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Developing Sustainable Education through Knowledge Justice

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1. Introduction

This report sets out the findings of a small-scale qualitative research project, funded by the Centre for Global Education in York, into the views and experiences of secondary school teachers in decolonising the curriculum. The report seeks to define what is meant by knowledge justice, its application in a school context and its relationship to decolonising the curriculum. The report also offers insights from teachers putting these ideas into practice and suggests implications for consideration by those seeking to pursue a knowledge justice and decolonising approach in schools.



2. General Overview

Recent debates about sustainable education and knowledge justice have highlighted the importance of challenging the legacy of educational assumptions and practices from the UK's imperial past and the ways that this has legitimised certain kinds of knowledge. This has privileged Western frames of thought whilst disavowing others, with preference and superiority afforded to Western ways of knowing (Di Angelo, 2018). Critically examining this legacy and challenging its impact on schooling would provide greater exposure to diverse knowledges which is valuable both for: a better self-understanding and understanding of humanity; and for addressing the big societal challenges of our times. This means giving students the opportunity to engage with a plurality of knowledges and understandings from a variety of perspectives and traditions and foster what Edward Said calls 'the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons' (2003, p. xiv). This 'will to understand', the report argues, implies being expansive rather than reductive in the way knowledge is viewed. It suggests examining what is included in school curricula and taught in schools and considering which kinds of knowledge traditions and interests are validated and selected for inclusion.

3. What Does the Literature Say?

To understand better some of the issues and debates in this area, researchers undertook a review of the literature on knowledge justice, decoloniality and its application in education. Decolonisation is not a new concept, but it has gained significant attention as a visible social, political, and intellectual movement among educators, academics, and activists who collectively seek to converge around the term to dismantle racial and social inequalities and injustices (Masaka, 2019; Bhabra, Nisancioglu and Gebrial, 2020). The literature indicates that there are frequent and vigorous debates on the questions of decoloniality and the degree to which contemporary education policy and practice uphold humanistic values associated with sustainability such as cooperation, collaboration, equity, justice, and a commitment to notions of a common good. Some writers highlight the contrast between these humanistic ideals and the neoliberal policies that have influenced education since the 1980s for example Lotz-Sisitka (2016) and Rowe (2007). They explain how neoliberal thought has sought to frame education through narrow bureaucratic market rationalities, prioritising consumer-driven knowledge over humanistic values of equity, diversity and inclusion. In this context, some writers, for example Macfarlane and Ogazon (2011), illustrate how such a system prioritises relentless testing, standardisation, and subject atomisation, which subsequently marginalises cooperative learning and diminishes global connections in the curriculum. It is argued that under such a system, students are often unknowingly conditioned to view education primarily as a pathway to employment rather than a humanistic endeavour (Lotz-Sisitka, 2016).

UNESCO (2015, p.3) has proposed an approach to sustainable education that emphasises 'cultural literacy, on the basis of respect and equal dignity, helping to weave together the social, economic, and environmental.' Within such a framework of knowledge justice, the call to rethink education by prioritising the 'hearing of silent voices' in the form of those individuals and communities who have historically been marginalised or ignored can be seen as a merging of values linked to both sus-

tainable education and the intellectual movement of decolonisation in pursuit of knowledge justice. This convergence advocates for educational curricula reflecting contemporary society's cultural hybridity.

Amongst various approaches to decolonising the curriculum prominent are methods which critically examine and expose colonial legacies, seeking to eliminate inequalities (Heleta, 2016; Langdon, 2013). At the heart of this movement was the Martiniquan philosopher Aimé Césaire (2000), who argued that decolonising the curriculum was fundamentally about raising awareness and challenging colonised ideals, customs, and imperial worldviews. Césaire's thinking has raised questions about whether decolonising the curriculum should focus solely on rejecting Eurocentric perspectives and instead move towards a position that places non-Western and Indigenous knowledge systems at the centre of educational curricula.

The survey of the literature for this project suggests that questions of what should be taught, and following on from this, questions about pedagogy and assessment have wide public interest and should therefore be open to public debate (Tikly, 2023, p.39). This research aims to contribute to that debate, through investigating why and how a small sample of secondary school teachers have developed decolonial approaches to their subjects within the school curriculum in England; what challenges they have encountered; and to evaluate their understandings of the impact of decolonial teaching methods in developing students' understandings of equity, social justice, global knowledge, and cooperation.

To explore these questions and the approaches and resources utilised by teachers in their classroom practice, the Centre for Global Education provided grant funding to conduct a small scale qualitative research study.



4. The Research

The qualitative research study, which aimed to explore the possibilities for interconnected and epistemologically pluralistic sustainable learning in schools, was informed by the following research question: how can we develop sustainable education through knowledge justice or 'epistemic justice'? From this question, the research team identified two aims for the study:

- to investigate current barriers impacting knowledge justice within the school curriculum in England; and
- to evaluate the impact of decolonial teaching approaches in developing students' understandings of equity, social justice, global knowledge, and cooperation.

The empirical data collection to enable investigation of these questions was through semi-structured focus discussion group interviews with teachers, curriculum leads from different discipline areas and school leaders. The interview questions were designed to elicit understandings (and examples) of decolonising approaches used by the participants. A purposeful convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit participants through contacts and networks of the research team and eleven participants across three secondary school settings in Yorkshire and Merseyside regions agreed to take part. Two discussion groups took place face to face on school premises and one was conducted via online video conferencing. Ethical approval for this research was given by York St John University research ethics committee and it was conducted in line with the relevant university ethical guidelines, including anonymisation of participants and data. Focus group sessions were transcribed and analysed in a process of thematic analysis from which the research team constructed and elaborated the themes reported in the Findings section (below).

5. Findings

In this section of the report, the categories and themes assembled from the analytic process are discussed and illustrated with selected data extracts.

Knowledge justice

Central to the question of decoloniality is the issue of the origin of knowledge, how it is constructed and given prominence and who it belongs to. As a teacher at one school put it:

'one of the things you need to be conscious of when delivering the content is what has been made and who has it been made by' (teacher, School C)

Some respondents demonstrated an awareness of the impact of colonialism's legacy on the way in which knowledge is constructed, how it is transmitted in the social world and the importance of teaching as a means of challenge and exposing young people to a range of perspectives:

'trying to decolonise those perspectives to make them more broad and a wider range but also we want the students to think about like why it is that those perspectives are overlooked ... So, I guess I'm kind of taking it from diversifying the curriculum to more decolonising' (teacher, School B)

This suggests that decolonising is not solely about alternative knowledge but also bound up with enabling students to understand the process of knowledge creation and knowledge justice. This process was characterised by the respondent as moving from diversifying to decolonising the curriculum, something that should embrace both the content of the curriculum and the pedagogical approaches employed by teachers.

Factors driving a decolonising approach to the curriculum

The research suggests three chief motivations and drivers for adopting a decolonising approach that can be constructed from the data, the most significant of which seems to be the interest and motivation of individual or groups of teachers to provide their students with an education that enables them to understand better and engage with the world they live in.

'We do want those students to also be more aware globally of the world and different people's lived experiences. We don't want them to grow up with like one narrative of British history and that be it.' (teacher, School B)

Offering an educational experience that reflects the reality of students' diverse backgrounds which is not rooted in Eurocentrism and anti-Blackness is also suggested as a driver as this extract illustrates:

'We have students from all different backgrounds, so its important they see themselves in school, and in jobs and careers and things like that.' (teacher, School C)

This motivation is most frequently attributed to individual teachers' commitment and interest, not school policy or leadership initiative. Whilst this grassroots, teacher-led approach was spoken of positively, the lack of policy and leadership direction, both locally and nationally, and the attendant lack of support was identified as a difficulty for a decolonising approach.

'So it is all grassroots. So we are just pushing up ourselves from the bottom, but actually there's no support from the top or encouragement from the top necessarily which is what we should be doing.' (teacher, School B)

In one school, whole school policy was identified as being a driver for a decolonising approach linked to introduction of Citizenship GCSE for all Key Stage Four students, giving the approach greater purchase and importance across the school:

Yeah, yeah, whole school approach. And then it will also give a little bit more validity to it, because you know there will be qualification tied to it as well. So it means that there will be a little bit more buy in as well.’ (teachers, School C)

Teachers at this school also suggested that a driver for adopting a decolonising approach was the necessity for the school to fulfil its legal obligations to teach British values, and how this could not adequately be fulfilled without decolonisation of the curriculum:

‘And you think about the actual British values, you know without colonisation, without a wider view, that you’re not actually teaching it correctly. If you’re not incorporating that diversity in school, you wouldn’t be following the guidelines for teaching it in schools, you know, that would be the wrong way to teach it.’ (teacher, School C)

Teachers at another school, however, felt that a central, policy driven approach would act to stifle creativity, presenting an obstacle to decolonising. The ethos of the institution and values of teachers with a strong orientation to justice and fairness was of greater importance in ensuring decolonising work took place:

‘This is something, its absolutely ingrained in our in our ethos and anything, anything overly strategic in terms of approaching these issues would probably kill the subject.’ (teacher, School A)

The research suggests that motivation of teachers to engage with and implement a decolonising approach is driven by individual commitment, beliefs and values which position social and knowledge justice at the core of the teacher’s role and the purpose of teaching, alongside the desire to help young people engage in a way which reflects the values of the school.



Benefits for students from decolonising approaches to the curriculum

When asked about what outcomes for young people came from their work to decolonise the curriculum, all respondents suggested that measuring such things was difficult and not susceptible to the forms of accountability and assessment routinely applied in schools. Respondents suggested that there were benefits, which they observed as teachers, related to better engagement of students from diverse backgrounds who recognised themselves and their heritage(s) in what was being taught.

‘These days, your classes are much more diverse and actually one impact I would observe anecdotally, is that students who are from perhaps an Indian background or an Arabian background or whatever. They do see their own histories now.’ (teacher, School B)

Another area of impact for students highlighted by the research is the development of critical thinking and being able to listen to and respond to different perspectives and views; the fostering of critical citizenship, what one teacher referred to as ‘helping our students to be the citizens they need to be’:

‘I think that those students who leave us are able to have an open mind to be able to listen, to come out of the echo chamber and hear other voices. So hopefully that’s creating, you know, citizens, which are gonna really be important in communities.’ (teacher, School A)

Understandings of decoloniality and Black voices

From the analysis of the data, it is possible to construct a view of participants’ understanding of decoloniality and the role and importance of Black voices and perspectives in shaping this. One significant factor in the growth of this understanding would seem to be the wave of protest to the murder by police in the USA of George Floyd which crystallised a range of responses to racial injustices and gained global expression in the Black Lives Matter movement and an accompanying wave of activism, debate and public awareness. Coupled with teachers’ growing awareness of issues of justice and colonialism, and individual teachers’ responses to the opportunities and challenges of increasingly diverse school populations, this would seem to have acted as an impetus for change in the curriculum driven by individual teachers rather than institutional or policy responses. Such responses have not been without a critical reaction and an awareness amongst teachers of the political sensitivities and difficulties of challenging deeply held assumptions about hierarchies of privilege, Eurocentrism and anti-Blackness which underpin the accepted wisdom of the curriculum was expressed by respondents. For example, teachers at School B expressed an understanding of this political reaction to their work but felt it was based on an ignorance of what they were doing which could be addressed through dialogue and opportunities to expose politicians and opinion formers (local and national) to their work.

‘Well in fact actually there’s been conservative voices saying that actually we’re teaching, we’re teaching woke history. Oh yeah, well, that are critical of decolonising.... And that, it’s not just from the Daily Mail.’

‘Please come and visit, stop slagging us all off. Please visit and see what we’re doing.’ (teachers, School B)

The following extracts illustrate how teachers in the study have developed their understanding of decoloniality and the importance of challenging the assumptions of whiteness and seeking out and incorporating Black voices and perspectives.



‘Well, I think, <a colleague>, a long time ago said that we were always teaching black people as victims, and we very much wanted to work on actually seeing black people, as you know, agents in themselves working for their own freedom’ (teacher, School B)

‘I mean, one thing that <Black student> brought up actually is to what extent is my voice being represented in planning as you know, and to what extent and what I’ve been represented in this meeting. So it’s a good question. Yeah and you’ll have noticed that we are predominantly, I think, almost entirely actually a white staff here.’

‘Apart from the technicians.’

‘Apart from the technicians, which is an issue in itself’ (teachers, School A)

Here, the respondents begin to develop a critique of the institutional aspects of privilege and hierarchies of power that exclude Black voices by showing awareness of the way in which people of colour are relegated to supporting and less powerful roles in the school staffing structure. This is an important consequence of work to decolonise the curriculum; as issues of power and justice are raised in the curriculum, the same analytical gaze begins to turn on the structures and workings of the institution.

Situating decoloniality within the curriculum

Differing approaches to who should be responsible for the work of decolonising the curriculum are suggested by the research. As indicated

above, the role of individual and groups of teachers working on their own initiative is identified as a significant driver. Decolonial approaches being embedded throughout the curriculum and not as an ‘add on’ are seen as very important as this extract illustrates.

‘We tend not to make a big fuss about Black History Month because our philosophy is that we teach black history all the time. It’s everybody’s history.’ (teacher, School B)

In this way, the respondents speak about their move away from separate additions and special events in the curriculum and stress their attempts to reshape the whole curriculum to integrate subjugated and marginalised knowledge.

‘And what’s most important to me is the embedded element of addressing the decolonising the curriculum. Any attempts that are bolt ons or extraneous or significant units, they fall into all the problems that you read about’ (teacher, School A)

Here the importance of embedding decolonising approaches is emphasised to ensure subjugated and ignored perspectives and voices become normalised and a routine expectation of staff and students.

The research suggests that teachers are able to exercise skill and creativity in using the relative freedoms at Key Stage 3 to reshape and decolonise the curriculum. However, there is a strong indication that the constraints imposed by the assessment regime at Key Stage 4 and GCSE and Key Stage 5 and GCE have a limiting effect on the flexibility and opportunities for a decolonising

approach because of the more centrally directed content and the requirement of examination syllabuses. Teachers at one school felt strongly that this would need to be addressed if decoloniality were to be better realised at Key Stages 4 and 5.

‘And massive thing will be to change Key Stage 4 you know, GCSE and A level are the biggies. Like you say they are political footballs.’ (teacher, School B)

6. Implications

From the analysis of the focus group discussions and teachers’ views and perspectives on decolonising the curriculum the report suggests the following implications should be considered by those concerned with knowledge justice and decolonising the secondary school curriculum.

At an individual school level

- The importance of recognising and supporting the interest, creativity and motivation of individual teachers and providing appropriate opportunities for this to develop.
- The need for institutional support at the level of school leadership and governance by providing an appropriate authorising environment and incorporating decolonising aims within the institution’s public value proposition.
- The need to consider what policy response the institution will adopt in relation to issues of decolonising the curriculum.
- The need to consider consultation and engagement with the full range of school partners, community and stakeholders to build a supportive consensus for decolonising work.
- The importance of enabling and supporting teachers to both develop and prepare resources and critically examine existing materials and texts, taking advantage of the wide range of material available and local contexts. The research team have developed an exemplar of what such a framework to critically examine and formulate resources might involve (see appendix). The research team is willing and able to offer professional development sessions to schools and groups of teachers to support the use of such a framework and assist in developing approaches to decolonising the curriculum.

At a wider policy and political level

- Recognise the threat to the principles and practice of sustainable education and knowledge justice from the rise of populism and divisive rhetoric and acknowledge the need to support a decolonising approach as an important aid in developing critical thinking and commitment to addressing racial and social injustices.
- Acknowledge and seek to address the impact of the centralised performative framework of hierarchical accountability that underpins the current curriculum and assessment regime, particularly at Key Stage 4 and 5 and in the GCSE and GCE qualifications.

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8. Appendix

Aspects and resources for decolonisation of the school curriculum

This resource for teachers is intended as an aid to planning and implementing decolonisation of the curriculum. The first column suggests five aspects of knowledge justice and each aspect is accompanied by a series of questions which are intended as reflective prompts that teachers may find useful to discuss to inform thinking and planning. These aspects have been derived from a Centre for Global Education (York) funded research study between 2024 and 2025 into teachers' perspectives and experiences of decolonising the school curriculum. The second column sets out some examples of resources relating to these themes that can be accessed online for reference and use by teachers and educators as appropriate.

Aspects of knowledge justice	Illustrative Resources
<p>Knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whose knowledge? From when/where and for what purpose? Contextualising the origins and purposes of knowledge. What is the influence of 'official' knowledge (statutory curriculum, assessment and external exams)? How can pedagogical approaches promote students' exposure to learning from the knowledge of minoritised groups, as well as learning about such groups? 	<p>Drawing upon Indigenous knowledges; voices of under-represented and marginalised groups; using lived experiences; books for children (many of which are in the York St John University library):</p> <p>Decolonisation in theory and practice: Recommended reading and resources York St John University</p> <p>Some resources and ideas including essays and film from Carol Back could be found here.</p> <p>David Olusoga, the author of 'Black and British' (2016): A comprehensive overview of Britain's role in the world and what his experiences of growing up as a Black man in Britain have been. Lots of useful information about our society and its wealth, contextualises racism and our links to the Slave Trade and colonialism.</p> <p>A link to 'Black and British: A Forgotten History' on the BBC is here.</p> <p>Histories of ancient Africa and Asia.</p> <p>https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/information-for-teachers/teaching-resources.html</p> <p>Early African and Indian migrant stories:</p> <p>https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z327cwx/revision/2</p> <p>Black officers from the Commonwealth who served in wars:</p> <p>https://www.cwgc.org/our-work/blog/great-war-black-officers-stories-you-need-to-know/</p> <p>Free teacher resources from The Black Curriculum:</p> <p>https://theblackcurriculum.com/resources#block-ab021add4a1cdb74e123</p> <p>Science – Henrietta Lacks: https://youtu.be/pgB1lqGp8BE</p> <p>Stories from Australia's First Peoples: https://dreamtime.net.au/</p>

Aspects of knowledge justice	Illustrative Resources
<p>Teacher Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How much scope, control and autonomy do teachers have to determine what is taught and how it is taught? How can they create spaces within constraints? What opportunities are there to work collaboratively and creatively with others? What role does the institution play? Is it supportive, neutral or obstructive? Have teachers examined their values, rationales and aspirations for what they are trying to achieve? Is there an orientation towards social justice? [Or 'how can teachers continue to ...' - maybe more ongoing and open-ended] 	<p>Teach the Future - Curriculum change for climate: https://www.teachthefuture.uk/tracked-changes-project</p> <p>Teaching mathematics for social justice (teachers and educators working collaboratively and creatively): https://mathsocialjustice.org/</p> <p>Royal Meteorological Society: Met Link – resources made by teachers for teacher: https://www.metlink.org/teaching-resources/</p> <p>Orientation towards social justice from teacher educators in England – the anti-racism framework has been disseminated across all ITE providers in England: https://www.ucet.ac.uk/downloads/14636-Anti-Racism-ITET-framework.pdf</p>
<p>Local context and school community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do all students recognise themselves in what is being taught, and are their perspectives, cultures and heritages valued and drawn on? How is the wider community in which the school is situated drawn on? 	<p>Teacher Inclusion and Diversity conference in June 2022 includes various shared from presenters to inform practice:</p> <p>YSJ Teacher Education Diversity and Inclusion Conference - Initial Teacher Education at York St John University</p> <p>Leeds Heritage Corner: https://heritagecornerleeds.com/</p> <p>This link provides further information on:</p> <p>The Ivory Bangled Lady of York in park museum and Septimus Severus, Nesyamun (Leeds)</p> <p>Olaudah Equiano - stayed with the Leeds Quaker and abolitionist Wilson Armistead in Leeds.</p>

Aspects of knowledge justice	Illustrative Resources
<p>Pedagogy and Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are students encouraged to develop their skills to critically question and examine texts and sources? What are the benefits and outcomes for student learning, beyond additional content/subject knowledge? Is this approach embedded within all subjects i.e. does it run through all aspects of teaching, learning and organisation across the curriculum (rather than a 'ghettoisation' of content and approaches)? <p>Support for a decolonial approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the networks and other opportunities within the school, the locality and more widely, for professional development, for testing out ideas and approaches and for access to other voices? How can we foster an environment in which our assumptions are sometimes 'unsettled' without overwhelming busy and committed staff? 	<p>For example, at York St John University there is a plethora of online resources across the curriculum (see links above and below) for students and teachers to critically examine texts and sources.</p> <p>As an example, PGCE mathematics students developed a range of resources on climate change, critical mathematics education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops critical thinking skills Promotes social justice and equity Enhances problem-solving skills Increases engagement and motivation Fosters creativity and innovation. <p>For further development of these ideas on teaching social justice in mathematics, please read the following publication:</p> <p>Towards a Socially Just Mathematics Curriculum</p> <p>Subject associations for teachers and teacher educators will offer professional development.</p> <p>Jamaica Windrush Eulogy with link to Leeds: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-48622784</p> <p>Yorkshire Young Asian Achiever Awards: https://yayas.uk/2023-shortlist/</p> <p>Yorkshire-based QED: 'Turning Challenges into Opportunities since 1990': https://www.qed-uk.org/</p> <p>Since the riots of summer 2024 in England, schools working to develop empathy</p> <p>https://www.empathylab.uk/don-t-hate---educate</p> <p>Free professional development materials, videos and links for primary and secondary mathematics, geography, history and English: UCL/centre-climate-change-and-sustainability-education/teaching-sustainable-futures</p>

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(Images from Sam Balye, Taylor Flowe and Museums Victoria on Unsplash)

