Decolonizing Education: Enunciating the Emancipatory Promise of Non-Western Alternatives to Higher Education

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Abstract:

Today's globalizing world inadvertently creates an imbalance in power relations between the so-called 'western' and 'non-western' contexts, and discourse about educational excellence often circumvents indigenous paradigms, needs, and ideas about the purpose of education. Further still, the hegemony of western-inspired, industrial-styled education often constrains conversation about the challenges of reforming higher education in ways that suggest a thought-linearity and blindness about the promise of alternatives. In light of the intractable difficulties associated with higher education in the so-called developing world, this paper draws from a post-structuralist, social constructivist, ethos and advocates for a decolonization of the educational milieu. By focusing on examples of unorthodox approaches to education drawn from principally non-western contexts, we support a move towards radical differentiation and pluralisation as a solution to today's higher education problems. We claim that higher education might be better served if it exists in tension with indigenous alternatives

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– instead of bearing the sole burden of service. Ultimately, we imagine what alternatives to 'school' might look like, and reflexively present the emerging contours of a participatory action research and community-driven, culture-sensitive process that breaks through the linearity and modernistic assumptions of mainstream schooling – a process these authors are embarking on tentatively called 'Koru'.

Introduction

In this paper, we continue in the trends of critical pedagogy by assessing the almost complete dependence on, or commonplace association of 'education' with, Western-styled education structures. Our postmodern, post-colonial critique of 'schooling', generally articulated here in terms of the well-known transitory systems that often begin with Primary Schooling all through to University education, expectedly throws suspicion on the claims to universality and completeness offered by most advocates of formal education in support of its global expansion. We critique the metatheoretical assumptions behind such claims, and voice out our preferences for a localized view of knowledge and wellbeing. Our account of the interactions and tensions between the so-called 'western' and 'non-western' spaces is therefore couched in colonialist terms – highlighting the ways mainstream, traditional and hegemonic ways of being (in this instance, ways of understanding education or articulating the need to be educated) have relegated indigenous paradigms to the fringes of social relevance, to the silence of the peripheral. Our submissions are emboldened by the social constructivist perspectives that implicate the observer in the observed, effectively nullify all claims to neutrality, and expose 'truth' as the prevalent narrative in a power-imbalanced

situation. Not in the least spared from this assessment is the concept of globalization, which we cast of as euphemistic of a westernization process – an internationalization of values, perspectives and ways of being that we deem to be political, directional, often assimilationist, and perilous to cultural plurality.

This paper however attempts to address an aspect of formal education, which is higher education, and then critique its globalizing trend (Bird & Nicholson, 1998) – that is, to develop an anti-narrative about its assumed indispensability in multiple contexts. In developing this anti-narrative, we draw examples of note from India's and Nigeria's quest for higher education and their failed attempts at securing the benefits it offers for most of their citizens. As faculty members in a university, we are all too aware of the discourses that seek to promote the multiplication of higher education systems in our respective nations (Nigeria and India). These insist on the emancipatory prowess of higher education, praise the advantages that university education has brought to the stylized 'developing world', and berate governmental efforts at not addressing the crippling problems facing its sustainability in the 'majority world' (Dasen & Akkari, 2008) – and all this in spite of the age-old structural challenges of successfully implementing higher education recognized and experienced in both non-Western and Western[1] contexts. While we, trained and nurtured in these formal school systems imported from our mutual colonial pasts, do not seek to demonize them, we hope to help start – or, at least, perpetuate – the conversations that bring to light the incompleteness and often oppressive features that are consequent upon the valorisation of higher education as a global elixir.

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[1] We employ the labels of 'Western' and 'non-Western' quite hesitantly – understanding the gaps that must attend every communicative event and the syncretism that makes such demarcations mere oversimplifications. That is, we recognize that these archetypes create a false dichotomy which could occlude discourse on their similarities. We do not mean to create a 'great divide'. However our needs to speak about the hegemonic influence and the power imbalances have informed these presently unavoidable distinctions.

We join voices with a growing consensus that recognizes that 'schooling' has, contrary to popular opinion, not brought forth a world of peace, equality and prosperity – the values and goals bequeathed it by its modernist roots and industrial/enlightenment-age articulations. Additionally, the long accepted traditions that link human capacities for learning or 'doing well at school' with economic wellbeing are finding powerfully voiced contradictions. Our submission is thus directed at the attained 'invisibility' (Reagan, 2005) and normativity of higher education praxis – an unfortunate situation that has stopped would-be indigenous pedagogical alternatives from evolving. In some sort of Derridan way, we are affrighted by the seeming universality of higher education, and it is not difficult to understand why this is so! As Higgs (2002, p.175) states:

> *Present day educational discourse, no longer sees the need to interrogate the givens of education, or the social and political contexts in which education functions. As a result, nearly all educational discourse is reduced to...the application of "...technologies of managing consent, where teaching is increasingly a function of training for test taking." All this can be regarded as an aberration of education, as the mystification of education in the service of dominant ideologies that see education as a process of information transfer (mainly of a scientific, technical and legislative kind), and which, in turn, aim to ensure conformity to political and economically acceptable norms.*

The postmodern moment a la Derrida presses upon us the need to rethink the other, to see education as a non-neutral arena of interests, and presents a new horizon of dialogue, pluralism and embedded meanings. The expansionist ideals that oil the colonizing influence of formal forms of education are thus set in sharp contrast with a far more refreshing preference: the indigenous voices about education. Indeed, we reject the one-size-fits-all

thesis, the idea that higher education is a neutral process, and that its assumptions reflect a concrete, objectively referable 'given' that is unanimously attainable to all cultures at all times. Thus, with respect to the multiple arenas of doing education now theoretically open to us, we, not in this particular order, briefly highlight some subversive educational practices across the globe, discount the anxieties about the challenges of implementing higher education as non-universal, and attempt to find ways in which socio-educational 'justices' (again, in the Derridan sense of leaning towards a plurality of voices, not aloofly charting out an ethical trajectory or methodology for education for which its implementation might be called 'justice') might come alive. This last 'imperative', that of articulating socio-educational 'justices', is, in our view, the most critical aspect of our paper. Again, we draw from the words of Higgs (2002):

> *...it can be concluded that, what is needed today, is an awakening of the educational or a return to education. In short, present day educational discourse must re-think itself. The philosophical challenge of re-thinking education, of deconstructing education, does not consist in changing, replacing, or abandoning education. On the contrary, to deconstruct is first and foremost to undo a construction with infinite patience, to take apart a system in order to understand all its mechanisms, to exhibit all its foundations, and to reconstruct on new bases. To be sure, it is a matter of transforming our relation to education, to reflect on the conditions of such a transformation, and to give ourselves the theoretical and practical means to do so.*

In concluding, we attempt to articulate the emerging outlines and contours of a 'powerful rethinking of education' – one that encapsulates, to some degree, the vulnerabilities of the

Derridan text (or the deconstruction of 'truth' as a signification of a culturally-neutral ultimate of any kind), the ethical directedness of alterity, the incompleteness of western-styled higher education, and the indigenous ways of knowing and experiencing worlds. What we are suggesting, a participatory action research driven process stylistically called Koru (in reference to the Maori metaphor for an unfurling, ever-creative, process of change), is just as well embedded in the ambivalence and incompleteness that weaves through every communicative act. In less tenuous words, 'Koru', our mutual undertaking – still now in its very incipient stages of articulation, is not a perfect alternative to higher education. There is no such thing; there are no 'final' solutions. However, it (Koru) is a powerful possibility grounded in the hope that the hegemonic influence of higher education might recede and the pluralistic worlds once banished to the outskirts and borderlands of relevance might find their orbits.

The Challenges of Higher Education in the Majority World[2]

Higher education[3] has often been correlated to economic prosperity, and discourse that supports its existence often adorns its advent into non-Western contexts with a messianic status – obviously celebrating its emancipatory prowess. For instance, Kuppusamy (2009) speaks glowingly about the first Western universities to enter into India, giving impressive data about the number of universities in each state of India, while stressing the need to increase their numbers. Odia & Omofonmwan (2007) also draw a link between escalating standards of higher education and economic wellbeing. Berating Nigeria's seeming lack of capacity to meet up with the global race for more higher education outlets, they assert that the

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[2] We have used 'majority world' in place of less politically correct distinctions such as 'developing' or 'Third' world. Our orientation is informed by Dasen & Akkari (2008), who argue that the so-called 'developed' world are, anyway, in the minority – hence, the appellation 'majority world' for less economically buoyant nations.
[3] A definition of higher education is not attempted. Our approach is to assume the matter-of-fact prevalence of western-styled formal school systems in the reader's context.

Education system in Nigeria today, needs a total overhauling and restructuring, this reform is required to improve the performance of higher education in the country, the nation entered the 21st century insufficiently prepared to cope or compete in the global economy, where growth will be based even more heavily on technical and scientific knowledge.

In short, a global concern about the state of the world is increasingly being related with higher education (Moore, 2005). Concomitantly, educational discourse seems securely centred on how to improve the standards in higher education, how to redesign teacher-student interactions and develop technology that will modify information transfer, and how to strengthen the linearity of school performance / economic wellbeing. In sum, the literature base is quite suggestive of the permanence of higher education and its general acceptance across geopolitical zones and by almost all governments in the world.

The trouble with this permanence, at least in the majority world, is its vulnerability. The ideals of higher education can be tough and exacting on the nations that have adopted it. What this means is that problems of incompatibility and structural deficiencies are plaguing the otherwise totalizing ideals sweeping across the planet. For instance, India's burgeoning middle class and increasing population means the nation's Education Ministry might never be able to provide 'education' for its teeming masses. Feith (2008) argues that

...despite education being valued generally in Indian society, access to higher education is limited. There are not enough universities or other higher education institutions to meet the demands of the huge, growing population. The population is increasing, the economy is growing, the

middle class is expanding, and the IT industry in particular is thriving,

but there has not been a corresponding growth in provision of education.

This limited access also plagues the Nigerian higher education context as well. Its so-called advantages aside, higher education is expensive. To effectively run the formal operations implied by higher education requires an almost unlimited availability of funding, human resources and massive institutional frameworks set about to govern activity. But the quest to satisfy the higher education drive would be no better for it even if all these were summoned For example, Oloruntegbe, Agbayewa, Adodo, Adare, & Laleye (2010) reveal how adults in the UK are falling out of school, and becoming functionally illiterate. In short, the problems of access, infrastructure, remuneration for the hundreds of thousands of teachers needed, quality of teaching staff, irrelevance of the curriculum base, and the emphasis on mass testing and standardization are only aspects of the faltering prestige of being a university student or graduate.

In response to the problems of implementing mass higher education, there have been calls for reforms and new policies in higher education that border on the provision of new technologies, new salaries, new recognition for the roles of teachers, new curricular adjustments and even the introduction of indigenous knowledges into the school regulatory frameworks. All these reforms, and much more, are proposed to help solve the stunted globalization of higher education. It is believed that with some innovative solutions applied to the problems of unequal access, curricular aloofness, student disenchantment – among other problems – higher education will find its unrivalled space on the globalized educational pedestal. We, however, problematize this narrative, and – inspired by the postmodern moment – question some of the assumptions behind the globalizing trend and hegemonic influence of higher education. In other words, we depart from the arena set up to find solutions to higher education's comparatively stunted growth in the majority world, and

probe the silences at the periphery of this conversation – the voices that have been snuffed out by the popularity and the sheer presence of the centre. The real problematic thus comes to bear when we stop perceiving higher education as a neutral process that inevitably will bring about equity, egalitarian societies and prosperity, and begin to notice the Westernizing domination exerted in formal educational frameworks and philosophies. Higher education *may* be perceived as a cultural imperialistic drive to perpetuate a single myth about the nature of knowledge, education and wellbeing. Beyond the discourse of reforms, higher education poses a threat to non-Western ways of conceiving the world, and threatens the very existence of indigenous wellbeing due to its homogenizing expansion. This usurpatory role of formal education denies indigenous discourse, and severely limits praxis by shaping the arena of participation to the exclusion of competing claims about the world and being in the world.

The Postmodern Moment

If perceived through social constructivist lenses (Shek & Lit, 2002), the globalizing educational milieu immediately transforms into a scenario of power imbalances between non-Western and Western ideas about education. This is made possible by the undercurrents of social constructivist talk, which critique the modernist devotions and positivistic advances towards the concept of 'truth' (Weinberg, 2008) as a universal given, an objective referent and a predetermined ideal that may be appropriated if a certain trajectory of thought or practice is adhered to. The mechanistic detachment derived from the epistemological worldview that valorizes proximity to 'truth' as the giver of worth gives way to the *anticipatory* orientation towards 'reality' as dialogic, discursive, hermeneutic and shaped by narratives. Thus, the postmodern critique of modernity, the promotion of a single narrative, and the conquest of metanarratives effectively does away with ideas about neutrality or disinterestedness. The political innervates everything, and the space for the colonial is brought about. The globalization of higher education, as interpreted by social constructivist

thought, is not the non-neutral, apolitical, superior advancement of a 'force for good' it is touted to be – especially when it is contrasted with indigenous knowledges, which are constructed as negative, archaic, and even dangerous to wellbeing:

> *Colonization and general western imperialist influences has resulted in a dualism (coexistence of the indigenous and modern) in all aspects of life in Africa – social, political, economic and religious. The 'birth of development" as modernization after world war II...accelerated this dualism by acting to suppress indigenous development processes and knowledge systems in preference for Euro-centric constructions of how Africa should develop and what it needs to develop. Arguably it could be said that the most pervasive impact of this dualism is prevalent in the formal educational system. In creating the needed human capital to manage the colonial interests, western education was enforced where ever colonial rule occurred. After the colonialists left, the incoming national governments adopted the western educational system to the extent that all the educational policies of post colonial countries were and are still invariably based on western worldviews and development paradigms. This has combined to deflect the gaze of Africans from their knowledge system, institutions and material resource base towards western models and conceptions of development.*

Indeed, higher education is so accepted that it is very often no longer seen as 'Western' (Dasen & Akkari, 2008). It is now, more or less, accepted as the sole bearer of educational discourse in the world today – an unfortunate conclusion that perpetuates the positivistic myths of Western superiority, 'truth' as hierarchical not dialogical, indigenous knowledges as 'false' and even 'evil' (especially if one implicates the simultaneous drive for conquest of

religious monologues), and the future as closed to alternatives. Perhaps the 'real' significance of this picture, the severe consequences of being made to adhere to another's image and be validated by the extent of one's adherence, and a real appreciation for what is forgone is often lost in academic diatribes and seemingly boring references to postmodernism, pluralism, and a socially constructed world. However, the prospects for affirmative action directed towards more pluralistic educational alternatives, informed by these subversive views about how we shape our world, are exciting. We learn, therefore, thanks to the postcolonial moment, that there are no educational singularities, there are multiple educational realities; we learn that there are no givens, and that the historical articulations of the purpose of education, of how education should be carried out, and what it means to be educated, emanating from the stylized West are just one possibility in educational praxis out of an infinite ever-changing flux of possibilities. What the postmodern ethic might be said to contribute to the globalizing ideals of higher education is, in a word, its termination.

Pockets of Hope: Alternatives to Higher Education

Again, the discourse of consequence here is not the need to revitalize the higher education contexts across the world, but the need to relieve higher education and formal education of the sole burden of educational emancipation simply because higher education – as received through our colonial pasts – is not the heritage of all communities, but the imposition of a modernist world order largely configured around the belief in singularities. This is to insist that the reform of higher education or the reconfiguration of its practice – including the reported inclusion of indigenous languages and subject matter (Jensen, 2006) – might not be enough to bring about educational justices (Higgs, 2002) or counteract the hegemonic influence of Western thought.

> *The worry here is that, the globalization process facilitated by the*
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> *western/global educational system, is systematically universalizing the*

world knowledge system and weeding out all other forms of knowledge systems, institutions and resources that are not western in origin...(The) furthest globalization has gone is to attempt to harness practical indigenous knowledge and skills to facilitate the growth development model (Guri, 2007).

The need we advocate therefore is not the adoption of better universities and schools, but the pluralization of educational options, the leaning towards communities who do not subscribe to the assumptions behind formal educational praxis, and the privileging of worldviews hitherto relegated to the periphery.

Across the globe, there are indigenous communities that are beginning to recognize their voices, their needs, the constraints and specifications of their own unique worldviews, and the need to speak their stories to power. These indigenous groups recognize the cultural undertones of higher education; they understand that Western values, beliefs, worldviews, discourses about the self, and ways of being are injected through the structures, actuating philosophies, and practices of higher education. Some of these practices largely perceive education as a holistic, spiritual exercise; 'knowledge' implicates the divine, and the connectedness between the environment and the community is a strong theme. This is in sharp contrast to 'school', which divorces the student from everyday activities, and privileges theoretical abstractions that often downplays practical intelligences. For instance, Shona people from Zimbabwe and Mozambique gaze upon the world as an interplay of three spheres of being – the spiritual, the natural and the human. Traditional education is thus seen as a response to these visions of the world (Guri, 2007). Additionally, the distinctions between 'play' and 'work' are not so distinct in many African educational traditions (Reagan, 2005), a cultural practice which stands in sharp contrast to the Western formal school systems that demarcate between hours of play and work, and privilege the latter – often to the

detriment of the former. This apparent messiness detected in African traditional education systems goes hand in hand with the oral traditions or methods of communicating, which make rich uses of proverbs and wise sayings – like the Igbo people of east Nigeria. The socialization of a child, supported by the entire community, is largely based on imitation and practical engagements with economic life and moral life. To be educated is a lifelong process of continuous interactions with the community, and is to be able to partake of, and contribute to, the bountifulness of that community. Another similar rich culture that promote an undemarcated educational practice is the Native American culture, the education of the young in which revolves around the important roles played by strong family units and Elders. Educational goals over time have helped shape a strong ecological sensitivity; that is, relationship with nature and life is problematized, and the young are enjoined to live in harmony with their world – as partners, not domineering lords (Reagan, 2005). Education has little to do with skills and factual knowledge; it has all to do, however, with positionality upon a path or journey towards higher, more compelling expressions of what it means to be human. Native American education thus deconstructs the need for the built environment; 'school' is not a place, it is an act, a performance within a network of performances that are vital to survival and wellbeing.

It is important also to note that the themes of creating a society of justice and equity, thought to be an actuating core value in Western formal schools, is not shared by all traditional systems (Okoro, 2010). Indeed, Chinese traditional education, based on the moral expositions of Confucius, privileges a hierarchical structure that places individuals in classes based on talents and ability. The Chinese also helped pioneer written examinations, which were often replete with cheating by 'students'. While it may be said that the Chinese focuses on moral life, it may be said Hindu traditional practices are enacted to support students on their individual quests for the source of knowledge. As against the acquiring of 'bits of

knowledge' or 'objective knowledge' (Reagan, 2005), Hindu education is performed to guide the student into a much more totalizing encounter with the universe, what we might call 'enlightenment'. Formal education takes place in less institutional ways than in Western contexts, and proceeds with the departure of a potential learner from his homestead in order to live with a master or authority figure who has attained more advanced stages in the quest for holistic knowing. Reagan (2005) comments:

> *The Hindu educational tradition is both one of the oldest and one of the richest in the world. It has functioned for millennia, in different forms, providing an education that emphasized the individual and his spiritual needs, even as it taught that only by renouncing the self could one achieve unity with the whole of the universe. Although sharing common roots with the West in the very distant past (as reflected in the ties of the Sanskrit language to other Indo-European languages), Hinduism presents us with a very different view of both the educated person and of the purposes of education than those with which most of us in the West are most familiar and comfortable.*

The point to be made in briefly encountering these alternative conceptions of educational practice is that the Western formal educational system, while sharing some similarities with indigenous practices, cannot meet all the paradigmatic needs of every competing cultural space. Further still, and even more important, the West is not the sole custodian of knowledge – for there isn't one 'knowledge', there are many 'knowledges'; there are many wisdoms, many sciences, many educational ultimates, many 'pregivens', many worldviews and many ways to be human or other-than-human.

Koru: Emerging Contours of a Pluralistic Educational Praxis

As researchers given to the idea of plurality and diversity, we continue to explore ways to promote the 'irreducible dignity of difference'. Our similar worldviews have led us to explore alternative research paradigms in our respective fields of concern (biotechnology and clinical psychology) and, much more, multiple biological and therapeutic realities. We believe that our disciplines can find new ways of being performed that is distinct from the orthodox ways of the past. Our interest in education stems from our practice as lecturers at the university. Being students of postmodern thought and deconstruction, we have often ached to articulate our classroom contexts in ways that are pluralistic and facilitative – giving space for students to find their voices and speak out in a setting that contains divergence and emphasizes conformity. Indeed, we have gone as far as deconstructing our roles as leaders or managers of the classroom context by switching roles with students, allowing them make large inputs in the development of a semester's course compact or curriculum, opening for debate teaching styles to be employed, de-emphasizing competition and encouraging collaboration, and even holding quite a number of our classes outside the built environment (for instance, in the university gardens). By viewing 'knowledge' as a co-construction of meaning – not an imposition of facts, our 'transgressive' approaches to education have brought us in close contact with the needs and preferences of the students we are privileged to partner with. These students were largely brought up in Western ways, and most do not speak their indigenous languages. Yet, they sometimes express their reservations about the school system as being too limiting, or not suitable to meet their developmental needs. What would have been thought heretical in years gone by is today freely expressed by first-comers: School is boring! We believe this testimony represents much more than feedback about the lack of cable television on our campus; we think that there are existential difficulties faced by our students learning to live in a system they find inhibitory or not life-affirming. Our individual and joint

attempts at suggesting reforms (Moore, 2005) have not been entirely satisfactory – not simply because of the traditional business-as-usual practices that define university management, but much more due to the inherent constraints and measures resistant to change found at higher institutions. In other words, reforms will not be enough.

Drawing from our social constructivist biases, the feedback we receive from the students we interact with on a daily basis, and our research orientations in the direction of multiple realities, we have begun to respond to what we feel is an ethical imperative of our time: the call to preserve, promote and celebrate indigenous ways of knowing and being. Our present concern is to develop a practice that helps fulfil the goals of engendering participation, decentralizing educational involvement, deconstructing the hegemonic and globalizing trends of higher education, and bringing the wealth of other knowledges from the backburner to the centre of discourse. Our current formulation is called 'Koru', which is Maori for the metaphors of creation, journeying, and the unfurling playfulness of life.

Koru is an educational program currently being designed to address the needs of indigenous peoples in the world. It works by deconstructing the present 'school' system in the participation of non-experts with various communities willing to enter into the context Koru provides. Specifically, Koru is not a type of school, an alternative to school, or any set of ideas about how education should be done. It is a community-driven praxis facilitated by willing volunteers who are empowered to co-create a dialogic space with underserved communities about their educational needs, preferences and worldviews about wellbeing. This dialogic space engenders action leading to the co-construction of contextually sensitive educational paradigms. Though Koru is not any one alternative to school, the proposed praxis critiques various features of formal higher education such as the need for the built environment, the purpose of education, the idea of knowledge, the linearity of formal education systems, standardization, the role of the teacher and the student, mass

institutionalized schooling, expertise, the self, economic models of wellbeing, and the myths of development and progress. In short, Koru is a vision for social evolutionary pluralism (Jensen, 2006), for unnerving the hegemony of transferred knowledge, for enunciating the situatedness of present wisdom, and for discontinuing the colonization and exclusion of local knowledge spaces (Hutchinson, 2009).

We note that the articulation of Koru is ongoing and emergent, and therefore presently incomplete and fraught with questions left unanswered (how do indigenous knowledges compete favourably in a globalized economic context built around Western institutions of learning? (Aina, 2010; Zubairu, 2007; Zolfaghari, Sabran, & Zolfaghari, 2009;), gaps in its enunciation (is Koru potentially emancipatory, or are its goals romanticized ideals?), and untested. We however hope that its presentation will stir conversations about the opportunities now open to scholars, professionals, lay persons, and communities to take their futures into their own hands (Ocholla, 2007).

Conclusion

Our principal focus has been to show that the globalizing ideals of higher education have perpetuated the myth of educational singularities or pregivens decidedly owned by Western formal systems of schooling. Drawing from a social constructivist bias, we have shown that it is now the time for indigenous systems to own their respective futures, and, if willing, break away from the colonial influences of received education. Our own proposed framework, Koru, the outlines of which were briefly communicated, is an example of some of the initiatives that may be employed to the service of indigenous peoples in the world today. We speak with urgency, encouraging participation and dialogue about our collective futures and identities. It is our hope that the richness and wealth of alternative educational paradigms serve and empower the identities and lives of future generations of children yet unborn.

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