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Research article

Decolonial approaches to school curriculum for Black, Indigenous and other students of colour

Monisha Bajaj^{1,*} 

¹ University of San Francisco, USA

* Correspondence: mibajaj@usfca.edu

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Abstract

This article analyses findings from a research project examining the Pear Tree Community School in Oakland, California, USA – a small, social justice-focused school primarily serving Black, Indigenous and other students of colour in grades from kindergarten to Grade 5. Through this multi-year case study, which included observations, interviews and focus groups, this article presents data from interviews with teachers and administrators who explain how they decolonise their primary school classroom curriculum, particularly amid national and global issues, such as heightened racial violence and increasingly polarised political discourse, which adversely impact the families and communities to which students belong. Teachers and administrators share concrete examples of decolonial approaches at the school level and within their classroom curricula that centre the lived experiences and histories of communities of colour. This article contributes an

empirical study of one school's decolonial approaches at the early grades level to the emerging scholarship on decolonising education.

Keywords decolonisation; critical pedagogy; primary schooling; students of colour; Indigenous resistance; social justice education; educator praxis; racial justice

Introduction

Calls for decolonising the school curriculum often parallel calls for greater representation, whether in textbooks (Merryfield, 2008; Rogers Stanton, 2014), through the addition of new courses such as ethnic studies (Subedi, 2013; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015) or through greater diversification of the teaching force (Achinstein et al., 2010). The racial, socio-economic, ethnic and/or gender mismatch between students and their teachers has been an often discussed dimension in educational scholarship in the United States, where the teaching force is approximately 80 per cent White, while more than 50 per cent of the student population nationally come from Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities (Loewus, 2017; NCES, 2020). The presence of teachers of colour, however, does not necessarily mean that decolonial approaches will be undertaken (Cherry-McDaniel, 2019; Kohli and Pizarro, 2016). In fact, much 'unlearning' must take place in the process of 'decolonising education', or the unsettling of norms that reproduce racial, (settler) colonial and socio-economic privilege through schooling (Battiste et al., 2002; Mayo, 1995). Decolonial approaches require an iterative and ongoing examination – paired with reflective practice – of the structures, policies and curricula of any setting to impede the inclination of schooling towards the social reproduction of racial and class inequalities (Patel, 2016).

This article analyses findings from a research project examining the Pear Tree Community School in Oakland, California, USA – a small, social justice-focused school primarily serving Black, Indigenous and other students of colour in grades from kindergarten to Grade 5. Through a case study, which spanned from 2019 to 2021 and included observations, interviews and focus groups, this article presents data on how teachers and administrators sought to decolonise their classroom curriculum, particularly amid national and global issues, such as heightened racial violence, which adversely impact the families and communities to which students belong. Research questions for this study included: How does the Pear Tree Community School seek to decolonise education in the early grades? In what ways do teachers decolonise their curriculum and practice, particularly when they may not have been trained to do so? As a school that employs BIPOC teachers and serves primarily BIPOC students, what insights emerge for decolonising education for Black, Indigenous and other students of colour in the United States and elsewhere?

In this article, I first review relevant scholarship on decolonisation and education – very little of which has been done at the elementary or primary school level (Grades K to 5) – then introduce the Pear Tree Community School. I go on to present data in two sections – one on school-wide approaches and the other on teacher praxes – that exemplify the intentional, decolonial approaches undertaken at Pear Tree that demonstrate attempts to unsettle and interrupt racial hierarchies that in other schools inculcate a habitus rooted in coloniality and White supremacy (Ayling, 2020).

Decolonising education

Decolonisation refers both to the political act of nation states freeing themselves from the repression and brutality of colonialism and to the intentional process of reimagining a future beyond the explicit and implicit vestiges (whether physical, psychological and/or sociocultural) of colonial domination. Philosopher and theorist Achille Mbembe (2021: 44) states: 'Decolonization, itself, as an act of refusal turned into an act of self-assertion, an act of rebellion turned into an act of refoundation, ... was imagined as a kind of relation to the future. The future, in return, was another name for the force of self-creation and invention.' What Mbembe (2021: 44) terms 'self-creation and invention', when applied to education in newly independent nations, usually looked like citizenship formation through national curricula and expanded access to schooling for all (Boli et al., 1985); the essential elements of Western schooling created as a sorting mechanism for role differentiation largely went unchallenged in most places.

Scholarship on decolonising the university or secondary curriculum exists to a greater degree than at the primary or elementary levels (for example, Mbembe, 2016), although recent literature offers insights into how educators may intervene (Keenan, 2021; Chatterji, 2021; Tejada et al., 2003). Regardless of the level, Moncrieffe et al. (2020: 9) note that:

decolonising the curriculum takes deliberate effort. Educators need to recognise that the curriculum largely reflects the dominant social group, and therefore can establish a narrow, monocultural view of the world in which ‘others’ exist only on the margins. Decolonising the curriculum is therefore about seeing and appreciating the world – past, present and future – by ensuring that the views and voices of marginalised groups are heard, acknowledged and appreciated. Such an approach benefits all members of society.

In this article, data are presented from a small school in which young children are learning history and social studies for the first time through a critical, decolonial and social justice lens that privileges heretofore silenced histories; these young learners do not have to ‘unlearn’ prior dominant narratives, as is the case with many social justice educational efforts at the secondary or tertiary level.

Thus, the call to ‘decolonise education’ is twofold: on the one hand, it seeks to counteract the dehumanisation that colonisation, slavery, settler colonialism, imperialism and their vestiges have instilled within communities; on the other, it seeks to reconstitute systems and processes in ways that unearth and advance subjugated knowledges through Indigenous and collective forms of learning that are radically humanising for all. Decolonial educational approaches should be, at their core, grounded in what Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2012: 41) terms ‘a pedagogy of solidarity’ that uncovers ‘the possibilities of relational, transitive, and creative solidarity as a strategy for recasting not only human relations but also the very notion of what it means to be human, as crucial for decolonization.’ Further, Subedi (2013: 621) offers that ‘the decolonizing framework values the need to critique how questions of community are written within the curriculum’, so that practices of solidarity can ‘seek possibilities to develop consciousness that is emancipatory’.

Notions of community, pedagogies of solidarity and radical humanisation are central to the project of decolonising the curriculum. Drawing on the work of anticolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter, Desai and Sanya (2016: 718) offer that:

Curriculum is informed by how we understand what it means to be human and what we hope for our collective future. Therefore, employing Sylvia Wynter’s anticolonial theorising of the human also decolonises what counts as valuable and desirable knowledge, ... and can imagine and sustain decolonial personhoods.

For centuries, individuals and communities have been (and continue to be) seen and treated as less-than-human as a justification for oppression and state violence; the inter-generational trauma, and adaptations to cope in the face of such trauma, condition the lived experiences of many marginalised communities, such as BIPOC communities in the United States. This article explores the deliberate practices and approaches that offer educators and young people the chance to articulate what Desai and Sanya (2016: 718) term ‘decolonial personhoods’ at one elementary school in California.

Research site and methods

The research presented in this article is part of a multi-year study to engage with the structures, practices and experiences of a small private school – the Pear Tree Community School – in the mid-sized city of Oakland, California. Oakland has approximately 430,000 residents, with a long history as a destination of Black internal migration from the US South in the 1800s to work on the transcontinental railroad as labourers, porters and cooks, and then from the 1940s through to the 1970s in the shipyards and army bases in Oakland and nearby Richmond, California. When the Black Panther Party first launched in Oakland in the late 1960s, and through to the 1980s, Oakland was nearly 50 per cent Black, but with current demographic shifts due to gentrification and displacement, the racial and ethnic composition of Oakland is currently 24 per cent Black, 27 per cent White, 27 per cent Latinx, and 16 per cent Asian (with many recent immigrants comprising the population of the latter two groups; Rowen, 2019). The rate of those living below the poverty line in Oakland is 17 per cent (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

The Pear Tree Community School was established in 2013, first as a kindergarten, and then extending grade by grade each year to become a larger elementary school. Pear Tree is a private, independent, social justice-oriented Montessori school. A staff of approximately 11 educators work full-time (with some part-time assistants) with the nearly 75 students who are in multi-grade classrooms; all of the faculty and staff at the school identify as people of colour (six Black, four Latinx and one Asian American). Families pay a range of tuition fees for the school, with nearly 70 per cent of the students receiving full or partial financial aid. The school demographics (at the time of writing) consisted of 91 per cent children of colour (a category that includes Black, Latinx, Asian American/Pacific Islander and Indigenous), and 64 per cent of the total student body at the school identified as Black. The Pear Tree Community School faced significant hardships due to families losing income during the COVID-19 crisis; as such, the school cut an older grades class for the 2020/1 school year (during part of the research period) and had plans to bring it back in subsequent years. The significant amount of financial aid offered facilitates the high percentage of families of colour being able to access the school and its educational programme.

Since 2019, I have been a participant observer in the life of Pear Tree Community School, carrying out interviews with eight teachers and administrators (over Zoom during the pandemic, which sent the school primarily online during 2020), observations of school life and special events over the two-year period, and analysing school documents and student work. It is important to note that I occupy dual roles in the research setting, as a researcher and as a parent, and exist in this project as a 'mother-scholar' (Caballero et al., 2019). In discussions of decolonising research methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), scholars have noted the need for researchers to be transparent about shared (and differential) subjectivities, as well as about one's positionality and relationality within the research (Patel, 2016). Adler and Adler (1996) discuss the advantages and disadvantages of, and the need to carefully navigate, the 'parent-as-researcher' role when studying children and educational settings. Being a member of a school community generates relationships and rapport in organic ways, namely: (1) it can diminish 'role pretence' in which researchers sometimes occupy an unknown and artificial space in research settings; (2) it can allow for deep immersion into the research setting; and (3) it can facilitate naturalised triangulation, given the researcher's integration in the research setting (Adler and Adler, 1996). The risks of simultaneously parenting and researching include the possibility for what Adler and Adler (1996) term 'role confusion', wherein responses to one's different roles can become muddled. In order to mitigate these risks, it is incumbent on the parent-as-researcher to continually attend to any imbalances of power, to engage in a continuous process of securing consent, and to practice reflexivity about one's ongoing involvement in the research setting.

My own identity shapes my involvement in the school setting as well – as a mother, as an educator, as a scholar, and as an individual of South Asian descent who grew up in the United States. Over the past two decades, I have sought through collaborative research to elucidate instances where communities have integrated peace and human rights education as a strategy for transforming and humanising the learning process for marginalised students (Bajaj, 2009, 2011, 2018; Bajaj and Suresh, 2018). However, this is the first research project I have undertaken where individuals in my family unit simultaneously occupy the categories of 'the researcher' and 'the researched' (Villenas, 1996).

In order to be completely transparent about my multiple roles at the school, all members of the school community were informed about the research and given the opportunity to ask questions, as well as being provided with consent forms. Teacher and administrator interview participants read and signed consent forms, offered their permission for their real names to be used when given the choice of a pseudonym, and member checked interview transcripts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). Permission was secured from parents and children for the student work presented in this article as well. Data from these sources were analysed and are presented in this article in two thematic areas: school-wide approaches and educator praxes in the classroom.

School-wide approaches

The Pear Tree Community School began in 2013, growing out of the preschool that had been previously started by Michele Hamilton, a long-time educator from Oakland who has Black, Native American and White heritage. Her more than two decades of work in public schooling in Oakland as a teacher,

teacher educator and administrator both informed and created contradictory feelings when launching an independent, private school separate from the public schooling system:

As a public school advocate, it is pretty ironic that I would found a private school. But in my last iteration working within the public school system, I spent significant time in a programme that did what was called 'school quality review'. We descended upon schools – kindergarten through Grade 12 – in Oakland in teams, and we were able to observe every classroom from beginning to end. We looked at a lot of measurable data, including test scores and demographics. We did focus groups with parents, educators and students. We were able to then create a list of advice for principals, and it was during that time that I really was able to see that we had these phenomenal pockets of principals and of teachers, but the system as a whole was continuing to replicate really similar results in terms of the way in which we were failing Black and Brown kids. Suspension and expulsion rates were decreasing statistically, but what we found when we were at schools is that often students were being placed in in-house suspension or sent to another classroom; so while they weren't being suspended on paper, Black boys were still being sent out of class at a disproportionate rate. (Interview, January 2021)

The issue of disproportionate suspensions of students of colour and their facilitation of the school-to-prison pipeline has been documented by various scholars (Hantzopoulos, 2016; Meiners and Winn, 2010) and by national data (NPR, 2018) as an issue of educational and racial injustice.

Michele Hamilton continued:

This is true in Oakland, but it's also true nationally ... The system is not broken; it's continuing to replicate the same kinds of results that it was originally designed to. And so I wanted to see what was possible in creating a programme that could potentially be an observation site that can try to re-envision a model of education that truly decolonises systemically the curriculum, and do that in ways that can really serve all children, especially Black and Brown children. Until people can really see something that's possible, it's hard for them to imagine it. And while, of course, what we do here may not be directly replicable, there are things that I think are transferable in some really meaningful ways. (Interview, January 2021)

Part of Hamilton's desire to create an observation or learning site or learning lab at Pear Tree stems from the knowledge that most students will not be able to participate in such a small school setting, but that the lessons generated can be shared to influence practice in the public school system.

Several features reflect Hamilton's vision for a school that is rooted in social justice, that allows for the thriving of Black and Brown children, and that seeks to decolonise education. One important feature is the explicit emphasis on hiring educators from BIPOC communities to reflect the majority of the children at the school. Hamilton noted:

Young children (up to age 10) are very literal in their conceptions of the world, so the visual of having somebody who mirrors the child as a mentor, as a leader and as a guide as their brain is forming is so critical for their self-esteem and self-confidence. It is fundamentally about how children are framing their world view at this age. (Interview, January 2021)

Teachers, all of whom are either Montessori certified or possess a California teaching credential, also undergo continuous in-service training at the school, focusing on reducing implicit and explicit biases, discussing their classroom management approaches, and strategising about the curriculum. In fact, Hamilton stated, 'We [the teachers and head of school] meet twice a month to discuss the curricular elements of decolonising the classroom' (interview, January 2021).

The Pear Tree Community School describes itself as a 'social justice-informed Montessori elementary school', and the decision to utilise the methodologies first developed by Maria Montessori in the mid-1900s stems from the agency and freedom that these methods provide to student learners. Additionally, Montessori education, as Hamilton notes:

really evens the playing field, because children are able to work at their own pace. So, when children come in, regardless of the place they are entering from, teachers are able to meet them where they are, and then bring them to where they need to be in a really concrete, hands-on way that incorporates all of the different learning modalities: kinaesthetic, visual, audio and verbal. Montessori really incorporates all of the different ways that children engage with learning. (Interview, January 2021)

However, Montessori learning materials do not always reflect diverse communities; as such, Hamilton notes that teachers at Pear Tree often have to modify existing materials or create their own. For example, Hamilton noted that together she helps teachers develop a 'critical eye', so that 'they're able to look at the Montessori curriculum that we use, and say, "I'm going to pull this out because this is racist, or I'm going to change this because it's only representing heterosexual couples in marriage and it's not normalizing other types of marriages"' (interview, January 2021).

Pear Tree is part of a growing movement of schools that seek to serve historically and currently marginalised populations in culturally sustaining (Paris and Alim, 2017) and sociopolitically relevant ways (Bajaj et al., 2017) through Montessori education (Debs, 2019); another such Montessori school is the Keres Children's Learning Center, a dual-language (Keres/English) school that serves Pueblo communities in New Mexico and also creates many of its own materials to centre Indigenous students' realities. Such schools have increasingly been able to communicate and share experiences through the organisation Montessori for Social Justice, which was started in 2013, and which holds annual conferences and hosts regular communications through an email list-serve and on social media.

The curriculum is the primary avenue for decolonising education at Pear Tree. Given that the school is independent, and not subject to public mandates around curriculum or state-wide testing, there is a greater degree of flexibility vis-à-vis curricular innovation. Students routinely exceed their grade-level mastery, even when they may have entered the school behind or on par with students in other schools. According to Hamilton, classroom texts:

serve as mirrors and windows for kids. We study ancient civilisation in ways that support the holistic thinking about knowledge itself and where its roots are. We centre the enlightenment periods of the Indus Valley, Timbuktu, Egypt, Ghana, Greece/Rome and of the Maya, Inca and Mexica [Aztec] civilisations. We want students to have an understanding of the enlightenment across the globe and through a de-centring of Western civilisations and European enlightenment. (Interview, January 2021)

In the upper primary grades (Grades 4 and 5), Hamilton noted that for the United States History Curriculum, students read Howard Zinn's *A Young People's History of the United States*, 'alongside the study of resistance movements and allies. We also analyse how historical events directly impact current events, like how the Thirteenth Amendment impacts the prison-industrial complex and disparate policing of communities of colour' (interview, January 2021). The Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution not only abolished slavery, but also permitted penal labour; many critics have noted that the disproportionate incarceration of Black people subjected to forced labour is an extension of the exploitative economic conditions originally set up under slavery (Alexander, 2010).

Other aspects of the decolonial approach that Pear Tree utilises focus on the whole child through arts education, restorative approaches to discipline, and an emphasis on social emotional learning. Teachers routinely observe one another and students to point out any areas where implicit biases may be operating and to ensure that all students are included, whether in the classroom or in the playground. Students come from many ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as from diverse family formations, including many families that identify as queer, and multiple students at the school have physical or learning disabilities. The intentional focus on ensuring that all students are included in classroom and in play activities seeks to interrupt exclusionary practices that may enter the school from the larger society.

In the enrichment programme that takes place during the school day in the afternoons, students in different grades are exposed to dance and music from around the world. For example, students in the younger grades have an Afro-Brazilian capoeira class, students in Grades 2 and 3 have a world cultures music class that teaches songs in Nahuatl, Lucumí (a language derived from Yoruba), Spanish and Portuguese; and all children participate in a hip-hop music and dance class each week. Each week, a local organisation that focuses on climate justice, the Mycelium Youth Network, leads an hour-long lesson on environmental issues, and students tend the carbon sequestration garden (one of the first such school gardens in the country) on the school grounds, planted in collaboration with the Mycelium Youth Network in 2019 (see, for example, Brown, 2020).

In summarising Pear Tree's decolonial approach to education, Hamilton stated, 'One part is developing the curriculum, and the other is developing the teachers so they're able to teach the content in a way that is not reinforcing a colonial paradigm, and in a way that really honours the children who

we are teaching, and their ancestors' (interview, January 2021). In stating the school's hopes for children, she further offered:

I want our children first and foremost to have had as much of a protected childhood as they can as Black and Brown children in a toxic world. I want them to have had joy and feel really loved and really supported and really seen at school, and I want them to see themselves as powerful and strong and smart and funny and silly – all the things that a lot of White families and White children take for granted. I want them to have their childhood.

Secondly, I want our children to be prepared for a racist and toxic society as much as they can be. I would like them to have the skills to critically think and critically engage, to be aware when things are being taught of what's missing and also to have the capacity to be able to navigate it. I think that's an important skill for Black and Brown children when they launch into middle school or high school or college, that they are able – when they see racism, when they see sexism, when they see heterosexism – to navigate it gracefully and in a way that protects them in their integrity. (Interview, January 2021)

The school's approaches and objectives are primarily met through educators' praxes in the classroom, as will be explored in the next section.

Educator praxes in the classroom

Neither abolition nor decolonization are philosophies. They are practical routes. Abolition and decolonization are practices. (Tuck and Yang, 2018: 10)

Teachers at Pear Tree engage in many intentional strategies to decolonise their curriculum. As mentioned in the school-wide section, the curriculum is discussed and set together by the school head and teachers, but it is primarily enacted in the classroom by each teaching team (each classroom at Pear Tree has a lead teacher and an assistant teacher). The term 'praxis' within education refers to 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it', as defined by Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire (1970: 33). Scholars have further noted that 'the emphasis on praxis in decolonizing pedagogy provides opportunities ... for students to practice "guided action aimed at transforming individuals and their world that is reflected upon and leads to further action"' (Tejeda et al., 2003, as cited in Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015: 112).

An important curricular element at Pear Tree is the use of the morning circle (a version of Montessori circle time that occurs daily) to teach students in each classroom about notable and/or revolutionary leaders who have made contributions to science, medicine, history and social movements. Morning circle takes place first thing each day, after students arrive, for approximately 30 minutes. Students are welcomed, sometimes a song is sung, and each day, a new individual or movement is introduced to students, every day of the school year. At Pear Tree, each month has a theme, and teachers and the head of school share their research on notable individuals and movements in order to have content for the morning circle presentations. For example, October focuses on First Nations (Indigenous communities), November focuses on Latinx communities, February on Black and African communities, March on notable women (mostly women of colour, although women are also included year round in the other months) and April focuses on Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. During 'Women's Herstory' month in March, students in Grades 2 and 3 also undertook a project to interview (and write reports on) women in their families, as well as women teachers at the school, thus linking their learning about notable figures to their own families and communities as well.

Through the daily presentation of individuals and movements, educators are consistently learning alongside their students, as much of this content is not taught in teaching credential programmes, whether Montessori or state-run. One teacher noted:

This is a daily practice that isn't just for the students, it's a daily practice for me, because while it's awesome that we're making this curriculum, it's also hard work; it requires an education that I'm getting myself while I'm giving it to the students. I'm a creator of the curriculum, which is different from previous schools I was at, where the time was so micromanaged and the assessment focus was so overwhelming that I just wanted someone to hand me the instructions and all the materials that go with it and leave me alone. Now I really feel like I'm creating

something, in a way that feels freeing and liberating; I don't feel bogged down. (Interview, March 2021)

In a staff meeting in autumn 2020, two teachers became emotional and teared up talking about this practice of researching and creating curricula, stating that it has been healing for them to teach this content because they never learned these histories in their own schooling.

Teaching the Indigenous past and present

Many examples could be offered, but one that offers a stark contrast to the California elementary or primary school social studies curriculum is the central focus in public schools on the Spanish-implemented mission system in California, and Pear Tree's explicit focus on Indigenous history and present-day realities. From the mid-1700s to the mid-1800s, Spanish missions imposed a system of land seizure, forced labour and targeted violence, and engaged in rampant sexual violence as part of their strategy for cultural, political and economic domination, and religious conversion. 'The Spanish missions, called "California's first system of mass incarceration" by historian Benjamin Madley (2016), paved the way for the US government-sanctioned genocide of California Indian peoples' (Keenan, 2021: 111). Under Spanish, then Mexican, and later US rule (when bounties were offered for the killing of Indigenous people), the Indigenous population of California went from 300,000 people within 200 tribes, to just 16,000 by 1910, both through state-sponsored acts of genocide and through disease brought by settlers (Library of Congress, n.d.; Madley, 2016).

In an analysis of the 'mission project' undertaken in public schools in California over a month-long period, educational scholar Harper Keenan (2019: 19) finds both an erasure and a distortion of the brutality of this period that 're-naturalizes colonization as an unquestionably rational way of reorganizing the world'. Keenan's in-depth analysis of the textbooks utilised and case study of the mission unit of one fourth-grade class, required in all California public elementary schools, found that 'the representation of that violence disproportionately presents California Indians as perpetrators and the Spanish as victims, a framing incongruous with the historical record' (Keenan, 2019: 19; see also Keenan, 2021). Building on scholarship by Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013: 78), who identify 'the settler colonial curricular project of replacement' of Indigenous peoples, Keenan (2019: 9) states that the 'school curriculum serves to replenish the idea that colonisers and their descendants are entitled to land by controlling or erasing Indigenous knowledge'. Thus, while students in California public elementary schools plan field trips to missions, learn to identify with the Spanish colonists by learning about the era through their world view, construct replicas of them and discuss their merits in line with state standards, students at Pear Tree have a vastly different engagement with California's Indigenous past and present.

As mentioned earlier, educators research and present individuals or movements daily in morning circle pertaining to the month's theme. October, as First Nations month, necessitates that teachers develop short presentations on Indigenous people. Pear Tree teacher Nakachi Clark-Kasimu, who is a Black educator and has taught in Oakland and San Francisco for many years, presented on various Indigenous Americans – near and far, deceased and living – to her class of kindergarten and Grade 1 students in October 2020. Private schools in the United States can use their own texts and need not follow the state curricular standards the way that public schools must. While Clark-Kasimu's students were younger than the fourth-graders who carry out the mission project in public schools, it is a notable contrast that there is no required state curriculum that covers Indigenous Californian experiences at present, despite some efforts under way to change this (Jones, 2018).

Clark-Kasimu encouraged students to develop artwork and statements of solidarity with Indigenous struggles, showed *In the Land of My Ancestors* (Chitnis, 2019), a short documentary film about the resistance of the Ohlone people on whose ancestral land the school sits, and discussed an effort started by local Ohlone leader Corrina Gould for land repatriation through the Sogorea Te Land Trust (<https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/>).

In discussing her own learning and approach to teaching about Indigenous people, Clark-Kasimu offered the following:

In October, we were celebrating Indigenous cultures. It was an opportunity for me to learn, but it was also something that Michele said that flipped my perspective of how to teach history and how to teach cultures. She said we should introduce students to *living* Indigenous

people because they are still here. They are wearing hoodies and jeans, and some are water protectors, some are earth protectors.

Then that took it to another place for me – not only choosing people who are living, but also having the children think about centring these people within themselves. For example, the Ohlone people, we discussed some of the contemporary movement leaders like Corrina Gould, the Land Trust she has developed, and I asked the children, ‘What is something about Corrina Gould that you have learned that you also value, that is also important to you?’

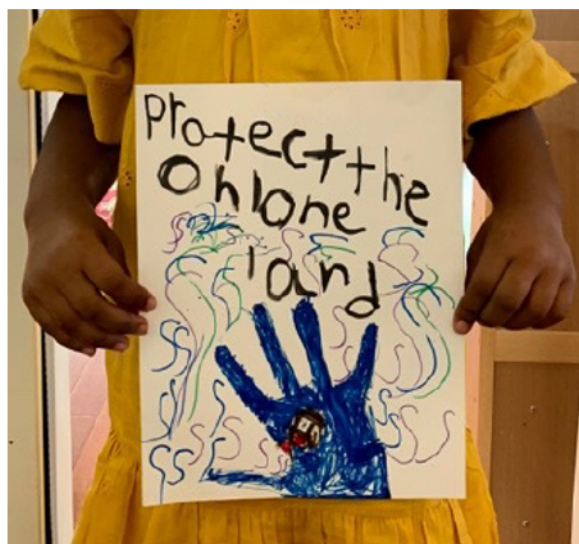
That changed our perspective because the coloniser separates, the coloniser makes distinctions and hierarchies. This whole idea of celebrity is that ‘oh, they’re so amazing; oh, they’re so perfect’, and there’s this distance between what you want, and who you are. Decolonisation is ‘everything I want comes first, for me, is within me first and I just have to look in here’ [points to heart].

Having them look at the world in that way, and also starting with people who live where they live, people who may look like them or may not, that has been really important because even though I have White students, Latinx students, Black students, mixed race students, Pacific Islander students, it’s important for all of them.

It’s so important for them to have that perspective, one, that these people are alive. And two, that there is a real movement right now, like the Sogorea Te Land Trust, you can get excited about it, you can ask your parents about it, you can do research about it, and that everything that you’re admiring is something that you can also admire about yourself. (Interview, March 2021)

Students seemed to have responded well to this approach. While interviewing students fell outside the scope of this research, Figure 1 shows an example of student artwork during the month that focused on Indigenous communities from Clark-Kasimu’s classroom, which illustrates how students were making sense of the curriculum offered.

Figure 1. A Pear Tree student showing her artwork (Source: Pear Tree Community School)



In the Grades 2 and 3 classroom, students also explored Ohlone leaders in October, and later, through an in-depth exploration of Australia that lasted over five weeks in the spring, learned about the sacred site of Uluru in Australia, and its meaning to Aboriginal peoples. During Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in April, students were introduced to notable native Hawaiians, such as Olympic medal-winner Duke Kahanamoku (1890–1968), and social movements such as the Polynesian Panthers, started by Māori activists in the 1970s in New Zealand modelled on the Black Panther Party in the

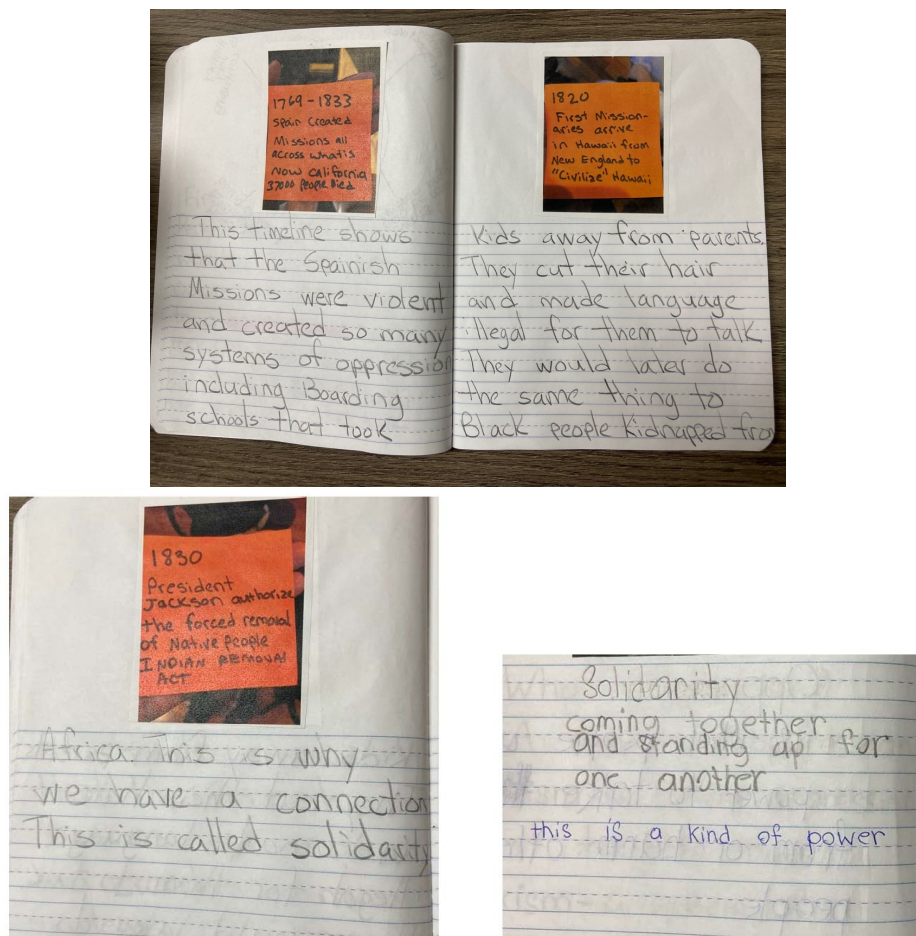
United States. Similar to some of the work of the Black Panthers, the Polynesian Panthers provided food, education and economic support through small-scale loans in their communities (Shilliam, 2012). Sample student work from the older grades also illustrates the way in which students made sense of these lessons on Indigenous histories over the multiple years in which they were exposed to content that centred Indigenous voices, and the connections they drew across historical periods.

In Figure 2, photographs are presented from a Grade 4 notebook in which a student reflected on their engagement with events in US history from 1769 to 1830. These notebooks are part of regular writing activities carried out after material is presented; students develop their own responses, and teachers regularly check their writing, giving corrections. The first page has a historical fact presented that reads '1769–1833: Spain created Missions all across what is now California. 37,000 died'. On the next page is another fact: '1820: First missionaries arrive in Hawaii from New England to "civilize" Hawaii'. On the third page is another fact: '1830: President Jackson authorizes the forced removal of Native people, Indian Removal Act'. Below these facts, the student has written across the four notebook pages:

This timeline shows that the Spanish [sic] Missions were violent and created so many systems of oppression including Boarding schools that took kids away from parents. They cut their hair and made language illegal for them to talk. They would later do the same thing to Black people kidnapped from Africa. This is why we have a connection. This is called solidarity. Solidarity: coming together and standing up for one another. This is a kind of power.

As can be seen from these samples, students are being presented with a fairly different content and historical lens from their counterparts in other schools, which use the California state curriculum.

Figure 2. Grade 4 student notebook excerpt on Spanish missions and the westward expansion of the US (Source: Pear Tree Community School)



Through the curriculum, whether science, mathematics, history or English, students at Pear Tree have been exposed to content through a decolonial lens that uncovers subjugated histories and knowledge(s) that became a source of new learning in their own households and communities as such knowledge ripples outward.

Conclusion

This article has offered insights into one school's decolonial approaches to primary education in kindergarten through Grade 5 in Oakland, California, USA. The school seeks to constitute what Desai and Sanya (2016: 718) term 'decolonial personhoods' to instil deep knowledge about global majority communities, foster critical thinking, and prepare students for potential encounters with systems of inequality and domination after they leave the protected space of the school. Many of the aspects of the school's practices are not necessarily replicable or scaleable, given their small size and the school's precarious financial model, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, and the resultant socio-economic shocks faced by many students' families. Further, as has recently been witnessed across the United States, there is substantial outrage among many largely suburban and White parents about the teaching of racial injustices and an accurate rendering of US history, suggesting that an extension of the approach espoused by the Pear Tree Community School might meet greater resistance and contestation in a public school setting and in a more conservative-leaning community. At the time of writing, political debate is under way in the United States regarding whether or not to teach about the racial diversity of the country and its history of exclusion of people of colour in public schools. Conservative commentators have incorrectly labelled inclusive teaching that attends to historical accuracy as 'critical race theory'. In actuality, critical race theory is a framework developed by legal scholars (for example, Bell, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1996) to analyse the structural dimensions of racism; critical race theory scholars argue that such analysis is required in order to dismantle racial hierarchies that are a permanent feature of American life, given the nation's history of African enslavement and Indigenous genocide.

Thus far, Pear Tree has not encountered resistance to its educational model and approach, as parents who enrol their children at the school are aware of its explicit social justice mission and have observed classes and/or attended school events prior to joining. Longitudinal data from this project could also better elucidate the permanence of the social justice attitudes and orientations that students appear to be adopting at a young age.

Nonetheless, the school's deliberate and intentional attempts to decolonise elementary school curricula and institutionalise innovative pedagogies and praxes offer a useful case with which to engage. The data presented here contribute to educational research in multiple ways. First, much scholarship on social justice or decolonial education focuses on secondary or tertiary education, where educators are engaged in reframing what has already been learnt with new, alternative narratives; in the case of Pear Tree, young children are learning histories for the first time through a critical, social justice lens, and they do not have to 'unlearn' prior dominant narratives. Second, scholarship often discusses decoloniality and education in an abstract manner, as opposed to through empirical data collected from efforts in progress, as have been presented in this article. Third, this article has centred the experience of teachers of colour, working primarily with students of colour, engaging in critical, decolonial readings of the curriculum.

While hinted at in the presentation of data above, one aspect central to the decolonial approach that has not been explicitly mentioned is its grounding in what Antonia Darder (2017), discussing Paulo Freire's seminal work on education, terms a 'pedagogy of love'. Such love, in Freire's (1970: 89) conceptualisations is 'an act of courage, not fear, a commitment to others' and 'the cause of liberation'. Similarly, at Pear Tree, founder and head of school Michele Hamilton noted, 'You cannot decolonise without deep, deep love for the children and their communities' (interview, March 2021).

As statues of colonisers – from the United States to Canada to Belgium to South Africa to Colombia to the United Kingdom – are toppled, and as the calls to decolonise education continue to resound, there is greater need for close examination of the practices in classrooms and communities around the world. As theorist Achille Mbembe (2015: n.p.) has noted: 'A number of our institutions are teaching obsolete forms of knowledge with obsolete pedagogies. Just as we decommission statues, we should decommission a lot of what passes for knowledge in our teaching.' Greater research on education at all levels can allow for critical engagement and analysis of where coloniality lingers in schools (Williams, 2016), and where we can highlight 'pockets of hope' (de los Reyes and Gozemba,

2001) – places where, against the odds, educators are imparting a humanising and justice-centred curriculum towards a decolonial future. This article contributes one such example to the ongoing scholarly conversation by examining a small-scale model in our discussions of the possibilities and praxes of a decolonial education.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that this research was carried out under protocol No. 1291: 'Montessori-Based Education for Social Justice for Students of Color', approved by the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS).

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made.

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