

Discussing Decolonization in the Classroom

——Greenland as a Case for Philosophical and Ethical Dialogues——

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1. The purpose of discussing a real-life controversial issue of decolonization

Decolonization has been one of the key topics in education for the past few decades. Raising awareness of the colonial and imperial foundations of universities led decolonization to become a movement to rethink history, curriculum, and admissions and hiring processes of higher education institutions. In the U.S., the Black Lives Matter movement pushed a number of universities to remove monuments of historical figures with controversial backgrounds, and their names from campus buildings. For example, the University of Virginia removed the name of its first president, Edwin A. Alderman, from its main library due to his commitment to eugenics, and renamed it after its fourth president, Edgar Shannon, who “admitted the first female undergraduates in 1970, pushed to increase Black admissions and endorsed a student-led protest against the Vietnam War”⁽¹⁾. And diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has come to the center of public discourse, becoming one of the most pressing issues for the universities to address. Today, the movement has reached primary and secondary education, and the National Education Union in the U.K. is calling for “a broad and balanced education in which teaching fully examines British imperialism and racism, as well as histories and cultures from around the world”⁽²⁾. Teachers are demanded to reexamine their teaching ideologies to establish a system where every student, staff, and teacher is supported without bias, discrimination, or oppression.

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- (1) Jason Armesto “UVa poised to change name of Alderman Library”, The Daily Progress, March 1, 2024. https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/education/uva-poised-to-change-name-of-alderman-library/article_61cd a796-d752-11ee-a941-eb96679afa43.html For more examples and details, see Johanna Alonso “A Building by Any Other Name,” Inside Higher Ed, November 17, 2022. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/11/18/new-policies-guide-removal-controversial-building-names>
- (2) National Education Union “Decolonising education” <https://neu.org.uk/advice/equality/race-equality/decolonising-education#:~:text=Decolonising%20education%20involves%20examining%20the,they%20have%20influenced%20education%20policies>. Accessed September 10, 2024.

There must be some transformative significance in discussing such pressing social issue, not only among the teachers and staff, but also with students in the classroom. Nel Noddings and Laurie Brooks (2017) suggest implementing interdisciplinary seminars within the high school curriculum, where students develop critical thinking skills by engaging in ethical conversations about real-life and current controversial issues⁽³⁾. They emphasize that “[t]he object is not necessarily to win a debate”⁽⁴⁾. “Rather, it is to understand what is being said on all sides and, perhaps, to find a nucleus of agreement that will provide a starting point from which we can work together. The idea is to use critical thinking in contributing to healthy human relations and the maintenance of a strong participatory democracy. Citizens in such a democracy must be able to communicate effectively with one another, and this capacity should be developed in our schools”⁽⁵⁾. One example of the topics the importance of which Noddings and Brooks stress is the religious beliefs of the American founding fathers; many were deists, and a few may have been atheists, which undermines the popular belief that the U.S. was built on Christian beliefs. To tackle such issues, they propose teachers to gather materials that will allow students to build a common understanding, a shared knowledge on the issue, or “a starting point”, that prepares them to discuss what beliefs are, what role Christianity played in the founding of the U.S., and what equality entailed in the course of U.S. history, among other difficult questions.

Case method is another pedagogical approach to developing critical thinking skills that has been implemented in the classroom. The approach was first implemented in American law schools, where it was crucial to prepare students to use their critical thinking skills while communicating and working with people that do not share the same opinion, standpoint, or perspective. The main idea of this approach is to use real-life, decision-forcing cases as teaching materials to enhance students’ thinking and decision-making skills in situations with limited time and information. Reflecting on the early days of case method implementation, Moskowitz (1992)⁽⁶⁾ writes, “in fact the case method did turn out better lawyers. Interaction with a Socratic teacher helped to sharpen students’ minds. They learned to think on their feet, to express themselves, and to read cases - skills that a lawyer needs and that the lecture/text-

(3) Nel Noddings and Laurie Brooks. (2017). *Teaching Controversial Issues: The case for critical thinking and moral commitment in the classroom*. Teachers College Press.

(4) Ibid., p.1

(5) Ibid., p.1

(6) Myron Moskowitz. (1992). Beyond the case method: It's time to teach with problems. *Journal of Legal Education*, 42(2), 241-270.

book method had done nothing to enhance. In addition, while the prior method taught students the rule the case method gave them a deeper understanding of the rules"⁽⁷⁾. This practice-oriented approach, or competence-based approach to critical thinking has gradually spread to other fields, including education⁽⁸⁾.

The purpose of this paper is to present a prototype of a teaching material on the controversial issue of decolonization that can be used in the classroom for discussion and inquiry. As a specific topic, we will focus on the colonial and decolonial state of Greenland with the anticipation that it will bring a new perspective to the discussion of decolonization, which is otherwise mostly limited to the context of former European colonies in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. While we will broadly review previous studies on Greenland, there will be limitations in the information provided, as the number of previous studies is itself limited.

2. Basics of the Geography and History of Greenland

Greenland is known as the world's largest island. It is located in the northeast of Europe, and while it was colonized by Denmark, it is in fact significantly closer to Canada than Denmark⁽⁹⁾. Søren Rud (2017) explains the basic geographic features of Greenland.

Approximately 80 percent of Greenland's area is covered by a gigantic ice sheet (approximately 1.8 million km²) yet the ice-free coastal areas equal the size of Germany. The population of around 56,000 inhabitants live in towns and settlements in the ice-free coastal regions, mainly along the west coast, which is more accessible by ship. No roads connect the towns or settlements in Greenland and all transportation is by ship, helicopter, or plane. The lack of infrastructure and the geographical realities present great challenges to contemporary Greenland⁽¹⁰⁾.

Note that the western coast of Greenland, where the majority of the population lives, faces

(7) Ibid., p.244

(8) See Shinichi Takeuchi, Yasushi Maruyama, et al. (2018). Case method and philosophy of education. [in Japanese] *Studies in the Philosophy of Education*, Philosophy of Education Society of Japan, 117, 105-111, Michitaro Nakamura et al. (2023). How Case Method Education Contributes to the Exploration of Leadership in School Education. [in Japanese], *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education*, Shizuoka University, 74, 176-191.

(9) The closest distance between countries borders is 30 kilometers between Greenland and Canada, while it is 2063 kilometers between Greenland and Denmark.

(10) Søren Rud. (2017). *Colonialism in Greenland: Tradition, governance and legacy*. Springer International Publishing, p.2

Canada and not Denmark. Peter Bjerregaard and Christina Viskum Lytken Larsen (2015) also provides a brief explanation on its features.

The total population of Greenland is 57,000 of whom 90% are ethnic Greenlanders (Inuit). Genetically, Greenlanders are Inuit (Eskimos) with a mixture of European, mainly Scandinavian genes. They are genetically and culturally closely related to the Inuit/Iñupiat in Canada and Alaska and, somewhat more distantly, to the Yupiit of Alaska and Siberia⁽¹¹⁾.

This means that ethnic Greenlanders are not only physically but also genetically close to the Native Americans. However, because of its colonial history, many Greenlanders are said to “have family ties to Denmark as a result of marriage or migration”⁽¹²⁾.

The colonial phase began in 1721, when the Danish-Norwegian priest Hans Egede established a mission and trading activities in the area of the present-day capital Nuuk, and this phase lasted until 1953, when Greenland was integrated into the Danish Realm. Greenlanders born before 1953 were thus born in the official colonial period and they have experienced the palpable consequences of the modernization policies in the subsequent period. They have also witnessed a period of political mobilization against inequalities and a lack of cultural and political recognition –culminating in the Greenland Home Rule Act in 1979 and the Self-Government Act in 2009.⁽¹³⁾

3. Issue of Language in Greenland

The integration to the Danish realm meant that Greenland becomes a part of Denmark, which requires assimilation of the Greenlandic people. “At the beginning of the 20th century, especially, Greenlandic [language] flourished and was actively developed in literature, poetry and in the educational system. But, with the 1953 amendment of the Danish constitution where the colonization officially ended and Greenland was turned into a Danish county, the

(11) Peter Bjerregaard and Christina Viskum Lytken Larsen. (2015). Time trend by region of suicides and suicidal thoughts among Greenland Inuit. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 74, p.2

(12) Rud (2017), p.2

(13) Ibid.

Greenlanders were forced to more or less abandon their mother language in favour of learning Danish”⁽¹⁴⁾. The Danish language was prioritized in schools, and “[a]s a consequence, many children from the 1950s and 1960s did not learn Greenlandic”⁽¹⁵⁾.

Documentary film “Sumé: The Sound of a Revolution” (2014) captures how the Greenlandic rock band Sumé influenced the younger generation in the 1970’s by being the first artist to record singing lyrics in the Greenlandic language, “a language that prior to Sumé didn’t have words for ‘revolution’ or ‘oppression’,” empowering the people towards “a revival of Greenlandic culture and identity, and paved the way for a Greenlandic home rule government” in the mid 1970’s⁽¹⁶⁾. After the Greenland Home Rule Act in 1979, “Greenlandic [language] was re-introduced as the primary language in the educational system”⁽¹⁷⁾. To this day, both Greenlandic and Danish languages are taught in the Greenlandic primary curriculum, along with English as the third language. However, “[t]he political and administrative elites predominately speak Danish while a majority of the population – 70 percent – speaks only Greenlandic,” which raises “the democratic question of whether a country can be governed in a language that is only spoken by a minority”⁽¹⁸⁾. The situation is disturbing particularly because the University of Greenland (Iisimatusarfik Kalaallit Nunaat), the only university in Greenland, offers most of its courses in Danish, and only has few Greenlandic natives on their faculty⁽¹⁹⁾.

4. Urbanization in Contemporary Greenland

According to Bjerregaard and Larsen (2015), “[u]rbanization started in the early 20th century and has increased rapidly since the 1950s. In 1951, 68% of the population lived in villages with less than 500 inhabitants; by 2010, this proportion decreased to 15%”⁽²⁰⁾.

(14) United Nations, Regional Information Centre for Western Europe “The Politics of Language in Greenland” <https://unric.org/en/the-politics-of-language-in-greenland/#:~:text=In%20the%2070s%2C%20students%2C%20fearing,language%20in%20the%20educational%20system>. Accessed September 10, 2024.

(15) Ibid.

(16) “Sumé: The Sound of a Revolution” official website. <https://www.thesoundofarevolution.com/about/> Accessed September 10, 2024. The cover of Sumé’s first album, Sumut, that was released in 1973, showed a reproduction of a 19th-century Greenlandic woodcut depicting an Inuit hunter killing a Norseman. The lyrics of their songs were not violent, yet they claimed for Greenlandic cultural independence from Denmark.

(17) United Nations, *ibid*.

(18) Ibid.

(19) For details, see Iisimatusarfik Kalaallit Nunaat official website. <https://uk.uni.gl> Accessed September 10, 2024. It must be noted that vocational education is provided in Greenlandic at different institutions.

(20) Bjerregaard and Larsen (2015). p.2

Greenland's 80 communities are all located on the coast. The communities are divided into towns and villages. A town is defined historically as the largest community in each of the 17 districts. In 2010, the population of the towns varied between 469 and 5,460 with the capital, Nuuk, having 15,469 registered inhabitants and probably a fair number of unregistered ones, while that of villages varied from less than 10 to around 550. Located in the towns are the district school(s), health centre or hospital, church, district administration and the main shops. These institutions are absent or present to a much smaller extent in villages. The capital, Nuuk, has a population 3 times that of the second largest town and despite its small size has many of the characteristics of a northern capital such as central government offices, a university and other post-secondary teaching institutions, the central hospital for Greenland, and so on. The most remote communities in Greenland are situated on the East Coast and in the far north. They were colonized much later than the central West Coast and suffer from being remote, having dialects that differ considerably from Central West Greenlandic, lower income and less employment opportunities⁽²¹⁾.

The World Development Indicators⁽²²⁾ show that in 2002, 17.9% of the Greenlandic population (10,136 persons) lived in the rural areas, while in 2020, it dropped to 12.5% (7,078 persons). On the other hand, urban population grew from 82% (46,473 persons) in 2002 to 87.5% (49,575 persons) in 2020. This does not necessarily indicate positive social mobility and wealth to the Greenlanders. Two of the incentives for the younger generation moving to urban towns can be said to be the education system and global warming. In Greenland, you need to attend a school in an urban town for a minimum of one year to take the 10th-grade school-leaving exams and complete compulsory education (primary and lower secondary). Moreover, for the youths that aspire to learn more, vocational schools and upper secondary schools in Greenland can only be found in towns⁽²³⁾. Global warming is also affecting the traditional Greenlandic lifestyles⁽²⁴⁾, disrupting the generational inheritance of hunting, sledding, and fishing skills. A docufiction film "A Polar Year" (2018) portrays how Greenland's Danish-based education system contradicts with

(21) Ibid.

(22) World Bank Group "Databank: World Development Indicators" <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> Accessed September 16, 2022.

(23) For more details, see Trap Greenland official website. <https://trap.gl/en/samfund-og-erhverv/uddannelse-sundhed-og-omsorg/> Accessed September 10, 2024.

(24) See NHK "Climate change threatens traditional lifestyles in Greenland", November 6, 2023. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/2816/>

the Greenlandic traditional lifestyles, and poses conflicts and dilemmas in the lives of Greenlandic children that are split between the Danish and Greenlandic lifestyles and career paths. As many people become aware of the impact of global warming and the risk it entails in preparing the future generation for the traditional lifestyles, it is thought that choosing the Danish, modernized and urban life will become more of a compulsion than an option.

5. High Suicide Rates among Greenlandic Indigenous Young Men

Previous studies and data indicate high suicide rate among the young Greenlanders. According to T. Kue Young, Boris Revich, and Leena Soininen (2015)⁽²⁵⁾, the mean age-standardized suicide rate in Greenland between 2000-2009 is approximately 80 per 100,000 persons, which is higher than any other Nordic countries/regions and North American countries/regions. Hannah Sargeant, Rebecca Forsyth and Alexandra Pitman (2018)⁽²⁶⁾ writes that “suicide is the leading cause of death among young men aged 15–29 in Greenland,” and “[a]ccording to suicide data published by Statistics Greenland, suicide accounts for 8% of total deaths in Greenland”⁽²⁷⁾.

As disturbing as it is, Young, Revich and Soininen (2015) adds that suicide rate among the indigenous population is significantly higher than the non-indigenous population when looking in data not only in Greenland but across Alaska, Canada, the Northern regions of the Scandinavian countries (Northern Sweden, Norway, and Finland), and northwestern Russia. They also state that approximately 9% of the indigenous respondents in Greenland answered that they “had seriously thought of committing suicide in their lifetime” while approximately 7.75% said that they had such thoughts “within the last year”⁽²⁸⁾. In addition, they mention that the world’s highest youth suicide rates occur in Greenland and Nunavut, the territory of Canada that comprise most of the Arctic Archipelago, which can be said to be the two jurisdictions where indigenous people have advanced the furthest towards self-government. The data implicates a correlation between decolonization, the struggles and chaos that it entails, and high suicide rates of the indigenous youths.

(25) T. Kue Young, Boris Revich, and Leena Soininen. (2015). Suicide in circumpolar regions: an introduction and overview. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 74:1.

(26) Hannah Sargeant, Rebecca Forsyth and Alexandra Pitman. (2018). The Epidemiology of Suicide in Young Men in Greenland: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15.

(27) Ibid., p.1

(28) T. Kue Young, Boris Revich, and Leena Soininen. (2015). p.7

Sargeant, Forsyth and Pitman (2018) outlines the trends in suicide cases throughout modern Greenlandic history. They write that “Danish physician, Dr. Alfred Bertelsen, recorded 14 suicide cases from 1891–1930” and “estimates of average annual suicide rates were 4 per 100,000 for the period 1891–1903 and 3 per 100,000 for the period 1901–1930”⁽²⁹⁾. The small estimate is thought to have changed drastically during the latter half of the 20th century. “Findings covering 1970–2011 supported a dramatic rise in suicide rates in Greenlandic men aged 15–24 from 1976,” and the “highest rates recorded were almost 600 per 100,000 per year in men aged approximately 20–23 over 1977–1986”⁽³⁰⁾. They also state that “at the Greenlandic population level, age-standardised population suicide rates over the period 1972–1995 increased markedly from approximately 44 per 100,000 population in 1975 to approximately 110 per 100,000 in 1984–1989, stabilising at 110 per 100,000 from 1990–1995”⁽³¹⁾. However, the reasons for this remains unknown. “These geopolitical factors set important context. The dramatic increase in suicide rates in young men in Greenland in the 1970’s coincided with a period of rapid modernisation and social change. However, we were unable to identify specific risk factors for suicide in young men as no studies reported these”⁽³²⁾.

6. Implications and Guiding Questions for Discussions on Decolonization

This paper briefly outlined some of the important real-life, ethical, and controversial issues facing Greenland, with a particular focus on issues that are closely related to education and youth. While more in-depth materials should be developed to encourage further research, the limited information may still encourage students to discuss and inquire about decolonization. The following questions can be used as a guide for classroom discussion and inquiry.

-What does language mean to us?

Do we need language to preserve our cultural identity and/or independence?

Which is more important for a person, enhancing their native language or acquiring a more global language?

Can we assume that every child can become multilingual?

-Does education provide happier lives?

(29) Sargeant, Forsyth and Pitman. (2018). p.13

(30) Ibid., p.1

(31) Ibid., p.12

(32) Ibid., p.12

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What sort of lifestyles do our schools prepare students for?

How is global warming affecting our lives, and what are the disparity in the extent to which it affects different groups?

What conditions should we meet to have children and youths be able to have equal options in their careers and lifestyles?

-What makes our lives worth living?

How can we take away the factors for suicide?

Can education prevent suicide?

To what extent does the political state of our country affect our psychological well-being?

-What is decolonization?

How can we define colonization?

With what can we determine that a country or region has been fully decolonized?

Do the formerly colonized population need to endure political chaos and psychological crisis to reclaim their independence, freedom, and cultural identities?

Noddings and Brooks (2017) mentioned that classroom discussions on controversial issues are “in pursuit of truth”. “We hope to bring people together –to help them understand each other in the fullness of their humanity. That there is a ‘real morality’ involved in public discussion cannot be denied”⁽³³⁾. We hope the prototype material provided in this paper do the same –encourage critical discussions on important contemporary issues that needs not only rational and critical thinking skills but caring conversations between those with different and opposing views that leads to careful decision-makings.

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(33) Noddings and Brooks (2017). p.159