



Decolonizing Educational Leadership: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Leading Schools

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Book Review:

Decolonizing Educational Leadership: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Leading Schools

By Ann E. Lopez

Toronto: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 96 pages

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Decolonizing Educational Leadership: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Leading Schools highlights both the challenges and possibilities for moving forward in the field of educational leadership within K–12 schools. It is a powerful call to action that implores school leaders to reflect on current leadership practices and suggests that these leaders play a pivotal role in the social, emotional, and academic well-being of their students. Leadership is messy, complex, and multifaceted. Author Ann E. Lopez (2020) notes that leadership is “wrapped up in systems of power, and often reinforces ideologies and practices of the status quo” (p. 12). She feels leaders “must respond to the growing calls for more equity and justice in schools” (p. 86). Thus, leaders are urged to (1) engage with coloniality as a starting point, in order to understand how it manifests in education; (2) deconstruct colonial ways of knowing that are embedded within education and schooling; and (3) be intentional and deliberate about disrupting Eurocentric epistemologies. For educational leaders to meet the challenges of 21st century education and address inequities, systemic racism, and other forms of oppression, Lopez says understanding, naming, and addressing coloniality is key. Through the lens of educational and school leadership discourse, Lopez provides recommendations, strategies, and solutions for incorporating alternative forms of leadership that move away from traditional Western leadership models that focus on a top-down, hierarchical framework that is deeply entrenched in business models and prioritizes organizational efficiency and profitability. She argues that Western leadership is informed by colonial and imperial frameworks. For Lopez, an alternative leadership model is one that is rooted in values, behaviours, and principles of service, respect, reciprocity, and consensus that are critical to student self-expression, identity, mattering, and belonging.

Chapter 1 situates notions of decolonizing educational leadership in current social and political contexts for social change. It makes the argument that education is a colonial project.

It outlines the manifestations of settler colonialism in education, as well as the ramifications to cultural groups, not only in the time of colonialism but in current day transgressions. The author urges school leaders to apply decolonization methods as a means to improve student outcomes and achievement. “Decolonizing approaches create space for students and educators to draw on their histories, anchor themselves in their stories, and use this knowledge for their educational advancement” (p. 18). Inclusive curricula, for example, allow students to see themselves reflected; thus, they feel that they matter, are important, and have value. This then translates into motivation and a willingness to learn.

Chapter 2 underscores the growing importance of leadership in steering a course towards transformation. This chapter asks us to think critically about the ways in which colonialism, neoliberalism, and globalization have contributed to “produc[ing] a system in which student disengagement, and inequities continue to thrive” (McMahon & Portelli, 2004, as cited in Lopez, 2020, p. 12) and offers alternatives to Western educational leadership models in the forms of Culturally Relevant Leadership, Transformative Leadership, and Social Justice Leadership.

Chapter 3 highlights the continued presence of coloniality in education, labelling coloniality as “the most general form of domination in the world” (Abdi, 2020, as cited in Lopez, 2020, p. 30) and the stealing not only cultures but knowledge (p. 30). Lopez suggests “current educational and schooling practices cannot be understood without understanding coloniality” (p. 32).

Drawing from the work of Nandy, Chapter 4 acknowledges a “second colonialism” (p. 41), speaking to the remnants of “mental colonization” (p. 44) long after the physical appropriation has occurred. This chapter offers nine steps to decolonization, as proposed by Anishinaabek scholar Kathy Absolon: detoxify from the internationalization of a colonized mindset; rethink/retheorize how, what, and why we practice, teach, and research the way we do; cleanse the spirit, mind, heart, and body from the toxins of colonial knowledge; question the norms and status quo of the application of theories; embrace discomfort; engage in a journey of learning and return to the land; restore respect for Mother Earth; and reject being a host of colonization.

Chapter 5 explores a shift from capacity building to capacity development in the implementation of decolonizing approaches to educational leadership. Capacity building equips leaders, staff, and partners with the skills, tools, strategies, resources, and relationships to be effective leaders. “Capacity development reminds us that we are in fact not building something that did not already exist; it already existed and colonization stripped it away. So, capacity development essentially accentuates that need for reclaiming what was taken away—the cultures, the stories, the history, ontologies and epistemologies” (Lopez, 2021).

Chapter 6 highlights the power of storytelling in connecting to students’ senses of self and identity. Lopez provides the example of Jamaican culture being filled with proverbs and riddles that have been passed down through generations and offers how these can help students and school leaders to understand and reconnect to their identities. Currently, I feel this is something that is lacking in school practices and is important to highlight. When students connect to their identities (through culture), they are more motivated to participate in school activities. Leaders must recognize this and create space for it to happen.

Chapter 7 brings to the fore the “footprints” European colonizers left in the form of European norms, knowledge, and practices, which informed the “organization of social, economic and political life” (p. 85) and which persists in current-day education and schooling practices.

Lopez' book offers Critical Praxis, where theory is connected to action. The text both highlights the ways in which oppression and injustice are manifested in education and schooling and provides educational leaders with strategies and recommendations with which to act as agents of change in the decolonization of education. The text is accessible and easy to read and understand.

The author positions herself openly and honestly within the research, identifying as a Black, Canadian, Jamaican, educational leader, herself "disrupt[ing] the impact of colonial education" (p. 3). Lopez very clearly defines concepts and terminologies necessary for the reader to comprehend the text (e.g., coloniality vs. colonialism, pedagogies of resistance, mental colonization, etc.). In order to move from a place of theory into a place of action, Lopez places the onus on educational leaders to reflect on their leadership approaches and urges them to cultivate a decolonizing philosophy that guides action, to be intentional about wanting to change, and to develop clear action plans to support the process and journey. The book's greatest strengths are the solid and practical recommendations for educational leaders to employ in order to bring about change and transformation. However, while the book highlights Black and Indigenous students' stories and experiences, the work could be further strengthened by including more diverse representation of the experiences of students of colour. For example, it would be useful to include perspectives from additional racialized groups, such as Asian and Latinx students, as they face some intersecting challenges.

The evidence is well-researched, drawing from the author's personal narrative, as well as from the experiences and research of various racialized academics and scholars. The methodology used is qualitative and ethnographic. The research draws from 1) principles of settler colonial theory (in examining the ongoing system of power that perpetuates the repression of marginalized peoples); 2) decolonizing theory (in revealing and dismantling colonialist power from institutional structures, systems, and ideologies); 3) critical education theories (in challenging dominant ideologies and practices in education); and 4) anti-colonial discourse and frameworks (by supporting how one can disrupt the operations of colonial thinking in social and political spheres in education).

Decolonizing Educational Leadership: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Leading Schools is a compelling call to action, positioning decolonizing educational leadership as an alternative leadership approach, highlighting the impact of dominant culture on curriculum, teaching, leading, learning, classroom practices, and policies, and emphasizing how colonial practices in education are upheld by current educational policies, grounded in neoliberalism. This new approach to leadership calls on leaders and policy makers to develop skills, collaborate, and reinvigorate the self, implement decolonizing education into principal preparation programs and educational leadership programs, and develop anti-colonial and decolonizing policies. It successfully does what it sets out to do, which is to critically examine educational leadership in an effort to reimagine how policies and practices can intentionally disrupt colonial remnants in discourses and practices of educational policy and the organization of schools. In a collective attempt to create space for students and educators to draw from their history and anchor themselves in the stories, we must remember the primary purpose of schooling—to equip students with access to learn, participate, and succeed. This book provides concrete strategies and approaches for how this can be achieved. Educators must "engage on a journey of unlearning, relearning, rereading, and reframing notions of school leadership grounded in more liberatory approaches" (p. 47). Lopez reminds us that "[c]olonialism, and subsequently decolonization, has very real and material effects" (p. 86) and that "[f]or decolonization to be effective, it must be a complete project in schools that include[s] leadership practices, curriculum, pedagogy and overall school culture" (p.

86). This book is an important contribution to educational leadership, decolonization studies, and social justice research and scholarship. It is beneficial for emerging leaders, educational leaders, teacher leaders, scholars, practitioners, and anyone who believes that “education is a legitimate process for growth and change” (p. 47).

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