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Decolonising Australian history education

An Australian perspective

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Abstract

History education communities worldwide are grappling with the imperative to decolonise history education. Australian history education researchers are uniquely placed to contribute to this project, owing to their experience of decolonising history education within a settler-colonial context. We do not claim to have any quick fixes, however, recent scholarship provides practical strategies for enacting decolonising approaches and elevating sovereign First Nations voices in history classrooms. The article encapsulates these strategies as actions centred on critically reflecting, listening, learning, localising and evaluating. It also illustrates how the concepts of place, positionality, and settler colonialism provide theoretical underpinnings for this work. Overall, it shows that although structural reforms need to be led by First Nations leaders and communities, non-Indigenous educators have a responsibility for decolonising history education and themselves. International readers will be interested in how these approaches and challenges converge with those in their own contexts.

Keywords

Decolonising, First Nations histories and cultures, Australian history education, settler colonialism, positionality

1. Positioning

It is the end of January and the hot, dry season here where I live as a non-Indigenous person on Wadawurrung Country, in Victoria, Australia. Moonah trees are abundantly blossoming, providing shade for other plants in the heat and nectar for birds and butterflies. They are covered in sweetly scented, creamy coloured flowers, which Wadawurrung People made into a sweet drink (BCN, n.d.). These gnarly trees can live up to 200 years, which means many of them predate European colonisation of this area.

This time of year is also the anniversary of the colonial invasion of these lands. The January 26 public holiday recalls the date Captain Phillip and the First Fleet, with its boatloads of convicts, sailed into Sydney Cove or what the local Eora Nation know as *Warrane*. Australia Day/Invasion Day/Survival Day has many meanings. For some, it is a day for patriotic celebration and citizenship ceremonies. For First Nations People it is not a date to celebrate. It is a day of mourning, a day to recognise the impact of the invasion of unceded, sovereign First Nations lands, as well as a day to respect the resistance and survival of First Nations People.

This year, these perspectives were deliberately polarised here in Geelong/Djilang on Wadawurrung Country. Early in 2024, the City of Greater Geelong Council consulted with the

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community and agreed not to celebrate 26 January. More recently the newly elected Council voted – without community consultation – to reinstate the celebration of Australia Day and to hold citizenship ceremonies. Wadawurrung Traditional Owner groups passed a vote of no confidence in the Council, stating: "January 26 is not a day of celebration for First Nations Peoples, but one of mourning, survival, and remembrance" (First Peoples United Together Djilang, 2025). In contrast, the neighbouring Surf Coast Shire Council– also on Wadawurrung Country– continues not to formally recognise Australia Day, holding a truth-telling event with Wadawurrung Traditional Owners instead.

At the federal level, the Australian opposition leader, Peter Dutton, has been flagrantly fueling these sorts of divisions. Dutton said if he was to become prime minister he would not stand in front of the Aboriginal flag during official press conferences as is the custom, and his first act would be to make it law for councils to hold celebratory events like citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day. Speaking of the need to be proud of Australia, he said on national television: "We've got university lecturers and some teachers who are telling children they should be ashamed of their history and who we are as a country" (cited by Ireland, 2025).

As one of those university lecturers, I would remind Mr Dutton that lecturers and teachers do not tell students how they should think or feel about the history of this country, rather we help them develop the knowledge and skills that enable them to form their own interpretations. However, some of us do seek to do this in ways that actively centre once marginalised historical narratives and perspectives, and encourage critically investigating historical injustices, including the ongoing effects of settler colonialism. As explored below, this can be a challenging and sometimes discomforting process, but one that is essential to decolonising Australian history education. As a non-Indigenous person of mostly Irish and Scottish ancestry, I cannot truly feel the pain that 26 January brings to First Nations Peoples. However, I can recognise that in the past my ancestors directly and indirectly furthered the violent project of settler colonialism, and I continue to benefit from the denial of First Nations sovereignty. In developing a decolonising praxis, I grapple with my complicity as a history educator within an education system that has long deployed history education to reproduce a dominant Westerncentric metanarrative that ignored more than 60,000 years of continuous First Nations culture and whitewashed settler-colonial history.

This article offers an Australian perspective on decolonising history education by providing readers with a snapshot of recent scholarship in this space, drawing largely on a new edited collection, *Decolonising Australian history education: Fresh perspectives from beyond the 'history wars'* (Cairns et al., 2024). I have commenced by evoking two key concepts–place and positionality. The importance of localising decolonising practices is highlighted by Mignolo and Walsh (2018): "What does it mean to decolonize? cannot be an abstract universal. It has to be answered by looking at other W questions: Who is doing it, where, why and how?" (p. 18). The notion of place is also one that requires decolonising, given that non-Indigenous renderings of place, such as my own, are shaped by a Westerncentric framing that differs vastly to First Nations worldviews about place (see Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) and Country (see Lowe et al., 2020).

Meanings and interpretations of decolonising education shift depending on place and positionality. Elsewhere I have articulated my interpretation of the broader objective of decolonising history education as "seeking to recognise and redress the way colonial powers (i.e., Euro-American powers) have controlled the knowledge production practices of disciplinary History and therefore presented distorted views of historical processes, especially the ongoing effects of the invasion of the lands of Indigenous Peoples across the world" (Cairns, 2024, p. 160). This aligns with the broader aims of decolonising education, which, Moncriefe (2022) suggests, seeks to "expose and disrupt the ongoing processes of colonialism, identified by the uncritical reproduction of Eurocentric curriculum, knowledge and discourses" (p. 1). My interpretation is further refined when applied to settler-colonial Australia and school history:

> In settler-colonial Australia decolonising history curriculum recognises the rights of First Nations Peoples to exercise sovereignty and self- determination, promotes teaching and learning about First Nations Peoples histories and cultures in ways that re-centre First Nations Peoples perspectives, uses but also problematises historical inquiry as a means to interrogate settler colonialism, and seeks opportunities for critical self-reflection on one's own historical positioning in relation to Australia's colonial past and decolonising present and future. (Cairns, 2024, p. 160).

A commonality that unites interpretations is an appreciation that *decolonising* education is a verb, an action. It should therefore be focused on outcomes (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Throughout the article I mostly use the term First Nations People. Given the cultural and linguistic diversity within and between First Nations communities, this is not used as a homogenising term but one that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People as the First Peoples of Australia. Where possible I have also referred to specific Traditional Owner groups and language groups, of which there are more than 250 (AIATSIS, 2024).

2. Contextualising

The project of decolonising history education aligns with the broader purposes for decolonising education and is rooted in the scholarship and praxis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, educators and activists. In Australia, it builds on research on postcolonial history education (e. g. Parkes, 2011) and research that critiques the politicisation of history education (e. g. Clark, 2006; Taylor, 2012). Within the broader field of history education research, the emerging field of decolonising history curriculum connects with, but is different to, literature on difficult histories. Epstein and Peck (2017) define these as "historical narratives and other forms (learning standards, curricular frameworks) that incorporate contested, painful and/or violent events into regional, national or global accounts of the past" (p. 1). This work often focuses on how history education contributes to the transformation of societies emerging from conflict (e.g. Ahonen, 2014). However, conceptualisations of difficult histories seem to lack the specificity required in settler-colonial societies like Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. This is pinpointed by Prebble (n. d.), a historian-educator in Aotearoa/New Zealand:

> I find myself grappling with this label, not because it's inaccurate but because it feels incomplete. Yes, this history can be difficult – it feels uncomfortable, unsettling, challenging and confrontational, a thing to be avoided. But the term 'difficult histories' doesn't really articulate what is difficult, let alone how to respond to these difficulties. (para. 4)

As Prebble (n. d.) contends, an important starting point for thinking about how to respond to what is difficult about some histories, such as settler-colonial history, is acknowledging that, in addition to intergenerational trauma, "there is shame, guilt and anxiety" (para. 12). How people individually and collectively respond emotionally will depend on how they are positioned by settler colonialism.

Similarly, in the field of transitional justice, there is recognition that, while history education as an instrument for facilitating transitional justice in settler states has potential to contribute to truth telling and reconciliation, it is considerably limited by the historical thinking models that frame disciplinary approaches (see Keynes, 2019). Keynes (2024) argues a decolonial approach to transitional justice requires substantial structural reform of current history education frameworks to better "accommodate enduring injustices or Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing history" (p. 25).

3. Critically reflecting

Of the 27.2 million Australians, just over one million or 3.8 per cent are First Nations People (ABS, 2024). In 2023, there were 515,000 registered teachers in Australia of which 6,577 identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers (AITSL, 2024). As most registered history teachers are non-Indigenous, much of the decolonising work required in history classrooms hinges on them. Even if they do not readily adopt a decolonising approach, having the capacity to teach First Nations content and First Nations students are professional requirements. Since 2010, the Australian Curriculum has required all teachers to enact the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority and teach First Nations content. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017) also include the following standards: i) Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; ii) Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Despite these expectations, research indicates teachers are fearful of integrating First Nations histories, cultures and perspectives (e. g. Hogarth, 2022; Harvie, 2024; Hradsky, 2024; Madsen et al., 2021; Weuffen, 2024). This is often attributed to feelings of being unfamiliar, under-prepared and under-resourced to teach locally anchored content and First Nations culture, history

and pedagogies (Harvie, 2024). Weuffen (2024) articulates the broader colonial power structures at work here:

> For non-Indigenous teachers who have been raised within the Australian education system, they are caught up in an indoctrination process that has been operationalised to a point where pedagogical practices become inextricably aligned to a particular settler-colonial ideology without them even knowing it. (p. 74)

Compounded by the fear of getting it wrong or offending someone, this dominant ideology results in "epistemic inertia" (Weuffen, 2024, p. 71) and the "silencing of Indigenous Knowledges in curricula and educational spaces" (Hogarth, 2022, p. 5).

Decolonising approaches therefore seek to confront the perpetuation of these avoidance tactics and challenge educators to grapple with their positionality through critical self-reflection, that is, decolonising self (Briggs et al., 2024; Harvie, 2024; Hradsky, 2024; McKnight, 2024; Weuffen, 2024). Reflecting on the teachings of Boon Wurrung Elder, N'arweet Professor Carloyn Briggs, Anderson and Slater (2024) articulate the self-reflection process as one of learning, unlearning and relearning:

> The realisation that the knowledge you have been taught is biased can lead to feelings of discomfort and of not knowing what to do. When teachers speak about embedding First Nations Peoples teaching into their curriculum, they often comment, "What if I do it wrong?" Self- reflection can be confronting, and you may not know what to do with such feelings. Sitting with the discomfort can lead to deeper learning, a stronger commitment, and changes to pedagogy and practice. Not acting on these feelings keeps the current learning environment in the status quo. (p. 92)

Similarly, Hradsky (2024) observes: "What has proven to be successful in assisting in processing discomfort is leaning into it, processing it, and forming new practices based on new knowledge" (p. 12). Methods for facilitating this sort of critical self-reflection include learning with First Nations educators and communities; walking with and learning from Country and using resources created by First Nations People (Briggs et al., 2024); acknowledging lived and educational experiences through memory writing and shared reflective exercises (McKnight, 2024; Harvie, 2024); and participating in embodied pedagogies and drama-based reflective activities (Hradsky, 2024). Explicit examples of questions to scaffold critical reflection are also outlined in this literature. For example, Weuffen (2024) articulates two sets of Who am I? and Where do I come from? reflective questions to help teachers interrogate their positionality.

These strategies for self-reflection are also applicable in initial teacher education (ITE) settings, where most teacher educators are non-Indigenous (Hogarth, 2022; Hughes & Fricker, 2024). With the aim of addressing the over-burdening of First Nations stakeholders with the labour of decolonisng within ITE, Hughes and Fricker (2024) have developed a model that "promotes co-construction of education contexts through shared labour and leadership of First Nations and non-Indigenous stakeholders" (p. 1907). The first step involves "critical reflection and decolonial positionality" particularly for non-Indigenous educators and students through "reflecting on one's own complicity, pre-conceived notions and countering norms" (Hughes & Fricker, 2024, p.1917). The next step relates to the "recognition of First Nations sovereignty and self-determination" (Hughes & Fricker, 2024, p. 1917), which foregrounds First Nations leadership in the indigenising of educational contexts, a process that can only be undertaken by First Nations stakeholders owing to their heritage and culture. For example, Fricker (2024), a sovereign Dja Dja Wurrung educator, illustrates how he enacts this indigenising work through the authorship of a secondary school history textbook chapter about First Nations rights and freedoms, which "allows First Nations stakeholders to tell First Nations stories" (p. 60). The third step is about "co-constructing education contexts" and "decolonising labour and leadership of non-Indigenous stakeholders" (Hughes & Fricker, 2022, p. 1917), meaning:

> ... the responsibility and work of decolonising the curriculum and classroom contexts must be the responsibility of those who have traditionally perpetuated and benefited from the colonisation of the curriculum in the first place, that is, this is work for non-Indigenous people. (Hughes & Fricker, 2022, p. 1918)

This ITE model could and should be readily adapted to schools. Speaking specifically about history education, Weuffen (2024) warns that if non-Indigenous educators do not engage in this critical work "First Nations Peoples will continue to do a disproportionate amount of heavy lifting in the Australian education space and in efforts to decolonise the Eurocentric (re)telling of history on the Australian continent" (p. 79).

Guidance from such models and other protocols created by First Nations People can assist non-Indigenous educators overcome the notion that they need special permission to teach about First Nations histories, cultures and perspectives. Professor Melitta Hogarth, a Kamilaroi woman and Director of Ngarrngga (a resource for teachers made in collaboration Indigenous Knowledge Experts) says:

> Some teachers may think that they need permission to actually engage with Indigenous Knowledge, or to do the work about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures... You don't need permission. What you need is the knowledge and the understanding about how to engage respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. If you don't start somewhere, you're never going to start. (Ngarrngga, 2023, Episode 2)

This sentiment is reiterated by Hradsky (2024): "Listen. Hear. Let stories be told. Teach the truth. Let excitement overcome your fear. If we don't do this, it won't happen" (p. 48). These messages do not seek to oversimplify the complex and challenging work required of decolonising history education, rather they impel educators to get on with challenging the status quo.

4. Listening, learning and localising

Some other practical ways history teachers can enact a decolonising approach are centred on listening, learning and localising. Keynes (2024) underscores listening is fundamental to building understanding of First Nations knowledges: "While the project of articulating a decolonial history education should be led by First Nations Peoples, settlers in this space have a responsibility to first listen, and second, decentre settler ways of knowing and being" (pp. 25-26). This includes actively listening to how First Nations People think the failures of history curriculum can be addressed, reflecting on how Western and First Nations conceptualisations of 'history', nationhood and sovereignty differ, and engaging with local and national truth-telling processes (Keynes, 2024). At the national level this may involve engaging with the views of First Nations leaders (e.g. Behrendt, 2024) on how we move forward from the failed 2023 Voice Referendum, in which the majority of Australians rejected the proposed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. At the state level, listening to the truth telling facilitated by justice commissions can help history teachers develop a deeper understanding of the true impact of colonisation.

Building local connections to Country and First Nations communities is an important way of learning about First Nations ways of knowledges, and fostering care, trust and respect (Briggs, et al., 2024; King, 2024; Harvie, 2024). Drawing on research with pre-service teachers, Burgess et al. (2022) developed the Learning From Country Framework, which begins with building respect through deep listening to First Nations community voices. King (2024) encourages teachers to fill in "the silences of local settler histories to reveal the truth about the impact of colonisation" (p. 177) by finding local history texts, exploring Country in the local area and building community relationships. This can also lead to co-creation of localised resources. King exemplifies this with the VR 360 film he co-created with Peek Wurrung Elder, Uncle Rob Lowe, about Uncle Rob's lived experiences of segregation and racism, which can be viewed on YouTube (King, 2021). Another example is the series of picture books Balnarring preschool school co-created with Boon Wurrung Elder N'arweet Professor Carloyn Briggs (see Briggs et al., 2024). Increasingly, a range of resources are being created by First Nations People that tell their local stories and teachers have access to First Nations-led incursions and excursions to learn about the Country on which they live. Renumerating First Nations People for their knowledge and expertise, as well as committing a budget to resourcing are essential to this (Fricker, 2024; Harvie, 2024).

5. Evaluating

The last set of strategies centre on how history educators evaluate curricular texts and resources to address the limitations of official curricula. Conducting an audit of the school's library, textbooks and curriculum plans can help teachers assess the extent to which sovereign First Nations voices are represented (Fricker, 2024; Harvie, 2024). Having the evaluative skills to do this is imperative because:

> Educators need to ensure that resources that they select are appropriate, meaningful, and that they represent the stories, knowledges, lived experiences, and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rather than simply re-presenting historical misunderstandings and ideas that are under-pinned by racialised ideas. (Madsen et al., 2021, p. 142)

To support teachers to do this, First Nations educators Madsen, Perkins and Shay (2021) have developed the YARNS tool as a framework for critically evaluating resources related to First Nations content. In my experience with pre-service teachers, it is highly effective tool for building confidence with selecting appropriate resources and could be used by schools for auditing purposes. History teachers also need to be conscious of advice on using historical sources that include terminology considered inappropriate and offensive; such language should be historicised and contextualised "to support students to understand why these terms are now so offensive" (Madsen et al., 2021, p. 138).

Another fundamental area of history education that requires evaluation is the official curriculum. Despite the expanded inclusion of First Nations content in national and state curricula, many have critiqued the capacity of curriculum structures more broadly, and the disciplinary nature of history more specifically, to meaningfully embed First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing, confront the ongoing impact of settler colonialism, and further truth telling (e.g. Bedford, 2023; Hradsky, 2020; Keynes, 2019; 2024; Lowe et al., 2020). Decolonial critiques argue that the significant structural reform needed should be led by First Nations People (Bedford, 2023; Hradsky, 2020; Keynes, 2024). This is further highlighted in current Treaty discussions. At the end of 2024, Rueben Berg, Gunditjmara man and co-chair of Victoria's First Peoples' Assembly, opened Treaty discussions with the Victorian government by saying he wants local First Nations leaders and communities to have decision-making powers over how the state's Indigenous history is taught (see Ore, 2024).

Notwithstanding the need for comprehensive curriculum reform, history teachers can utilise decolonising strategies to resist some of these shortcomings. Garrard (2024) encourages history teachers to tackle the colonialist narrative that has long dominated history curricula and texts by doing Australian history as intercultural history. Drawing on explicit curriculum descriptors and textbooks, Garrard (2024) maps strategies for enacting an intercultural history framework. This models how teachers can work with students to build intercultural understanding by "sharing, negotiating, accepting, or rejecting the story" (Garrard, 2024, p. 153) represented in the historical texts and visual sources they use. Deconstructing historical meta/narratives enables teachers and students to "speak back to instrumental ethnocentric and Eurocentric narratives" (Garrard, 2024, p. 154) that have sustained discourses of white possession in history curricula (see Cairns, 2024). My own research (Cairns, 2024) shows this work is not limited to meta/narratives about settler denial of First Nations sovereignty, as similar strategies can be taken up in decolonising approaches to Asia-related Australian history. Arguably, history teachers can extend decolonising approaches to all historical contexts by engaging critically with "new questions about agency, power, narrative and sovereignty" (Cairns, 2024, p. 173). For example, in the context of the Palestine crisis there have been calls for teachers to take a deeper look at how settler colonialisms in other places intersect with settler colonialism in Australia (Calleja et al., 2024).

6. Concluding

Throughout this article I have deliberately avoided engaging with the so-called 'history wars' debate. These debates get ample attention and, by getting on with the work of decolonising education, we can push history education beyond a perpetual cycle of politicisation and polarisation (Fricker et al., 2024). Instead, the energy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and scholars in the history education community can be focused on actioning decolonising approaches centred on critically reflecting, listening, learning, localising and evaluating. This is not to suggest that the political context is unimportant or that there are quick fixes; this is challenging, complex and discomforting work. The considerable structural changes needed to achieve decolonising outcomes will require sovereign First Nations voices to lead curriculum reform. These challenges are compounded by other systemic pressures teachers face in schools presently. Furthermore, as highlighted by the opening vignette, this project is being undertaken at a time of heightened socio-political division spurred by fresh waves of Australian jingoism and the influence of neocolonial forces. How we decolonise history education depends on who and where we are; however, the opportunity to bring together perspectives in this journal's special issue will hopefully create space to form transnational connections and solidarities.

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