Towards a Transformed Geography Curriculum: A Post-colonial Critique

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ARTICLE INFO

How to Cite:

Tarisayi, K. (2023). Towards a Transformed Geography Curriculum: A Post-colonial Critique. *Indonesian Journal of Social Research (IJSR)*, *5*(3), 222-230.

https://doi.org/10.30997/ijsr.v5i3.361

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines research on efforts to decolonize geography education. The main research problems addressed are documenting the history of calls to reform geography curricula to challenge Eurocentric biases, synthesizing arguments on the need to decolonize curricula to empower marginalized voices, and identifying examples of implemented reforms. A systematic review methodology was utilized. Academic databases were searched using relevant terms, and inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied to identify 31 peer-reviewed articles published from 2000-2022. Key data was extracted, and thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns related to the research problems. The review reveals longstanding calls to decolonize curricula from post-colonial perspectives that critique Western epistemic dominance. Arguments emphasize how current curricula perpetuate cognitive injustice by marginalizing indigenous knowledge and fail to address local perspectives on global issues. Examples of reforms in New Zealand, South Africa, and elsewhere demonstrate the localization of content, pedagogy, and knowledge. However, progress remains uneven. The study concludes that transforming geographic education is critical for social justice but depends on investments in teacher training focused on decolonization and indigenous knowledge to enable meaningful curriculum reforms.

1. Introduction

Geography cannot be separated from the heritage of colonialism and the expansion of empires. European colonies were drawn, named, and studied, as were most of the world's territories, and knowledge systems were created. These systems have continued to bear upon today's geographical understanding (Ramutsindela, 2021). However, critics argue that contemporary geography curricula remain Eurocentric, marginalize indigenous and local knowledge, reinforce colonial power dynamics, and promote cognitive injustice (Jazeel, 2017). Additionally, Ramutsindela (2021) buttresses the justification for repositioning 'African geographies' in post-colonial Africa by arguing, "we need conceptual apparatus to recover the Africa that has been erased by colonial discourses, representations, and western epistemologies." The growing need to decolonize higher education has also pressured geography educators to reform curricula and pedagogy. The term "decolonization" has a unique meaning in geography. It includes recognizing how patterns of colonial power have shaped the rise of geography as a discipline while promoting alternative epistemologies centered on local voices, rights, and knowledge (Barker & Pickerill, 2020). However, implementing curriculum changes in geography classrooms can take time due to multiple factors. Geography curricula are influenced by several factors, including standards, textbooks, teacher knowledge, and institutional cultures, which can be resistant to change (Clayton, 2020).

Furthermore, decoloniality discourse should be informed by a critical reflection on whose version of reality matters. The reality of the previously marginalized voices that have been overlooked should matter and shape the narrative. Moreover, scholars argue that transforming geographic education to challenge colonial legacies empowers marginalized voices and promotes place-based solutions, which is essential in achieving social justice and sustainable development (Noxolo, 2017).

Calls to decolonize geographic education have persisted for decades, motivated by broader critiques of post-colonial knowledge systems and protests by indigenous groups (Jazeel, 2017). At the same time, geography educators have struggled to bring about change, and the curriculum has been criticized for continuing to promote unbalanced epistemological priorities and limiting non-Western perspectives (Barker & Pickerill, 2019). The urgency of reform is underscored by the recent wave of student activism in African universities demanding decolonized education (Suina, 2016). The urgency of decoloniality was summed up during the 'Rhodes must fall' and 'Fees must fall' protests in South Africa. These movements were a clarion call for curricula that students can identify with and curricula that speak to their lived struggles and reality. Essentially, these calls questioned whose perspective, narrative, or beliefs about the nature of reality should be valued and seen as legitimate within the curricula. However, a systematic review of the history, principles, pathways, and challenges associated with the decolonization of geography education is lacking in this field. This systematic review addresses this gap by distilling critical themes from the relevant literature on the history of calls to decolonize the geography curriculum, the rationale for the need for curriculum reform, and examples of how the geography curriculum has been decolonized worldwide. A post-colonial theoretical perspective provides a valuable framework for conceptualizing these themes, highlighting the rationale for transforming geography education and illuminating how teacher education focusing on decolonization, place-based pedagogy, and local knowledge can support curriculum reform.

Post-colonial theory provides a useful theoretical framework for conceptualizing efforts to decolonize geography education programs in the Global South. Post-colonial theory emerged as a critique of colonial ideologies, power structures, and knowledge systems. As Langer and Matić (2023) explain, post-colonial theory "unpacks the complex legacies of colonialism and questions prevailing power dynamics" (p. 3). A core focus is analyzing how colonialism shaped representations and discourses about non-Western subjects. Bhati (2023)

highlights how Said's seminal Orientalism revealed how "European colonialism was an enterprise of knowledge and power to create an idea of the Orient" based on depictions of "inferior 'disorder,' 'irrationality,' and 'primitivism'" of non-Europeans (p. 204). These colonial discourses justified exploitation and subjugation by positioning the colonized as the 'Other.' Post-colonial theory also attends to intersectional identities shaped by colonialism; as Bhati (2023) notes, Spivak highlighted how colonial patriarchy marginalized subaltern women. Overall, post-colonial theory "provides [s] a theoretical perspective to understand the exploitation and subjugation of colonial subjects" and how colonialism molded identities and power dynamics (Bhati, 2023). Post-colonial theory offers conceptual tools to critique lingering colonial biases, empower subjugated voices, and reveal alternative histories. As the authors argue, post-colonial theory has key relevance for fields like geography that remain shaped by colonial legacies, as it can spur critical examination of prevailing narratives, ethics, and inequities. Scholars have used post-colonial theory as a lens to critique colonial legacies, privilege marginalized voices, and promote epistemic transformation across disciplines (Carter, 2017; Mignolo, 2010). Critical elements of post-colonial theory that align with geographic education's efforts to decolonize include critiquing colonial discourses and power dynamics, giving the marginalized voices and knowledge, questioning Eurocentric notions, and promoting cognitive transformation.

The main goal of post-colonial theory is to critique colonial discourses and power structures that perpetuate inequality (Mignolo, 2010). Long et al. (2019) argue that post-colonial perspectives are central to decolonizing the geography curriculum, challenging "the theoretical underpinnings of disciplinary knowledge that privilege certain cultures and are indiscriminately applied beyond human contexts, circumstances, and voices." Post-colonial critique reveals how patterns of colonial power continue to shape geography as a discipline (Barker & Pickerill, 2020). A post-colonial perspective recognizes how colonial ideologies, structures, and knowledge systems continue to shape contemporary social structures and discourses. It seeks to uncover and challenge underlying colonial assumptions, perceptions, and power relations (Gyamera & Burke, 2018; Horrill et al., 2018; McKinney, 2016). It is in line to decolonize the geography curriculum by critiquing how colonial legacies influence current knowledge and privilege Western epistemology. Post-colonial theory seeks to privilege marginalized voices and subaltern narratives suppressed by colonial power (Mignolo, 2010). Decolonizing geography curricula requires re-evaluating long-excluded indigenous and local knowledge (Long et al., 2019). Post-colonial perspectives promote epistemic pluralism by decentralizing Western knowledge systems and legitimizing non-Western epistemologies (Carter, 2017). Post-colonial theory seeks to give voice to those marginalized by colonialism and respect underlying narratives, histories, and realities (Mongia, 2021; Nicholas & Hollowell, 2016). It is linked to efforts to decolonize the geography curriculum by centralizing indigenous and local knowledge that has long been excluded or marginalized. Post-colonial criticism questioned a European representative as a center that legalized the status of Western dominance and colonial violence and inequality (Long et al., 2019).-Colonized geography requires critical research on how imperialism and "discovery" tell how to strengthen the dynamics of the course colonial strength (Barker & Pickerill, 2020). Post-colonial perspectives question the dominant Eurocentrism of non-Western societies and cultures, revealing biases and omissions in such narratives. It is consistent with critiquing how imperialism and exploration are framed in geography courses in general and ensuring respect for other perspectives (Murray, 2020).

Ultimately, post-colonial theory aims to promote social and cognitive transformation by empowering marginalized groups and promoting equity in knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2010). Similarly, proponents of the decolonization of geography education seek to reform the curriculum to promote transformational change through education (Long et al., 2019). Post-colonial theory attempts to promote epistemic pluralism by decentralizing Western knowledge

systems and recognizing the legitimacy of non-Western epistemologies. It aligns with efforts to incorporate local knowledge, solutions, and African perspectives into geographic education. Post-colonial theory provides a valuable perspective on the conceptualization of geographical education for non-polonization. It tries to criticize the conversion of colonial heritage, privileges, and cognitive transformation. Key principles include critiquing colonial discourses and power dynamics that marginalize non-Western knowledge, privileging subaltern narratives long excluded from the curriculum, questioning Eurocentric notions that mask colonial violence, and promoting social and cognitive transformation. Post-colonial theory critiques the way patterns of colonial power shape geography as a discipline and aligns with decolonization curriculum goals (Kvangraven & Kesar, 2023; Laing, 2021.; Shahjahan et al., 2022). It prioritizes the marginalized voices suppressed by colonialism over the more recent indigenous and local knowledge. Post-colonial criticism questions the legitimacy of Eurocentric notions of Western dominance and reflects calls for a critical examination of imperialism in the curriculum. Ultimately, post-colonial theory aims to empower marginalized groups and promote equity in knowledge systems, reflecting the goals of curriculum reform for transformative change (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Struckmann, 2018). The research methodology used in this study will be described in the next section.

Overall, this systematic review explored why geography educators are being asked to 'decolonize' the curriculum, the tensions and obstacles they face during reform, and what the pathways for change might look like. The review also highlighted the need for further research to understand better strategies for preparing geography teachers to implement transformative curricular changes that meet social and cognitive justice goals.

2. Methods

The method used established guidelines for conducting systematic reviews in the social sciences (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). The review addressed three overarching research questions: What is the history of calls to decolonize geography courses? What arguments support the need to decolonize geography courses? What are some examples of decolonization in geography courses? The search for the academic databases of the system was made from April 2022 to June 2022. It explored the following databases: Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), JSTOR, Scopus, and Web of Science. Search terms included the following combinations: "decolonization course," "decolonization geography education," geography course "indigenous knowledge," "African perspectives," "post-colonial theory," and "teacher education."

The included articles were published in peer-reviewed journals between 2000 and 2022. Only articles focused on decolonization and published in English, specifically on geography education curriculum or related elements (e.g., teacher education, pedagogy, content, knowledge) were included. Articles that focused more broadly on decolonization education without specific reference to geography were excluded. The initial database search yielded 100 articles. After removing 44 duplicates, study titles and abstracts were screened for appropriateness against the inclusion/exclusion criteria, resulting in 56 articles deemed worthy of review. After reviewing the full-text articles, 25 were removed because they did not specifically focus on decolonization in geography classes. The review was based on a final sample of 31 articles. A data extraction form was developed to extract key information from the included articles: author and date, country/region, purpose/focus, theme/structure, and recommendations. Thematic analysis was performed on the data to extract overarching themes addressing the three research questions. Direct quotations and paraphrased summaries of key arguments also support the themes. The review also covers articles published in peer-reviewed journals, and relevant grey literature may be omitted. Finally, a standardized and systematic search strategy was used to identify and analyze relevant literature that could clarify the three

research questions that guided the review. We attempted to apply inclusion/exclusion criteria consistently and obtained adequate data for thematic analyses. Although a rigorous methodology was followed, some limitations were noted. The next section presents the results of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

The idea of decolonization, especially in subjects such as geography, closely related to the legacy of colonialism, is an important and pressing issue. The purpose of this systematic review is to trace the history behind calls to decolonize geography curricula, justify the need for such efforts, and identify examples of curriculum decolonization. Several overarching themes emerged from the literature review.

3.1. Calls for Decolonization

There have long been calls to decolonize geography and other subjects, fearing that dominant Western knowledge systems perpetuate colonial power dynamics and marginalize indigenous and non-Western perspectives. As Jazeel (2017) points out: "Decolonial thinking from Western global hegemony and its classics has been key to the critique of post-colonial higher education." Decolonizing geography involves recognizing how colonial patterns of power shape disciplinary knowledge and promoting alternatives that prioritize local knowledge, voices, and rights (Barker & Pickerill, 2020). According to Noxolo (2017), "decolonizing geographical knowledge in the colonized and recolonized post-colonial world" means resisting imperialist discourse, revitalizing indigenous histories, and centering indigenous perspectives. Calls to decolonize geography courses gained momentum in the post-colonial era when former colonies gained independence, and critical discourses examining colonial legacies emerged. However, despite decades of reform, contemporary geography curricula are criticized by many for continuing to prioritize Western knowledge, marginalize Indigenous perspectives, and reinforce colonial power dynamics (Long et al., 2019). The recent wave of student activism in South African universities demanding decolonized education underscores the urgent need for curriculum reform. As Suina (2016) notes, decolonization courses must "rediscover indigenous history and heritage" and respond to "the dominance of Western colonizers." Thus, scholarship has long called for decolonizing the curriculum, as revealed by the exponential growth of studies advocating for transforming curricula that are predominantly Western knowledge.

3.2. Reasoning for The Need for Decolonization of Geography Courses

There are several arguments why the decolonization of geography courses in universities is essential. First, current curricula perpetuate cognitive violence by excluding or marginalizing non-Western knowledge and perspectives (Heleta, 2016). Khoo et al. (2020) argue, "Higher education has been strongly contested in recent times, on the grounds of its role in reproducing epistemic injustice, leading to calls to 'decolonise' institutions, curricula and teaching practices." Cognitive violence, epistemic injustice, and epistemic violence are some of the phrases that have been put in words to articulate the subjugation of local knowledge in the Global South. Due to the epistemic injustice, it becomes critical, as pointed out by Carter (2017), that decolonizing education requires resisting the "Western assimilation of entire societies to Western norms" (p. 17). Second, curricula that reinforce the duality of colonial representation risk erasing local histories, voices, and realities (Long et al., 2019). Third, geography curricula that address local knowledge systems are insufficient to address key global issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable development from

a local perspective (Long et al., 2019). Finally, geography curricula that reinforce Western dominance fail to empower marginalized groups and relegate their focus on knowledge creation, a key goal of decolonization education (Long et al., 2019). Teacher training and professional development are key tools for curriculum decolonization. Teachers who have been exposed to both Western and non-Western knowledge are critical in the endeavor to decolonize the curricula in geography. As Suina (2016) notes, decolonization education requires "awareness, critical thinking, and critical education." However, likely, extensive changes in pedagogy and teaching content will only take place if educators are sufficiently informed and prepared for their work (Heleta, 2016). Thus, investments in teacher training with a focus on decolonization, post-colonial theory, and indigenous knowledge are needed to support curriculum reform.

3.3. Examples of Decolonization of the Geography Curriculum

Several examples of how the geography curriculum has been decolonized worldwide reveal possible future directions. In New Zealand, education reform focused on the localization of curriculum, knowledge systems, and pedagogy has been transformative (Jazeel, 2017). In South Africa, efforts have focused on creating a critical post-colonial framework by including African perspectives on various topics, changing place names, and privileging indigenous knowledge (Long et al., 2019; Noxolo, 2017). Curriculum change must "incorporate key areas of knowledge about imperial and colonial histories that have shaped geographies" and focus on previously marginalized ways of knowing (Harambam, 2021). A critical inquiry into the framing of imperialism, an inquiry credited with 'discovery' and benefiting from dominant narratives, are key starting points (Long et al., 2019). The curriculum should focus on "decolonizing geographical knowledge in a post-colonial world of colonization and recolonization," promoting social justice-oriented education and empowering marginalized perspectives (Noxolo, 2017). This paper suggests several ways of decolonizing the geography curricula. Population geography could include more discussion of population issues in African countries like rapid urbanization, rural depopulation, and the effects of diseases like HIV/AIDS. It highlights African realities often overlooked. Economic geography could incorporate more African economic activities like subsistence farming, cash crop production, extractive industries, and the impacts of global trade. Centering African economies provides balance. Cultural geography could highlight more diverse African cultural practices, languages, and beliefs instead of focusing predominantly on European societies; representing African cultures is essential. Political geography could discuss ideas of nationhood, borders, and governance in African contexts, considering the history of colonialism. Africa's political history merits focus (Sharp, 2013). Development theories could critique Eurocentric models and elevate perspectives from the global South on alternative development paths, replacing outdated images of Africa's decolonizing views (Glück, 2018; Kalema, 2019.; Moloi, 2020.; Ukwandu, 2015).

3.4. Connecting Themes to Post-colonial Theory

A post-colonial theoretical perspective provides valuable insight into why the decolonization of geography courses matters and what pathways to reform might look like. Several general themes emerge from the post-colonial perspective. First, calls to decolonize geography courses stem from post-colonial critiques of how Western-dominated knowledge systems perpetuate colonial power dynamics and marginalize non-Western perspectives (Barker & Pickerill, 2020; Jazeel, 2017; Noxolo, 2017). Post-colonial critique reveals how colonial patterns of power continue to shape geography as a discipline and curriculum and drive reforms that challenge these dynamics (Barker & Pickerill, 2020). Second, the debate

about why the decolonization of geography education is necessary is consistent with the central tenets of post-colonial theory. Current curricula that exclude or marginalize non-Western knowledge perpetuate the cognitive violence that is a central problem of postcolonialism (Carter, 2017; Heleta, 2016). A curriculum that reinforces the representational dualism associated with colonialism risks erasing Indigenous histories, voices, and solutions to global challenges—issues that post-colonial perspectives seek to address (Long et al., 2019). Ultimately, the decolonization of geographic education aims to empower marginalized groups and promote equity in knowledge systems, reflecting post-colonial goals (Long et al., 2019; Mignolo, 2010). Third, examples of how the decolonization of geography courses reflect key post-colonial interventions. Reforms focus on indigenizing content, knowledge, and pedagogy, parallel post-colonial goals of privileging popular narratives and voices (Jazeel, 2017; Noxolo, 2017). Efforts to include African perspectives and privileged indigenous knowledge systems are consistent with post-colonial efforts to disseminate Western knowledge and strengthen marginalized epistemologies (Long et al., 2017; Carter, 2017).

Collectively, these themes highlight why teacher education focusing on decolonization and indigenous knowledge is essential to support curriculum reform from a post-colonial perspective. Equipping educators with a post-colonial perspective, understanding colonial legacies, and honoring indigenous knowledge is critical to achieving curriculum reform aimed at transformative social change, a key post-colonial goal (Heleta, 2016; Suina, 2016). Thus, conceptualizing efforts to decolonize geography curricula through a post-colonial theoretical lens can clarify why such reforms are necessary, how they can be implemented, and what ongoing efforts are needed to create more just and equitable knowledge systems. A post-colonial theoretical framework illuminates how teacher education can support curriculum reform consistent with broader goals of social transformation and cognitive justice.

4. Conclusion

Calls to decolonize geography education have persisted for decades, driven by post-colonial critiques of Western epistemic dominance. Arguments emphasize how current geography curricula perpetuate cognitive injustice by marginalizing indigenous knowledge and voices. Examples of reforms in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand demonstrate efforts to incorporate African perspectives, privilege local knowledge systems, and focus on place-based pedagogy. Significant progress has been made in decentring Eurocentric bias and empowering marginalized voices. However, substantial obstacles must be overcome due to engrained institutional cultures and inadequate teacher preparation. Fundamentally transforming geographic education to challenge enduring colonial legacies and promote social justice requires investing in teacher training focused on decolonization and indigenous knowledge. It will enable meaningful curriculum reforms that privilege marginalized voices, provide place-based solutions to local issues, and advance the broader goals of cognitive justice and social transformation. Further research should examine strategies to facilitate this transformation in geography education.

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