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EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

Decolonization of Education: How Educators Can Aid Transcultural Acculturation to Advance Communities Committed to Social Justice

Aradhana Mudambi¹ and Elena Sada²

Abstract: Cultures recreate themselves constantly, sometimes through natural transformations, sometimes through imposition. While colonialism was atrocious, partly because it transformed cultures by imposing disfigured identities and understandings (Fanon, 1963), we cannot reset cultures to how they were before conquest. That would require erasing languages now spoken for generations, dismantling religions and beliefs now practiced for hundreds of years, and purifying food habits now valued by the palettes of those formerly colonized. We can, however, work towards decolonizing our present-day society. Specifically, we can identify how colonialism continues to position some populations and their cultures as inferior (minoritized) and others as superior (majoritized; Vaccaro, 2021). We can also explore how colonized cultures adapted to colonialism, leading to the fusion or mestizaje of cultures that, in spite of colonial atrocities, led to new, intersectional identities that have now fallen prey to the same hegemonic perspectives of the past. And we can examine how natural mestizaje that occurs with immigration can be subject to contradictory pressures to assimilate to colonial ideals and to resist colonial influences. This paper proposes that Catholic schools are in a privileged position to contribute to decolonization by aiding students' transcultural acculturation (Mudambi, 2021a; Mudambi, 2021b). Furthermore, this article offers specific actions in which Catholic schools can engage to mobilize education towards decolonization and, in doing so, foster a Christian culture of equity and justice, while serving as a model for other education systems.

Keywords: Transcultural Acculturation, decolonization, Mestizaje

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*A*t a Connecticut, Catholic elementary school, several Kindergarten students of varying races were playing house during after school care. One of the White children then picked up a doll and threw it across the room. She said, “I don’t want to play with Black dolls, and I don’t want Black friends.” The prevailing hegemonic perspective of White as the superior race reigns in many sectors, including in education, leading to situations like the one above which took place at a recently shuttered Catholic school in Windham County, Connecticut. This racial hierarchy finds its roots in centuries of past and present colonialist histories. Colonialism finds its origin in disfigured identities and understandings, distorting recounts of the colonized peoples’ past, even leading them to doubt their own identities and future possibilities (Fanon, 1963). Colonialism institutionalized a hierarchy in stories, languages, arts, and customs; and, while many intellectually acknowledge the flaw of its hierarchical perspective where, arrogantly, some populations and their languages are seen as inferior (minoritized) and others as superior (majoritized), little has been done in our education systems to heal the disfigured identities and understandings produced by colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Salinas, 2020; Vaccaro, 2021). Catholic schools are no exception, and while called by Pope John XXIII (1963) to be a beacon of Christian social justice in society in *Pacem in Terris, encyclical on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty*, historically, only some have favored pluralistic perspectives, opposing linguistic and cultural assimilation (Provenzo & McCloskey, 1981) while others, such as those identified by Paul Green (2011) as limiting minority students’ access to advanced classes, have carried and perpetuated colonialistic beliefs of racial superiority (Aldana, 2016; Harris, 2020). Hence, while more research should be done in understanding the structures of racism still present in Catholic schools, documented examples of racism demonstrate that decolonization in Catholic settings continues to be a must rather than an option.

In Catholic schools, our vision, by God’s mandate, is a world where all people live in God’s love, liberated from stigma and oppression. Christ’s assessment of the human heart remained within the spiritual and moral realm; and that is how he distinguished the good seed from the weed (Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43). Never was his assessment based on language, skin color, or race. Thus, this vision leads us to see all people as equals, and their linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, as gifts to themselves and to one another. This vision and mission are far from impositions of cultures and languages as superior. The understanding of our privileged position as agents for reparation, for the damages caused by colonialistic perspectives, hence, is fundamental.

To better understand our call in the process of decolonization, and to recreate a more just and fair world, this paper justifies briefly the reason behind decolonization, grounding it in true humanism and in Christian doctrine, and presents transcultural acculturation (Mudambi, 2021b) as an effective process towards decolonization since it leads to honoring and accepting the intersection of cultural identities – which in turn, leads to complex and unique individuals. It also unwraps theories and myths surrounding the concept of *mesitzaje*, placing it at the core of our new

intersectional decolonization processes. Finally, it offers specific actions in which Catholic schools can engage to mobilize education towards decolonization. Specifically, this paper intends to make a case in favor of Catholic schools' privileged position as decolonizer contributors, and offers a concrete way to decolonize through transcultural acculturation, mainly by exploring: (a) ways in which identities can be affirmed in schools, (b) how minoritized cultures can be elevated, and (c) how minoritized languages' prestige can be restored.

It is our hope that through the application of these actions, we may foster a Christian culture of equity and justice, while serving as a model to other education systems so that less children and adults think of skin color, race, language, and nations' histories within a superior and inferior dichotomy.

Postcolonial Theory

The unprovoked invasion of a country or a land gives rise to unequivocal sentiments of sadness and potentially rage. The arrogance, presumption, and entitlement reflected in any unjustified invasion are the opposite of love. The assumption that one group of people has the right to destroy or take another group's home or land and impose their language and culture is at the root of colonization. These actions are contrary to true humanism – the focal dignity of all humans (Coughlin, 2003), a democratic culture (CDC; Paul VI, 1996), and our dignity as an image of God (Gen, 1:27).

Postcolonial theory is described by Leela Gandhi (1998) as the analytical reflection of what systematically has kept some races as inferior and others as superior in connection to their colonization history. From this perspective, it includes considerations of the lasting effects of hegemonic relationships between those who colonized (the imperial and powerful) and the colonized people (the oppressed and subjugated). Postcolonial theory analyzes what happens to the colonized after the superior other takes away the right for minoritized people to express and affirm their identity and to represent themselves through their own languages, customs, beliefs, education, and economic systems and values; it discusses what happens after colonized populations are positioned as savage, unprepared, and uncultured (Sada, 2020).

The effects of colonialism are both far-reaching and misunderstood. "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (Fanon, 1963, p. 149). To this effect, the *mestizaje* or the mixture of customs that naturally occurs within colonial structures still can never measure up to the self-declared superior culture of those in power as that mixture is always tainted by a "distorted and disfigured past."

A clear example of the rejection of this *mestizaje* by a so-called superior race can be seen in the birth of *La Raza Mexicana*. In the 14th and 15th centuries, European languages – English, Spanish, and French – along with those who spoke them, were considered superior; Indigenous

peoples, oppressed into inferiority, were forced to abandon their cultural and linguistic identities in exchange for the colonizers' religions, customs, and languages. However, after the United States declared war against Mexico only twenty years after Mexico's independence in the 1840s, and after appropriating half of Mexico's territory, the postcolonial minoritization of culture and language repeated (Sada, 2020). Mexicans, in spite of practicing a White, European religion and speaking a White, European language, in the eyes of the northern White population, became the inferior other; for, after all, they had not only lost the war, but had given signs of *mestizaje* – their predominant race was a combination of European (superior) and Indigenous American (inferior) blood. Even those Mexicans who presented as White now practiced cultures that had become laden with traces of Native American symbolism and with this *mestizaje*, the status of their White, European religion and language had dropped, inspiring a postcolonial rhetoric that there was a hierarchy among Christian practices and languages and that the American presentation of Christianity and English were superior (Banks, 2006).

Catholic schools can and should dismantle the ongoing colonial structures where minoritized students' identities, languages, and cultures take a back seat (Downey, 2019). But in doing so, we need to embrace the *mestizaje* of cultures that happened both during the colonial era and that continues to happen today by virtue of students growing up in multiple cultures. Each student whose home culture is different from the predominant culture likely embodies a *mestizaje* of cultures that while neither good nor bad, challenges their identity as neither from the home culture nor from the predominant culture, and places them at a point of potential ridicule by both those in society with racial power and those at home who resist the same power. We must encourage a process of transcultural acculturation for minoritized students, or a process through which students explore, accept, and honor the intersection of the cultural identities within them, which in turn create complex and unique individuals (Mudambi, 2021b). In doing so, we also teach majoritized students to respect the *mestizaje* of cultures around them.

Catholic Education's Agency

Catholic schools are in a unique position to address the continued impact of colonialism. Our presence in most countries and among multiple populations gives us the ability and responsibility to serve as a model for education systems worldwide. And although leading by example may not be enough to change majority populations' mindsets, Christ commanded us to put the needs of those who are least in society above the needs of those who are the greatest in society (Luke 9:48, Mark 10:42-45, Matthew 25:40). While throughout the centuries, millions have done just that by building schools and staffing hospitals, such that service the neediest has become our Catholic identity, our call to serve those in need also translates into a call to repair and retribute for the damage done by colonization. Therefore, while we consider all people equal in God's image (Genesis, 1:27), we also recognize the need to compensate for systemic, damaging ideologies that have minoritized

some populations, cultures, and languages; and we are called to make up for it through proactive compensation. And in order to decolonize schools, one cannot wait to convince those with privilege in society's racial hierarchy to change their practices (Kendi, 2019). While a core group must engage in individual work to dismantle personal biases, policies and structures within the system must be reformulated to serve the purposes of decolonization.

Call to Action

In a decolonized school, educators and the system as a whole must offer students the opportunity to explore and honor the intersection of their own identities, a process known as transcultural acculturation (Mudambi, 2021b). Furthermore, to support this process, schools must additionally elevate the status of minoritized cultures and languages, acknowledging that these cultures and languages are valid and valuable elements of students' and schools' identities (Beeman & Urow, 2013).

Exploration of Identities

A child of color sees her mother dancing at Mass, and tells her, "Our teacher told us that you should never dance in Church. You have to stand very still like this." The mother points out all the other people of color who are also swaying to the music. The child shakes her head, and says, "That's just wrong." Students who grow up in the United States and belong to minoritized cultures often feel, as the 1988 movie title states, *Ni de aqui, ni de alla*, (neither from here, nor from there). Known as "third culture kids" (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999), they naturally absorb characteristics of both their home and school cultures, but not in every realm. For instance, a third culture kid may embody culture in terms of food from their home culture, yet clothing from the majoritized culture. And the combination of cultural elements embodied by each student may be different even when they share the same heritage (Mudambi, 2021b).

Third culture kids often feel pressured at school to assimilate, a term used to describe the process of becoming more like those with hegemonic power in a racialized society (Kendi, 2019). In a Catholic school setting, this push for assimilation may mean being forced to make prayer hands after the Sign of the Cross rather than forming and kissing the cross made by their thumbs and index fingers as done in many cultures, or not being allowed to use their home language. Or, as the child in the above vignette from the aforementioned, shuttered, Connecticut Catholic school demonstrated, the push for assimilation may manifest in not being allowed to move to the music at Mass.

Ironically, the same students may be criticized as "not Mexican enough" or "not Vietnamese enough," facing ridicule when they demonstrate the traditions they are taught at school. For example, students may be labeled as "coconuts" (brown on the outside, white on the inside) or other

such derogatory terms as family members resist the racism inherent in trying to force minoritized peoples to assimilate, leaving students feeling unaccepted by members of both cultures.

In addition to these outside pressures, students may place pressure upon themselves to fit neatly within a cultural category, although *mestizaje* is a natural part of growing up outside one's home culture. Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae* (1756) created a pseudo-scientific, racial hierarchy that continues to influence society today. In his supposed hierarchy, he placed members of African descendancy at the bottom, ascribing to them the term "Homo sapiens afer," the color black, and the description of "beastly." Above them, he placed Native Americans with the term "Homo sapiens americanus," to whom he ascribed the color red and the description of "lazy." Then, right above them, he placed Asians whom he labeled as "Homo sapiens asiaticus" and ascribed the color yellow. He described this group as "greedy." At the top of his hierarchy, he placed people of European descent whom he labeled as "Homo sapiens europaeus;" to them, he ascribed the color white, and described them with all positive imagery such as "beautiful" and "smart" (Linnaeus, 1756). Upon the creation of the Latin race, the hybridization of cultures and races influenced this pseudo-scientific hierarchy, and the novel group was then situated by majoritized peoples between Indigenous peoples and Asians.

Unfortunately, this socially constructed hierarchy continues to influence societal structures even today, not only creating a hegemonic order but also challenging identity upon the hybridization of races and cultures (Kendi, 2019). Because people have been so neatly divided into categories, Latino students, although often wanting to fit into the white category due to the status Linnaeus afforded to this group, want to at least fit into a single group. When they feel they don't fit into any, they struggle to deal with the intersectionality of their cultural identities.

Therefore, schools must facilitate transcultural acculturation by having students explore their own intersectional identities. Students need to talk honestly about their experiences. We must allow minority students to discuss when they feel "not American enough" or "not Dominican, Indian, Mexican, etc. enough." We need to listen and assure students that they are, in fact, enough and that each of them is becoming a unique blend of the cultures they encounter.

In order to solicit such conversations, consider a pre-activity. For instance, have students create visual representations of their identities on puzzle pieces that can come together to show how each person makes up a part of the whole. Then, have students talk in small groups about why they chose the images that they did and how those images describe their identities. This will allow students to express the complexity inherent in their identities and discover that other students are similarly complex. Furthermore, books such as *Funny in Farsi* (Dumas, 2004; Mudambi, 2021b) which focuses on the experiences of a Persian child growing up in the United States, can also serve as springboards as students learn about others who also struggle with what may feel like competing, cultural identities.

Another avenue for soliciting conversations about students' intersectional identities is to involve families. "Funds of knowledge" refer to the idea that families are the best source of understanding students' backgrounds (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002; Wright, 2019). For instance, in the above vignette – where the mother dances while the student does not, school staff could have prevented the uncomfortable encounter between mother and child by learning about different expressions of faith during Mass from the child's parents. The teacher could have subsequently had a conversation with students about how certain expectations during Mass may change in accordance with the culture, and how these differences are neither good nor bad. Hence, by applying families' funds of knowledge to classroom discussions, educators can remove the pressure to assimilate and honor the intersection of students' identities by allowing children, with the guidance of their parents, to consciously make their own decisions about which values and customs they want to embrace from both their home and school cultures without labeling any of them as wrong or inferior.

Elevating the Status of Minority Cultures Within Our Schools

In order to support the process of transcultural acculturation, schools must set an example not just by allowing for cultural differences but also by actively dismantling Linnaeus's (1756) hegemonic order by purposely elevating the status of minority races, cultures, and languages. Catholic schools are in a special position to do this because as an attempt to elevate cultures, Catholic schools can incorporate global traditions into their religious practices. For instance, in lieu of or in addition to celebrating Halloween which has now largely faded into a non-Catholic festivity, schools can choose to celebrate El Día de los Muertos, a Mexican and Guatemalan holiday born from the *mestizaje* of Native and Spanish Catholic traditions. Families of all cultures can be invited to loan pictures of their deceased loved ones who can be honored on *ofrendas* decorated with traditional markers of the holiday such as skulls from the Mesoamerican cultures and skeletons from the Spanish culture. Families should be educated as to how the tradition is a *mestizaje* of the Catholic traditions of All Saints Day and All Souls Day and the Aztec traditions of leaving food for dead relatives, burning incense in their honor, and making *ofrendas* or offerings. This unique *mestizaje* can then be compared to the celebration of Christmas since, although many theologians believe Jesus to have been born in the Spring, the Catholic Church chose to merge the Feast of the Nativity with the ancient Roman holiday *Saturnalia*, a holiday dedicated to Saturn, the god of agriculture. The *mestizaje* resulted in the customs of *Saturnalia* such as using evergreens, singing, and lighting candles to become integral parts of Christmas. By comparing examples of *mestizaje* within Catholic traditions in the colonized world to *mestizaje* within the majoritized world, we allow all students and families to understand that the *mestizaje* of ancient, non-Christian traditions within the majoritized culture is no greater than those within minoritized cultures. Furthermore, by celebrating traditions such as El Día de los Muertos (and others that also reflect *mestizaje*, such as Posadas and El Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe, etc.), we allow the *mestizaje* within our students to naturally flourish.

Elevating the Home Language

The most efficient way to elevate the status of minority cultures and languages is by creating dual-language structures at schools. In dual-language programs, students have the opportunity to learn for at least 50% of the academic day in the language other than English (LOTE). The three goals of dual-language programming are bilingualism and biliteracy, high academic achievement in both languages, and sociocultural competence (Howard, et al., 2018). A well-administered dual-language program promotes the linguistic identity of students who speak the LOTE at home and ensures that minoritized students maintain key cultural connections to their heritage countries and their families (Beeman & Urow, 2013).

For dual-language programs to successfully dismantle racial hierarchies, it is important to avoid the gentrification of DLE programs. For instance, because dual-language programs are the only programs that research can prove close the racial opportunity gap, it is paramount for all speakers of the LOTE who attend the school to be enrolled in the program before the program is opened to monolingual, English speakers (Mudambi, 2022). Furthermore, minority students' academic progress in both languages should be disaggregated and analyzed in both the LOTE and in English. Schools should build bilingual bulletin boards where the LOTE appears before English. They should conduct large-scale parent meetings in the LOTE and translate into English

Table 1

Actionable Steps to Aid Students' Transcultural Acculturation

<i>Instead of . . .</i>	<i>• Details</i>
<i>. . . assuming that students have a single linguistic or cultural identity . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• Have students explore through books, movies, and each other how others navigate multiple cultures.</i> <i>• Offer opportunities for students to talk about the intersection of their identities.</i>
<i>. . . always seeing yourself as the teacher . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• Learn about students' identities through families' funds of knowledge.</i> <i>• Incorporate that knowledge into lessons that affirm your students' identities.</i>
<i>. . . seeing the single dimension of a holiday . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• Discover and teach the mestizaje components of both majoritized and minoritized holidays.</i> <i>• Investigate if and how each family celebrates these holidays.</i>
<i>. . . defaulting to the English language as the main communication venue . . .</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• Explore becoming a dual-language school.</i> <i>• Create a multilingual ecology in the school.</i> <i>• Ask for training on how to capitalize on students' home languages to maximize learning</i>

rather than the other way around, or at least divide the time equally between the two languages. Staff members who speak the LOTE should be encouraged to use their language, and whenever possible, staff meetings should be conducted in the LOTE with language support for monolingual English speakers.

Even when there are not enough students who speak a particular minoritized language to create a dual-language program in that particular language, there are multiple alternative ways to elevate the status of all low-incidence languages spoken at the school. These strategies include the implementation of bilingual and multilingual bulletin boards; holding school-wide multilingual rosaries led by multilingual students; and hosting festivals where families of minority cultures can share their cultures. Finally, teachers can be trained on how to capitalize on students' home languages during instruction, which has proven to improve academic and sociocultural competence outcomes (Canagarajah, 2011; Garcia, 2009; Lewis, et al, 2012).

Conclusion

By actively decolonizing our schools, the scenario with which we opened this article could read: *At a Catholic elementary school in Connecticut, Kindergarten students play house during after school care. One of the White children picks up a Black doll and tells her Black friend, "She looks like you. Let's play with her."* Colonialism transformed cultures by imposing disfigured identities and histories, positioning some as superiors and others as inferior, a practice that continues even in the face of both the *mestizaje* of cultures through which many cultures adopted the customs of the hegemonic powers and the withdrawal of active colonial presence. We can, and are called by God to serve "the **least of these** my brothers" (our emphasis; Matthew 25:40). We argue that to do this we must learn from the experience of colonization and engage in decolonizing practices that can repair and compensate for the damage done.

This paper examines how natural *mestizaje* still occurs and, instead of subjecting immigrants and refugees to the same postcolonial pressures to assimilate, we can encourage transcultural acculturation (Mudambi, 2021b) to honor our society's *mestizaje* and to restore equity in our society. Specifically, this article offers actionable steps in which Catholic schools can engage to mobilize education towards decolonization. These actions are: (a) exploring ways in which identities can be affirmed in schools, (b) seeking to elevate minoritized cultures, and (c) restoring the prestige of minoritized languages.

Decolonization is imperative. Our generation, and those to come, have had the opportunity to learn from history and to see the downfalls of colonialism. And while there is no way to undo the damage done, we can collectively and systematically engage in decolonization, foster a Christian culture of equity and justice, and serve as a model to other secular education systems.

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