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From Diversification to Decolonisation: Navigating the Challenges and Opportunities for School Teachers to Reimagine the Curriculum

This think piece examines the transformative potential of decolonising the school curriculum through the lens of knowledge justice and epistemic equity. Drawing on our experiences of working with school educators and relevant literature, this article explores how teachers in England could embed decolonial principles into their pedagogical practices to challenge Eurocentric assumptions, broaden epistemological inclusivity, and foster critical citizenship. The article distinguishes between diversifying and decolonising the curriculum, emphasising that the latter requires a fundamental rethinking of knowledge systems, power relations, and pedagogical intent. Examples of classroom strategies across humanities, science, and mathematics illustrate how decolonial approaches can make learning more culturally responsive and socially meaningful. The piece concludes by arguing that systemic support, whether through school leadership or policy reform, is vital to move beyond individual efforts toward sustained, collective transformation. Decolonising the curriculum is thus positioned as both an ethical and epistemic imperative for equitable and sustainable education. In summary, this piece seeks neither to replace Western knowledge with Indigenous or non-Western knowledge nor to merge different traditions into a single, undifferentiated curriculum. Rather, the aim is to create pedagogical spaces where students can examine different knowledge systems in relation to their histories, methods, purposes, contexts, and limits.

Keywords: Decolonisation; Knowledge Justice; Epistemic Justice; Curriculum Transformation; Critical Pedagogy

Decolonisation must start from a place of strength; a place that is open to other ways of knowing and being. Only there can we find meaning and belonging within our own sense of identity (Martin et al., 2020, p.317)

This think piece explores how decolonising the school curriculum can promote knowledge justice by challenging Eurocentric biases, amplifying marginalised epistemologies, and fostering critical, inclusive learning environments. Drawing on relevant research and our experiences as educators, it highlights both the challenges teachers face, such as institutional resistance, and the transformative potential of decolonial pedagogies for equitable and socially just education.

The concept of decolonising the curriculum has gained significant attention in contemporary education, driven by a broader movement to address the legacies of colonialism in knowledge production and distribution (Race et al., 2022). At its core, decolonisation questions whose knowledge is prioritised, whose histories are represented, and whose voices are amplified within educational settings and broader social life. This movement goes beyond mere inclusion by advocating a comprehensive revaluation of curriculum design that interrogates Eurocentrism and seeks to integrate diverse perspectives and traditions (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu, 2018). A key distinction throughout this article is between diversification and decolonisation. Diversification expands representation within the existing curriculum by including a wider range of voices, histories, examples, and cultural traditions. Decolonisation goes further by asking how the curriculum itself has been shaped by colonial histories, racialised hierarchies, disciplinary exclusions, and assumptions about whose knowledge is universal, rigorous, or authoritative. The focus on Indigenous, African, diasporic, South Asian, Islamic, Latin American, Aboriginal, Native American, and local knowledge systems is therefore not intended to establish a new hierarchy of inclusion. Rather, it signals the need to examine how different knowledge traditions have been positioned unequally in relation to Western epistemologies, and how teachers might support students to understand both the value of these traditions and the power relations that have shaped their marginalisation. By focusing on knowledge justice, the project seeks to explore how these approaches can foster equity, critical thinking, and global awareness, while also addressing the systemic barriers that hinder such initiatives (Elhinnawy, 2023).

Although decolonising the curriculum presents notable challenges, including institutional resistance and political pushback, it also offers transformative potential. For educators, it can reignite a commitment to justice and inclusion; for students, it nurtures critical thinking and active citizenship; and for educational institutions, it provides an opportunity to drive meaningful change towards a more equitable and sustainable future (Swain et al, 2025; Race et al., 2022).

Decolonisation of the school curriculum and knowledge justice

Decolonisation of the curriculum is a transformative educational endeavour that interrogates and dismantles the enduring legacies of colonialism embedded in knowledge systems, pedagogies, and institutional hierarchies. It compels educators and policymakers to ask fundamental questions about whose knowledge is legitimised, whose histories are prioritised, and which epistemologies are rendered invisible in mainstream education (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancıoğlu, 2018). To strengthen this argument, we distinguish between three related but distinct concepts: knowledge justice, epistemic justice, and epistemic equity. Knowledge justice concerns whose intellectual traditions, histories, methods, and explanatory frameworks are included, valued, and made available to learners (Kurtulmus and Irzik, 2017). Epistemic justice concerns who is recognised as a legitimate knower, interpreter, theorist, and producer of knowledge (Fricker, 2013). Epistemic equity refers to the wider educational condition in which learners have meaningful access to plural knowledge systems and are supported to interrogate the historical and political processes through which some forms of knowledge become authoritative while others are marginalised (Dymitrow and Mihaylov, 2026). These concepts are interdependent: knowledge justice addresses curriculum content and structure; epistemic justice focuses on recognition and participation in knowledge-making; and epistemic equity represents the broader educational aim of creating fairer conditions for learning, interpretation, and social action across diverse contexts and knowledge traditions.

The theoretical roots of decolonisation draw on postcolonial and anti-colonial scholarship, notably the works of Edward Said and Aimé Césaire. In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) exposed how Western scholarship constructed the "Orient" as inferior and static, thereby justifying imperial control. His call for a "will to understand" advocated for authentic engagement with other cultures, grounded in respect rather than domination. Césaire, in *Discourse on Colonialism* (2000), similarly revealed the violence and dehumanisation underpinning

colonialism, rejecting the notion of Empire as a civilising mission and exposing its epistemic erasures. Both scholars call for a radical reimagining of education that confronts the ideological foundations of Western knowledge systems.

Literature shows that decolonisation extends far beyond diversifying curricula; it demands epistemological and pedagogical transformation. Teachers reported shifting from "diversifying" to "decolonising" by embedding Indigenous, African, and other non-Western knowledge systems into their teaching, thereby disrupting dominant epistemologies and cultivating critical engagement. This reorientation aligns with UNESCO's (2015) vision for sustainable education, which promotes equity, intercultural understanding, and learner dignity. As Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2016) argue, decolonising education nurtures the common good by countering neoliberal individualism. Ultimately, it challenges entrenched power relations and fosters critically engaged, inclusive learning environments that advance justice, empathy, and global consciousness, despite persistent institutional and political resistance (Race et al., 2022).

Challenges: Teacher's Agency, Motivation, and Constraints

Diversifying and decolonising the curriculum are distinct but related processes that aim to make education more inclusive and equitable. Diversifying the curriculum involves expanding the range of perspectives, voices, and knowledge that are included, while decolonising goes further by critically examining and challenging the power dynamics and colonial legacies embedded in existing knowledge systems and teaching practices. A decolonising approach, therefore, aims to critically reassess and disrupt the arguments and assumptions of Western and colonial-focused thought within the school curriculum by investigating how staff can reframe the curriculum and pedagogy to challenge traditional Eurocentric curricula and hierarchies of knowledge (Swain, Green and Mierzwinski, 2025).

Teachers' agency plays a significant role in pursuing decolonial approaches, and the impetus to be agentic in this field is frequently attributed to individual teachers' commitment and interest. Policy, both national and at the school level, and leadership initiatives and requirements can drive decolonising work, particularly in curriculum and assessment, while a lack of clear policy and leadership may constrain a systematic approach to curriculum change. While individual teacher commitment, beliefs, and values are often important catalysts for decolonising work, such agency should not be understood as the sole or most reliable driver of change. Teachers' capacity to act is

shaped by curriculum policy, school leadership, assessment regimes, access to professional learning, departmental cultures, and the availability of high-quality resources. Decolonising the curriculum therefore requires attention to both individual agency and the institutional conditions that enable or constrain it.

In England, resistance to curriculum decolonisation is shaped not only by interpersonal or ideological factors but also by policy, accountability, and disciplinary traditions (Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021). Teachers operate within curriculum frameworks, examination specifications, inspection regimes, and university-entry expectations that often privilege particular forms of knowledge, language, argumentation, and cultural capital (Eldridge, Kalter, and Taylor, 2023). Discourses such as “British Values” may support democratic reflection but can also centre national cohesion while marginalising colonial histories, racialised inequalities, and contested memories of empire. Similarly, disciplinary traditions can frame subjects such as history, science, geography, and mathematics as neutral bodies of knowledge, obscuring their relationships with colonialism, extraction, translation, and erasure. These structures may make decolonising work appear optional or risky, particularly where teachers are primarily assessed through measurable outcomes and examination performance (Race et al., 2022). The consequences of not decolonising are significant. Maintaining colonial knowledge hierarchies can marginalise students whose histories, languages, communities, and knowledge traditions remain underrepresented, while reproducing inequalities through dominant cultural codes. It can also limit understanding of how colonialism shapes contemporary inequalities and constrain education’s contribution to sustainable futures by overlooking Indigenous, African, diasporic, local, and other non-Western knowledge traditions.

A further motivation is concerned with teachers' desire to develop criticality in their students. This entails fostering critical citizenship through the development of critical thinking and the ability to listen to and respond to a plurality of perspectives and views. Personal identities and experiences would seem to be crucial in shaping a teacher's commitment and interest in decolonising the curriculum, as they influence their perspective on power dynamics and their willingness to challenge dominant narratives. Understanding their own positionality - including race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other social identities - allows teachers to critically examine biases and inequalities within the curriculum and to exercise agency in pursuit of change.

Opportunities: Pedagogical Practices and Curriculum Design

In the following examples, we present some strategies for teaching towards decolonisation. The strategies used in the examples, all for Key Stage 3 (11–14-year-olds), can be adapted for primary-age pupils.

Teaching World War I through biography

Examining historical periods through individual biographies provides a powerful means of linking personal experiences to broader social, political, and cultural contexts. Biographical approaches allow students to interrogate how historical narratives are constructed, highlighting whose voices are prioritised and whose are marginalised. This method repositions stories from minoritised groups as central, challenging conventional, Eurocentric interpretations. For instance, Lyndon-Cohen (2021) utilises the life of Britain's first Black infantry officer and professional footballer, Walter Tull, to explore the First World War. By tracing Tull's Edwardian childhood, mixed-race heritage, and early experiences of discrimination, students gain insight into the racial and social hierarchies of the era. His football career, shaped by racist abuse, alongside his military service, documented through newspapers and letters to his brother, illustrates intersections of race, nationalism, and belonging. Engaging with primary sources to draft letters supporting Tull's Military Cross encourages critical analysis of evidence, representation, and censorship.

A Decolonial Pedagogy for Science Education

While humanities subjects such as history, geography, English, and RE lend themselves to such interpretivist, decolonial approaches, disciplines like science and mathematics are often framed as neutral, obscuring the socio-cultural and colonial dynamics that shaped their development. Gandolfi (2020) presents a compelling example of how the science curriculum can be decolonised through a process-based and narrative approach that foregrounds global interconnections, cultural knowledge, and the power relations shaping scientific development. In our view, such approaches help move towards epistemic equity. By focusing on the history of medicine through structured inquiry, students critically deconstructed linear narratives of scientific progress, interrogating issues of ownership, exploitation, and the extraction of Indigenous knowledge during colonial encounters. Integrating topics such as biodiversity and vaccines within this framework allowed exploration of how Indigenous expertise has contributed to medical innovation, often under conditions of coercion or environmental harm. Case studies, including Ghanaian antimalarial bark treatments and Indian snakeroot for

hypertension, encouraged reflection on whether such 'collaborations' were equitable or exploitative. This approach positions multiple knowledge systems as legitimate and valuable, fostering critical awareness of how science is entangled with colonial histories and enabling more inclusive, reflexive, and ethically grounded science education.

Pedagogical Approach to Teaching Shape and Space

A cross-curricular approach that integrates mathematics with art, textiles, and religious education can connect abstract concepts to tangible cultural contexts, enriching students' spatial reasoning and cultural understanding. Using culturally diverse patterns - from African textiles (Zaslavsky, 1990), Islamic art, Aboriginal designs, and Native American crafts - students explore geometry through creative practice and critical reflection. Activities such as compass-and-straightedge constructions enable the recreation of authentic cultural motifs, reinforcing precision while highlighting mathematical aesthetics. By analysing symmetry, rotation, reflection, and translation in artefacts such as Botswana baskets, Roman mosaics, and the Alhambra, learners contextualise mathematical principles within diverse cultural traditions, fostering inclusive and globally informed mathematical literacy.

In the above three strategies of curriculum decolonisation, assessment is central to whether decolonising curriculum work becomes meaningful or remains peripheral. If assessment rewards only recall of dominant narratives, canonical knowledge, or culturally narrow forms of expression, then decolonial pedagogies may be undermined even where classroom teaching is innovative. Assessment for decolonising education should therefore examine not only what students know, but how they analyse the production, circulation, exclusion, and legitimisation of knowledge. Possible assessment approaches include reflective commentaries, comparative source analysis, oral presentations, dialogic inquiry, community-based projects, and written tasks that ask students to evaluate why particular knowledge traditions have been privileged or marginalised. Such assessment should not reduce Indigenous, African, local, or non-Western knowledge systems to interchangeable examples. Rather, it should support students to understand the specificity, authority, context, and ethical conditions under which knowledge is produced and shared.

Conclusion: Institutional and Policy-Level Implications

This think piece outlines pedagogical strategies to support schoolteachers in decolonising the curriculum and advancing knowledge justice, epistemic justice and epistemic equity. While such approaches face considerable challenges, they offer transformative potential for

teachers, students, and institutions. For decolonisation to gain traction, sustained, systemic, and collaborative support is essential. At the school level, meaningful curriculum transformation requires whole-school commitment, guided by leadership, collaboration, and critical reflection. School leaders play a pivotal role in legitimising decolonial practice and challenging entrenched epistemic hierarchies. When leaders actively support decolonising initiatives, teachers can move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward authentic engagement with diverse epistemologies and lived experiences. Arar et al. (2025) propose an Indigenous ethics-driven framework emphasising relationality, decolonial critique, and reciprocal engagement, including dialogic spaces for ongoing professional learning. However, the language of ethical standards requires careful handling. Ethical practice should not be assumed to derive from a universal framework imposed by Western institutions, nor should it be treated as a settled set of procedures detached from context. In decolonising curriculum work, ethics should be understood as relational, situated, and dialogic. This means asking how decisions are made, who participates in them, who benefits from curricular inclusion, who may be harmed by misrepresentation, and how schools remain accountable to the communities and knowledge traditions they engage. Ethical curriculum design therefore requires ongoing negotiation rather than a one-off act of approval.

Iterative, reflective professional development and collaborative networks within and across schools are crucial for sustaining momentum, sharing resources, and embedding decolonisation as a systemic, community-driven endeavour rather than the responsibility of a few committed individuals. High-quality professional development must also address the ethics of knowledge authority. Teachers should not be positioned as neutral collectors of Indigenous, local, African, diasporic, or other non-Western knowledge, nor should schools extract such knowledge from communities without reciprocity or acknowledgement. Instead, decolonising professional learning should be developed through careful engagement with scholars, community knowledge holders, local histories, families, cultural organisations, and where appropriate, Indigenous or diasporic communities. This engagement must ask: who has the authority to share this knowledge? Under what conditions can it be taught? What risks of simplification, appropriation, or misrepresentation need to be addressed? Such questions are central because decolonisation is not only about expanding curriculum content, but about redistributing epistemic power. A further implication concerns teacher efficacy. Although this think piece does not present empirical findings on teacher development, decolonising curriculum work has the potential to strengthen teachers' professional confidence by

supporting them to engage with contested histories, plural knowledge systems, and culturally responsive pedagogies. Teacher efficacy in this context is not simply confidence in delivering content; it includes the capacity to question inherited curriculum assumptions, facilitate difficult conversations, design assessments that value criticality, and recognise students as contributors to knowledge-making. Future research should examine how sustained professional development in decolonising pedagogy influences teachers' classroom practices and how these practices affect students' sense of belonging, critical awareness, participation, and educational outcomes.

At the policy level, decolonising the curriculum requires confronting structural barriers that limit teachers' agency and constrain the transformative potential of education. Prevailing performative accountability systems - shaped by standardised testing, rigid curriculum frameworks, and narrowly defined performance metrics - tend to prioritise compliance and measurable outcomes over critical inquiry, cultural responsiveness, and ethical engagement. Such frameworks can marginalise decolonial practices, positioning them as peripheral rather than central to meaningful learning. Policymakers must therefore reconceptualise accountability structures to foreground reflective pedagogy, community engagement, and the development of students' critical and ethical capacities. Recognising decolonisation as integral to cultivating socially responsible and critically aware citizens shifts education from a model of knowledge transmission to one of empowerment and justice. Akbar (2024) emphasises that decolonising the curriculum is not only a moral or social imperative but an epistemic urgency, requiring its integration into curriculum standards, assessment frameworks, and teacher accreditation. Integrating Indigenous, local, African, diasporic, and other non-Western knowledge systems with Western disciplinary knowledge does not require collapsing the differences between them or positioning one as a replacement for the other. A decolonised curriculum should help students examine knowledge systems in relation to their purposes, methods, histories, contexts, and ethical commitments. This means teaching Western knowledge as powerful but situated, rather than universal and neutral, while also avoiding the romanticisation or simplification of non-Western knowledge traditions. Decisions about what knowledge is introduced to children should therefore involve multiple forms of accountability: disciplinary rigour, teacher expertise, student relevance, community consultation, and sensitivity to local, national, and global contexts. Some elements of decolonising curriculum work may require national commitment, particularly where colonial histories and racialised inequalities have shaped public knowledge. Other elements should be

localised, enabling schools to engage with the histories, communities, languages, places, and knowledge traditions most relevant to their students. Systemic decolonisation necessitates alignment between classroom practice, school leadership, and policy vision, with sustained, collaborative efforts essential to foster equity, inclusion, and recognition of diverse knowledges.

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