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Toward a Decolonial Praxis in History of Education Research: An Exploration of The Conversations as a Collective Study Practice

Vers une praxis décoloniale dans la recherche en histoire de l'éducation : une exploration des Conversations comme pratique d'étude collective

Hacia una praxis decolonial en la investigación en historia de la educación: una exploración de "Las conversaciones" como práctica de estudio colectivo

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Toward a Decolonial Praxis in History of Education Research: An Exploration of The Conversations as a Collective Study Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential for a decolonial praxis in history of education research. It argues that history of education scholarship, despite its inclusion of critical post- and decolonial perspectives, remains largely entrenched in a modernist logics of scholarly knowledge production. This paper proposes an alternative approach by examining 'The Conversations', as an example of a locally-embedded practice of collective study that we undertook in the Spring of 2022 in Belgium. Inspired by decolonial scholarship and decoloniality research, we argue that such an alternative approach to historical study and research may help in connecting the discipline's commitment to a critical study of the (colonial and imperial) past with the activation of possible futures, and promote alternative ecologies of knowledge.

Keywords: decoloniality, history of education, (post-)colonialism, study practice

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Hacia una praxis decolonial en la investigación en historia de la educación: una exploración de “Las conversaciones” como práctica de estudio colectivo

Resumen

Este artículo explora el potencial de una praxis decolonial en la investigación en historia de la educación. Argumenta que los estudios en historia de la educación, a pesar de incorporar perspectivas críticas pos- y decoloniales, siguen en gran medida arraigados en las lógicas modernistas de producción de conocimiento académico. Este artículo propone un enfoque alternativo al examinar « Las Conversaciones », un ejemplo de práctica local de estudio colectivo que llevamos a cabo en la primavera de 2022 en Bélgica. Inspirándonos en la investigación decolonial y los estudios sobre decolonialidad, sostenemos que dicho enfoque alternativo al estudio e investigación histórica puede ayudar a conectar el compromiso de la disciplina con un estudio crítico del pasado (colonial e imperial) con la activación de futuros posibles, promoviendo ecologías alternativas del conocimiento.

Palabras clave: descolonialidad, historia de la educación, (pos)colonialismo, práctica de estudio

Vers une praxis décoloniale dans la recherche en histoire de l’éducation : une exploration des Conversations comme pratique d’étude collective

Résumé

Cet article explore le potentiel d’une praxis décoloniale dans la recherche en histoire de l’éducation. Il soutient que les études en histoire de l’éducation, malgré leur intégration de perspectives critiques post- et décoloniales, restent en grande partie ancrées dans les logiques modernistes de production de savoirs académiques. Cet article propose une approche alternative en examinant « Les Conversations », un exemple d’une pratique locale d’étude collective que nous avons entreprise au printemps 2022 en Belgique. S’inspirant des travaux sur la décolonialité et des recherches en études décoloniales, nous affirmons qu’une telle approche alternative à l’étude et à la recherche historiques pourrait contribuer à relier l’engagement de la discipline envers une étude critique du passé (colonial et impérial) à l’activation de futurs possibles, tout en favorisant des écologies alternatives du savoir.

Mots-clés : décolonialité, histoire de l'éducation, (post-)colonialisme, pratique d’étude

Introduction

In recent years, an increased critical awareness of the problematic nature of colonialism and its systemic effects in the present has spurred calls for the decolonization of society. While 'decolonization' initially referred to the formal process through which formerly colonized territories in Africa, Asia, Latin-America and the Caribbean gained political independence from colonial rule, its scope "soon extended in meaning to include all elements incurred in the colonial experience, 'whether political, economic, cultural or psychological'".[1] Under the influence of the works of, amongst others, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and Edward Said that exposed the dehumanizing effects of colonial rule and interrogated its underlying narrative of Western superiority,[2] consensus grew over the fact that decolonization could not (and cannot) be achieved through the creation of politically self-governing nation-states alone. After all, a growing body of critical scholarship documented that the success of colonialism had precisely consisted in its creation of a colonial subject "socially located in the oppressed side of the colonial difference to think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions".[3] As such, consensus grew over the fact that the mind needed to be decolonized, as well.[4]

For critical post- and decolonial scholarship, the global disparities "in wealth and standard of living between the former colonial powers and the colonized areas" demonstrated that the self-regulating nation-state of the (politically) decolonized world had in many ways embraced Western-style modernization, in terms of its institutional and socio-cultural structures.[5] Hence, the persistence of social inequalities, the economic exclusion of the so-called 'Global South' and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledges in today's world were increasingly traced back to the structures and languages of domination and oppression that European powers had installed during the colonial era. Post-and decolonial scholars argued that interrupting the influence these colonial modes of thinking continue to have in today's society requires a commitment to active intervention within ongoing oppressive circumstances and an engagement in favor of transnational social justice.[6]

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[1] Raymond F. Betts, "Decolonization: A Brief History of the Word," in *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonization of African and Asian societies, 1930s-1970s*, ed. Els Bogaerts and Remco Haben (Leiden: KITLV, 2012), 23.

[2] For a more detailed introduction to the seminal work of some key postcolonial theorists, see: *Postcolonial Studies: An Anthology, ed.* Pramod K. Nayar (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

[3] Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1 no. 1 (2011): 5. Cited in: Claire Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn in the Humanities," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 40 (2020): 31.

[4] Cf. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London and Portsmouth: J. Currey; Heinemann, 1986).

[5] Betts, "Decolonization," 28.

[6] See also: Robert Young, *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 57–58.

Especially since the 1980s, the critical observations and insights of post- and decolonial scholarship have prompted historians of education to deconstruct the master narratives that justified and rationalized European colonialism on the grounds of Western moral, cultural, scientific and technological superiority as part and parcel of the modernist epistemological hegemony that had undergirded Western imperialism.[7] Under the influence of postcolonial studies, in particular, history of education scholarship made a significant contribution to uncovering the logics and language of racial and cultural 'othering' that colonial and imperial powers installed in and through education. In doing so, historical studies in education increasingly drew attention to the "problematic nature of the relationship between education, racism and ethnicity", not only in the past, but equally in the present.[8]

While important and relevant, the question remains as to how empire has informed "the institutionalization of [the] historical and social scientific knowledge" that the history of education field and history discipline itself produces.[9] By focusing predominantly on how post- and decolonial theory might inspire historians of education to ask "new or different kinds of questions of historical data old or new"[10], the practice of historical research in education has largely remained within the Eurocentric "rules of the social sciences and humanities game"[11]. As a result, and despite their common ground, the discipline remains largely disconnected from the decolonial projects and initiatives, such as those undertaken by First Nations and Indigenous communities that have paired decolonial approaches to education with historical initiatives for 'truth-telling'.[12] The incorporation of decolonial and Indigenous perspectives into the field of history of education has been predominantly advanced by scholars working in former settler colonies, such as Australia and Canada.[13] Nevertheless, a large portion of (European)

[7] Cf. Orsolya Kereszty, "Postcolonial Perspective in the History of Education: Research Problems and Trends in an International Context," *Hungarian Educational Research Association* 4 (2014): 16.

[8] Joyce Goodman, Gary McCulloch, and William Richardson, "'Empires Overseas' and 'Empires at Home': Postcolonial and Transnational Perspectives on Social Change in the History of Education," *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 6 (2009): 697.

[9] Amanda Behm, et.al., "History on the Line. Decolonizing History: Enquiry and Practice," *History Workship Journal* 89 (2020): 171.

[10] Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, "'Empires Overseas'," 699.

[11] Walter Mignolo, "I Am where I Think: Epistemology and the Colonial Difference," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 241.

[12] See, for instance, Elizabeth A. Munroe, et. al., "Decolonizing Aboriginal Education in the 21st Century," *McGill Journal of Education* 48, no.2 (2013): 317–338. For details on truth-telling commissions, see for instance, "History of Truth-Telling in Australia," ANTAR, accessed November 26, 2024, https://antar.org.au/issues/truth-telling/history-of-truth-telling-in-australia/.

[13] For Australia, see for instance, Mati Keynes, Beth Marsden and Archie Thomas, "Does Curriculum Fail Indigenous Political Aspirations? Sovereignty and Australian History and Social Studies Curriculum," *Nordic Journal of Educational History* 10, no. 2 (2023): 59–84; Julian R. Kusabs, "Curriculum and Colonisation: The Conceptual and Methodological Challenges of Scope," *Curriculum Perspectives* 44,

scholarship in historical studies in education appears to have largely decoupled its critique of colonialism and imperialism from the broader epistemic and social justice frameworks proposed by decolonial theorists and decoloniality research.[14]

Against the backdrop of these observations, this paper reflects upon the possibilities and need for a decolonial praxis of history of education research. More specifically, it proposes the development of a research and study praxis that approaches history of education research not as a form of disciplinary knowledge production by scholarly experts alone, but rather as a collective practice of study that may open up new, decolonial horizons. We do so from the vantage point of The Conversations, an experimental study practice revolving around the histories and legacies of (Belgian) colonialism, as a concrete example of a decolonial praxis that operated in the margins of the (Western) university. We argue that study practices, such as The Conversations, that aim to "delink from the bubbles of modern thought"[15] by changing terms of the conversation (and not only its content), may help in extending our dominant approach of de-/coloniality as an analytical category with an understanding of de-/coloniality as "something to think with"[16]. More specifically, we believe that such study practices may help in connecting and reaffirming the discipline's commitment to a critical study of the (colonial and imperial) past with the activation of possible futures that allow "different epistemic foundations and ontologies"[17] and promote alternative ecologies of knowledge.[18]

To develop our argument, the following sections first introduce the theoretical background of this paper. The first section provides a concise history and overview of some of the key debates within post- and decolonial scholarship. As we will discuss, post- and decolonial scholarship share some common roots and principles but also exhibit significant differences. Taking the evolution of interest in post- and de-colonialism within the International Standing Conference on the History of Education (ISCHE) – as one of the most significant international associations of historians of education globally – as a starting point for reflection, the second section explores how

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no.1 (2024): 97–99. For Canada, see for instance, Heather E. McGregor, Sara Karn, and Micah Flavin, "Regenerative Capacities: Centering Indigenous Perspectives in Climate Change-Responsive Social Studies and History Education," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 26 (2024): 119–140; Michael Marker, "Borders and the Borderless Coast Salish: Decolonising Historiographies of Indigenous Schooling," *History of Education* 44, no. 4 (2015): 480–502.

[14] For a similar argument for Philosophy of Education, see: Rowena Azada-Palacios, "The Role of the Philosopher of Education in the Task of Decoloniality," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (2023): 4.

[15] Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 228.

[16] Cf. Hans Schildermans, "On Problematic Situations and Problematizations: Study Practices and the Pragmatics of a World To-Be-Made," *Educational Theory* 72, no. 4 (2022): 467.

[17] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 33.

[18] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies (London: Verso, 2007).

(mostly European-based) historical studies in education have hitherto engaged with post- and decolonial scholarship. While acknowledging the contributions of the discipline in examining the dynamics of colonial power, we highlight the potential risks of incorporating a broader range of voices and perspectives within the Western epistemic framework, without interrogating how the (modernist) principles that undergird the production of that historical knowledge, in perpetuating and reinforcing the Eurocentric episteme. In light of these considerations, the third section offers a detailed description of The Conversations as a concrete and locally-situated example of an alternative praxis of collective study that we developed at the University of Leuven (Belgium). Documenting our experiment, we aim to illustrate how The Conversations facilitated an unpredictable encounter among participants who collectively examined the interconnections between a (de-)colonial past, present, and future, thus generating the possibilities for alternative ecologies of knowledge to emerge and enabling new imaginative futures.

Post- and Decolonial Theory and the Challenge of Coloniality

When, in 1993, ISCHE dedicated its central theme to the history of colonial encounters for the first time, aiming to highlight the potential of critical approaches such as postcolonialism to historians of education, post- and decolonial studies were already firmly established within the academy. [19] Postcolonial critique, having its roots in the immediate anti-colonial liberation movements, "secured its place in academic and intellectual discourse in the mid-1980s, along with other distinguished 'post' tendencies such as poststructuralism and postmodernism."[20] Although the term postcolonialism remains somewhat contentious, as it is also often used to describe the historical era of political independence after empire,[21] it generally refers to the theoretical scholarship that combines a "political analysis of the cultural history of colonialism" with a critical investigation of its "contemporary effects in western and tricontinental cultures."[22] In doing so, postcolonial critique highlights the connections between the marginalization of the colonial subject and 'subaltern voice' in the past and in contemporary global politics. Building on the foundational work of scholars such as Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for instance, postcolonial studies have critically examined the history of Western colonial expansion and domination— that they chronologically locate in the period between the Spanish conquest of the 'New World' in 1492 and the

[19] For more details, see: Kereszty, "Postcolonial perspective in the history of education"; Gabriela Ossenbach and María del Mar del Pozo, "Postcolonial Models, Cultural Transfers and Transnational Perspectives in Latin America: A research Agenda," *Paedagogica Historica* 47, no. 5 (2011), and Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, "'Empires Overseas'."

[20] Ossenbach and del Mar del Pozo, "Postcolonial Models," 597.

[21] Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, "'Empires Overseas'," 702.

[22] Young, Postcolonialism, 6.

beginning of political decolonization in 1945—as both specific and problematic.[23] More specifically, postcolonial studies distinguish Western colonial expansion from earlier or alternative forms of oppression and conquest either within traditional or modern societies, arguing that colonialism installed a global power structure that ensures the sustained dominance of 'the West over the rest', in terms of its political, economic, military, and cultural authority. Beyond creating global economic and governance systems controlled by and serving the interests of the West, colonialism was morally justified as a mission to bring civilization and modernity to the entire world, purportedly benefiting all.[24] By highlighting both the political and economic ramifications of Western colonialism, as well as the global entrenchment of European cultural values resulting from it, postcolonial critique has given broader significance to colonial history: it located the intricate power relationships between colonized and colonizer not merely in the past, but instead focused on "how colonial norms were established and continue into the present".[25] Postcolonialism's interest in instances of colonial oppression and domination in the past is therefore always "guided by the relation of that history to the present," and it actively seeks to develop "new forms of engaged theoretical work that contribute to the creation of dynamic ideological and social transformation".[26]

Both inspired by and dissatisfied with postcolonial critique, decolonial studies emerged approximately a decade later, particularly following the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Primarily rooted in Latin-American scholarship, decolonial studies critically examined the enduring structures of power that perpetuate colonial hierarchies and injustices at the intersections of race, class, and gender. Similar to postcolonial theory, decolonial studies seek to "explain why, despite the formal end of political colonization in many parts of the world, global asymmetries of power remain."[27] Hence, and while sharing with postcolonial scholarship its historical roots in the political anti-colonial movement, decolonial studies emphasizes the intrinsic interconnectedness between colonialism and modernity, thereby "issuing more direct confrontations with existing [scholarly] practice."[28]

Indeed, introducing the notions of 'coloniality' and the 'colonial matrix of power', Annibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo have pointed out that colonialism and modernity

[23] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

[24] Cf. Robert Young, *Postcolonialism*.

[25] Patricia Noxolo, "Decolonial Theory in a Time of the Re-Colonisation of UK Research," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42, no. 3 (2017): 342.

[26] Robert Young, *Postcolonialism*, 11.

[27] Azada-Palacios, "The Role of the Philosopher of Education," 4.

[28] Noxolo, "Decolonial Theory in a Time of the Re-Colonisation," 342.

are “two sides of the same coin”.[29] They have posited that colonialism—and the resulting subjugation, oppression, and marginalization of Indigenous peoples—was made possible only through the advancements in science, technology, and political organization that characterize Western modernity. More specifically, documenting – amongst others – how the production of maps and literary texts facilitated the control and exploitation of colonial subjects, at the same time epistemically reinforcing the superiority of Western systems of knowledge production over Indigenous ones, Mignolo documented the deep implication of the European scientific revolution in the colonial project.[30]

For Mignolo, the ‘colonial matrix of power’ that Western modernity installed comprised four interlocking systems of (Western) control. These include ‘the control of economy’ through land appropriation, exploitation of labor and control over natural resources, ‘the control of authority’ through the instalment and imposition of administrative, legal and governance structures that served the interests of European imperial powers, ‘the control of gender and sexuality’ through the introduction of patriarchal norms and values that reshaped family structures and social structures to fit the European model, and the ‘control of subjectivity and knowledge’ through the imposition of Western educational systems and knowledges that devalued or even erased Indigenous ways of being and knowing.[31]

Decolonial scholarship has argued that these four interconnected systems of Eurocentric power, pivoting around the ideas and institutions of Western modernity, persist to this day. After all, modern capitalist notions of labor relations, the nation-state, and modern/colonial ideas about knowledge and knowledge creation – that rest on the binary distinctions between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, ‘rational’ and ‘not-rational’, the ‘knowing subject’ and the ‘subject of knowing’, - as well as the actors and the institutions that conserve and explain these ideas, continue to shape contemporary thinking.[32] Hence, in spite of the fact that territories in the ‘Global South’ have gained political independence, coloniality has not ended, as the ideas, actors and institutions that were installed in the past by colonialism continue to rationalize, justify, and perpetuate a modern, Western universalism and dominance.[33]

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[29] Walter Mignolo, “Interview – Walter Mignolo/Part 2: Key Concepts.” Interview by Alvina Hoffman. *E-international Relations*, January, 21, 2017, https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts/#google_vignette.

[30] Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

[31] Walter Mignolo, “Introduction : Coloniality of Power and De-Colonial Thinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 155–167.

[32] See also: Sara Lucia Hoagland, “Aspects of the Coloniality of Knowledge,” *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 8, no. 1–2 (2020): 48–60.

[33] Mignolo, Interview.

Working toward a more decolonial future, decolonial thinkers have argued, therefore requires an "epistemic re-constitution" that can be made possible only though a de-linking from modern/colonial "ways of thinking, languages, ways of life, and being in the world".[34] More specifically, it requires a process of de-linking oneself from the colonial matrix of power by putting into the question "the terms of the conversation" and "the structures of knowledge and subject formation (desires, beliefs, expectations) that were implanted in the colonies by the former colonizers".[35] As such, (theoretical) decolonial scholarship has fed into decoloniality research that uses the theoretical principles of decolonial theory to develop 'real-world' practices that promote a pluri-versal world beyond Western universalism; a world where different worlds can co-exist and that (re-)integrates different, alternative forms of knowing.[36]

As such, and more so than postcolonial theory, decolonial thinking and decoloniality studies (as its more practically-oriented 'application') serve as significant counterpoints to the continued dominance of the paradigm of Western universalism and reason, historically rooted in the European Enlightenment and modernity.[37] After all, the "epistemic challenge"[38] that decolonial theory presents, brings under scrutiny the often-celebrated aspects of modernity, including its dominant modes and institutions of knowledge production such as the academic research conducted at universities. In this respect, a portion of the decolonial scholarship has equated the postcolonial research agenda that "sought to excavate and critique the legacy of colonialism by borrowing from Western post-structural theory" with "a new form of academic colonialism."[39] While postcolonial critique predominantly focuses on producing scholarly critical studies *of* the systemic domination and subjugation (for instance, through the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and voices), thus remaining a "project of scholarly transformation within the academy"[40], decolonial and decoloniality studies concentrate more on developing and putting in practice alternative modes of thinking and knowing, both *with* and *from* the margins.[41]

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[34] Mignolo, Interview.

[35] Mignolo, Interview.

[36] Cf. Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009): 159–181; Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of Decoloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–514.

[37] Nevertheless, similar arguments have been made about postcolonialist theorists working *from* and *with* the margins. For more details, see Taisha Abraham, *Introducing Postcolonial Theories* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2007), cited in Kereszty, "Postcolonial Perspective in the History of Education," 3.

[38] Cf. Noxolo, "Decolonial Theory in a Time of the Re-Colonisation," 342.

[39] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 33.

[40] Mignolo, "Delinking," 449.

[41] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 33. At this point, it is important to remark that the commitment to work from and with the margins to some degree also resonates with the research agenda of the South-Asian Subaltern Studies Group. Cf. Betts, "Decolonization," 32.

To achieve this, decolonial scholars such as Walter Mignolo, have proposed forms of 'border thinking,' with which they refer to as "a mode of thinking (and living) emanating from what European colonial modernity constituted as its exterior."[42] Hence, decolonial theorists advocate a move beyond a mere consideration and integration of alternative perspectives—such as the inclusion of a greater diversity of (Indigenous) voices or the introduction of 'new' research approaches—within the Western episteme. Instead, they invite scholars and academic experts to explore the 'liminal spaces' where different research practices, worldviews, and modes of knowing may meet, intersect, and interact. In that respect, Mignolo and Walsh, for instance, have urged scholars to 'work from the cracks.' With the term 'cracks' they refer to the fissures, gaps, and 'vulnerable' or marginal spaces within modern (and thus 'colonial') institutions, such as the university, that may be 'exploited' to foster and develop practices that resist the dominant normativity of modernity and the dichotomies upon which this rests (such as the distinctions between theory and practice, or between subjectivity and objectivity). By working from these marginal spaces, they argue, scholarship may nurture a plurality of epistemologies, perspectives, and worldviews.[43] Hence, and while this approach may be easily misunderstood as a call for a "nostalgic and ethnocentric return to tradition", a "reformulation of a nativist agenda,"[44] or even a complete disavowal of all Western epistemologies, decolonial theorists have emphasized the importance of "an otherwise in plural."[45] Thus, decolonial theory does not understand 'decoloniality'—or a delinking from the colonial matrix of power—as the total absence of coloniality and Western epistemology, but rather as the "serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, knowing, sensing, and living".[46]

The Postcolonial and Decolonial Turn in Historical Studies in Education: Opportunities and Criticisms

As Gallien posits, the influence of postcolonial studies, and perhaps to a lesser extent also decolonial studies, extended across various disciplines within the humanities, notably literary criticism, history, and translation studies.[47] In the field of the history of education too, postcolonial scholarship especially has gained visibility, particularly from the end of the 1980s onwards.[48] This may be exemplified in the thematic orientation of

[42] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 33.

[43] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality.*

[44] Cf. Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 31.

[45] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality, 24.*

[46] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality, 81.*

[47] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 29.

[48] Kereszty, "Postcolonial Perspective in the History of Education," 16.

several ISCHE conferences in the 1990s[49], and the “numerous monographic issues that the journals *Paedagogica Historica* and *History of Education* have dedicated to the issue of transnationality and postcoloniality in education”.[50] A first case in point is the ISCHE Conference held in Lisbon in 1993, themed "Education Encounters, Peoples and Cultures: The Colonial Experience between the 16th and 20th centuries". By foregrounding the everyday experiences of colonialism, the conference aimed to destabilize the 'imperial gaze' that shaped some of the earlier colonial histories. It argued that to disrupt the perpetuation of the grand narratives of colonialism that were written from a Eurocentric perspective, historical studies in education needed to amplify marginalized voices and the perspectives of the colonized.[51] António Nóvoa, in his seminal article published in the special issue of *Paedagogica Historica* two years later, for instance, proposed that a greater scholarly attention to the experiences of educational actors, the cultural practices within the colonial education system, and the intricate relationships between colonial discourses and the formation of personal, political, and social identities could help in achieving that.[52]

Building upon these suggestions, the ISCHE conference held in Sydney in 1999, themed “Education and Ethnicity” maintained a similar focus on the cross-cultural encounters within empires. Certainly, the conference theme resonated with the commitment of post- and decolonial critique to study how empire intersects with categories of race, class and gender. Prioritizing the analytical lens of ‘transnationalism’, the 1999 ISCHE conference signaled a greater recognition within the field about how “the cultural and educational influences stimulated by imperialism flowed in more than one direction.”[53] This acknowledgement of the multidirectional and dynamic nature of colonial encounters helped the discipline to move beyond the ‘abyssal thinking’ prevalent in some of the earlier historical scholarship on colonial education systems. With this notion of ‘abyssal thinking’, the Latin-American decolonial scholar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, refers to the deep-seated binary divisions characteristic of the

[49] While our analysis of centers mostly on the annual conference themes of the International Standing Conference on the History of Education (ISCHE), a key global association for historians of education, we acknowledge that debates on post- and decolonial approaches within national associations may have evolved at different paces and taken distinct directions. However, given ISCHE’s international scope, resulting in numerous special issues in *Paedagogica Historica* as one of the leading journals in the field, we contend that its conference themes and publications offer a valuable starting point to reflect on the discipline's global state-of-the-art.

[50] Ossenbach and del Mar del Pozo, “Postcolonial Models,” 591.

[51] Kereszty, “Postcolonial Perspective in the History of Education”.

[52] António Nóvoa, “On History, History of Education, and History of Colonial Education,” in *The Colonial Experience in Education: Historical Uses and Perspectives*. *Paedagogica Historica* (Ghent: CHSP, 1995); cited in Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, “’Empires Overseas,” 697.

[53] Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, “’Empires Overseas’,” 697.

Western modernist worldview.[54] Indeed, by drawing on the 'classical' dichotomy between 'the metropole' and the 'peripheries' to describe the relationships between colonizer and colonized, a portion of the earlier histories of education tended to reinforce some of principles undergirding Western modernity. In that respect, the ISCHE conference in Sydney signaled a shift within history of education research toward a critical re-examination of the spatial and temporal dimensions of empire that put greater emphasis on the cross-cultural exchanges between – to speak with Goodman, McCulloch and Richardson – the "empires at home" and "empires overseas", and the multidirectional networks that ran across them.[55]

This reorientation, as articulated in the introduction to a special issue following an international symposium held in Hamburg in 2007 on postcolonial and transnational perspectives in the history of education, not only marked a greater scholarly recognition of the interconnectedness of European colonial activities overseas with social and educational developments within 'the metropole', but it also indicated a significant shift in the discipline's attention for the 'agency' of the subaltern subject.[56] More specifically, by focusing on interactions within the 'contact zones' and 'frontiers' of the colonial encounter, histories of education increasingly "demonstrated a space of agency for colonized peoples within situations of uneven power."[57]

Emphasizing the active participation of colonized peoples in imperial relationships of power and their resistances to it, these histories have provided textured descriptions of how 'the subaltern subject' exercised agency in various forms, ranging from 'overt' political struggle to more subtle forms of cultural expression. Highlighting Indigenous voices and revealing the complexities of their experiences and the strategies they employed to navigate colonial systems of education has certainly helped the field to move beyond simplistic portrayals of the colonized as 'passive' recipients of colonial oppression.[58]

While certainly not 'exhaustive' in its scope, this brief discussion suggests that especially postcolonial studies have influenced history of education research to re-evaluate existing and dominant master narratives. By challenging the simplistic center-

[54] For more details, see: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014). See also: Kristin Gregers Eriksen and Stine Helena Bang Svendsen, "Decolonial Options in Education – Interrupting Coloniality and Inviting Alternative Options," *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education* 1, no. 4 (2020): 3.

[55] Cf. Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, "'Empires Overseas'," See also: Rebecca Swartz and Peter Kallaway, "Editorial: Imperial, Global and Local in Histories of Colonial Education," *History of Education* 47, no. 3 (2018): 362–367. For a very recent example of this re-orientation toward international transits, hybridizations and appropriations, see Diana Gonçalves Vidal and Vivian Batista da Silva, eds., *Rethinking Centre-Periphery Assumptions in the History of Education. Exchanges among Brazil, USA, and Europe* (New York and London: Routledge, 2024).

[56] Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, "'Empires Overseas'," 696.

[57] Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, "'Empires Overseas,'" 701.

[58] Cf. Goodman, McCulloch, and Richardson, "'Empires Overseas'," 701.

periphery dichotomy, highlighting the agency of the colonial subject, and exploring the dynamic and complex interactions between education, imperial power, and identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts, postcolonialism, in particular, has made significant contributions to the field.[59] However, in seeking to 'apply' this critical perspective, history of education scholarship has predominantly centered on a historical critique *of* colonial systems (of schooling).[60] In doing so, and while certainly fruitful, important and relevant, the field has also tended to detach itself from the broader epistemic project and social justice agenda proposed by decolonial scholarship, in particular.

Indeed, history of education scholarship seems to have understood the critical unveiling of the 'colonial matrix of power' predominantly as a "project of scholarly transformation within the academy", which is – as Mignolo has reminds us – close to the project of postcolonial critique, but far less so to that of decolonial and decoloniality studies.[61] After all, history of education scholarship seems to have left the question unaddressed as to how the discipline itself, and the research practice that it adopts in the production of historical knowledge are implicated in the colonial matrix of power that it seeks to unveil. In this respect, it is noteworthy that scholarship that has critically examined how the postcolonial condition has affected history of education research geographically centers on the formerly colonized world, ironically leaving the European academy virtually untouched by critical introspection. [62] Especially in the former colonial 'metropole' of Europe, critical history of education scholarship of imperialism and colonialism has not spurred significant scholarly debate over how empire has "fundamentally shaped the institutions in which we work, research, and teach."[63]

Bearing the observations of decolonial theory in mind the question remains, however, whether the colonial histories of education written 'from below' that highlight Indigenous experiences and voices, or the transnational histories of empires that seek to overcome the simplistic center-periphery divide, have not merely augmented and elevated "the Western episteme with new content", putting decoloniality's 'epistemic challenge' aside. [64] As such, there seems to be a disjuncture between, on the one hand, the increasing calls to include the critical observations of post- and decolonial scholarship into our work – and the 45th ISCHE Conference on (De)coloniality and Diversity held in Natal (Brazil) in 2024 may serve as a recent example of that – and, on the other hand, the actual practice of how histories of education are conducted. Yet, as

[59] Cf. Kereszty, "Postcolonial Perspective in the History of Education."

[60] Cf. Ossenbach and del Mar del Pozo, "Postcolonial Models."

[61] Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 449.

[62] For Asia, see: Ting-Hong Wong, "Different Postcolonial Conditions, Different Education Histories: The Cases of Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong," *History of Education* 52, no. 2–3 (2023): 246–269. For settings of former settler colonialism, see also the scholarship mentioned earlier, in footnote 13.

[63] Behm, et.al., "History on the Line," 188.

[64] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 28.

Mignolo reminds us, to delink from the colonial matrix of power requires more than a dissent from within the Eurocentric structures, for instance through the inclusion of new research lenses or a greater diversity of (historical) voices.[65] Merely "adding epistemologies onto the same (modern) ontological foundation" in this way "will always be a limited strategy for interrupting colonial harms and habits of being."[66] Instead, to interrupt coloniality, we need to explore new ways of studying the past that de-link from the colonial/modern ideas about knowledge and knowledge creation (that rely on the binary distinctions between 'subject and object', 'rational' and 'not-rational', the 'knowing subject' and the 'subject of knowing).[67] Such a new study and research praxis might foster a "pluriversal hermeneutics" that recognizes and seeks to foster the coexistence of a diversity of ontologies and epistemologies, encourages learning from and with others and may allow for new possible futures to open up.[68] To document how a decolonial research practice may be enacted with the margins of the university, the following section introduces The Conversations as a concrete experiment that, inspired by Mignolo's de-linking, sought to extend our conventional modes of historical research that is often oriented on the empirical authority of the (modern) archive and maintains a strict distinction between past and present/future time, with a collective practice of studying and "thinking with"[69] (de-)colonial history to create a space where the horizon of expectations could be thought of as di-verse, or even pluri-verse.[70]

Addressing the Legacy of Belgian Colonialism: The Conversations as a Collective Study Practice

In the Spring of 2022, we initiated The Conversations, a project that aimed to bring together individuals with diverse identities and experiences of historical colonialism, as well as positionalities toward de-/coloniality to collectively reflect on the central question: "how should we deal with the colonial past to be able to live together in the future?"[71] This project emerged from a combined concern. On the one hand, we were concerned about the collective state of perplexity that surrounds the legacy of colonialism and the issue of decolonization in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in Belgium. On

[65] Mignolo, cited in Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 38.

[66] Sharon Stein et. al., "From 'Education for Sustainable Development' to 'Education for the End of the World as we Know it'," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 3 (2022): 274–287,

cited in: Eriksen and Svendsen, "Decolonial Options in Education," 7.

[67] See also: Hoagland, "Aspects of the Coloniality of Knowledge."

[68] Cf. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, and Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 38–40.

[69] Schildermans, "On Problematic Situations," 467.

[70] Mignolo, "Delinking," 497.

[71] More information on our project, in Dutch may be found on our website: www.deconversaties.be. For a short introduction in English, see: Sarah Van Ruyskensvelde and Mieke Berghmans, "In Pursuit of Decolonization in Belgium," *Polylogues at the Intersection(s) Series.* Convivial Thinking.org, November 9, 2022.

the other hand, our project arose out of a need to reconsider the role of knowledge institutions and actors, such as universities and academic experts, in addressing this urgent question.

While Belgian society long understood its colonial action in the Congo as a controversial and dark chapter in its history,[72] the legacy of Belgian colonialism recently evolved into "a living moral issue."[73] Specifically, it was only after June 2020 that Belgium's colonial past appeared as a contemporary social justice issue requiring a collective societal response. This shift was spurred by the Black Lives Matter protests that, in Belgium, took place in June 2020, coinciding symbolically with the 60th anniversary of Congolese independence from Belgian colonial rule.[74] The scale of the street protests, occurring amidst a global pandemic, focused the attention of policymakers and the public on the historical roots of contemporary social issues, such as racism, socio-economic inequality, and exclusion, in the colonial structures of the past. A significant effect of the Black Lives Matter movement was the introduction and 'popularization' of a "critical race vocabulary"[75]: concepts, such as '(racial) micro-aggression,' 'white guilt,' 'privilege,' and 'black anxiety,' which had previously been confined to academic scholarship or milieu of political and artistic activism, spilled over to the wider public, providing a new lexicon that allowed for different ways of speaking and thinking about how oppressive, colonial systems are "current social problems, and not (only) historical legacies." [76] Nevertheless, this increased awareness over the need for renewed modes of collective action to address the colonial past and work toward a more 'decolonized' future also generated a feeling of collective perplexity amongst Belgian society. Decolonial activism provided a clear diagnosis of how social injustices are historically produced and perpetuated, but it did not offer clear solutions or answers as to how individuals and society could work toward a more just future. Consequently, a feeling of having "reached an impasse" and being "at a loss for any solution" soon prevailed among the Belgian public.[77]

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[72] See, for instance, Georgi Verbeeck, "Legacies of an Imperial Past in a small Nation: Patterns of Postcolonialism in Belgium," *European Politics and Society* 21, no. 3 (2020): 292–306; Idesbald Goddeeris, "Postcolonial Belgium. The memory of the Congo," *Interventions* 17, no. 3 (2015): 434–451.

[73] Jane Addams, "Education by the Current Event," in *On Education* (New York/London: Routledge, 2014), 212.

[74] For an English introduction to the history of Belgian colonial action in Congo, see, for instance, David Van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

[75] Cf. Cheryl E. Matias, "Tears worth Telling: Urban Teaching and the Possibilities of Racial Justice," *Multicultural Perspectives* 15, no. 4 (2013): 187–193; Cheryl E. Matias and Daniel D. Liou, "Tending to the Heart of Communities of Color: Towards Critical Race Teacher Activism," *Urban Education* 50, no. 5 (2015): 601–625.

[76] Melissa Steyn and Kudzaiische Peter Vanyoro, "Critical Diversity Literacy: A Framework for Multicultural Citizenship Education", *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* (2023): 1–17.

[77] Helen De Cruz, "Perplexity and Philosophical Progress," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 45 (2021): 209.

A notable response to this impasse could be observed within the university and at different policy levels. Specifically, in the wake of the protests of June 2020, multiple expert groups, in which scholars and academic experts often had a seat, were established to tackle questions pertaining to the 'decolonization' of Belgian society. For instance, the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) – to which both authors are affiliated – tasked a commission of scholarly experts from within the institution to formulate recommendations on how it could deal with the university's large collection of colonial 'heritage' (often objects 'purchased', taken or robbed from the Congo)[78] and how it could position itself within a multicultural and globalized society. As they approached the legacy of colonialism as, to speak with Latour, 'matters of fact', university experts and scholars were considered to be in the best of positions to tackle the question of decoloniality.[79] After all, so it is assumed, the university and its experts have access to and produce scientific, and thus true and objective, knowledge. Underlying this reliance on 'technocratic solutions' to societal issues, however, lies an assumption that scholarly produced (historical) knowledge about de-/coloniality will – when extracted and applied – result in clear-cut answers and evidence-informed solutions for the future. As such, this approach reflects the normative assumptions of universal, 'detached,' and objective knowledge that pervade the Western episteme, presupposing the existence of a singular perspective that is capable of elucidating all realities and from which a singular solution can be derived to 'craft the future'.

Alternatively, and to 'de-link' from this dominant rhetoric and research practice of Western modernity, we judged it more fruitful to approach the legacy of colonialism as – to speak with Latour again – a collective 'matter of concern'.[80] More specifically, instead of inserting ourselves in the dominant logic of scholarly knowledge production that centers on (historical) research to provide 'evidence-informed' answers to societal issues, we took on the decolonial project of 'de-linking' to develop an alternative study and research practice that resists some of the assumptions of Western modernity, such as that of universalism that maintains that a single perspective can explain all realities. Inspired by Mignolo's notion of "I think where I am", we designed The Conversations as a locally embedded practice of collective study that acknowledges the 'embodied nature' of our perspectives on and experiences of the world.

To this end, we organized a series of six consecutive conversation sessions between March and June 2022, involving seven participants. These individuals had either directly (e.g., the son of a Belgian army officer in colonial Congo, a female

[78] For an introduction (in Dutch) to the colonial history of the University of Leuven, see: Ruben Mantels, *Geleerd in de tropen. Leuven, Congo en de wetenschap, 1885–1960.* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007).

[79] Bruno Latour. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry*, 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–248.

[80] Cf. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"

decolonial activist and artist of color) or indirectly (e.g., a female white administrative employee of the university, a male white history teacher working in a secondary school in Brussels) experienced Belgian colonial rule and its effects. These participants were carefully selected to ensure a diversity in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity, and gender, which we assumed to be associated with their "familiar interpretative frameworks" linked to the cultures in which they grew up and the experiences they had over the course of their lives.[81] Nonetheless, they all shared a concern about how to deal with this colonial legacy in contemporary (Belgian) society.

Recognizing and embracing the diversity of these possible interpretative frameworks, The Conversations aimed to create the conditions for a collective praxis of study in which a multiplicity of perspectives vis-à-vis the issue of de-/coloniality could co-exist. In that respect, our ambition was not to stimulate a debate between opposing parties, nor did we want to increase people's knowledge of the historical facts and reach consensus over it. After all, conceiving of de-/coloniality in this way would be again to assume that the issue is a mere 'matter of fact', and thus that the response to the current state of collective perplexity is matter of retexturing people's beliefs, perspectives and values in a way that is more attuned to the historical facts. Instead of approaching the legacy of colonialism as a 'problem' that we need to 'overcome' (and assuming that the solution is inherent to how that problem is defined and formulated), *The Conversations* understood the legacy of colonialism and issue of decoloniality as questions that "set thinking, knowing and feeling in motion."[82]

To achieve this, we kicked off The Conversations with an introductory session. Apart from introducing the general principles that underpinned our project, we asked participants to prepare a brief introduction of themselves. Instead of asking them, however, to share 'factual information' about themselves (for instance, with regards to their age, job position or gender), they were asked to share with the group whom they would like to have a coffee with or have a chat on a bench in the park. This concrete 'introductory exercise' was intended to "de-center the self" in the (first) conversation, allowing participants to gain a first, basic insight not only in 'who' the others around the table were, but also in their worldviews, experiences and perspectives on the world.[83] Interestingly, this first session immediately uncovered the tensions and 'fracture lines' that exist between different 'imagined communities', calling for a collective formulation of a 'set of rules' and principles that would allow us to move from an a-perspectivism to a multiplicity of perspectives.[84]

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[81] Cf. Maria Grever, "Conversations about Contested Pasts. Historicizing Historical Consciousness in a Globalizing World", *Euroclio*: 3. Retrieved from: https://euroclio.eu/wp-content/uploads/Conversations-about-Contested-Pasts-Historicizing-Historical-Consciousness-in-a-Globalizing-World-.pdf.

[82] Schildermans, "On Problematic Situations," 467

[83] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 32.

[84] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn," 32.

Bearing these principles in mind, the second and third sessions aimed to bring the participants together in a conjoint study activity around the materially-visible traces of colonialism in today's streetscape. During these sessions, a collective study of the material colonial heritage in Belgium, in general, and in the city of Leuven, in particular, served as a contextually-embedded common point of reference to initiate a different kind of dialogue over the legacy of colonialism and a reflection about how we may live together in the future. To do so, the participants took a guided walking tour that took them to several 'colonial heritage sites' in the city of Leuven, and an unguided visit to the Africa Museum: Belgium's principal museum *on* and *of* colonial history that was initiated at the end of the 19th century by Leopold II to promote his *mission civilisatrice* in the Congo. During these visits, the participants were asked to write down their observations and reflections and take pictures of the material traces of colonialism that somehow stood out for them. These personal 'recordings' of reflections and observations were then used to initiate a collective dialogue on what colonialism, coloniality and decoloniality meant for each of the participants. During these sessions, each participant was first asked to write down keywords on post-its that they associated, respectively, with colonialism in the past, and the possibility of a decolonial future. After this individual exercise, participants discussed what they and the others wrote on the post-its, highlighting not only the differences in perspective that separate us, but equally stressing the similarities that may connect (our) different perspectives. By doing so, these two conversations sessions aimed to generate a new "community of truth" that, instead of being driven by the goal of achieving 'certainty' through scholarly research,[85] was driven by an attention for the way in which the problem of de-/coloniality is formulated and how this influences "what specific suggestions can be considered and which will be dismissed, what kind of observations will matter and which will not, and what kind of ideas or hypotheses will seem to be relevant or not".[86]

We took this one step further in the following sessions that centered on uncovering the positionality of each participant vis-à-vis the question of de-/coloniality. Rather than inviting the participants to share their personal opinions about colonialism and its contemporary effects, we asked them to select and image, a fragment from a film or text that they felt was somehow reflective of their perspective on this matter. Concretely, we asked: "what must the other participants have seen, read or heard, to understand your perspective?" During the session, and under the guidance of a moderator, each participant presented their materials and contextualized their choice. This approach aimed to avoid a focus on (and potential 'clash' of) 'opinions'; instead encouraging an act of listening to the perspectives of others, with a view on fostering a greater recognition of the profound shaping influence of personal (life) experiences on how we

[85] Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach. Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2007), 107.

[86] Schildermans, "On Problematic Situations," 465.

view the world, its history and future. As such, rather than taking the historical facts *to* the participants, this session aimed to mediate "the knowledge that is constructed by a community of inquiry that exercises mutual checks and balances within itself", assuming that the narratives that emerge from that may, in fact, "tell us something important about our lives in the present and our choices for the future".[87]

Therefore, and on the basis of the insights gained from all previous sessions, a final conversation session aimed at collectively developing a shared answer to the question: "what can we, as a group, do to encourage others to take responsibility for our colonial past, so that we, as a society (or local community) may move forward together?" As such, and instead of merely debating theoretical solutions to the question of de-/coloniality, the participants designed a public intervention. Specifically, they made a poster campaign and printed coasters with challenging questions about the legacy of colonialism, with a view to initiating a conversation amongst the wider public of the city of Leuven. Lastly, The Conversations was concluded with a public exhibition in the University's Central Library. As much as demonstrating that a 'polylogue,' where a multiplicity of perspectives can coexist, is indeed possible, we intended to show to the academic community that our roles as (historical and educational) 'experts' may extend well beyond 'critical debunking', to one of assembling a public around matters of concern that acknowledge the locally-situated and contextually-embedded nature of the "present-past."[88]

As such, and while our collective study practice focused less on the history of education itself, we do believe it may hold significant potential for rethinking our public and societal roles as historians of education. Acknowledging the central positioning of (colonial) history education in our discipline, our involvement in practices of collective study may extend our conventional commitment of disseminating critical historical critique (of colonialism) *to* the broader public, with a public engagement as mediators among a diversity of publics in the collective construction of knowledges that go beyond the traditional epistemic foundations and ontologies of the Western academy. Such an approach may not only democratize the historical knowledge we produce but may also connect it to some of the practical and ethical imperatives of decolonial studies and decoloniality research, enabling the public to critically engage with their past while envisioning and enacting more just and transformative futures.

Nevertheless, it may be evident that The Conversations is not a 'magic bullet', capable of effortlessly resolving all tensions and fractures that persist between different

[87] Peter Seixas, "Historical Consciousness: The Progress of Knowledge in a Postprogressive Age," in *Narration, Identity and Historical Consciousness*, ed. Jürgen Straub (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 149.

[88] Cf. Aleida Assman, "Transformations of the Modern Time Regime," in *Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, ed. Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupert, 2013), 39–56; cited in: Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, *Unfinished Histories*: *Empire and Postcolonial Resonance in Central Africa and Belgium* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022), 28.

'imagined communities', and that became apparent during the first session of our project too. Beyond the labor-intensive nature of the entire process, we found that the recruitment of a sufficiently diverse group of participants with varied backgrounds and experiences was very difficult. Study practices, such as The Conversations, require not only a long-term commitment, potentially 'scaring off' interested participants, but also carried the limitations of being initiated by two white university researchers. Inevitably, this influenced the project's resonance. Reaching out to and involving a sufficient number of participants, certainly from communities of color and despite efforts to communicate as broadly and inclusively as possible, remained a persistent challenge. As such, the experiences of the participants involved in the project proved very different. However, despite these different experiences, a majority of participants did emphasize that the project had provided them valuable insights into the positionality of themselves and that of others. For instance, reflecting on the – at times tense – dynamics during the sessions, one participant remarked: "There was one person within that group that I didn't really like. At the end of the day, I understood why that person's reactions were always that way."[89]

Several factors proved imperative for creating the conditions for a meaningful polylogue where a diversity of positions, perspectives and experiences could co-exist. These included the emphasis on "speaking from your experience, your vision", as noted by one participant, as well as fostering a sense of hospitality and care to generate informal but meaningful moments of collective activity (such as eating, walking, … together) and ensuring that no one felt isolated. Additionally, several participants also indicated that the collective drafting of agreements during the initial session served as a critical foundation to generate a space of collective study that allowed for mutual respect and dialogue.

Conclusion: Historians of Education and the Activation of a Decolonial Horizon

The aim of this paper has been to critically engage with the current state of history of education scholarship through the lens of decolonial thinking and decoloniality research. It started from the observation that a large portion of history of education research remains entrenched in a modernist logics of knowledge production that prioritizes theoretical advancement and an accumulation of a greater diversity of untapped perspectives. Undoubtably, postcolonial and decolonial scholarship have contributed greatly to the introduction of new, alternative and innovative historiographical turns within the discipline, encouraging historians of education to shed light on the experiences and perspectives of historical actors marginalized by colonialism. While this

[89] The analysis of the interviews conducted with all actors involved in the project, including ourselves, the moderator and the participants are included in an unpublished internship report, drafted in Dutch: Marie De Meester, "Rapport. 'De Conversaties'" (Internship Report, University of Leuven, 2023).

paper does not want to advocate a total abandonment of such a historical critique *of* colonialism, it does argue that if the discipline wants to take a decolonial turn seriously, it must contemplate more profoundly the ways in which the principles of modernism (and 'colonialism') inform its scholarly research practice. After all, if historians of education continue to adhere strictly to the epistemological frameworks of Western modernity, they might end up perpetuating the very colonial structures they seek to critique.

Building further on these critical observations, this paper introduced The Conversations as an alternative practice of collective study that approaches historical culture as a temporal space of entangled coexistence and transversality. While certainly not intended as strict methodological frame that future research *should* adopt, the discussion of our Conversations-project aimed to illustrate how a decolonial research praxis *could* be enacted within the margins of the (Western) university. More specifically, this paper presented The Conversations as an experimental study practice that aimed to bring together different people around a "problematic situation that concerns them and in which they try to learn anew and find ways of inhabiting the situation."[90] We documented that this objective necessitated an alternative approach to scholarly knowledge production, as well as a reconceptualization of our roles as scholarly experts. Instead of presenting the historical facts and interpretations accumulated in our research to the participants, The Conversations formed a 'enabling constraint' that generated a concrete space for our participants to collectively study the history of colonialism and its legacy in the present. Such collective practices of research and study that embrace a multiplicity of perspectives "from embodied positions, making knowledge locally relevant and participatory,"[91] we argue, may effectively propel history of education research toward a more 'decolonial horizon'.

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[90] Schildermans, "On Problematic Situations," 457.

[91] Gallien, "A Decolonial Turn,": 43.

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