

Unsilencing the Histories of Ireland's Indigenous Minority

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Abstract:

Despite their wealth of cultural and environmental knowledge, indigenous epistemologies are largely excluded and silenced in mainstream environmental discourses. This article explores how storytelling, a pedagogical approach central to indigenous peoples around the globe, can function in classrooms as a culturally sustaining pedagogy which unsilences indigenous cultural and environmental perspectives and ways of knowing. Drawing on the traditional ways of knowing inherent to Mincéirs, an indigenous Irish ethnic group, we argue that the use of indigenous stories allows for the exploration of environmental issues in a holistic, informed and responsive way.

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Languages: English

The unequal power relations established during colonialism, and exacerbated through capitalism, continue to have profound negative consequences for indigenous communities globally. One of the most enduring legacies of these processes has been the reframing, erosion, re-placing or erasure of indigenous knowledge systems and practices.[1] As argued by Bonnett, colonisation, in practice, has denied “the validity of widely experienced and valued phenomena by simply presuming the superiority of their perspective”. [2] As a result, indigenous voices and perspectives are largely absent from global school curricula. Inclusion can serve to validate indigenous knowledge systems and redress this curricular omission and systemic injustice.

The Human and the Natural World

In this article, we understand indigenous knowledge to be the “traditional norms and social values, as well as mental constructs that guide, organise, and regulate [indigenous] peoples’ way of living and making sense of their world”. [3] These sense-making forms are often in conflict with Eurowestern understandings of the world which position the human world in opposition to (and separate from) the natural world. This anthropocentric view bestows intrinsic value on human beings, positioning them as inherently superior to non-human entities. [4] The animal, plant and mineral entities of the natural world are othered and ascribed instrumental value; they are commodified as resources to be extracted solely for human benefit. This exploitative relationship, a key feature of colonial expansion, is a significant contributing factor to our current planetary predicament. [5] As will be explored below, it is antithetical to indigenous relational onto-epistemologies.

The Silencing of Indigenous Knowledge

The ontological refers to what we know of reality, while the epistemic refers to how that knowledge is validated. These are often viewed as separate in Eurowestern traditions. Onto-epistemology, according to Barad, is “the study of practices of knowing in being” [6] that accentuates the inter-relationship of the two in how we understand the world around us. For example, land and place are inextricably linked to indigenous identity; they are viewed by many indigenous peoples as extensions of themselves, as sources of spiritual strength and as fundamental components of how they

understand the self and the wider world.[7] In many instances, planet earth is referred to as “Mother Earth”[8], and in such conceptualisations, land is ascribed intrinsic value rather than economic value. It is not viewed as owing anything or being in servitude to humanity.

As argued by Hernandez, the Eurowestern views of the natural world as a commodity and land as property is alien to indigenous cultures. Reciprocity rather than extraction and exploitation define indigenous peoples’ relationships with the natural world because historically, indigenous people “always knew to take only what they needed”[9] and replace what they could. A similar profound respect for nature and close relationship to the land is found in Mincéir culture in Ireland,[10] particularly in regard to the healing qualities of herbs and plants.[11] Providing students with learning experiences which facilitate reflective, critical and respectful engagement with indigenous onto-epistemologies, such as those of the Mincéirs, can offer rich opportunities for reimagining humanity’s relationship with the natural world.

Ireland’s Indigenous Ethnic Minority

Mincéirs are an indigenous Irish ethnic group comprising 0.7% of the general population of Ireland.[12] The Mincéir community share a common history, language (Cant/Gammon), cultural heritage and tradition of nomadism. Similar to other indigenous peoples, they also share a long history of oppression. Racial hierarchies within society have resulted in experiences of acute and pervasive structural and institutional racism.[13] These experiences have left their mark, particularly within education, where Mincéir children experience low teacher expectations and monocultural school policies, practices and curricula, all of which are implicated in high illiteracy levels, academic underachievement and significant damage to well-being and mental health.[14] Tellingly, the suicide rate for Mincéirs is almost seven times that of the settled population.[15]

In amplifying Mincéir onto-epistemologies and histories that relate to human non-human relationships, we recognise that this could be interpreted as a form of Critical Race Theory’s interest convergence[16] – that we are centering Mincéir narratives because they may prove useful to

us members of the settled “white” community. Rather, in sharing these stories and highlighting their pedagogical value, we, in our positions as teacher educators (positions we recognise our settled privilege played an important role in securing), are seeking to include Mincéir knowledge systems within classroom contexts, and more broadly, to redress the non- and mis-representation of Mincéir experiences in Irish curricula. However, we equally recognise that as non-Mincéirs, we cannot fully understand the full meaning and significance of the stories shared.[\[17\]](#)

There are few tangible traces of Mincéir histories in Irish official records despite the fact that Mincéirs are a historically and culturally rich ethnic group. This invisibility is also reflected in school curricula. Folklore is embedded in the culture of the Mincéirs and Oein DeBhairduin’s anthology “Why the Moon Travels”, a collection of beautifully curated stories that have been passed orally *ó ghlúin go glúin* (from knee to knee in the Irish language) by members of the Mincéir community, gives voice to the silenced ways of knowing of Mincéirs. They provide an entry point to both validate and include Mincéir perspectives in the mainstream curriculum and give rich insights into the connectedness of both the human and natural world as well as uncovering alternative ways for students to understand and appreciate the spaces around them.

Storytelling & Oral Histories

As forms of culturally sustaining pedagogy, indigenous storytelling and oral histories offer rich opportunities for indigenous students to draw on their identities, experiential knowledge and the knowledge of their elders and ancestors.[\[18\]](#) By ascribing value to these as a pedagogical approach, indigenous voices can be unsilenced, their communitarian values shared, epistemologies brought in from the margins and deficit understandings of indigenous pedagogies, knowledge systems and ways of being can be challenged.[\[19\]](#)

The stories found in “Why the Moon Travels” provide rich insights into Mincéir views of both the human and natural world. Stories like “Airmid’s voice” (Airmid’s gresko) and “Bees and Giants” (Beach an tom gloke), offer valuable springboards for encouraging students to think about humanity’s relationship with nature and to imagine how it could be otherwise. For

example, “Airmid’s voice” is a retelling of the legend of the healing goddess Airmid, who taught the Mincéirs about the bio-medical value of native herbs in healing. This story offers rich opportunities for reflection on the unique and rich diversity of the natural world but also of the intergenerational connectedness to nature the Mincéirs still draw on today. As DeBhairduin explains, “Travellers have always had a close relationship with the land and all its bounties”.[\[20\]](#)

This deep appreciation of nature’s bounties is also seen in the story “Bees and Giants” which provides a provocative stimulus for discussions centred on humanity’s extractive and exploitative relationship with nature and also of bees’ fundamental intrinsic as well as instrumental value. This connection to the natural world is woven throughout the stories, and through the personal vignettes prefacing each one, DeBhairdúin provides an insight into the onto-epistemologies that shape Minceir worldviews.

Embedding Indigenous Voices

Critical engagement with current human-nonhuman relationships is a fundamental aspect of reimagining more just and equitable futures and indigenous stories can provide rich stimuli for beginning such reimaginings. Additionally, embedding minoritised voices, knowledge and experiences in school curricula, provide opportunities to begin the wider process of redressing generations of institutional racism and cultural repression. This, however, must be preceded by critical reflection on the tacit assumptions which underpin teachers’ own views of indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems. There is much to be learned from indigenous ways of understanding and relating to the natural world found in folklore and stories and it is time for educators to recognise their value and include them in their curricula.

Further Reading

- DeBharduin, Oein. *Why the Moon Travels*. Dublin: Skein Press, 2020.
- Hernandez, Jessica. *Fresh Banana Leaves. Healing Indigenous Landscapes through Indigenous Science*. California: North Atlantic Books, 2022
- Haynes, Amanda, Joyce, Sindy, and Schweppe, Jennifer. *The Significance of the Declaration of Ethnic Minority Status for Irish Travellers*. *Nationalities Papers* 49 (2): 270–288. doi:10.1017/nps.2020.28.

Web Resources

- Irish Travellers Movement – Promoting Equality for Travellers: <https://itmtrav.ie> (last accessed 6 March 2022).
- Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS): <https://en.unesco.org/links> (last accessed 6 March 2022).
- A Short History of Irish Travellers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bhBbMrF8Z0> (last accessed 6 March 2022).

[1] M. Satish Kumar, and Lauren A. Scanlon, “Ireland and Irishness. The Contextuality of Postcolonial Identity,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 109, no. 1 (2019): 202–22.

[2] Michael Bonnett, “Sustainable Development, Environmental Education, and the Significance of Being in Place,” *The Curriculum Journal* 24, no. 2 (2013): 250–71, here: 265.

[3] George J. Sefa Dei, Budd L. Hall, and Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg, *Indigenous Knowledge in Global Contexts. Multiple Readings of Our World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 6.

[4] Hakim Mohandas Amani Williams, and Maria Jose Bermeo, “A Decolonial Imperative. Pluriversal Rights Education,” *International Journal of Human Rights Education* 4, no. 1 (2020), https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/?utm_source=repository.usfca.edu%2Fijhre%2Fvol4%2Fiss1%2F1&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages (last accessed 6 March 2022).

[5] Farhana Sultana, “Climate Change, Covid-19, and the Co-Production of Injustices. A Feminist Reading of Overlapping Crises,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 22, no. 4 (2021): 447–60; Williams, and Bermeo, “Decolonial Imperative”.

[6] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 187, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388128>.

- [7] Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves*; Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place–Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non–Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!),” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 20–34.
- [8] Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves*.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 73.
- [10] Oein DeBharduin, *Why the Moon Travels* (Dublin: Skein Press, 2020).
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] Central Statistics Office, “Census of the Population 2016 – Profile 8: Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion” (Dublin: Stationary Office, 2018), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8itd/> (last accessed 6 March 2022).
- [13] Anne Marie Kavanagh, and Maeve Dupont, “Making the Invisible Visible. Managing Tensions around Including Traveller Culture and History in the Curriculum at Primary and Post-Primary Levels,” *Irish Educational Studies* 40, no. 3 (2021): 553–569.
- [14] *Ibid.*
- [15] All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, “All Ireland Traveller Health Study: Our Geels,” 2010, https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/AITHS_SUMMARY.pdf (last accessed 6 March 2022).
- [16] Derrick A. Bell, “Brown vs Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980), https://www.hartfordschools.org/files/Equity%20Page/Interest_Convergence_by_Bell.pdf (last accessed 6 March 2022).
- [17] Recognising our positionality as non-indigenous academics and in an effort to avoid inadvertent generalisations, reductiveness and oversimplification of the complexity and diversity within and between indigenous culture and knowledge system, we rely on the writings of indigenous authors in this section.
- [18] Muhammad A. Khalifa, Deena Khalil, Tyson E.J. Marsh, and Clare Halloran, “Toward an Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership. A Literature Review,” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2019): 571–614.
- [19] Alec Couros, Katia Hildebrandt, Claire Kreuger, Patrick Lewis, Ken Montgomery, Joseph Naytowhow, and Jennifer A. Tupper, “Storying Treaties and the Treaty Relationship. Enhancing Treaty Education through Digital Storytelling,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 6, no. 4 (2013): 544–558.
- [20] DeBharduin, *Why the Moon Travels*, 21.
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