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Indigenous Curriculum, Indigenous education, Indigenous education policy, Indigenous research

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Indigenous voices: why we urgently need windows and mirrors

By Amy Thomson

Could you see yourself reflected in your English classroom?

I would like you to take yourself back in time for a moment.

Take yourself back to your high school English classroom.

I want you to imagine the books you studied.

Think of their titles and who they were by.

Think about what you learnt and how these texts impacted you.

Think about the characters and how they are represented...

I wonder, can you see yourself or your family reflected back to you on the pages of any of these books? Through the characters? Through the authors' voice?

A worrying absence – Where are the Indigenous voices?

My name is Amy Thomson and I am a Mandandanji woman. As an Aboriginal young person, I struggled to locate authentic representations of my identity in my English classroom. As an English teacher, I endeavoured to ensure my own teaching programs reflected the complexity of Indigeneity and Indigenous perspectives. Now, as an Indigenous Education researcher, I am determined to ensure my research [privileges Indigenous voices and experiences and disrupts coloniality](#).

One of the questions my PhD study asks is how does English teacher text selection impact Indigenous and non-Indigenous students? I ask this as I'm interested in whether or not Indigenous texts are included in the schools in my study. In my experience, there is a phenomenon occurring in teacher text selection, [despite curriculum changes](#), and this is causing the subordination of Indigenous voices.

Colonial texts on Aboriginal land: The dominance of the 'canon' in Australian English classrooms

In English classrooms in Australia, there is a [prevalence of the privileged](#) in the books chosen for study – the dominance of the "Canon" of literary classics that are reused over and over due to their ["cultural" and "literary" value](#) has meant that the same few authors from England, such as Shakespeare and Chaucer, are [as ever present in Australian classrooms today as they were during World War 2](#).

This made me wonder – what does this suggest to the Indigenous young people in the classroom who don't have the same cultural background or values as those in the studied texts? Are their culture or values not worthy? But also, what covert messages is this sending non-Indigenous students about the value of Indigenous voices?

We need windows *and* mirrors in our classrooms when teaching for reconciliation

My study is informed by the ["windows and mirrors"](#) concept by Indigenous Education researcher Kaye Price – including Indigenous perspectives in the classroom provides "windows" for non-Indigenous students into a culture different from their own and "mirrors" for Indigenous students to see themselves reflected in their classrooms. [In an increasingly racist climate, it is essential to do this while teaching for reconciliation](#).

For non-Indigenous students, [reading Indigenous texts](#) allows them to develop [an appreciation and respect for Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories](#). For Indigenous students, like in the image I've included in this blog, in these texts, they can see themselves and their families reflected back in a powerful way. Reading strength-based Indigenous literature can uplift a [student's image of themselves](#) as the [Indigenous characters are empowered](#) – like the characters, they too can become a [tool of cultural resistance](#) in the face of colonialism.

The need for disruption – are you providing your students with windows *and* mirrors?

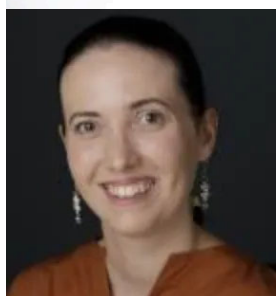
As teachers, we need to understand our role as [knowledge producers and cultural actors](#) because we must make sure that we are not continuing to disadvantage those who don't feel a sense of belonging in the dominant normative culture. Teachers need to [engage in self-reflexive critique as we move away from deficit paradigms](#) and rise to the challenge in understanding and combating how [Whiteness has shaped knowledge production](#).

Indigenous content [must not be treated as an “add-on.”](#) Nor should teachers let the word “[tokenistic](#)” scare them away – references to tokenism dismisses an attempt at privileging Indigenous voices before it has been attempted. If Indigenous literature is included and taught in English classrooms with a [willingness to unsettle inherited knowledges about knowledge and place](#), students can engage with texts aware of their standpoint, and move away from more colonised versions of subject English.



Visions for the future of English teaching – from both teachers and students

But how do we get to this? My PhD will speak to English teachers and students about their experience of subject English and their school's current inclusion of Indigenous texts. Through focus groups, I will bring both students and teachers together to create a vision for the future of their school's English teaching, particularly regarding the embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, and perspectives. Through these plans for the future of English teaching and the inclusion of Indigenous literature, it is my hope that all of these students and teachers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, can come to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for the sovereign Kings and Queens we truly are.



Amy Thomson is a Mandandanji woman and a PhD candidate in the School of Education at the University of Queensland. She was awarded the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Post Graduate Student Researcher Award at the 2022 AARE conference for her paper, Colonial texts on Aboriginal land: The dominance of the Canon in Australian English classrooms, on which this blog post is based.

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