully (Hill et al., 2020); lack of resources (Philpott and Dagenais, 2012); restrictive curricular policies (Dover, 2013); institutional policies and governance (Esposito and Swain, 2009); and resistance from students and teacher colleagues (Dover, 2013). Dover (2015) also reported that differences in social location and sociopolitical emphasis are also likely to affect teachers' approaches to justice-oriented curriculum, pedagogy and social action. Further, the curriculum and school policies often control, measure, categorise, order and regulate what topics should be implemented by teachers (McMahan et al., 2012). Williamson (2017) found that English teachers perceive a socially just literacy curriculum as complicated, characterised by ongoing struggles between multiple actors and ideologies from students and strict administrative policies. Studies have also found current K–12 curricula create *othering*, often promoting an agenda where curricular expectations reinforce and reproduce a colonial knowledge of the *other* (Liou and Cutler, 2021; McMahan and Portelli, 2012). Bringing a critical social justice lens has the potential to enable teachers to bring in multiple perspectives and ways of knowing to better support students (de los Ríos et al., 2015).

From the literature, it is evident that key emphasis has been placed on teacher capacity, classroom practices, curriculum constraints and teaching philosophies when it comes to integrating justice and equity topics in predominantly US classrooms. However, there are limited studies in Canada that fully address how teachers are integrating social justice topics in their classrooms, the gaps between formal and informal learning on these topics, the limits of curriculum and restrictive policies. Also, there are few studies that explicitly focus on how K–12 students take their own initiative to educate themselves about social justice topics outside of formal school structures. Living through a global pandemic and witnessing many social issues, this study highlights how young high-school students in Ontario, Canada, have engaged with justice and equity topics through informal spaces in response to the lack of space within formal education structures.

Theoretical framework

Institutional, structural and systemic racism is formalised in the school system through policies and practices. Whiteness is the norm, and it is reproduced by educational practices and policies, thereby reifying and normalising racism (Dei, 2008). Furthermore, within the Canadian school system, colonial histories unequally bind Indigenous, Black, racialised and other non-Indigenous peoples through 'colonial frontier logics . . . enforc[ing] epistemological and social conformity to Eurowestern standards' (Donald, 2009: 4). When it remains unquestioned, colonial thinking denies how white supremacy enables complicity in structures of inequality, normalising existing unjust systems and reinforcing whiteness, as the suffering of Black, Indigenous and other racialised peoples becomes a tool for learning. Paradoxically, even when education exposes the 'historical exploitation, domination, and colonisation to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy', it may inadvertently pathologise communities according to a 'theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation' (Tuck, 2009: 413). Meanwhile, the Euro-Western orientation of the school system risks making Indigenous and Black expressions of resurgence invisible or appropriating Indigenous ways of knowing and Black consciousness for colonial ends. Colonial ways of knowing and being may find expression in educational initiatives that address the symptoms of inequity rather than reconfiguring the structures and relationships that contribute to inequity.

Considering the ubiquity of colonial ways of knowing and being in mainstream Canadian schools, this article analyses how informal education through social media is contributing to the use of Black, Indigenous, Asian and other racialised peoples' suffering as a point of departure into educating about justice and equity. This calls on us to question how these moments can move away from causing further harm and instead lead to 'ethical relationality' (Donald, 2009), that is: 'an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other' (Donald, 2009: 9; see also Ermine, 2007; Lear, 2006). When grounded in ethical relationality, learning does not only rely on personal experiences of injustice (Ho et al., 2015; Sasser, 2014) but also upon relational understandings of how we may act together from our various positions. Within education systems shaped by colonial histories, significant relationship building, guided through a commitment to cognitive justice, is required for such work.

Cognitive justice calls for 'space[s] of engagement' (Grande, 2014: 234) with (settler) colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, racism, imperialism and neoliberalism. According to Prakash (1995, as cited in Odora Hoppers, 2009), this process of ethical engagement produces an agenda to resist injustice. It encompasses:

diverse communities of problem solving . . . with a non-market, non-competitive view of the world, where conversation, reciprocity, translation create knowledge not as an expert, almost zero-sum view of the world but as a collaboration of memories, legacies, heritages, a manifold heuristics of problem solving, where citizen[s] [take] both power and knowledge into [their] own hands. (Visvanathan, 2009: 38)

As such, this article discusses the possibilities of creating decolonial and anticolonial spaces for ethical engagement in schools where educators and students work to challenge institutional, structural and systemic barriers to justice through education, and offers a critical interpretation of how decolonising the curriculum can support such engagement.

Methodology

The objective of our research was to explore youth's experiences and understandings of the various social justice events that have been occurring since the start of the pandemic. Ethics approval was received from Queen's University General Ethics Board (Approval #1018-20) prior to commencing the study. General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) were followed in the handling of all confidential and personal data. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all research assistants and the transcriber who had access to the raw data signed confidentiality agreements.

We employed a case study methodology, with our case being a very specific time period (the first COVID-19 restrictions period in Ontario, Canada, between March and September 2020), accompanied by specific events during this period (lockdown, changes in schooling, re-emerging social justice issues). This unique time offered an important temporal case study to understand the ways in which youth were engaging in social justice topics. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic in conjunction with the initial closure of schools, subsequent move to asynchronous learning, and the Ontario Ministry of Education policy decision that student course grades could not decrease for the remainder of the school year provided a unique opportunity in which many youth could engage with the world around them differently, as they were no longer burdened with learning being tied to formal assessment practices. As such, the experiences of youth during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in Ontario presented an ideal case from which to explore a more 'holistic representation of context-dependent knowledge of/in practice' (Miles, 2015: 309; Flyvbjerg, 2001). The context- or temporal-dependent knowledge was critical in drawing much-needed attention to how youth were engaging in social justice events during the pandemic, which in turn will help to inform curriculum development, instructional strategies and policy development.

In order to richly capture youth's experiences, we also adopted a narrative enquiry process. Many of the issues addressed in this research (for example, #BlackLivesMatter [#BLM], Indigenous rights or police brutality) are very complex, challenging and difficult to navigate for most adults, and likely even more so for youth as they seek to grapple with and understand the inherent issues, their own understanding, and their own positionality in relation to the events. As such, we invited participants to reflect on their experiences and understanding through stories. There is an ease, a relatability and a power to being able

to connect with and share experiences through (re)telling stories. It is a fluid relationship; that is, 'people shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are . . . Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience' (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006: 477). Through the interview process, all participants connected with our questions or discussions through the (re)telling of stories.

Participants (n=10) included youth aged 15 to 17 with a range of diverse racialised and cultural backgrounds who were enrolled in a high school in a south-eastern city in Ontario. Two of the participants used he/him pronouns; eight participants used she/her pronouns. Based on their availability or their preference, we arranged semi-structured focus groups or individual interviews with participants that were conducted over Zoom. These lasted for 60–90 minutes, were recorded, professionally transcribed and edited by the research team. Questions during the first set of interviews included broadly asking about participants' awareness and understanding of the following issues: the Wet'suwet'en protests and train blockades in Canada, #BLM protests in the US and Canada, police violence (including by the RCMP) and the COVID-19 pandemic in general and its impact on schooling. Participants were asked questions such as: What do you recall about this event? What sorts of discussions did you have with peers, family and teachers? Did you seek out any information on your own and in what ways? Their responses were largely contextualised around specific anecdotes, such as talking to friends or family, or experiences observed and learned through online and in-person schooling and, in some cases, connections to work or extra-curricular activities. Based on the data and the preliminary analysis of the first set of interviews, 30-minute follow-up interviews were conducted with individual participants over Zoom. These were recorded, professionally transcribed and edited by the research team. Questions for the follow-up interview varied, as they invited participants to expand on their thoughts or understandings about the events from the previous interview.

The data were thematically coded using NVivo, which enabled the exploration of patterns without a predetermined set of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2014). We followed Creswell's (2007, 2014) stages of thematic analysis by first organising and (re)reading the data, categorising, refining and describing the codes. The process was highly iterative, and we continued to revisit or re-analyse the themes and sub-themes when necessary. The results of our analysis yielded four main themes: education, power, knowledge and positionality. Each theme included multiple and related sub-themes. For the purpose of this article, we will focus the discussion on one of the more prevalent recurring education themes: the gaps between formal and informal learning, with specific attention to two sub-themes – social justice performativity in the classroom and considering social media as decolonial and anticolonial learning spaces in order to engage in decolonising curriculum and educational spaces.

Findings

Gaps between formal and informal learning

This section provides an overview of one of the main themes, the noted gaps between participants' experiences with formal and informal learning. In the context of this article, we refer to *formal learning* as opportunities that are typically implemented in traditional K–12 school environments, which include either physical classroom spaces or online remote learning environments; it is derived from the activities directed by the teacher in classroom settings, such as lectures, classroom activities and assignments, elements mandated by government and school-based curricula and policies. *Informal learning* refers to learning that occurs outside of the classroom or school, and is often unstructured. Informal learning can occur explicitly (for example, direction and guidance from parents or mentors) or implicitly (for example, reading about events on social media, listening to conversations or observing interactions). Examples of informal learning in the context of this study include:

- interactions and conversations with peers, family and work colleagues
- participation and/or involvement in extracurricular activities, or community and/or religious organisations
- engagement with social media platforms.

For the purposes of this article, we focus on the informal learning experiences of participants gleaned from their engagement with social media platforms, as that appeared to be their primary informal space of learning.

As noted earlier, during the interviews, we asked participants about their awareness and understanding of a number of key issues that occurred during the early onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The events that generated the most discussion among participants were in relation to the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent resurgence of the #BLM protests. With the exception of Gloria and Lua Choiva, who did not have social media accounts because of personal choice or family rules, respectively, all other participants learned about the murder and #BLM activist movements (and most other social justice issues) via social media, with Instagram being their preferred platform. Fay and Ada both observed that after the murder of George Floyd, their social media feeds 'blew up'. Fay augmented her comments by noting, 'I don't think I've ever seen something like that happen.' Ada noted that her social media feeds were also 'blowing up' because she had 'heard a lot about [#BLM] because I have Black friends'. She also noted that she was engaging in and observing many important conversations about related issues and events. Kamilah also noted how youth typically engage with and learn about important social justice issues via social media: 'I think that this generation specifically is overwhelmed or bombarded constantly with all sorts of information. So we don't even need to look for it.' This was then quickly followed by a question: 'Why are 15-year-olds and 16-year-olds talking about this kind of stuff in such detailed depth in comparison to other generations?' Fay shared that such learnings may be left to informal contexts because 'I doubt the teacher really has much time to take out of the day to have a discussion like this when she's just trying to get through a curriculum, which we're going to be tested on [in] an exam.' Furthermore, both Kamilah and Ada noted how young people were relying on social media to engage in important conversations, but, as Kamilah asked, why are young people placed in situations where they are engaging with complicated and challenging topics mostly on their own? It is this question that becomes the focus of our findings and subsequent discussion on two sub-themes.

Social justice performativity in the classrooms

When asked whether or not participants were engaging in conversations or topics about social justice events such as the #BlackLivesMatter protests, Diana noted:

my class is actually . . . reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is [a] book about racism. So it was good timing . . . when we were talking about the book to kind of look at the protest and how the book is related . . . how there's still a problem of racism and injustice in our society.

Diana further added that studying *To Kill a Mockingbird* was 'really good learning for me in English class, but at the same time, it was really hard to read a book about real life and then look at the news and look at videos of the exact same thing happening'. In her follow-up interview, Carmen noted that she was enrolled in an Indigenous English course, and that she was reading *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, death, and hard truths in a northern city* by Tanya Talaga and shared the following: 'I really liked it. I found it really interesting . . . I learned a lot more about Indigenous issues.' When asked about whether her teacher extended upon the topics shared in the book, Carmen noted:

[The teacher] mostly just sends us articles to read or sends us off to read the book, . . . [our classes are] mostly about just what has been happening in the book and then she'll teach us how to answer questions on it. But questions have been like, 'what is the message of this paragraph' . . . [and] we haven't really talked about any of the Indigenous issues, [which is what] I was hoping would happen.

Ignatius, enrolled in a different school to Carmen, was also taking the Indigenous English class, and also read Talaga's book. While he admitted to 'hating English', he did share that:

[*Seven Fallen Feathers* is] actually probably one of the best books that I've read in an English class because it's not written by an old dead white guy [and] that's always a bonus. . . . the book is three years old. So . . . that's pretty good. But once again, you're not getting to what's happening today. Any articles that [the teacher is] picking for us to read and dissect are all at least a few years old. . . . there would have been so much opportunity to discuss what's happening today and why it's relevant, but that has not happened.

By 'what's happening today', Ignatius referred to examples such as the attack on the Mi'kmaq fisheries in Atlantic Canada and the Wet'suwet'en protests against the Coastal GasLink pipeline in British Columbia. Ignatius did note that he was 'kind of nervous' about reading Talaga's book because:

I've had really bad experiences with teachers teaching about diverse communities. . . . I'm curious about what training [the teacher had] . . . You know if she had conversations with Indigenous people and that kind of education piece . . . what process has happened for her to be able to teach this course with context and perspective that is culturally appropriate. . . . I feel like I haven't learned anything in an English class since the sixth grade . . . there's so much potential there. And . . . it's not taken advantage of.

Outside of English classes, Diana commented that her civics class focused on 'incorporating global problems and politics' and that she did engage with a wider variety of topics and issues, such as 'on why Indigenous people do not have drinkable water', but that in her civics class she did not engage with 'many projects that were happening [such as with] Black Lives Matter or the global pandemic'. Carmen shared an incident about her history teacher, who she described as 'great', but noted an example where he directed the class on a project about 'LGBTQ rights issues' by sharing 'a few resources and then we would go in and search [a topic] ourselves . . . '. Carmen elaborated:

So [my peers] would come up with homophobic essays and then hand them in. And then he'd have to analyse it and have their point of view. So [he wasn't] able to go in and be like, 'hey, this is a really biased point of view, maybe change that' . . . he's not really able to do that, which I think should kind of be changed . . . I feel that definitely shouldn't happen in class.

Kamilah, who was part of Carmen's focus group, followed up:

Every student should have the right to express their opinion. It comes down, though, to [whether] their opinion is hurting others or . . . if their opinion [is] implicitly racist or homophobic . . . because a lot of teachers tend to just completely brush it off and just kind of be, like, all right. I didn't see that.

In their follow-up interviews, when participants were asked about thoughts or suggestions they had about ways to combat racism and bring more social justice issues into the classroom to move towards more equitable processes, Kamilah suggested that 'we need to start with the light stuff', and that, for example, 'music is something that connects people cross-culturally . . . you don't need to really speak the language or understand the lyrics to feel it'. She expanded by suggesting introducing 'other culture's food because you're starting with something that is a commonality; we all listen to music. We all eat food.'

Schools as traumatising spaces for minoritised youth

As the youth participants in this study indicated, schools are traumatising spaces for minoritised youth. Kamilah noted: 'I don't think school is a very amazing space. Even if the teacher is amazing, the student environment is not. So it's not amazing to have conversations like these in school communities.' Kamilah also discussed how Black youth were often labelled as 'the token Black kid' in their friend groups, and Carmen denoted how Black youth had their racialised identity erased and were described as 'white' because 'he's a very sweet guy'. Not only were these students' identities erased, but their Blackness was seen as problematic. As Ada noted, whiteness 'is seen as the ideal'. Within these physical school spaces, the participants indicated that they and many of their peers were negatively impacted by a culture that embraced white cis-gendered heterosexuality as the norm. Furthermore, the conversations in which they had been taking part or observing on social media platforms were not transferring to the physical classroom space, further contributing to the traumatising effect of schooling.

This othering of Black, Indigenous and racialised students, as well as gender and sexual minority students, was not confined to their peers but also evidenced through the actions of educators. Ada discussed a teacher who spoke of white students as 'not allowed in DECA' (The Distributive Education Clubs of America), and while this may be explained away as sarcasm or a facetious response, it has the effect of reinforcing a belief among some students that such clubs are purposefully excluding white students, perpetuating a problematic and false understanding. Furthermore, while teachers attempted to incorporate topics around justice that were occurring in the wider society and in particular in social media, they often lack the training to do so through anti-racist, decolonising and/or culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies. As Kamilah shared, one class discussion on the #BLM rallies was followed by the singing of songs that had been sung by African American slaves, which are a part of African

American culture. To then expect predominantly white students in a Canadian school to sing these songs dehistoricises these songs as a form of resistance.

The youth revealed multiple instances where through attempts to integrate social justice topics, teachers reinforced racism, homophobia, transphobia and colonialism. Ada shared about an English teacher who had students write speeches on a justice topic of their choice:

One person decided to do it on why men's rights are less than women's rights and why women have better rights. In the . . . rubric was just given three reasons. And the reasons he gave were really pathetic and they didn't really prove his point at all . . . And it's just sad that he had to have a good mark, just because he gave his reasons.

Carmen shared a similar experience, where a teacher decided the class would debate:

'Do you think LGBTQs deserve rights or not?' Being like a young lesbian in that class. . . like there's kids genuinely arguing against it, and it completely confused me and sent me back into the closet.

This absence of any curricular connection being made to justice issues that youth were accessing via social media was also shared by Gloria with regard to her Grade 10 civics course that she described as a 'missed opportunity on my teacher's part because I think it would have been really important to educate us through that'. Students such as Gloria and Diana lament what they see as a push to 'teach facts' as opposed to critical thinking skills by integrating current social issues and events into the curriculum. Furthermore, when youth voice that these topics are introduced and presented in ways that reinforce harm, their teachers express surprise and shock, or ignore students' critiques. In Ignatius's words:

Either the teacher has no idea [what] is happening [or] they're afraid to have conversations. So, when I'm talking about all these issues in class, they have no clue that any of this is happening and they're just flabbergasted or offended or completely upset.

It is apparent that for these participants, educators failed to create a space in which youth could engage with these issues and topics, and youth noted the failure of an education system in meeting their learning needs.

Discussion: creating transformational decolonising spaces through social media

As educators, the authors echoed the participants' question as to why young people are placed in situations where they are engaging with complicated and challenging topics mostly on their own. Conversations and resources related to social justice topics, especially those that are at the forefront of our collective consciousness, should be the focus in the classroom. Yet when asked, participants responded that connections to social justice issues, for example, were not usually included in their classes, and when included they were very superficial and performative; these comments and observations were also reflective of their experiences with schooling as a whole. Diana mentioned that her English teacher made some connections to current events through a novel study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, the inclusion and reliance on such so-called canonical texts are fraught with issues (for example, Ako-Adjei, 2017; Domise, 2018), as this book in particular centres on a white saviour mentality and removes any agency from the central Black character. To perpetuate such a discourse is performative and harmful and continues to depict Black people as only victims. As Carmen noted, teacher-directed activities such as being tasked to independently read articles on topics related to justice illustrate that minimal opportunities were provided for engaging collectively on complex topics such as racism. Such activities do not provide students with opportunities to engage in critical discussion with classmates and educators who can ask introspective questions and, thus, allow for collective learning to take place. Students, then, are also not being provided with opportunities to create relationships with one another that are based within 'ethical relationality', relationships built not on 'deny[ing] difference, but rather seek[ing] to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other' (Donald, 2009: 9).

Other participants noted how some teachers made connections to some social issues, but these often occurred in electives (for example, music and art) or in courses such as civics that include specific objectives, such as the study of global and political issues (for example, Diana's project on Indigenous

communities and accessible drinking water). Surprisingly, while the majority of participants alluded to or acknowledged the gap between their informal and formal learning experiences on topics around equity and justice, no participant could provide a solid example when asked about what kinds of courses or topics they would like to see more of in their classes. Kamilah suggested ideas similar to those that many schools already implement, such as multicultural days. This informs us that while many students see the need for schooling to bridge the gap between what is happening in society and their formal education, they still require formal structures and mandated policies designed by experts in the field of social justice, anti-racist and decolonising education.

This performativity is further confirmed by Ignatius, who unabashedly admitted to 'hating English' because only if a student writes in alignment with the teacher's perspectives will they receive a good grade. Ignatius did note the lost potential of English classes in particular. Further, many participants reverted back to the expected genre and patterns of schooling they have experienced, such as those reflected in Fay's comments about teachers not having time to have such discussions when they have a curriculum to get through, for which students are going to take a final exam. As former high school educators, Pillay and Ahn find this highly problematic, as we strove to include diverse perspectives on, and connections to, current and important social issues and events. Further, in our current roles, we guide our teacher candidates to consider what it means to engage in decolonising, anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogies, to consider approaches to decolonise and Indigenise curriculum and teaching practices.

Attempts to incorporate anti-oppressive pedagogies require not only curriculum expertise, but also training and expertise to go beyond being merely performative. As Carmen's experience in her history class details, attempting to do so without such expertise may cause more harm. Carmen's anecdote demonstrated a lack of teacher capacity, as the teacher introduced the assignment with little to no guidance or introduction of the issues, resulting in her peers submitting assignments that Carmen noted were 'racist or homophobic'. Carmen attributed this result to her teacher (and teachers in general) often thinking that they are unable to 'impose' their opinions on the class. This alludes to the false premise that teachers can be neutral. Engaging in social justice teaching through the tenet of neutrality is performative and will have very damaging effects on all students, as opposed to being a substantive effort to create an ethical space for decolonisation.

Despite his disdain for English class, Ignatius noted how his English teacher included *Seven Fallen Feathers* as a novel study and admitted he enjoyed reading the novel because 'it's not written by an old dead white guy'. However, he noted that his teacher was not connecting the novel to many of the current and ongoing issues of Indigenous people in Canada. Ignatius attributed these disconnections to the possibility of the teacher's lack of training and understanding of Indigenous histories and issues, and the lack of representation of Indigenous teachers in the K-12 school system in general. As the experiences of Carmen and Ignatius illustrate, when individual teachers take on the task of bringing in such content without having the background knowledge, and without the administrative or external curriculum support that can provide professional development on how to incorporate such resources appropriately, there is always the danger of reinforcing injustice.

This study demonstrates not only the impact of social media, but also its potential transformative pedagogical power, which is being ignored in traditional classroom environments. Informal sites, in particular, offer spaces for historically marginalised and racialised youth to build communities with similar interests, motivations and backgrounds, spaces where they often feel safer and better supported. When asked about the spaces where participants engaged in conversations about, for example, racism, Kamilah noted that schools were not the space in which to have such conversations. In fact, when asked about their reasons for participating in the study, all participants said they were interested in the issues, wanted to voice their opinions and/or were curious to learn about what other youth were thinking, revealing a desire for such facilitated conversations. Those who chose to participate in focus groups, such as Carmen, indicated that it was 'honestly amazing hearing about [everything]' and, according to Ada, that 'a lot of the things we talked about today are things I didn't even realise before'. As many youth noted, their attempts to bring attention to these topics in their classrooms are met with teachers who are not knowledgeable about teaching such issues.

Social media has played a significant role in catalysing important conversations about racism (Carney, 2016) and is, especially today, as critical in considering the 'formation of identities and social structures as teaching that goes on within formal classrooms', and these informal spaces of learning are 'pervasively pedagogical' (Burdick and Sandlin, 2010: 349-50). Yet comments about teachers not having

enough time or space to include social justice topics reflect the continued reliance on traditional and colonial approaches to learning, valuing certain perspectives, approaches, knowledge and voices over others, and a belief that the inclusion of social justice topics is appropriate only within non-core subjects or certain subject-related classes, such as civics. Also, since resuming either in-person or online learning, all participants noted they were less engaged with social justice issues because their focus returned to doing well in school, whereas during the initial lockdown period of March–August 2020, they were more aware of the issues because they had more time. What this study clearly demonstrates is the nuanced but powerful effect that social media and other informal learning spaces have on young people, the necessity for greater critical focus on what types of learning are occurring (Merchant, 2012), and that greater consideration needs to be given to the interconnections between informal and formal learning (Cox, 2013).

Social media has become one space in which youth are engaging in such learning, through their engagement with often very violent injustices, such as the murder of George Floyd. This learning, then, is predicated on violence and trauma. Students require ethical spaces of decolonisation in which to engage in critical, constructive conversations about what such injustices mean and about how they and their communities may be implicated, as well as about paths forward. Generating such an ethical space for decolonisation (Battiste, 2013; Grande, 2014) requires producing an agenda to resist injustice, disrupting normative colonial discourses, and engaging in ethical relationality. Without such spaces in schools, social media spaces become sites of trauma porn, where victims of violence are objectified, their lives and the violence inflicted on them merely tools for the education of the more privileged. As the interviews and focus groups indicated, social media can often initiate these conversations by creating awareness, and by providing students with a window on to the discussion from various angles. Yet schools need then to generate ethical spaces for decolonisation to facilitate conversations that help students think through these events and learnings, not only in relation to each other, but also in relation to those who are victims of injustice. How do youth understand their connections to the Wet'suwet'en protests and to #BLM? How are their own lives and futures tied historically, socially, culturally, economically and politically to these events? Without such spaces to engage in these conversations, more students will face the circumstances shared by Gloria and Fay, wherein their own mental health was adversely affected by engaging on social media around these traumatising issues. This often results in choosing to disengage from this learning, thus often allowing colonial systems of injustice to continue unabated.

Conclusion: implications for policy

Our initial assumption when we conceptualised this study was that youth would be struggling to understand and navigate the complex and traumatic events that were occurring in the world around them due to the move to online asynchronous learning between March and August 2020, and due to a lack of support from teachers or peers to help them understand the events transpiring. Our data confirmed that youth were struggling with learning about and responding to not only those events that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown, but also events that happened prior to, or in the immediate period following, the return to in-person schooling in September 2020. All youth participants indicated not only limited engagement on such topics in their classes, but also that the majority of teaching and learning activities were inappropriate and/or that teachers lacked the knowledge, pedagogical skills and capacity to engage in teaching about social justice issues through anti-racist, decolonising and anti-oppressive educational pedagogies and practices.

Our study found that: (1) educators required extensive professional development pertaining to decolonising, anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogies; (2) a belief that focus on social justice issues and decolonisation was not within the boundaries of the curriculum and outside of formal education objectives; and (3) while the majority of students are accessing social media as a space to learn about the world around them, there is limited acknowledgement of the necessity of educators and schools to view social media as a material resource that requires critical engagement. Going forward, it is imperative for educators to be provided with ongoing support in the form of professional development, as well as material resources for implementing decolonising, anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogies in their teaching. This also necessitates revised policies on more equitable hiring, so that individuals from historically marginalised communities are purposefully recruited into the teaching profession. However, such recruitment of educators must be accompanied by a tangible commitment to decolonising

curriculum, where equity and social justice topics are incorporated in substantive ways into all curriculum. Having such topics and pedagogies included only at the discretion of the teacher results in perpetuating a colonial education system that *others* historically marginalised student populations, along with their experiences and knowledges. Curriculum revisions must take into consideration that student learning is not confined to the classroom, and that large numbers of youth are creating communities through social media that inform their ways of knowing and being. Not to create such ethical spaces for decolonisation within schools leaves youth vulnerable, as there are limited educational spaces to which they can turn to think through and navigate the complexities of the new learnings with which they are engaging in social media spaces. Incorporating these decolonising spaces into the curriculum is therefore imperative for the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of all youth and their communities.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Ethical clearance was granted for this study by the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

References

- Agarwal, R., Epstein, S., Oppenheim, R., Oyler, C. and Sonu, D. (2010) 'From ideal to practice and back again: Beginning teachers teaching for social justice'. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61 (3), 237–47. [CrossRef]
- Ako-Adjei, N.B. (2017) 'Why it's time schools stopped teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*'. *Transition*, 122, 182–200. [CrossRef]
- Allen, J., Mahamde, F. and Williams, K. (2020) 'Disparities in education: E-learning and COVID-19, who matters?'. *Child & Youth Services*, 41 (3), 208–10.
- Battiste, M. (2013) *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77–101. [CrossRef]
- Burdick, J. and Sandlin, J.A. (2010) 'Inquiry as answerability: Toward a methodology of discomfort in researching critical public pedagogies'. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16 (5), 349–60. [CrossRef]
- Burke, A. and Collier, D.R. (2017) 'I was kind of teaching myself': Teachers' conversations about social justice and teaching for change'. *Teacher Development*, 21 (2), 269–87. [CrossRef]
- Carney, N. (2016) 'All lives matter, but so does race: Black Lives Matter and the evolving role of social media'. *Humanity and Society*, 40 (2), 180–99. [CrossRef]
- Chun, C.W. (2018) 'Critical pedagogy and language learning in the age of social media?'. *Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada*, 18 (2), 281–300. [CrossRef]
- Connelly, F.M. and Clandinin, D.J. (2006) 'Narrative inquiry'. In J.L. Green, G. Camilli and P. Elmore (eds), *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research* (3rd ed.). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 477–87.
- Cox, M.J. (2013) 'Formal to informal learning with IT: Research challenges and issues for e-learning'. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 29 (1), 85–105. [CrossRef]
- Creswell, J.W. (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J.W. (2014) *Research Design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

- de los Ríos, C.V., Lopez, J. and Morrell, E. (2015) 'Toward a critical pedagogy of race: Ethnic studies and literacies of power in high school classrooms'. *Race and Social Problems*, 7 (1, SI), 84–96. [CrossRef]
- Dei, G.J.S. (2008) 'Schooling as community: Race, schooling, and the education of African youth'. *Journal of Black Studies*, 38 (3), 346–66.
- Domise, A. (2018) 'No, To Kill a Mockingbird shouldn't be taught in 2018'. *The Globe and Mail*, 21 October. Accessed 13 May 2022. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-no-to-kill-a-mockingbird-shouldnt-be-taught-in-2018/>.
- Donald, D. (2009) 'Forts, curriculum, and Indigenous métissage: Imagining decolonization of Aboriginal–Canadian relations in educational contexts'. *First Nations Perspectives*, 2 (1), 1–24. Accessed 13 May 2022. https://www.mfnrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/004_Donald.pdf.
- Dover, A.G. (2013) 'Getting "up to code": Preparing for and confronting challenges when teaching for social justice in standards-based classrooms'. *Action in Teacher Education*, 35 (2), 89–102. [CrossRef]
- Dover, A.G. (2015) "'Promoting acceptance" or "preparing warrior scholars": Variance in teaching for social justice vision and praxis'. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 48 (3, SI), 361–72.
- Ermine, W. (2007) 'The ethical space of engagement'. *Indigenous Law Journal*, 6 (1), 193–203. Accessed 13 May 2022. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ilj/article/view/27669>.
- Esposito, J. and Swain, A.N. (2009) 'Pathways to social justice: Urban teachers' uses of culturally relevant pedagogy as a conduit for teaching for social justice'. *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 6 (1), 38–48. Accessed 13 May 2022. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ838745>.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again* (Trans. S. Sampson). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Giroux, H.A. (2001) *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a pedagogy for the opposition*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey.
- Grande, S. (2014) 'Red pedagogy: The un-methodology'. In N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln and L. Tuhiwai Smith (eds), *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 233–54.
- Greenhow, C. and Lewin, C. (2016) 'Social media and education: Reconceptualizing the boundaries of formal and informal learning'. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 41 (1), 6–30. [CrossRef]
- Guthrie, E. (2018) The Importance of Digital, Multimodal Pedagogy in the General-Writing Classroom. Paper presented at the 6th Annual 21st Century Englishes Graduate Student Conference, Bowling Green, OH, 10 November.
- Harber, C. (2004) *Schooling as Violence: How schools harm pupils and societies*. London: Routledge.
- Hill, C., Rosehart, P., St. Helene, J. and Sadhra, S. (2020) 'What kind of educator does the world need today? Reimagining teacher education in post-pandemic Canada'. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46 (4), 565–75. [CrossRef]
- Ho, E., Clarke, A. and Dougherty, I. (2015) 'Youth-led social change: Topics, engagement types, organizational types, strategies, and impacts'. *Futures*, 67, 52–62. [CrossRef]
- hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Howell, P.B., Chambers Cantrell, S. and Rintamaa, M. (2019) 'Setting the stage for action: Teaching social justice in the middle school classroom'. *The Clearing House: A journal of educational strategies, issues and ideas*, 92 (6), 185–92. [CrossRef]
- Kahne, J. and Bowyer, B. (2018) 'The political significance of social media activity and social networks'. *Political Communication*, 35 (3), 470–93. [CrossRef]
- Kahne, J. and Bowyer, B. (2019) 'Can media literacy education increase digital engagement in politics?'. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44 (2), 211–24. [CrossRef]
- Kelly, D.M. and Brandes, G.M. (2010) 'Social justice needs to be everywhere: Imagining the future of anti-oppression education in teacher preparation'. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 56 (4), 388–402. Accessed 13 May 2022. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=source%3A%22Alberta+Journal+of+Educational+Research%22&ff1=subTeacher+Attitudes&pg=3&id=EJ914839>.
- Kinloch, V., Penn, C. and Burkhard, T. (2020) 'Black Lives Matter: Storying, identities, and counternarratives'. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 52 (4), 382–405. [CrossRef]
- Kumi-Yeboah, A. and Smith, P. (2016) 'Critical multicultural citizenship education among black immigrant youth: Factors and challenges'. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 18 (1), 158–82. [CrossRef]
- Ladson-Billings, G. and Tate, W. (1995) 'Toward a critical race theory of education'. *Teachers College Record*, 97, 47–68. [CrossRef]
- Lear, J. (2006) *Radical Hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Liou, D.D. and Cutler, K.D. (2021) 'Disrupting the educational racial contract of Islamophobia: Racialized curricular expectations of Muslims in children's literature'. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 24 (3), 410–30. [CrossRef]
- McMahon, B., Munns, G., Smyth, J. and Zyngier, D. (2012) 'Student engagement for equity and social justice: Creating space for student voice'. *Teaching & Learning*, 7 (2), 63–78.
- McMahon, B. and Portelli, J. (eds) (2012) *Student Engagement in Urban Schools: Beyond neoliberal discourses*. Charlotte: Information Age.
- Merchant, G. (2012) 'Mobile practices in everyday life: Popular digital technologies and schooling revisited'. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43 (5), 770–82. [CrossRef]
- Miles, R. (2015) 'Complexity, representation and practice: Case study as method and methodology'. *Issues in Educational Research*, 23 (5), 309–18. Accessed 13 May 2022. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier25/miles.pdf>.
- Odora Hoppers, C. (2009) 'Education, culture and society in a globalizing world: Implications for comparative and international education'. *Compare: A journal of comparative and international education*, 39 (5), 601–14. [CrossRef]
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2014) *Education at a Glance: OECD indicators*. Paris: OECD.
- Philpott, R. and Dagenais, D. (2012) 'Grappling with social justice: Exploring new teachers' practice and experiences'. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 7 (1), 85–99. [CrossRef]
- Sasser, J.S. (2014) 'The wave of the future? Youth advocacy at the nexus of population and climate change'. *The Geographical Journal*, 180 (2), 102–10. [CrossRef]
- Skinner, N. and Bromley, P. (2019) 'Individual and collective social justice education: Comparing emphases on human rights and social movements in textbooks worldwide'. *Comparative Education Review*, 63 (4), 502–28. [CrossRef]
- Tikly, L. and Barrett, A.M. (2011) 'Social justice, capabilities and the quality of education in low income countries'. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31 (1), 3–14. [CrossRef]
- Tuck, E. (2009) 'Suspending damage: A letter to communities'. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79 (3), 409–28. [CrossRef]
- UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). (2020) *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020 – Inclusion and Education: All means all*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Visvanathan, S. (2009) 'The search for cognitive justice'. *Seminar*, 597. Accessed 13 May 2022. http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/597/597_shiv_visvanathan.htm.
- Williamson, T. (2017) 'Listening to many voices: Enacting social justice literacy curriculum'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 61, 104–14. [CrossRef]