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Towards critical, anti-colonial and anti-racist education in national and global contexts

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Abstract

The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". With over 122.6 million people worldwide forcibly displaced, and the number of refugees globally reaching 43.7 million by mid-2024, focusing on the importance of refugees accessing lifelong learning has become more urgent than ever. Despite this, refugees have been excluded from SDG-related national development plans, monitoring and reporting, raising questions about how the targets agreed in the Global Compact on Refugees and the SDGs are being implemented and met. Education, migration regulation and border regimes that reproduce injustices are fundamental elements of colonial education and have implications for lifelong learning. Education is often presented as crucial to the "integration" of migrants, including refugee people who have come to England. Nevertheless, the British government's austerity policies, regarded by some as a form of racism, have underfunded the education system. This has made it more challenging for all learners from low-income families, and specifically refugee people, to access adequate education, amongst other rights. This article begins with a look at the assimilationist and apparent neutrality of approaches to education as sponsored by global and national commitments. The author then briefly discusses education as a practice of oppression, with colonial implications, including presenting perspectives from England and Brasil drawn from qualitative and mixed-methods doctoral and postdoctoral research. The article concludes by proposing approaches to enact education and lifelong learning as a practice of liberation rooted in critical, anti-racist and anti-colonial thinking and praxis.

Keywords Lifelong learning · SDGs · Anti-colonialism · Education · Migration · Refugees

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Résumé
Vers une éducation critique, anticoloniale et antiraciste dans les contextes des pays et du monde – Le quatrième Objectif de développement durable (ODD 4) de l'Agenda 2030 des Nations unies vise à « assurer l'accès de tous à une éducation de qualité, sur un pied d'égalité, et [à] promouvoir les possibilités d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie ». Alors que plus de 122,6 millions de personnes dans le monde sont actuellement déplacées de force et que le nombre de réfugiés a atteint 43,7 millions à la mi-2024, se concentrer sur l'accès de ces derniers à l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie est plus urgent que jamais. Malgré cela, les réfugiés ont été exclus des plans nationaux de développement liés aux ODD, ainsi que des mécanismes de suivi et de reporting, ce qui engage à s'interroger sur les questions concernant la mise en œuvre et l'atteinte des objectifs définis dans le Pacte mondial sur les réfugiés et les ODD. L'éducation, la réglementation migratoire et les régimes frontaliers qui perpétuent les injustices sont des éléments fondamentaux de l'éducation coloniale qui entraînent des répercussions directes sur l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. L'éducation est souvent présentée comme un élément clé de « l'intégration » des migrants, y compris des réfugiés arrivés en Angleterre. Néanmoins, les politiques d'austérité du gouvernement britannique, considérées par certains comme une forme de racisme, ont sous-financé le système de l'éducation. De ce fait, tous les apprenants issus de familles à faibles revenus, et notamment les réfugiés, ont davantage de difficultés à exercer, parmi d'autres droits, le droit à bénéficier d'une éducation appropriée. Le présent article commence par examiner l'approche assimilationniste et l'apparente neutralité des politiques de l'éducation promues dans le cadre des engagements pris par les pays et sur le plan mondial. L'autrice aborde ensuite brièvement l'éducation en tant qu'instrument d'oppression, lié à des aspects du colonialisme, et présente dans le même temps des points de vue extraits de recherches doctorales et postdoctorales menées en Angleterre et au Brésil sur la base de méthodes qualitatives et mixtes. L'article s'achève en proposant des approches qui visent à faire de l'éducation et de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie une pratique libératrice, ancrée dans une réflexion et une pratique critiques, antiracistes et anticoloniales.

Introduction

Most of the world's population continues to live in their countries of birth. However, mass human movement across borders has increased to around 281 million international migrants (IOM 2024). Although rarely discussed in national and global policies related to education, migration across borders is often spurred by inequalities related to colonialism and imperial violence, such as poverty, economic instability, war and genocide, global climate change and public health emergencies. These factors intensify pre-existing educational and socioeconomic inequalities at national and global levels. Instead, a neutral, apolitical and humanitarian approach has been favoured by governments in global minority countries and organisations that dominate migration discourse and policy. Global North countries have been concerned with migration from ex-colonies, arguably due to "challenges for nation-states in maintaining social cohesion within increasingly

diverse populations" (Taylor and Sidhu 2012, p. 1). Nevertheless, the wealthiest countries do not host the most refugees; instead, "low-income" countries, often bearing the brunt of colonialism and imperialism, take in most refugee people. More than 75 per cent of the world's refugees remain in global majority, low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR 2024a, p. 2), demonstrating that "[h]osting forcibly displaced people falls inequitably on different nations" (Peterson et al. 2017, p. 6). For example,

> by the end of 2023, the number of Afghan refugees reported globally increased by 741,400 to reach 6.4 million, mostly reflecting new population estimates reported by both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan (UNHCR 2024b, online).

The strategy of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations (UN) claims its focus has shifted towards including young refugees in national systems to prepare them for "*participation in cohesive societies*" and to help create the conditions for refugees to access education that enables them to "*contribute to peaceful coexistence and civil society*" (UNHCR 2019, p. 6 – emphases added). Nonetheless, refugees have been excluded from national development plans, monitoring and reporting related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; Grossman and Post 2019). In addition, anti-immigration and anti-refugee discourse in the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe has increasingly criminalised migrants and limited their access to essential rights.

Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez proposes that the *refugee* has become a "floating signifier" in contemporary Europe. Within media rhetoric of the "refugee crisis", refugees represent "the anxieties and fears of what the media [have] conceived as the majority of the population", often imagined as white national bodies (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018, p. 19). These "anxieties and fears of the presumed population are projected onto an imagined racialized Other" (ibid.), thus fabricating a "crisis". The portrayal of refugees as a threat to a Europe under siege (Lucassen 2018, p. 390) by the arrival of (Muslim and African) refugees has long been normalised. By the start of the 21st century, anti-Muslim politics portrayed Muslim migrants as unwilling to integrate, culminating in a "broadly supported consensus that immigration was harmful to nation states" (Lucassen 2018, p. 398; Lucassen and Lucassen 2015).

There have long been racist riots in the UK, including in 1919, "the first time many people became aware of the presence of black and minority ethnic people living in Britain, including those who had lived and worked" there for "many years and served in the war [World War I]" (TNA 2024, n.p.). As recently as August 2024, "unprecedented violence" took place in the UK

> as rioters shouting racist slogans attacked people of colour, emergency shelters for asylum seekers and mosques in dozens of locations across England and Northern Ireland (Ducourtieux 2024, n.p.).

In 2024, as in 1919, the riots were spurred by racism(s) but also by disillusioned poor white people living in an increasingly unequal and impoverished Britain

who have been led to believe that newcomers are taking away their jobs. Nadine El-Enany argues that the

> failure to connect the presence of many racialised people in Britain to the destruction and dispossession of British colonialism is as profound as it is pervasive (El-Enany 2020, p. 9).

Moreover, liberalisation and globalisation have caused significant political and socioeconomic instability globally, increasing poverty and unemployment and adding to the population of migrants and refugees. Despite this, honest discussions about Britain's colonial past and present and the extent to which its practices have caused forced displacement, slavery and poverty globally have been largely ignored in education, discourse and policy.

But how is education relevant to the contexts of migration, asylum and displacement? Access to education is related to other essential rights across the Global North and South. Education is also regarded as essential to promoting integration, a paramount focus particularly in Global North countries (HO 2022 [2019]). Human migration and refugee studies literature often focuses on Global South countries as sites of permanent crises and dysfunctionality. My own positionality as a migrant from South America guided me to design a study, reversing the gaze to focus on England – a Global North country. I adopted critical, anti-racist and anti-colonial perspectives (Freire 1970, 1973, 1976; hooks 1994; Cabral 1979; Fanon 1980; Carneiro 2011) to consider how England's education and (im)migration systems and procedures may be extensions of Great Britain's colonial history. Similarly to how Great Britain erased the histories of the people it colonised, it has also attempted to hide the horrors of its colonial history by erasing them from the compulsory curriculum.

For this article, I drew on my qualitative multi-method PhD research in England (Câmara 2023a) and a mixed-methods postdoc study in Brasil[1] (Câmara 2024) to move beyond apolitical, assimilationist and humanitarian approaches to education. The study in the south of England involved interviews with eight refugee children and young people, three mothers and 13 teachers from a secondary school (Câmara 2023a). The study I conducted in Brasil focused on the northern region of the country and involved five children and young people, three mothers, 18 teachers, four representatives from local governments and one representative from an international humanitarian agency (Câmara 2024).

In the following sections, I argue for critical, anti-colonial and anti-racist approaches to lifelong learning that recognise how the colonial past is still active in present inequalities experienced by migrant displaced learners, including refugees. I assert that anti-colonial and anti-racist approaches to refugee education and education in emergencies (EiE) could serve as counter-hegemonic projects in global minority countries such as England and global majority countries like Brasil. I also propose that anti-colonial and anti-racist theoretical frameworks may engage

[1] Reflecting my political and cultural identity and personal preference, Brasil is spelled with an s throughout this article.

critically with the coloniality of education and (im)migration regulation to help reconceptualise education as a tool for liberation and to interrogate oppressive border regimes.

Education as a practice of oppression

Education is often portrayed as an unmitigated good; nonetheless; it "is not an innocent or apolitical activity" (Sriprakash et al. 2022, p. 25). Instead, education is a

> practice and process that generates and contests social orders and interests ... Indeed, while education has long been viewed as a "soft power" in global geopolitics, it also carries a militaristic force, symbolically and mentally (ibid.).

The EiE competency framework (INEE 2020) is particularly aimed at countries in the Global South. EiE as a "field" has been developed and shaped by Eurocentric and humanitarian logic (Shuayb and Brun 2020). It contradictorily relies on temporary approaches within future-focused education systems driven by the demands of global capitalism. Global commitments to education are often based on humanitarianism – a continuation of the colonial project – and are guided by neutral language to appear apolitical and appease funders. Through a humanitarian logic, EiE knowledge production and implementation, only in the Global South, appears to be guided by colonial agendas and funded by colonial powers to address crises caused by their actions. Arathi Sriprakash et al. (2022) argue that "global agendas for education under the" UN SDGs prioritise

> the incorporation and assimilation of children into systems of mass formal schooling without addressing, much less altering, the relationship between education, racism and the economy (ibid., pp. 34–35).

Global commitments asserting the right to education, including the *Convention against Discrimination in Education* (UNESCO 2003 [1960]); the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (UN 1976); the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda (UN 2015); and the *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants* (UN 2016), are essential. Nevertheless, are these commitments sufficient to ensure the fulfilment of refugee learners' right to education? According to UNHCR,

> The Global Compact on Refugees "Indicator report 2023" found, based on data from 51 countries, that 73% of countries had laws allowing refugees to access national primary education systems. However, legal rights did not always translate to access in practice, with the same report finding that only 48% of refugee children of primary and secondary school age in reporting countries were enrolled in national education systems (UNHCR 2023a, online; referring to UNHCR 2023b).

Global commitments to education often overlook the systemic conditions that exclude people from accessing education and, indeed, from securing even the most

basic means of survival. Economic warfare exacerbates these challenges, disrupting lives and denying access to education and other fundamental rights for the world's most oppressed populations. For example, while a dire "humanitarian crisis" in Venezuela causing its people to flee in high numbers in recent years has received some international attention, the effects of US-imposed economic sanctions on Venezuela as the primary cause for the displacement of Venezuelans and violation of their human rights must be acknowledged and challenged. US economic sanctions

> have inflicted, and continue to inflict, very serious harm to human life and health … and … would fit the definition of collective punishment of the civilian population as described in both the Geneva and Hague international conventions, to which the US is a signatory (Weisbrot and Sachs 2019, p. 6).

It has also been argued that "US economic sanctions and their effect on the preventable mortality of Venezuelans fit the UN definition of genocide" (Zakrison and Muntaner 2019, p. 2586). Global commitments to education must acknowledge and address the geopolitical causes of displacement, which threaten lives and, indeed, access to education and other essential rights.

It is unclear how global commitments to education will ensure that forcibly displaced people will be able to "participate" in and "contribute" to society in their home or host countries. Additionally, the focus on social cohesion raises questions about the purpose of refugee people's education. Integrationist framings of education are present in global and national commitments to education. The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN 2015). And as mentioned in the introduction, the focus has recently shifted to including young refugees in national systems to prepare them for participation in and contribution to society. An SDG recognising education as a lifelong necessity is a welcome development, but in practice, refugees' education continues to focus on limited basic numeracy and literacy learning. Should the purpose of education be to promote social cohesion and coexistence? Coexistence implies merely tolerating. This appears to be the primary concern of UNHCR's Education 2030 strategy for refugee inclusion (UNHCR 2019), but are social cohesion and coexistence primary concerns for refugees too?

Global agendas for education fail to acknowledge that education systems are "a primary arena for both the maintenance of entrenched racial stereotyping and discrimination" (Alexander and Shankley 2020, p. 93; Alexander et al. 2015). Refugee education, (im)migration regulation and broader educational systems intersect in ways that lead to significant repercussions, particularly when access to education is tied to legal migration statuses. (Im)migration regulation "is often used to define who are desirable and undesirable migrants and citizens in ways which are frequently racialized" (Shankley and Byrne 2020, p. 35). As shown by the language used in SDG 4, international commitments focus on "social cohesion" and "intercultural dialogue" (UNESCO 2016, p. 10). Integrationist projects are more concerned with making the newcomer appear tolerable. It is rarely discussed that newcomers may be allowed to stay if they "come in [and] don't rock the boat" (Sriprakash et al. 2022), in contexts where some ethnicities,

nationalities and religions could be either welcomed or targeted for exclusion and prejudice depending on the nation-state's discretion. These approaches are also implemented at the global level through imperialistic practices aimed at sustaining the hegemonic power of the US and its allies. As Fidel Castro argued,

> wealth is still concentrated in the hands of a few powers whose wasteful economies are maintained by the exploitation of the labour as well as the transfer and plunder of the national and other resources of the peoples of Africa, Latin America, Asia and other regions of the world (Castro 1979, p. 675).

While the importance of ensuring access to education for all children and young people has been emphasised (Shuayb and Crul 2020), it is equally essential to disrupt the colonial underpinnings of education and (im)migration systems, requiring the dismantling of harmful educational policies and practices on global and national scales. Furthermore, global commitments to education are ahistorical and fail to account for the lived experiences of the estimated 7 million refugee children who remain out of school (UNHCR 2023c) in an international context where neocolonial and imperialist actions continue to impoverish and displace people.

Colonial past and present: implications for education in England and Brasil

In England, the right to education for all children, regardless of (im)migration status, is enshrined in law and policy (Câmara 2023a). Similarly, Brasil's Resolution No. 1/2020 (GoB 2020) by the Chamber of Basic Education (CEB) and the National Education Council (CNE) determined that migrant children, including refugees, have the right to attend school regardless of (im)migration status and document provision (Câmara 2024). Similar to other Global North countries, education in England has often been considered a tool to promote the integration and social cohesion of immigrants and diasporic groups. Nevertheless, funding cuts to English language education programmes and migration control measures often delay or prevent migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, from accessing adequate education (Câmara 2023a). British immigration law and policy "since 1948 has been driven by a restriction of citizenship rights and rights of abode in ways which were often highly racialised" (Shankley and Byrne 2020, p. 35). For example, while Ukrainians have been given the right to work in England (HO 2022 [2024]), and receive fairly welcoming treatment, most asylum seekers are not allowed to work even after living there for several years. Furthermore, "the creation of a 'hostile' or 'compliant' environment" contributes to "the discrimination and harassment suffered by ethnic minority individuals and communities" (Shankley and Byrne 2020, p. 35). These factors cannot be ignored in the context of refugee education if stakeholders are legitimately concerned about their lifelong learning needs. Sarah Dryden-Peterson (2019) argues for a future-oriented school education for refugees using a backward design method:

> Policymakers and teachers can use backward design both to forward this student focus and enable the kind of education that adopts the future orientation refugee young people and their families espouse (Dryden-Peterson 2019, p. 52).

Nonetheless, despite the benefits of focusing on refugees' learning goals as a starting point, it is still a version of *incorporating* or *assimilating* them into a system conceptualised within colonial and nationalist frameworks designed to exclude them. Further, there is "a strong, existing evidence base concerning the nature and effects of institutional racism", which is "deeply embedded in systems and processes in educational institutions" (Tikly 2022a, p. 474). For example, students from Black Caribbean backgrounds are

> twice as likely to be temporally excluded and four times as likely to be permanently excluded from school, with learners from White/Black Caribbean backgrounds also considerably over-represented [in Britain] (ibid.).

Considering that most "migrants and refugees from global conflicts have often been created by former imperial wars and action" (Tomlinson 2019, p. 2), presenting honest portrayals of British and European colonial violence is part of reparative justice. According to El-Enany, what is

> absent from mainstream political discourse [is] any acknowledgement that the making of Britain's modern state infrastructure, including its welfare state, was dependent on resources acquired through colonial conquest (El-Enany 2020, p. 8).

Similarly, the British education system has "left untouched a 'whitewashing' of the past and the post-imperial values of empire" (Tomlinson 2019, p. 5), failing "to acknowledge the extent to which the existing curriculum whitewashes British colonial history" (Tikly 2022a, p. 477). England's Department for Education (DfE) proposed that the national curriculum "should not try to cover all human learning or 'become a vehicle for imposing passing political fads on our children'" (DfE 2010, p. 41). "Political fads" include discussions of "race, racism, multiculturalism, immigration and even gender issues" (Tomlinson 2019, p. 197). Instead, the national curriculum adopted a

> traditional subject-centred curriculum with minimal information on the British Empire, Commonwealth and the EU, and no explanation as to why the society was multicultural and multiracial (ibid.).

Global and national education policies have invested in students' intercultural communications and understanding "as essential skills to living in a globalized world" (Walton 2018, p. 59). Like the UNHCR's 2030 strategy for refugee inclusion (UNHCR 2019), policies of this nature focus on increasing cultural knowledge, celebrating cultural diversity and "having respect and getting along" (Walton 2018, p. 59). These strategies often ignore racism or, if racism is acknowledged, it is in relation to individual actions and interpersonal relationships with little to no consideration for how individual and interpersonal behaviours mirror institutionally

harmful practices that advantage some while disadvantaging others (Walton 2018). Racial inequality is "contextually specific – often enacted at national and sub-national scales" (Sriprakash et al. 2020, p. 679). However, racism at the global level has been impacted "profoundly by European colonisation's production of a global colour line" (ibid.). There is a "direct causal link between colonialism and ongoing global wealth disparity and inequality in income and land distribution in former colonies" (El-Enany 2020, p. 9).

Race and empire influence the "concept of national citizenship, and resentment of immigration shaped the view of who should belong or should be excluded" in the UK (Tomlinson 2019, p. 3). As a result, "hostility towards Black and Muslim young people [has] intensified" (ibid., p. 178). When discussing hostility towards Muslims in England, it is relevant to mention the Prevent policies present in schools, organisations and other educational institutions (HO 2024 [2015]). The Prevent duty – a legal duty placed on schools and other institutions to prevent young people from being drawn to terrorism – was implemented by the British government as part of a broader counter-terrorism strategy called CONTEST (HO 2011, 2023, 2024 [2015]) focusing on preventing "radicalisation" and "extremism". The 2007 Prevent strategy

> set out four key objectives: "promoting shared values, supporting local solutions, building civic capacity and leadership and strengthening the role of faith institutions and leaders" (Holmwood and O'Toole 2017).

At first glance, these tenets may appear harmless; nevertheless, this integrationist strategy focuses on "radical Islam" (Ratcliffe 2012, p. 273) as a threat to "British values" by addressing "sources of radicalisation" (ibid), which could be as broad as criticising democracy (DfE 2022) or supporting Palestine in schools (CAGE 2021).

The core of "British values" includes the "belief in human rights, democracy, and the rule of law" (HO 2011, 2024 [2015]). Although these values are not uniquely British, their adoption with regard to England's understanding of "terrorism" and "extremism" led to the idea of British values becoming a more identifiable idea, which was then extended into education and schooling through integrationist frameworks. Leon Tikly points out two characteristics of a British nationalist approach that are relevant to education. First, he refers to "a colourblindness that refuses to acknowledge the existence of systemic and institutionalised racism", and second, an "assimilation in which racial and cultural minorities are expected to adopt British values and traditions" (Tikly 2022b, p. 867). I argue that a third characteristic of England's nationalist project is its positioning of migrants, including refugees, as threats to the "benevolent", "democratic" and "compassionate" dominant English society.

Tikly demonstrates that Britain's nationalist project is

> organised around an essentialised view of British values and institutions such as the family and the monarchy, a belief in law and order and a glorified view of British history that extols Britain's role in the world, its right to sovereignty and elides the more barbaric aspects of empire including the expropriation of land, genocide, massacres, indentured labour and slavery (Tikly 2022b, p. 866).

As acknowledged by a Prevent strategy report, its success "depends on a successful integration strategy" (HO 2011, 2024 [2015]). As an integrationist policy, Prevent's impact on education can also be seen through its use to justify increased policing of schools. The police have played a "central role" in implementing Prevent (Awan 2012, p. 1172), and its agenda of community cohesion and fundamental British values (FBVs) in schools (HO 2024 [2015]). For example, there is no specific guidance on how *extremism* can be interpreted and distinguished from rebellious teenage behaviour (Heath-Kelly 2013). The vagueness in language allows for further criminalisation, policing and profiling of already marginalised students and communities. Consequently, Muslim and Black communities have been portrayed as "suspect communities" (Ratcliffe 2012, p. 273). England's nationalist approach to education and migration reproduces the image of migrants as "strangers" and "uninvited guests" (Danewid 2017, p. 1675), which is then extended into education. Moreover, "immigration law and policy, whether in the form of the hostile environment, visa requirements or other external border controls" are "ongoing expressions of empire … part of an attempt to control access to the spoils of empire which are located in Britain" (El-Enany 2020, p. 9).

The contemporary political debate in England has focused on "national identity as something that should bring people together and provide a sense of common purpose and social cohesion" (Holmwood and O' Toole 2017, p. 30). Nevertheless, social cohesion is "frequently achieved by defining others as not part of that identity. It is also clear that this concern with national identity is associated with anxieties, especially that others are a potential threat" (ibid.). Gutiérrez Rodríguez states that,

> [m]igration within the emergence of the modern nation-state in the nineteenth century in former European colonies illustrates the divide created between the insider and outsider of the nation. This divide evokes the logic of coloniality, as it creates a racial difference between the insiders, considered members of the nation, and the outsiders, considered "migrants." Thus, the dichotomy between citizens and migrants is embedded in a racializing logic produced within social relations shaped by the enduring effects of colonial epistemic power (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018, p. 25).

Despite Britain's colonial history and its ramifications, England's education system has continued with its "dishonest presentation of a history of colonialism and its consequences, or relationships with Europe and the rest of the world" (Tomlinson 2019, p. 220). There have been no official efforts to create a curriculum that includes knowledge about the British Empire in England (Tomlinson 2019).[2] These practices and policies, or lack thereof, are examples of institutionalised racism, not simply because they exist but also because of the "institutional failure to do anything about them" (Tikly 2022a, p. 477).

Drawing on Brasil's historical context, Lélia Gonzalez, one of the most important thinkers of Afro-Brasilian feminism, coined the term *Amefricanidade* to highlight

[2] Tomlinson (2019) refers to Bernard Coard's *How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal in the British school system* (Coard 1971), focusing on the miseducation of Caribbean children.

Black and Indigenous peoples of the Americas' histories of resistance as colonised peoples (Gonzalez 1988). Thinking about educational practices based on anti-racist and feminist education, as proposed by Gonzalez, requires exhaustive research, teaching and learning to understand history from the point of view of the *subalternised* (those seen as "inferior"; see Gramsci 1971). The hegemonic interpretations of those events apolitically erase the struggles of Afro-Brasilians and Indigenous peoples by marginalising the history of 19th-century rebellions, teaching all children, particularly Black and Indigenous youth, that the abolition of slavery was an act of kindness by Princess Isabel (1846–1921). The curriculum presented to me as a child attending school in Brasil was a single European white history – starting from the beginning of colonisation and ignoring the complex societies that already existed in the country. As demonstrated, ignorance can be used for dehumanisation (Wynter 1994) of the oppressed and the "non-white other" whose histories are erased. Ignorance is further perpetuated when those histories are excluded from education curricula, leading to a lack of awareness regarding past injustices that hinders learners' understanding of how historical injustices continue to be reproduced through education.

Policy meets lived experiences: perspectives from England and Brasil

Educational policies and practices in the Global North are hardly ever scrutinised at the global level. Nevertheless, *crises* also exist within their education systems where migrant learners, including refugees, often encounter underfunded schooling systems unprepared to receive them. In England, schools and teachers face barriers in offering appropriate provisions due to funding cuts (NEU 2025). European and Anglo-European nation-states are often more concerned with *integrating* the communities they perceive to be *suspect* and a threat to the status quo than investing in accessible quality education for newcomers. The purpose of refugees' education must also be considered. For instance, what should access to the education system entail? Securing a school place and attending lessons may not necessarily equate to full access to education that fulfils young learners' needs and supports their aspirations. By listening to the young refugees who participated in my doctoral research, I learned that young people's voices and wishes are often not heard or considered in policies and practices regarding their education and aspirations (Câmara 2023a).

Temesghen,[3] a young refugee learner from Eritrea who was in Year 10, participated in my research. He shared that he felt his educational experiences in England did not prepare him for his future. I found that his educational experiences had little relevance to his concerns about his present life and future aspirations. For example, he had difficulty understanding schooling demands that required him to annotate Shakespeare's poems while he was still learning how to write for the first time. Temesghen also came from a community in Eritrea where oral language was favoured over written words. Inaccessible curriculum content and other exclusionary

[3] For confidentiality, all interviewee names are pseudonyms.

policies that disadvantage young people make them feel insecure about themselves. On three occasions, Temesghen told me "I don't know what's wrong with me" because he struggled to annotate English poems as requested by his teacher. When I spoke to his teacher, she stated that she had been unaware that Temesghen was a refugee learning how to write for the first time in his third language.

There was nothing wrong with Temesghen; however, he was enrolled in a flawed English educational system that was not designed to celebrate his knowledge(s) and respond to his aspirations. When asked about his most pressing concerns, Temesghen stated that he was worried about money, getting a job, becoming an adult and getting old. He highlighted that education had not prepared him for a future in the following statement:

> "They at the school just do what they have to do. They don't tell you what you need to know. They don't help about the future, just what you need to do now: behave good, homework, exams. If you have six classes a day, it is difficult to learn everything because there is so much to learn and completely different subjects" (Temesghen).

Temesghen's school appeared to have low aspirations for him (Câmara 2023b). Classroom and school policies and practices may underestimate and stifle what students from non-dominant backgrounds may be able to accomplish academically. Temesghen said that at his school he was encouraged to become a plumber. While plumbing is an essential profession, Temesghen said that he did not have opportunities or even information on how to pursue other professions if he wished to. He stated that a career advisor at his school had advised him to attend college and try to get an apprenticeship. Temesghen said he had tried visiting that college but was unsure if he had gone to the right place. I asked if he had ever considered going to university, and he said that he did not know, explaining that his school had not given him information about applying to university (Figure 1).

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the "global enrolment of refugees in higher education" was only 7 per cent in 2023 (UNHCR 2023d, online). None of my young participants had ever heard of the two major universities nearby, and most had yet to learn about higher education's purposes or how one can attend university in England. A staff member at Muhammad's school commented that their local universities were not accessible, and there was often a limited connection between higher education institutions and schools serving low-income students in England.

According to staff at Muhammad and Temesghen's secondary school, in 2020 the leadership began to acknowledge, influenced by the Black Lives Matter protests, that their curriculum privileged Eurocentric knowledges across subjects. The curriculum's Eurocentrism had already been noticed by Muhammad as he had expressed his disappointment to me before. Muhammad stated that he was bored from hearing about European wars, especially World War II, in his history classes. He had hoped they could learn about Asian history and other parts of the world too (Figure 2).

According to Sally Tomlinson, from 2010 the national curriculum "had largely become a vehicle for government-approved learning, obsessed with a traditional model of transmitting approved knowledge" (Tomlinson 2019, p. 220). Based on

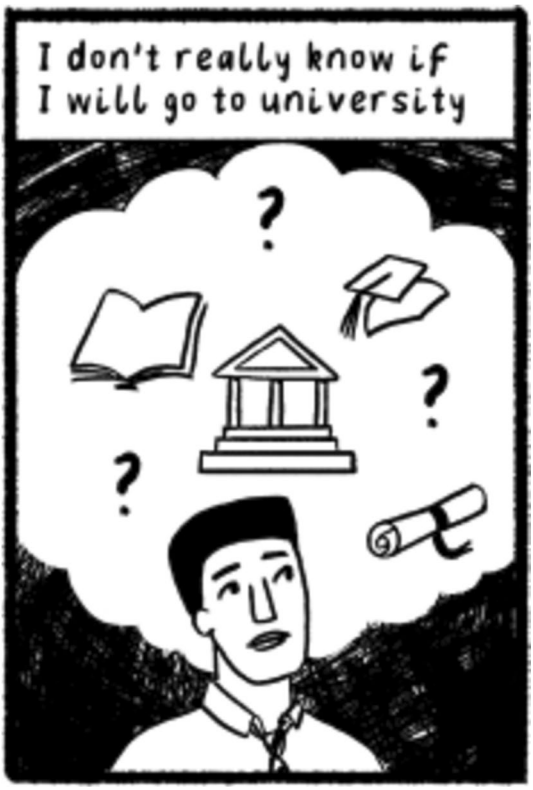

Fig. 1 Illustration from Câmara (2023c). Reprinted with permission.

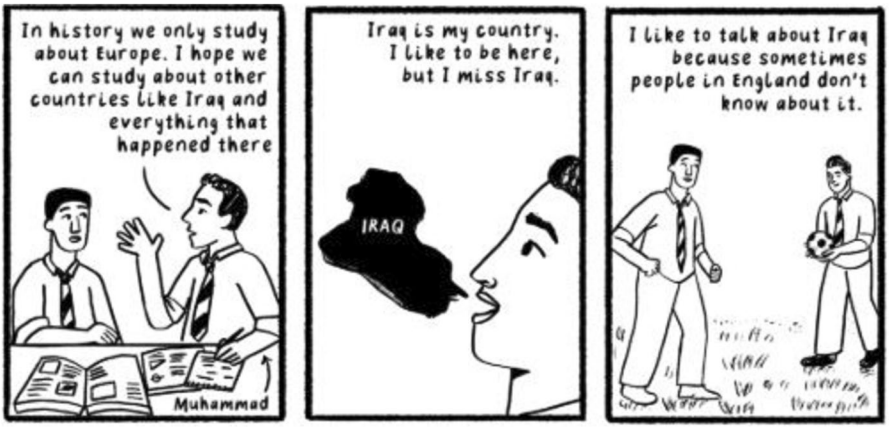

Fig. 2 Illustration from Câmara (2023c). Reprinted with permission.

young refugees' accounts of their experiences, the curriculum was failing to engage with Britain's issues of racism, colonialism and imperialism. Young people are active agents aware of the injustices around them. Muhammad understood that

Western countries create refugees, such as in Iraq. He explained that he wanted to be an architect to build skyscrapers in Iraq. In other words, Muhammad wished to rebuild his country:

> **"**I want to be an architect. In the future, I will build nice and important buildings in Iraq. I want to build the tallest biggest building in the world in Iraq. You see [the] USA likes Dubai and Dubai has big buildings. Maybe if Iraq has big, tall, nice buildings, the USA will like Iraq too and won't throw bombs in Iraq" (Muhammad).

Muhammad makes a compelling point about the US. In 2003, the UK also invaded Iraq after having invaded Afghanistan in 2001 (Tomlinson 2019, p. 12). Tomlinson (2019) argues that

> [t]he consequences of xenophobic and racist understandings of past decades will not be changed by teaching questionable "British values" and continuing to blame migrants and minorities for social and economic ills that are the consequences of long-term policies and austerity programmes that impoverished millions of working people (ibid., p. 21).

Changing the Eurocentric focus of the curriculum is a necessary step. However, it is insufficient considering how colonialism and imperialism have affected many young people living in England and around the world today. The pedagogies of the state "can take multiple forms" (Sriprakash et al. 2022, p. 26), including decisions on which knowledge is privileged in or excluded from the school curriculum. Pedagogies of the state are also manifested through the erasure of British and European colonial violence from the national curriculum, the connections between colonial history and current global migration, and through (im)migration regulation and integrationist (read: assimilationist) policies. Education systems should scrutinise the knowledge(s) being privileged in their curricula and whether negative narratives of historically oppressed peoples, many of whom may be refugees, Black and Brown people and travellers,[4] are being reproduced through their educational practices. Oppressive practices and racism(s) can exist between and within various contexts.

I argue in this article that anti-racist and anti-colonial perspectives are essential in education for all young people and throughout lifelong learning. Furthermore, refugee learners are also overlooked since England does not have a national plan for their education that aligns with SDG 4 and other global commitments. Refugees are not recognised as a specific group within national educational policy; therefore, they receive no specific funding to support their needs. This invisibilisation in policy often translates to practice where schools and educators may be unprepared to welcome refugee learners. Furthermore, schools often lack a school-wide approach to working with newly arrived migrant children as provision varies greatly from school to school. At the global level,

[4] Travellers are members of an ethnic minority in Britain and Ireland, alongside those of Gypsies and Roma.

> the exclusion of refugees and other crisis-affected populations from the SDGs begins with the goals, targets and indicators set by UN Member States (Grossman and Post 2019, p. 3).

Consequently, countries are not pressured, guided or encouraged to include the affected communities "in their national development planning or in their national review of progress towards the SDGs" (ibid.). Refugees are excluded from national plans in most countries, including England (Câmara 2023a) and Lebanon (Abu Moghli 2022). Only "a small number of refugee-hosting countries, such as Uganda, Colombia and Ethiopia", have begun "to align their action plans to meet the longer-term needs of refugees with their national development plans" (Grossman and Post 2019, p. 3).

In Brasil, all young people have the right to a school place regardless of their migration status. Increased enrolment means that schools may exceed their capacity to adequately welcome new learners. This leads to overcrowded classrooms and adaptation of inadequate facilities, as schools and unprepared teachers are already overwhelmed (Câmara 2024). Significant barriers related to poverty and temporary accommodation also disrupt refugee people's education and learning. Figure 3 shows a building facility that was adapted for use as a school for mostly Venezuelan youth. The school has one doorway used for entering and exiting and no windows, posing significant safety concerns. Additionally, students have no access to the outdoors to play or practise sports during school hours.

Education as the practice of freedom

Young refugees' educational experiences in England raise questions about the purpose of their education. What are the aspirations of migrant and refugee children and adolescents? How do educational and lifelong learning opportunities make sense for them? In my study conducted in England, young refugees and

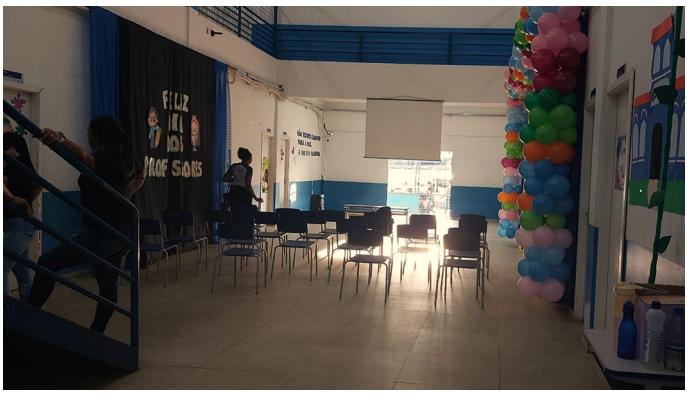

Fig. 3 A school serving a majority of recently arrived Venezuelan youth. Photograph taken by the author near the land border between Brasil and Venezuela in 2023.

their families' educational opportunities were limited as they faced challenges to access, thrive and remain in education and integrate into English society. I found that young refugees' educational experiences were centred around a *neutral* approach to learning that appeared to fail to engage with historical inequalities still present at every level of English society.

Refugee education has shifted towards a global lifelong learning approach (Dryden-Peterson 2019). However, this cannot be realised without a curriculum "that would allow spaces for learners to explore the possibilities for reparative justice as a basis for more racially and culturally just futures in education" (Tikly 2022b, p. 869). I argue in favour of national education systems that engage with education and curricula through a critical, anti-colonial and anti-racist lens. Anti-racist education has "diverse roots in the struggles against colonialism and imperialism" (ibid., p. 870). Therefore, beyond focusing on *access* to basic education, global and national commitments to realising rights to education for all people must also *interrogate the role that curricula play* in legitimising past and present violence and silencing past injustices.

According to one of my participants, Muhammad, his peers assumed that he was a refugee because of the Iraq War (2003–2011). However, they seemed unaware that the UK had invaded Iraq as part of a US-led coalition and played a prominent role that led to mass displacement of Iraqi people. Figure 2 illustrates that Muhammad was acutely aware that the curriculum that shaped his learning prioritised European perspectives and that children his age rarely knew what had happened to his beloved country, including the reasons his people had fled. However, while education can be oppressive, scholars like bell hooks and Paulo Freire propose that education can be a practice for liberation through critical and engaged pedagogies.

> I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom (hooks 1994, p. 12).

What knowledge(s) are considered legitimate? Whose perspectives are privileged and whose are erased? Whose language(s)? Whose history is taught? Curriculum planning involves a process of exclusion and inclusion of knowledge; it provides a way of looking at the world by organising knowledge in specific ways. Young people and their families have big dreams and high aspirations (Câmara 2023a), which are often frustrated by the reality of their material conditions and institutional barriers. Sriprakash et al. (2020) highlight the importance of historical thinking for future-oriented policy and practice in education because it can offer "a vital starting point for critiquing and reformulating the interrelations of past, present and future" (Sriprakash et al. 2020, p. 2). In thinking about futures, it is important to consider how *futures* might be conceptualised. Julia Paulson et al. argue that education can be viewed "as a locus of power for the transmission of memory, important for its role in ensuring continuity across generations" (Paulson et al. 2020, p. 434).

> Here, education is seen to simply play a strategic role within the politics of memory by institutionalising a collective history so that it can be passed on to

> generations. In this respect schools are seen to disperse an image of the nation, and promote loyalty (ibid.).

Nevertheless, schools are not simply sites where ideas are transmitted. Education itself is a site of memory where difficult histories and futures are created. I propose that an anti-racist and anti-colonial approach to refugee education needs to engage in "historical thinking" for "future-oriented" policy and practice in EiE and lifelong learning. Discussing colonialism may seem shocking and uncomfortable because Britain's colonial history is not honestly taught in British schools (Tomlinson 2019). In addition, education for refugees is guided by colonial normative and integrationist perspectives both in how it is provided in Global North countries and how the field is run in Global South countries through policies, funding and implementation. Any attempt at lifelong learning for refugees should move away from institutional practices that reproduce exclusion and oppression.

As mentioned earlier in this article, SDG 4 fails to include refugee needs in its focus on national education systems. Considering this, I propose that national education systems need to move beyond performative inclusion policies. Instead of focusing solely on "access", which is essential but insufficient, national systems must take a holistic approach to education that considers access to housing and stable, safe living conditions for children (and their families) that allows them to focus on their studies, creating greater opportunities for learning. Further, going beyond inclusion to favour anti-racist policies is essential, particularly in contexts where there have been historical oppressive practices aimed at racialised people. National systems also need to consider their specific contexts and apply policies accordingly. Global commitments are often shaped by neoliberal education standards influenced by actors who have a vested interest in the marketisation of education rather than reparative justice.

Education that supports lifelong learning is incompatible with views of refugee people as threats to the nation-state and practices that essentialise their lived experiences through a lens of deficit and trauma. Furthermore, current educational opportunities and progressions for refugees are limited. The British government appears to focus on migrants' access to education only to the extent that they learn enough basic English and maths to secure low-paid employment.

Freire's liberating approach opposes "policies and practices of Lifelong Learning which mainly focus on the labour market" (Lucio-Villegas 2018, p. 151). According to Licínio Lima, Freire's *critical pedagogy* presents

> an alternative to what he calls "humanitarianist", "paternalist", and "assistentialist" approaches, refusing to adopt a view based on the salvation of the oppressed and, by extension, the unqualified, those with low levels of education, or with few skills (Lima 2022, p. 22).

Critical pedagogy may be helpful because it argues for an education where students and teachers may be active agents of change, transforming the world around them. *Problem-posing education* encourages learners to think critically about their social worlds, and how global and local economic practices may contribute to their predicaments. From a critical pedagogy perspective, "education cannot be

neutral; it is always directive in its attempt to enable students to understand the larger world and their role in it" (Giroux 2016, pp. 300–301). In addition, Leona English and Peter Mayo (2019) argue that greater attention to lifelong learning policies in line with SDG 4 would increase the chances of refugees achieving an autonomous life. Nevertheless, it may be futile to focus solely on education without addressing the powers and factors that destabilise the world and create refugees, emergencies and crises.

Paulo Freire's (1970, 1973, 1976) problem-posing education, combined with anti-colonial and anti-racist perspectives, presents an opportunity to reconceptualise education as liberating. Similarly, in *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) highlights the importance of intersectionality and decolonisation in education to disrupt asymmetrical power relations. A model of problem-posing education encourages students to construct personal understanding through successive stages of critical inquiry. It begins by exploring the present perspective of students and gradually assists them to become more informed and critical social participants. As explained by hooks, "Freire's work affirmed that education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor" (hooks 1994, p. 14). Freire's notion of mutual labour resonated with "Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy of engaged Buddhism, the focus on practice in conjunction with contemplation" (ibid.). hooks drew on Freire's critical pedagogy and Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy to create an engaged pedagogy approach, including consideration of body, mind and spirit. Similarly to Freire's approach, hooks proposed that students are active agents in knowledge production, where "knowledge [is] a field in which we all labour" (ibid.). An engaged and critical approach to education that interrogates institutional racism, particularly in colonial contexts, requires national systems to move beyond access-to-education policies as a sole focus. Instead, it requires system-wide and school-wide approaches that consider each *whole* learner.

As global commitments continue to highlight the need to ensure access to education for all, it is essential to acknowledge that national education systems are often unprepared to respond to the needs of all people, regardless of age. As I argued earlier in this article, although education is often portrayed as an unmitigated good, we need to interrogate the type and purpose of education and lifelong learning not only for refugees but for all people. What pedagogies do we need to promote education as a practice of freedom? How is the way young people are educated related to the futures we hope for? Both Freire's and hooks' approaches, described above, can be drawn on by education systems and educators across all settings. Further, teaching children an honest portrayal of history also requires critiquing the ways that a capitalist economic market system, which is inherently racist, has not only been essential to the realisation of colonial violence, but continues to sustain similar oppressive structures today, as shown by the consequences of increased environmental destruction and ongoing genocides in Palestine, Sudan and the Congo. In 1964, Malcolm X demanded that it was necessary for Black children to have an education that affirmed their racial identities in the US (X 1964). Malcolm's demands were later reflected in the 10-Point Platform for the Black Panther Party (BPP). Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale stated the Party's educational goals as follows:

> You want education? What kind of education do you want? An education which what? Reveals the true nature of this decadent American society? That's what I thought you said. WE WANT AN EDUCATION WHICH TEACHES US OUR TRUE HISTORY AND OUR ROLE IN THE PRESENT DAY AMERICAN SOCIETY. Put a semi-colon in between the first part and the second part cause a lot of young people will be reading the ten points; we don't want to be accused of bad punctuation (Newton and Seale 1966, online).

The importance of an education that strives for institutional change, as proposed by Malcolm X and later by the BPP, was only recognised, albeit stripped of its radical politics, years later in academic settings. However, it demonstrates that those histories are also pedagogical and can inform pedagogical possibilities in the present and future. I propose that colonial history must be put into the UK compulsory curriculum. In Brasil, there is a law (Lei 10.639/03; GoB 2003) which stipulates the teaching of Afro-Brasilian and African history and culture, emphasising the importance of Black culture in shaping Brasilian society. Putting Britain's colonial history of violence into the curriculum will also provide greater context for understanding migration and displacement, particularly in explaining why people may migrate to the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

Integrationist approaches to education that are assimilationist in nature may not promote lifelong learning because they only "appear" to be inclusive. Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale were right that Black children, and all oppressed peoples, need an education that teaches them their true histories. White children in colonial contexts are also often ignorant about the histories of their countries, such as in England. There needs to be an honest engagement with violent histories to create more just futures, including creating spaces to interrogate the role that the capitalist economic system plays both in supporting and legitimising colonial and imperialist expansion. Policies and commitments to education for refugees often treat education as a tool for social cohesion. These education policies may contribute to the erasure of Britain's colonial history and its imperial legacy globally.

Considering the non-neutral nature of education systems and migration regulation regimes, critical, anti-racist and anti-colonial education perspectives serve as a vital lens to understand refugee people's educational experiences in England and globally. An anti-colonial and anti-racist approach to education goes beyond pointing out that refugee learners have limited educational access and progression opportunities. It also recognises that inequalities continue to be created and sustained in and through education. Ideally, including refugees and displaced persons in global commitments is essential and countries should also be required to develop and monitor national policies according to these commitments. Furthermore, refugees need to be part of these conversations and practices.

The British government's lack of policy focused on refugee education leads to young refugees being managed solely through (im)migration, integration and social

cohesion policies. These policies may contribute to erasing Britain's colonial history and imperial legacy globally. Considering the non-neutral nature of education systems and (im)migration regulation regimes, critical, anti-racist and anti-colonial education perspectives serve to understand refugee people's educational experiences in England and help overcome the institutional practices that disadvantage them. Global commitments to education focus on "Global South" countries as dysfunctional places of permanent crises. Nevertheless, they should also consider how racist and exclusionary policies have flourished in Global North countries both in and through education and (im)migration systems. Further, global commitments to education, migration, human rights and climate change must acknowledge the role of colonialism, racism(s) and imperial violence both as causes of crises and barriers to enacting changes and improving the lives of the most affected global majority. Moreover, in addition to including refugees and displaced persons, global commitments must be accompanied by guidance, monitoring and incentives for countries to include refugees and displaced persons in their national planning.

Education should be more than just a process of securing employment; it should also recognise the unequal power relations under which refugees live globally, including in the so-called Global North countries. As Henry Giroux aptly put it, the "future should offer students a life that leads to the deepening of freedom and social justice" (Giroux 2016, p. 301). All learners need to be encouraged to understand their realities and actively participate in transforming their futures. Transformative educational experiences should allow learners to interpret and actively intervene in the world, thereby playing a crucial role in shaping their present and future.

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Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethical approval The research referred to in this article was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, School of Education, University of Bristol in 2019 and 2020 and by the Centre for Lebanese Studies in 2023.

Participant consent The young refugees, their families and school staff participated voluntarily and consented to their data being used for scientific purposes.

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