

## Cultural Intersections, Pedagogical Encounters, and Ethical Disruptions

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*How do we counter colonized schooling narratives in places where Indigenous identities and cultural ways of knowing have been silenced? Based on encounters with children, the authors inquire into how cultural intersections can become pedagogical with the potential to disrupt colonizing narratives and explore Indigenous ways of knowing. They discuss inquiry's emancipatory potential: granting space to listen, explore difference, think differently, and challenge the dominant colonizing discourses about Indigenous and Black children in early childhood settings.*

**Key words:** *Indigenous knowledge; colonizing narratives; emancipatory inquiry*

We—Ramona, Alana, and Sharon—have been supporting early childhood educators, each in our various roles: Alana (a preschool administrator) with Sharon (the assistant director of early childhood education) in government-funded preschools in Bermuda, and Ramona (an early childhood educator and consultant) with Sharon (a superintendent) in kindergartens (on and off reserve) in Ontario. In these contexts, the image of the teacher as most knowledgeable and in control is often firmly held and tied to the dominant Eurocentric history and its discourse of schooling. This teacher image determines how children are seen, what teaching and learning will look like, and ultimately what practices are possible.

While labouring to meet a Eurocentric standard of success, only a single perspective is heard on this issue of identity and schooling, and the intelligence of Indigenous places, peoples, and cultures is silenced. The loss of language, cultural awareness, and Indigenous perspectives means that even when given an opportunity

to speak, Indigenous peoples may not be aware of an alternative and may be “proficient only in the language of the colonizer” (Anderson, 2002, p. 293).

Can we imagine a learning space where Indigenous teachers' identities are distinguished and where Indigenous children are deemed successful?

### Cultural intersections and pedagogical encounters

In this paper we inquire into encounters we have had with children in the early childhood settings where we work. Using emancipatory inquiry as a strategy to liberate thinking, we explore Indigenous ways of knowing as an alternative to the dominant colonizing narrative.

*Intersections of geography and culture*

This first encounter comes from Ramona's kindergarten class in Sudbury, Ontario, where she was working as an early childhood educator. Ramona, an Anishinaabe Kwe from Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory on Mnidoo Mnising (Manitoulin Island), had recently moved with her family to Sudbury, an urban centre located on the traditional territories of the Atikameksheng Anishinaabek. In this place, she found herself traversing two worlds, proficient in her own cultural heritage and traditions and adapting to new and different ones.



Figure 1. Zuri drawing on blackboard.

*Ramona: A glance across the classroom draws my eyes to an image that is being drawn on the chalkboard by a young Black girl of African descent. I am intrigued by this image that has cultural significance for me. I see the four directions—north, south, east, west—and ask Zuri to label her drawing. I make an immediate connection to the four elements—earth, wind, fire, water—of the medicine wheel and its teachings.*

*“I live here,” Zuri says as she points to place inside the circle that she has drawn.*

*This moment ignited something in me. I immediately was connected to the familiarity of this image, stunned, really, that she was creating something I recognized, and I wanted to make sense of it all. I had just moved from my home to the city and was teaching for the first time in the provincial school system. As I was navigating this new and unfamiliar setting, I often found myself wondering who I was within this context. (Shawana, Villeneuve, Caruso-Parnell, Hearn, & Kelly, 2017)*

Reggio educators describe encounter as a “place for dialogue” about the intersections of culture and place that gives a way to define identities—ours, yours, and mine (lecture, study week in Reggio, 2010). Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and colleagues (2015, citing Saldanha, 2006) suggest that “encounters of difference are a site for complex identity negotiations in which contradictory, situational, and contingent perspectives are constructed” (p. 95). The image drawn by Zuri<sup>1</sup> opens a “place for dialogue” between her and Ramona, an invitation to explore the intersections between their African and Anishinaabe cultures and what it means to each of them to be constructing an identity that is situational and contingent, evoked by living in a new place.

In our experience, encounters with children have the potential to locate us in time and space and connect us. They draw us into inquiries about who we are and where we come from, and if we are open, to engage in thinking about the possibilities of how we might respond to a child’s invitation to explore cultural intersections such as geography and culture.

### *Intersections of race and gender*

This second encounter, an example of an intersection of race and gender, occurred in Bermuda at the preschool where Alana was the administrator. Alana, a Black Bermudian born and raised in this British Overseas Territory, describes Bermudian society and culture as a complex dynamic with respect to varying social, economic, and racial difference, which translates into how children are viewed and their capabilities and rank in society.

*Alana: The children’s interest in babies has grown due to the arrival of Azure’s and Cruze’s new baby sisters. In a small group, the children discuss their theories about babies with their teacher.*

*Teacher: Where do babies come from?*

*Cruze: She was in my mama’s belly. I can’t touch her. She has to get big.*

*Teacher: How do you know when someone is having a baby?*

*Azure: They have a baby shower. That’s how you know that someone is having a baby. We knew she was having a girl ‘cause they had pink balloons.*

*Cruze: I didn’t know my baby Kara was white-face, Kara. She’s so pretty.*

What do we make of this dialogue? Azure’s and Cruze’s associations of female as pink is a stereotypical identification of gender, and white-face as pretty reflects the dominance of whiteness. How might we respond as educators? How do we stay with this? Do we challenge, provide an alternative, or perhaps engage in trying to understand the children’s points of view?

### **Being in relation: A listening and learning stance**

According to Bill Readings (1996, as cited in Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), “pedagogy is a relation, a network of obligation (p. 154) ... an infinite attention to the other (p. 158) ... [and] education is this drawing out of the otherness of thought” (pp. 161–162). Rather than a method to be followed, as is the case with scientific inquiry, inquiry as an emancipatory pedagogical strategy is a stance in relation to and with attention toward the other, a way of being that is open and curious about difference.

*Ramona: Anishinaabe people often ask when we meet someone, “Where are you from?” It is important to share who we are so that we know how to be in relation to that person.*

*Alana: Similarly, in Bermudian culture, “Where are you from? Who are your people?” are common introductory questions. We find it necessary at the onset to contextualize people to decide how future encounters will progress.*

Treating these seemingly everyday moments with children as pedagogical encounters (as ways of getting to know the other) put us into a listening and learning stance and draw us closer to understanding who we are in relation to other beings and the spirit of place, community, and culture. This stance, for us, is aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing. This “being in relation” is evident to us as we reflect on these encounters with children.

*Ramona: Watching Zuri create this image made me curious about what she could potentially be communicating about who she was and where she came from. Was it possible that she too was grappling with this idea of who she is in this place?*

*Alana: Rereading this conversation about the babies, I want to have a further discussion with Cruze. I think he might have been referring to the fact that the baby’s skin is lighter than both his and his siblings, as these are often everyday conversations in our society. I wonder if that’s his meaning?*

Being in relation, akin to being in a listening and learning stance, requires that we see our perspectives as both located and subjective and have a desire to experience a different point of view. In schools, inculcated in Eurocentric precepts, however, teaching is often perceived as an act of certainty. This mask of certainty impedes authentic relationships and restricts our vision of what is and what is possible. Loris Malaguzzi (1994) explains that our theories (and, we argue, the colonial narratives that shape us) orient us as we talk, listen, and observe the child and determine what child we will see.

## What identities do you see?

Ramona and Alana, curious to learn more, decide to seek clarification by talking to the children, their families, and Elders in their communities. What does Zuri’s drawing represent? Ramona wants to gain a deeper understanding of Zuri’s culture. Alana wants to know how Cruze sees his baby sister. She wonders what family values may be influencing his perspective.

*Ramona: Zuri’s father shared with me that he wants to ensure that his daughter is bicultural, able to walk in two worlds. He explained, “Culturally I give my children both. I teach them to know where they came from but also teach them to adapt to life here. You can’t live here like you live in Congo” (personal communication, 2011). When I was listening to Zuri’s father’s story of his family and what was important to him, it resonated with my own situation, specifically, being in a new community with my children, and the opportunities that we came here for. I am aware that as Anishinaabe people we sacrifice a part of self to achieve in this world. Brock Pitawanakwat (as cited in Simpson, 2008) writes, “The trouble with being (almost) assimilated is that I know something is missing but I am not sure what” (p. 161). How do we resist assimilation and the loss of Indigenous identities while living in cultural contexts that differ from our own?*

Through pedagogical encounters with children, such as these, we begin to see children and adults as having contingent and complex rather than singular or static identities, and as cocreators of culture and knowledge rather than merely replicating what they have seen and heard.

*Sharon: Zuri appears to be actively constructing her identity through this large drawing. She locates herself globally, in contrast to the classroom, where she is the only Black child. Is Cruze surprised that his newborn sister is white faced and pretty? Is he restating something that he has heard? Is he thinking about these things differently, or maybe he is exploring these concepts and trying them on in front of his peers?*

*Alana: In a later conversation with Cruze, he expanded on the idea of skin colour: “Baby Kara is not white-skinned anymore. She’s turning black like me. Her skin changed.” “Her skin is turning black like you, Cruze,” another child commented. “Like my skin,” another added. I talked to the children about their concept of pretty to see if we could uncover their thinking about skin colour. Initially, they focused on outward appearances, defining pretty as mascara, high heels, and pink, sparkly dresses. When I asked them if black skin is pretty, they agreed. However, when I asked them if they would rather choose a black doll or a white doll to play with, they responded that the white doll is nice.*

These topics are pedagogical both for children and adults, for they teach us about socially constructed notions of culture, race, and gender and the existing, oftentimes contradictory, tensions.

*Alana: Ongoing debates around gender and gender roles continued to emerge this year. These intrigue me. Experiences and opinions expressed in their homes influence children’s views on gender and acceptable gender roles. The interesting point for me is that children are often willing to revise their opinions in the face of new information. However, sometimes they remain resolute in their views despite new or opposing information.*

Back in Alana’s classroom, the conversations continue.

*Damian, a 4-year-old boy, is standing with his classmates with hands on his waist, expressing his displeasure at a situation.*

*Cruze: Take your hands off your hips. That’s what girls do!*

*Damian: No, that’s not what girls do. Anybody can do it!*

*Cruze: No, my daddy said that’s how girls stand. You must be a girl.*

*Damian: No, I’m not.*

On another occasion, the conversation about gender roles resurfaced when the children were dancing to music.

*Cruze: You’re dancing like a girl. Only girls do ballet.*

*Other children: Yeah, only girls do ballet. Boys can’t do ballet.*

*Cruze: Ballet is for girls. Boys are rough and tough!*

*Alana explains: I decided to show them a clip of boys participating in a ballet performance. Some of the children were open to revising their views. However, others continued to maintain that ballet is not for girls. I asked Cruze’s mom about what appears to be his strong opinions about gender roles. She stated, “He knows that dolls are for girls and trucks are for boys. Obviously, some toys will overlap, but if the girls are playing house or dress up, we pull him away and give him something masculine to do. We make sure that the children understand that the natural order is that male is male and female is female” (personal communication, May 2018). Cruze’s parent shared that their religious views are fundamental in helping to formulate their children’s characters and their worldview. She added that it is the family’s role to teach right and wrong.*

Arun Saldanha’s (2006, as cited in Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) proposal that encounters are sites for complex identity negotiations seems applicable here, as we hear the contexts in which Cruze is constructing his identity—at home, where parents promote particular subjectivities, and at school, where children offer something different. What is our responsibility as educators? How do we honour the child’s point of view in a nonjudgmental way while seeking to gain insight into the child’s identity? How do we respectfully navigate different identities in a way that

honours each and provides space for learning and growing from each other? We think it is helpful to understand the underlying family and cultural values and the cultural context.

## Conceptions of children and childhood

*Alana: In Bermudian culture, religion and spirituality are very influential in the formation of children's identities. They are taught in the home as well as through schools and churches. A large part of children's early identities is connected to their God, their church, and their family's religious affiliation.*

In contrast to the Eurocentric worldview where persons become through individual agency, Shepherd and Mhlanga (2014) describe a different ethic, a worldview where persons become "in relation" with community:

Beginning from early childhood, in African traditional societies, children were identified by their extended families and in turn their immediate communities ... All elders bore the responsibility of nurturing desired moral values in children ... This communal ethic was fostered in these elders by the preceding generations. The end result was the desired product, a person with ubuntu or personhood (Chitumba, 2011). (Shepherd & Mhlanga, p. 4)

*Ramona: The Elder shared with me how our people see the child: "Children are sacred gifts given to us from the creator. Children have an innate holistic worldview" (I. Pitawanakwat, personal communication, 2011). It has always been our view that when a child is born, each brings something to our collective well-being. We do not focus on weaknesses or deficits but gifts. As Anishinaabe, we have always placed great value in each child born into our community and the role they play.*

The communal ethic is also evident in the Anishinaabe worldview that speaks to how the community is in relation to children and their gifts, bestowed to the community by the Creator. David Anderson (2002) explains:

We know that each child is on loan to us from the Creator. We have traditionally honoured our children through ceremonies. Children receive their Spirit names so the Creator can recognize who they are. These names reflect their gifts. Our communities were given Clans, so our children know they are not alone in the world but have other beings around them to help teach and care for them. How do our schools and classrooms honour these children, their Clans and their Gifts? (p. 297)

Anderson's question reorients us from a colonized stance of children and school toward being in relation with Indigenous and Black children as contributing members within a community, honouring who they are and the gifts they bring. This alternate way of thinking can also reorient us pedagogically.

## How do we conceptualize learning? What constitutes knowledge?

Colonized views of education and learning hold that there is a specific and objective body of knowledge acquired only through academic pursuits, whereas in the Indigenous worldview there is an appreciation for the varied paths that lead to knowledge and wisdom, specifically from the land, water, and the animals. Rhonda Hopkins, a fluent Anishinaabemowin speaker and language coach in elementary school and community college contexts, explains: "There is no word for 'teacher' in Ojibwe. The closest word, *Dakenjgewin*, or learning, is defined as what the learner does, how they make it their own" (R. Hopkins, personal communication, 2018). Anderson (2002) expands on this conception of learning:

From infancy, children were taught the "big story," the abstract messages of our being ... They listened to the teachings of the Elders, the words of their Mothers and Grandparents ... It is the work of the

individual child to take these abstract concepts of Creation, community, family, and individuality and to make meaningful relationships with the people, the land, the elements and the animals around us all. (p. 4)

*Ramona: Zuri's parents shared with me that in the Congo, Elders would tell stories at night time. All the children in the village would gather around to listen, and there was a lesson to be learned (personal communication, 2011). From my conversation with Zuri's parents, I learned that legends and storytelling are traditions shared in both the Anishinaabe culture and the people of the Congo. In my culture, Anishinaabe Elders are our traditional teachers in the school of life. Their experience is passed down from generation to generation to keep spiritual wisdom alive.*

*I decided to introduce a storytelling stool into our classroom as a means of nurturing my relationship with Zuri. The storytelling stool originated in the Congo. Elders could be found carrying the stool over their shoulder as they would travel from village to village sharing stories with the children. As a means of sharing my culture with my students, I share Ojibwe legends. When the students see me pick up the stool, they immediately gather in anticipation of the telling of a legend. Zuri identified with the stool. She told me, "This looks like my table at home."*

*This encounter with Zuri permitted me to look inward. She helped me to see that there was a place for culture. When I introduced the storytelling stool as a way to honour and include her, it became a segue for exploring culture in the classroom. Through documentation and reflection on this experience, I have come to view Zuri like Migizi (Eagle), a messenger sent to me to assist me in realizing my purpose. This moment was pivotal in my growth as a teacher as well as an Anishinaabe Kwe.*

An encounter "operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities" according to Simon O'Sullivan (2006, p. 1, as cited in Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017, p. 40). Encounters, such as Ramona's encounter with Zuri, change us. Donna Haraway (2008, as cited in Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017) identifies this as new world making: a process through which we are remade.

## Ethical disruptions

*Sharon: The formation of identities in the intersections between cultural contexts is nuanced and complex. What is our ethical responsibility?*

*Alana: These encounters with children have confirmed my belief in the liberating power of inquiry: helping children to find their voice, express who they are, and construct knowledge in a way that is meaningful and relevant to their experience. I have witnessed the transformation of children who initially recoiled from conversations and engagement to demonstrate the confidence to ask questions, make and explain theories, and engage in meaningful conversations around ideas and concepts (Tucker, 2018). These transformations have been the most gratifying part of this journey. Children bring their identities and understandings of the world, all unique to their perspective and experiences. I feel it is a moral obligation to value, in meaningful ways, the culture and identities and ways of knowing that children bring.*

Through emancipatory inquiry, we are free to use encounters with children as curriculum. Ramona responded by connecting with the family, deciding to bring storytelling into the classroom, and including an African stool. Through this act, she acknowledged Zuri and her family's culture and created a way to bring her identity and culture into the classroom. Alana revisited earlier conversations and disrupted stereotypical images of gender by offering an alternative possibility, such as a boy who dances ballet. She held a conversational space for children to encounter difference and to internalize different ideologies. In her role as moderator, she supported the children to grapple with ideas and engage in a discourse, helping children learn to hear one another and to understand that each voice has equal value.

Erkki Patokorpi (2009, as cited by Speir & Simmons, 2016) states that, “through the lens of abductive reasoning, learning is a complex and an incomplete process, cannot be fully understood and is never complete” (p. 11). When we conceptualize encounters with children and teachers “as spaces of possibility and surprise; as sites of ethical and democratic practice; or indeed as ‘works of art’ or in many other ways” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 59), we open up a space for dialogue that gives voice to the silenced and unspoken. Those of us who work with teachers and children have the privilege and responsibility of bearing witness when the crack or opening appears. The ethical response, according to Emmanuel Levinas (1989, p. 137, as cited by Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 77) is to encounter the other, staying open to alterity without attempting to grasp their identity and their experience as our own.

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## (Endnotes)

- 1 The children's names are pseudonyms.