


Decolonizing education in an era of neo-imperialism

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Geraldine Balzer, an Associate Professor at the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, discusses the importance of decolonizing education in a time of neo-imperialism

As we consider the current [conversation around decolonization](#), we must also consider our histories. The great explorations of the 15th century opened the world to Europeans and launched centuries of exploitation and struggles for wealth; these quests included the expansion of empires, the enslavement of peoples, and the control of land and resources by European nation-states.

By the 20th century, the impact of colonialism was felt in every corner of the world, resulting in massive wealth redistribution, wars over resources, and revolutions over the redistribution and reclamation of lands and resources. The latter decades of the 20th century saw massive migration as people moved from the colonized and newly independent countries to the cosmopolitan centres in search of economic security, education, and safety.

At this point in history, thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire began critiquing the impact of colonialism. Postcolonial theory was developed by academics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. Postcolonialism sits alongside other liberatory theories such as Feminism, Queer theory, and Critical Race theory, holding at their centres an understanding that colonialism and imperialism were built on the backs of women and those racialized as non-white.

Decolonizing education in neo-imperialism research

Young (2004) challenges us to reconsider the foundational status of history, wondering if Western history is a myth caught in the trap of Eurocentrism and that “the loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the centre of the world” would lead to the dissolution of ‘the West’ (p. 52).

The last decades have been marked by the struggle between the old order canonizing Euro-American historical thinking and the new order challenging the inherent racism and sexism through new historical perspectives. Young contends that “the analysis of colonialism has shown the extent to which such relations of power and authority are still endemic in current social and institutional practices...Colonial discourse shows the enactment of racism in its colonial moment” (p. 218).

Increasing awareness of these enactments of racism led to an understanding of systemic racism in Western society, resulting in attempts to mitigate the exclusions and offer pathways to education and economic success. Affirmative action programs were

developed with the hope that marginalized groups would have access to education and employment. Educational institutions began to look at ways of decolonizing their programs and processes, recognizing that the harms of colonialism were embedded deep within the systems.

Eurocentric and Americentric histories were being challenged, and governments and institutions were building paths to reconciliation and restoration. Academics, me included, were building careers by unthinking Eurocentrism. Decolonization was the buzzword of the last decade in the continuing quest for social justice.

Decolonization, however, rests uneasily beside Neoliberalism, the prevailing economic philosophy emerging during the Thatcher and Reagan years. While Jimenez (2005) believes “decolonising praxis speaks to the move from oppositional discourse into the embodiment and actions that interrogate colonial legacy” (p. 50), Grimaldi (2012) notes that social justice is an impediment to Neoliberalism: “the subjugation of social justice issues by economic rationalism implies the vanishing of any reference to progressive values such as education for citizenship, democratic schooling, active and critical thinking, students’ well-being and cultural recognition.

Such discursive moves clearly hinder any possibility to break the self-reinforcing circle of deprivation and exclusion. They relegate education in a reproductive role, as an appendix of economy and productivity” (pp. 1150- 51). Recent political events have seemingly diminished the gains of the past decades and appear to be heralding a new era of imperialism.

A new era of imperialism?

The beginning of 2025 has seen U.S. Government actions halt advances on social justice, if not reverse them. Educational institutions, corporations, and government departments have seen diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives threatened and halted. These actions in the United States bolster similar movements in other Western nation-states. Nation-states are under threat in this new age of imperialism.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Israel’s demolition of Gaza are legitimized by threats of annexing Canada as the 51st state, taking over the Panama Canal, and buying Greenland. We are learning that “Neoliberal ideology produces a very specific governing and organizing regime that makes democratic and justice aims difficult to achieve” (Kliewer, 2013, p. 74).

And yet, in classrooms around the globe, teachers and professors seek ways to resist and continue fighting for the education of the students in their care. Researchers continue to resist, seeking ways to disprove harmful myths and advance knowledge that will benefit all.

The ongoing quest for decolonized education

Critical literacy is key to the ongoing quest for decolonized education, enabling teachers and students to analyze and deconstruct the biases and power relations of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Louloudi (2024) contends that “through critical literacy, students and teachers work towards dismantling normative structures that privilege specific groups and (historically and systemically) disadvantage others. This questioning happens on the basis of challenging neutrality of materials and investigating postcolonial narratives that centre the perspective that has been previously minoritized both locally and globally” (pp. 326-327). In this age of neo-imperialism, critical literacy holds hope for a more just future.

References

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