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Unsettling Universality: Decoloniality and Anti-Racism in Human Rights Education

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This paper examines the convergence of decolonial theory and anti-racist praxis within contemporary human rights discourses, focusing particularly on educational contexts and minority rights frameworks. Through critical engagement with recent discourses on decolonising curricula in higher education, this analysis interrogates the scrutiny to which the ostensibly universal edifice of human rights has been subjected, revealing its entrenchment within colonial epistemologies and racial stratifications. The paper also explores how meaningful advancement of minority rights necessitates fundamental epistemic transformation rather than superficial inclusion within existing institutional structures.

Two theoretical developments frame the analysis: an emerging strand of scholarship proposing anti-colonisation as a distinct move beyond decolonisation, and the growing integration of intersectionality with decolonial frameworks. Together, these signal a field grappling seriously with the gap between theoretical ambition and institutional practice. Decolonial approaches carry genuine transformative potential, but that potential is routinely absorbed and neutralised by institutional diversity agendas that adopt decolonial language while leaving colonial power relations intact.

This paper underscores the imperative of synthesising decolonial and anti-racist modalities to foster authentically equitable human rights, particularly within educational spheres that shape subsequent generations' understanding of justice and human dignity.

Keywords: human rights education, decoloniality, anti-racism, epistemic justice, minority rights, UNESCO, educational policy

Introduction

Human rights discourses, as they crystallised in the post-World War II era, carry a founding contradiction. They profess universal commitment to human dignity and liberty, yet they were forged within the same colonial order they claim to repudiate (Mutua 2001). This contradiction illuminates what Aníbal Quijano

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termed the 'coloniality of power' – enduring structures of domination that outlast formal decolonisation and continue shaping global relations through epistemological, cultural, and institutional mechanisms.

The historiographical context of anti-racism within the United Nations framework proves essential for understanding these tensions. Following 1945, the atrocities of Nazism compelled UNESCO's nascent anti-racism endeavours, exemplified by the 1950 Statement on Race, which sought to demystify biological racism through scientific discourse. As decolonisation movements proliferated across Africa and Asia, human rights architectures struggled to accommodate Indigenous and minority assertions against residual colonial vestiges embedded within supposedly universal frameworks. Contemporary movements, from Black Lives Matter to Indigenous advocacy networks, continue exposing these contradictions, with decolonial intellectuals increasingly asserting that human rights frequently function as an apparatus of neocolonial hegemony rather than genuine emancipation.

Confronting these complexities requires acknowledging the epistemological violence inherent in hegemonic human rights narratives. As Frantz Fanon argued in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965) colonialism effects the dehumanisation of the subjugated, rendering their rights provisional upon assimilation into the coloniser's worldview. This underscores the necessity of anti-racist decoloniality: a trajectory that repositions subaltern perspectives and deconstructs racialised asymmetries of power. In this vein, education emerges as a crucial site for what Paulo Freire (1970: 79) termed 'conscientization', wherein learners dialectically interrogate oppression to articulate liberatory rights demands that transcend colonial impositions.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948 in the midst of active decolonisation struggles, has faced persistent criticism for encoding Western liberal individualism as universal, at the expense of the collective rights and relational ontologies central to many non-Western traditions. The question this paper takes up is not the validity of such critiques, but what it would actually mean to reconceive human rights frameworks through decolonial and anti-racist lenses, particularly in education, where these frameworks shape what justice is understood to mean for subsequent generations.

Looking to contemporary human rights education, it is easily discernible that this is confronting an unprecedented epistemological crisis. International frameworks have become more attentive to cultural diversity and Indigenous rights, but the underlying architecture remains organised around colonial epistemologies that treat Western knowledge as universal and everything else as supplementary. This tension manifests most sharply in educational contexts, where the promise of universal human rights encounters the reality of 'epistemic violence' – a concept that extends beyond Gayatri Spivak's (1988: 280) original formulation to encompass the systematic devaluation of non-Western intellectual traditions within supposedly inclusive pedagogical frameworks. Recent scholarship has significantly expanded the understanding of epistemic violence, for example Kather (2026: 48) develops it as a connection point between neoliberalism

and fascism, while Schützle et al. (2024: 45) provide interdisciplinary analysis framing epistemic violence along decolonial concepts of coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. These developments represent significant theoretical advancement, demonstrating how ostensibly progressive human rights education initiatives often reproduce colonial power relations through their methodological assumptions and institutional structures.

Decoloniality is not simply the political end of colonial rule. As Aníbal Quijano (2000: 533) argued, modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same structure, and the racial hierarchies that gave colonialism its logic did not dissolve when formal empire ended. What remains – in institutions, curricula, and epistemic norms – is the 'coloniality of power'. This is why decoloniality has moved from theoretical provocation to active policy agenda across educational settings but heightened visibility has brought a familiar problem: the more decoloniality is taken up institutionally, the more it risks being absorbed into progressive diversity initiatives that maintain colonial hierarchies while speaking the language of transformation (Shahjahan et al. 2022: 103).

Anti-racism constitutes an active praxis aimed at dismantling these hierarchies, understanding them not as episodic aberrations but as constitutive elements interwoven with capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism (Smith–Lander 2023a: 28). Within human rights discourse, anti-racism necessitates acknowledgment of racism's subversion of universality, particularly for disenfranchised constituencies whose narratives are systematically effaced and pathologised.

The evolution of decolonial theory and anti-racism reflects growing sophistication in understanding relationships between knowledge production and colonial power relations. Whereas earlier scholarship often focused on recovering suppressed knowledge systems, later developments emphasise fundamental transformation of the epistemological foundations upon which modern educational institutions rest (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). This shift becomes apparent in the distinction increasingly drawn between decolonisation and anti-colonisation.

Theoretical frameworks: From decolonisation to anti-colonisation

Anti-colonisation, as theorised by George J. S. Dei and Alessia Cacciavillani (2024: 209), positions itself as a more radical alternative to decolonisation efforts that may inadvertently legitimise colonial institutional structures through reform attempts. While decolonisation often seeks to diversify existing curricula or include marginalised voices within established pedagogical frameworks, anti-colonisation insists upon the impossibility of achieving genuine justice through such measures. This perspective draws upon Indigenous spiritual ontologies and healing literacies that fundamentally reject the secular, individualistic assumptions underlying Western educational institutions.

This turn toward anti-colonisation also reflects a sharpening critique of Walter Mignolo's concept of 'epistemic delinking' – the idea that decolonial transformation requires a clean break from Western epistemologies. Temin (2025: 139) argues that this framing distorts and flattens anticolonial traditions by privileging the epistemic at the

expense of material and political analysis. Zembylas (2025: 2) makes a related warning: delinking, precisely because of its abstraction, can be bent toward ethno-essentialist and authoritarian ends. What these critiques open up is a live debate within decolonial theory about whether genuine transformation means constructing separate knowledge systems, or whether it means engaging critically with dominant epistemologies while refusing to cede ground to them.

Global South epistemologies and the challenge to universalism

Understanding the limitations of approaches focusing exclusively on challenging Western colonialism while ignoring domestic forms of epistemic violence requires confronting multiple overlapping systems of domination. Leon Moosavi's (2020: 341) analysis of the 'decolonial bandwagon' demonstrates how decolonisation efforts in the Global North risk replicating the very coloniality they seek to dismantle when scholars fail to engage critically with their own practice. His framework identifies six key limitations: first and foremost, Northerncentrism – the tendency of Global North decolonial scholarship to marginalise precisely the theorists from the Global South whose work it claims to champion; and beyond this, the tendencies to reduce decolonisation to a simple task, to essentialise and appropriate the Global South, to overlook the multifaceted nature of marginalisation within academia, to produce nativism, and to remain tokenistic. Together these produce what Moosavi calls 'decolonisation without decolonising'.

African scholarship offers sophisticated critiques of universalist approaches to decolonisation. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018: 234) concept of 'epistemic freedom' emphasises developing autonomous intellectual traditions that neither reject Western knowledge entirely, nor accept it uncritically. This approach recognises that contemporary African intellectuals necessarily work within hybrid epistemological frameworks while maintaining commitment to decolonial transformation. His work develops a tripartite structure for epistemic freedom: the ability to choose epistemic endeavours, means to pursue them, and meaningful participation in epistemic communities.

The concept of 'defiant scholarship', emerging from African academic networks through Patricia Daley and Amber Murrey (2022: 156), represents another significant development. Unlike approaches seeking legitimation within existing academic frameworks, defiant scholarship explicitly refuses justification according to colonial epistemological criteria. This refusal extends beyond content to encompass methodological and institutional dimensions, challenging not only what knowledge is produced but how knowledge production is organised and evaluated.

Contemporary debates: Epistemic justice and its implementation

Recent work on epistemic justice has moved well beyond Miranda Fricker's (2007: 1) foundational distinction between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Through engagement with decolonial scholarship, the concept has been extended to include

what Cummings et al. (2023: 1965) call 'epistemic injustice' – the systematic exclusion of marginalised groups not just from being heard, but from the processes of knowledge production itself.

The 'epistemic core' framework developed by Maria Balarin and Lizzi O. Milligan through the JustEd Project research across Nepal, Peru, and Uganda provides concrete insights into operationalising epistemic justice (Balarin–Milligan 2024: 125). Their identification of three crucial dimensions – grounding learning in experience and place, providing broad epistemic resources, and promoting rich pedagogies enabling critical participation – offers practical guidance for implementing decolonial approaches. However, this framework also reveals tensions between universal principles and contextual specificity that continue challenging decolonial theory.

Caroline Kerfoot and Basirat O. Bello-Nonjengele's (2023: 462) research on multilingual epistemic justice demonstrates how seemingly progressive educational policies can perpetuate epistemic injustices through implementation. Their analysis of translanguaging practices in South African schools reveals that while such practices may improve educational access, they often fail to challenge fundamental hierarchies between languages and knowledge systems. Achieving linguistic epistemic justice requires not merely accommodating multilingualism but transforming institutional practices that systematically privilege particular languages and knowledge systems.

Implementation challenges and institutional resistance

The translation from theory to practice is where decolonial ambitions most visibly collide with institutional reality. Godsell et al.'s (2024) research on assessment in South African universities is instructive here: alternative forms – plays, portfolios, reflective essays – enabled students to demonstrate knowledge through diverse criteria, directly challenging the standardisation that colonial educational structures inherited. Yet these same innovations ran into opposition from accreditation bodies and questions about academic rigour. That resistance was not incidental and it reflected precisely the epistemological conflicts that decolonial pedagogy is trying to address.

The British Higher Education context demonstrates how decolonial initiatives often become constrained within what Derrick Bell termed 'interest convergence', whereby racial progress occurs only when converging with dominant institutional interests. Universities across Britain rolled out decolonial initiatives largely responding to Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, primarily because anti-racist work, in that moment, aligned with neoliberal and capitalist interests rather than representing genuine commitment to epistemic justice.

Heather Smith and Vini Lander's (2023a: 28) *Anti-Racism Framework for Initial Teacher Education/Training* is an example of a sustained effort to address these limitations. Their work through the Anti-Racist Teacher Education Network (ARTEN) focuses on moving from absence to action in curriculum development, identifying 'pockets of possibility' for genuine anti-racist transformation (Smith–Lander 2023b: 22). However,

empirical studies indicate that curricular decolonisation across U.K. higher education remains uneven, with limited systematic evaluation of impact, and business schools in particular show minimal evidence of decolonial initiative effectiveness.

The United States presents a similar pattern of visible institutional commitment alongside unresolved questions of depth and durability. The Erikson Institute's anti-racist teacher education programme (https://www.erikson.edu) centres faculty from historically marginalised communities and integrates land education challenging settler colonial narratives. Yet the programme sits within a broader landscape where decolonial teacher education remains institutionally fragmented, with little comparative evidence of whether such faculty-centred models produce measurably different outcomes than structural or curricular interventions. The University of Arizona's Decolonial Pedagogy and Curriculum Inventory (DPCI) – a 92-item tool across 12 constellations designed to evaluate decoloniality in teacher education (Simmons et al. 2020) – attempts to address this evidence gap. But as a self-developed institutional metric, its external validity is untested, and its very existence as an evaluation tool rather than a widespread implementation framework underscores the field's preoccupation with measuring what remains largely unbuilt.

Human rights education: UNESCO frameworks and global policy developments

UNESCO's 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development, adopted by all 194 member states, marks a significant moment in the international policy landscape. The framework explicitly calls for "fostering critical views of and supporting the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism in all their forms and manifestations" (UNESCO 2023: para. 24) – language that echoes the 1974 Recommendation it revises, but that now carries renewed urgency within a contemporary decolonial frame and a transformed geopolitical context. Unanimously endorsed, its reaffirmation of this commitment matters; what remains wide, however, is the distance between endorsement and implementation.

That distance is not incidental as academic analysis suggests that UNESCO's broader institutional framework requires more sustained engagement with decolonial thought if it is to address its Eurocentric legacy, one rooted in the organisation's own founding conditions (Becker 2021). The tension is visible even in its more progressive initiatives: while UNESCO increasingly acknowledges Indigenous knowledge systems through its LINKS programme, critics argue that such efforts tend to position non-Western knowledge as supplementary to dominant scientific paradigms rather than genuinely alternative to them. Inclusion, on these terms, does not disturb the epistemological hierarchy, it accommodates difference within it, perpetuating colonial knowledge structures under the sign of openness.

The African Union's declaration of 2024 as the 'Year of Education' demonstrates institutional commitment to educational transformation, framed around the theme

Educate an African Fit for the 21st Century: Building Resilient Education Systems for Increased Access to Inclusive, Lifelong, Quality, and Relevant Learning in Africa (African Union 2024). The initiative is explicitly designed to accelerate the implementation of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025 (CESA 16–25), which prioritises curriculum reform centring African experiences, integration of Indigenous knowledge systems, and development of pan-African educational networks (African Union Commission 2016). However, the gap between such declaratory commitments and systemic implementation remains significant. A 2024 review noted that CESA 16–25 operational plans were not drafted, monitoring data proved insufficient, and comprehensive progress assessment remained impossible (UNESCO IICBA 2024).

Conversely, the OECD faces intensified criticism for its *Learning Compass 2030,* characterised as promoting a neocolonial vision of education that privileges Global North epistemologies at the expense of those of the Global South despite humanitarian rhetoric (Hughson 2024). The *Learning Compass* maintains colonial rationality by positioning Global North knowledge systems as universal ideals, marginalising Global South epistemologies through instrumental knowledge construction and cultural homogenisation via 'high-performing systems' based on Western metrics.

Regional variations and implementation challenges

Regional analysis illustrates significant variations in how international human rights education frameworks are interpreted and implemented across different political and cultural contexts, with particular complexity emerging in postcolonial societies navigating multiple colonial legacies and contemporary geopolitical pressures.

South Asian contexts present particular challenges for decolonial educational frameworks, given the layered relationship between colonial legacies, Indigenous knowledge systems, and entrenched structural inequalities that predate and exceed colonial rule. Jatuporn's (2024) theorisation of 'Asia as method' in decolonial education – developed specifically through a Southeast Asian, Thai-centred lens – offers a productive regional counterpoint to Western-centric decolonial frameworks, demonstrating how scholars from Thailand and the broader ASEAN region are articulating their own epistemic alternatives rather than simply adopting Euro-American decolonial frameworks. In the Indian context specifically, universal aspirations toward democratic and humanist values in education encounter the deep structural violence of caste. Chand's (2025) critical analysis documents the mechanisms plainly – Dalits face reduced access to higher education not through formal exclusion alone but through the daily discriminatory practices of teachers, peers, and administrators that make formal entitlements functionally unreachable.

Linguistic diversity presents additional complexity with India's National Education Policy 2020 emphasising mother tongue instruction "until at least Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8" (Ministry of Education – Government of India 2020). Educational challenges vary dramatically across regions. A nationally representative study using NSO 75th

round data (2017–2018) found that students in rural India have "significantly less chance of accessing early years of education" compared to their urban counterparts, and that urban households spent 256% more on early childhood education than rural households (Choudhury et al. 2023). The same study noted that this rural–urban gap narrows with increased household capacity to pay and higher educational attainment of the household head.

Minority rights and epistemic justice: Contemporary challenges

The relationship between linguistic diversity and epistemic justice has emerged as a crucial site of struggle within human rights education. Recent research on translanguaging and epistemic justice examines English Medium Instruction programmes, revealing epistemic injustices where Grade 6 learners in South Africa demonstrate how multilingual approaches can construct 'new decolonial relations of knowing and being' (Kerfoot – Bello-Nonjengele 2023: 474).

The evolution of 'plurilingual, decolonial digital language learning approaches' represents promising developments for supporting linguistic epistemic justice while engaging contemporary technological possibilities (Galante et al. 2024: 3). However, implementation requires addressing digital divides and technological dependencies that may perpetuate rather than challenge global inequalities.

The struggles of Indigenous communities for educational sovereignty illuminate broader questions about relationships between minority rights and epistemic justice. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021: 67) argues, incorporating Indigenous knowledge into dominant educational systems risks appropriation and distortion if undertaken without Indigenous control over how knowledge is shared and used. This challenges liberal approaches focusing on inclusion rather than self-determination.

Education Northwest (Livingston 2024) has developed frameworks supporting tribes in reclaiming educational sovereignty through community engagement, connecting traditional knowledge to evidence-based practice, and educator support. Case studies with the Nez Perce tribe created distinct instructional strands from traditional pedagogies, demonstrating how educational institutions can be designed according to Indigenous values while providing students credentials recognised by the dominant society.

Religious and cultural minority communities face similar challenges securing recognition for their educational rights and knowledge systems. The European Court of Human Rights recognises parents' rights to ensure that their children's education is in line with their religious and philosophical convictions, but implementation varies significantly across national contexts (Harris et al. 2009: 267). These variations reflect deeper tensions about relationships between minority rights and democratic citizenship continuing to challenge liberal approaches.

To give an example, Roma are widely recognised as Europe's largest marginalised ethnic minority, numbering over 10 million across the continent. Across the European Union, educational exclusion remains severe, with high rates of early school leaving and

limited progression to higher education. In Britain, the disparities are similarly stark: only around 9.1% of Gypsy and Roma pupils achieve grade 5 or above in GCSE English and mathematics compared to over 50% nationally, and just 6.9% progress to higher education by age 19 (Brassington 2022). Decolonial approaches to Roma education emphasise moving beyond deficit models blaming Roma culture for educational underachievement, focusing instead on institutional discrimination and antigypsyism as structural racism requiring systemic solutions. Fernández Ortega's (2021) critical analysis exposes the 'ideology of integration' as perpetuating 'white order' and 'modern civilisatory mission' toward racialised Roma bodies, arguing for genuine decolonial praxis recognising Roma collective memory and challenging epistemological limits of Western historiography.

Critical analysis: Contemporary debates and future directions

Shahjahan et al.'s (2022: 103) review of 207 articles on decolonising curriculum and pedagogy arrives at a conclusion that is both clarifying and uncomfortable. The meanings, realisations, and challenges of decolonial work are irreducibly contextual, with 'political and epistemological consequences'. There is no universal template and this does not mean the project is incoherent – it means that anyone proposing a single model for decolonial implementation across different settings should be treated with scepticism. The political and epistemic specificity of each context is not a problem to be solved, it is the condition under which genuine decolonial work happens.

María Lugones's (2007, 2010) analysis of the colonial/modern gender system has become increasingly central to this conversation. Where intersectionality identifies overlapping oppressions, Lugones insists that gender itself – as a binary, as a category – is a colonial imposition that erased Indigenous gender systems. Nassiri-Ansari et al. (2025) develop this into a framework of decolonial feminist futures that moves beyond Western intersectionality by situating feminist analysis within specific cultural, geopolitical, and historical contexts rather than treating it as universally applicable. This connects directly to the anti-colonisation argument: if the very categories through which we analyse oppression carry colonial freight, then the question of whether genuine transformation is possible within existing institutional frameworks becomes sharper, and more urgent.

Yet contextual specificity alone is not enough. Without some shared principles, decolonial work risks either fragmentation or capture by institutional actors who appropriate decolonial language while protecting colonial power arrangements. Cummings et al. (2025: 3235) point toward one productive response: communities of practice that cross institutional and disciplinary boundaries, building collaborative knowledge production that holds contextual specificity and decolonial commitment together without forcing a false universalism.

Assessment and evaluation represent another crucial tension site between decolonial theory and institutional requirements. While research demonstrates that alternative assessment methods can provide 'epistemic access and epistemic justice', such approaches often face resistance from accreditation bodies and concerns about academic rigour.

These tensions reveal deeper conflicts about legitimate knowledge and appropriate evaluation methods, which require a fundamental transformation of institutional cultures and governance structures.

Digital technologies present decolonial educators with a genuine dilemma. The possibilities are real, for example plurilingual and decolonial digital pedagogies have shown capacity to centre learners' own epistemologies in ways that traditional classrooms often cannot (Galante et al. 2024: 3). But Nothias (2025: 386) tracks how the design of digital platforms encodes Western cultural assumptions and surveillance logics – what he calls 'digital colonialism' – such that the medium can quietly reproduce the hierarchies the pedagogy aims to disrupt.

Future research directions within United Nations discourse and human rights education present significant opportunities for decolonial intervention. The Fifth Phase (2025–2029) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education marks institutional evolution toward recognising 'youth, including children as priority sectors' with thematic focus on human rights and digital technologies, environment and climate change, and gender equality. Crucially, this phase aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4.7 on education for sustainable development and cultural diversity, representing recognition of pluralistic educational approaches. However, critical decolonial scholarship reveals implementation gaps between theory and practice, with scholars like Becker (2021) arguing that UN approaches remain embedded in "Eurocentric assumptions and principles which serve as premise for human rights and human rights education", calling for exploring "pluriversal knowledges of human rights" and problematising "the Human of human rights" (Becker 2021: 49). Future research needs to close the gap between theoretical work and the lived conditions of marginalised communities. Community-based, participatory methodologies – ones that place community knowledge and priorities at the centre, not as data, but as the starting point – are essential. Methodological rigour and epistemological humility are not in conflict here and attending seriously to diverse knowledge traditions is part of what good research in this area requires.

Teacher preparation and professional development emerge as crucial sites requiring systematic transformation rather than superficial modification. Teachers cannot be expected to implement HRE effectively without structured training that develops legal knowledge, critical thinking and ethical sensibility. These are capacities that must be deliberately cultivated rather than assumed. Smith and Lander's (2023a: 28) work through the Anti-Racist Teacher Education Network demonstrates promising approaches through their 'pockets of possibility' framework, identifying spaces within teacher education where genuine anti-racist transformation can occur despite institutional constraints.

Conclusion: Toward epistemic justice in human rights education

The debates surveyed in this article point toward a central tension between the sophistication of decolonial and anti-racist theory, and the stubbornness of the institutions that theory is trying to change. This is not merely an implementation problem as it reflects

something more structural – the degree to which educational systems, international frameworks, and minority rights protections have been built from within, and in the service of colonial epistemological orders. The question is not whether we have the right theory. It is whether institutions can be genuinely transformed, or whether they will continue to absorb decolonial critique while protecting their fundamental arrangements.

Scholarship as emerging from the Global South – including Ramón Grosfoguel's (2013) 'epistemic racism/sexism', Nelson Maldonado-Torres's (2025) 'combative decoloniality', Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) epistemic freedom and decolonisation as 'a politics of life', and Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) 'Asia as method', has proven crucial for developing decolonial approaches avoiding both universalist and relativist pitfalls while maintaining social justice commitment. These contributions demonstrate that achieving epistemic justice requires confronting multiple overlapping systems of domination rather than treating colonialism as a sole source of educational inequality.

Policy progress is real but uneven, for instance UNESCO's 2023 Recommendation and the African Union's Year of Education represent genuine institutional movement. Both, however, are being navigated alongside standardisation pressures and efficiency logics that pull in the opposite direction. Naming the advance matters but so does naming what it is up against.

The experiences of Indigenous, Roma, and religious minority communities in this paper point toward the same conclusion, that inclusion is not the same as self-determination. Formal equality provisions have demonstrably not dismantled the mechanisms that reproduce educational exclusion. Roma educational outcomes in Europe and Britain speak for themselves – they are not a legacy problem but an ongoing one, driven by institutional discrimination that formal equality has not reached. Colonial logics do not require colonial-era institutions to function; they operate through contemporary ones.

The critiques of decolonial theory addressed in this paper around essentialisation, appropriation by Global Northern institutions, and the limits of implementation are worth taking seriously rather than deflecting. They sharpen the project but critique can also serve conservative functions, and calls for 'balance' in this context often mean requesting that transformative scholarship tone itself down. That demand should be resisted.

Future research needs to close the gap between theoretical work and the lived conditions of marginalised communities. Community-based, participatory methodologies – ones that place community knowledge and priorities at the centre, not as data, but as the starting point – are essential. Systematic investigation of alternative institutional models, assessment practices, and teacher preparation approaches remains critical for demonstrating what decolonial transformation can look like in practice.

The deepest challenge remains a material one. Epistemic change matters, but it is not sufficient on its own. Who controls educational institutions, and in whose interests they operate, are the structural questions that decolonial and anti-racist approaches must keep in view as its grounding and not as an afterthought to the epistemic argument.

Human rights education can only challenge colonial power relations if it is willing to name them, in institutional and policy contexts as well as theoretical ones.

The path forward requires a sustained commitment to both theory and practice, while we must remain vigilant against those forces that appropriate decolonial rhetoric while preserving colonial power structures. To circle back to a point made earlier in this paper, this demands 'defiant scholarship' (Daley–Murrey 2022: 159) – intellectual work refusing legitimation according to colonial epistemological criteria while building alternative frameworks for knowledge production and distribution. Such scholarship recognises that transforming human rights education cannot occur through reform alone, but requires fundamental reimagining of educational relationships, institutional structures, and societal purposes education serves, particularly within United Nations discourse and minority rights frameworks that must evolve beyond colonial foundations to genuinely serve the communities they purport to protect.

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