

# TRANSCA

## Colonialism

### Why read this text..

The legacy of European colonialism is evident in every sphere of life and this is also true of education. However, colonial legacies and relations are not always easily visible and the influence of the colonial era can therefore seem distant. By shining a light on these legacies, anthropology may help teachers find ways to engage in decolonizing education.

### Historical Context

Colonialism is a form of rule, a system of government that is both centralized and expansive. In this text it refers to the process of European colonization (Western Europe) that started in the 15th century and is closely tied up with imperialism. As a historical process, European colonialism has configured the world we know today in very significant ways. The very prosperity and wealth of Western Europe is dependent on colonial projects. Often, a distinction is made between settler colonialism, as in the case of Australia, United States, or more recently Israel, and exploitation colonialism that includes exploitation of land, resources, people and their labor as in the case of Belgian colonization of what is today The Democratic Republic of Congo. However, these distinctions are tentative as most colonial projects include elements of both and much more. Today we often hear about postcolonialism and decolonization as well as neocolonialism in broad contexts. While postcolonialism refers to the academic study of colonial projects and their legacies, decolonization sometimes refers to the process of fighting for and gaining independence that started en masse in the second half of the 20 century. Importantly, decolonization also refers to the “revealing and dismantling of the colonialist power in all its forms” (Ashcroft et al. 1995:56). Neocolonisation refers to the fact that although previously colonized countries have largely gained independence, they remain dependent on former colonial centers through the logics of the economic, political, social and cultural systems created and developed under colonial rule. A seemingly banal though much used example of a colonial perspective, one we tend to take for granted, is any conventional map of the world in which Europe has the top and central position.

It is thus about *perspectives*, and decolonizing education means to question the centrality, hierarchy and fixedness of all forms of knowledge, not just knowledge of map making. Because colonial projects and their aftermath are embedded in much, if not most of our contemporary knowledge production, they have particularly strong repercussions in education. Questioning the production of knowledge itself, what is thought, how and why brings to light knowledge of how European colonialism has configured and continues to configure the world in which we live and teach.



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## a) Discussion

It is important to understand that colonial histories are characterized by their diversity of forms, effects, reactions and negotiations, experiences and cooperation. There are many different colonial histories and in educational settings teacher and educators need to stay aware of those that are of immediate importance to the teacher and class at hand. Education has historically been one of the main instruments of colonization. Colonizers used education to assimilate and appropriate the indigenous peoples of a particular colony, often educating them for the work force while working to erase their knowledge and practices, including their economic systems, family systems, political systems, religious, medical and educational systems and more.

The concept of colonization is also useful for shedding light on forms of oppression related to class and gender. In particular 'colonial education' may also be understood as a specifically Eurocentric and androcentric (male) perspectives thought of, and wielded, as universal. Moreover, many European institutions are still largely the legacy of colonial era and schools and education are no exception. Questions of identity, of race, nation, geography, family, history, capitalism and even ecological crisis cannot be understood removed from former colonial projects. The challenge for educators is how to engage with colonialism and its many legacies in everyday educational settings, and in relation to nationalized curricula with particular ways of presenting national, European and world histories. Today there are various decolonization movements across academic disciplines, state institutions and civil society, which educators can draw on in their own efforts to bring colonial legacies and their repercussions in the lives of children to light.

## b) Practical Example

Teaching students in their first language can be decolonizing practice, just as teaching a second language can be, but it can also mean including topics, ideas and significant people that resonate with and are connected to student's backgrounds, as well as to backgrounds of particular localities with their own histories. In that respect, anthropology can also offer a way to explore those backgrounds and histories including fieldwork-like activities and exercises using ethnographic tools and techniques such as participant observation, interviewing, life history interviews and other tools at our disposal that empower students by giving them tools for exploring and uncovering by themselves different kinds of knowledge about the world.

Jason G. Irizarry and Tara M. Brown (2014) practice Participatory Action Research (PAR) in which representatives of the targeted populations participate as co-researchers. This approach is grounded in the belief that understanding and solving social problems requires knowledge of those directly affected by them. Irizarry and Brown have conducted a participatory action research project - Project FUERTE (Future Urban Educators Conducting Research to Transform Teacher Education) – that engaged students in US urban schools in



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co-constructing research while enhancing their academic skills. The project's primary goal was to familiarize students with the conventions of PAR as a means of examining the educational experience of Latino, African American and other minority youth that have historically been underserved by schools. Students were researchers of their own experiences and developed recommendations based on their research for improving teacher practice. Once students engaged in the learning process of PAR, they became more critical and involved in their education and empowered to do something about it.

## Thinking further:

- Try to imagine a world in which European colonialism did not happen? What would your life look like? Would the state where you live look quite different now? What would have changed for its citizens, including you and the students?
- Think about your curriculum. Is it Eurocentric? What literature do you use for your classes? What do you teach as "classic"? Do you include sources and examples from all over the world? Do you include perspectives and knowledge from non-white people and women?
- How do you engage with your students? Can they have a say in what they learn and how? Do you take their identities into consideration and reflect on your own?

## KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Doing School, Ethnocentrism, Intersectionality, Reflexivity

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