



Decolonial Options in Education – Interrupting Coloniality and Inviting Alternative Conversations

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Received 5 May 2020; accepted 7 May 2020.

Introduction

With the call for papers to this special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*, the purpose was to initiate a conversation on decolonial options in education. This might not be an expected focus for an education journal based in the Nordics, in light of the strong and tenacious denial of coloniality as at all relevant in the genealogy of the nation-states as well as educational systems in this context (Eidsvik, 2012; Eriksen, 2018a; Fylkesnes, 2019; Gullestad, 2002; Keskinen et al. 2009; Loftsdottir & Jensen, 2012; Mikander, 2014). We wanted to explore what and how a conversation on decolonial options from the Nordics could hear, feel, and look like. We are truly grateful for the contributions included in this special issue. The texts represent different and rich perspectives on decoloniality and illustrate the complexity of this conversation across varied contexts. They provide contributions that address and interrupt the coloniality of educational theory, practice, and research, and explore ways of thinking, doing, and materialising education otherwise. Although the decolonial critique powerfully shows us that location matters, we have also included several contributions from outside the Nordic context, including what is currently known as Canada, Argentina, and Australia. These contributions remind us how we can learn from each other and think collectively, and

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how the conversation on decoloniality must be at once local and global. This is fundamental when starting from the field of Comparative and International Education (CIE), which while aiming at celebrating the diversity of education around the world is still embedded in colonial logics and Eurocentric perspectives (Takayama et al., 2017).

Contextualizing the conversation

The conversation on decoloniality in education brings together political and academic efforts. In recent years, student movements in many countries have called for the decolonisation of higher education institutions. These initiatives include the *Rhodes-must-fall* campaign in South Africa, the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) based *Decolonising our minds society*, and the Students and Academics International Assistance Fund (SAIH) campaign for the decolonization of universities in Norway. The student movement for decolonizing the university calls for an end to white and European epistemic privilege, an end to white curricula, and equal access to education without fees (Bhambra et al., 2018). The movement is part of a decolonial project that has been built intellectually over decades by scholars who have been concerned with the consistency of colonial power relations in the modern world. The decolonial project involves a conversation between current anticolonial social movements and a legacy of antiracist and anticolonial scholarship from Latin American sociology, philosophy and area studies, Indigenous studies, Black studies, feminist studies, and postcolonial studies.

In the field of CIE, there is an ongoing reconceptualization of globalization and perspective on global sustainability. Decolonialism is indebted to and interlinked with world-systems theory in focusing on understanding global economic inequality and criticizing ongoing structures of capital accumulation (Andreotti, 2011b; Grosfoguel, 2002; Wallerstein, 1974). Through this lens, globalization is understood as continuing colonialism. Colonialism did not end with national autonomy for states in the Global South, as illustrated by the global division of labour as well as current capitalist and socio-material structures. This global division of labour is still racialized, and the idea of the “White man’s burden” is reproduced through the “burden of the fittest” in global cooperation today, explaining global inequality as a lack of attributes in the South that the North can provide (Andreotti, 2011a). The decolonial perspective offers a historical and systemic approach to understanding global inequalities that alter ideals of sustainable development today (Eriksen, 2018b), highly important to the field of CIE.

The decolonial project has produced international and comparative scholarship that investigates and critiques the coloniality of education. Coloniality, a shorthand for the coloniality of power, describes how epistemologies and power relations produced through and by colonialism continue to inform present-day society and institutions (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Coloniality can be traced in education through the reproduction of knowledges that continue to justify European and white *de facto* supremacy and renders colonised peoples’ knowledges and livelihoods backwards, inferior or non-

existent. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) describes this as how modern western thinking is a system of separation where social reality is divided into the realms of “this side of the line”, represented by the Global North, and “the other side of the line”, the Global South. The line produces “the other side of the line” as non-existent, positioning the Global South in the abyss. Coloniality can also be traced to education systems that continue to racially stratify people through unequal access to education. Importantly, the decolonial perspective urges us to move beyond traditional modes of social critique by approaching our current problems not simply as issues of ignorance to be solved with more knowledge, or emphasis on the “right” moral values; they are problems of denial that are rooted in desires for and investments in the continuity of a modern-colonial habit of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Stein et al., 2020).

In the Nordic context, the coloniality of education has been upheld and eschewed by the widespread denial of the colonization of Sápmi, and the Nordic colonial endeavors in Africa and the Americas (Keskinen et al., 2009). This denial has been a condition for the production of the idea of the Nordic states as homogenous and “natural” entities, rather than as states built on the territories of several peoples and nations (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). Externalization of racism continues to be widespread in the region, which is evident in the problems with developing a vocabulary for race and racism in Nordic public discourses and educational practice (Gullestad, 2006; McEachrane, 2014; Harlap & Riese, 2014; Svendsen, 2014). The coloniality of education is particularly pressing in Sápmi, the ancestral homeland of the indigenous Sami, covering the area commonly known as the north of Norway, Sweden and Finland, and the north-east of Russia. In this region, in particular, colonization through education has caused severe damage to people’s self-esteem and their prospects in life (Minde, 2003). Furthermore, assimilation and colonization policies in education have affected national minorities harshly. Over the last decades, significant decolonising work has been done to indigenise education and reintroduce Sámi knowledges and languages in formal education (Keskitalo et al., 2013). In this special issue, the chances of gaining an education without giving up one’s culture and language are explored by Pär Poromaa Isling through the experiences of Tornedalians in Sweden and Roma in Norway.

How can we question, criticize, or even undo the dominant epistemological and ontological frames within which current educational institutions and imaginaries are embedded? The contributions from this special issue provide initiatives for decolonizing education or imagining education otherwise. This should not be interpreted as an attempt to provide an alleged prescriptive *alternative* to replace current, harmful ways of doing and thinking about education, but rather to provide “alternative thinking of alternatives” (Santos, 2018, p. viii), changing the terms of the conversation. As Stein et al. further explain in their contribution to this issue, the point in experimenting and engaging with decolonial forms of cultural production and pedagogy is not to offer new, normative definitions or blueprints for “just” education. The effort is rather to ethically engage with different, contextually relevant decolonial practices that offer important teachings about the difficulties

of interrupting colonial habits as well as a reminder that something else is possible. In a similar vein, with this special issue, we do not aim at proposing a new system of intellectual dominance by rejecting modernity wholesale or reproducing binary thinking, but rather open and broaden the conversation on education in the Nordics by enabling epistemological plurality and reconceptualizing the central questions. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) reminds us, “We perceive the world as seemingly complete only because our questions about it are always very limited” (p. 136).

Initiating the conversation – five potential starting points

Reading and engaging with the contributions in conversation and reciprocity, we have located five major starting points for conversations reflecting the topics emerging across the contributions. These may initiate engagements that bring to the fore the “rarely acknowledged colonial entanglements of knowledge in the field of comparative and international education” (Takayama et al., 2017, p. 1), seen from the particularities of the Nordic context. They are 1) Challenging coloniality in institutions and curriculum, 2) Anticolonial strategies, 3) Collective knowledge creation, 4) Post abyssal pedagogies, and 5) Critical reflexivity. We will briefly introduce these decolonial options, and point to the contributions where they are fleshed out and exemplified.

1) Challenging coloniality in current institutions and curricula

Challenges to colonial aspects of educational institutions and curricula aim at tearing down existing structures of privilege to make space for decolonial options. In their contribution to this issue, Pashby and Sund shed light on how repeated and intersecting historical patterns of oppression are often reproduced through global learning initiatives in the North. Curricula indicate what counts as worth knowing and who counts as knowers. Cecilia Salinas’ article “A decolonial option to a pedagogy of detachment” details the relationship between curricular and social politics in education and the relationships between whose knowledge is valued and children’s sense of self. She documents how social and cognitive justice are inseparable (Santos, 2018). Changing curricula within modern educational institutions is challenging, however. Juan Velásquez Atehortúa’s contribution “Participatory teaching as a decolonial pedagogy in gender studies” sheds light on how decolonizing curricula is possible within the existing frameworks of the university, but also how this work is bound to come up against the limits of the institution. Pursuing decolonizing options in teaching practice tends to produce a commitment to students’ empowerment that the mandated university teacher role cannot contain. This results in friction when working in modern colonial institutions. Another option is to decolonize education by working with and through community-based and everyday knowledges to increase communities’ capacities for survival and self-determination. Yumagolova and colleagues relate their experiences from working in this way in their contribution “Preparing Our Home: Lessons from the Lil’wat Nation, Siksika Nation and Mohawk Nation

at Akwesasne, Canada”. Even in such attempts at decolonizing education from and through Indigenous communities’ knowledges and practices, learning is not fully extracted from the coloniality of education, however. As Salinas reminds us, the material and social practices of schooling tend to enact colonial epistemologies. Pursuing decolonial options can ultimately require leaving school behind, as an anticolonial strategy.

2) Anticolonial strategies

Anticolonial theories might help locate sites of resistance and strategies of disentanglement with marginalized or Indigenous groups from the colonizing nation-state governments or power-relations (Dei, 2000; Fanon, 2002; Simpson, 2004). An important example of the workings of anticolonial strategies is provided in the article by Pär Poromaa Isling in this issue. Drawing on Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s (2006) concept of decolonial pockets, Isling shows how the Tornedalian minority of Northern Sweden resist the dominance of Swedish language, culture and practice through the nationally imposed education system. Not counting as proper knowledge in education’s official rhetoric and execution, Meänkieli language and Tornedalian culture are kept alive in non-institutional school settings. Hence, such strategies of resistance to the colonial cultural genocide of homogenizing and universalizing educational systems might spark the promotion and revitalization of marginalized knowledge. Such anticolonial movements may also work to spark counter-hegemonic appropriations, where concepts and practices developed by dominant social groups are appropriated by oppressed groups and turned into tools for struggling against domination (Santos, 2018). This is illustrated by Hagatun in her article on the school situation for Roma girls in Norway. Historically, the Roma minority in Norway has been fiercely excluded by the nation-state, even explicitly outlawed from the country by law during the early 20th century. This has led to a political strategy of empowerment and cultural resistance through willed segregation (Haugen, 2018). However, the Roma population in Norway is still subject to the national law of obligatory schooling. As Hagatun argues, knowledge about how the school is experienced by Roma pupils today constitutes a vital contribution to the needed effort to decolonize the national educational system as it represents a unique opportunity to critically rethink how visions of “inclusion” are operationalized through schools as representing the colonial state apparatus.

3) Collective knowledge practises

Pursuing decolonial options encourages thinking against modernity, i.e. “delinking from its fictions” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 109). The academy is mired in the myth of the genius and continues to bolster the colonial fiction that knowledge practices can be individualized. Decolonial thinking works to expose the extractive and kleptomaniac principles on which the idea of claiming knowledge as individual property rests (Smith, 2012). Cognitive democracy involves replacing “knowing about” with “knowing with” in aca-

demic practice (Santos, 2018). The contributions in this volume document and demonstrate collective knowledge practices as a decolonial option in education in different ways. Two of the contributions, both from the Canadian context, are written by collectives that challenge the concept of “author” in academic writing by applying an inclusive rather than exclusive principle for authorship. Jessica Gannaway’s article “Knocking, Unsettling, Ceding: A non-indigenous teacher’s journey towards decolonizing teaching practice in a ‘remote indigenous community’” starts from the perspective of white, settler-Australia and reflects critically on how difficult it is for teachers with privileged backgrounds in the modern colonial world order to engage in and contribute to collective knowledge practices as decolonial options in education. Committing to this option tends to require deep unlearning from those of us who are accustomed to being seen as “knowers” in the modern colonial order.

4) Postabyssal pedagogies

Education systems and pedagogy are key institutions producing and reproducing the colonial, abyssal line rendering pedagogies based in the epistemologies of the South invisible in the canonical, modern discipline of pedagogy (Santos, 2018). As eloquently explained by Gannaway in her autoethnographic account for being a white researcher aspiring to learn from Indigenous elders as thinking partners, “just because I could not interpret my Indigenous colleagues’ pedagogies did not mean there were none at play. I become aware of the danger of not seeing things simply because I do not have the eyes to see it”. Stein et al. encourage rethinking our visions of learning through engagement with the “*breadth and integrity of the learning process itself, including in its non-intellectual (especially relational and affective) dimensions*”, and this invitation is powerfully taken up in the contribution by Cecilia Salinas. She forcefully describes how formal schooling can insert a sense of inferiority, shame, and detachment from one's origins and experiences. Salinas locates in these processes the presence of a colonial structure of a pedagogy of detachment at work, instrumental to the geopolitics of modern/colonial knowledge (Mignolo, 2011). Starting from the concept of *sentipensamiento*, or feel-thinking, and how it has been manifested and conceptualized in different local variations across South America, Salinas gestures toward different ways of conceptualizing learning and pedagogy that take into account the diversity of human experiences. Feel-thinking is also the decolonial option that is produced in Juan Velásquez Atehortúa’s activist teacher intervention the gender studies classroom.

5) Critical reflexivity

This special issue addresses issues of decoloniality in education from several white, majoritarian perspectives. This reflects the geopolitics of knowledge structuring the very field of comparative and international education as such, both through the fact that the field is dominated by scholars from the English-speaking and Northern (i.e. white) world and through how it is almost always concerned with an *Other* (Takayama et al., 2017).

This way, the very process of putting together this special issue can be seen as a colonial act. However, thinking with Santos, both the colonizer as well as the colonized must be an object of decolonization, and the central question of positionality is not on what side of the abyssal line we are, but on which side of concrete decolonizing struggles (2018). As Stein et al. point out, working as a collective of different structural positions, the “we” of decolonial struggles are not “equally responsible or capable, and are not equally called to respond” to colonial violence. Ioana Țișteea contributes to further insights into the methodological reflexivity required by white, majoritarian researchers in her comprehensive review of reflexivity in Roma research in the Nordics, a field strongly dominated by Non-Roma scholars. Țișteea argues that our practices of reflexivity must move beyond a methodological tool that often re-inscribes difference by claiming to represent and thus contain a knowable subject, towards a decolonial “reflexivity of reflexivity” that uncomfortably questions whether and how colonial differences are constructed and how they are linked with structures of power.

For scholars whose self-interest lies in upholding existing power structures and institutions, which is the case for both us editors and several contributors to this special issue, it is easy to opt for an add-on strategy that aims to diversify our curricula and institutions rather than decolonise them (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Diversification can indeed be a step in the direction of decolonization. It can also, as Sara Ahmed (2012) has reminded us, be an end station that keeps colonized people and knowledges included in the margins of otherwise unchanged institutions. Stein and colleagues write that “adding epistemologies onto the same (modern) ontological foundation will always be a limited strategy for interrupting colonial harms and habits of being”. The conditional and tokenistic inclusion of difference into an extractive colonial capitalist system does not fundamentally transform that system or its inherently violent and unsustainable nature. It can even provide cover for continued displacement and dispossession. While such a critique may be taken as fatalistic, it identifies a pattern that is reproduced in response to decolonial struggles worldwide, including in the Nordic region, and suggests the need for approaches to decolonization that challenge the cooptation of critique.

Closing reflections

The decolonial options we outline here should be read as partial, provisional gestures, not universal absolute solutions. They point towards both the immediate demand for reforming educational systems, research, and practice internationally to interrupt current colonial acts of violence, but also for moving towards something otherwise. Even if agnostic about whether modern institutions can, in fact, become just, we have a responsibility to make the institutions more livable in the present, for all (Andreotti et al., 2015). Decoloniality as an opening path to other ways of living and thinking cannot be conceived without “epistemic disobedience and the creative joy of knowing beyond the disciplines” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 225). This is fundamentally a case of changing the terms of the

conversation or inviting and making space for different conversations. We want to show our gratitude towards the chief editors of the Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education for making space for these vital conversations. We warmly thank the contributors to the special issue for thinking and writing in dialogue with us editors and you readers about what decolonial options in and beyond education could hear, feel, and look like. We hope they will inspire engaging with some of these decolonial options, and exploring different ones.

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