
Book Review: *Decolonizing Education for Sustainable Futures* edited by Yvette Hutchinson, Artemio Arturo Cortez Ochoa, Julia Paulson, and Leon Tikly

Authors: Shreya Shreeraman and Luke Pye

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BOOK REVIEW

DECOLONIZING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

EDITED BY YVETTE HUTCHINSON, ARTEMIO ARTURO CORTEZ OCHOA,

JULIA PAULSON, AND LEON TIKLY

BRISTOL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2023. 288 PAGES

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In *Decolonizing Education for Sustainable Futures*, Yvette Hutchinson, Artemio Arturo Cortez Ochoa, Julia Paulson, and Leon Tikly pull together contributions from a wide range of authors. These works originated with an online seminar series and contributions to UNESCO's Futures of Education program, which addressed the "enduring presences of extraction and oppression" (p. 2) in education and how to envisage and realize a sustainable future.

The editors have deliberately and skillfully woven the book together in three distinct parts. They start by taking the reader through the conceptual underpinnings of both decolonization in education and futures thinking, a process of attempting to understand possible futures and their implications. The latter two parts of the book heed the calls of Mignolo and Walsh (2018, 138) in ensuring that attention is paid to both practice and theory: "Praxis without theory is blind; theory without praxis is sequestered." The editors intentionally showcase diverse perspectives on decolonization and acknowledge the tensions contained within these different perspectives.

In part one, the editors conceptually explore the connections between decolonization and sustainable futures in education. They start with the opening chapter by Tikly, who lays out five distinct narratives of sustainable futures. These include an expansion of existing thinking on sustainable development and education to include a decolonizing narrative, before charting the past, present, and potential future roles of education in these narratives. The two other chapters in part one draw from the idea that "education is directly implicated in the crises of the Anthropocene and our failure to imagine alternatives" (p. 49). They do so by imagining a series of radical vision statements for the future of education and theoretically redressing the existing divide between contemporary global education and our natural world.

The five chapters in part two focus squarely on praxis and on moving theory to practice and action, including contributions from teachers in the UK city of Bristol. This part of the book takes readers through a critical reflection on the efforts and experiences of decolonizing the curriculum in the "unconducive policy environment" (p. 136) that is the UK school system. The authors of these chapters focus on multiple levels of the

education ecosystem, starting with curriculum and learners, followed by perspectives on the process of decolonization in large institutions, in this case the British Council and the University of Bristol. Chapters by Hutchinson and Birdi respectively examine the complexities and possibilities of organic insurgent people-led processes of decolonization, and how they interact with larger bureaucratic processes led by institutions that espouse similar decolonial aims.

The authors of the four chapters in part three bring these threads back to theory, emphasizing the argument that decolonization cannot occur without a reparative lens. They critique the recent “decolonial bandwagon,” noting how the discourse is often co-opted in performative ways that fail to disrupt coloniality or racial hierarchies, and may even reinforce existing power dynamics. The authors of these chapters argue for the centrality of repair and reparations, and call for historic engagement and concrete action to redress harms and prevent their recurrence.

Despite not making explicit reference to crisis-affected contexts or the field of education in emergencies (EiE), the authors’ perspectives and arguments on the urgent need for a reparative and sustainable future in education, for decolonizing the global education space, and for reimagining education as something more deeply connected to the planet and to people have significant relevance to the EiE field. The book also offers practical examples of efforts to apply futures thinking and decolonial frameworks in education systems and institutions without shying away from how messy this process can be, especially when implementing decolonial ideas in historically colonial institutions. There also are two important, provocative offerings to those in EiE who are seeking to advance thinking, practice, and policy in the field.

The first and potentially most important offering is to encourage EiE theorists and practitioners to adopt a “futures lens” that wrestles with the injustices of past, present, and potential futures. EiE has only recently begun engaging with the questions of how imperialist, racialized, and capitalist logics have underpinned the field and the sector, and of how power is often structured by large agencies, funders, and a cognitive framing of the Global South as the “other” that is in need of intervention (Shah et al. 2025; Novelli and Kutun 2023; Menashy and Zakharia 2023). EiE is too often decoupled from the past. However, there is extensive literature on and recognition of education’s role in creating futures oriented toward peace, which necessitates an engagement with injustices, both past and present (Paulson and Shanks 2023).

A solid starting point for those working in EiE is Paulson’s chapter on reparative pedagogies, which offers reflections on how education systems may choose to grapple with the “truth” of the past, particularly in contexts with violent histories, using examples from practitioners in Colombia and Cambodia. Against the backdrop of cuts to foreign aid and strengthened efforts to meaningfully localize the EiE sector, the question of what sustainable futures we are working toward is more critical than ever. The thinking and

arguments presented throughout the book provide ideas for disrupting short-termism in EiE and can help move the sector beyond the current dominant vision of the future. These ideas include moving EiE toward a more organic, locally led, epistemically just, and decolonial future.

The second offering is to challenge the EiE field to imagine a radically different relationship with the planet. Chapter two, a contribution from the Common Worlds Research Collective, envisions a future in which humans are no longer positioned above the living world and rejects the belief that we can exploit or “improve” nature without consequence. In crisis-affected contexts, the relationship to the environment and the natural world is messy, as both elements can be both the victim and the driver of crises. The book’s contributors offer perspectives on education’s relationship to the planet that challenge us to go further: Could education reframe our relationship with the natural world by valuing the planet as more than a resource for survival? Might this perspective deepen if EiE can embrace diverse epistemologies, including those from indigenous communities? These questions provide useful provocation to reimagine and redefine EiE and challenge us to wrestle with the historic logics and injustices underpinning the field (Shah et al. 2025).

Despite the overall quality, strength, and diversity of this book, we felt at times that it tended to lean toward theory and to underrepresent the political economy of the current moment. Although several contributors frame the current moment as a “polycrisis,” the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, the role of emerging technologies, the rise of militarism, and the underlying political economy of global change in relation to decolonizing education for a sustainable future seem underexplored. However, the book does provide a valuable starting point for expanding and deepening these perspectives. We hope for future work in a similar vein that draws inspiration from this book’s contributors.

Noting the transdisciplinary and intersectional approaches needed to address educational injustices (Jules and Salajan 2025), we thought the editors could have gone further in diversifying the methodologies represented in this volume. While the contributors do use a range of methodologies, there is no representation of quantitative work, which leaves certain voices absent, such as those involved in climate modeling, futures forecasting, or even decolonizing financing. Including this different viewpoint would have been useful in understanding a wider range of efforts to imagine sustainable futures and might have provided a different perspective on ideas of decolonization and reparative justice in practice.

Overall, this book stimulates thought and imagination around the meaning of sustainable futures in and through education. For the EiE field, it provides strong theoretical grounding, practical examples, and insightful reflections for theorists and practitioners on shifting our collective vision for the future and imagining different and radical

possibilities for the role of education in crisis-affected contexts. As explicitly noted in the introductory chapters, the book is not meant to function as a “manual” for decolonization; the aim, rather, is to push the reader to move beyond familiar frameworks, understand decolonization from different viewpoints, and embrace the courageous task of imagining a different kind of future. It does this successfully.

SHREYA SHREERAMAN AND LUKE PYE

Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)

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