NORDIC PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 2

NORDIC COUNTRIES' INVOLVEMENT IN THE EUROPEAN COLONIAL PROJECT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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Introduction

In June 2020, statues of the Danish-Norwegian missionary and colonizer Hans Egede, in Greenland's capital Nuuk and in Copenhagen, were daubed with red paint and the word 'decolonize' (BBC News, 2020). These incidents were a direct response to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that had taken place in the United States the previous month, following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The BLM protests against police brutality and racism resonated with those challenging the pervasiveness of racism and legacies of colonialism. As they were frequently expressed through attacks on controversial colonial statues, they can best be understood as symbolic acts of reappropriation of a despoiled past. Indeed, the advancement of the BLM movement across the world would not have occurred on such a scale without the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism.

The wave of global protests also reached the Nordic countries, with thousands of people gathered at several locations across the region to express solidarity with BLM and to demonstrate against racism. It is difficult to convey the significance of the BLM Nordic protests without the background context. In the aftermath of the Second World War the Nordic countries emerged as global champions of democracy, peace building and human rights. For years they have also topped the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022). Parallel to this, the region's global performance, branded as Nordic Exceptionalism, has reinforced the Nordic governments' credibility and moral authority in the international arena. This sense of exceptionalism has been also crucial in defining the Nordic countries' aloofness in relation to European colonial memory and their perceived peripheral status to the contemporary process of globalization. By placing coloniality and racism in the Nordic context, the

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BLM protests challenged the notion of colonial exceptionalism and the self-perception of the Nordic societies as post-racial.

This chapter discusses how the Nordic countries' self-perception of being untouched by colonial legacies is an obstacle to addressing vital challenges within their educational systems, such as experiences of exclusion, discrimination and racism. Across the region, human rights are seen as an important part of national identities and core educational values. Yet the understanding of human rights as synonymous with national values also has a flip side. It often results in teachers' dependence on tacit knowledge, a focusing on rights abuses in distant locations rather than human rights principles at home, and a failure to draw on students' life experiences (Osler & Skarra, 2021; Vesterdal, 2018).

The chapter takes as its point of departure the historical background, presenting various examples of how the Nordic countries have engaged in colonialism. Based on the existing literature, as well as a new analysis of selected Norwegian textbooks, it demonstrates that the teaching materials tend to present the Nordic countries as outsiders to the European colonial project. While highlighting a link between history education and human rights education (HRE), I argue that downplaying the colonial involvement of the Nordic countries reproduces assumptions about their historical and contemporary exceptionalism. The chapter further discusses how the tendency to ignore these aspects of history is related to a regional perception that they are post-racial societies. This in turn silences other perspectives on colonialism and its consequences and ultimately undermines the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity that are inscribed in Nordic national curricula. Based on these reflections, the final section draws attention to the teacher's role in decolonizing teaching about colonialism.

Nordic colonial complicity

The Nordic self-perception of non-involvement in the European colonial project encompasses varied historical experiences, such as those of Denmark and Sweden, which were colonial powers, and those of Finland, Iceland and Norway, whose status varied at different periods of time – from *de facto* colonies to more or less autonomous territories. Finland first became an independent state in 1917, after nearly a century as a part of the Russian Empire. Until 1809, it had been under Swedish rule for several centuries. Norway was a junior partner in a union with Denmark from 1537 to 1814. After its defeat during the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark was forced to cede Norway to Sweden, but retained the Norwegian medieval claims to Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland. While Iceland became independent in 1944, both the Faroe Islands (1851) and Greenland (1953) were incorporated into Denmark, though in very different political and cultural contexts (Kočí & Baar, 2021).

From the 17th century, during the second wave of European colonialism, both Denmark-Norway and Sweden showed an interest in territories in other parts of the world (Naum & Nordin, 2013). The most prominent of their overseas possessions, due to their role in the transatlantic slave trade, were forts on the Gold Coast in West Africa and some Caribbean islands. In 1653, the short-lived Swedish Africa Company established the fort of Carolusborg in today's Ghana, which the British Royal African Company took over in 1664 and transformed into a place of imprisonment for Africans awaiting embarkment on the Middle Passage. In 1784 Sweden purchased St. Barthélemy Island in the West Indies from the French and established a centre for the prosperous slave trade. Denmark-Norway was even more successful in this area. It is estimated that the Danish West India Company, the main operator in the Danish slave trade, transported 120,000 enslaved Africans from Christiansborg, the Danish castle in Accra on the Gold Coast, to St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John in the West Indies. These islands remained Danish possessions from 1673 until they were sold to the USA in 1917.

Although Finland, Iceland and Norway were not independent during most of the colonial era, which goes back to the 15th century, many Norwegians, Finns and Icelanders took active part in the Swedish and Danish colonial projects. At the same time, apart from the conquest and exploitation of the overseas possessions and the profitable transatlantic slave trade, Nordic participation in European colonialism took other forms. From the 1820s until the 1930s people from the Nordic countries emigrated in high numbers to the United States. Although this is rarely highlighted in the context of Nordic emigration to North America in this period, it was a form of settler colonialism which contributed to the elimination and displacement of the indigenous inhabitants (Bergland, 2021). Another example refers to the treatment of such groups as the indigenous Sámi peoples and Greenland's Inuit population. Their treatment in many ways resembled the fate of the populations of the overseas territories colonized by the European colonial powers. The Nordic notion of non-participation in colonialism is finally difficult to reconcile with many histories of successful entrepreneurs from this part of Europe who, by virtue of the transnational character of the colonial enterprises, participated in and profited from the economic exploitation of colonized territories in Africa, Asia or Oceania (Alsaker Kjerland & Enge Bertelsen, 2015).

Scholars argue that viewing the Nordic countries as outsiders to European colonialism neglects their various roles and involvement in colonial projects (Keskinen et al., 2009; Merivirta et al., 2021). In an effort to capture the Nordic countries' ambiguous stance in a (post)colonial context, Ulla Vuorela (2009) developed a concept of 'colonial complicity', which challenges a traditional divide between European powers with and without colonial possessions and suggests a broader context for the legacy of the colonial era. The narrow understanding of colonialism as a system limited to colonies and colonial institutions has contributed to a perception that colonialism was not a

part of the history of those countries which did not have their own colonies. However, the concept of 'colonial complicity' encompasses ideological and economic aspects, allowing activities such as exploration, trade and missionary work to be seen as integral parts of colonial enterprises.

By highlighting the manifold aspects of the Nordic countries' involvement and complicity in colonial projects, Vuorela (2009) challenges the Nordic self-perception of being untouched by any colonial legacy. In this regard, Vuorela's argument points to a process of internalizing the world through the lenses of the leading European colonial powers, which has to be seen as a consequence of participation in and acceptance of colonized practices. Not only did colonial complicity form the worldview of those who lived in the colonial era and took part in the process of knowledge production shaped by the Eurocentric colonial view, but it also fostered the construction of colonialism as a discourse which affects the way we understand and interact with the world at present.

The European identity and worldview of the colonial era was built on the assumption of the superiority of European civilization, combined with a systematic discrimination of indigenous people and people of colour (McEachrane, 2018). Once assumed to be morally justified, these paternalistic attitudes have contributed to establishing racial and cultural hierarchies that still mould European societies. Although Nordic self-perception is often characterized by a feeling of remoteness from the rest of the European continent, Nordic countries do not constitute an exception. They have been equally shaped by racial distinctions and colonial hierarchies.

Refusal to acknowledge this colonial complicity has resulted in a lack of a clear critique of this part of the history of the Nordic countries. It is noteworthy that this 'colonial amnesia' (Hall, 2000 quoted in Hvenegård-Lassen & Maurer, 2012), may be applied as much to Iceland, Finland and Norway, countries which did not possess formal colonies, as to Denmark and Sweden, where the colonial past has been either played down or disavowed. A good illustration of an effort to efface the (post)colonial legacy may be Greenland's incorporation into the Danish realm as one of its provinces in 1953. This happened against the background of growing demands for decolonization in different parts of the world and was possible because of Denmark's alleged reputation as 'a benevolent colonial power' (Mølholm Olesen, 2019). The perception of Denmark as more humanitarian than the other European colonial powers enabled it to keep Greenland and re-establish its power position under the banner of modernization (Jensen, 2012).

Linking HRE and teaching about colonialism

The main goal of HRE is to enhance awareness and empower learners to make human rights a reality in their communities and in the world. According to the Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, HRE

encompasses education about, through and for human rights (UN, 2011). These three dimensions are interconnected but accentuate different educational objectives. 'Education about' has to do with providing knowledge and understanding of human rights; 'education through' refers to teaching based on respect for educators and learners; and 'education for' aims at empowering persons to uphold their own rights and those of others (UN, 2011).

Considering the inherently anti-human rights nature of colonialism, colonial history becomes a relevant and significant topic for HRE. To be able to recognize that certain acts of discrimination are rooted in historical contexts and power dynamics, students need to gain historical insight into the universal struggle for justice and dignity (Lenz, 2016). Such a perspective highlights the connection between HRE and history education through 'an awareness of history', which involves understanding historical experiences and applying them to present and future judgments (Lenz, 2016). Accordingly, we may assume that if students learn how colonial legacies continue to influence the societies they live in, it will contribute to a more profound historical awareness, laying the foundation for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the present.

There is, however, a certain scepticism against linking HRE to past traumatic events (Lenz, 2016). Critics argue it is ahistorical to apply the human rights framework to teaching about historical injustices that occurred before the conceptualization and legal establishment of human rights. In addition, those who consider human rights to be a part of a Western cultural hegemony point out that framing history education within a human rights perspective may be seen as sustaining colonialism. While these objections are important, it is an oversimplification to confine colonial damage solely to the past. Colonial legacies continue to have an impact on people's lives and relations today. This also concerns the Nordic region, where colonialism is generally absent from national narratives, despite various involvements in colonial projects. In reply to the latter argument, it may be pointed out that the standard history education canon generally reflects the Western/Eurocentric perspective. By emphasizing equality and empowerment, the human rights perspective has the potential to challenge the Eurocentric nature of history education. Therefore, although it is not possible to fully dismiss the argument about the Western origins of the human rights regime, HRE can play a significant role in dismantling established historical narratives rooted in the notion of Western superiority.

Although Nordic textbooks, over time, have provided more nuanced and balanced depictions of European colonialism, a Eurocentric focus still dominates the teaching of colonialism (Eriksen, 2022a; Hennessey, 2022; Torjussen, 2018). This may be attributed to the fact that the national curricula do not explicitly call for a postcolonial perspective and teachers lack guidance on how to attenuate the predominant Eurocentric view. The wordings of the curricula guidelines indicate that colonialism is primarily seen as a political and

economic phenomenon, distant in place and time. As a result, none of the subject curricula explicitly mention Nordic colonial involvement but refer in general terms to colonialism as an important global historical process.

For the purpose of this chapter, I have analyzed representations of colonialism and imperialism in recently published Norwegian lower secondary school textbooks in social studies, respectively *Samfunnsfag 10* (Bredahl et al., 2022), *Arena 8* (Hellerud et al., 2020) and *Relevans 8* (Heidenreich & Moe, 2020). The focus was on assessing the extent to which textbooks address the involvement of Nordic states in colonial practices, as well as how broadly the term 'colonialism' is used. The examples I refer to illustrate how these textbooks approach this topic: I consider their dominant historical narrative and the degree of inclusiveness.

Studies from Sweden and Finland (Hennessey, 2022; Mikander, 2015), along with my own analysis, confirm the prevalence of a narrow definition of colonialism in the majority of textbooks. They typically mention Denmark-Norway's and Sweden's formal colonial empires and their involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, but these topics are not given significant focus in the main text. As a result, the textbooks reinforce the perception of the Nordic countries as outsiders to the European colonial project. And although the textbooks do relate colonialism to structural societal inequality resulting from modern globalization, they largely align with the conventional view of colonialism as a system centred around the formal control of overseas territories by European colonial powers. The notion of colonialism as an external phenomenon confined to the traditional colonial powers seems to be so unquestionable that *Samfunnsfag 10* omits Denmark's control of Greenland from a map of colonial powers and possessions in 1945, despite Greenland still having the status of colony at that time (Bredahl et al., 2022, pp. 108–109). This omission not only creates an epistemological gap but also reproduces historical injustice through erasing Greenland's colonial experience. In addition, it represents a missed opportunity to contextualize the idea of the colonial legacy within the Nordic region.

One of the challenges of HRE in schools is transforming the traditional content of history education to bring it in tune with education for rights (Osler, 2016). HRE aspires to develop a cosmopolitan outlook based on the universal character of human rights. History education, in turn, is generally perceived as a matter of socializing young people into an established national narrative. The tendency to ignore or marginalize the Nordic countries' colonial involvement plays a part in building a national identity that is based on a sense of exceptionalism. This tendency is rooted in a strong belief that the Nordic countries have always been on the right side of history. *Arena 8* emphasizes, for example, that Denmark-Norway was the first country in the world to abolish the slave trade, as if to indicate that, despite the circumstance Denmark-Norway was in fact quite progressive at the time (Hellerud et al., 2020, p. 191). Although this information itself is correct, the textbook seems

to conform to a popular myth of the country's role as a pioneer in the abolition of slavery (Jørgensen, 2014). Yet the Norwegian textbook does not specify that although the law abolishing the slave trade was passed in 1792, it came into effect in 1803. Meanwhile, there was an agreement to use all possible means to increase the volume of the slave trade to satisfy future demand for labour in Danish-Norwegian sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Neither does it add that although Denmark had forbidden the slave trade, slaves in the Danish West Indies were not liberated until 1848, 15 years later than in the British Empire.

The Nordic colonial past has been subject to considerable research in the past two decades. However, some sceptics downplay its significance by comparing it to the extensive colonial possessions of other European states. The viewpoint seems to rely on a narrow understanding of colonialism, reducing the colonial past to formal overseas possessions in the Global South, and in this way excluding colonies in the Arctic, most notably Greenland. The Nordic colonial past is consequently often reduced to Denmark-Norway's and Sweden's miniscule formal empires that ceased to exist before colonial policies became more problematic than profitable. Moreover, the narrow understanding of colonialism is intertwined with a national approach to history education while colonialism, despite competing interests between the states involved, was in its nature a transnational enterprise based as much on national belonging as on racial hierarchies, as evidenced by the involvement of Nordic explorers, settlers, merchants and missionaries in the European colonial project.

From colonial to racial denial

The Nordic self-image as outsiders to colonialism and the refusal to acknowledge the enduring impact of the colonial legacy have played a crucial role in positioning racism as external to Nordic societies (Keskinen et al., 2009; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012). Since the 1970s the Nordic countries have become prominent advocates of anti-imperial and anti-racist ideas without, however, questioning their own involvement in colonial and racial projects. This tendency to deny the relevance of racism in the Nordic countries has most notably surfaced during public debates on the use of racially loaded words and expressions (Gullestad, 2005). Although similar debates have also taken place in other counties, it seems that the Nordic societies have been especially prone to believe that, due to their assumed non-involvement in colonial and racial projects, the derogatory N-word is apparently objective and value-neutral when, for example, used in a traditional name of Swedish chocolate balls (Hübinette, 2012). In a similar manner, when the nursery rhyme, *Ten Little Negroes*, was republished in Iceland in 2007, some commentators argued that the book should not be seen as racist since racism did not exist in Iceland when it was first published in 1922 (Loftsdóttir, 2012).

The notion of racism as something less relevant in the Nordic political and social context has been possibly also strengthened by the predominant use of a definition of racism restricted to a biological concept and extreme or individual attitudes (Danbolt & Myong, 2019; Loftsdóttir, 2012). Such an understanding, however, does not correspond with definitions of racism provided by key international human rights instruments, which explicitly name structural and cultural forms of racism and at the same time emphasize links between colonialism, its consequences, and racial discrimination (McEachrane, 2018).

Despite Nordic countries often being portrayed as free from racism, racial discrimination remains a significant social problem, both culturally and structurally. Recent reports from Sweden and Norway on children's experiences of racism highlight the importance of anti-racist education (UNICEF, 2022; Rädda Barnen, 2021). A study of Norwegian middle school students reveals the challenges faced by teachers in bridging the gap between textbook teachings on 'race' as a historical concept and students' daily encounters with racism (Svendsen, 2014). The omission of 'race' as an explanatory concept for social divisions poses a serious educational challenge in addressing racism. This reflects a profound reluctance to use the terms 'race' and 'racism', which Lene Myong (2009, quoted in Danbolt & Myong, 2019) refers to as a 'culture of racial silence', grounded in a misleading assumption that using the term 'race' would be proof of racial thinking. The result is that students doubt the school's ability to address their experiences of racialization and othering (Ramirez, 2022). Similarly, Osler and Lindquist (2018) argue that the silence about racism and race in teacher education deprives educators of essential tools to confront structural and cultural racism.

As mentioned before, the only example of Nordic colonial involvement in the Norwegian textbooks refers to the Danish-Norwegian islands in the West Indies which served as points of destination for enslaved Africans. *Samfunnsfag 10* actually links this topic to racial attitudes. Students are asked to think how to put a stop to 'the attitudes based on a belief that persons of melaninrich skin are less worthy than others', which 'some people' still have (Bredahl et al., 2022, p. 105). Students are also encouraged to reflect upon 'the still common use of the N-word' and if it endorses the myth about the superiority of one group of people over another. While it is undoubtedly important to encourage students to talk about sensitive topics like racism, it might paradoxically also increase the othering of minorities (Eriksen, 2022b). By stressing the notion of discrimination based on skin colour as something restricted to extreme or individual attitudes, the text seems to overlook structural forms of racism which are present in the Nordic countries. As for the latter question, while the N-word is internationally considered to be offensive and directly racist, the authors do not explain this adequately, but rather encourage students to make up their own minds. Without addressing the history of the N-word and how problematic its use is, the textbook fails to provide a crucial

context. Considering that student teachers do not receive adequate training about racism and that they are not properly equipped to address the issue in the classroom, the reflection question is likely to provoke a superficial discussion, putting students of colour in a vulnerable situation.

The same textbook also poses another question, which is apparently supposed to make it easier for students to see how the history of colonialism is relevant to their own lives. Students are encouraged to reflect if they think that 'we are responsible for what our ancestors used to do' (Bredahl et al., 2022, p. 105). The question seems problematic in two ways. First, although the question itself may be discussed separately, due to its location after the paragraph on Danish-Norwegian involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, the reader is likely to relate it to this topic. Considering the multicultural character of many Norwegian classes, the question of cross-generational responsibility may therefore appear excluding, as it seems to address only the majority group students. Second, the question may imply that colonialism and the slave trade belong to the past and that these issues should be seen exclusively in the light of the ancestors' wrongdoing. As a result, the wording of the question does not seem to acknowledge how the colonial legacy continues to sustain asymmetrical power relationships.

The above-mentioned examples, though undoubtedly well-intentioned, may be problematic as they apparently overlook classroom diversity, and students may be in different positions in any debate on the ramifications of colonialism in racial discrimination. Although the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity, inscribed in the Nordic national curricula, require that education addresses and responds to the diversity of all learners, the examples indicate that teaching about colonialism and racism is often based on the assumption of a shared cultural and historical background. These observations conform with studies which show that the narrow understanding of racism, prevalent in the Nordic countries, leads to the denial of the marginalized groups' perspectives on their struggles for rights (Osler, 2016). Osler (2016, p. 113) argues that the assumption of sameness may be seen as a breach of human rights, since it can reinforce a feeling of exclusion among students from marginalized backgrounds.

The teacher's role in disrupting colonial legacies

The Nordic countries are not alone in their efforts to downplay their colonial legacies. We see similar tendencies in former European colonial powers like Britain or France, where sanitized versions of history neglect the darkest sides of colonial oppression and exploitation, or weigh them against alleged positive aspects of the colonial presence (Lotem, 2021). As a result, the school undermines its role in encouraging students to reflect critically on contemporary issues in the light of the past. In case of the Nordic countries, it may seemingly be easier to avoid acknowledging colonial legacies, due to the

more convoluted nature of colonial complicity. However, the Nordic countries' unwillingness to acknowledge different forms of colonial involvement as a part of their national histories determines teaching and learning processes in a way that goes beyond the classroom transmission of historical knowledge. Textbooks play an important role in this regard as they are an important means of reaffirming national identity and continue to be key pedagogical tools in defining classroom teaching.

Historical awareness, one of the key concepts in history didactics, stresses the historical context of every person, but may refer to both collective and individual awareness (Stugu, 2020, p. 19). The prevalent collective historical awareness of the Nordic countries appears to be founded upon a sense of exceptionalism, derived from the belief that they can claim no (or relatively insignificant) colonial past, and consequently uphold the notion of Nordic societies as being post-racial. This tendency to ignore or marginalize the colonial past is a premise for historical knowledge that denies a link between colonialism and modernity and consequently sustains a notion of European/Western superiority grounded in the alleged innate ability to progress. The narrative of Nordic non-involvement in colonialism contributes to a misleading perception that makes it difficult to understand prevailing racial and cultural hierarchies in society. It thus undermines education 'through' and 'for' human rights.

The intricate parallel between downplaying colonial legacies and insufficient focus on anti-racist education in the Nordic countries highlights the importance of confronting and challenging historical patterns of oppression that have influenced education in the past, and which, though in a more subtle form, are still present today. In this regard, the BLM protests which took place in the Nordic countries may be seen as form of resistance against a collective understanding of history which excludes certain groups and their historical understandings. It is therefore crucial for teachers to reflect on their role in developing students' awareness of history – how to make them understand that they are shaped by historical processes, but also empower them to shape their own lives and actively participate in making history (Stugu, 2020, p. 19). In order to succeed with this task, teachers need to be able to engage students to think about how we assess and construct accounts about the past and, not least, have a critical stance towards representations of the past in textbooks.

At the same time, acknowledging the pivotal role of history education in shaping how students understand themselves, how they think about their communities and how they envisage their place in the world, teachers need to contemplate their responsibility in helping young people gain the historical and cultural insights essential for the development of their identities and that empower them to succeed in increasingly diverse societies. The postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha emphasizes the 'right to narrate' as a condition for securing human dignity and equality (quoted in Osler, 2016, p. 130).

Bhabha's 'right to narrate' resonates with the concept of historical awareness since it highlights every person's fundamental need and right to verbalize their own historical experience. In the context of teaching about colonialism, the 'right to narrate' points to two different, though related, aspects that underline a need to change the structure of classrooms into spaces of counter-narratives and decolonial knowledges. One aspect is about promoting an inclusive learning environment through supporting students' diversified identities. If teachers promote the collective 'we' that excludes certain marginalized and minoritized groups, students will struggle to learn to respect others' identities and embrace their own identities. Another aspect of the 'right to narrate' points to including perspectives that will disrupt harmful and excluding historical narratives like the one rooted in the notion of Western superiority. More concretely, it is about challenging the Eurocentric perspective, broadening the understanding of colonialism to convey its multifaceted nature, and engaging with historical examples that are closer to home and speak to students' life experiences. The 'right to narrate' is as much about providing a vocabulary as about giving a voice. Only by gaining a vocabulary through acquiring knowledge about historical injustice will students be able to name injustices and effectively exercise their 'right to narrate'.

Concluding remarks

The examples from the Norwegian textbooks illustrate how Nordic colonial complicity is downplayed in history teaching. The existing literature suggests that this tendency is not unique to Norway but also exists in other Nordic countries. By neglecting the colonial past, the postcolonial present of the Nordic societies is also ignored. Consequently, the school's attempts to address students' experiences of exclusion, discrimination and racism are often inadequate and thereby unsuccessful. Teachers hold a crucial role in addressing these issues and have a special responsibility to challenge established historical narratives that sustain a notion of colonial exceptionalism that denies a link between racism and colonial legacies. By fostering critical thinking and promoting a more comprehensive understanding of history, they can make a significant contribution to equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to assert their own rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others. In this regard, HRE may play an instrumental role in supporting teachers to create inclusive spaces of counter-narratives and decolonial knowledges as well as empowering students to recognize and dismantle the colonial legacy.

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