

## Decolonizing Education Implications for Systems Transformation in Vermont

*(Author's note: A scholar can only write from a partial, limited perspective. I study and think from the standpoint of white skin and European heritage, a Cisgender female who has fluctuated between poverty and middle-classness over the course of a lifetime, a U.S. citizen, a teacher, a mother. My professional positionality has been mostly within the arena of higher education. I am indebted to scholars of color, some of whose works can be found in the bibliography at the end of this paper, but also to my Native American friends, colleagues, and family members who have shared with me their experiences of being colonized people in the United States, to my friends and colleagues of African descent who have, with invariable kindness and tact, helped me to see and own my biases and blind spots, and to my many students from all over the world who have shaped my perspectives on what it means to be an immigrant, a person of color, a new English speaker, and/or an oppressed minority in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> and now the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Decolonization is a global/historical movement, and my own experience is limited to these United States and its heritage of European colonization.)*

In Vermont, conversations about equity and racial justice abound — in statewide summits, conferences, legislative chambers, classrooms, task forces, and school districts. In March of 2019, the Vermont legislature passed a bill approving the creation of an Ethnic Studies and Social Equity advisory group to assess and address issues of equity, bias, access, opportunity, and representation in Vermont schools. Prominent intellectuals (Ibram Kendi, Robin DiAngelo, Paul Gorsky, Jamila Lyiscott) have been brought in to the state to speak on racial justice, equity literacy, and white fragility. Non-profits are hired to help educators understand implicit bias and research projects are launched with the aim of ensuring that young people in Vermont have the knowledge, will, skills, and dispositions that nurture a just, sustainable, and civil society. A statewide network (Vermont Learning for the Future) holds “equity, sustainability and joy” as its objectives. Both the VT-NEA and the VPA (Vermont Principals’ Association) have initiated significant equity projects. And signifying the upsurge in youth voice and activism, *Black Lives Matter* flags have been raised at schools across Vermont as racial justice and social equity student groups form. Four Abenaki tribal groups have achieved state, if not Federal, recognition [the Elnu Tribe of the Abenaki and the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation in 2011 and the Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi and the Koasek Traditional Band of the Koos Abenaki Nation in 2012], and many convenings begin by honoring the original inhabitants of the land on which the gathering takes place. Often these acknowledgements are made with reference to “decolonization” — a social/political movement with global dimensions and local specificities. This paper is intended to be a contribution to the local conversation on decolonization. I offer it in hopes of increasing our shared understandings of the terminology as well as the dimensions of this work.

Ensuring that youth “have the knowledge, will, skills, and dispositions that nurture a just, sustainable, and civil society” would be laudable aims for any moment in a democratic society’s history; they take on a particular urgency in the volatile present, faced as we are with serious challenges to such a society: daily stories of climate-related disasters, massive pollution on a global scale, accelerating extinctions, refugee and migration crises, growing inequality, a resurgence of populist nationalism and white supremacy, and an increasingly unstable national government at the highest levels. Young people are awake and aware, and their demands for serious attention to the climate crisis as well as racial and social justice are commanding

attention. Yet schools are slow to pick up on the call for an education that will provide young people with the “knowledge, will, skills, and dispositions” to survive and thrive, an education that can guide them into an uncertain future.

Vermont is uniquely positioned to provide such an educational experience, as the overarching legislative framework (following years of bottom-up advocacy for progressive policies) supports a “systems change” of as-yet-unrealized magnitude. The foundations are in place for young people to take charge of their learning and map meaningful educational journeys, with state mandated requirements for personalized learning plans, freedom from required curricula and coursework, flexible pathways towards graduation (including early college and work-based learning), the elimination of the conventional grading system (one designed to sort and rank students according to “merit”), and unlimited opportunities to design community-based learning experiences with self-chosen mentors. A multitude of non-profits in Vermont support educational projects in cultivating youth voice, developing curricula for sustainability, fostering student-directed learning, and anti-racist pedagogy. These efforts, while commendable, are not always linked in ways that lead to understanding the systemic issues at the root of racial and ethnic injustice, social inequality, and environmental degradation. Therefore, they are necessary, but not sufficient to address the multi-faceted crises we are experiencing. As English Language Arts scholar, James Moffett, noted,

The generation about to enter schools may be the last who can still reverse the negative megatrends converging today. In order for these children to learn the needed *new ways of thinking* the present generation in charge of society must begin to set up for them **a kind of education it never had and arrange to educate itself further at the same time.** (1994)

In order to cultivate *new ways of thinking*, it is essential to understand the *old ways of thinking* that are no longer functional, and are, in fact, the basis for the crises. bell hooks describes the current interlocking globalized system accurately when she speaks of “imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy,” a system with deep historical roots, the branches of which stretch into virtually every institution in society. Dismantling such a hegemonic structure might appear an impossible task, though history — from the Rome of Romulus Augustulus to the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev — is abundant with narratives of crumbling empires, most usually a result of internal pressures. We don’t have to dig too deeply to understand the internal pressures the current system is under: environmental degradation and climate catastrophe demonstrate the limits of the extractive, fossil fuel-based economy, equality movements contest gender norms and patriarchal values, anti-racist projects challenge white supremacy, and a multitude of activist groups call out wealth inequality. One useful way of connecting the dots between all of these movements is in terms of “decolonization” – an umbrella concept with historic origins and contemporary significance, a concept that can help us to unlock the roots of the current crisis and understand the complex ways that such forces as disaster capitalism, economic imperialism, and border policing are linked in mutually supportive ways that sustain an unjust and unequal system. Global justice movements in former colonies and people who live in United States “sacrifice zones” are building networks of coordinated solidarity, but the majority society in our country is slow to take responsibility for the multi-faceted crises we face and initiate the necessary bold movement towards systemic change. It is essential that we face our history and our complicity in order to successfully address the present realities, and with grace, good luck, and *new ways*

*of thinking*, create a livable future with our young people. It is to these ends that this working paper is dedicated.

### What do we mean when we say “Decolonizing?”

When we hear the word “decolonization,” we generally think about the political processes begun after WWII when formerly colonized territories asserted their independence from European empires and exerted political self-determination. In the past, colonialism was justified by asserting the moral, technological, and cultural superiority of the Western empires, and colonialism proceeded hand in hand with missionary Christianity and commerce (which generally consisted of the plunder of raw materials, forced labor and the disruption of local economies). Colonized people (mostly brown and black) were considered culturally inferior by colonizers (mostly white) and incapable of “civilizing” themselves.

*Painting by American John Gast- Manifest Destiny: the doctrine justifying settler expansion, genocide, slavery, and occupation in the US.*



In the United States, the colonialist project has many faces. U.S. history texts emphasize the colonial status of the European invaders, and valorize the successful revolution that brought independence from Britain. Less attention is given to the processes by which European settlers emigrated from Europe over the next few centuries and spread across the United States, colonizing, dispossessing, and slaughtering the indigenous inhabitants – distinct peoples who constituted hundreds of sovereign nations. Genocide, says one historian of this period, is a term that “drills to the very core of U.S. history, to the very source of the country’s existence” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, p. xiii).

Alongside the genocide that opened up territories for white settlement, a system of forced labor, or enslavement, of people from the African continent commenced in the early 1500’s and formed the foundation of what would become the largest economy in the world. Estimates place the enslaved population at 4 million by the 1860’s. And if we include in our discussion

groups of people who have been conquered or annexed by force, then Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants are a colonized minority; though their homeland was first colonized by Spain, the U.S., driven by the idea of Manifest Destiny, acquired much of territorial Mexico (over 500,000 square miles) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through annexation and conquest.

This brief overview does not pretend to present a detailed history of these major historical events. The bibliography contains some new and classic sources that can be informative, and it is important for educators to dive deeply into this literature. **“Decolonization”** is a process that **recognizes the connections between what has occurred in the past and what is experienced and perceived in the present, and works to shape a future that atones for the misdeeds of the past and heals the wounds that persist into the present day.**

Colonization has both **internal and external dimensions**. As noted above, external processes of colonization include conquest, occupation, enslavement, genocide, removal, dislocation, forced labor, forced assimilation, etc. and continue into the present with segregation, disenfranchisement, economic injustice and inequality, mass incarceration, and an unequal education system. The impacts of colonialism can remain long after the cessation of its political structures and despite rights legislation, and it should be noted as well that oppression evolves and takes on new forms (for example in the current U.S. judicial and penal system [see Alexander, 2012]).

**Internal colonization** refers to the multiple (and to some, invisible) ways in which domination and inequality are sustained by a **dominant culture**. In the United States, descendants of white people from Northern Europe have constituted a majority for much of recent history – though that is changing – and they wield much of the economic and political power. People whose recent ancestors were enslaved, oppressed, or victims of genocide or dislocation can experience a range of emotions and ailments – anxiety, distrust, fear, shame, anger, grief – that both consciously and unconsciously can structure beliefs and behaviors in the present. This has been named **transgenerational trauma**. Both the oppressed and/or marginalized people in a society, and the **privileged** (individuals and groups who benefit from the historical legacies of colonialism and occupation) have been **mentally colonized** by media, educational curricula, power relations, and institutional structures that create and sustain **myths of inferiority** and propagate **racism** (power plus prejudice or discrimination based on an assumption that one’s own race is superior) and **ethnocentrism** (the evaluation of other cultures according to the standards and customs of one’s own). If education is to take seriously this idea of “decolonization” and be truly transformative, the stories of the past must be carefully attended to in order for healing to occur. Educators need to confront and challenge the colonizing practices that influenced education in the past and are still operative in the present.

As noted above, this document does not delve deeply into the histories that need to be studied to understand the necessary processes of decolonization. As a starting place, we offer here a partial list of terms:

### ***Decolonization***

Decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological *divesting* of colonial power (definition usually attributed to Linda Tuhiwai Smith). Decolonization is about shifting the way indigenous people and internally colonized people view themselves and the way non-indigenous people view indigenous and

internally colonized people. Indigenous Peoples in many countries are reclaiming the family, community, culture, language, history and traditions that were taken from them under government policies designed for assimilation. Decolonization is a process of undoing colonizing practices through healing, cultivating critical consciousness, storytelling, restoring cultural practices and beliefs, the birthing of new ideas and thinking, and liberation from the physical, territorial, economic, cultural and intellectual shackles of the oppressor.

### ***White supremacy***

The racist belief that white people are superior to people of other races and therefore should be dominant over them; also can refer to a political or socioeconomic system, in which white people enjoy a structural advantage (privilege) over other racial or ethnic groups, on both collective and individual levels.

### ***Settlers***

Persons who migrate to a new land, often as a result of conquest, occupation, or colonization: “People who have privileges that arise from the historic and ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples” (Whyte, 2018). Settler colonials are portrayed in most history texts as hard-working, adventurous and deserving pioneers; seldom explored are the ways in which settlers persist in the on-going extermination of indigenous people and cultures or the process of occupying indigenous lands and converting them to private property. Settler colonials wield power over displaced people through affiliation with the military and police powers of the central (conquering) government.

### ***Indigenous***

Related terms include aboriginal, first peoples, native peoples - terms are used interchangeably but there is on-going discussion and contestation about meanings and preferred terms. The words are generally taken to mean people who originated in a particular place, or are native to a location, prior to groups who settled, occupied, conquered, or colonized the area: “living descendants of pre-invasion inhabitants of lands now dominated by others... culturally distinct groups that find themselves engulfed by other settler societies born of forces of empire and conquest” (James Anaya, former Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

### ***Indigenization***

Indigenization recognizes the validity of indigenous worldviews, knowledge and perspectives, incorporates indigenous ways of knowing and doing, and requires non-indigenous people to be aware of indigenous worldviews and to respect that those worldviews are equal to other views. Indigenization is about incorporating indigenous worldviews, knowledge and perspectives into the education system, right from primary grades to universities.

<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/a-brief-definition-of-decolonization-and-indigenization>

### ***Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)***

Sometimes called “Indigenous Knowledge” or “Native Science,” refers to the evolving knowledge acquired by indigenous and local peoples over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment. This knowledge is specific to a location and includes the relationships between plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes and timing of events that are used for lifeways. TEK is an accumulating body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural

transmission, about the relationship of living beings (human and non-human) with one another and with the environment. It encompasses the world view of indigenous people which includes ecology, spirituality, human and animal relationships, and more.

### ***Internal colonialism***

This term refers to a condition of subordination or oppression of one (often ethnic) group over another. It highlights the ways in which “colonization” has taken many forms, differing along lines of geography, history, culture, language, etc. Thus, forms of decolonization differ according to historical circumstances as well as current conditions. African-Americans, for example, whose ancestors were enslaved in territories dominated by settler colonists from Europe, experienced colonialism differently than the indigenous people who inhabited the territories prior to invasion, and both are involved in decolonizing efforts distinct to their experiences.

## **Decolonizing Education**

The form of education that we in the United States are all so familiar with is European in origin. The old German Republic of Prussia, a quasi-military state, gave the West compulsory schooling, educational technologies of surveillance and control, the idea of a prescribed national curriculum, regular testing, and state certification for professional teachers. Complementing the influence of Prussian methods were the laboratories of Wilhelm Wundt in 19<sup>th</sup> century Saxony, where the seeds of psychological behavior modification and social control were germinated, tested, and refined. Enormously influential in western education, strong traces of these ideas remain in systems of discipline, zero tolerance policies, positive and negative reinforcement, grades, and rewards – everything from praise to pizza to degrees. This form of education spread across the globe in tandem with colonization, and it persists today, accompanied by the loss of languages, the loss of cultural identity, the loss of traditional technologies that have evolved in response to local conditions, and the loss of bioregional sensibilities. Some indigenous scholars understand this form of education as a threat to their sovereignty: “...wherever education advances, homogenization establishes itself. With every advancement of education or the educated, a ‘global monoculture spreads like an oil slick over the entire planet’” (Prakash & Esteva, 1998, p. 7).

With apologies for condensing volumes of critical educational theory into a few paragraphs, modern education in the United States exists primarily to create workers and consumers who will play their part in global, corporate economic domination, an economic model that is extractive, exploitative, and profit-driven. Much of the education we experience (testing, separate subjects, pacing calendars, grading, discipline policies, etc.) is designed to sift and sort students according to “merit” and the outcomes often fall along predictable lines of race, social class, ethnicity, language, ability, and gender. Increasingly, as people come to understand the unsustainability of the current economic model, they are beginning to connect the dots between the kind of education we have and an economy that is driving global warming, unprecedented ecological damage, and increasing inequality. Fortunately, we have options, and models exist – holistic, ecological, democratic pedagogies – that point us towards developing an educational system that is learner-centered, experiential, inclusive, just, equitable, joyful, and which aims to heal the wounds generated by centuries of colonization, racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and environmental plunder. These models can be said to be “decolonizing.”

There are many components involved in such a ‘systems transformation’, including subject matter, or curriculum content; instructional approaches; school policies such as discipline; school culture and/or climate; family/community relations; physical plant and visual culture; and teacher preparation (this list is not exhaustive). We should not underestimate the enormity of the task of decolonizing education. Colonization has been a “global project of domination over ways of thinking, knowing, valuing, feeling, doing, being, and becoming” (Reyes, 2019, p. 1). Because colonial power has been exerted historically by (mostly) white people, and the colonized have been primarily people of color, “whiteness” is a pervasive norm, and this “directly influences the ways that schools are organized and how teachers, students, and families interact” (Reyes, 2019, p. 3). These conditions often operate below the level of consciousness, and may be experienced by privileged people as “natural,” as “just the way things are.” Hence, projects like uncovering “implicit bias” are prevalent in anti-racist and decolonization work. A pedagogy of decolonization works to “examine, disrupt, and transform how the colonial project has normalized and naturalized western-centered ways of thinking, knowing, valuing, feeling, doing, being, and becoming” and to “recenter indigeneity while also calling for the abolition of white supremacy and world capitalism” (Ibid. p. 3). Clearly, this is a huge undertaking and we cannot begin to do justice to its many dimensions in this brief overview. We offer here some of the main points that are raised in the discourse on decolonizing education, just a few of the projects that must be undertaken:

- Teachers and school leaders need to study historical processes of colonization and examine their own subjectivities in relation to power, being, and knowledge.
- School structures need to be examined for their ideological frame, and understood as ways that act to reproduce coloniality (or the dominant – white - culture).
- School materials (textbooks, bulletin boards, signage, etc.) need to be analyzed for how various people and cultures are represented, and for ways that they transmit messages about power and privilege.
- Educators need to be aware of whose knowledge and ways of knowing are prioritized and how/when/by whom academic subject matter has been created.
- Colonizing education attempts to homogenize people; decolonizing values individual and cultural diversity and provides personalized approaches to learning.
- Colonizing education attempts to sift and sort students and works from a deficit model; decolonizing education works from a strengths-based model and fosters resilience.
- The narratives that constitute the curriculum must be inclusive of the many stories people tell about their lives and their relations with other species on the planet. “Counter-stories” must be unearthed and history (as just one example) must be studied from multiple perspectives, not just the narrative of the conqueror/dominator.
- Classrooms must be spaces that are grounded in human values. They must also be grounded in “eco-values” – a recognition of the inherent worth of all species – if we are to survive.
- “Decolonized education is rooted in connections to place. Place-based education empowers students and helps restore cultural knowledge” (Centre for Youth and Society).
- New relations between schools and communities need to be cultivated – *all adults* in a community need to be seen as mentors, role models, and teachers of youth.
- Decolonized education focuses on the whole person (emotions, embodiment, identity, etc.), not merely the intellect.

- A decolonized education validates the experiences of young people, and calls forth youth voice and activism.

Reyes suggests that a pedagogy of and towards decoloniality must be “a project of ‘Re’ – resisting, refusing, rehumanizing, remembering, reminding, restoring, reframing, revisioning, and reimagining” (2019, p. 7). Every educational context is different – who the students are, the communities they come from, the values and beliefs of their families — hence, decolonizing work will look different in every setting. Common factors, however, include the necessity of looking below the surface for **root causes of conditions**, and problematizing situations: “listening, asking questions, and drawing connections to the broader implications of systems of oppression” (Reyes, p. 7). Decolonizing education is a **healing process** – healing the wounds that have been inflicted by centuries of domination, exploitation, and violence perpetrated by people against their fellow human beings and the planet. Decolonizing education asks us to reconsider the fundamental purposes of education: rather than educate so that a tiny sliver of people rise to the top of the global income chain, we need to educate *all people* for the art of living well together on a fragile and sacred planet. We need to emphasize not just academic achievement and high test scores, but shift our focus to fostering compassion, community, empathy, imagination, insight, friendship, creativity, communication, justice, practicality, pleasure, courage, humor, wisdom, introspection, transcendence, ethics, service, solidarity, and the ability to live well within the carrying capacity of our ecosystems.

### **Selected new and classic references**

Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. N.Y: The New Press.

Bowers, C.A. (2001). *Educating for eco-justice and community*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Buchanan, A. (2019). *At the movement’s heart: A comparative analysis of four activist schools*. Unpublished thesis.

Centre for Youth and Society. <https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/youthsociety/>

### **Books by Gregory Cajete**

*Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* (1994)

*Ignite the Sparkle: An Indigenous Science Education Curriculum Model* (1999)

*A People’s Ecology: Explorations in Sustainable Living* (1999)

*Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (2000).

*Spirit of the Game: Indigenous Wellsprings* (2004)

Carola, C.R. “Precursors of decolonial pedagogical thinking in Latin America and Abya Yala.”



Access at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.72343>

Chomsky, N. & Dieterich, H. (2002). *Latin America: From colonization to globalization*. Ocean Press Books.

Cuauhtin, R.T., Zavala, M., Sleeter, C., Au, W. (Eds.) (2019). *Rethinking ethnic studies*. Rethinking Schools.

Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2014). *An indigenous people's history of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Fanon, F. (1952). *Black skin, white masks*. (1967 translation by Charles Lam Markmann: New York: Grove Press).

Fanon, F. *The wretched of the earth* (1963 translation by Constance Farrington: New York: Grove Weidenfeld)

hooks, b. Understanding patriarchy. Access at:  
<https://imagineborders.org/pdf/zines/UnderstandingPatriarchy.pdf>

Isenberg, N. (2016). *White trash: The 400-year untold history of class in America* N.Y: Viking Press.

Kendi, I. X. (2016). *Stamped from the beginning: A definitive history of racist ideas in America*. N.Y: Nation Books.

Kimmerer, R.W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Kimmerer, R.W. (2017). Speaking of nature. ORION Magazine. Access at:  
<https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/>

Laenui, P. (2006). Processes of decolonization. Access at:  
[www.sjsu.edu/people/marcos.pizarro/maestros/Laenui.pdf](http://www.sjsu.edu/people/marcos.pizarro/maestros/Laenui.pdf)

Mitchell, S. (2018). *Sacred instructions: Indigenous wisdom for spirit based change*. North Atlantic Books.

Moffett, James. (1994). *The universal schoolhouse: Spiritual awakening through education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Nieto, S. (1992). *Affirming diversity*. N.Y: Longman Press.

Prakash, M. S. & Esteva, G. (1998). *Escaping education: Living as learning within grassroots cultures*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Reyes, G.T. (2019). Pedagogy of and towards decoloniality. In M. A. Peters (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Teacher Education*, Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

Smith, T. (2016). Making space for indigeneity: Decolonizing education. *In SELU Research Review Journal* 1 (2) (49-59).

Takaki, R. (1993). *A different mirror: A history of multicultural America*. Boston: Little, Brown, and C.

Tuck, E. & Yang, K.W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. In *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1, (1), (1-40)

Smith, L.T. (1998). *Decolonising methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Auckland: New Zealand, Zed.

Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird, M. (2005). *For indigenous minds only: A decolonization handbook*. School for Advanced Research Press.

Whyte, K.P. (April 3, 2018) *Yes!* Magazine.

Books by Howard Zinn

*A People's History of the United States* (2015, reissue)

*A Young People's History of the United States: Columbus to the War on Terror* (2009)

*A People's History of American Empire: The American Empire Project, A Graphic Adaptation* (2008)

Kathleen Kesson is Professor Emerita of Teaching, Learning and Leadership in the School of Education at LIU-Brooklyn. Prior to her tenure in Brooklyn, she was the director of the education program at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont and the founding Director of the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont. Her work appears in numerous book chapters, academic journals and the books *Curriculum Wisdom: Educational Decisions in Democratic Societies* and *Understanding Democratic Curriculum Leadership* (both with James Henderson) and *Defending Public Schools: Teaching for a Democratic Society* (with Wayne Ross).

APA Citation:

Kesson, K. (2019). Decolonizing education: Implications for systems transformation in Vermont. Unpublished paper.